



**IAHA statement on the need for greater protections for sites of cultural significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.**

**Available for Immediate Release**

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Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) support calls for national action to address the inadequacies of development and mining approvals, including those under Section 18 of the Aboriginal Heritage Act, and (a lack of) protections for sites of cultural significance. IAHA call for a halt to any further actions under existing approvals and a moratorium on new approvals until this is rectified and heritage laws are fundamentally changed.

The existing failures and a lack of recognition and value for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural history has recently been illustrated by the destruction of sacred sites at Juukan Gorge, which had a recorded 46,000 year history and significant cultural value for the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura peoples and to Australia as a nation.

As an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health organisation, IAHA are deeply concerned about the health and social and emotional wellbeing impacts of such decisions and desecration. The distress and trauma caused by both the destruction and public undervaluing of culture is significant and intergenerational; and contributes to the inequity in health and wellbeing outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Research over decades, including the 1995 Ways Forward Report, supports what is known by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, that cultural stress, grief and trauma have unique impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A manifestation of these issues is increased risk of suicide and self-harm, which remains a significant issue in communities.

The continued destruction of the environment and of sites of cultural significance is also at odds with governments commitments to health, in which the cultural determinants are being increasingly recognised and understood as protective factors for good health and wellbeing. We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are kept well through connection to Country and culture. The destruction of cultural sites undermines self-determination, nation building and the cultural determinants of health, concepts which governments purport to endorse and which underpin any success to be achieved under the Closing the Gap report.

We recognise that several actions have since been initiated to address these concerns, including an inquiry by the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia and West Australian government in the reform of the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA). Once again, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations have demonstrated leadership, with a new alliance including the Cape York Land



Council, the Northern Land Council, the Kimberley Land Council, the National Native Title Council, and academic Marcia Langton, offering to work with governments to overhaul heritage laws.

We note too, that some companies have taken some initial, welcome steps, with BHP halting plans to expand a mine in Western Australia in order to work with the Banjima people on mitigation and preservation of cultural sites. However, there is an ongoing concern that action will be insufficient, ineffective, or simply too late, particularly in the context of historical and ongoing imbalances of power between governments and mining companies and Traditional Custodians. It is essential that stakeholders work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Meanwhile, the NSW Government have approved the Shenhua Watermark open-cut coal mine, despite identified impacts on biodiversity, air, and noise pollution, as well as concerns about the potential impacts on the water table. Of great concern, is the earmarked destruction of sites south of Gunnedah which hold significant cultural value to the Gomeroi people, and that approval has been granted despite the government acknowledging the cultural significance of these sites.

IAHA call for the NSW Government to overturn the decision to approve the Shenhua Watermark open-cut coal mine until these concerns are addressed and cultural sites are offered full protection in a manner agreed with the Traditional Custodians. Nationally, greater protections must be enacted as a national priority and in a way which recognises the contribution and value of such sites to Australia, beyond any economic or other imperative.

Nicole Turner, IAHA Chairperson

Endorsed by the IAHA Board of Directors on 1 July 2020.