

Whale of a pit irons out ore record

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HIDDEN in the Pilbara, just out of Newman, is a hole big enough to fit Subiaco Oval nearly 29 times in length and more than 12 times in width.

That hole – BHP Billiton's Mt Whaleback mine – has helped the resources giant break another record, producing 36.5 million tonnes of iron ore from its Pilbara operations in the three months to September 30.

That's almost 25 per cent more than the same period last year.

According to Geoscience Australia, at 5.5km long and nearly 2km wide, Mt Whaleback is the biggest single-pit open-cut iron ore mine in the world.

Once completed, its depth will be twice the height of the almost-finished City Square tower in Perth's CBD, which is 250m.

Geoscience Australia mineral resources section leader Aden McKay said the mine had capacity to produce about 30mt of iron ore a year and the Mt Newman hub, which includes Mt Whaleback and 13 other mines, accounts for 124mt a year.

The best part of Mt Whaleback for BHP is the high grade of the ore.

Mt Whaleback is 2.5km longer and about 2km wider than Kalgoorlie's famous Super Pit. Just like its southern cousin, it attracts tourists with 6000 visitors in the past year.

Rio Tinto's biggest mine, Yandi-coogina, also a tourist site, is expected to stretch more than 20km.

Rio hopes to produce 144mt in 2011, with targets of 350mt a year by 2020 and an ultimate goal of 450mt.

