

Ancient treasure saved

Museum men dig up slice of Aboriginal history

A Haulpack truck ploughs through thick red dust only metres from a security compound containing some of the oldest Aboriginal rock engravings in Australia.

By **JOHN WHISTLER**

The driver is unaware that he is passing an archaeological treasure trove described as one of the most significant collections of pre-literate art in the world.

For many workers involved in Woodside Petroleum's onshore development on the Burrup Peninsula the fenced enclosure holds little importance.

In fact, few know of its existence and those who do aren't particularly interested in its contents or relevance.

The desire to work long hours in the searing Pilbara heat and earn top wages—up to \$600 a week—offers much greater rewards.

"And that's the way we like it," says WA Museum officer Peter Randolph. "Far too much work has gone into salvaging and studying the engravings for them to be damaged or lost."

"The collection is extremely valuable in historic terms and must be preserved at all costs."

Two years ago, Woodside embarked on a \$500,000 program to remove Aboriginal relics and engravings from sites along the narrow, rocky peninsula which would be most susceptible to the North-West Shelf natural gas project.

While museum officials in four-wheel-drive vehicles marked and studied sites in almost inaccessible areas, a sealed road was gradually snaking its way through a series of valleys and a construction camp was being built overlooking Hearson's Cove.

This work is continuing, but the museum team under the supervision of the registrar of Aboriginal sites Bruce Wright, has completed the bulk of its project.

The compound, which contains more than 800 rock engravings, bears

mule testimony to the archeologists' presence. Each rock is numbered and its own story is documented in files at the WA Museum's Fremantle branch where data is being registered and analysed.

Lifting the larger boulders by crane and taking them to the compound was certainly one of the most difficult tasks," Peter says.

"But there were many other aspects of the program which were carried out. Extensive studies were done of middens where we found shells, stone artefacts and flaked stones.

"Slowly, we have been able to draw up a picture of what Aboriginal life in the region was like.

"But there is still a lot of guesswork involved. We are in the embryonic stages, but gradually a fascinating story of the area's past is evolving."

Mr Randolph, who is the deputy registrar of Aboriginal sites, says carbon dating carried out in some excavation sites indicated human occupation of the peninsula, including the nearby archipelago, could go back 6000 years or as much as 20,000 years.

He says further excavations will give more accurate results.

The diverse styles and figures on the engravings suggested the peninsula had been inhabited by at least three different aboriginal cultures.

In a report earlier this year, Mr Wright said some of the human figures had stylistic links with similar engravings in the Chichester Ranges and extending to the Cleland Hills in the Northern Territory.

They had been estimated at 17,000 years old. Where possible, Aboriginal sites and engravings have been left untouched as is the case



Catherine Meager, an officer with Woodside Petroleum's public affairs department, points out some engravings in the compound.

on the southern side and the tip of the peninsula. Middens and rock engravings which cannot be removed are clearly defined by red plastic tags which prominently dot the landscape near the main construction areas.

Although most of the major field work is completed, archeologists from the museum will continue to work on the peninsula from time to time.

A laboratory in Fremantle is now the centre of activity.

Here, experts from the museum's conservation are analysing engravings on fibreglass moulds taken on the Burrup Peninsula and studying stone implements, bone fragments and other material.

However, the museum is in a quandary over the future of rock engravings in the compound.

"We would like to put them on display somewhere on the peninsula," Peter says.

"Several options are being considered. One is putting them near Hearson's Cove which is popular with local people and tourists.

"But there would need to be a safeguard against vandals. Obviously we will be talking with local Aboriginals about our plans before we make any decision.

I can't see anything happening for five or six years yet."

Anna.
I spoke to Peter Randolph.
Asked about documented story - he couldn't help he said
- There were 1760 rocks
- Were looking at placing at Woodside City office Japan office.
- Only some were sacred

his number is
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