

Burrup Update

EUROPEAN history on the Pilbara's Burrup Peninsula has been marked by tragedy. In 1868 at least 60 men, women and children from the Yabarara Tribe were murdered. Other massacres have occurred and European diseases have ravaged the remaining population. The result has been the elimination of a tribe whose sophistication enabled them to live in harmony with their surrounds.

Walking on the Burrup today the spirit of the area's former custodians is inescapable. The strangely piled granite rocks tempt even the heat weary to climb them. From an ochre and brown summit there's the thrill of an ocean view, and the relief of a breeze. And there's the chance of finding an ancient rock engraving. Robert G. Bednarik, President of the International Rock Art Federation, describes the Burrup as the world's richest petroglyph gallery. It's impossible to look at an engraving of a turtle, a dugong, a shark or any other of the many subjects without thinking of the man or woman who once sat in the exact same spot and so carefully practised their art. It's a tragedy that we risk never knowing more about the Yabarara.

Sadly there may be more Burrup tragedies. High pressure sales people, some of whom work for the WA Government, are seeking to entice big industry to this sacred area. Multinational companies like Methanex, GTL Resources, Syntroleum, Oswal Projects and Japan DME are all well on the way to the construction phase. These proposals will cover approximately 780 ha and will use North West Shelf gas in liquid methanol and liquid ammonia fertiliser plants. The WA Government is set to provide a subsidy of \$135 million while the Commonwealth Government is keen to assist with \$85 million.

In addition to the cultural heritage values the area has unique ecological values, which have been described in the reports of various consultant botanists, but conveniently ignored by proponents. Two proponents are suggesting that they should be allowed to skip essential post wet season biological survey work because their projects would be delayed by 12 months.

The development of the Burrup reflects a failure of environmental planning processes. There is a perfectly viable alternative to the Burrup for these developments at the 3000 ha Maitland Industrial Estate. Maitland is buffle grass dominated, clapped-out station country, which has already been rezoned for industrial use.

Yet again the WA EPA has let the environment down by only considering each proposal in isolation, preferring to ignore cumulative environmental impacts, such as increased emissions of NOx and SOx or increased marine pollution level increases. The impacts of increased NOx and SOx on rock art have not been properly considered. There seems to be an EPA view that we can gamble that some of the proposals won't proceed and therefore the

adverse impacts won't be as bad as anticipated.

Previous articles in *The Greener Times* have discussed the greenhouse gas implications of Burrup proposals. Calculations by the Conservation Council indicate that the main Burrup projects will increase our emission levels by nearly 30% relative to our 1995 emission levels. We are already well above our Kyoto Protocol commitment of 108% of 1990 levels by 2010. This is a sad reflection on Australia's attitude to a crucial environmental issue and on Australia's attitude to international commitments.

A further issue of concern is that the main proposed Burrup industrial area, between King Bay and Hearson Cove, is low lying land, which could be very prone to a combination of sea level change, high tides and increased cyclone intensity. This issue has not been adequately considered in the environmental impact assessment process.

In its document *Focus on the Future: Opportunities for Sustainability in Western Australia* the Gallop Government has recorded its definition of sustainability as: "the simultaneous achievement of environmental, economic and social goals." The Burrup situation will be a good test of the Government's resolve to apply it to real life. ■

