

Space-age technologies to protect rock art  
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THE troubled relationship between some of Australia's largest industries and some of the country's oldest Aboriginal rock art is to be monitored by technologies similar to those used by NASA.

Western Australia's Burrup Peninsula is home to some of the country's most important industry, including the North-West Shelf Project and Hamersley Iron.

But it also boasts one of the world's largest collections of indigenous rock art, dating back 17,000 years.

Environmentalists have been concerned about the impact 21st century industrial methods may be having on the ancient art, prompting the state government to order a monitoring program to observe possible effects of industrial emissions.

Today, the CSIRO detailed how the rock art would be monitored – including using a state-of-the-art mineral mapping tool similar to the technology used by NASA to study surface minerals.

The infrared spectrometer will accurately record any subtle changes in the surface minerals of the rock art over time.

And in a related study, CSIRO scientists are recording differences over time in the colour of the engravings and adjacent, undisturbed rock surfaces.

Associate Professor Frank Murray, chair of the Burrup Rock Art monitoring management committee, said the project would be the most thorough scientific research of impacts on rock art ever undertaken.

"The studies are aimed at assessing whether industrial emissions are affecting the natural weathering of the rock surfaces," Prof Murray said.

As well as the spectrometer and colour studies, microbiologists will look at the growth of bacteria and fungi on the rocks, while a comprehensive analysis of atmospheric conditions will also be carried out.

State Development Minister Clive Brown has previously promised to examine the best ways to reduce the impact of emissions, should the monitoring program find they are harming the art.

AAP