

# Archeologists push to protect rock art

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Science writer

THE "father of Australian archeology", academic John Mulvaney, is leading a campaign to win National Heritage listing for endangered rock art on Western Australia's Burrup Peninsula and Dampier Archipelago.

Estimated to include up to one million works, the area is home to the world's richest collection of rock carvings, or petroglyphs, some at least 17,000 years old.

It also includes standing stones erected by Aborigines to indicate natural resources such as water and other artefacts of Aboriginal life, from grind stones to rock quarries.

Professor Mulvaney said it was "a total tragedy" that the region wasn't given protective listing in 1981, as recommended by a joint committee of national academics, including the Australian Academy of Science and the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering. Professor Mulvaney, who is still lobbying the federal Government for the listing, was president of the Australian Academy of Science at the time.

According to Griffith University rock art expert Paul Tacon, the art is a precious record of past lives, beliefs

and experiences that cannot be gleaned from other archeological records.

"We're looking into the mind and the identity of individual artists and whole communities," he said.

Environment and Heritage Minister Ian Campbell, who met Professor Mulvaney last Wednesday, agreed. "I'm incredibly cognisant of the cultural values up there. I'll be visiting as soon as I can," he said.

According to Professor Mulvaney, now emeritus with the Australian National University, National Heritage listing is necessary to protect the rock art precinct from expansion of port facilities and the liquid gas and fertiliser industries.

For instance, Woodside Energy Ltd is considering development of the Pluto Gas field on the west coast of the Burrup Peninsula. The region contains significant rock carvings.

Experts such as Robert Bednarik, of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations, argue that one-quarter of carvings across the Burrup have been destroyed by development and corrosive industrial emissions.

His concern is shared by the World Monuments Fund, which in June named the precinct one of the world's 100 most endangered sites.

Last August, Senator Campbell extended to next September a statutory deadline on assessment of a listing by the Australian Heritage Council. He also agreed to fund extensive archeological surveys of the area under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. Consultation with Aboriginal groups is under way.

While acknowledging the complexity of getting all players on side West Australian officials have expressed concern about the effect of a listing on economic activities by companies such as Woodside and Rio Tinto and support for development on the Burrup. Senator Campbell was "reasonably confident" of a positive outcome.

Some experts predict the Environment and Heritage Minister will agree to a National Heritage listing for the area that allows industrial activity within a defined zone.



Under threat: Ian Campbell with archeologist John Mulvaney Picture: Kym Smith