

Bid to deny rock art heritage

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A PUSH to deny heritage protection for the world's biggest collection of rock carvings found in a resource-rich pocket of Western Australia has been likened to Britain refusing to protect Stonehenge or Egypt leaving the pyramids open to exploitation.

Responding to a call by the West Australian Government for the carvings on the Burrup peninsula and Dampier archipelago to be left off a national protection register, West Australian National Trust director Tom Perrigo reacted with incredulity.

"Without inclusion on the heritage list, there is no protection. We have wasted years and the state Premier (Alan Carpenter) has got to take some leadership on this," he said.

"Would England move Stonehenge for a mine, or Egypt sell its pyramids for oil?"

"We have something older than both of them, and we're

planning to destroy them."

In its submission to the Australian Heritage Council, the Carpenter Government has opposed placing "all or any part of" the remote region on a national register. It stated that national heritage protection would have "potentially grave consequences" for Australia's economy and threaten plans for massive industrial expansion of oil and gas facilities on the Burrup.

The state's position makes for a possible clash with federal Environment and Heritage Minister Ian Campbell, who has indicated he gives weight to the cultural importance of the rock art, some of which dates back 17,000 years. He has the final say on whether it will be protected.

Companies operating on the Burrup peninsula, in the Pilbara mining region of the state's northwest, include North West Shelf LNG partners, Rio Tinto, Hamersley Iron and Burrup fertilisers.

The state Government's approach is a "contradictory position", says former state Liberal leader Colin Barnett.

He rejected the Government's written argument that "existing state management and regulatory processes" could offer sufficient protection "while also enabling industrial development within designated industrial estates".

"The state is saying it can preserve the sites when it is also proposing industrial estates that, of necessity, will involve destroying a large amount of rock art," Mr Barnett said.

At a forum on the Burrup rock art's fate last weekend, Mr Barnett admitted that, as resources minister between 1993 and 2001, he had not realised the world significance of Burrup rock art.

He said it would be a "national shame" if Australia did not end decades of destruction of the human and animal form rock etchings.