

Tassie tiger art on rocks in ruckus

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NEW evidence that Tasmanian tigers once roamed Australia's mainland has come to light in the world's largest concentration of rock art, adding weight to calls for its legislative protection.

Twelve rock carvings of the extinct thylacine have been found on the Burrup peninsula, a rugged 20km-long expanse on the northwest Pilbara coast of Western Australia.

The discoveries by archaeologist Ken Mulvaney, some made as recently as last month, double the number of thylacine images found among ancient Aboriginal rock carvings scattered across 2000 Burrup sites. As many as 300,000 individual drawings, featuring animal and human figures, have been etched into boulders.

The Australian revealed on Thursday that the state Government had lodged strong opposition to proposed National Heritage listing to protect the rock art. It had cited "grave consequences" for Australia's largest resource project, the North West Shelf LNG plant, and other projects on the peninsula.

But Mr Mulvaney, who is also president of the Australian Rock Art Research Association, said the rock art needed urgent legal protection from industrial expansion and acid rain that was eroding rock surfaces.

"You cannot say any of the art is safe, and we don't know what other carvings are out there because no survey has been done in areas earmarked by the WA Government for industrial estates," he said.

Mr Mulvaney said it was cultural vandalism to continue promoting industry in an area where the world's greatest rock art had been created over a 20,000-year period.

"The Burrup continues to reveal highly significant petroglyphs, both in a scientific and aesthetic sense," he said.

A spokesman for federal Heritage Minister Ian Campbell, who was overseas, said the minister would "take all views into account" before making his decision in September on Burrup's listing.

The Tasmanian tiger is believed to have roamed widely across Australia up until about 3000 years ago. Around that time — perhaps because of the arrival of the dingo — it disappeared from the mainland, surviving only in dingo-free Tasmania until the last thylacine died in 1936 in Hobart Zoo.

Professor Iain Davidson, head of the University of New England's archaeology department, said Mr Mulvaney's discoveries were important evidence that thylacines lived on the mainland, and that Aborigines interacted with them.

But saving it did not mean industry had to leave the Burrup. "The best way to protect heritage is to work with industry and government to make sure they understand how important it is," he said, adding that a recent decision by LNG partner Woodside to audit the heritage assets on its Burrup sites was "a good start".