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Aboriginal rock art site faces the bulldozers

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The planned expansion of a massive industrial site on a remote part of the Australian coastline threatens to destroy hundreds of ancient Aboriginal rock engravings.

The petroglyphs, which depict human figures, mysterious abstract motifs and extinct animals, are etched into boulders and rock faces on the **Burrup** Peninsula in Western Australia. They were painstakingly carved by Aborigines over the course of more than 20,000 years.

But the carvings share the 20km-long peninsula with huge natural gas processing plants and iron ore shipment facilities. Conservationists say expansion of the industrial complex will destroy hundreds, if not thousands, of carvings, in the latest chapter in a decades-old battle between Aboriginal heritage and the demands of modern economic development.

They argue that bulldozing or removing any of the petroglyphs would be cultural vandalism akin to the Taleban's destruction of the Bamiyan buddhas in Afghanistan.

The West Australian government announced last week that it would fight an attempt to have the rock art placed on the National Heritage list, which would afford greater protection.

It said the listing would have "potentially grave consequences" for the planned expansion of oil and gas facilities.

"We are trying very hard to work with industry and the Aboriginal community to minimise any impact on individual rock art sites while also managing the multi-billion dollar industry in the area," the Department of Industry said.

Much of the development was likely to occur away from the boulder-strewn gullies and rocky uplands where petroglyphs were found, the department claimed.

One of the resources companies with a stake in the peninsula, Woodside Energy, wants to develop a gas processing plant on the west coast, an area containing significant rock art.

It concedes that carvings will inevitably be destroyed when the 100-hectare site is cleared. "Sixty per cent of the peninsula has already been set aside for conservation," said Woodside's corporate affairs manager Rob Millhouse. "There are carvings all over the peninsula. It's impossible to preserve every one."

Last year, the World Monuments Fund placed the peninsula on a list of the world's 100 most endangered sites.

Industrial development started in the area, near the town of Karratha, in the 1970s. At least 4,800 petroglyphs have already been destroyed since then.

In addition to the rock art, there are millennia-old standing stones, stone circles and grinding stones.

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