

## Not your place: writer fights for ancient rock art

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WEST Australian miners face a new heritage battle with traditional owners, backed by Aboriginal author Sally Morgan, over a second ancient rock art precinct in the state's northwest Pilbara region.

Morgan, who wrote the best-selling *My Place*, called for the protection of the rock etchings at Abydos-Woodstock, a pastoral region 150km south of Port Hedland. She has thrown her support behind the Pilbara-based Palku indigenous group, to which her mother, Gladys Milroy, belongs. The group claims thousands of etchings at the site are threatened by a proposed railway corridor.

"This is 'my place' and we all want to protect it, not just for us but for future generations," said Morgan, professor of indigenous history and the arts at the University of Western Australia.

The 150,000ha area, which is scattered with rocks bearing incised images of animals and humans, was granted protected status under the state Aboriginal Heritage Act in the late 1970s.

But state Heritage Minister

Sheila McIale confirmed in parliament last month that mining entrepreneur Andrew Forrest's Fortescue Metals Group had requested partial lifting of heritage protection over a 200m-wide rail corridor through the Abydos-Woodstock area.

Fortescue failed last month to force BHP Billiton to provide access to its existing railway to Port Hedland, forcing it to build its own railway to meet massive iron ore orders from China.

Ms McIale said Fortescue had demonstrated good cause for their request and that she had directed the state Aboriginal Cultural Materials Committee to consider waiving protection over the corridor. A decision is expected this month.

Palku native title working party member Terry Jaffrey said his group wanted the rail line moved outside the protected zone. "I want to see mining companies avoid that area altogether," Mr Jaffrey said.

"We've still got a culture running through that country."

Fortescue spokesman Julian Tapp said it had sought to avoid all major engraving sites and had

signed access agreements with native title holders. He said the closest rock art outcrop would be 40m from the rail line.

But Morgan said her mother and other Palku traditional owners had not known at the time of signing that the entire Abydos-Woodstock area had protected heritage status.

She drew parallels with the Burrup peninsula, where recent discoveries were made of 3000-year-old engravings depicting the Tasmanian tiger, or thylacine. Federal Heritage Minister Ian Campbell will decide later this year whether to add Burrup's rock art precinct to the National Heritage List.

*The Australian* revealed last month that the West Australian Government has opposed listing the Burrup, citing "potentially grave consequences" for Pilbara-based resource giants, which had already invested more than \$35 billion in local infrastructure.

Morgan said if the state Government removed protected status from Abydos-Woodstock, "it would signal open slather for mining companies to destroy and move rock art".