

Monday, Aug. 07, 2006

In Search of Climbing Men

Burru Peninsula, W.A.

BY TOM DUSEVIC

A decade ago or thereabouts, Perth-based photojournalist David Dare Parker explored some of the ancient rock carvings on the Burrup Peninsula, near Dampier. He's keen to see them again. The peninsula alone holds some 10,000 known engravings, but the visitors' center is closed for renovations, there are no signposts, and the intrepid Parker, 47, searches his creaky memory in vain. Low, brown boulders and rust-colored piles of super-hard granophyre give no clue to the location of the artistic riches hidden in the scrub beyond the sealed road from Karratha.

It's an unfortunate coincidence that what is thought to be the world's richest trove of prehistoric rock art, an island-dotted precinct covering a 45-km radius, is also one of the hubs of Australia's resources bonanza. Liquefied-natural-gas tankers and ships loaded with iron ore leave from here on timetables set by China's seemingly endless demand.

Doubling back to Karratha, the gateway for Pilbara miners and North West Shelf gas-platform workers, we consult a friendly resident and get a pointer to the location. Back on the peninsula, we walk through tangled, prickly foliage and over jagged rocks. Laden with three cameras, Parker forges ahead alone, the din of Woodside's LNG plant and the whistling wind blocking out attempts at voice contact between us. Parker uses the factory's fiery emission stack to get his bearings until, half veiled in shadow a few meters above the valley floor, he finds what he's looking for: the "climbing men."

Are these human figures, arranged on either side of vertical lines, images of sailors clinging to the masts of ships? Do they depict visitors from afar, or locals involved in some rite or ceremony? Other petroglyphs in this area—many thought to be at least 6,000 years old—depict fish, reptiles, kangaroos and birds, as well as human figures. According to experts, they show wide variation in style and technique, suggesting that they were created in different eras. The images are still visible, thanks to the contrast between the dark red-to-black patina of iron oxide that covers the rock and the underlying gray that emerged when the patina was cut into or scratched away.

Though they have been studied for years, the engravings of the Dampier Rock Art Precinct remain a vast mystery. No one is sure what they—or the deliberately assembled piles of rocks that dot the area—signify. Aboriginal elders claim that only people from

Burru country can understand the messages their ancestors etched into the stones, and that those messages must remain secret.

What is known is that thousands of engravings have been destroyed since industry came here. To save the rest, a campaign has begun to secure heritage listing and block further development until a new management plan is in place. A register is being compiled, but with the petroglyphs thought to number in the millions, completing it could take decades.

[From TIME Asia Magazine, issue dated August 14, 2006 / No. 32](#)