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The World Today - Gas project threatens ancient rock art

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Reporter: Steve Holland

ELEANOR HALL: The Burrup Peninsula in the rugged north-west of Western Australia is home to some of the oldest rock carvings in the world, dating back tens of thousands of years.

But the area is also enormously rich in other resources, and energy giant Woodside Petroleum wants to strip away some of the rock artworks to build a plant as part of its Pluto gas project.

The Federal Government is now considering whether the Burrup Peninsula should be listed on the National Heritage register.

But it's widely expected it will reject this proposal and instead reach agreement with the Western Australian Government to greenlight the resource development at the expense of some of the artworks.

We'll hear from the Federal Environment Minister, Ian Campbell, about the Government's position in a moment.

But first Steve Holland reports from the North West about the competing significance of Burrup to its people and to industry.

(Sound of didgeridoo)

WILFRED HICKS: It breaks our heart to see all the destroyed art, rocks and that getting ripped up all the time and blown. It is a heartbreaking feeling. It makes us older generation cry about what they're seeing happen.

(Sound of didgeridoo)

STEVE HOLLAND: On the red rocks scattered across the Burrup Peninsula, ancient carvings tell the tale of a people that have lived on the harsh terrain for more than 20,000 years.

Wilfred Hicks, elder of the Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo West Ngarluma, has lived in the Pilbarra since he was born. He remembers walking on the Peninsula as a child, listening to his grandfather telling the history of the rock art on the Burrup.

WILFRED HICKS: That is our bible. The Minghella gave that to us, and that's Lord Jesus Christ. We've got it in our mind and on sand and on rocks.

STEVE HOLLAND: The Burrup Peninsula is located on the north west coast of Australia. It's surrounded by 42 islands that make up the Dampier Archipelago.

For archaeologists like Ken Mulvaney, the Burrup is a wealth of information.

KEN MULVANEY: We clearly have an area of world cultural significance. No one denies that. But what we have continuing is a state government and government departments that continue to insist that the Burrup is better suited for industry.

STEVE HOLLAND: In a bid to strike a balance, the West Australian Government released a plan to protect 60 per cent of the Burrup. That leaves the rock art in the remaining area vulnerable to development, and many are opposed.

KEN MULVANEY: The reality is the rock art has been here for over 20,000 years. You cannot move that. Industry can relocate anywhere. There is no resource on the Burrup that is specific to the industry.

STEVE HOLLAND: The State Government disagrees.

West Australian Premier Alan Carpenter.

ALAN CARPENTER: The companies want to be in the Burrup because of the access to the facilities that are there and the port facilities and the berthing facilities and so on.

STEVE HOLLAND: Victorian Brad Bennett loaded his Ute and drove 4,000 for a job on the Burrup Peninsula. The 24-year-old labourer takes home more than \$1,000 a week, but spends the nights sleeping in a swag.

BRAD BENNETT: Ended up here from, yeah, all the stories of the money that can be made up here, though they don't tell you about the accommodation shortage up here.

And I finished up on the Burrup because that was just the first job that came up pretty much. As with most people, they just come into town and within a couple of days they've got a job offer somewhere and you just go where the work is.

STEVE HOLLAND: West Australian Environment Minister, Mark McGowan, insists on leaving almost half of the Burrup open to development, an area archaeologists believe houses millions of examples of the 20,000-year-old rock art.

MARK MCGOWAN: It's a bit late now to say that there shouldn't be development on the Burrup. It's been going there now for somewhere between 50 and 40 years. The horse has bolted in relation to that argument. Now the best way of managing this issue is the question, and we think we've got a good balance.

(Sound of song, 'Solid Rock', by Goanna)

STEVE HOLLAND: For many, the Burrup is a source for cash, for others it's a well of knowledge, and for a few it's a spiritual home. But all will fight for it.

KEN MULVANEY: You cannot move that.

MARK MCGOWAN: It's a bit late now to say that there shouldn't be development on the Burrup.

BRAD BENNETT: You just go where the work is.

WILFRED HICKS: We're going to go as far as we can go until we can have our land back, because Native Title, the way we see it, is still on that land.

(Sound of song, 'Solid Rock', by Goanna)

ELEANOR HALL: Steve Holland prepared that report.

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