

World's oldest rock art loses out to mine projects

By Steve Lewis and Victoria Laurie

September 04, 2006 01:00am

Article from...  THE AUSTRALIAN

THE future of Australia's biggest resources project seems assured with the Howard Government to reject calls for blanket heritage listing of Western Australia's Burrup Peninsula.

Despite the presence of the world's oldest rock art in the area, federal Cabinet is today expected to agree to work with the West Australian Government on a new development strategy for the peninsula, in the state's rugged northwest.

This would allow companies such as Woodside Petroleum, which operates the \$19 billion North West Shelf gas project, to press ahead with developments.

Under the Cabinet plan, a new management agreement would be reached with the state Government. This would allow development to proceed, while reducing the chances of environmental groups launching costly legal challenges to development applications.

The decision is unlikely to please groups such as the National Trust, which believes resources giants like Woodside risk destroying Aboriginal artworks dating back tens of thousands of years.

Heritage bodies in Western Australia say the Carpenter Government is poised to approve the destruction of up to 100 rock carvings to make way for industry. But senior federal government sources said the move represented a sensible path forward that would also protect Aboriginal rock art against wholesale destruction.

Federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell is understood to have circulated his cabinet papers to other ministers only late last week. Pro-development ministers are expected to argue strongly against any plan for a blanket heritage listing. Government sources are hopeful the cabinet decision would obviate the need for heritage listing.

Today's debate highlights the conflicting demands of continuing to foster Australia's resources boom while protecting Aboriginal heritage.

Apart from the North West Shelf project, which supplies liquefied natural gas to markets around the world, the Burrup is home to other mining and chemical industries, including the world's biggest ammonia plant.

The National Trust of Western Australia has called for a prompt decision by Senator Campbell amid fears that Woodside will be given approval to remove 12 per cent of rock art on a site earmarked to build a new processing plant for its Pluto gas project.

Trust spokesman Robin Chapple said the proposed site was one of the most concentrated areas, with over 1000 artefacts, some of which will be preserved.

"It's almost obscene that the federal minister is deliberating on heritage values on this place, while the state minister is about to grant approval that would allow industry to build on what is one of the most significant archaeological sites on the Burrup," Mr Chapple said.

But Alan Carpenter, the pro-development Premier, argues that any plans to place Burrup on the heritage list would be a major setback for the national economy.

"National heritage listing would mean duplication of approvals processes, for one thing, added delays and uncertainty in the management and development of the area," Mr Carpenter told state parliament last week.

"More importantly, and I think this is the rub, national heritage listing allows Federal Court injunctions against any activities that might have a significant impact on a national heritage site," he said. "Even if an injunction is unsuccessful, there is potential for significant delays and project uncertainty."

The remote Pilbara peninsula has the biggest concentration of ancient rock art in the world, some of which is 30,000 years old, or seven times older than Britain's Stonehenge. A preliminary Australian Heritage Council report, sent to Senator Campbell in May last year, said the entire peninsula qualified for both national and world heritage listing.

Burrup's traditional owners told a July meeting of the state Aboriginal Cultural Material Committee, which oversees site protection, that they opposed any further industrial disturbance of rock art. They called for new industries to move away from the artefacts.

Indigenous author Sally Morgan, who is a claimant on rock art sites near the Burrup, has called for federal intervention to save artefacts.

"If Stonehenge were in the Pilbara, it would no longer exist," she said. "The Government has now assumed the role of covert vandal in order to ride high on the resources boom."