Ancient Australian rock art threatened by major gas project

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SYDNEY -- Some of the world's oldest rock art looks set for destruction to make way for a multi-billion dollar gas project, the Australian government admitted Tuesday.

Environment Minister Ian Campbell said ancient Aboriginal rock art in Western Australia's Burrup Peninsula would not be allowed to derail the development of a five-billion Australian dollar (3.75 billion US) liquefied natural gas plant.

The Burrup site contains thousands of pieces of Aboriginal artwork between 4,000 and 40,000 years old.

"It is a practical reality that every piece of rock art cannot be saved if Australia's economic development and the environmental benefits that flow from selling natural gas to the rest of the world are going to be realized," Campbell told national radio.

Australia's largest oil and gas group Woodside Petroleum, which has proposed building the LNG plant at the site, says about 90 percent of the artworks would not be disturbed by the development.

Campbell said that the plant could easily co-exist with the ancient art.

"No one in their right mind would propose saving every single last bit of heritage on the peninsula unless they wanted to close down the economic development of Australia," he said.

However, the International Rock Art Federation and Australia's National Trust nominated the site for inclusion on the National Heritage List earlier this year.

National Trust chief executive Tom Perrigo said heritage listing was needed to prevent the engravings from being "blown up" during construction or damaged later by the plant's emissions.

Australian Greens leader Bob Brown recently noted that there were excellent industrial sites nearby where development could take place without harming the rock art.

"The (Prime Minister John) Howard government will be fostering the nation's best interests if it saves the Burrup Peninsula sites and ensures that industry expands at the alternative venues," he said.

The carved petroglyphs of the surrounding Dampier Archipelago -- the world's largest collection of such rock art -- were named as one of the world's 100 most endangered sites by the New York-based World Monuments Fund last year.

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