

# Pressure on Woodside over threat to ancient art

Western Australia says it would be an economic catastrophe not to develop the Burrup Peninsula due to heritage concerns, writes **Andrew Burrell**.

It's been likened to building a petrochemical plant next to Stonehenge or bulldozing a few of the pyramids to make way for a mine. Woodside Petroleum's plan to destroy or relocate some of the thousands of pieces of ancient Aboriginal rock art on Western Australia's rugged Burrup Peninsula to develop its \$5 billion Pluto liquefied gas plant has horrified heritage campaigners around the world.

Moreover, the artworks that will remain – some of which are believed to date back 30,000 years, much older than both Stonehenge and the Pyramids – will be at serious risk of permanent damage from industrial emissions from the liquefied natural gas plant, according to archaeologists.

The influential World Monuments Fund, a body bankrolled by credit card giant American Express, has listed the Burrup rock art on its list of the world's 100 most-endangered heritage sites.

This weekend, the Middle Eastern-based Al Jazeera television network will film a documentary on the area and its almost 1 million engravings.

Yet in Australia, the value of the artworks has failed to seep into the public consciousness – even though the engravings probably rank as our most significant heritage site.

"The rest of the world is more concerned about the Burrup than Australia is," says Robin Chapple, a special projects officer at the WA National Trust.

Federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell conceded this week

that some of the rock art would have to be destroyed to make way for Woodside's liquefied natural gas plant and that he would not allow a possible national heritage listing to derail the development.

He said the plant could easily co-exist with the ancient rock 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," Campbell said.

His hardline stance seemed at odds with his comments on a visit to the Burrup in June when he told the *60 Minutes* program: "I see the value here, I see something quite remarkable, something unique, something that is important for many generations to come."

**"It is like putting an oil well in the Great Barrier Reef."**

Archaeologist Ken Mulvaney, who is based on the Burrup, says claims that the Pluto development can be a "win-win" scenario for industry and conservation are a fallacy. "It is like putting an oil well in the Great Barrier Reef," he says.

Mulvaney blames successive state governments for actively promoting the Burrup as an industrial hub when it could easily have chosen alternative sites in a region not exactly suffering a scarcity of land.

Former WA Liberal leader

Colin Barnett, who served as state resources minister between 1993 and 2001, has conceded he was not told of the world significance of the rock art when he drew up plans for industry on the Burrup.

Now Barnett is campaigning to stop future development to try to save the art.

The National Trust wants Woodside's Pluto project and other future developments moved to Maitland, about 30 kilometres south of the Burrup and a safe distance from the rock art.

But the state Labor government, which has sunk more than \$180 million into developing infrastructure on the Burrup since 2001, says the cost of shifting future industrial developments to Maitland would be prohibitive.

Premier Alan Carpenter, who wants to attract more industry to the peninsula, has warned of economic "catastrophe" for Western Australia if the federal government grants national heritage listing to the Burrup.

For Woodside, the cost of locating the Pluto plant at Maitland – which it examined in feasibility studies – would cause a cost blowout of \$500 million for a project that is already stretched to meet budget and production deadlines.

But while Woodside has vowed to work with heritage bodies and the Burrup's indigenous custodians to minimise disruption to the rock art, it cannot claim a proud record in this area.

As many as 4000 engravings on the Burrup were lost during the construction of Woodside's North-West Shelf liquefied



**Aboriginal rock art, some of which is believed to date back 30,000 years, is threatened by industrial expansion**

natural gas plant in the 1980s. Another 2000 engraved boulders were taken from the site of the plant and placed in temporary storage, where they remain today.

Woodside declined to comment on the debate, but has said that only about 10 per cent of engravings in its proposed development site will have to be disturbed.

But that is still too many for heritage activists, who question when the industrial work will end.

Even pro-development types in the resources industry who have

seen the ancient art works up close acknowledge they are incredibly special.

About half of the carvings, which were made by removing the outer surface of the rock to create a sharp colour contrast, are schematic shapes and patterns.

Human and animal motifs are common, including turtles, fish, birds, emus, kangaroos and even the Tasmanian tiger, which has been extinct on mainland Australia for about 3000 years. Many motifs and some stone features are connected to the beliefs and ceremonial practices

of Aboriginal people in the Pilbara today.

Mulvaney, who is president of the Australian Rock Art Research Association, reckons governments could earn future revenues from the Burrup through starting to promote the Aboriginal art to international and local tourists rather than through industry.

But he does not hold out much hope. "It is absolutely shocking that the government continues to encourage industry in an area that has the highest concentration of engraved rock art in the world," Mulvaney says.