

Aboriginal rock art under threat, report

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The largest collection of ancient rock art in the world, located in the rugged northwest of Australia, should be entirely protected from industry, says a new report.

The report on the archaeology and rock art in the Dampier Archipelago was released this week by the National Trust of Australia (WA).

It fuels ongoing debate about development in the area, which is being considered for National Heritage listing.

Robin Chapple, of the National Trust, says there are around a million rock carvings on the archipelago.

And he says 500,000 of these petroglyphs are estimated to be on the Burrup Peninsula, where Woodside Energy was recently granted permission from the Western Australian government to begin development of a natural gas project.

"It's basically the largest collection of rock carvings in one location," says Chapple.

The report says some of the oldest of the carvings, which are tens of thousands of years old, include those of archaic faces.

And there are also depictions of animals that disappeared long before Europeans arrived on the continent.

For example, there are carvings of thylacines, which have been extinct on the mainland for 3000 years.



The Dampier Archipelago is home to the largest collection of rock carvings in the world
(Image: National Trust of Australia)

Chapple says the rock art is made of a very hard type of granite, which means it has been able to last longer than comparable sites elsewhere.

He says current evidence suggests the area includes up to seven distinct eras of art, each with its own style, dating between 6000 and 30,000 years old.



The report likens the rock art to the Palaeolithic art of Western Europe
(Image: National Trust of Australia)

Other evidence of prehistoric human activity on the archipelago includes food preparation sites, quarries, stone arrangements and terraces.

"It's a bit like walking into the Mary Celeste," says Chapple. "You've got this whole feeling like you're actually in someone's living room."

One of the report's key messages is that there is no complete archaeological inventory of the area.

"We don't know what's there yet ... We don't know what we're destroying," says Chapple.

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These provide archaeological "time capsules" of information on different environments, says Chapple.

For example, more depictions of marine creatures are found in the rock carvings at a time when the sea level was higher.

Chapple says scientists can use the art to trace adaptation to changing environmental conditions, including changing climate.

Industrial development

The new report notes that industrial development has seriously impacted the Dampier Archipelago since the 1960s resulting in the physical destruction of hundreds of cultural features, and thousands of individual petroglyphs.

Some have suggested a compromise in which industry is allowed to expand in the area at the expense of some rock art.

But the report says the two are incompatible.

Chapple says because the rock art covers such a vast time period and not enough is known about how it all relates to each other, the area needs to be protected and managed as a whole.

"It's a bit like saying well it's okay if we destroy a couple of Rembrandts and move the rest into the Vincent Van Gogh room because we've still got a large percentage left," he told ABC Radio.

The land also carries significance for the Aboriginal community.

"All those carving on the rock, that is our bible. It's culture drawn on those rocks," Wilfred Hicks, a senior custodian of land on the Burrup told ABC Radio.

"You see kangaroos, goannas, porcupines, emus. And all those are in the songs when Aboriginal people have their culture meetings. With all this construction going on we're going to end up with nothing."

The International Federation of Rock Art Organizations and the National Trust have nominated the Dampier Archipelago for National Heritage listing.

The federal government is considering the proposal.



The oldest carvings on the Dampier Archipelago include these face motifs (*Image: National Trust of Australia*)