

Australian petroglyphs threatened by new gas project

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The National Trust of Australia is calling for urgent measures to protect the largest collection of ancient rock art in the world, located in the rugged Dampier Archipelago in northwest Australia.

The calls took on new urgency Monday, after the state government of Western Australia approved plans to build a gas-processing facility on the Burrup Peninsula.

The National Trust, an independent agency charged with protecting heritage sites, wants a heritage listing for the region and a moratorium on industrial development.

In a report released last week, the National Trust said there are about one million rock carvings on the Dampier Archipelago, a chain of islands off a remote part of Australia.

The carvings are 6,000 to 30,000 years old and chronicle the cultural heritage of ancient Aboriginal societies.

The petroglyphs are under threat because of acid rain from existing petrochemical plants in the region, and projects that involve blasting to clear the way for development, the report said.

Western Australia's Department of Indigenous Affairs has approved a gas-processing plant for the Burrup Peninsula in a \$5-billion Australian (\$4.2-billion Cdn) project planned by Woodside Energy.

'We can destroy any amount we like'

Robin Chapple from the National Trust questioned how the project could have met environmental guidelines when it will lead to further destruction of petroglyphs.

"Currently our process of dealing with rock art on the Burrup is that we can destroy any amount we like because there's lots more," he said.

"Unfortunately, in this instance we don't know if the Mona Lisa is amongst those parts we are seeking to destroy."

Chapple said a full inventory of the art in the region has never been performed, but National Heritage estimates 20-25 per cent of the works have disappeared since the 1960s, when industrial development was first permitted on the Dampier.

Aboriginal groups have backed calls to protect the rock art.

"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 said.

"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 Western Australian government has imposed conditions on Woodside which it says will reduce the impact on petroglyphs on the Burrup.

Chapple says an art collection of this significance needs greater protection.

"It's a bit like saying, 'Well, it's OK 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 said.

Ancient faces, extinct animals

The petroglyphs include carvings of archaic faces and depictions of animals, such as thylacines, the striped dog-sized mammal also known as the Tasmanian tiger, that have become extinct.

The carvings come from seven time periods in ancient Aboriginal culture, each with its own distinctive style and subjects.

The National Heritage report recommends in-depth research into the region's archeological history so more can be learned about the ancient cultures that created the art.

An online petition opposes further industrial development and urges protection of the petroglyphs. Heritage groups are calling for world heritage status for the site.

Canada also has sites with ancient petroglyphs that are without protection. Recently rock carvings in a remote part of Nunavik suffered damage, apparently at the hands of vandals.

With files from the Australian Broadcasting Corp.