

Gas plant threatens Australia's ancient art

By Kathy Marks in Sydney

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The petroglyphs carved into the red rocks of the Burrup peninsula, on Australia's north-west coast, chronicle the lives of the Aboriginal people who have roamed this rugged region for tens of thousands of years.

The Burrup contains the world's largest concentration of ancient rock art, some of it believed to be 30,000 years old. But the carvings of human and animal figures - kangaroos, lizards, emus, even long-extinct Tasmanian tigers - are under threat. Offshore are massive reserves of natural gas, and an energy company, Woodside Petroleum, wants to build a processing plant on the remote peninsula.

That would mean the destruction of an unknown quantity of the art, prompting outrage from indigenous people and heritage organisations. But the state government in Western Australia is pressing for the project to go ahead because of its significance to the regional economy.

The final decision rests with the federal Environment and Heritage Minister, Ian Campbell, who, despite visiting the area and declaring himself awestruck, appears to be giving more weight to the economic arguments.

Mr Campbell was supposed to make a ruling this month but has deferred it. "I want to make sure all the major stakeholders, particularly the economic stakeholders, are very happy with the process, and we get what I call a win-win-win," he said. "A win for the economy, a win for the environment in terms of greenhouse gas reductions, but also putting in place a long-term management plan for the ancient rock art."

The Australian Heritage Council believes the entire peninsula qualifies for national and world heritage listing. Despite opposition from the state government, Mr Campbell indicated some of it would be protected but did not say how much.

Conservation groups fear substantial quantities of the art will be left unprotected. Tom Perrigo, director of the West Australian National Trust, believes that up to 10,000 of the hundreds of thousands of carvings have already been destroyed by industrial activity. "Would England move Stonehenge for a mine, or Egypt sell its pyramids for oil?: he said. "We have something older than both of them and we're planning to destroy them."

Robin Chapple, of the National Trust, said: "Our process of dealing with rock art on the Burrup is that we can destroy any amount we like because there's lots more. Unfortunately, in this instance we don't know if the Mona Lisa is amongst those parts we are seeking to destroy."

For Aborigines, the area holds great cultural significance. Wilfred Hicks, an elder of the Wong-Goo Tt-Oo West Ngarluma people, said the rock art was "our Bible", and it was heartbreaking to watch it being destroyed.