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Archaeologist defends Woodside's art scholarship

The archaeologist co-ordinating a project to profile rock art on the Burrup Peninsula in north-west Western Australia has defended a scholarship offered by oil giant Woodside.

The peninsula is home to Australia's largest collection of rock art, which dates back at least 7,000 years and possibly 20,000 years.

Woodside, which is planning to build a \$5 billion gas plant in the region, has announced that it will fund a three-year study into the art.

Critics say the funding is a public relations stunt to bolster the chances of Woodside's development being approved.

But Professor Ian Davidson, of the University of New England in New South Wales, says it is a well-funded study.

He says the construction of the plant is inevitable and people trying to save the rock art should work with Woodside.

"I agree entirely that it would've been far better if heavy industry had not been established in that particular place, in that particular way," he said.

"But it has been so what we now need to do is to do what we can to get the best out of situation."

Professor Davidson disputes claims that 20 per cent of the rock art has already been destroyed.

"We know of the damage to several hundred engravings which was sanctioned by the State Government at the time the [original] Woodside plant was set up," he said.

"We cannot say that 20 per cent of the engravings - 200,00 engravings - have been destroyed."

Survival uncertain

But Professor Davidson concedes there are no guarantees that the rock art will survive the development of the peninsula.

"All I can say is that they will co-exist," he said.

"The rock art can't go anywhere else, so what we have to get the best outcome from that co-existence."

But Robert Bednarik, from the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations, is dismissive of the Woodside scholarship.

"I thought it was quite funny - you have a company that is destroying the largest body in the world and same time funding a rock student," he said.

"This student won't have much to study if they keep going the way they are."