

National Heritage: Australia's Stonehenge

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Most people know the Burrup Peninsula in Western Australia — if they know it at all — from TV footage of gas tankers powering through the impossibly blue channels of the Dampier Archipelago, delivering gas to an energy hungry world from the processing plants on the remote North West coast.

What most do not appreciate, is that in the background is the most significant heritage site in Australia and the only Australian entry on the [World Monuments Fund's list](#) of the 100 most endangered places. For on the Burrup — or to give it its Indigenous name, Murujuga — is the densest concentration of rock art in the world, estimated at as many as a million petroglyphs. What some have described as 'the world's largest gallery of engraved prehistoric art.'

And most Australians are entirely ignorant of its existence.

[IslandAd]

Rock carvings are scattered through the barren rocky ridges and steep-sided valleys of the peninsula and surrounding islands. The oldest of the artwork is believed to date from the period when the Burrup was an inland range, before much of the surrounding landscape was submerged over 9000 years ago. Among the distinctive images are geometric designs, tracks of humans, animals and birds, and a huge variety of both naturalistic and figurative representations of humans and animals, some so detailed that they can be identified as particular species.

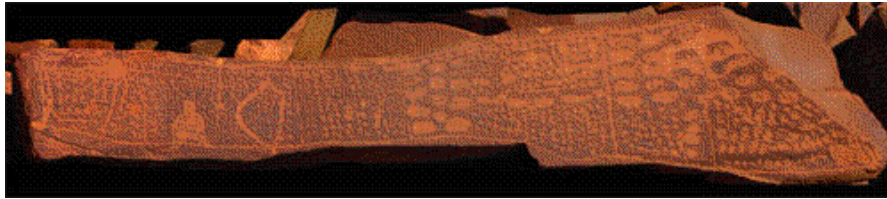
The rock art includes depictions of thylacines (Tasmanian tigers — extinct on the mainland for over 3000 years), and panels and composite images of daily activities such as hunting, which have clearly been added to over long periods of time.

Many different engraving styles are represented: scored lines made with a very fine pointed rock, pecked marks, abraded lines and indents in the dark red-black glossy patina that covers the rocks in this area.

All who have seen even part of this extensive precinct — covering the peninsula plus 42 islands over a 45 kilometre radius — marvel at the range, quality and diversity of the artwork which, together with camp sites, middens, quarries and standing stones, form an irreplaceable record of the lives of the of the local Yaburara people, many of whom were massacred by European settlers in 1868.

The National Trust has described the Dampier Rock Art Precinct as 'one of the world's pre-eminent sites of recorded human evolution and a prehistoric university.' It should be obvious that such a site is a

precious part of our heritage — indeed of the world’s heritage — deserving of careful study and preservation.



But instead of the care and reverence that we would expect to be shown to a site with the significance of [Stonehenge](#), the painted [caves of Lascaux](#) in France or the structures of [Machu Picchu](#), the rock art precinct on the Burrup has been scandalously abused, taking second place to resource exploitation for more than 40 years.

An unknown number of petroglyphs were turned to rubble when the Hamersley iron port and rail infrastructure, the town of Dampier and the Dampier Salt facilities were constructed in the 1960s and 70s. Without a thorough heritage assessment, thousands more were destroyed when Woodside Petroleum’s North West Shelf LNG plant and its associated port was constructed in the 1980s, while others were shifted from their original sites and placed in a temporary compound, left undocumented and without proper conservation for 20 years.

Despite persistent pressure on governments to properly assess the cumulative effects of the sulphur and nitrogen emissions from the LNG plant, this research has only just begun and has already been criticised for failing to deal explicitly with the question of the effects of the emissions on the rock surfaces, since it is the colour contrast between the patina and the engraving which gives the carvings their distinctive character.

The most recent assault on the rock art occurred during the construction by the State Government of an infrastructure corridor to facilitate further industrial development on the Burrup. Meanwhile, access to the site is not managed and there is no surveillance to prevent further desecration. Every day, many of the petroglyphs are exposed to possible theft and vandalism.

Although there have been a number of partial surveys of the site, many of them undertaken as part of the development approval process, it has never been the subject of a comprehensive inventory or analysis. As a result, there is no generally accepted framework for understanding the various locations and cultural elements within the site. Nor has a heritage management plan of any kind been devised. The site is



plagued by a proliferation of plans and a lack of overall co-ordination.

Successive governments — my own included — have failed to appreciate the global significance of the peninsula. Indeed the current Federal Government opposes heritage listing of ‘all or any part’ of the Burrup because of ‘potentially grave consequences’ for the resources sector. No mention of the potentially grave consequences for our heritage.

As if these problems were not grave enough, Woodside now proposes further destruction of the site to accommodate a new LNG plant, a wharf and storage facilities. They have promised not to destroy more than 10 per cent of the rock art (as if it is a series of unrelated elements), although much more will be stranded in the moonscape that is the LNG plant. It’s on a par with the actions of the 17th century Dominicans who destroyed the lower central portion of Da Vinci’s painting of ‘The Last Supper’ to accommodate a door into their Milanese monastery kitchen.

There are other options, including use of an already cleared site adjacent to the existing plant, although this may result in further pollution damage to the rocks. And is not clear why the town of Onslow, which seems to be a far superior location and already selected by BHP-Billiton for similar activity, should not be fully evaluated and costed before the Burrup is sacrificed yet again to the great God Mammon.

There is a glimmer of hope that if the site is placed on the National Heritage list, as strongly recommended by the Australian Heritage Council, a proper heritage management plan will be implemented. However, while even Woodside has now agreed that the site should be listed, the Federal Minister for Environment and Heritage, Ian Campbell, has delayed his decision, saying that, in any case, more of the rock art will have to be destroyed.

An application for emergency heritage listing was [lodged on Tuesday](#) . The Minister now has 10 days to respond.

Meanwhile, Flemington Racecourse has been listed and the Prime Minister has demanded that the PNG Government not allow a mining proposal on the Kokoda Trail because of its value to Australia’s heritage.

Anyone who’s been paying attention to Australian politics over the last few years can’t have failed to notice that there’s been a lot of talk about values. Heritage, of course, is about values — or more precisely, what we value from our past, what we are prepared to protect and conserve and to pass on to future generations.

Knowledge and experience of our heritage gives meaning to our lives, inspires us and contributes to our

collective sense of identity. The sites, landscapes and places that we choose to protect are an indication of what matters to us and what we think of ourselves.

Our actions speak louder than words.

About the author

Dr Carmen Lawrence is the Federal Member for Fremantle, Western Australia.
