

Fate of rock carvings known in 10 days

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Environment Minister Ian Campbell will decide the fate of 165 ancient Aboriginal rock carvings at Western Australia's Burrup Peninsula within 10 days.

Conservationists are worried a proposed gas project earmarked for the peninsula will destroy the carvings which date back to the last Ice Age.

The Burrup peninsula has been declared an area of National Heritage Value by the Australian Heritage Council and National Trust.

However, the declaration does not stop the area being developed.

Resources giant Woodside Petroleum wants to develop a gas project on part of the peninsula that would affect 165 carvings.

In a bid to force the government to protect the works, Australian Greens senator Rachel Siewert, Labor MP Carmen Lawrence and independent MP Peter Andren submitted an application for emergency heritage listing of the Burrup Peninsula.

Once an emergency listing application is lodged, the minister must reply within 10 days.

Under the environment conservation act, emergency heritage listings can be made if a site is directly threatened.

Senator Siewert believes the site is at risk, following the circulation of material from the WA Department of Indigenous Affairs revealing state Indigenous Affairs Minister Sheila McHale had secretly approved the development under section 18 of the WA Heritage Act.

"The reports are extremely concerning and we believe that the minister needs to move with a sense of urgency to resolve this issue," she told reporters.

WA Premier Alan Carpenter released a statement last week indicating the state's initial opposition to the heritage listing would be reconsidered following consultation with the commonwealth.

"While protecting heritage, we need to ensure that it does not constrain current projects, the capacity of industry to expand within agreed boundaries or impact on transport corridors for the facilitation of these industries," Mr Carpenter said.

A spokesman for Woodside Petroleum, which operates the \$19 billion North West Shelf gas project, said the state's new position would allow the development to start before the end of the year.

Although Senator Campbell would not confirm his position on the emergency heritage listing request, he hinted the government would override the heritage advisory, calling for an approach that protects the economic development of Australia.

"The government will not do a heritage listing that in any way constrains the expansion of that important natural gas industry in the Burrup," he said in parliament.

"Ensuring we have a healthy investment environment for expanding the natural gas exports from the Burrup Peninsula is phenomenally important for the global environment."

Senator Campbell called the use of the emergency heritage listing measure an abuse of the consultation process and an example of why it should be abolished among amendments he has introduced to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act in the Senate this week.

"It throws into doubt the entire process that has painstakingly been negotiated by myself and the West Australian Carpenter government to proceed under the new federal law which is under way in the Senate this week," he said.

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