

Burrup air quality as good as Perth suburbs



Sucking in the air: City people on a brisk walk. The air they are breathing is pretty similar to that on the Burrup Peninsula near Karratha. A sample of Burrup rock art is pictured right.



Imagine yourself on a brisk walk, striding out, sucking in the air of your local area. It could be Pegs Creek in Karratha, an isolated hillside on the Burrup Peninsula, or any residential suburb in Perth between Wanneroo and Wellard for that matter.

You will probably feel invigorated by the experience.

The fact of the matter is this: air quality in all of these places is pretty similar and pretty good. It is not corrosive, injurious to one's health, or damaging to cultural artefacts, as is sometimes claimed. Scientific facts rarely make a good headline, so these facts tend to be forgotten or misconstrued.

This is evident from the first year of science-based air quality monitoring on the Burrup Peninsula. The tests were conducted by the CSIRO's Marine and Atmospheric Research group and the organisation's manufacturing and materials technology arm (CMMT). The techniques were also independently verified and endorsed by internationally recognised experts from the US and Europe.

Commissioned by the Department of Industry and Resources and coordinated by the Burrup Rock Art Monitoring Management Committee (chaired by Associate Professor Frank Murray from Murdoch University), the air monitoring was undertaken between August 2004 and September 2005. This initial

monitoring data represents the first year of results from a four-year study.

The purpose of the exercise was to assess whether there might be impacts on Aboriginal rock art on the Burrup Peninsula resulting from industrial activity in the area.

Using state-of-the-art collection methods and involving some of Australia's leading scientists, the monitoring found no clear measurable changes in rock colour, mineralogy or microbial activity. Although this evaluation has taken place over a very short period, the observation is consistent with the good air quality that was measured by the CSIRO scientists, which in turn agreed with the results of earlier work, carried out by the Air Quality Branch of the Department of Environment and Conservation.

The monitoring included measurements for concentrations of nitrogen and sulphur oxides, nitric acid and total acid deposition fluxes. These benchmark compounds were found to be at relatively low levels, comparable with those found in the suburbs of Perth.

The results also showed, as expected, that the amount of dust (PM10) in the air on the Burrup was much higher than in the suburbs of Perth, especially near industry. The background levels of dust present in the Pilbara are much higher than those in Perth because the Pilbara is naturally a dusty place, with or without industry, the scientists noted.

The Burrup Peninsula is home to a large number of Aboriginal petroglyphs (rock engravings) which are culturally significant to Australia, and particularly to the local indigenous communities. The petroglyphs are of various ages from a few hundred to over 10,000 years old. They provide a glimpse into the life of the early inhabitants of the area.

The greater part of the Burrup has long been reserved for the protection of environmental and heritage values, as have the neighbouring islands of the Dampier Archipelago. The smaller remaining part of the Burrup has, since the 1960s, hosted some of the most important export industries in the State, one of Australia's busiest ports and the gas pipeline that supplies Perth and the State's South West. The boundaries of the Burrup Industrial Estate will not be expanded, but it holds the key to some important future developments, including Woodside's Pluto project.

The Western Australian Government remains committed to the protection and sustainable development of the Burrup Peninsula and will protect the important heritage of the area while ensuring that industry continues to prosper.

To ensure that any change resulting from new industry is taken into account, the monitoring work is ongoing.

For more details, the report can be accessed via DoIR's website: www.doir.wa.gov.au/burruprockart/monitoringresults ■