

Translation from German into English

Who Knows Australia's Greatest Cultural Treasure?

The Mining Boom threatens the rock carvings of Murujuga

An encyclopedia of Australia's history for over 8,000 years, the rock carvings of the Dampier Archipelago are probably the greatest cultural treasure of the 5th continent. Yet this is largely unknown by the public. Through the mining development 25% of the petroglyphs are already destroyed. However, finally a change emerges.

ruh. Sydney, in January

“We would like approval to remove some rocks and boulders, because we intend to build an oil rig at the site mentioned” – can anybody imagine such an application to the authorities if it concerned world famous sites such as Stonehenge, the Pyramids at Gizeh or Angkor Wat in Cambodia? Hardly. Not only imaginable but indeed officially sanctioned is such a course of action at the Murujuga [Burrup] Peninsula in Australia's Northwest. Even though it is the location – as archaeologists think – of the greatest cultural treasure on the 5th continent and one of the most important in the world: a huge accumulation of rock carvings [petroglyphs], a fantastic encyclopedia of human presence for the last 8,000 years.

But: hardly anybody knows the Burrup Peninsula – not even in Australia – and the name Murujuga is at the most known to only a tiny circle of insiders. On the other hand, Dampier, the harbour on the peninsula, is a generally well known name. Millions of tons of iron ore are loaded here and recently natural gas has been processed into liquid gas [LNG] – all for the export trade to East-Asia. Over the last four decades Dampier has become even more important. In the ocean off the northwest coast of the 5th continent are huge natural gas reserves. In order to process them into LNG, the company Woodside Petroleum wants to extend the existing facilities at Burrup Peninsula considerably.

The approvals have now been granted – by the State Government of Western Australia as well as by the Federal Government. Thus 165 rocks with petroglyphs have to make way for industry. If you consider the export revenue of billions of dollars from the sale of the gas and the jobs created by its processing, this is a justifiable step, said the then Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, Ian Campbell about a year ago. Moreover, you have to take into consideration that LNG has substantially less greenhouse gas emissions than coal and therefore contributes to the protection of the environment. In addition, you have to see the 165 rocks in relation to the estimated million petroglyphs to be found in an area of around 250 square kilometres on the Burrup Peninsula and some islands of the Dampier Archipelago.

Fight for Recognition

Robert Bednarik sees it in a different way. The Austrian born scientist more or less accidentally discovered the treasure of Murujuga about 40 years ago. He is enthusiastic about rock art. That was the reason why he went to the nearly undiscovered Pilbara region in the northwest of Australia at the other end of the world. Meanwhile he has not only become one of the most important rock art experts in the world, he has also devoted countless hours of his academic life on the Murujuga Peninsula and fought for its recognition as Australia's most significant historic-cultural place, even if hardly any one knows about it. It remains in the shadow of Uluru, the famous red monolith in the centre of the continent which is visited by hundreds of thousands of tourists every year.

Bednarik is convinced that: "If the Murujuga Peninsula were as famous as Uluru no one could treat it like they do now." He doesn't only think about the mining industry but has mainly the Government of Western Australia in mind. The government invested millions of dollars in infrastructure, like the harbour of Dampier and the town of Karratha to attract industry and development to that region. As Bednarik sees it, through stubborn efforts for the amortization of a doubtful investment [because other sites would have been more plausible], already some 25 % of petroglyphs are lost. The danger for the future is the Woodside expansion. It's not about the 165 petroglyphs that will have to be removed, it's more the emission concentration from the gas industry which creates acid rain. This affects the patina of the stones and gradually erases the carvings.

A milestone has been reached when the Murujuga rock art was finally heritage listed. For the environmentalists this was the first step to have the Dampier Archipel declared as an Unesco World Heritage site. If the petroglyphs of Murujuga are an unappreciated jewel in the crown of Australia's heritage, the question is, why is there not more tourism at the Dampier Archipelago, similar to the big attractions in Central Australia or the Kakadu National Park with its excellent rock art. "We simply don't have the capacities", is the answer of the Tourism Bureau in Karratha. The town is indeed fully utilised by the mining industry and struggles with its overstretched service industry.

So it is possible that the biggest accumulation of valuable rock art will stay simply exposed to hot sun in Australia's tropical Northwest. Robert Bednarik thinks that it is actually not such a bad thing. Of course, he is aware of the fact that more tourism would also bring more publicity and with it more protection and recognition for the heritage objects of Murujuga and probably also more money available for their conservation. But he is too much of a scientist to welcome the arrival of masses of visitors to the Murujuga Peninsula. "It should be modelled on Kakadu National Park. They got it right there. Only a few sites are accessible to the public and all the others are closed."

Double Standards

The question remains why the Dampier Archipelago, in spite of the outstanding cultural and historical significance of its petroglyphs is not mentioned in the same breath as other significant sites in the world, such as Uluru or the rock paintings in the Kakadu National

Park, and instead is so disregarded. The theories range from unfavourable general conditions (remote and difficult to access) via ignorance and incompetence of decision makers to deliberate negligence on the part of the governmental organs of a society which foremost sees worthy of protection what originates from the culture of European settlers in Australia.

Bednarik makes even stronger statements. He speaks of government-sanctioned vandalism, which may even be used to eliminate a historical atrocity. The atrocity was the massacre of the Yaburrara Aboriginal tribe, the original inhabitants of the Murujuga Peninsula, by the white settlers. The exact circumstances are not clear and records are one sided, namely the side of the settlers. However, it is clear that tensions escalated between Aboriginals and Europeans in February 1868 which led to skirmishes resulting in the murder of almost all of the perhaps 100-220 Yaburrara.

Whether ignoring the treasure of the Murujuga petroglyphs by the government of Western Australia was indeed the result of a deliberate endeavor to wipe the memory of a detestable event remains a matter of conjecture. It is certain, however, that Australia uses different value judgements when addressing cultural and historical events and memorials connected to Aboriginal people as opposed to matters of modern Australia's history.

One and a half years ago there was a public and political outcry when a (in fact, Australian) mining company introduced a plan to dig for gold under the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea. The Kokoda Track was a scene of fighting between Australian and Japanese forces in 1942 and is one of the most important Australian sites to remember the Second World War. If this mine eventuates, a short part of the track would have to follow a different route in a few years' time for the final stages of the mine. To prevent this from happening the government of Australia as well as the opposition were doing everything possible – at a time when the petroglyphs of the Murujuga were (still) not deemed worthy of their protection.

[Translated by Frauke Chambers, Annemarie Hindinger, Ute Wilke]
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