

Kimberley threatened by mining boom

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The pristine Kimberley Region in Western Australia is one of the nation's natural wonders but that could change if a multi-million dollar gas project gets the green light. Environmentalists are up in arms but the traditional landowners believe they're entitled to reap the financial rewards.

Transcript

KERRY O'BRIEN: The Pilbara region of WA is known as the hub of the Australian resources boom but now there's pressure on pristine parts of the Kimberley region further north to cash in on the seemingly endless riches.

A \$40 billion liquefied natural gas project has been proposed that includes a massive production plant on islands that feature turtles, dugongs and sensitive coral reefs.

The Federal and Western Australian Governments have announced they will fast track environmental assessments of proposals, but the final decision will lie with the region's traditional land owners, represented by the Kimberley Land Council.

The Council says it doesn't want to sacrifice its cultural heritage but is all too aware the revenue may provide a welfare free future for its people.

Hamish Fitzsimmons reports from the Kimberley.

MALCOLM DOUGLAS, SAVE THE KIMBERLEY: The north-west Kimberley is one of the most important pristine savanna woodland left in the world. It's to us, it's as important as Antarctica or the Great Barrier Reef.

HAMISH FITZSIMMONS: The Kimberley is a land full of mystery and beauty and also bountiful natural resources. It's those resources that include gas and minerals which are now being eyed off by the world's miners. The biggest prize is the offshore Browse Basin, which holds huge gas reserves.

WAYNE BERGMANN, KIMBERLEY LAND COUNCIL: These are multi-billion dollar projects and traditional owners should expect no less than a multi-billion dollar deal.

HAMISH FITZSIMMONS: The Kimberley Land Council knows this is a once in a lifetime chance to deal Indigenous people into the resources boom. It has the task of choosing which parts of the coastline it might have to give up for the greater good.

WAYNE BERGMANN: Our people are living in absolute poverty and crisis. We can't turn our back on that. We've got, we have a responsibility to try and change that.

MINERALS AND ENERGY REPRESENTATIVE: Where we look at these projects is being very much the cornerstone of the resurgence of the West Kimberley. We see the Browse projects as a once in a generation opportunity for the West Kimberley community in terms of bringing a whole host of new industrial development.

HAMISH FITZSIMMONS: The development plans have sparked emotional opposition from the community. As head of the Land Council, Wayne Bergmann is largely responsible for trying to negotiate a revenue agreement that will provide for the future of the indigenous community and strike a delicate social and cultural balance.

WAYNE BERGMANN: We've just flown this morning to Jarlmadangah and we've been talking to Johnny Watson, Anthony, William Watson.

HAMISH FITZSIMMONS: His days are spent travelling the vast tracks of the Kimberley speaking to traditional owners like the Bardi people here at One Arm Point. Frank Davey is one of the senior people Wayne Bergmann is seeking to win over.

FRANK DAVEY, BARDI ELDER: Money is not really important us to, our culture is more important. It's a very hard thing for us to sell. We never ever sold any of our culture. And we are there to protect it.

WAYNE BERGMANN: We have to know seriously the extent of the development of that project and to what extent they are going to affect our cultural values, the heritage values, the environmental values.

HAMISH FITZSIMMONS: The remote Maret islands off the far north-west coast are the site of the biggest proposal in the region. A \$40 billion liquefied natural gas plant for a Japanese company, Inpex. The Marets host a large turtle rookery and its waters are home to dugongs and migratory whales.

MALCOLM DOUGLAS: Our concern is that they are going to decimate the turtle rookery on the island.

HAMISH FITZSIMMONS: The opposition to any development on the Maret islands and the rest of the Kimberley is growing in strength and voice. The Save the Kimberley is campaigning nationally and started with this cruise on Sydney Harbour.

ALBERT WIGGAN, BARDI MAN: The only way you can really truly grasp the Kimberley is through your heart.

HAMISH FITZSIMMONS: Some traditional owners like Bardi man Albert Wiggan have joined the Save the Kimberley campaign. He doesn't believe the short-term gain from the development is worth the long-term impact.

ALBERT WIGGAN: It is the environment, it is the country and it's a land that make us who we are.

Without the land, and without the country, we belong to nothing.

And we end up nothing.

HAMISH FITZSIMMONS: Save the Kimberley has also enlisted high profile recruits like film-maker Malcolm Douglas, who also runs a popular crocodile farm near Broome.

MALCOLM DOUGLAS: There are very few wilderness areas left in the world. Wilderness areas in 100 or 200 years are going to be more economically important to the good and well being of the people of

Australia and the rest of the world, than sticking some LNG plant up on the island there for 40 years.

HAMISH FITZSIMMONS: The KLC wants money from resources development to flow throughout the Kimberley to places like the Jarlmadangah community more than 150km from the coast. Here, the community has created its own employment programs and it also runs its own school but it wants to do more.

ANTHONY WATSON, JARLMADANGAH COMMUNITY: To get real welfare, that we want to be independent. It's one of our dreams.

HAMISH FITZSIMMONS: Creating more jobs is proving harder and that's where people like Anthony Watson believe resources revenue will make a big difference.

ANTHONY WATSON: The difficulty is getting funds to hit the ground to actually do those programs, there's a shortage of jobs within this region, and shortage of infrastructure to actually to work under or to use as their job.

HAMISH FITZSIMMONS: There is a feel of caution about the arrival of the resources companies. Elders look south to what they see as the mistakes made by other Indigenous people in preserving their heritage.

Developments like that on the Burrup Peninsula where parts of the world's largest collection of rock art have been removed, worry senior lawman in the Kimberley like John Watson.

JOHN WATSON, JARLMADANGAH COMMUNITY: If it's gone the right way, through the Land Council, certainly it will be a benefit to people. Otherwise if those mining companies are taking short cuts the people are not going to get no benefit.

WAYNE BERGMANN: The Aboriginal participation down south in the Pilbara, in Karratha is not something to be proud of. The management of Aboriginal heritage is not something to be proud of. There is no way we're going to let that kind of record stand in the Kimberley.

HAMISH FITZSIMMONS: There's little doubt the stakes are high in the growth of resources development in the Kimberley. One thing both parties in the debate agree on is that this is a crucial point in time in the history of the region.

WAYNE BERGMANN: We want to find a balance between development and an environment and our culture.

MALCOLM DOUGLAS: Hypothetically they do allow the development up there. There is going to be a campaign not in Australia, there's going to be a worldwide campaign, it's going to be bigger than the Franklin River and if they think we're going to take this lying down, there's no way that we will.

KERRY O'BRIEN: That may be a story that we will be having to keep in touch with. Hamish Fitzsimmons with that report.