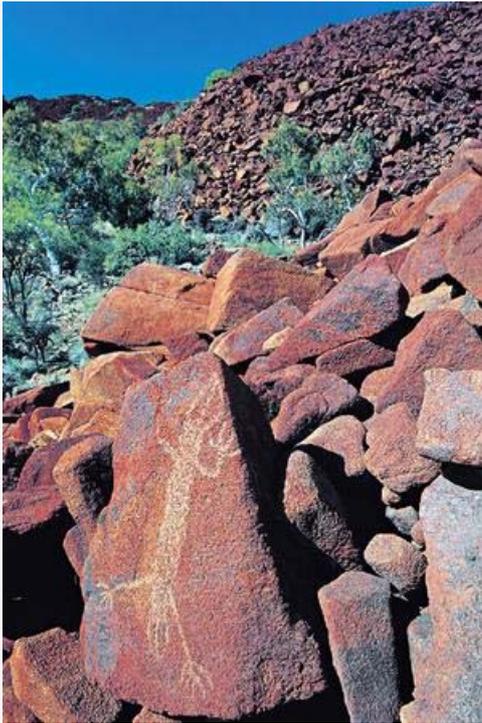


Garrett steps in to protect ancient Pilbara rock art from mining

Sarah Smiles
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National heritage: Some of the prehistoric Aboriginal art near Dampier, on the Pilbara.
Photo: *Western Australian Tourism Commission*

ENVIRONMENT Minister Peter Garrett has taken a tough stand on protecting Aboriginal rock art threatened by the mining boom in Western Australia by refusing to give the State Government total control of development on the Burrup Peninsula.

The rock art of the Pilbara's Burrup, regarded as one of the world's most endangered heritage sites, has been damaged by mining companies since the 1960s. Engravings of humans and animals dating back 30,000 years have been blown up, bull-dozered or moved, including a compound of rocks dumped in scrubland at Hearson Cove by Woodside Petroleum in the 1980s.

"I think it's highly regrettable that there's been any destruction of rock art," said Mr Garrett of the engravings which pre-date Stonehenge and Egypt's pyramids. "There's no doubt that if everybody had an opportunity to go back 15 to 20 or 30 years and start again (in the Burrup), then there would have been some pretty serious thinking about the best way to ensure that these cultural matters were given real consideration."

In an interview with *The Age*, Mr Garrett said Aboriginal heritage was of equal value and importance as other landmarks such as the Kokoda Trail.

Part of the Burrup was listed as national heritage last year, giving the Commonwealth authority over it under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. But the State Government wants Mr Garrett to cede his control to approve development proposals, citing the need to remove "red tape".

"There's quite a confused legal situation if you like," said Eric Ripper, Western Australia's Deputy Premier and Minister for State Development, of the need for state and Commonwealth approval. His Government has drafted a bilateral agreement for the Commonwealth to transfer some of its powers, but Mr Garrett has yet to sign it. "We want to share decision making (about future development)," said Mr Garrett, who is still negotiating the terms of the agreement. He said that negotiations were "constructive" but that the Commonwealth had an "important role to play in matters of national environment significance".

Mr Garrett acknowledged the economic potential of industry on the Pilbara, which generates thousands of jobs and billions for the Australian economy. But he said environment and

heritage values must be considered at the "front end" of any development proposals to minimise further destruction.

Archaeologists estimate there are anywhere between 500,000 and 1 million engravings on the Burrup — the world's largest collection of engravings or petroglyphs. They depict images from archaic faces to emu and fish and have remained well preserved because of the hardness of the Burrup's rock.

Former WA premier Carmen Lawrence and resources minister Colin Barnett have lamented the destruction of the art, saying they never fully grasped the significance of the area as it was being developed into an industrial hub.

There has never been a comprehensive study of the extent of the art there.

The Federal Court ruled in 2005 that native title rights were extinguished on the Burrup, where the original inhabitants were wiped out in a massacre in 1868. A controversial agreement brokered with corresponding clan groups in 2003 authorised major industrial developments on the southern end of the Burrup. Some Aboriginal groups believe the West Australian Government is approving development without conducting appropriate heritage clearances.

Former Greens MP Robin Chapple warns that giving the State Government total control of development would be like "putting Dracula back in charge of the blood bank". He said former governments had not valued the art and the current one should not be trusted.

Images from a time before the pyramids and Stonehenge

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THE Burrup Peninsula rock art pre-dates the pyramids and Stonehenge and maps a history of human settlement on the continent as far back as the ice age.

Its significance has been recognised by world renowned archaeologists. But art critic Robert Nelson, of Monash University, said the Burrup art was "a very neglected field (of) Australian cultural history".

It is difficult to determine the age of the engravings, but some believe they date back 30,000 years. Archaeologist Ken Mulvaney said the art was unique because it related a constant history of human settlement and environmental change.

The older art depicts megafauna and the now extinct Tasmanian tiger. Mr Mulvaney believes the rock art continued until 1868, when the Yaburara tribe was massacred.