

Aboriginal heritage on the rocks

The Burrup Peninsula in Western Australia contains the largest concentration of Aboriginal rock art in the world – some of it as old as 30,000 years. Last year the federal government placed 99% of the islands in the Dampier archipelago, of which the Burrup is a part, on the National Heritage list. The remaining 1% is leased to Woodside, Australia's second biggest oil and gas producer, which is building a processing plant for its offshore natural gas reserve. The development will mean the destruction or relocation of thousands of the petroglyph-covered rocks. It has sparked the outrage of Wilfred Hicks, an elder of the Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo, Aboriginal custodians of the land

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A rock with ancient etchings stands near the site of the Woodside oil and gas plant. Photograph: Carmela Ferraro

The Burrup Peninsula is full of rocks with lots of carvings – kangaroos, emus, snakes, dogs, turtles, whales, people – there's everything carved on those rocks. It's also a deeply spiritual place. You walk out there, especially around some gorges, and you can feel the spirits. European people and anthropologists or other scientists who have been there at night say that it's frightening, that they get goose pimples when they walk around.

The Burrup means everything to our people. All that we know, that we sing about, that has been taught to us through our elders, is based on what is carved on those rocks out there. Our ancestors created each and every one of those engravings for a reason – a spiritual reason.

But the mining companies are destroying what's there. They say that they don't break the rocks anymore, that they just shift them. But the moment you move a rock with a carving of a person, a snake or whatever on it, you've broken its spirit. It's the same as moving someone from their grave. The spirit mourns, it cries for the place it was forced to leave.

The National Heritage listing of the Burrup was, of course, a great thing. But it hasn't lessened the threat to the land: Woodside will have to shift a lot of rocks to make room for its new processing plant. And it's not going to stop there. Woodside is not talking to us and hasn't been informing us of its plans for a while now, but I believe the company intends to dramatically increase its business in the future. This can only mean more development in the area.

We can't work out why the government leased Woodside that 1% [of the Dampier archipelago islands] – it's the very area that was in danger and that we wanted to protect. The whole Burrup should be seen as one, rather than bits and pieces. The rocks link to each other and should be left where they belong.

Mind, my people and the other two local Aboriginal custodian groups do have an agreement with the state government about industrial development on the Burrup. But I can't talk too much about that. All I can tell you is that it's not worth the paper it's written on.

I can say that they must want the development – the dollars. But the Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo [one of the land's traditional custodian groups, of which Wilfred Hicks is an elder] are not trying to stop development. What's there already, we can't do anything about. After all, we can't expect the companies to pack up and move. And the economics is good – for them, the state, the country – even for our people: we get jobs out of it.

But rather than adding to the demise of our heritage by creating a new facility, why can't Woodside take its new buildings, trucks and pipeline further out? There's plenty of empty land for them to go to. Apache Energy moved 40km down and they're not having any problems. It wouldn't effect the business side of it, and people would still get to keep their jobs – they'd just be working in a different area. Woodside reckons it's too expensive to move elsewhere. But what: they'd rather see our heritage get broken, our bible torn apart?

At the moment we're working hard to get the Burrup on the World Heritage list so that it gets the respect it deserves. After all, the Burrup is there for everybody – like Stonehenge in England, which by the way is thousands of years younger than this rock art. We've been pushing for the listing for the past three to four years. The International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (Ifrao) has been helping us with making applications to the minister, that sort of thing. But we've got nowhere so far. We can't get the state government to back it.

They say that it's state government land, that the Burrup isn't within the boundary areas handed down as part of the native title around these parts. The courts rejected our claim. They reckoned that native title no longer exists over the Burrup because the original group was wiped out in a massacre and is no longer a distinct group. But that's not right. My people, being the closest group to them, had close ties with them, and some of us are the descendants of those who escaped.

But it's not just the Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo who cry over the destruction and desecration of our land. All the other Aboriginal groups around here are also upset. I have to say, it didn't help matters that at first the other groups didn't want the World Heritage listing. I don't know if it was because they valued the money over their heritage, or because the powers that be encouraged us to fight so that we would be divided, which would leave them to do as they liked. But seeing the damage now, the others are coming in and saying that what has been done to our country should never have happened.

We now all want World Heritage protection for the Burrup. Without it the damage will only get worse, and eventually there'll be nothing left.

- Wilfred Hicks was speaking to Carmela Ferraro.