



Australia's ancient Aboriginal rock art at risk, experts say

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BURRUP PENINSULA, Australia (AFP) — Australia's greatest ancient Aboriginal rock art is at risk of being damaged or destroyed because it sits at the epicentre of the country's resources boom, experts say.

The etchings of men and animals on the rocks of the Burrup Peninsula, some of which are believed to be up to 30,000 years old, lie in Western Australia's remote and mineral-laden Pilbara region.

Images carved onto the red rocks scattering the landscape include kangaroos, lizards and emu tracks as well as the extinct native Tasmanian tiger which died out on the mainland 6,000 years ago.

Among the most significant panels are those showing human faces and activities and what experts believe are mythical figures.

"One of the pictures is depicting movement, is showing a man climbing a tree; probably to go hunting a possum or something like that," says archaeologist and anthropologist Sue Smalldon.

"The depiction of movement is quite rare in historic art around the world."

But the peninsula is also seeing increasing industrial activity, including a gas processing plant, a fertiliser factory and iron ore port facilities, making it the only place in Australia to feature on the World Monuments Fund's list of the most endangered sites.

Smalldon believes the rock art has suffered since mining took off in the Pilbara, which holds some of the richest mineral deposits on earth, in the 1960s.

"We had nearly one million panels of rock art," Smalldon told AFP.

"That's what so important about it. Yes, it's important to culture, yes, it's important aesthetically and for other reasons. But from an international perspective, it's the greatest concentration of rock art in the world."

She said the threat to the art has intensified in recent years as mining and energy companies drain the region of iron ore, natural gas and other resources to feed the huge demand for raw materials from Asia.

Smalldon cites the removal of rock art from the area by energy producer Woodside Petroleum to build a new liquified natural gas (LNG) plant, as an indicator of how industrial development threatens the works.

"Archaeologists, anthropologists, Aboriginal people -- we all said 'no don't do it'," she said.

Woodside said it tried to avoid rock engravings when it designed its Burrup LNG Park but that 170 boulders containing art which could not be avoided were moved to nearby natural settings with the guidance of indigenous custodians.

"No rock art was damaged or destroyed during this process and the relocated boulders are now indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape," a spokesman for the company told AFP.

But Smalldon is unimpressed.

"It's like saying Stonehenge is a round circular site, let's remove two of the stones," she said.

"You're removing a percentage of the rock art and therefore reducing the significance of it. You've got to think of it as the Aboriginal people think of it -- as a whole. They see it as a place, they don't see it as individual rock art."

Smalldon has taken other affronts in her explorations over the past seven years including crude graffiti scratched into rocks bearing thousand-year-old images and construction camps built around sacred Aboriginal men's sites.

Part of the problem is the lack of management for the art works which are scattered over 88 square kilometres around the peninsula some 1,300 kilometres (800 miles) north of Perth.

The government placed the Burrup rock art on the National Heritage List in mid-2007 but as yet there are no fenced-off areas and no walkways to guide visitors to the sites where kangaroos, echidnas and other native fauna roam wild.

Aboriginal middens, the dumping grounds for the remains of shellfish eaten by local tribes which provide a rich source of material for archaeologists, have been trampled by unsuspecting visitors.

The road into the peninsula has a gas pipeline along one side, while the Burrup Fertiliser factory lies close to important pieces.

People wanting to view the rock art must scramble over boulders for a vantage point and the only nod to authority is a small sign asking visitors to "Please help preserve this site for the future".

"It's just so sad," said Smalldon. "There has been no management for this archaeology to date.

"Anywhere with this level of significance, heritage of this significance, you would have management in place, in my opinion. Somewhere equivalent like Stonehenge or Kakadu - all of those places have management in place."

The lack of management also means it is possible for theft to occur. The worst case involves vandals removing at least one rock face with power tools.

"People take these rocks away. If there's a small rock with an engraving on it, people have been stealing them," Smalldon said.

Robert Bednarik, who since discovering the rock art in the 1960s has been a passionate defender of the area, said the industrial development of the Burrup was an "enormous planning blunder" given the importance of the art.

"Western Australia has one of the lowest population densities in the world. We have oodles of land, we have enormous stretches of coastal spinifex plains that are completely unoccupied," he said.

"And what do we do? We put the biggest industrial development in the country at the same site as the biggest cultural heritage site in the country. It's incredible."

Austrian-born Bednarik, an epistemologist who has published widely on archaeology, believes industrial emissions pose the biggest risk to the art and will gradually strip away the etchings.

"The only rock art, the only petroglyphs that you are going to see 100 years from now are those very, very deeply carved. And they of course are a small minority," he said.

Woodside and the government deny the assertion, saying air monitoring on the Burrup has found air emissions to be well below national and international environmental and health standards and are not impacting rock art.

Western Australia's Deputy Premier Eric Ripper said the state government was establishing Murujuga National Park, to be jointly managed with the indigenous community, over parts of the Burrup that lie in National Heritage areas.

An Aboriginal heritage management plan to guide the protection of indigenous heritage and culture in the wider Dampier Archipelago had also been developed.

"We recognize the immense national cultural and heritage values of the area and believe a cooperative approach between all of these groups is the best way to manage and protect those heritage values," he said.

But local Aboriginal leaders such as Wilfred Hicks, from the Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo people which claim a connection to the Burrup, remain concerned about the site.

"I'm very worried about it. All my people are worried about it because it's destroying all the Aboriginal art," he said.

"To me, there's enough development now, I don't think there should be any more."