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Hundreds march to save rock art
By Layla Tucak

HUNDREDS of people yesterday marched on the Burrup Peninsula in Western Australia's remote north to protest against the state Government's endorsement of six new multi-billion dollar industries which they claim could destroy the area's ancient rock art.

The Burrup, near Karratha, contains the world's highest known concentration of engraved rock art, or petroglyphs, believed to be up to 10,500 years old. But it is also home to Australia's prosperous northwest gas industry.

The open-air art gallery, which protesters claim successive governments have failed to recognise by committing money to its conservation, impressed Prince Charles when he visited the area in the early 90s.

Yesterday about 600 people, including representatives from Roebourne Shire, the Greens, One Nation and the Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo -- one of three Aboriginal groups that claim ownership of the land -- met State Development Minister Clive Brown to protest against the plans.

The proposal includes ammonia, fertiliser and methanol plants.

Greens MLC Robin Chapple said the state and federal governments together had committed \$220 million to the development but not a cent to conservation of the area.

He said there had never been a comprehensive environmental assessment of the Burrup or of the 1 million historic engravings.

Months after Premier Geoff Gallop delivered a speech on sustainability, the Government approved a \$400 million Hismelt pig iron plant at Kwinana, committed millions to the Burrup development and appears to be pushing for at least one new coal-fired power station. Community consultation has been a catchcry of the Government but Roebourne Shire claims it was not applied to them in relation to the Burrup plans.

Protesters yesterday said it would be a "crime" and a "tragedy" to develop the Burrup especially when a nearby industrial estate at Maitland could be used as an alternative site. Mr Chapple said the \$220million subsidy would be better spent at Maitland.

"Maitland would be cheaper to development because the site costs are halved ... the Burrup is all rock, Maitland isn't," he said.

"And industry emissions would not blow over the rock art and the town -- like they would on the Burrup."

But Mr Brown said advice to the Government was that Maitland would be the more costly venture due to the amount of infrastructure needed. He said the state stood to lose billions of dollars if the developments did not go ahead on the Burrup.

“It takes a long time to secure these investments and the Government must honour its agreements,” Mr Brown said.

Environment Minister Judy Edwards defended the Government's stand.

“Any development whether it be a power station or an industry on the Burrup has to go pass an environmental impact assessment,” she said.