

This is a transcript of AM broadcast at 0800 AEST on local radio.

Claim Aboriginal rock art neglected

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LINDA MOTTRAM: Some of the country's most significant Aboriginal rock art has been damaged or gone missing and there's confusion over who's responsible. The work includes some 18,000 petroglyphs, or rock carvings, and they've been housed in a compound in the remote north of Western Australia, near the Northwest Shelf Gas project.

But an independent report has revealed serious neglect of one of the greatest single concentrations of such art anywhere in the world. From Perth, Tanya Nolan reports.

TANYA NOLAN: Industry has always taken precedence over most else on the Burrup Peninsula in the remote northwest but the operator of the Northwest oil and gas project, the nation's single resource development, says it's concerned that the rock art which was removed to make way for it isn't being cared for.

Meath Hammond is Woodside's Indigenous Affairs adviser.

MEATH HAMMOND: Woodside would like to see the rocks of the compound managed in a way which respects the cultural and scientific value of the engraving.

TANYA NOLAN: Does it concern you that the report actually found a significant proportion of damage amongst those 18-hundred or so petroglyphs?

MEATH HAMMOND: I think that didn't come as a surprise to those people who make regular visits to the compound. The boulders were placed in there 20 years ago and as far as I know, there has been very little productivity taken in the management of those engravings. Personally, I wasn't all that surprised to be made aware that there was damage to some of those boulders.

TANYA NOLAN: Woodside recently commissioned a report to determine the state of about 1800 petroglyphs being housed in a compound near the gas plant and it found that many of the boulders are missing, have been broken and damaged by fire, and that some of the more significant ones are lying face down in the dirt.

But the Western Australian Museum, which has had responsibility for the site since its vesting in the early 1980s, says it's only been aware of its obligations for the past few years.

A spokeswoman for the Museum says that before that it was left in the control of the Aboriginal sites department, which separated from the museum leaving it no documentation about the rock art.

It is a situation which has left none more displeased than the area's traditional owners, with several groups contesting native title over the Peninsula.

But John Hackwell, CEO of one of the claimant groups, the Nalima Ingibandi Foundation, says the blame can't be laid squarely with the museum.

JOHN HACKWELL: The area of course is under native title claim and I guess until that is settled, there wouldn't really be a consensus.

TANYA NOLAN: And the native title dispute which has been raging on the Burrup Peninsula for many years now, looks no closer to resolution, with the area tipped for billions of dollars worth of industrial development.

But President of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations, Robert Bednarik, says continued inertia over the future of the petroglyphs or further development at the site could both spell doom for the ancient rock gallery.

ROBERT BEDNARIK: Even at it's best rate, there is not going to be terribly much rock art left at the end of the century. But if we increase the rate, as it has been proposed, by three times, then of course the deterioration would correspondingly accelerate. We predict on current indications that the first loss will be quite noticeable by about 2025 or 2030.

LINDA MOTTRAM: Robert Bednarik, President of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations, speaking to Tanya Nolan in Perth.

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