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Industry kicks up the red dust of history

By Amanda Hodge * Environment writer

KEVIN Richards was a plumber working for Woodside Petroleum almost 20 years ago when he helped remove 1800 Aboriginal rock carvings from the site chosen for the company's North West Shelf oil and gas plant and put them inside a fenced compound overlooking the beautiful Hearsons Cove on the Burrup Peninsula, 1700km north of Perth.

The images of daily and spiritual life etched into red-tinged rock had lain undisturbed for more than 10,000 years.

These days, as mayor of Roebourne Shire, which takes in the now heavily industrialised Burrup Peninsula, the guilt is catching up with Mr Richards.

``When this was all removed we were led to believe it would be reinstated in a place suitable to the traditional owners. We've been trying for years to get something done and nothing seems to happen."

A new report commissioned by Woodside into the state of the compound where the rock etchings are piled up has found damage to 20 per cent of the pieces and highlighted an extraordinary management vacuum. The Australian Cultural Heritage Management report found some pieces had been fractured by bushfires and others were lying face down in the dirt.

The rock art also faces a threat from plans to develop new petro-chemical plants on the peninsula. Mr Richards points to at least four proposed development sites.

Traditional owner David Daniels says any attempt to build industrial plants near the engravings without negotiation with Aboriginal people will ignite enormous anger.

``Where they want to put those companies is right near our engraving sites," he said. ``The art was given to us by our ancestors, it represents our country and it's important it's passed down to the next generations."

The West Australian Government has defended the proposals, which include the development of methanex, fertiliser and nitrogen plants, saying they will not affect the majority of the rock art.

That is despite submissions from the West Australian Museum recommending the sites be awarded National Heritage status and warnings from the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations that the damage from nitrogen and sulphur emissions would cause serious damage to the engravings within 30 years and eventually completely erode them.

``Putting a methanex plant at Hearson's Cove would be like putting a refinery at Bondi," Mr Richards said.