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Bulldozer threat to ancient Aboriginal art
By Nick Squires in Sydney
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A remote stretch of the Australian coastline that is home to the largest collection of Aboriginal rock art in the world is under threat from a plan to exploit the area's oil and gas reserves.

The engravings, which depict human figures, mysterious abstract motifs and extinct animals such as the Tasmanian tiger, are etched into boulders and rock faces on the Burrup peninsula in Western Australia. The Aborigines whose ancestors carved the designs over 20,000 years were wiped out by disease and the colonial police in the 19th century.

Today the 12-mile peninsula's main occupants are the huge oil and gas processing plants whose plans for expansion have outraged conservationists.

They argue that bulldozing or removing any of the petroglyphs would be cultural vandalism akin to the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan.

"It's the equivalent of finding oil under Stonehenge and deciding to blow it up," said Tom Perrigo, the director of the National Trust of Western Australia. "There could be a million carvings out there - they've not even been properly surveyed."

At least 4,800 engravings have already been destroyed since the industrialisation of the area began in the 1970s. Last year the peninsula was placed on a list of the world's 100 most endangered sites.

The government of Western Australia announced this week that it would fight an attempt to have the rock art placed on the National Heritage list, which would afford it greater protection.

"We are trying very hard to work with industry and the Aboriginal community to minimise any impact on individual rock art sites while also managing the multi-billion dollar industry in the area," the department of industry said in a statement.

One of the companies planning a new plant on the peninsula, Woodside Energy, has conceded that some carvings will inevitably be destroyed.

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