

Engrave danger

Governments have to find a path between encouraging exports and protecting our rock-art capital, writes **Victoria Laurie**

WHEN it comes to choosing between heritage and economic progress, Western Australia finds itself between a rock and a hard place. More precisely, between rock-art precincts of great antiquity and a China-driven resource boom that is demanding some parts be bulldozed out of industry's way.

To get a first-hand view of the conflict, federal Environment and Heritage Minister Ian Campbell last month clambered over rocky outcrops on the remote Burrup Peninsula, a 20km long, 5km wide strip of land jutting out from the northwest Pilbara coast. In the distance, he would have spied Burrup's sprawling industrial estate, where billions of dollars have been invested since the mid-1960s.

Heritage conservation was then no impediment to the North West Shelf partners when they were building a giant gas-processing plant there. Rio Tinto also built the Hamersley iron-ore port. Billions more in infrastructure spending is on the drawing board for offloading facilities, plants and roads. Take Woodside Energy, which is considering an onshore processing plant on the peninsula's western side for its Pluto gas platform, located 195km off the Pilbara coast.

As he climbed the craggy Pilbara landscape, Campbell's focus of interest lay at his feet: rock faces carved with human and animal figures of extraordinary beauty, including rare images of the Tasmanian tiger or thylacine. How an ancient culture managed to carve tens of thousands of images into granite during periods dating back possibly 3000 and up to 20,000 years ago is still a mystery.

"They're just absolutely fantastic," enthuses Campbell, whose trip was recorded by a Channel 9 film crew.

"What was amazing to me was the clarity of the illustrations, some of which are as sharp as computer drawings: emus, lizards, turtles, kangaroos, people. On the face of it, this is of incredibly high heritage value to Australia."

It will be welcome news to rock-art advocates, who suggest that Campbell fronting a commercial TV crew means

he can hardly turn around and refuse to list the Burrup Peninsula on the National Heritage Register, which would afford it the highest level of commonwealth protection.

With the decision officially not due until September, Campbell balks at giving an outright yes but drops heavy hints that a form of listing will happen. "The boundaries are an issue we have to look at," he tells *Inquirer*.

This is bad news for local industries such as the North West Shelf Venture, which has registered its opposition with Campbell's office. So has the WA Government: it opposes heritage listing "all or any part" of the Burrup, citing "potentially grave consequences" for resource players who have already invested more than \$35 billion in infrastructure there.

"It is an unhappy coincidence that Australia's most significant rock-art site happens to coincide with arguably Australia's most important industrial site," observes Colin Barnett, a former state resources minister and Liberal leader and still a state MP.

Barnett's reaction is typical of the Johnny-come-lately way the issue of Burrup's archeological treasure trove has been handled. Now a passionate convert to rock-art preservation, Barnett signed off on deals that consigned some rock engravings to rubble during his time as resources minister from 1993 to 2001. "Perhaps, to my shame, I did not at that time recognise the significance of the rock art or indeed its scale," he admits.

Campbell says existing industry should not leave the Burrup, but any new projects should be directed to greenfields sites south of the peninsula. "It would be a national shame if the art isn't protected."

Yet the blunt truth is the nation barely knows it exists, an ignorance that frustrates experts who cite the Pilbara's rock-art marvels like a mantra. It is the world's largest rock-art precinct, with perhaps 300,000 items scattered across the peninsula and more on adjacent islands in the Dampier Archipelago.

Apart from intriguing puzzles such as the thylacine drawings, there are standing stones that hint at mysterious Aboriginal rituals and activities.

"There are megalithic stone arrangements, rock warrens and little caves," says Burrup expert and author Robert Bednarik, who accompanied Campbell. "I've been saying for decades that it is important."

By sheer coincidence, the federal minister witnessed first-hand evidence of destruction after Bednarik went in search of a particular standing stone that features on the cover of his book on Burrup art, *Australian Apocalypse: The Story of Australia's Greatest Cultural Monument*. "I discovered it was bulldozed immediately before our visit and I showed him," says Bednarik. "It was extremely ironic and demonstrated the point."

Another perceived threat is rain-water acidity, dust deposits and higher gas concentrations from industry, leading to a CSIRO study, as yet incomplete, of possible effects on rock faces. Many artefacts remain undocumented. Ironically, mining companies have funded most anthropological surveys in a bid to determine what lies in their path. Woodside alone estimates it has spent \$5 million since 2002 documenting Burrup sites.

In 1996, more than half the peninsula was set aside for conservation, heritage and recreation. But that offers no guarantees of protection, says the WA branch of the National Trust. It is watching closely to see if state Culture and Arts and Indigenous Affairs Minister Sheila McIlhale allows the removal of protected status from another abundant rock-art precinct 150km south of the Burrup, in the Abydos-Woodstock pastoral region.

The entire 150,000ha area is protected under the state's Aboriginal Heritage Act, but mining entrepreneur Andrew Forrest plans to build a railway through it to Port Hedland, metres away from another line owned by BHP Billiton.

Deadlines are tight if his Fortescue Metals Group is to deliver its first consignments of Pilbara iron ore to Chinese customers by 2008. Lifting heritage protection over the rail corridor would permit artefacts to be moved out of the way, although Fortescue says it will inflict minimal damage and fence off affected sites.

Indigenous author Sally Morgan,

who wrote *My Place*, has bought into the argument on behalf of the Palku people, to whom her mother belongs. Morgan flew to the Pilbara last month, when McHale was inspecting the site, and put an argument in favour of rerouting the line and leaving the artefacts alone. Says Morgan: "I don't ever want to be in the position of taking my great-grandchildren to a museum, looking through the glass of a display cabinet at a rock engraving and saying, 'Our country was once covered with such beauty.'"

Up to 10,000 Burrup engravings have already been destroyed by industrial activity or moved to a fenced area, says National Trust director Tom Perrigo. "Would England move Stonehenge for a mine or Egypt sell its

pyramids for oil? We have something older than both of them and we're planning to destroy them," he says.

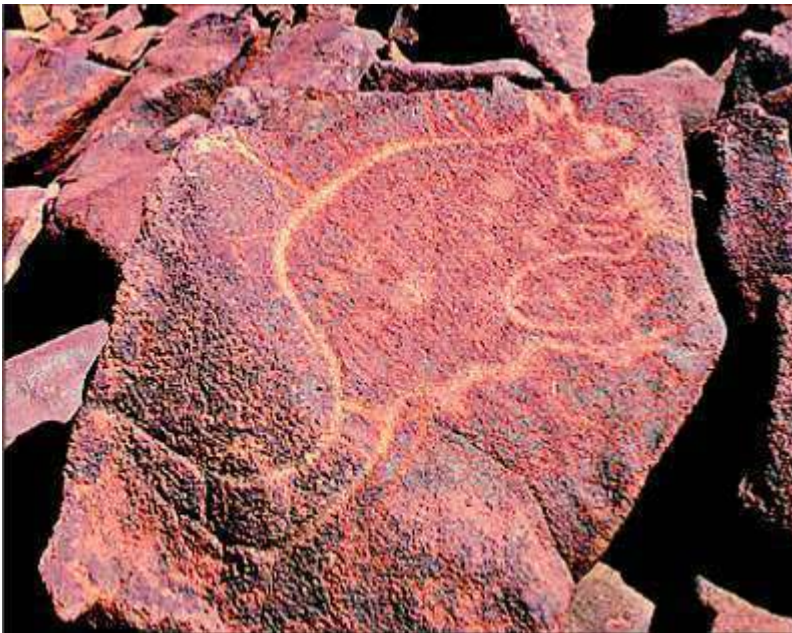
"Without inclusion on the National Heritage list, there is no protection. Premier [Alan Carpenter] has to take leadership on this and rein in his Department of Industry and Resources."

A barrage of publicity and forums is planned: the trust is considering enforcing a 2003 UNESCO agreement that prohibits the destruction of cultural heritage. Bednarik says the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations, of which he is the Australian convener, would get behind such a last-ditch move. "Our greatest concern is Woodside building on the Burrup site, and we would take the

state Government to court to stop it... all of this is a result of bad planning."

Meanwhile, governments are enjoying a flood of royalties and investment from WA's resources boom. Woodside is seeking to exploit a market opportunity that would require Pluto's natural gas to be ready for delivery by 2010-12. Work on a Burrup processing plant would need to start next year.

The issue may come to a head sooner than anticipated. Woodside has just lodged an application for state Aboriginal heritage protection to be lifted over its proposed work. This will be considered by the Government's Aboriginal Cultural Material Committee on July 5.



Treasure: There are up to 300,000 items of rock art in the contested area

PRIZED PENINSULA



Bloom and boom: Sturt's desert pea grows on a hillside overlooking Woodside's LNG site when it was under construction, on the Burrup Peninsula near Dampier