

Fight to save

By West Australian correspondent
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The West Australian Government has announced a management plan for the Burrup Peninsula, in the State's north-west, to help conserve ancient

Aboriginal rock art and standing stones threatened by development.

Environment Minister Mark McGowan said the plan included the protection of about 60 per cent of the petroglyphs on proposed Aboriginal freehold land that would form the Burrup Peninsula Conservation Reserve.

"Under the plan, the land will be managed by an Aboriginal body corporate and the West Australian Government," Mr McGowan said.

There also are plans to build a cultural centre on the Burrup and low-impact accommodation for tourists and the Government has called for public submissions on the idea.

However, Aboriginal and environmental groups have criticised the management plan because it fails to guarantee protection of the entire 60 per cent which has been quarantined from development and offers no

protection to the other 40 per cent in the industrial estate itself.

Gas giant Woodside has applied to develop an area on the Burrup, known as Pluto A, for the on-shore processing infrastructure needed for the Pluto gas deposit about 200km north-west of Karratha.

The company has filed Section 18 notices with the Aboriginal Cultural and Materials Committee (ACMC) with the West Australian Department of Indigenous Affairs.

Pluto plans

Woodside declined an interview with the Koori Mail but did send the following written statement:

"We are proposing to develop the Pluto LNG development within the established Burrup industrial estate. We have conducted comprehensive heritage surveys on our reference case sites and have worked with the relevant Indigenous groups to redesign our development footprint to minimise impact on rock art.

"We believe about 90 per cent of rock art on our sites will fall outside of the potential disturbance footprint, and will be unaffected. Efforts will continue to ensure impact on the remaining 10 per cent is minimised."

National Trust of Australia (WA)

spokesman Robin Chapple said the Government proposal gave no recognition to the World Heritage value of the rock art which had been dated to about 20,000 years and included petroglyphs of thylacines and a desert kangaroo, both of which have been extinct on the mainland for more than 6000 years.

"To say that we can now hand 40 per cent of the rock art precinct over to industry is not management, it is obfuscating their responsibility.

"Quite clearly it would be inappropriate to hand over 40 per cent of Stonehenge to industry, and this material is at least four-times older than that."

Massacred

The traditional owners of the Burrup, the Yubbura people, were massacred by settlers in 1868 and the site is now under the care of three groups in a native title agreement.

Wongatoo Elder Wilfred Hicks said there should be no more development at all on the peninsula and any future development should be moved to the nearby Maitland estate or other port facilities at Onslow or Port Hedland.

Mr Hicks also disagrees with

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● LEFT: The area identified by Woodside as Pluto site A for the onshore processing of the Pluto gas deposit. The shaded small dots represent where ancient rock art has been identified. Each dot may represent dozens of individual petroglyphs.



The Woodside Pluto site. The National Trust wants to excavate the beaches (centre of photo) which are certain to conceal more rock art and give an accurate creation date which would be 8000 years or older. The trust claims the Pluto development will destroy or damage the rock art on the point of the bay and onshore. The rocky area to the right of the photo is the site identified for huge storage tanks - all rocks seen in this photo contain art works.

peninsula rock art

● From facing page

building a cultural centre and accommodation at the site because tourism development would also destroy some the rock art, some of which cannot be viewed by women for cultural reasons.

"There's some art there that no women should see and all sorts of things but that will have to be sorted out," Mr Hicks said.

Woodside moved some of the rock art during previous development phases and placed it in a fenced compound in Dampier.

"It's all been done by Woodside which has put it all in one area and a great fence put around it," Mr Hicks said.

"Most of those that women are not allowed to see have been put facing to the ground.

"Now, we're saying we're going to straighten them up and leave them exactly where they are because they've been moved once and we shouldn't have to keep moving it."

Opponents to the development of the Maitland estate say that port facilities would have to be built on West Intercourse Island, which also contains thousands of examples of rock art, but Mr Chapple said the port facility would not need to use the island.

"From Maitland, one could put a jetty system out. One does not need to go

across West Intercourse Island or any of the Burrup to do that," he said.

"There are jetty systems around the world equal to, if not longer, than anything that might be needed to get Maitland out into deep water."

Australian Greens leader Bob Brown visited the Burrup in mid-July and will lobby the Federal Government to include the peninsula on the National Heritage list, which would allow for the protection of the site while consideration is given to World Heritage listing.

'Cultural cringe'

Senator Brown said the West Australian Government was suffering from cultural cringe, much like the Tasmanian Government in the 1980s during plans to dam the Franklin River.

"I saw a lot of this with the Franklin River campaign 20 years ago," he said.

"They said it was just another river and there were other wild rivers.

"They claimed that if they were going to build a dam, it would reflect the mountains around it and give visitors twice the value, and they could transplant the huon pines and put them somewhere else.

"A whole lot of extraordinary nonsense that in some way or other, governments can improve or tread lightly over extraordinary provinces like this when

they go for industrial development."

A Karratha-based conservation group, known as Champions of Burrup Rock Art (COBRA), claims that the issue of rock art preservation has resulted in many industrial groups deciding to develop overseas or in other parts of Australia.

COBRA co-ordinator Garry Slee said the Government's attitude to the precinct was having a negative economic impact.

"Existing and potential new industrial proponents on the Burrup run a reputational risk. Nobody wants to be known as a vandal of rock art around the world," he said.

"There's a huge global movement trying to protect this particular icon, so you don't want people banging on your director's door in London or The Hague or Houston or New York saying 'what are you guys doing?'"

No guarantee

West Australian Development Minister John Bowler admitted that there could be no guarantee that the surviving rock art would be protected from development.

"If we have to expand, would we knock down a handful more of petroglyphs? I can't answer that," he said.

"All I know is that we will be very cognisant of what's left and so far as a government, we've done a good job of protecting what's left."

Mr Brown said the Government's plan and the general attitude to development compounded the problems started when the Yubbura people were massacred in 1868.

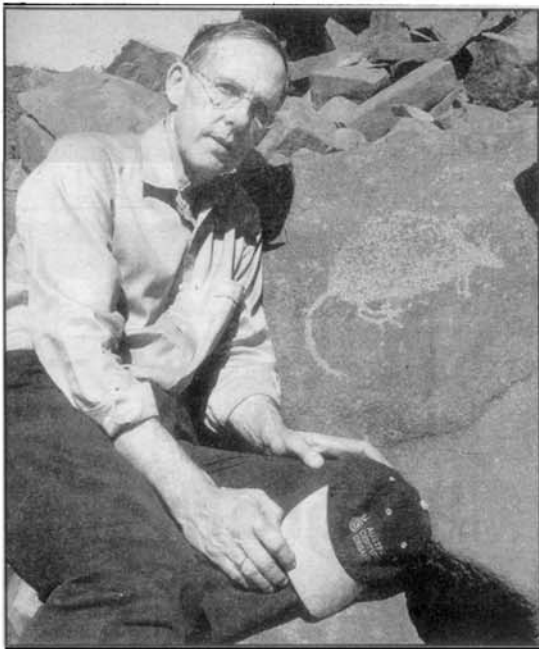
"It compounds that awful history that there should be a destruction of the heritage which has been left by the Indigenous people, after the terrible history we have in this country of indifference," he said.

Mr Hicks said the rock art had special spiritual significance to the local Indigenous groups.

"That rock art is a bible to the cultural people. Non-Aboriginal people have church and they have bibles that they read," he said.

"Ours is the rock and also the land that we walk on, and to see all of those things getting pushed over day after day, it hurts the peoples' heart and they're crying 'why?'"

● The draft management plan is able to be viewed online at <http://www.naturebase.net/haveyoursay> and submissions should be sent to Management Planning Co-ordinator, Burrup Peninsula Conservation Reserve Planning Advisory Committee, Department of Environment and Conservation, Locked Bag 104, Bentley Delivery Centre, WA 6983.



Greens leader Bob Brown inspecting an ancient rock art site during his visit on July 16 "It compounds that awful history that there should be a destruction of the heritage which has been left by the Indigenous people," Senator Brown said.



Wongatoo Elder Wilfred Hicks, left, with World Monument Fund head Bonnie Burnham and Wongatoo Elder Tim Douglas "That rock art is a bible to the cultural people," Mr Hicks said.

A series of islands

The Burrup Peninsula is actually an island which was called a peninsula when a bridge was constructed in the 1960s joining the mainland with Dampier Island, the main site for the huge infrastructure required to handle the then emerging resources economy.

The island is just one of a group of 42, the tips of an ancient mountain range which would have been 80km from the coastline during the last Ice Age, which ended 6000 years ago, 14,000 years after the first Aboriginal engravings were put there.

There are no accurate estimates on the number of petroglyphs (ancient rock carvings) contained on the islands, which cover an area of about 88 square kilometres, but estimates range from 500,000 to one million.

The petroglyphs also include carvings of the thylacine (Tasmanian tiger), which has been extinct on the mainland for thousands of years.

Archeologists say that there may be up to five 'phases' of the development of the rock art, ranging from 20,000 years to 6000 years.

Another discovery of World Heritage value was the Standing Stones site, where stones and boulders have been arranged in an obvious ceremonial pattern.

Professor Jenny Gregory, the West Australian president of the National Trust of Australia, said the heritage value of the Burrup was equal to some of the iconic natural heritage sites on the planet.

"When we think of standing stones, we think of things like



The Burrup Peninsular Islands, looking from the north towards Karratha.

Stonehenge in Britain, but those standing stones are only about 4500 years old, whereas the Burrup standing stones could be somewhere up to 20,000 years old," Professor Gregory said.

"There are hundreds of these stones up on the peninsula and the surrounding islands."

The development of the Burrup Peninsula began in 1962 when Hamersley Iron established port facilities for its iron-ore projects in the Pilbara.

There are various reports over the decades for strategic plans for development, but little, if any, consideration has ever been given for the Aboriginal heritage value of the area.

The National Trust claims that about 10,000 petroglyphs have been destroyed in the past 44 years, about

half since the Aboriginal Heritage Act came into force in 1972.

The traditional owners of the area were wiped out in the so-called Flying Foam massacre in the 1860s, and three groups with links to the region – Ngarluma Yinjibandi, Wongatoo and Yaburrara Madu Thana – have agreed to be joint custodians.

A native title claim by the three groups failed, but an industry agreement has been signed with the West Australian Government 'allowing' the use of land on two islands in the Burrup group, one at the northern end, and one in the south.

The northern portion is under a 99-year lease, but the group has been forced to sign a waiver of any rights over the southern piece of land because it is earmarked for development.