

Green outrage at Pluto plant nod

By **Upstream staff**

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A long-simmering dispute over Aboriginal rock art at Western Australia's Burrup peninsula is set to heat up after the state government's Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) gave the go-ahead for the onshore portion of Woodside Petroleum's proposed Pluto liquefied natural gas development.

Woodside plans to build an LNG processing facility on the western side of the peninsula, which hosts the largest concentration of ancient rock art in the world. Archaeologists, who have surveyed just 30% of the peninsula, claim the carvings are between 4000 and 40,000 years old.

A spokesman for the National Trust of Western Australia said: "It's almost obscene that the federal minister is deliberating on the heritage values of (the Burrup), while the state is granting approval that allows industry to build on what is one of the most significant archaeological sites on the peninsula."

However, EPA chairman Wally Cox said that the project is unlikely to compromise the area's environmental or cultural value.

"The company has been very responsible in the way it has negotiated with the local indigenous people," he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

"(Woodside) changed its proposal on the way through to accommodate any concern the Aboriginal communities had. As a consequence, it is our view they have achieved a good outcome in terms of protecting the conservation values as well as the indigenous heritage sites," he added.

However, in its report, the EPA said that while any environmental impact could be contained, the Pluto proposal "will result in the permanent loss of native vegetation, fauna habitat and some indigenous heritage sites".

In statements released ahead of the EPA's decision, Woodside said that 90% of the carvings would be preserved.

Meanwhile, federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell said the carvings would not be allowed to derail the multi-billion dollar LNG project.

"It is a practical reality that every piece of rock art cannot be saved if Australia's economic development and the environmental benefits that flow from selling natural gas to the rest of the world are going to be realised," Campbell told ABC radio.

He added that the plant could easily co-exist with the ancient art.

"No one in their right mind would propose saving every single last bit of heritage on the peninsula unless they wanted to close down the economic development of Australia," he said.

Australia's National Trust, which, together with the area's indigenous claimants and the International Rock Art Federation, nominated the site for inclusion on the Natural Heritage List earlier this year, said building the plant would destroy up to 100 engravings.

National Trust chief executive Tom Perrigo said heritage listing was needed to prevent the carvings from being "blown up" during construction or damaged later by the plant's emissions.

Shortly after the EPA's recommendation was made public, Campbell received a report on the Burrup from the Australian Heritage Council, which he will consider before deciding if all or part of the peninsula and the surrounding Dampier archipelago should be listed on the National Heritage Register. He has until 24 September to decide whether the Burrup should be listed or to seek further public comment.

The report is believed to reiterate findings published in an interim study made public in May last year, which said the entire peninsula qualified for national and world heritage listing.

The EPA's decision is subject to appeal until the close of business on 18 September.