



“The Burrup”: a national and international treasure under siege

Meera Atkinson



The Dampier Archipelago on the Pilbara coast of Western Australia, is made up of 42 islands. The largest of these, Dampier Island, is now an artificial peninsula due to industrial development now known as the Burrup Peninsula. “Burrup” is not exactly a household name but it is nevertheless a place matter of enormous global importance.

The Burrup is thought to contain the largest collection of petroglyphs (rock carvings) in the world. Incredibly, though few dispute it contains a corpus of art of national and international significance, there has never been a comprehensive study of the Dampier rock art. It is estimated to contain between 500,000 and one million motifs and boasts various styles of artwork and representations beginning from approximately 30,000 years ago.

The tragedy is that, despite its clear significance as a World Heritage site, the Burrup

languishes unprotected and at grave risk. There is no management of the area, meaning it is vulnerable to theft and vandalism — anyone with a four wheel drive can graffiti rocks or put them in the back and take them home — and there are no formal arrangements for the local Aboriginal custodians to act as guides. Over 4,000 engravings have already been lost due to industrialisation of the region over the last few decades.

So why hasn't the Burrup received the special attention usually accorded to major monuments of civilization? The answer, as usual, is money. Since the 1970s the Western Australian government has given the green light to industry to use the Peninsula as a northern hub, spending hundreds of millions of dollars on infrastructure

to host the energy and petroleum industries. Some companies have, in more recent times, realised that the value of the area disqualifies it from industry exploitation and have responsibly relocated.

Woodside Energy is Australia's largest publicly traded oil and gas exploration and production company. Having been steered to the Burrup by the WA government, they are pushing ahead with plans for a project called Pluto that will, should it go ahead, further disrupt the integrity of the Burrup.

The WA state government has maintained the image of the Burrup as an industry site and, because the location is so remote, Australians are not generally aware of the area's significance. Shakthi Sivananthan is the co-ordinator of GetUp!'s "Choose a Different Future" campaign to preserve and protect the Burrup. He describes it as a critical site in terms of the imagination of people pre-history.

"If you want to look at what people thought before they could write it down this is a hot place. And it's a slumbering monument to reconciliation," he says.

"There are places like Uluru and it's amazing but this is a place that probably explains how the first people got to Australia. It's the world of the first Australians and it features in the song lines of mobs from South Australia and the Northern Territory. It was definitely a meeting place and it could be the key Indigenous site in the country. Considering its location, it's probably the area that was joined to Indonesia and thus the link to South-East Asia. All that could come through but it needs to be studied for a decade or more."

Inspired by growing public concern, GetUp! joined the ranks of groups protesting against industry in the Burrup in 2006, by lodging a formal submission boasting over 17 thousand signatures. This means the Australian public has now entered a debate that has thus far been conducted between industry and government behind closed doors. The submission called on the Government to preserve the site with a federal heritage listing and to protect the remaining carvings with Commonwealth funding. It argued for moving industry to suitable locations down the coast. Away from the peninsular, a world class site could be built on a scale that isn't possible in the Burrup, making the move not only ethically necessary but economically sensible. Supporters of such a proposal say the move would constitute a win/win outcome.

Sounds wonderful, so what's the problem? Shakthi suspects two age-old impulses are at play: the tendency to cover up past mistakes and to defend financial investment. "No one knows for sure, but it seems back in the late 80s, early 90s the government put about half a million dollars worth of infrastructure in the Burrup and now they don't want to admit they just did the wrong thing."

But the days of the WA government being able to operate its dealings in the Burrup unfettered by pressure and outrage are numbered. The international community is waking up to the situation. *The Telegraph* in the UK likened the impact of industry in the Burrup to the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. The World Monument Fund in New York has recently placed the Burrup on its list of the 100 most endangered sites of the world. Shakthi confirms that the eyes of the world are indeed upon us. "We're a first

world nation. It's not expected that this should happen here. It's like drilling under Stonehenge or moving half of it for a bit of oil. They wouldn't do that even if that was the only place they could get the oil so if we go ahead and do it when there are other places it's going to look really bad for Australia."

He concedes that Woodside has made more of an effort to be consultative with the local Aboriginal community than industry has in the past, but the fact remains that despite this effort both Woodside and the WA government remain mired in murky ethical territory. While Woodside invite elders to the site to instruct them on which carvings are most important, the practice of avoiding those particular carvings or moving them to another location is ultimately an unacceptable compromise.

"The problem is that all these carvings relate to and are based on the exact position they sit in, so when you move them or bulldoze them it ruins it. It's like saying 'We're going to take away part of your house but we're going to let you choose which part we take,'" says Shakthi. And in the end final responsibility rests with the WA Government who oversee the Burrup's state heritage listing.

In any event, the Burrup may soon be taken out of WA's hands — the Federal Government looks set to step in. Malcolm Turnbull, Minister for Environment and Water Resources, has made a commitment to heritage listing the site and a final decision is expected in the coming months. Groups such as GetUp! are now focussing their campaigns on influencing the nature of the listing. "The only thing that's acceptable is that there is no industry in the Burrup," says Shakthi, "Which means that heritage listing protects all the remaining rock carvings."

As Vince Ross, Chair of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, makes clear the Burrup is not just a local issue but an issue of urgent national and global importance. "For the people who live in Australia this is our heritage. It belongs to us and we have to have ownership of it. This is important for our mob but it's also important for history. This is true history."



The Transit Lounge is an initiative of the Uniting Church in Australia,
produced collaboratively by the [National Assembly](#) and the [Synod of Western Australia](#)