

# History of neglect undermines us all

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I am fortunate to have worked in incredible natural and cultural landscapes around the world, many of them in remote parts of Australia. I work closely with indigenous people to study rock art - paintings, drawings, engravings, stencils, prints and designs made out of beeswax - found in rock shelters, in caves, on boulders and on rock platforms, often in strikingly beautiful locations.

Across the forests of Kakadu and Arnhem Land, throughout the deserts of central Australia, within the most rugged and wild parts of Wollemi National Park near Sydney and in many other parts of the country I have documented spectacular images that tell of the past in ways excavated archaeological remains will never reveal.

Recently I visited rock engraving sites of the Pilbara region for the first time. This area contains the largest complex of engraved images in the world, ranging in age from an estimated 30,000 years old to 19th and 20th-century depictions of the first European settlers to establish homesteads in the harsh, windswept environs of this part of Western Australia. This engraved complex is a testament to thousands of years of struggle and survival, of Aboriginal people, and recently Europeans and Asians.

But now it is the rock art that struggles to survive as the hunger for the land's resources threatens to consume not just the land, but also the engravings.

In parts of the Pilbara, such as the Dampier area of the Burrup Peninsula, the landscapes have been horrifically altered and many rock-art sites destroyed. In the 1960s and 1970s Aboriginal Australian rock art was not considered as important as it is today so many sites were bulldozed. At other locations boulders with engraved designs of extinct animals, human figures and mythical beings were rounded up like sheep to be herded into compounds where they remain today. One would think that in the 21st century this would have stopped, but since 2000 the process has accelerated because of the resources and development boom which state and federal governments have encouraged.

I am not anti-mining or anti-development. Mining and development have provided us with a lifestyle - cameras, 4WDs, computers and so forth - that assists with the documentation of rock art and other aspects of cultural heritage. The problem is that there are many places where industrial development could occur in the Pilbara without affecting the rock art, standing stones and other significant places. Some might argue that by moving the boulders with rock-art heritage is saved but the art's contextual integrity is still lost.

Australia has at least 100,000 rock art sites, more than any other country. This is part of the problem: there are so many sites it is impossible to document and protect all of them. Each year dozens of sites are destroyed by bushfires, vandalism, environmental degradation and development. Most recently, one of my favourite sites in the Northern Territory's Keep River National Park was irreparably damaged by fire. And, ironically, within Australia more money has been spent in recent years destroying or contributing to the destruction of sites than that spent on studying, documenting and conserving rock art. Less money is also spent within Australia on rock-art research than in South Africa and Kenya, both of which have national rock-art institutions, something Australia is yet to even consider.

Perhaps it is time a national rock-art research centre devoted to the study, documentation, conservation and management of this priceless aspect of Australian and world heritage be established. Perhaps it is time consultant archaeologists across the country refused to move

rock art or otherwise destroy rock-art sites while working for industry. Perhaps it is time government and big business worked together to harvest resources and undertake development in more sustainable ways, to protect cultural and natural heritage. Rock art is important because it illustrates not only Aboriginal history, but also that of European and Asian settlers. Australian rock art is a significant part of world heritage and each region of Australia is special in its own way. The Pilbara assemblage is highly remarkable and unique but much of it has not even been documented. It is time Australia stood up for contemporary indigenous Australians but it is time we also better respected the achievements of their ancestors.

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