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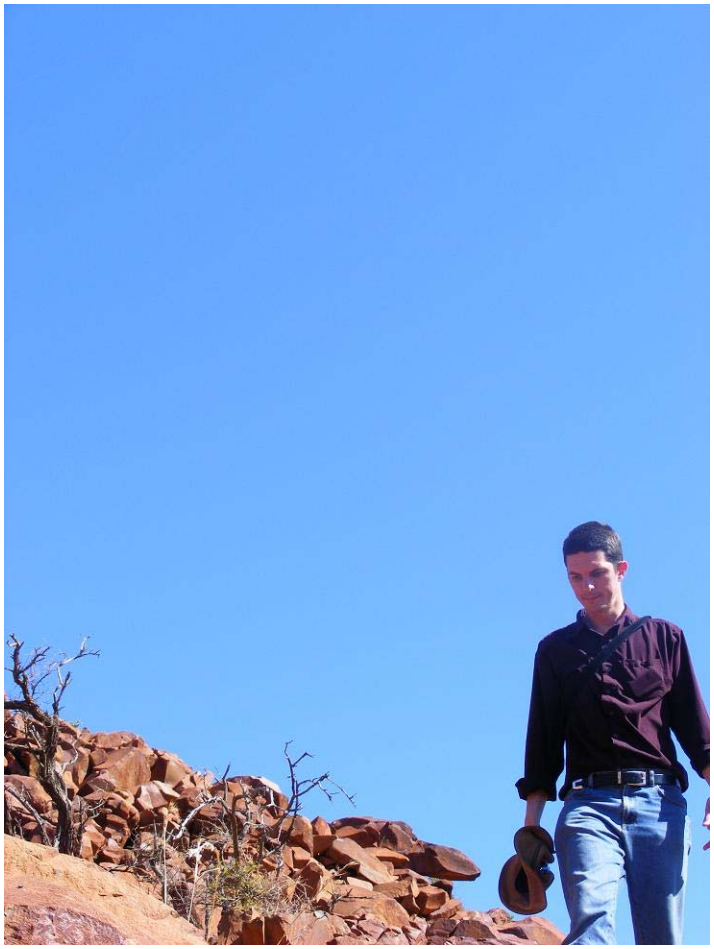
Blog

Collateral Damage: housing and heritage on the line in the Pilbara

By Scott Ludlam · July 21, 2008



For most of the country the mining boom is a good news story of mining royalties and economic resilience that has carried us – so far - through the turbulence on world financial markets. However from close-up in the coastal Pilbara, the resources boom has distorted the local economy beyond recognition. Some are making and taking a great deal of money out of the region; others are struggling to survive.

On my recent visit to Karratha, I heard incredible stories from angry and frustrated people. A modest four bedroom house now sells for more than a million dollars and rents are out of control, stretching from $1500 - $2800 per week. People are sleeping in cars, tents and clapped out caravans, with temperatures soaring regularly into the 40s through much of the year. Petrol is nudging $2 per litre and fuelwatch is a joke when the nearest alternative servo is hundreds of kilometres up the road. Women in labour rush to the Karratha hospital only to be told to drive three hours to Port Hedland because there are not enough nurses and doctors.

All conversations here lead back to housing: unless you own your own place or are employed by the mining industry you simply can't afford to live here any more. Small businesses, government departments and non-government organisations are well past desperate and running out of ways to hold on to staff.

In the absence of robust social or community infrastructure that provides adequate health care, policing, education or cultural activities, there are fewer and fewer incentives for families, particularly those with adolescent children, to stay. In the face of these difficulties, flying workers

in and out from Perth or Brisbane makes more sense, which is absurd in an increasingly carbon conscious world.

In April a Senate select committee investigating housing affordability visited the town. They have called for a ‘high level emergency task force’ to make up for years of premeditated inaction on behalf of state and federal governments, but folk up here have had enough of taskforces, reports and recommendations.

Karratha needs 2000 affordable beds, yesterday, to prevent the complete hollowing out of the community. The situation in Hedland and other Pilbara communities is similarly acute, but the cluster of townships around Karratha seems to be worst hit. These are communities literally collapsing under the weight of the boom.

Why? To find some of the answers, we look to the low range of rust-coloured hills across the bay from Karratha: to Murujuga, the Burrup Peninsula.

Murujuga, virtually unknown to the world until a few years ago, is the world’s oldest and largest work of ceremonial art – an entire landscape given over to unbroken cultural narratives stretching back nearly 30,000 years into the late Pleistocene. Along the main peninsula and across the islands of the Dampier Archipelago, up to a million petroglyphs – rock carvings – are distributed across tens of thousands of sites, amidst an enigmatic network of standing stones, boulder terraces, prehistoric campsites and shell middens.

Words can’t quite do justice to this otherworldly landscape of deep red granophyre, steeply incised valleys and shaded rock pools. Along some valleys, nearly every surface is engraved with a riot of archaic faces, birdlife, animal figures, footprints, outstretched hands and wildly abstract geometries.

It is humbling to spend time in this landscape with people who know it well. You quickly realise that we’re almost completely illiterate to the thousands of stories that these rocks have been telling since before the last ice age.

Nowhere else on planet earth do we have a continuous record of human cultural endeavour stretching back this long. Twenty five thousand years before our ancestors assembled the megaliths at Stonehenge, the first complex archaic faces were being carefully worked into the diamond-hard boulder piles of the Burrup.

In the 1960s, the iron ore port of Dampier was established, erasing unknown thousands of petroglyphs and blowing a town-sized hole through the fabric of the rock art province. In the 1980s, the construction of the Woodside onshore gas plant flattened a square kilometre of the central peninsula, dumping displaced rock art into a lonely fenced compound described by one Elder as a ‘cemetery’ and establishing the Burrup as one of Australia’s most important industrial areas.

Since then the gathering momentum of fossil capitalism has treated the Peninsula as an industrial sacrifice zone, scarring the silent terrain with roads, infrastructure corridors, pipeways, power lines and quarries. One of the world’s largest ammonia plants squats in the floodway between Hearsons Cove and the ruined landscape of King Bay, one cyclone away from a public health catastrophe.

Until recently, the highest point on the landscape has been the flare tower on the Woodside plant, but all that is about to change.

Despite a hard fought campaign by local activists, Traditional Owners, rock art conservators and a cross-party alliance of MPs, in 2007 the Western Australian Government signed off on a massive new gas plant – Woodside's Pluto Project. The Federal Government stood back and watched, declaring the whole Archipelago a National Heritage property while agreeing that specified leases should still be blasted flat for more heavy industry. As elsewhere in Australia, Indigenous voices were silenced by a combination of poverty, overwhelm and recondite legal agreements removing their right to public dissent, which makes their continued resistance all the more extraordinary.

Pluto is being bulldozed into existence on the northern flank of the Peninsula, on an artificial plateau that will be visible for miles in every direction. Forever hereafter, the ancient Burrup will be dominated by this architecture, when at the stroke of a pen the WA Government could have demanded that Woodside locate their plant on the flat coastal plain that stretches for hundreds of kilometres in either direction.

The Burrup's growing supporters are now gathering their strength to fight for the relocation of an avalanche of new development proposals: a quarry expansion; a huge explosives plant; another gas plant to handle Woodside's Browse field; an energy hungry desalination plant.

It is no coincidence that Karratha's economy has been pushed past breaking point – it is simply impossible for a town to expand fast enough to accommodate this breakneck pace of construction.

These 'developments' are the logical conclusion of an economic mindset that seems determined to liquidate Australia's non-renewable resources as fast as possible. Unless sanity prevails and we transition toward a conserver economy, within a generation we will have drained the north-west gas fields, stripped the Pilbara of its ancient ironstone resources and permanently ruined the Burrup. Karratha's survival at this point would be an open question; a visit to the spooky Goldfields ghost towns should be mandatory for anyone contemplating the future of the Pilbara under our present development model.

Even posing these questions is likely to see us accused of being blindly anti-development, but in fact we are only against blind development. At this pace, there will be nothing for the children of the Pilbara to inherit.

So let's get emergency housing resources into Karratha to help people out of the caravan park. While we're at it we also need to take a good hard look at where this rollercoaster ride is taking us, and whether it might not be a good idea to apply the brakes while we still can.