

Ancient secrets of lost art

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ITS current European name is borrowed from a murdered bank clerk. But to the Yaburara clan, who traditionally occupied most of the Dampier archipelago and the adjacent mainland, Burrup Peninsula was always known as Murujuga.

The island was re-named Dampier Island in honour of the English navigator who first anchored off the North West coast in 1699. Technically, it became a peninsula when it was connected to the mainland via road and rail during the first wave of development in the 1960s.

In 1979 it was re-named again as the Burrup Peninsula, taking the surname of Henry Thomas Burrup, a clerk for Roebourne's Union Bank who was murdered in 1885.

The first published reports of Pilbara rock art are those in the account of Captain John Wickham, whose ship, the HMAS Beagle, visited Depuch Island in the Dampier archipelago in 1840.

The motifs and roles vary immensely between engravings. Some are images of flora and fauna from the area while some are Dreaming sites. Others have a role as Thalu sites, places of great spiritual power, something equivalent to the Christian notion of a shrine.

A clan member would perform ceremonies at the Thalu site to regenerate and multiply the elements of the earth necessary for the clan's survival.

All the sites contain a spiritual essence. This essence gives off an energy which resonates with the traditional people from that particular area. The energy is considered dangerous to outsiders who venture into the area without ritual preparation.

Until the area was earmarked for development in the early 1960x, the rock engravings were largely unknown.

At the time, Depuch Island was going to be the site for the town, later called Dampier, but the results of a study undertaken by the WA Museum warned against it because of the large number of petroglyphs.

But no study was done of the current townsite prior to its construction.

Robert Bednarik says much of the rock art destruction on the peninsula occurred during the 1960s, especially in and around the initial town site and industrial estate of Dampier.

For instance, all of the coastline from the town to east of Parker Point was bulldozed and filled in, including several petroglyph concentrations.

Mr Bednarik says that among them was a major site where the power station was built, and others where the pelletising plant, conveyor systems and ship-loading facilities were located.

Smaller sites fell victim to the construction of roads, rail tracks and buildings.

The developments in the hills of western Murujuga, where the access road to the causeway connects to the berths of Mistaken Island harbour, also resulted in the destruction of major petroglyph concentrations.

"We have found an indigenous campsite in Perth that has been dated to at least 40,000 years," says Perth-based consultant anthropologist Rory O'Connor, who has nearly 25 years experience working with Pilbara Aborigines and studying the region's petroglyphs.

"It's safe to assume that Aborigines largely came from the north, so habitation in the Pilbara area is obviously going to be much older."

Nobody knows, as yet, exactly how long the clans have been carving images into the rock.

The number of petroglyphs on Murujuga has been estimated at between 100,000 to a million.

But Bednarik suggests it's somewhere between 200,000 to 250,000.

"There's no inventory, so it is just an educated guess," he says.

Rory O'Connor sees the destruction of the petroglyphs as an act of vandalism.

"Imagine somebody defacing that bell tower in Perth, well that's vandalism isn't it? Anal we're suggesting it's the same thing here.

"I worked with the last generation of Aborigines up here, very traditional people, who had a lot to say about the area, they'd tum in their graves if they saw this going on."