

WA rock art still under threat

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Woodside Petroleum will be allowed to proceed with its multi-billion dollar gas processing plant in the Burrup region if it reroutes a gas pipeline away from the area's ancient Aboriginal rock art collection, WA's Indigenous Affairs Minister Sheila McHale has announced.

The gas and oil giant will also need to build an access road away from ceremonial sites in the area.

While the decision effectively excludes Woodside from a 30ha area, containing about 225 ancient artwork panels, it still leaves an estimated 1,240 panels within its lease.

Ms McHale described the ruling as a compromise – one allowing "this important industrial decision to proceed, while ensuring the protection of some of the area's most significant indigenous heritage sites" - but conceded on ABC radio that "it's impossible to have development without impacting to some extent on Aboriginal sites."

"There are a number of sites which will certainly be within the development area."

Some ancient art will probably have to be moved, McHale's spokesman confirmed. "Without that flexibility, basically the project couldn't go ahead."

Woodside accepted the minister's decision, but Greens Leader Bob Brown was less happy.

"It will lead to further erosion of the integrity of one of the world's great rock art sites, which Minister McHale should be nominating for World Heritage rather than sentencing the Burrup peninsula to further destruction," Mr Brown said.

He called on Federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell to prevent the development from going ahead until a World Heritage assessment had been completed.

The National Trust of Western Australia is considering an appeal.

"A careful balance (between heritage values and economic development) does not mean destroying an international significant, potentially, World Heritage site," said Trust spokesman Tom Perrigo.

"When the Minister announces in her press release that it's saving a part of the site, what it doesn't say it's destroying the other part."

"The Minister refers to it ... as Indigenous heritage. It's not Indigenous heritage. It's Australia's heritage."