

GAS v ART

Civilisations collide in WA's North-West

COVER STORY

Griffin Longley

A remote North-West site few have visited is shaping up as the country's biggest environmental battle since the Franklin. *Weekend Extra* looks at the arguments over rock art on the Burrup Peninsula.

The Burrup Peninsula is the most complex piece of real estate in the country. It's an ancient finger of rock where crucial industry jostles for space with rock art of world significance.

And according to some, it is set to become the scene of the biggest conservation battle Australia has seen since the Franklin Dam controversy.

Two things are driving the escalation: Woodside Petroleum's plan to put its \$5 billion Pluto LNG plant on ground littered with rock carvings and the decision expected this week by Federal Environment and Heritage Minister Ian Campbell on whether to include the Burrup Peninsula on the National Heritage List.

Whatever he decides, sparks are sure to fly. In the green corner, the heritage lobby is gearing for the fight of its life.

The National Trust, whose campaign to protect the estimated 300,000 rock carvings has been funded to the tune of \$100,000 by American Express' World Monuments Fund, says this is the biggest battle of its 50-year history — and that it will take it "to the end".

The International Federation of Rock Art Organisations, which has fought for the preservation of historic sites around the world, says this is the big one, that even its seven-year campaign to save rock art in Portugal (a campaign they say helped bring about the demise of the incumbent

Portuguese government in 1995) was only a rehearsal for The Burrup.

In the brown corner is industry, the WA Chamber of Minerals and Energy and the WA Government. They say industry and the rock art can, and will, continue to coexist for decades to come. That the vast majority of the art will remain unscathed, and be better protected, by industry.

And they say that National Heritage listing could cripple industry on the Burrup by allowing "third parties" to bring existing industry and new projects to a standstill overnight, with court injunctions.

But not everyone is lining up in predictable positions.

Former Liberal resources minister Colin Barnett, for instance, has gone from being a champion of Burrup development to a vocal supporter of the rock art. He says the heritage value of the art is so high that attempts to protect it will never go away and the only way to provide the kind of certainty that new billion-dollar projects will need is to find them new homes. And he has just the place in mind.

Then there is the Karratha and Districts Chamber of Commerce and Industry that wants all new industry located away from the Burrup rock art, which is fast becoming recognised as one of the world's most important heritage sites. The area is listed on the World Monuments Fund's list of the world's 100 most

endangered heritage sites.

"We have had some great debates in Australia. We have had Fraser Island, the Barrier Reef, Franklin River and here, on a smaller scale, we have had the Coral Bay issue, but we have never had in Australia a debate over something of cultural heritage of the scale that is coming with this," says Mr Barnett in the boardroom of his Cottesloe office.

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Stories of the conflict are making their way on to the pages of newspapers like The New York Times, The South China Morning Post and Britain's Daily Telegraph. Last month the story even drew a television crew from Arabic broadcaster Al Jazeera to our shores to film a documentary.

Industry and heritage first collided in the Burrup in the early 1960s. The lifting of a wartime embargo on the export of iron ore opened up the Eldorado of Mt Tom Price for Hamersley Iron and led to the search for a deepwater export port.

Depuch Island, in the Dampier Archipelago, was considered but, ironically, was abandoned after a survey by the Museum of Western Australia reported there was too much rock art there to proceed. The



same survey mistakenly reported little evidence of rock art on the Burrup Peninsula, which was then known as Dampier Island, and Parker Point was chosen as the port site.

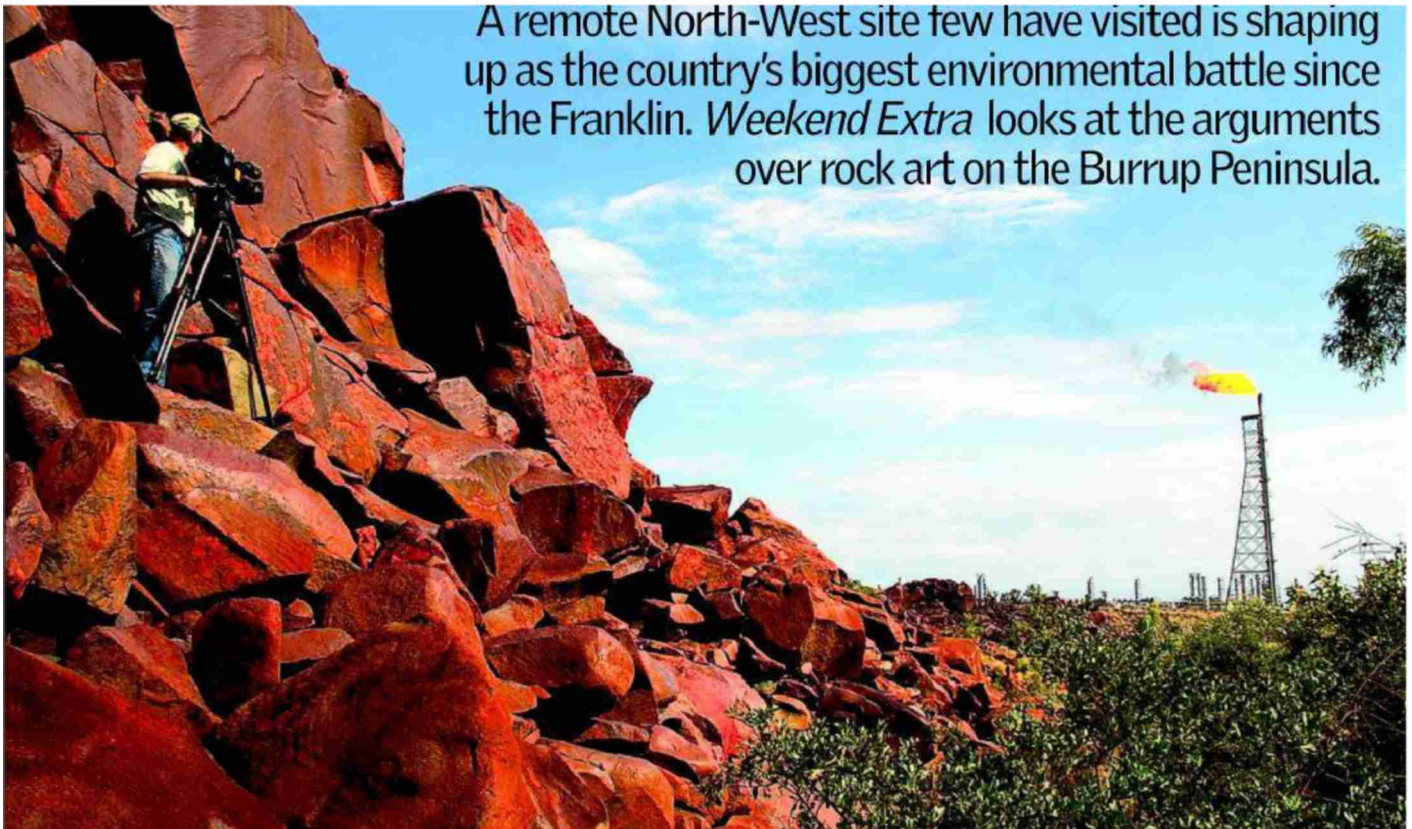
In 1963 Hamersley Iron and Dampier salt began their operations on the “peninsula”, three years later Dampier township was established. No one knows exactly how many engravings were destroyed in the

process but it is estimated to have been in the thousands.

Since the 1974 Pilbara Study, a Commonwealth and State government plan for resource development in the region, the Burrup has been earmarked as a resource and industrial development precinct. In the early 1980s work began on Woodside Petroleum’s North-West Shelf joint venture,

Australia’s biggest resource project, at King Bay.

During work on the North-West Shelf treatment plant, about 1760 engraved boulders were moved from the site. They were supposed to be relocated to the satisfaction of local Aboriginal people. To this day they remain locked in a fenced-in compound near Hearson’s Cove.



Foreign interest: An Al Jazeera news agency cameraman at the famous “climbing men” carving, pans over an industrial site on the Burrup Peninsula. Picture: courtesy of Robin Chapple





Known to the Yaburrara people as Murujuga, which means "hip bone sticking out", the island was joined to the mainland by a causeway in 1963 and named Burrup Peninsula, after Roebourne bank clerk Henry Burrup, in 1979.

While the voices on either side of the Burrup debate continue to rise, few of the rest of us have even cast eyes over the 119sqkm peninsula of rocks, ancient art and industry jutting into the Indian Ocean 1600km from Perth.

Standing on the side of rough track on the edge of the North-West Shelf joint venture, it takes me less than a minute to find an engraving. On the vertical face of a big red rock swims an etched picture of a turtle. Thousands of years before Stonehenge or the Egyptian pyramids were built, Australians were cooking meals, looking after their families and having ceremonies right here.

But these are young pieces for the Burrup, made some time since the end of the last ice age (10,000 to 12,000 years ago) resulted in the water level rising and what had been an inland granite ridge turning into a rocky island. Elsewhere there are carvings of the thylacines, or Tasmanian tigers, which have been extinct here for the past 3500 years. Others date back an estimated 30,000 years, a time when woolly mammoths and sabre-toothed tigers were still roaming in other continents.

When Colin Barnett spoke in Parliament this year about the need to protect the Burrup art, it was not without irony. He now admits that during his eight years as resources minister, it was more by good luck than good planning that much of the art wasn't destroyed. He knew there were heritage issues on the Burrup but says he didn't realise their significance.

We are now aware of its importance and in the 21st century, as a First World nation, we can't be condoning the destruction of ancient carvings," he says. "It will damage our international reputation and history will treat us very unkindly. Ignorance is no longer an excuse."

But even in the early days of development in the Burrup there were voices arguing for protection of

the art. Among them was Warwick Dix. As the inaugural registrar of Aboriginal Sites for the WA Museum in 1970, it was Mr Dix's job to identify heritage sites on the Burrup.

"It seemed to me the most wonderful place on the earth," he says from Sydney. "In my opinion, and in that of my colleagues, this was really something outstanding in world terms. It had everything that anybody who is interested in that kind of antiquarian art forms and culture could possibly wish for and there was enough research there to produce PhDs for the rest of time."

But there was little audience for Mr Dix's delight and his report on the Aboriginal heritage in the area was left out of the Pilbara Study.

"There was no doubt that rock art sites had been blasted and bulldozed into the water to produce the facilities that they needed in the beginning (at Dampier)," he said. "I mingled far enough down the food chain to talk to men who had been involved. Most of us at the museum argued that the Burrup wasn't the best place for industry but we weren't given a serious opportunity to argue."

Iain Davidson is a professor of archaeology at the University of New England in New South Wales and an international expert on rock art. He shares Mr Dix's estimation of the value of the Burrup art but believes the art and industry can coexist.

"I am one of the very lucky, fewer-than-100 people who have seen the paintings at Chauvet Cave at first hand and they are said to be not only the earliest but some of the finest paintings ever produced," he says.

"I have seen some of the finest painted caves in France and I have seen many of the finest sites in Australia, and the Burrup is clearly in the same league in terms of subjective artistic quality. The animals are extremely well drawn. I just find it astonishing that more people don't already want to rejoice in it."

Recently, Mr Davidson has been employed by Woodside to oversee an audit of the rock art on their leases. He can't comment on the report, which is due to be released in about two weeks, but he will say that Woodside came out well. And he says claims about the numbers of art pieces destroyed are misleading.

It's a point WA Resources

Minister John Bowler says is key to protecting the art at the same time as developing much-needed industry. In a meeting at Parliament House, Mr Bowler tells me that co-operation between government, industry and the indigenous people of the area is the best way to protect the art. "It's a win-win," he says.

"The fact of the matter is that the Burrup (industrial precinct) has been there for 30 years and we have so far had a win-win association. The area produces more wealth than any other part of Australia. The other win is that we estimate that at least 97 per cent of the rock art has been protected.

"If you talk to people up there, until industry came in, the rock art was continually being destroyed. People were going in with trailers and taking it home for their gardens."

Under existing arrangements, Mr Bowler says, most of the Burrup is protected and industry is working hard to limit "disturbance" to art within its leases. On the site where Woodside plans to put the first stage of its Pluto gas treatment plant, for example, a combination of archeological work and flexible planning will result in 95 per cent of the art in the lease remaining undisturbed.

"As it is, there is enough area set aside (for industry) of low heritage value that I think is going to see us clear for the next 20-30 years," he says. "But under (National Heritage Listing) the entire operations of the Burrup could be brought to a grinding halt."

After that 20-30 years, industrial development would be moved to the massive Maitland industrial area, 15km from the Burrup, which is more suitable for building than the Burrup and has no rock art.

Mr Barnett believes the move to Maitland has to happen sooner.

"In Western Australia, we are the world's leading mining economy, we have got brilliant engineers, a great mass of land and the ability to develop industry without further compromising rock art on the Burrup peninsula. It is within our ability — technical, engineering and financial — to do it and to do it properly. There is no excuse. We are not a Third World nation, we are not a struggling economy. Alternatives are there."

But Chamber of Minerals and





Energy chief executive Tim Shanahan says Maitland is out of the question. "The area of the Burrup hasn't happened by accident — it is a strategically significant area for industry," he says. "It is adjacent to the gas and the iron ore assets, and there is significant sunk investment so I think it would be very disingenuous to suggest that there is an alternative location other than the Burrup. Successive governments have invited industry to invest in the Burrup and have been marketing it globally to try to attract investment."

But the lure of more investment into the Burrup site could already be false dreams if International Federation of Rock Art Organisations president and long-time Burrup campaigner Robert

Bednarik is right. He says industry has already smelled the wind of change and companies looking for homes for billion-dollar projects will steer clear of a site with a heritage headache.

"There will not be any more industry coming in," he says. "Industry has got the message. We are not driving away industry but we are saying that it needs to be placed in an alternative position."

The National Trust's position is not as hardline. Trust chief executive Tom Perrigo says the trust does not believe responsible industry groups will start projects on the Burrup any more because of the increased awareness of its heritage values but the trust is prepared to accept some loss of art from the Pluto project,

which was started with assurances from government that heritage issues had been resolved.

"The community, if they really knew what was up there, would be horrified," he says. "And we didn't want to run a campaign like Ningaloo, but we may have to. The trigger for that is very close. A number of groups are talking about rallies at Parliament House. There is a groundswell."

Will the battle for the Burrup escalate into a full-blown car-sticker campaign? Or can compromise win the day?

We may know this week when Senator Campbell makes his decision on the National Heritage List.

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Burrup Peninsula rock art: A rich cultural vein but, some argue, a hindrance to industrial progress



