

Aboriginal rock art debate goes public

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The public is being asked to comment on plans to protect what's been called the world's largest art gallery, a collection of ancient Aboriginal rock art on the Dampier Archipelago.

Federal environment and heritage minister Senator Ian Campbell has called for submissions on a proposal that would see most of the area, which is in northwestern Australia, placed on the National Heritage List.

The proposal would hinder the development of the A\$50 billion Pluto Gas natural gas project by Woodside Energy on the Burrup Peninsula.

The Australian Heritage Council report on the Dampier Archipelago, which the minister released this week, describes the density of rock carvings, or petroglyphs, and stone arrangements on the Dampier as "exceptional".

It says the depictions of animals, human figures, human-animal figures and geometric designs "provides an outstanding opportunity to develop a scientific understanding of the social functions of motifs".

And it says the engravings, which date back 30,000 years, provide an "unusual and outstanding visual record" of Aboriginal people's responses to the rise of sea levels at the end of the last ice age.

During its assessment of the Dampier Archipelago the Council received 20 submissions from industry and state government authorities generally opposed to heritage listing.

There were only two submissions in favour of listing. One of these was from the local Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo Aboriginal group, the other from the Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA).

"What the minister, basically, in my opinion is looking for, is more support from the public," says Robert Bednarik of AURA, who has been advocating on behalf of the rock art for over 30 years.

Senator Campbell said last week he was keen to "get the balance right" between allowing industrial development and preserving the rock art.

"I want to make sure that all of the major stakeholders, particularly the economic



Some of the rock art on the Dampier Archipelago (Image: Robert Bednarik)

stakeholders are very happy with the process and we get what I call a win-win-win," he told ABC Radio.



In calling for public submissions on the proposed listing the minister drew attention to where the boundary for the protected area should be drawn.

"Agreeing to the right boundary is a key element of ensuring the heritage and economic values of the area can coexist in to the future," he said.

But some people are concerned about any compromise that would see some of the rock art sacrificed.

Bednarik, who is also convenor of the International Federation of Rock Art Organizations, says he spent three years surveying the art on the Dampier Archipelago.

"You can fairly describe it as the world's largest art gallery," he says.

The rock carvings may help understand how Aboriginal people responded to rise in sea levels at the end of the last ice age (*Image: Robert Bednarik*)

Bednarik says the rock art must be preserved as a whole, likening it to the UK's Stonehenge.

"What if a petrochemical plant said 'Look, you've got here 24 columns, couldn't we take a few out because it's in our way?'"

The World Monuments Fund has put the Dampier Archipelago on its list of 100 of the world's most endangered sites.

Opposition to the listing

Woodside Energy says it welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposal but will oppose heritage listing.

"As a general principle we don't doubt that the Burrup is a special place," says a company spokesperson.

But he says the listing will create uncertainty for industry in the area, which could be held liable for damage to the rock art through pollution.

"It wouldn't only hinder our project, it would hinder everything," the spokesperson says.

He describes the heritage listing as a "blunt instrument" because it fails to consider the economic values of the area that is the gateway to the A\$20 billion North West Shelf liquefied natural gas project.

"This is probably the most productive part of the Australian land mass," he says.

The spokesperson says the company prefers a management plan for the area produced by a coalition of state and federal government, Indigenous groups, conservationists and industry.

Comments on the proposal to list the Dampier Archipelago are to be made to the

Heritage Assessment Branch of the Department of the Environment and Heritage by 28 November.