

Legislative Council- Statement  
Wednesday, 15 November 2006  
Watson, Hon Giz

## **BURRUP PENINSULA - ROCK ART**

### *Statement*

**HON GIZ WATSON (North Metropolitan)** [9.55 pm]: I want to speak this evening on issues concerning the Burrup Peninsula. Members are aware of the Burrup Peninsula and the proposed further industrial activity there. I want to read from a presentation by Dr Carmen Lawrence because I thought it might be of some interest to Labor members in particular. Obviously, the Labor Party is pursuing a steady agenda of destroying the rock art on the Burrup Peninsula. I thought it would be useful to bring to the attention of the house some of the information, which was so well put in the presentation. It was presented this year to a conference in Fremantle and states –

. . . the most significant heritage site in Australia and, sadly, the only one on the World Monuments Fund's list of the 100 most endangered places. For on the Burrup - or to give it its indigenous name Murujuga - is the densest concentration of rock art in the world, estimated at perhaps as many as a million petroglyphs. What some have described as "the world's largest gallery of engraved prehistoric art".

And most Australians are entirely ignorant of its existence. Rock carvings - more precisely graffiti - are scattered through the barren rocky ridges and steep-sided valleys of the peninsula and the surrounding islands. The oldest of the art work is believed to date from the period when the Burrup was an inland range, before the inundation which drowned most of the surrounding landscape over 9000 years ago.

Amongst the distinctive images are geometric designs, tracks of humans, animals and birds, and a huge variety of both naturalistic and figurative representations of humans and animals, some so detailed that they can be identified as particular species. The rock art includes depictions of Thylacines or Tasmanian tigers, extinct on the mainland for over 300 years. Some of the rocks form panels and composite images of daily activities such as hunting, and have clearly been added to over long periods of time.

As anthropologist Pat Vinnicombe, who studied the area for over 15 years before her untimely death, told Nicholas Rothwell

*"I have the sense these carvings are bound up with instruction, initiation (that) the entire peninsula was a place of revelations, a teaching site*

*linked to myths. There's a sequence of images that leads from the ground level to the heights. I'm convinced this is what the Burrup is all about - all the sites are associated with stories, songs.*

*We tend, of course, to disassociate these things and see it as an art gallery. You might as well tear a chapter from a book and hope to catch its plot as understand this place piece by piece."*

The site has rightfully been described as "the richest most exciting region of rock engravings in Australia", providing an "unusual and outstanding visual record of the Aboriginal responses to the rise of sea levels at the end of the last ice age". It tells the story of the long history of contact and shared visual narratives between Aboriginal societies in the region and the inland area of Australia. With European settlement, as was so often the case in our history, came devastation for the original inhabitants of the peninsula, the Yaburara people, from disease and, most notoriously, as a result of so many being killed in the 1868 Flying Foam Massacre.

All who have seen even part of this extensive precinct - covering 42 islands over a 45k radius - marvel at the range and diversity of the art work which, together with camp sites, middens, quarries and standing stones form an irreplaceable record of the lives of the Indigenous people from the first arrivals to the recent past.

I do not know how many members have had the opportunity to walk over the Burrup, but it is a most extraordinary experience. I encourage members to do so soon before other areas of it are destroyed.

The presentation continues -

And it retains great cultural and religious significance for the Aboriginal people of the area. As Caroline Bird and Sylvia Hallam describe it in their report to the National Trust, "the entire Archipelago is a continuous cultural landscape providing a detailed record of both sacred and secular life." We are privileged to glimpse the minds and identities of individual artists and communities. The National Trust has described the Dampier Rock Art Precinct as "one of the world's pre-eminent sites of recorded human evolution and a prehistoric university."

It should be obvious that such a site is a precious part of our heritage, of the world's heritage, deserving of careful study and preservation. Instead of the care and reverence which we would expect to be shown to a site with the significance of Stonehenge, the painted caves of Lascaux in France or the structures of Machu Picchu, the rock art precinct on the Burrup has been scandalously abused, taking second place over more than 40 years to resource exploitation.

An unknown number of petroglyphs were turned to rubble when the Hamersley iron port and rail infrastructure, the town of Dampier and Dampier Salt facilities were constructed in the 60s and 70s. Without a thorough heritage assessment, thousands more were destroyed when Woodside's North West Shelf LNG plant and the associated port was constructed in the 80s, while others were shifted from their original sites and placed in a temporary compound, left undocumented and without proper conservation for 20 years.

Despite persistent pressure on the government to properly assess the cumulative effects of the sulphur and nitrogen emissions from the LNG plant, this research has only just begun and has already been criticised for failing to deal explicitly with the question of the effects of the emissions on the rock surfaces, since it is the colour contrast between the patina and the engraving which gives the carvings their distinct character.

The most recent assault on the rock art occurred during the construction by the DOIR of an infrastructure corridor to facilitate further industrial development on the Burrup. Every day, many of the petroglyphs are exposed to possible theft and to vandalism - access to the site is not managed and there is no surveillance to prevent further desecration of the site.

Although there have been a number of partial surveys of this matchless site, many of them undertaken as part of the development approval process, it has never been the subject of a comprehensive inventory or analysis. As a result there is no generally accepted framework for understanding the various locations and cultural elements within the site. Nor has a heritage management plan of any kind been devised. Indeed the site is plagued by a proliferation of plans and a lack of overall co-ordination.

To add insult to injury, the recently released Department of Conservation and Land Management Plan for tourism and visitor facilities on the Burrup Peninsula Conservation Reserve shows a truly astounding disregard for even the most basic cultural heritage and management principles. There is no reference, for example, to either the Burra Charter or the ICOMOS code of ethics which should govern such plans. Camping on previously inaccessible sites, the construction of visitors' facilities ruining the integrity and ambience of the site and uncontrolled visitation to areas which should be protected all point to a signal failure to understand the responsibilities of heritage protection.

This omission is not unique. The numerous government reports and management strategies all share a surprising lack of understanding and concern about the heritage and scientific value of the area or of cultural resource management more generally.

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As if these problems were not grave enough, Woodside now proposes further destruction of the site to accommodate a new LNG plant, a wharf and storage facilities. They have promised not to destroy more than 10% of the rock art (as if it is a series of unrelated elements) - although much more will be stranded in the moonscape that is the LNG plant. Tragically, the State Minister for Indigenous Affairs has already given her approval for the company to destroy or move the ancient rock art, affecting up to 150 rock art panels.

While it is probable that any further concentration of industrial activity in the area will pose a pollution threat, there is already a cleared site adjacent to the existing plant that the government could insist be used by Woodside instead of allowing them to undertake further destruction and removal of petroglyphs. Woodside claims that the other Joint Venture Partners are refusing to allow access, but in letters to the National Trust, Shell, Chevron, BHP Billiton and BP all indicate that they are willing to negotiate. In any case, should they fail to show good faith in these discussions - Woodside is now on a tight timetable - the State can easily intervene to force an outcome. It is not clear to me -

That is, Dr Carmen Lawrence, and neither is it clear to me –

why Onslow, which seems to be a far superior location and already selected by BHP Billiton for similar activity, should not be fully evaluated and costed before the Burrup is sacrificed yet again to the great God Mammon.

I will end the quote there, even though it goes on a little further. Again, I particularly want to raise this issue with government members. The proposed ongoing destruction of the rock art on the Burrup Peninsula remains an outrageous proposition. If the destruction of that valuable heritage area continues, we will be condemned internationally. I am continually appalled by the government's refusal to consider other sites.