



fara
Friends of
Australian
Rock Art

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The Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP
Minister for the Environment and Water Resources.
Department of the Environment and Water Resources
GPO Box 787
Canberra ACT 2601
18 February 2007

Dear Minister,

I write on behalf of Friends of Australian Rock Art, to urge you to make a decision protecting the art and archaeology of the Burrup Peninsula. The long-established but disastrous policy of using the Burrup Peninsula for LNG plants not only affects Australia's heritage reputation in the world, but also impedes effective long-term industrial planning.

As a world prehistorian in the best Cambridge tradition I am a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. I retired in 1989 from an associate chair at the University of Western Australia, where I initiated the teaching of world archaeology. My doctorate included work on early landscapes both in UK and Australia, on which I have written several books and many papers. I was joint author of a recent report to the National Trust on the art and archaeology of the Dampier Archipelago (available online at: <http://www.burrup.org.au/information.html>).

I have visited the Burrup Peninsula and observed its art and archaeology over the last thirty years, watching with increasing disbelief not only the assault on its unique heritage, but also the attempt to cram industrial construction into its tiny valley areas

Long term industrial planning for the Northwest

There is no natural gas or any other mineral on the Burrup Peninsula, or anywhere else in the Dampier Archipelago.

Woodside's Pluto field lies at the eastern end of a great arc of gas fields more than 100km offshore. BHP Billiton plans to bring gas from the western Scarborough field onshore at Onslow, near the centre of this arc, where large expanses of featureless spinifex plain offer unrestricted flat space for gas processing and ancillary industry, without the formidable construction costs imposed by the Burrup's vertical rock faces and boulder-strewn slopes.

The Pluto gas field is equidistant from Burrup and Onslow, and Woodside initially favoured this option on purely economic grounds, but was deterred by WA bureaucrats' insistence on justifying the infrastructure developed on Burrup's totally unsuitable terrain. Even after major landscape reshaping, industry would remain confined to tiny valley areas among precipitous massifs. The only small flat area lies on silted-up tidal flats vulnerable to tsunamis and the effects of global warming.

Any really substantial Northwest industrial development must locate off the Burrup Peninsula. Effective planning for the economic future of Australia would direct Woodside's development to

economically preferable locations immediately.

Heritage issues on the Burrup

The geologically diverse Dampier Archipelago produced comparable biological diversity, supporting visits by many Aboriginal groups, and providing rock faces for dense and ubiquitous rock carvings. These are set in a total archaeological context of sacred stone uprights and alignments, artefact scatters from domestic life, shaped landscapes - pits and terraces hosting plant staples, and great shell middens documenting human adaptations to rising seas

By contrast, spinifex flats on the mainland lack geological, biological and therefore archaeological richness, and thus offer negligible heritage problems.

Burrup art provides evidence of groups gathering at intervals for sacred rituals throughout human presence in Australia. Wide-ranging groups of the first colonizers met for ceremony and ritual in the narrow canyons and rugged valleys of what were then the Dampier Ranges, over a hundred kilometers inland. Here they carved geometric symbols, and the remarkable "archaic faces", now deeply weathered. Later groups engraved large outlines of land mammals, including extinct thylacines. As rising seas approached present levels around 8000 years ago, art showed marine creatures - fish, crabs, turtles. Abundant late lightly scratched motifs remain fresh and unweathered.

The art of the Dampier Archipelago is among the world's very earliest evidence of symbolism, ritual and religion as distinguishing marks of our own species. Modern humans, spreading from Africa, did not move into the cold of Europe until forty thousand years ago, but entered a greater Australia before fifty thousand, ranging quickly through empty terrain. Burrup documents the ceremonial activities of these earliest arrivals, and their capacity to adapt to rapid environmental change.

Conclusion

Not only does the reshaping of industrial landscapes on Burrup involve the physical destruction of rock engravings, but art and archaeology are also threatened by construction dust and fumes, 4WDs driving over engraved rocks and knocking upright panels, people accidentally and deliberately defacing carvings and stone arrangements, and the sheer visual pollution of smoke stacks closely adjacent.

It is geographically inevitable that future gas and ancillary industries will be constrained by space and costs to move elsewhere, whatever your decision. You, Minister, would do the economy a favour if your heritage decision encouraged a move to a more spacious, level and central location sooner rather than later. That really would be a win - win for heritage and industry.

The building of a cathedral spans hundreds of years; secular and sacred elements on the Burrup Peninsula span tens of thousands. Would we remove "only" 0.02% of Stonehenge, or of Salisbury Cathedral, or cover it in dust and fumes and the visual pollution of industrial construction? The archipelago and its early heritage form an entity, which we are subjecting to the death of a thousand cuts. If any part is threatened, the whole is threatened.

We urge you to save the world's best evidence of religion and resilience among the earliest modern humans moving into new continents.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Sylvia J Hallam (on behalf of Friends of Australian Rock Art).