

Historic rock art lies in dust and rubble

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THE first pictures of rock art removal on the Burrup peninsula show hundreds of boulders lying in piles amid red dust and rubble, after being bulldozed in recent weeks to make way for Woodside Petroleum's Pluto gas processing plant.

The secretly taken photographs show the extent of removal of rocks containing ancient Aboriginal carvings dating back as far as 10-20,000 years.

Some are wrapped up for removal, others encased in netting attached to cranes to hoist them out of the ground. Scraped and smashed rocks, with carvings visible on some surfaces, lie in piles several metres high.

Federal Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull has deferred a decision on whether to list Burrup on the national heritage register, pending further talks with the West Australian Government over rock art protection and industrial development in the area.

His decision angered the National Trust of Australia, which said the minister had effectively sanctioned the continued destruction of one of the world's great rock art galleries.

"It's an absolute disgrace and there will be outrage internationally," state National Trust executive director Tom Perrigo said.

"This minister, who is supposed to be a lover of art, has just shown his utter contempt for this national treasure."

Last month, outgoing environment minister Ian Campbell signalled a decision was "imminent" and would involve a compromise between preserving Burrup's rock art and permitting multi-billion-dollar industries, including the Northwest Shelf joint partners, to continue operating on the remote 20km northwest peninsula.

West Australian senator Rachel Siewert said months of delay in heritage listing had allowed Woodside to begin clearing the first of two sites, A and B, on which engraved images of faces, animals and symbols are scattered across the landscape. "If the minister delays again, it's giving tacit approval to further destruction on site B," she said.

Woodside says about 160 rock art items are being removed on site A with authorisation from the state Government's Aboriginal Cultural Materials Committee. It is now seeking permission to remove rock art from site B.

Woodside chief executive Don Voelte told an investors' conference on Wednesday the company was being extremely careful. "We are moving some of the very precious rock art, and up to this point everything is just fine," he said.

"I'm really proud of what our people are doing up there and I'll tell you it's costing us a little bit, but that's OK because they're being extremely careful."

Friends of Burrup Rock Art convenor Robin Chapple said the federal and West Australian governments should halt further clearing and direct Woodside to relocate its Pluto plant to a cleared site owned by the North West Shelf joint venturers.

"Otherwise we'll end up as international pariahs viewed in the same light as the Taliban when they blew up the Bamiyan statues," he said.

Burrup rock art vigils held in recent weeks in several countries, including at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, have intensified international coverage of the Burrup's fate. More vigils are planned at the mouth of France's rock art-decorated Lascaux Caves, in Rio de Janeiro and in Canberra.

Additional reporting: Paige Taylor