

# Circling sacred ground

*Vast wealth lies beneath the wilderness of the Kimberley coast and developers want to exploit it for an energy-hungry world, report **Victoria Laurie and Nigel Wilson***

LYING in a light plane over the shimmering sea of Australia's remote Kimberley coast, Sylvester Mangolomara looked out of the window and down at a couple of jagged islands below.

What he saw shocked him and two or three other Kimberley traditional owners taking the same flight last week. "We could see a drilling rig just offshore," Mangolomara told *The Australian*. "It made me feel sick in my heart that people were drilling on our country, and without our permission."

The arrival of the yellow platform on four thick black legs is symbolic of a gas-driven resources boom that is about to hit the Kimberley coast. Depending on your outlook, it will deliver untold wealth to an industry-poor pastoral frontier, or comprehensively trash one of Australia's last wilderness areas.

So radical are industry plans that the various proponents have kept very quiet until now, while anti-development groups have scabbled to unearth the details. What is undisputed is that the plans require some of Australia's biggest resource infrastructure to be placed smack in the middle of remote coastline that is not easily reached by road.

So what do we know so far, and who are the players? The source of Mangolomara's angst is Japanese-owned INPEX, a petroleum exploration company eyeing the uninhabited Maret Islands, tiny specks in the spectacular Bonaparte Archipelago off the Kimberley coast.

Last week, INPEX floated a drill rig close to the Maret Islands' southern beaches to begin geotechnical tests. Meanwhile, it is negotiating with the West Australian Government for permission to build a \$US10 billion (\$12 billion) gas plant and loading facility on the islands. The idea is to transport liquefied natural gas via undersea pipeline from its Ichthys deposit 200km out to sea.

Then there's Perth-based Woodside, Australia's biggest domestic gas producer, which also needs a site for an LNG processing plant along the Kimberley coast — if it opts not to go with an alternative processing platform out at sea near gas deposits.

What INPEX and Woodside have in common are their respective stakes in rich gas and oil condensate reserves at the Browse Basin, lying almost directly north of the Kimberley town of Broome in the Timor Sea. The Browse is a world hot spot for exploration, with dozens of companies probing an

area with total gas volumes of 40 trillion cubic feet or more — as much as the North-West Shelf gas reserves and probably substantially more. Shell, Chevron, BP, BHP Billiton, Santos, Italian company ENI and France's Total are only some of the players appearing on the Kimberley scene.

The federal Government is favourably inclined towards developing the Browse gas, not least because it would elevate Australia to become the world's second-biggest supplier of LNG before 2020. Pushing the go button on Browse also fits with the Government's argument that Australia can cut the world's greenhouse gas emissions by exporting its natural gas, which has half the carbon emission rate of coal.

Add in the West Australian Government's enthusiasm for developing Browse Basin gas, and multi-billion-dollar LNG plants materialising along its pristine coast may be inevitable.

"The Government supports LNG processing in the Kimberley," says Deputy Premier Eric Ripper, who is also state Development Minister. "There are at least two proponents seeking to move forward, and there may be others who are less advanced."

Two LNG plants in the Kimberley are "at least possible", says Ripper, although "the Government sees some merit in LNG processing being concentrated in a hub, rather than in many facilities along the coast. But these matters have to be worked through with the stakeholders". Ripper doesn't hide the fact that talks with both INPEX and Woodside have a pressing nature.

"The companies are expressing some urgency to get decisions on these matters," he admits. "They are looking to take advantage of what they see as windows of opportunity to develop the gas now. There is an argument that if they miss this particular cycle, they may have to wait until another cycle at a later stage before the gas can be developed.

"But they can only go ahead with the informed consent of Aboriginal people and with their substantial participation in the developments. We think it will provide much-needed income and training for indigenous people and others in the west Kimberley."

That may be so, but matters appear to have got off to a bad start. Kimberley Land Council executive director Wayne Bergmann says the

KLC received a letter last week announcing that INPEX had begun geo-technical drilling at the Maret Islands, yet it had not received the approval of the area's traditional owners.

"We were able to physically confirm [the drilling] when we flew over the islands with some traditional owners, who were sick at the sight of the drilling rig," Bergmann says.

Bergmann is furious that the native title futures act, under which proponents of exploration or mining activity must consult with registered Aboriginal claimants of an area, has been sidestepped by INPEX and the state Government.

"It's incredibly offensive drilling in someone's backyard without permission ... This has all the marking of the Noonkanbah dispute of the late 1970s," Bergmann says, referring to the historic clash between Kimberley Aborigines and US mining giant Amax when it moved a drilling rig to a sacred site with the backing of the Charles Court Liberal government.

"Last month, Eric Ripper apologised for the disgraceful treatment of Kimberley indigenous people in the Noonkanbah dispute," says Bergmann. "Today it seems that companies are prepared to treat traditional owners in exactly the same way."

INPEX spokesman Sean Kildare says the KLC was formally alerted about the drilling program and the company has the requisite government approvals.

"We don't have the KLC's approval at this time," Kildare says. "We have put in place a process of consultation and asked them to be involved, [but] the KLC has refused to engage until they receive a configuration of commitments and compensation that hasn't been able to be sorted out."

He says INPEX has a tight deadline to make its first gas delivery by late 2010 or early 2013.

What is clear is that two utterly conflicting ideologies exist about the future of the Kimberley region. While Ripper and gas proponents argue in favour of large-scale resource projects, environmental groups such as the Broome-based Environs Kimberley argue against them.

EK director Maria Mann says the Kimberley needs renewable industries such as well-managed tourism and pastoralism, pearling and native plant harvesting. EK also accepts small-scale mining, where once the mining is completed the area can be rehabilitated. But that doesn't include concreting an offshore island or two and installing an LNG plant.

"What's the cumulative impact of all these projects on the Kimberley coast?" Mann asks. "We need to find out what they propose to destroy and, secondly, force industry to form a single industrial hub."

Mann also articulates a widespread fear that the snowball effect of readily available gas could radically alter Australia's northwest wilderness over coming decades.

"A local supply of natural gas means an energy source which, linked with bauxite [found in the Kimberley region's Mitchell

Plateau] or other mineralisation, could lead to massive industrialisation, much like the Pilbara region," Mann says.

"For some people, that might be just what they want, but to those who value the cultural and environmental assets of the Kimberley, it's horrendous."

Western Australia's Chamber of Mines and Energy chief executive Tim Shanahan argues that the Kimberley gas resource is of such national importance it cannot be ignored.

"LNG plants and resource projects generally have got a small footprint. The amount of disturbed area is relatively small compared with other industries such as agriculture, for example," Shanahan says. "It is clearly in the national interest for us to look to develop that resource [and] bring it to market."

Yet former BP Australia chief Greg Bourne, who now heads the World Wildlife Fund for Nature, offered a more cautionary view when he addressed the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association's conference in Adelaide last month.

Pure commercial exploitation of the Kimberley is inappropriate, Bourne says, arguing that the region needs a form of strategic assessment, based on UN models, of the economic, social and environmental effects of development.

"The whole of the Kimberley is not well known to most Australians who live in the cities and towns around our coast," Bourne told oil and gas executives, "but anyone who goes up to the Kimberley knows how important and iconic it is, both from a social and environmental point of view."

Bourne might have added that historical and anthropological values in many parts of the west Kimberley are still unrecorded. Kimberley historian and heritage consultant Cathie Clement says the Maret Islands fall within a marine stretch traditionally frequented by Indonesian fishing parties. Bigge Island has stone middens and rock art paintings which are believed to show some of the earliest contact between indigenous Australians and outsiders.

"With both the INPEX and other Browse Basin proposals, sites of significance to Aboriginal people are likely to be exposed to the greatest risk," says Clement. "One problem with the timing and professed urgency of the LNG proposals is that we know too little about the significant aspects of the Kimberley coast, islands and reefs."

Yet INPEX has already been granted a permit to clear native vegetation on the Maret Islands, prompting the KLC and environmental groups to lodge appeals with the state Environment Minister.

"The Government has protected the Ningaloo Reef but the Kimberley is out of sight, out of mind," says Kevin Blatchford, president of the Kimberley Marine Tourism Association.

Blatchford runs a boat charter business and

cruises the Kimberley's most spectacular coastal river inlets and coves with tourists.

"The Kimberley is a great natural resource that could be exploited, but not at the expense of other industries. It's our last great wilderness, our Amazon."

Adventurer and filmmaker Malcolm Douglas, who once hunted crocodiles in northern

Australia before setting up a crocodile farm in Broome, agrees.

"We can't afford to lose this wilderness, he says. "It's going to be worth a lot more to the national economy in the long run than 20 to 30 years of gas."

Additional reporting: Paige Taylor



**Sick in my heart:** Sylvester Mangolomara, a traditional owner



**Cleared for clearing:** Flora found on the island



**Eyed for a gas plant:** The Maret Islands, on which Japanese-owned petroleum explorer INPEX wants to build a \$12 billion facility

Picture: Kimberley Land Council