

Kimberley set to become environment battleground

Piecemeal LNG developments come under fire

GREG Bourne, one-time head of BP in Australia, used the annual Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association conference in Adelaide in April to set a cat among the pigeons.

Now head of WWF-Australia, Bourne said the development of Kimberley LNG projects should not be allowed to go ahead piecemeal because of the region's delicate ecosystems.

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

WWF-Australia believed that development of the Kimberley had to produce net economic, social and environmental benefits — and not just be lowest-cost commercial exploitation.

The speech set the scene for what promises to become a major environmental battleground.

The Kimberley is the closest land area to the vast Browse Basin gas province, which is set to become the main source of supply for Australia's huge push to become the world's largest LNG producer after Qatar by 2020.

Investments worth tens of billions of dollars are now being planned for LNG developments, Australia's biggest deepwater exploration effort is under way and expectations are that the province will underpin Australia's economic performance well into the second half of the century.

Bourne's point was made to APPEA just as Japanese energy group Inpex was working towards securing Aboriginal approvals for its plan to put an LNG processing plant on the Maret Islands, in the Bonaparte Archipelago and off the Kimberley coast about midway between Derby and the town of Wyndham.

The Maret Islands are about 200km from the huge Ichthys gas reservoir tapped by both Inpex and Shell.

Woodside, Chevron, BP, BHP Billiton, ENI and Total are among the world giants searching for more gas reserves to meet the burgeoning energy demands of north Asia.

Woodside has already begun detailed planning for an LNG project based on the Brecknock reservoirs, close to Scott Reef, which is of particular concern for some environmentalists.

WWF-Australia is among critics of efforts

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to develop LNG production in the Kimberley. Some oppose it outright on environmental concerns, others see possible harm to Aboriginal heritage, tour operators are concerned that LNG facilities will destroy their business, and some simply say, "not in my backyard".

The Kimberley stretches from Broome in the west to Kununurra and Lake Argyle in the east, and covers about 421,000sqkm — slightly larger than Japan and bigger than the UK or New Zealand and twice the size of Victoria.

The region has only three towns, Broome, Derby and Kununurra, with populations of more than 2000, but attracting about 300,000 tourists a year.

Ironically, considering the lack of development today, the Kimberley was one of the earliest parts of the continent to be used by humans, both as a result of prehistoric migration and fishing forays from what is now Indonesia.

The region is spectacular and so vast that the mining and resources industries have only a small footprint.

The West Australian Government, having been stung by a campaign to block Woodside from developing Pluto LNG on the Burrup Peninsula because of 30,000-year-old Aboriginal rock art, moved quickly to set up a Northern Development Taskforce to resolve competing land-use issues.

"The Government's aim is to work with gas processing companies to ensure development is balanced against the exceptional environmental, cultural, tourism and heritage values," Deputy Premier Eric Ripper said last week.

But there are very important national interest questions that Ripper's taskforce will have to address.

On the strength of the opposition so far, it seems many of the critics — not WWF-Australia, which wants LNG hubs — won't be satisfied with anything less than a ban on onshore LNG developments, or those in sight of the coast.

Shades of California and Cabrillo Port?