

Threat to whale calving ground

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The Australian Greens have called on the Rudd Government to fast-track a World Heritage nomination to protect globally significant humpback whale calving grounds on the Kimberley coast of Western Australia.

But federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett has side-stepped any commitment, with a spokeswoman claiming whales are already "fully protected in Commonwealth waters".

Camden Sound, a natural harbour north of Broome, and adjacent bays and islands are the main calving grounds for humpback whales making a 13,000km return journey from Antarctica each winter.

The region is under threat from development proposals for gas exploration, bauxite mining, expansion of the pearling industry and the recent approval of a local shark-finning industry using 2.1km long drift nets with a 15m drop.

Japanese oil and gas exploration company Inpex also recently announced plans to build an \$8.23billion liquefied natural gas plant in the region.

West Australian Greens senator Rachel Siewert has called for the calving grounds to be protected by a World Heritage nomination for the rugged Kimberley coastline, urging the Federal Government to "do whatever it takes" to fast-track a nomination for consideration by the World Heritage Council this year.

Mr Garrett was unavailable for comment. A spokeswoman said he was "looking at positive ways to help identify and protect" the Kimberley's environmental and cultural values, but did not confirm a commitment to World Heritage nomination.

"We are working with the states and territories on a forward plan to develop potential World Heritage nominations for the next decade. In terms of fast tracking, we will work to the capacity of the World Heritage Committee to deal with nominations," she said.

Film-maker Richard Costin, who has spent 15 years studying whales in Camden Sound, said industrial pollutants from oil and gas processing, and discharge of ballast water would pose a serious threat to the marine ecology of the region.

"It is an incredibly important calving, resting and feeding ground for the humpback whales. We have recorded whale songs and the individual sound signatures of boats through the area, and there is clear evidence that the cows and calves are very sensitive to any disturbance," he said.

Camden Sound was also an important area for bull humpbacks as courtship and mating takes place there before the whales head south to their summer feeding grounds in Antarctica. The calving grounds should be protected as a specially designated national whale sanctuary or a marine protected area.

"It's nonsense to say whales are fully protected in Australian waters. They are not protected from boat noise, from entanglement in fishing nets or seismic exploration for oil and gas."

Mr Costin said the Kimberley coast deserved special recognition as a research area.