

Older than Lascaux... Rock engravings at Burrup Aboriginal Burial Place... one of the world's most endangered heritage sites with the Woodside LNG plant in the background.

Older than the pyramids or the Great Wall of China, and a significant record of the history of the Aboriginal people, the rock art of Western Australia's Burrup Peninsula is under threat on any number of fronts

ON THE ROCKS

STORY BY **ANDREW BURRELL**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ERIN JONASSON**

WHEN SYLVIA HALLAM visited the rugged Burrup Peninsula last July for the first time in more than 25 years, she trekked across the spinifex, clambered onto a massive boulder and quietly wept at what confronted her. Back in the 1970s, the professor of prehistory was among the first to recognise that the remote West Australian promontory and its nearby islands held the world's largest and pre-eminent collection of ancient rock art – as many as a million engravings created by generations of indigenous people over the past 30,000 years.

Yet, not long after those early observations, heavy industry began muscling its way onto the 27-kilometre strip of land, since transformed into the heart of Australia's booming minerals and petroleum industries. Now a sprightly 80, Hallam says she was emotionally devastated by her return trip to the Pilbara to view the rock art, now regarded as one of the most endangered heritage sites in the world and what must surely be Australia's biggest cultural secret. "I hadn't been back for so long and I just dreaded going back. And I cried – I couldn't believe it," she recalls of the trip to the Burrup, a short drive from the north-west towns of Dampier and Karratha that are booming, thanks to China's demand for commodities.

What Hallam couldn't miss, just a few hundred metres from

the rock art, were the shimmering metal pipes and hissing orange flares of Australia's biggest natural resources project, the North-West Shelf liquefied natural gas plant that emerged in the early 1980s and is now being expanded to meet soaring demand. To build the LNG plant, several thousand pieces of prehistoric rock art were either blown up or moved to a derelict compound, where they lie undocumented 25 years later, many with their surfaces degraded or damaged by fire.

"I couldn't believe the juxtaposition," says the Perth-based Hallam, a former Cambridge don. "It's not just what has been destroyed; it's not just what has been moved: it's the whole visual impact, the whole impact [on the rock art] of the flares spewing out nitrous oxide, and the impact of people in the area. It is the desecration of a sacred landscape."

Friction between development and heritage values is a story long played out across Australia. But nowhere is this conflict as stark as on the Burrup, where the multibillion-dollar exports being generated by the Woodside-operated North-West Shelf have come at an inestimable cost to national heritage. Woodside recently completed a fresh clearing program of almost 200 ancient artworks for its \$12 billion Pluto LNG project to be built near the original North-West Shelf plant.

This has angered local Aboriginal people as well as heritage campaigners such as Hallam, who pushed the oil and gas company to select one of several sites that are free of indigenous art. But Woodside, which is chaired by Perth businessman Michael Chaney, a former National Gallery of Australia council member who has supported Aboriginal reconciliation, refused to budge. Worse, say the defenders of the Burrup, the WA government continues to promote the peninsula as an industrial hub, although the land available for development has been curtailed due to the federal government's decision last year to place much of the area on the National Heritage List. A few, however, are recognising the mistakes of the past.

The former pro-development Liberal resources minister, Colin Barnett, belatedly admits his "shame and embarrassment" that he and other state governments, especially the current Labor administration, have failed to protect the art. Former WA Labor premier Carmen Lawrence is another recent convert to the cause, claiming her government in the early 1990s was never made fully aware of the Burrup's significance.

When *The Australian Financial Review Magazine* visits the area on a scorching January day, the jagged rocks appear, at first glance, unremarkable; just piles of sun-beaten boulders in the vast and unforgiving Pilbara. But closer inspection quickly reveals the unique marvels of the region: thousands of weathered, but distinct, images of humans, plants, birds, fish, and animals, including the thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger, which has been extinct on the Australian mainland for more than 3,000 years. It is a feeling of discovery and solitude in a mysterious land that jangles with the sight of the monstrous gas plant rising in the middle distance.

Many of the best engravings – some dating back to the last ice age more than 20,000 years ago – are known only to locals and require some energy-sapping treks to view them. But, within a few hours, we see depictions of whales, dolphins, turtles, kangaroos, lizards, snakes, dog-like animals and birds with long necks and curved beaks. Some of the human images are depicted as stick figures; others are more full-bodied. Among them is possibly the first detailed representation of the human face in history, according to a number of academics.

Archaeologist Ken Mulvaney says that based on the degree of weathering, it is assumed that the archaic faces are among the earliest of the art produced on the Burrup. Other art of this antiquity, he says, did not include detailed human faces with eyes, mouths and facial expressions. There are also unusual images of six-fingered hands, exaggerated genitalia and some of childbirth. About half the images are simply schematic

patterns and shapes. The styles are diverse, reflecting the extraordinary time period over which they were created – some between 20,000 and 30,000 years ago, and some as relatively recent as a few thousand years ago.

Intriguingly, some of the humans appear to represent Islander or Mayan people, attesting to the diverse cultural influences on the area over the past 30,000 years. Equally fascinating is the structure of some of the rock formations, including what are known as 'standing stones' – smaller rocks intentionally placed in an upright position, often in gaps between large boulders.

Put simply, say archaeologists and anthropologists, the Burrup provides Australia with a visual record of cultural life and evidence of ritual by Aboriginal communities from the relatively recent past back to prehistory, perhaps even to the first settlement of the continent. The carvings were probably bound up with Aboriginal initiation and myths, in a sequence of images that leads up from ground level to the heights. "I don't know of any other area in the world in which you have the possibility of the complete story of occupation of an area from the earliest occupants to the present," says Hallam.

THE WA MUSEUM had conducted surveys of the area in the 1960s but Robert Bednarik, the rock art specialist who 'discovered' the Burrup treasures later that decade, claims the destruction has occurred because successive state governments have kept the artworks a secret from the rest of the world. "Archaeologists were making excellent money on this [as heritage consultants], but it was made clear to them that they were working for the companies," says Bednarik, who heads up the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations.

Another rock art campaigner, former Greens MP Robin Chapple, agrees that between 12 and 20 archaeologists in WA operate as consultants to the resources industry (which has also used local Aborigines as heritage consultants). "The silence of the West Australian archaeological community on this issue is deafening," he says, adding that some fellow specialists from the eastern states have been more vocal about the desecration.

However, Mulvaney, who is doing a Woodside-funded PhD on the rock art, says those criticisms are unfair. He says archaeologists at the WA Museum and the University of WA pushed for the Burrup to be given World Heritage protection as long ago as the early 1970s. "It doesn't matter how up in arms archaeologists get. Since the 1960s, industry and the state government have seen the Burrup as an industrial precinct, and they still do," he says.

A senior archaeologist who worked for industry assessing the rock art before it was cleared, Patricia Vinnicombe, later denounced the destruction of the Burrup and campaigned to save it. During a visit there in 2003, Vinnicombe died of a heart attack after a walking inspection of the engravings at King Bay – a “men’s business” part of the peninsula that local Aborigines whisper she should not have been visiting.

In the late 1960s, Robert Bednarik moved to Australia from his native Austria after reading a newspaper report that no in-depth archaeological work had ever been conducted in the country’s north-west. He began traversing the rugged terrain and documenting the rock art, and was horrified to learn that a power station for the emerging town of Dampier was being built on what seemed, to him at least, a major heritage site. “I said to the engineer at the time, ‘Do you know about this rock art?’,” recalls Bednarik. “And he said ‘Oh yeah, they’re just blackfellas’ pictures. They’re everywhere’.”

Such attitudes persisted for decades. Today, few Australians have any idea that the Burrup rock art exists, and few tourists ever pass through this remote area – although recent visits by British, German and Middle Eastern television crews, as well as Discovery Channel, to film segments on the art could spark greater foreign interest. The influential World Monuments Fund, which is bankrolled by American Express, also raised the international profile of the Burrup when it put the rock art on its list of the world’s 100 most-endangered heritage sites. By all rights, the art should be a national landmark.

Many of the estimated 1 million engravings spread across the Dampier archipelago are far older than celebrated world landmarks such as France’s Lascaux caves, Egypt’s pyramids, England’s Stonehenge, Cambodia’s Angkor Wat, China’s Great Wall or Indonesia’s Borobudur. Yet these engravings remain, in a practical sense, largely unprotected; there are few patrols by rangers and the rocks have been subject to vandalism and theft. Only last year somebody drove into the centre of the peninsula and used an electric power drill to deface a piece of rock art. Local Aboriginal custodian Robyne Churnside says she has seen many rocks on the Burrup that have been spray-painted, allegedly by ‘white’ locals in four-wheel-drive vehicles. Many smaller rocks are literally on the edge of the road 20 minutes from Karratha airport, which locals say has proved to be a temptation for visitors on the lookout for an unusual souvenir of the Pilbara.

In archaeology circles, the Burrup artworks are known as petroglyphs, which means they were made by removing the outer surface of the rock by pecking, pounding, abrading or scoring, using various shaped tools, mainly pebbles and larger rocks. The rock art is so dense here because the igneous rock

found in the area is particularly suited to making petroglyphs. Removal of the darker weathered surface of the rock reveals a pale interior, creating a sharp colour contrast. Over time, that contrast has diminished as the exposed surfaces weather.

Sylvia Hallam acknowledges that it is difficult to date the antiquity of the engravings, and almost impossible when the surface of the rocks is being constantly damaged by the cumulative effect of industrial emissions. “You can get dates on paintings because that is something that is put on to the rock and you’ve got carbon that can be dated,” she says. “But with an engraving, you’ve removed something from the rock and you can’t date a hole in the air. The only way we are ever going to know is by detailed methods that examine the surface of the rock. But if it’s being affected by what’s going on in the atmosphere, then probably we already cannot do that. So we’ll probably never know; we’ll probably never be able to use physical methods, however much physical methods are improved in the future.”

IT WAS NOT, in fact, the construction of the North-West Shelf LNG plant in the early 1980s that heralded the desecration of the Burrup’s outdoor art gallery. Several thousand petroglyphs had already been turned to rubble when Rio Tinto’s Hamersley Iron port and rail infrastructure at Dampier was built in the 1960s to mark the opening up of the WA iron ore industry, today worth billions of dollars in annual export revenues.

It was not until 1972 that Aboriginal sites received legislative protection under WA’s Aboriginal Heritage Act, even though applications by industry to destroy rock art under the Act were routinely approved after that time and opposition by local Aboriginal groups regularly ignored. Robin Chapple, one of the most outspoken advocates for the rock art, says there has never been a comprehensive study of the artworks covering the archipelago. Instead, discovery and recognition of the rock art has been dictated by the demands of industry. Archaeological investigation has merely served as a prelude to further destruction.

Chapple says this approach has meant that, in total, more than 10,000 pieces of rock art have been destroyed over the past four decades. Bednarik estimates that up to a quarter of the petroglyphs have been lost. Construction of Woodside’s new Pluto plant has involved the relocation of 170 pieces of rock art over the past few months – a process that heritage campaigners have strongly opposed. This time around, however, Woodside is keen to be viewed as a more responsible corporate citizen, although the company declined to comment for this article. What it would say was that none of the rocks were scratched or damaged in any way while they were moved.

Despite last year's National Heritage listing, Woodside was able to proceed with its Pluto project because the LNG precinct was specifically excised from the area under protection. At Pluto's official opening last November, the company's chief executive, American Don Voelte, said that preservation of the rock art was one of the most important aspects of his job. "This is the one report I send to the board of directors all the time. These rocks are the most valuable rocks in the world and we are the custodian of them," he said.

Hallam and others argue that because the area has never been fully surveyed – something that would cost the cashed-up WA government only about \$15 million, according to estimates – it has never been treated as a single entity for heritage purposes, leading to its gradual desecration. "That allows Woodside to say 'we're only destroying 0.1 per cent in this little area here'," Hallam says. "But there was also that little area over here, and that little area over there. And, in total, rather more than a quarter of the whole of the Burrup has gone. It's like saying we haven't hurt any of Stonehenge; we've just moved some of the uprights a few yards or over the hill. But they're not damaged."

Colin Barnett says he was never told of the rock art's heritage value, even while he drew up plans for industry on the peninsula as WA's resources minister between 1993 and 2001. "I was aware that there were Aboriginal sites on the Burrup but I did not grasp the significance of the rock art," he says. "I'm not proud of that but I admit it." Barnett does not, however, blame the state's Department of Industry and Resources or its Department of Indigenous Affairs for failing to brief him fully on the issue. Instead, he lays some of the blame at the feet of the WA Museum, which has been notoriously silent on the issue in recent years, as well as some academics, for failing to make a stronger case against industrial development. "Knowledge of the rock art was kept very much in-house," he says.

But Lawrence, the former premier, echoing the view of the archaeologist Mulvaney, says the voices raised in defence of the Burrup have regularly been overwhelmed by the siren call of development, which is most seductive in WA. "Successive governments, my own included, have failed to do the necessary comprehensive survey of the site," she said last year. "We've been chipping away at it, gradually destroying it, without knowing what we are destroying."

And the attitude persists. The current state Labor government has been the most gung-ho about promoting industry in the area since 2001, spending almost \$200 million on infrastructure, even when alternative sites, including Maitland and Onslow to the south, have been available and posed no threat to rock art. As recently as 2006, Premier Alan Carpenter's then resources minister, John Bowler, admitted he had not even heard of the art "until a couple of years ago".

Voelte admitted at last year's Woodside annual meeting that the WA government had "guided" the company to build Pluto on the Burrup to aid its policy of turning the area into an industrial hub. "They [the government] are the ones that provide the leases. They guided us to the leases they wanted us to use due to their desires to potentially locate other industrial players in the future," Voelte said.

In contrast, BHP Billiton appeared to recognise the sensitivity of the area when it chose to build its Scarborough gas plant at Onslow. It is understood that in approving Woodside's application to clear the rock art last year, WA's then indigenous affairs minister, Sheila McHale, overruled her own Aboriginal Cultural Material Committee (ACMC). When contacted recently by *The AFR Magazine*, then ACMC chairman Charlie Smith said he "can't remember" the nature of the committee's advice to McHale. Premier Alan Carpenter, who warned last year of economic "catastrophe" if the federal government was to grant National Heritage listing to the Burrup, has said he still hopes to attract more industry to the region on land not included on the National Heritage List.

Voelte, too, has forecast that more Woodside gas plants will be built next to Pluto as part of a plan to create an LNG processing hub. It has also been revealed in the state's parliament that explosives maker Dyno Nobel and several other companies have spoken to the government about setting up facilities on the Burrup. Barnett claims that the government is still trying to push projects in the region in a desperate attempt to justify its infrastructure spend. He also accuses the government of failing to pressure Woodside's partners in the North-West Shelf – including BHP Billiton, BP and Chevron – to free up cleared land they owned adjacent to the massive plant to accommodate the Pluto plant, which would have avoided the further removal of rock art.

Duncan Ord, a spokesman for WA's Department of Industry and Resources, insists that the Burrup remains the most suitable location for many industries, especially LNG, due to the paucity of appropriate sites with deep water along WA's north-west coast. He says developers have had to conform to rigorous processes under the state's Aboriginal Heritage Act before clearing rock art, and the recent listing of the area will make further destruction highly unlikely.

Because the state and federal governments now both have jurisdiction over the area, Ord says that a heritage management plan will finally be developed to clearly define boundaries and to ensure protection of the rock art. The National Trust, however, has expressed concerns that the heritage listing will not guarantee the survival of the Burrup "due to ongoing pressure of industrial development". Bednarik says his major concern these days is not what has been destroyed in the past, but the threat posed to the engravings by future emissions from the Woodside LNG plants, the Burrup Fertilisers plant and other facilities yet to be built.

World Heritage listing may be the Burrup's only hope. Minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts, Peter Garrett, who recently visited the site, says he came away "astonished by the truly extraordinary profusion of rock art and the power of the landscape. It is a place of vivid contrasts, given the existing and planned industrial development, and management issues are complex. I intend to work closely with Aboriginal groups, industry and the WA government to make sure we look after this special place now and forever."

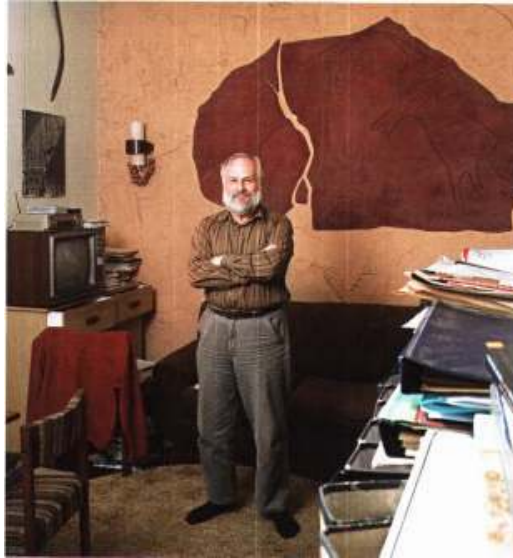
But there is still plenty of room for development on the 30 per cent of the Burrup allocated to industry. Ord contends

that initial studies of emissions since 2004 by an independent committee set up by the government have suggested there has been no damage to the rocks from existing industry. He says the government is confident further studies will confirm this.

But critics such as Bednarik scoff at the government's use of these reports over just a few years to claim there has been no damage to ancient rocks, claiming it is far too early to tell and it will likely be decades before the damage becomes apparent. "At the moment we've got 400,000 tonnes of acid being poured over the surrounding landscape," he says. "In 100 years from now, I am confident in estimating about 80 to 90 per cent of the rock art will simply be gone." ■

Colin Barnett claims the government is still trying to push projects onto the region in a desperate attempt to justify its infrastructure spend

"I don't know of any other area in the world in which you have the possibility of the complete story of occupation of an area."



Robert Bednarik, the rock art specialist who 'discovered' the Burrup treasures in the late 1960s, estimates that up to a quarter have already been lost



From left: Don Voelte, CEO of Woodside Petroleum, on site at the Pluto LNG processing plant in Dampier, with WA Premier Alan Carpenter and local state MP Fred Ribeling, inspecting the relocated rock art.



Emeritus Professor Sylvia Hallam at home in Perth. The former professor of prehistory at the University of WA was among the first to recognise the significance of the Burrup artworks (shown opposite).

