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CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL ART

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PETER HYLANDS

ADDRESSES AN ISSUE OF NATIONAL LOSS AT MOSSGREEN'S SHOW OF EARLY ABORIGINAL BARK PAINTINGS

Noted film maker and researcher Peter Hylans and his wife artist Andrea Hylands addressed a lunch at the gallery on March 5 and spoke about an issue of great national concern—the loss of indigenous rock art at Burrup Peninsula in West Australia. Extracts of his speech are published below and our clients are encouraged to learn more about this issue by visiting the dedicated website for this important cause: www.burrup.org.au



Left: Peter and Andrea Hylands
Above: Paul Sumner, Jeff Makin, Margaret Harrison & Ian Gunn at the private lunch

One thousand generations to make it, just one generation to break it.

I want to take you on a journey to the other side of the Australian continent, to the Burrup Peninsula in the remote North West of Western Australia. Over the last few weeks it has rained very hard on the Peninsula, the place is very hot, close to the hottest places in Australia. The heat and the wet are creating steam like conditions. Emerging from the mist is a German Television Crew who are making a program on what I am going to tell you about. They will have an audience of some 58 million people across Europe.

The indigenous people who lived on the Burrup were massacred in what is known as the Flying Foam Massacre. The responsibility of custodianship has passed to adjoining peoples including the Ngarluma. Many of the standing stones erected in memory of those murdered now lie broken.

The Burrup Peninsula, or in local language the Murujuga, contains an extraordinary collection of ancient rock carvings created by many hundreds of generations of aboriginal people over a period of about 30,000 years. The art includes the earliest ever depictions of the human face and the images of extinct animals.

The area of the Burrup rock art, which during the last ice age was some 150 kilometers inland, became a series of rocky islands as the ice caps retreated and sea levels rose, and now shaped by industry forms a Peninsula, joined to the mainland by earthworks to create road and rail access for industrial development.

The entire rock art precinct is made up of 42 islands, islets and rocks covering an area some 45 km in radius. The rock art precinct represents the largest and possibly the oldest such precinct in the world. There are more than one million rock carvings. The area is beyond value, and as well as being of great archaeological, cultural and artistic merit, it is a storehouse of knowledge and memory. The place is of great significance to indigenous peoples of the region.

Major industrial activity now exists on the Burrup including Woodside's onshore gas processing facilities or gas trains and the Indian company, Burrup Fertilisers.

Today, the Burrup is listed on the World Monument Funds list of the 100 most endangered places in the world.

The Burrup is however still under significant pressure from even more industrial development in the form of industrial infrastructure – factories and processing plants, infrastructure for extraction industries whose source of supply is distant from the Burrup. What is remarkable is that the rock art precinct on the Burrup contains some of the hardest rock on earth and is surrounded by degraded pastoral land which is some of the flattest on earth, the later perfect for industrial development and infrastructure.

It probably costs 30% more to build on the Burrup as massive amounts of rock have to be moved to clear the sites for construction. This rock of course is some of the most precious in the world.

The question therefore is, why is the Burrup being used for industrial infrastructure, given its enormously important and global cultural significance?

When the destruction first started the rock art was just bulldozed, no one knows how much, now an attempt is made to save and relocate the rock art. What is critically important now, is to ensure that as much of the rock art landscape as possible on the Burrup stays intact. Moving the rock art essentially destroys its relevance in time and place. As population pressure increases so does vandalism and the likelihood of theft. The rock art for the present remains largely unprotected and undocumented. A greater scientific effort is needed.

Vandalism on the Burrup is now rife, more is discovered on every visit. A recent example is the desecration of a fish engraving site with the use of power tools. The site is hard to access and would have taken a great deal of effort to get to so the vandalism was premeditated. This is so distressing that even the UK's Daily Mail dedicated a substantial amount of space about the graffiti occurring on the Burrup.

In early July 2007, the Australian Federal Government announced a National Heritage listing of parts of the Burrup

Peninsula. Unlike World Heritage listing, National Heritage listing in Australia, does not provide protection for the site.

There are now plenty of disparaging quotes from eminent persons around the world in relation to Australia's conduct on the Burrup. I will leave those for you to discover but give you two quotes from WA.

"Heritage is in a mess in Western Australia. If Stonehenge were in the Pilbara, it would no longer exist"

Sally Morgan, Aboriginal author, artist, academic, Sally's country is to the east of the Burrup in the central Pilbara region

"We've dreamt of this area [the Burrup] becoming the most important industrial region in the southern hemisphere for twenty to thirty years, and finally the realization is starting to happen"

Fred Riebling, Speaker of the WA Legislative Assembly & MP for the Pilbara region

As an international executive and consultant I am particularly interested in standards of governance, cross border standards and executive conduct in an international context. Why? because it is critical to ensure proper process and transparency as decent and proper standards of governance are one of the key building blocks of economy, society and justice. The Burrup gives a grim account of conduct by governments, of executive standards and the use of national and international shareholder funds to conduct activities that would never be allowed in either Europe or the USA.

I want to state clearly here that I understand the need for economic development and I am not against the mining or extraction industries per se as of course they are essential. There is plenty of evidence to show that, given the right legal framework and standards of governance, mining companies can conduct themselves as model citizens. Given slack, human nature takes over and things go off the rails.

The WA Government has consistently refused World Heritage listing of the site even though the Federal Government eventually proposed it, when it did there was no response from the WA Government.

Australian Heritage listing, which does not protect the Burrup from development, was postponed three times by the Federal Government. These delays were constructed to allow the door of development to remain wide open and resulted in the approval of the Pluto B gas train extension.

So what now with a change of government in Canberra? Martin Ferguson is now busy promoting, on behalf of the Federal Government, the development of a major Sassol Chevron plant on the Burrup. Meanwhile a number of companies have thought twice about the heritage and cultural issues on the Burrup and withdrawn from development plans, the WA Government, undeterred is now embarking on yet another round of encouraging new developments including a Dyno Nobel Explosives plant and various small granite mining operations on the Burrup.

Given the explosive mix of companies on the Burrup and the lack of process one can only wonder how safe the Burrup development really is?

From a heritage and professional point of view the complete lack of documentation of what actually exists on the Burrup is extraordinary. The WA government and its cultural institutions are to be condemned for this, as is the Federal Government for its compliance with these appalling standards.

Carmen Lawrence, Sylvia Hallam and I (and others) met with Woodside executives at their plant on the Burrup. They gave us a presentation on the economic significance of the development. The first and most obvious question that I asked them was 'have you taken into account the economic value (cultural and tourism) of the Burrup rock art site? Their answer was of course no - staggering for anyone who knows about economics. The real answer is the benefit to WA would be much greater if they had not located their plant on the Burrup but instead gone elsewhere. WA would then have had the greatest rock art site on earth and exactly the same revenues from gas, but with considerably cheaper infrastructure costs.

The police in WA have also been used in rather odd ways. Jeannine, the organiser of our July trip to the Burrup had a knock on her door, the visit was from the Western Australian Police, who spent an hour interrogating her about the reason for the visit and seeking information about the visitors. Jeannine has now left WA.

While information on the Burrup Rock art, including tourism information is sparse or inaccurate, cracks in the WA wall of silence are starting to grow. I recommend you read Andrew Burrell's article on the Burrup in last Friday's Financial Review Magazine.

My view is that whatever the national and international protests more of the Burrup will be destroyed (as will more of WA's indigenous heritage elsewhere in the state). We are stuck in a downward spiral of destruction.



This matter is now so serious and Australian Governments have proved so incompetent in this matter that it may be that international action is the only way forward.

"I have always considered the Burrup and its rock art to be one of human society's most important cultural sites. In one sense I think of the Burrup as a barometer of the human condition. If we can destroy our cultural heritage, that is our past and our present, we have the capacity to destroy the future; a future that belongs to others, the future generations of this world".

Peter Hylands at Mossgreen Gallery March 2008