



<http://remotecentral.blogspot.com/2008/07/western-australias-aboriginal-rock-art.html>

Monday, July 28, 2008

## Western Australia's Aboriginal Rock Art In Danger



In recent weeks I've written a couple of posts regarding European Palaeolithic caves in which rock art is considered to be in grave danger, one from mould destroying the actual fabric of the original paint materials, ([Lascaux](#)) and the other ([Praileaitz](#)) that finds

itself uncomfortably near quarrying activities and the frequent detonation of explosives.

But for this post, we're going to be travelling across to the other side of the world to north-western Australia, where in the open air, is to be found the world's greatest concentration of rock art, similarly endangered, once again due to the proximity of commercial enterprises which threaten to compromise the integrity of the site, as individual rocks and boulders are moved from their original locations. Local mineral extraction activities edge ever nearer, and pollution threatens to erode countless petroglyphs over the coming decades.

The rock art in question is spread over an area slightly bigger than 50 square miles, on the [Murujuga Peninsula](#) in Western Australia, and more commonly known in the present day as the Burrup Peninsula, which formerly belonged to an Aborigine people known as the Yaburara, until they were [massacred](#) by the British in 1868, more of which later.

But for an account of the present woes afflicting this remote corner of the world, we turn to the august pages of Yahoo! News, from which the following is taken...

*Australia's greatest ancient Aboriginal rock art is at risk of being damaged or destroyed because it sits at the epicentre of the country's resources boom, experts say*

*The etchings of men and animals on the rocks of the Burrup Peninsula, some of which are believed to be up to 30,000 years old, lie in Western Australia's remote and mineral-laden Pilbara region.*

*Images carved onto the red rocks scattering the landscape include kangaroos, lizards and emu tracks as well as the extinct native Tasmanian tiger which died out on the mainland 6,000 years ago.*

*Among the most significant panels are those showing human faces and activities and what experts believe are mythical figures.*

*"One of the pictures is depicting movement, is showing a man climbing a tree; probably to go hunting a possum or something like that," says archaeologist and anthropologist Sue Smalldon.*

*"The depiction of movement is quite rare in historic art around the world."*

However, there appears to be no shortage natural resources, which in this part of the world appear to be particularly abundant, and which in this case, pose the greatest danger to the long-term future of this vast site, part of which, Dampier, has previously been brought to the attention of the outside world by Robert Bednarik, who is credited with discovering the rock art there some 40 years ago, during which time there has been increasingly widespread destruction of sites where panels of engravings had previously been located.

*But the peninsula is also seeing increasing industrial activity, including a gas processing plant, a fertiliser factory and iron ore port facilities, making it the only place in Australia to feature on the World Monuments Fund's list of the most endangered sites.*

*Smalldon believes the rock art has suffered since mining took off in the Pilbara, which holds some of the richest mineral deposits on earth, in the 1960s.*

*"We had nearly one million panels of rock art," Smalldon told AFP.*

*"That's what so important about it. Yes, it's important to culture, yes, it's important aesthetically and for other reasons. But from an international perspective, it's the greatest concentration of rock art in the world."*

*She said the threat to the art has intensified in recent years as mining and energy companies drain the region of iron ore, natural gas and other resources to feed the huge demand for raw materials from Asia.*

*Smalldon cites the removal of rock art from the area by energy producer Woodside Petroleum to build a new liquified natural gas (LNG) plant, as an indicator of how industrial development threatens the works.*

For their part, Woodside Petroleum point to the fact that the LNG they produce has a greatly reduced carbon footprint, and as the demand from Asia for such products continues to grow, they are duty-bound to their share holders to take maximum advantage of the resources to which they have access, thus their plans to build a rig in the area. Additionally, they claim to have taken a course of action which causes the least damage to the local rock art they have encountered during the course of operations...

*Woodside said it tried to avoid rock engravings when it designed its Burrup LNG Park but that 170 boulders containing art which could not be avoided were moved to nearby natural settings with the guidance of indigenous custodians.*

*"No rock art was damaged or destroyed during this process and the relocated boulders are now indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape," a spokesman for the company told AFP.*

*But Smalldon is unimpressed.*

*"It's like saying Stonehenge is a round circular site, let's remove two of the stones," she said.*

*"You're removing a percentage of the rock art and therefore reducing the significance of it. You've got to think of it as the Aboriginal people think of it -- as a whole. They see it as a place, they don't see it as individual rock art."*

Here's some additional reportage and comment from [\*Neue Züricher Zeitung\*](#), January 22, 2008 (pdf), translated from the original text in German...

*"We would like approval to remove some rocks and boulders, because we intend to build an oil rig at the site mentioned" – can anybody imagine such an application to the authorities if it concerned world famous sites such as Stonehenge, the Pyramids at Gizeh or Angkor Wat in Cambodia? Hardly.*

*Not only imaginable but indeed officially sanctioned is such a course of action at the Murujuga [Burrup] Peninsula in Australia's Northwest. Even though it is the location – as archaeologists think – of the greatest cultural treasure on the 5th continent and one of the most important in the world: a huge accumulation of rock carvings [petroglyphs], a fantastic encyclopedia of human presence for the last 8,000 years.*

With regard to Stonehenge and the ongoing problems there, it is reported that one Labour MP did actually suggest moving the entire monument, so we can see that cultural myopia isn't restricted to the Murujuga Peninsula alone; here's [a word](#) from Robert Bednarik...

*"Western Australia has one of the lowest population densities in the world. We have oodles of land, we have enormous stretches of coastal spinifex plains that are completely unoccupied," he said.*

*"And what do we do? We put the biggest industrial development in the country at the same site as the biggest cultural heritage site in the country. It's incredible."*

*Austrian-born Bednarik, an epistemologist who has published widely on archaeology, believes industrial emissions pose the biggest risk to the art and will gradually strip away the etchings.*

*"The only rock art, the only petroglyphs that you are going to see 100 years from now are those very, very deeply carved. And they of course are a small minority," he said.*

And here's [some background](#) on Pilbara rock art as a whole, with particular reference to Dampier...

*The first published reports of Pilbara rock art are those in the account of Captain John Wickham, whose ship, the HMAS Beagle, visited Depuch Island in the Dampier archipelago in 1840.*

*The motifs and roles vary immensely between engravings. Some are images of flora and fauna from the area while some are Dreaming sites. Others have a role as Thalu sites, places of great spiritual power, something equivalent to the Christian notion of a shrine.*

*A clan member would perform ceremonies at the Thalu site to regenerate and multiply the elements of the earth necessary for the clan's survival.*

*All the sites contain a spiritual essence. This essence gives off an energy which resonates with the traditional people from that particular area. The energy is considered dangerous to outsiders who venture into the area without ritual preparation.*

*Until the area was earmarked for development in the early 1960s, the rock engravings were largely unknown.*

For a much more detailed look, this pdf, ['The Dampier Rock Art Precinct'](#) is essential reading, contains some nice images, and towards the end addresses the previously mentioned topic of the damage emissions from industry are likely to cause - as opposed to the short-term damage to the site caused by moving 165 boulders, and the alleged activities of various visitors to the area, said on occasion to help themselves to some of the smaller engraved rocks, either for souvenirs, or more likely in this day and age, to be sold on the black market to unscrupulous collectors - much in the same way, albeit on as yet a smaller scale, as Iraq is being looted of its archaeology, or a multitude of ancient sites across North and South America robbed of theirs.

Here's a word from officialdom, in this case the government of Western Australia, once again via [Yahoo! News](#) (scroll down)...

*Western Australia's Deputy Premier Eric Ripper said the state government*

*was establishing Murujuga National Park, to be jointly managed with the indigenous community, over parts of the Burrup that lie in National Heritage areas.*

*An Aboriginal heritage management plan to guide the protection of indigenous heritage and culture in the wider Dampier Archipelago had also been developed.*

*"We recognize the immense national cultural and heritage values of the area and believe a cooperative approach between all of these groups is the best way to manage and protect those heritage values," he said.*

*But local Aboriginal leaders such as Wilfred Hicks, from the Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo people which claim a connection to the Burrup, remain concerned about the site.*

*"I'm very worried about it. All my people are worried about it because it's destroying all the Aboriginal art," he said.*

And to wind up, here's an assessment from [ICOMOS](#) of the overall situation there - they note for example, that due to air pollution, some rock art on the Murujuga Peninsula will start to disappear as early as 2030....

*The Burrup Peninsula (Murujuga) is a unique ecological and archaeological province on the north-west coast of the Pilbara, Western Australia.*

*The Burrup features what is regarded as one of the world's largest and most significant collection of petroglyphs, ancient rock-art engravings dating back tens of thousands of years. Thousands of carvings cover the rocky landscape of the peninsula and surrounding islands. The area also possesses a major corpus of standing stones, the largest occurrence in Australia.*

*The Burrup is an artificial peninsula, formed when Dampier Island was connected to the mainland by a causeway constructed in the 1960s, when major industrial facilities were established in the remote region. Currently six giant gas processing plants are proposed for the peninsula, together with associated development - including infrastructure corridors, port expansions, water-desalination plants and quarry expansions.*

*If this development proceeds, rock art is in danger of being damaged or*

*relocated during construction, and the future emissions of sulphur and nitrogen from these plants may form acidic compounds that could gradually destroy the carvings.*

*Scientific data predict that the rock art will begin to disappear by 2030. Concern has been expressed that the management plan for the area will afford no real protection for this significant rock art.*

*Reports indicate that, collectively, the proposed heavy industry in the region may be responsible for emitting an additional 20 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per year, and this may also have a deleterious effect on the regions' unique ecosystem.*

*Furthermore, there appear to be prudent and feasible alternatives to the proposed location of the development, in particular the Maitland Heavy Industry Estate on the mainland, which would allow the development to proceed but also conserve the Burrup Peninsula's significant collection of petroglyphs (Sourced from Bednarik 2002, and the web pages ['Save Dampier Rock Art'](#) and ['Dampier Information Page'](#)).*

Looking at the history of the region over the past couple of centuries, especially in this brief but telling article by Robert Bednarik, ['The Killing Fields of Murujuga'](#)(pdf) and the way it has been effectively commandeered by central government and given over to industry, it's hardly a surprise to learn that the value of what Bednarik estimates to be 200,000-250,000 petroglyph panels has been somewhat ignored, and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

It is clear that there are billions of dollars to be made from exploiting the natural resources in this part of Western Australia, and it could be argued that anything that benefits the national economy so greatly, works towards the greater good, as the citizens of that economy supposedly experience the so-called 'trickle-down' effect; in contrast, even if all the rock art is saved and preserved, and some related tourism can be generated, there is no way that anything like the same amount of cash could be generated in the same time-frame.

So while it has to be accepted that further damage to the area and its

petroglyphs is more or less inevitable, there's a great deal that can and should be done to save as much as possible, which means properly funded projects to record what exists now, the restriction of some areas as is deemed suitable, and effective management of a vast cultural resource that once gone, can never be replaced.

Should you feel so inclined, there is an [online petition](#) to which you can add your name.

**Save Dampier Rock Art**

<http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/dampier/web/index.html>

**Ancient Secrets of Lost Art** <http://www.dampierrockart.net/Media/2002-06-29%20Ancient%20secrets%20of%20lost%20art-West.pdf>

**Burru National Trust pdf** <http://www.burru.org.au/ntwa.pdf>

**AURA** <http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/aura/web/index.html>

**ICOMOS** <http://www.international.icomos.org/risk/2002/australia2002.htm>

**Australian Archaeological Association Conference, December 2008**

<http://www.socialscience.uq.edu.au/index.html?page=74856>