

The Battle for the Burrup

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On one side is \$6 billion worth of international gas projects, which the government says are vital to our economic future. On the other is the world's biggest ancient rock art collection, which experts and locals fear will be destroyed by development.

Robert McGlynn investigates Burrup Peninsula's great divide.

TO SUCCESSIVE state governments, the value of the land on and around the Burrup Peninsula off Dampier has always been measured by what lies beneath.

Last financial year, production from the area's mining and petroleum industries contributed close to \$12 billion to the State's coffers. So it is no surprise that politicians like Pilbara MLA Fred Riebeling declare that development of our natural resources is an obligation of government.

But to the Dampier community, as well as several experts who have criticised what they see as a develop-at-all-costs attitude, any obligation to the economic future should not erase our obligation to the past.

The Government says the recently announced \$6 billion worth of international gas processing projects will create thousands of jobs in the region.

But in the process, according to experts such as Robert Bednarik, president of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO), the development will see the world's biggest collection of ancient rock art all but disappear.

Mr Bednarik, a world-renowned archaeologist, has been studying the rock art galleries of the Burrup peninsula and its surrounds since the mid-1960s.

In a report published in the May issue of his organisation's journal, Rock Art Research, Mr Bednarik says about 25 per cent of the rock engravings, or petroglyphs, have already been physically destroyed since the initial development of the townsite of Dampier and its nearby industrial estate.

The report further claims that since the 1980s there has been a noticeable deterioration in the petroglyphs still remaining, because of increased atmospheric pollution.

Using data provided by the companies themselves, Mr Bednarik goes on to say that if the proposed development goes ahead, his calculations indicate a trebling of atmospheric pollution, and the resulting acid rain will considerably hasten the engraving's disappearance.

The government's proposed development for the Burrup includes six new chemical plants, some of which will use natural gas as a base for products used in the plastics and fuel additives industry.

There are also plans for a plant to produce fertilisers, explosives and chemical feedstock, as well as another for producing ammonia for India's fertiliser industry. Woodside, already resident on the Burrup, is also planning an expansion of its activities.

To support the development, infrastructure corridors, quarry expansions and a water desalination plant will also be built.

Fred Riebeling, weary of dismissing outright claims of increased acid rain, believes Mr Bednarik and his supporters in the Green movement have got their research wrong.

"If the government produces acid rain it will be an absolute tragedy. And the first time I see a reputable agency say that, then I'll take it seriously," he says.

State Development Minister Clive Brown strongly defends industry expansion on the Peninsula, labelling concerns for the rock art as alarmist and uninformed.

The government has announced it will appoint a panel of experts to check Mr Bednarik's calculations and report on their validity. He says it's a farce.

"They want to know how such damning figures can be obtained by a researcher and whether anything was leaked to me. This issue is not about these figures, which are almost certainly understated, it's about checking my predictions. But no panel can do this because I'm the only person in the world who took lots of pictures there in the 1960s, and without knowing what the stuff looked like then, every argument against deterioration is illusory.

"The bottom line is simple. I have done the research, I have done my homework. The government departments have done nothing at all in 40 years about this matter. They don't need a panel to establish that, it already is a clear fact."

Greens MLC for the region, Robin Chapple, agrees.

He says the problem stems from the concept of the area being driven by development, and goes back to the early days of Pilbara development, well before the creation of the Aboriginal Heritage Act in the early 1970s.

The region was in the hands of the then Department for State Development. Although its name has changed over the years, its original vision for the Burrup has not.

"The same cowboys have been in control all this time," he says.

Rather than re-evaluating the situation, he says, the bureaucrats are continuing in the same direction and the department, now the Office of Major Projects, had failed to show any leadership.

"The people that are supposed to assess this, to see if there is going to be an environmental problem, have never seen a problem," he says.

Opponents of the development say that despite government claims to the contrary, the Environmental Protection Authority has never previously assessed the plan, and although several reports have been produced on specific areas, a complete survey of Aboriginal sites has also never been undertaken.

At a rally held earlier this month at Burrup's Hearson's Cove, where locals protested over the effects of the pollution on both the rock art and the cove's popular beach, Clive Brown said the area had been previously assessed.

He had been ill advised, Mr Chapple said. The community had been trying to get the area assessed for years without success.

Mr Chapple mounted a court challenge over a plan in 1994 to set up a process for developing the Burrup Peninsula. Because it was being undertaken by the Office of Major Projects, he says, no provision had been made for environmental assessment.

"I referred that document to the EPA and they called the proposal in for assessment," he says, adding that either the government or the Office of Major Projects then instructed the EPA to withdraw the assessment.

"So I then initiated court action against the EPA for failing to comply with their Act and they said 'you're correct, we will not defend the action'.

"At the 11th hour the government and Crown Law Department, on behalf of the Office, interceded and defended it. A deliberation was given which said that until such time as development was actually proposed, there was nothing to assess.

"As a result, the EPA has never previously assessed the land use of the Burrup; they weren't allowed to."

Since the latest development plans were announced, the EPA has initiated an environmental assessment. But, according to the Conservation Council of WA, statements by Mr Brown that the government will not back down over Burrup pre-empt the outcome of the environmental impact assessment process.

"The only way for the region to survive and get bigger is if we get development," says Fred Riebeling.

"All the people out at the protest work for the industry. They were basically saying it's all right for us but the next crop of people that want to live and work in the Pilbara, bad luck, we're happy with what we've got."

For Mr Bednarik, the global significance of the site is more important than what he calls "squabbling over some petty figures". In any case, he says, a ready-made solution already exists on the mainland.

"What's wrong with Maitland Industrial Estate?" was the question posed by the One Nation MLC for the region, John Fischer, at the Hearson's Cove rally.

"About 80 per cent of Burrup consists of huge boulder piles with very narrow, V-shaped valleys between them. It is impossible to build there, so the remaining 20 per cent of flat land is largely used up, with the exception of Hearson Cove," Mr Bednarik explains.

"It seems pointless to squeeze all this huge development into this tiny area, when on the coastal mainland there are tens of thousands of square kilometres of perfectly flat spinifex plains, totally unoccupied. I am sure there is some quite specific reason for it which the government does not tell us."

Mr Riebeling and the government say the cost of moving to Maitland would be prohibitive, and the companies involved in the project have already spent much money and resources on developing their projects in Burrup.

Opponents of the Burrup plan, such as John Fischer, dispute these figures but for the government, it's a matter of keeping its word.

"International companies trust WA to honour its commitments and not to breach agreement," says Clive Brown.

"To dishonour our commitment to the Burrup Industrial Estate would devastate a reputation built over the years. We would destroy our ability to attract major international projects and create jobs."

The government has acknowledged that Maitland will have to be developed in the near future.

"If we get a steel plant or a large petro chemical works (it) will mean the infrastructure for the Maitland site will be feasible but it's just beyond the State's capacity at the moment," says Mr Riebeling.

Plans for the estate, which is named after the Maitland River, include over 4000ha of flat land to provide broadacre and waterfront land to cater for future processing of iron ore, gas and salt.

Mr Brown says it's not about one development location versus another; it's more a debate about having development and jobs or not having them. He says that if projects were moved from their planned location on the Burrup Industrial Estate, they would be lost to Australia.

Mr Riebeling agrees: "The simple fact is if these companies aren't going to Burrup they're going to Indonesia or Chile."

But Mr Bednarik says the real issue is that the government is dithering and procrastinating over Maitland.

"Instead of doing the obvious and getting cracking on it, they argue and waste more time. No construction work has commenced.

"Everyone agrees that Maitland will be needed, that it will be established, and we've had many years to start on this and nothing happened. Every day the government delays the start of Maitland is another day lost, and if the companies were to get cold feet it would be because of that, not because they have to establish at Maitland.

"If the companies start looking elsewhere, then it is only the government's fault that the State loses billions of dollars in investment. The crux of the matter is the proposed relocation to Maitland."

Mr Bednarik says he is incredulous that a site of such significance has been ignored for so long.

"Successive state governments have never produced a management plan for the natural or cultural environmental assets of the Dampier Archipelago, nor ever presented an independent impact study, or commissioned a study of the condition of the rock art, despite several recommendations being made by scientists over the years.

"In fact, this government, which by legislation is charged with the protection of the rock art, has made no attempt even to create an inventory of the Dampier rock art." Robin Chapple is confident that Dampier's rock art galleries will be saved.

"This wasn't necessarily greenies, protesting for the galleries at Hearson's Cove. There are no greenies in Karratha.

After the rally I caught up with a rigger and he said to me: 'This is the greatest job ever. When I'm not working I've got the best art gallery in the world'. Coming from a so-called "beefy" rigger, it was a great surprise."