

Transcript: sacred stones

60 Minutes

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Story

RAY MARTIN: Round the port of Dampier and what they call the Burrup Peninsula, the hills are covered with rich, red boulders. Hidden in the gullies and the valleys of this old volcanic landscape are hundreds of thousands of ancient images — carved into the rock. Birds, animals, and secret rituals. Even thylacines — Tassie tigers — that roamed here and were carved here 10,000 years ago. Is this as important as Uluru?

ROBERT BEDNARIK: Oh, it is far more important than Uluru. This is the largest rock art site in the world. It is the largest cultural monument in Australia.

RAY MARTIN: Smack-bang in the middle of this enormous art gallery is Australia's biggest industrial complex. The fact is, it never had to be built here. There are vast spaces away from the precious art just a few kilometres down the coast.

ROBERT BEDNARIK: Can you imagine the British accepting the positioning of a petrol chemical plant at Stonehenge and the Government saying, "Well, we can remove a few of those columns, can't we?"

RAY MARTIN: For almost 40 years now, Robert Bednarik has been crying in the wilderness.

Do you think governments have deliberately kept this secret?

ROBERT BEDNARIK: I believe so.

RAY MARTIN: An Austrian-born engineer, these days, Robert is part-archaeologist, part-anthropologist and full-time rock wallaby.

ROBERT BEDNARIK: As you can see yourself, it's quite a fascinating structure. You have a column holding up this huge roof. And then up here, in front, you see ... this surface is entirely covered.

RAY MARTIN: Wandering the Burrup Peninsula for decades, Robert was the first whitefella to rediscover thousands of the pictures. Their carvings, chipped with stone, into the soft red-desert stain that forms on the hard-rock boulders.

When you walk here, do you feel the spirits? When you're alone?

ROBERT BEDNARIK: When you see it for the first time, being the first European to see it, you know, you do feel very close to the people who created it.

RAY MARTIN: The paradox is, except for a few people like Robert who've made the effort to climb these hard rocks, nobody knows about Australia's greatest cultural heritage.

WA RESOURCES MINISTER JOHN BOWLER: The average Australian is going to know about this with your program for the first time.

RAY MARTIN: John Bowler is the WA Resources Minister. He's the bloke responsible.

JOHN BOWLER: I'm from Kalgoorlie. I've only been minister in a year. It was chilling, I've got to say, when I went there and saw it in situ and walked amongst it and saw it, it was very special.

RAY MARTIN: Why have governments been so slack, then?

JOHN BOWLER: I don't think that many people knew about it. Did you know about it before? I never knew about it until a couple of years ago.

RAY MARTIN: It's an industrial park on a grand scale. Four percent of Australia's GDP — tens of billions of dollars — comes out of this single gas plant. Woodside wants another one right alongside. When the boom time meets the Dreamtime, well, something's got to give. Roads and train tracks, the salt works, and other industry have all smashed the rock art.

ROBERT BEDNARIK: See, the Government of Western Australia is the worst state in the world. Not only today, but probably in living memory.

RAY MARTIN: Hang on, you say the governments of Western Australia have been the worst state vandals anywhere in the world?

ROBERT BEDNARIK: Yes, we're talking about ongoing vandalism that has been going on for 43 years.

RAY MARTIN: The industrial boom has already destroyed a lot of the rock art. Nobody knows how much. Twenty-five percent?

ROBERT BEDNARIK: [A total of] 24.4 percent, 900 sites, have been destroyed out of 3690.

JOHN BOWLER: Our estimates, and they're much more scientific than those that you say, our estimates are that two to five percent, maximum five percent, has been disturbed.

RAY MARTIN: The National Trust and the World Monuments Fund have both put this rock art on their endangered lists.

JOHN BOWLER: That's the biggest wealth-creating area in Australia for its size. What we're doing now — we've got a win-win situation. We've got a huge amount of

wealth coming out of that area — a massive, unbelievable amount of wealth — that goes to everyone in Australia in some way or other.

RAY MARTIN: So what you're saying is, considering the amount of wealth it's produced, it's worth it?

JOHN BOWLER: No, no ... I just said I think we've got a win-win situation. We continue to create the wealth right alongside protecting this wonderful heritage.

RAY MARTIN: Robert's magnificent obsession drove him to re-enact the epic journeys of the first Australians. Island-hopping by bamboo raft from Indonesia to northern Australia.

ROBERT BEDNARIK: The first peoples that landed in Australia already had a tradition of creating rock art.

RAY MARTIN: Over the years, Robert has been able to directly link the Australian carvings with rock art from southern Asia and from central India. But where are the people who belong in this country? Where are the people who could tell us just what the Dreamtime stories are? [A distance of] 1550km down south at the State library here in Perth, there's an answer to that question.

Private letters and public records tell a shocking story of what went on up there in the late 1800s. There's a letter here dated 1869 from one station owner who talks about murder and tyranny against blacks — of the most cowardly and diabolical acts on women and children. There's no question there were massacres, there's no question that many died from smallpox and from booze. Some were stolen and used as slave labour on the pearling luggers up and down the coast.

The fact is, in 2003, the Federal Court concludes that there's nobody left, that there is no-one who has direct link with the land where that rock art is. After 10,000 years, they're all gone. And while the white history of the Pilbara is preserved and promoted to tourists, there's nothing here to tell of the greatest rock-art fields in the world. Nothing to preserve or protect the blackfellas' timeless treasure. What happened to these standing stones? There aren't 130 here now.

ROBERT BEDNARIK: That's correct. Of those 138, only 40 remain undamaged and still standing.

RAY MARTIN: What do you mean damaged?

ROBERT BEDNARIK: Within the last two or three years, somebody went along and smashed the rock.

RAY MARTIN: Like smashing gravestones?

ROBERT BEDNARIK: Indeed, yes.

RAY MARTIN: One-thousand and eight hundred sacred stones were salvaged from Woodside's gas plant. But for 25 years now, they've been locked away here, face

down in the dirt. Even more disturbing to Robert is the threat of so-called acid rain, bleaching the vast art galleries.

Do you think that's because of the air pollution?

ROBERT BEDNARIK: Indeed it is, yes.

RAY MARTIN: What — settles on the bushes?

ROBERT BEDNARIK: It's because sulphuride falls out of nitric acids.

RAY MARTIN: Elders, Wilfred and Tim, the traditional law man, now look after this sacred spot.

BARRUP CUSTODIAN WILFRED HICKS: Our hearts bleed to see everything that's happening on the 'bara. And it's a worry to us because our spiritual issues are getting broken all the time.

RAY MARTIN: State governments, they say, pretend to listen but do whatever they want.

WILFRED HICKS: Looking across, it just breaks my heart to see all the rocks that's getting doctored, pushed around by dozers, some getting crushed and used on roads and their construction works and that. You know, it's just a painful thing to go through me body every day.

FORMER WA RESOURCES MINISTER COLIN BARNETT: Well, I was wrong. I'll admit that, and I think if a few other people do that, we might go forward.

RAY MARTIN: Colin Barnett was Minister for Resources in the 1990s. Barnett drew up the plans which would see this green valley filled with industry.

COLIN BARNETT: Look see it as a minister, I drew lines on maps. If those lines were followed through, it would mean the destruction of more rock art. I'm not prepared to see that happen, that's why I'm speaking out now.

RAY MARTIN: We can't change what's there already, but can't a Government say, 'No more, that's it, stop'?

COLIN BARNETT: At the moment, there's too much denial. People are trying to pretend that the rock art isn't there. What I'm saying is this is of world significance but we cannot accept the loss of large areas of rock art as happened in the '60s, '70s and '80s. Ignorance that may be an excuse in those days is not an excuse today.

RAY MARTIN: Just 20km down the road is a huge open plain. Called the Maitland Estate, there's tons of room for all the industry that anybody wants. This is the alternative. But the State Government has no immediate plans to start building here. First, it wants a giant new gas plant and five or six super-factories like this one right in the middle of the Burrup rock art.

JOHN BOWLER: Once the Burrup is filled up — and it's getting close to being filled up — it will move to Maitland.

RAY MARTIN: Why do you want to fill it up when you've got this great art gallery there?

JOHN BOWLER: Any future expansion of Burrup will not disturb the art gallery.

RAY MARTIN: But it has, John ... it has!

JOHN BOWLER: It has now, but any future expansion won't.

RAY MARTIN: There is one man who could still save this extraordinary place. World's largest art gallery and a yobbo can come along and graffiti that.

FEDERAL HERITAGE MINISTER IAN CAMPBELL: Exactly. No management. No control.

RAY MARTIN: Tell me why.

IAN CAMPBELL: I don't know the answer to that.

RAY MARTIN: The Federal Heritage Minister, Ian Campbell, is about to decide whether this national treasure gets heritage-listed. That would guarantee its future and guarantee a fight with the WA State Government.

IAN CAMPBELL: I might say, the State Government are incredibly keen to ensure the Commonwealth has no say in this. You've got one almighty political barney occurring here.

RAY MARTIN: You know any Australian coming here would say to you, 'Minister, this is mine. Protect it for me'.

IAN CAMPBELL: I see the value here, I see something quite remarkable, something unique, something that is important for many generations to come and I'll make a decision in a few months time.

RAY MARTIN: After 40 years of his lonely fight out here romancing the stones, it seems that Robert has finally found some powerful friends.

COLIN BARNETT: It is absolutely unacceptable that Australia destroys any significant amount of this rock art. That's our heritage. And this — this is not just Aboriginal heritage, this is Australia's heritage, it's world heritage.

JOHN BOWLER: We can cry about the past or we can worry about the future.

RAY MARTIN: If we've lost five percent — forget 20 percent — if we've lost five percent, is that acceptable?

JOHN BOWLER: When you look at the wealth that's been created, maybe it is.