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The World Today - Woodside's rock art scholarship labelled a PR stunt

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Reporter: Conor Duffy

ELEANOR HALL: The archaeologist coordinating a controversial scholarship sponsored by Woodside Energy has told *The World Today* that rock art on the Burrup Peninsula may be destroyed by the company's gas development.

In the most recent confrontation over the sites in Western Australia, Woodside Energy has announced that it'll fund a scholarship to profile the area's ancient art.

Conservationists have criticised the move as a PR stunt from a company hoping to smooth the way for its development.

And while the respected archaeologist co-ordinating the project has defended the scholarship, he also says the industry may yet destroy the Peninsula's historic artwork.

Conor Duffy reports.

CONOR DUFFY: Normally an announcement that a company is funding an expensive study into rock art would be welcomed by environmentalists and archaeologists, but critics of Woodside's Burrup Peninsula development say it's just a public relations exercise from a company desperate to have a lucrative development approved.

Greens Senator Rachel Siewert.

RACHEL SIEWERT: I'm afraid the cynical part of me does think that this is a PR exercise. They'll have a bit of understanding of the art that they destroy. It does, it will not save the art. Their proposal destroys rock art. That's the basic fact.

CONOR DUFFY: The Burrup Peninsula is home to the world's largest collection of rock art, which dates back at least 7,000 years, some say as long as 20,000.

For the last 40 years though, it's had to coexist with heavy industry and Robert Bednarik, from the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations, says 20 per cent of the art has already been destroyed.

Mr Bednarik is dismissive of the Woodside scholarship.

ROBERT BEDNARIK: Well I thought it was quite funny. Here you have a company that is destroying the largest rock art body in the world and at the same time they're promising to fund a rock art student. The student isn't going to have much to study if

they keep going the way they are.

CONOR DUFFY: As well as being home to the biggest collection of rock art in the world, the Burrup is now home to Australia's biggest resource development.

Central to that development is the Woodside Pluto gas plant, estimated to be worth \$5-billion.

It's yet to be formally approved, but the man co-ordinating the Woodside scholarship, Dr Iain Davidson, says nothing can stop the plant.

IAIN DAVIDSON: Nobody is actually going to make the political decision to remove the Woodside plant, build a billion dollar plant somewhere else and probably encounter Aboriginal sites, probably not as good as the ones on the Burrup, but also have the heritage problems that are presented if you develop in any particular place.

CONOR DUFFY: Professor Davidson has hit back at critics of the Woodside scholarship, saying it's a well-funded study and people trying to save the rock art should work with Woodside.

IAIN DAVIDSON: I agree entirely that it would have been far better if heavy industry had not been established in that particular place in that particular way, but it has been, so what we now need to do is to do what we can to get the best out of the situation as it now is.

CONOR DUFFY: Professor Davidson has been working with Woodside to profile the damage its industry has already done to the rock art.

He disputes Mr Bednarik's claim that 20 per cent of the art has been destroyed.

IAIN DAVIDSON: We know of the damage to several hundred engravings, which was sanctioned by the State Government at the time the Woodside plant was set up. We cannot say that 20 per cent of the engravings - 20 per cent is 200,000 engravings - we cannot say that 20 per cent of the engravings have already been destroyed.

CONOR DUFFY: Professor Davidson, are you confident then that the heavy industry and rock art can co-exist?

IAIN DAVIDSON: No. I have no idea of that and nobody does, but all I can say is that they will co-exist. That's to say, the heavy industry is there. I see no great will in government to remove a billion dollar plant. The rock art can't go anywhere else, and so what we have to do is to get the best situation, the best outcome from that co-existence.

ELEANOR HALL: And that's the archaeologist appointed by Woodside, Professor Iain Davidson, ending that report from Conor Duffy.