

Burrup treasure is history in the taking

One of the world's most significant rock art sites may soon be lost forever, writes Victoria Laurie

It's hard to imagine a more impressive cultural site in Australia than the Burrup Peninsula, or a more undefended one. The largest, and possibly oldest, rock art site in the world consists of thousands of jagged red Pilbara rocks bearing remarkable human, animal and plant images etched into shadowed crevasses or sun-beaten surfaces.

A few are darkly outlined Tasmanian tigers, so individual in their sleek stripes or wolfish mien that they hint at many artists' hands and several millennia.

Others resemble photo negatives: smiling human faces tapped out of mineral-darkened surfaces to reveal pale rock outlines.

They are mysterious, often beautiful artefacts of generations of Aboriginal people that, for a period spanning perhaps 20,000 years, roamed a spinifex-covered sliver of land jutting into the Indian Ocean.

"You are looking at the beginning of the peopling of Australia and the religious activities and symbolic capacities that go with early modern man," says Sylvia Hallam, a former University of Western Australia prehistorian who has co-written a report into Burrup art for the National Trust. "[The images] tell us something about the movement of homo sapiens in world prehistory. It's enormously important."

Yet unlike the more famous Bradshaw rock paintings found farther north in the Kimberley, no book has been published that celebrates Burrup art or explains its ethnographic and aesthetic qualities to the public. No complete survey of its extent or content has been conducted and only one-third has been documented. And nowhere on the Burrup is there any hint that the reverence and protection afforded to England's Stonehenge, Cambodia's Angkor Wat or the painted caves of Lascaux in France — all much younger than Australia's ancient rock art — will be enjoyed here.

As the deadline draws near for yet more Burrup rock art to be destroyed or moved aside for industry, one can only wonder why. The debate over the Burrup Peninsula, where ancient art sits metres away from Australia's largest industrial estate, is throwing up some troubling questions. Why have Australia's heritage laws, state and federal, so woefully failed to preserve it? And why have so many expert voices been silenced?

The first surveys of Burrup art were conducted by the Western Australian

Museum in the early 1960s; today, museum director Dawn Casey has "absolutely no comment" to make about the Burrup or the debate surrounding it.

"The museum in the past has been a strong independent voice and is respected nationally and internationally for its expertise, but where is that voice?" asks National Trust WA director Tom Perrigo, a strong advocate of Burrup art.

Museum staff say they are mystified by the silence. "I've got very strong views but I'm not allowed to put them," says one employee. "The fact is there's no universe in which development and rock art can coexist. I've been up to the site and I know what actually happens on the ground."

Burrup's location may provide a clue as to why its rock art lacks the public champions the Bradshaw paintings have. While the Bradshaws are found in caves on pastoral leases held by sympathetic owners, Burrup's artefacts are scattered across a 20km peninsula with \$20 billion of port and industrial infrastructure, chiefly Woodside's North West Shelf liquefied natural gas plant.

In the 1980s, when the plant was being erected, it was permissible to destroy thousands of rock artefacts — perhaps one-quarter of all petroglyphs in existence, experts say — or pile them up in a temporary compound, where they remain. Burrup's defenders accept that industry makes strenuous efforts to avoid destroying petroglyphs. But in reality heritage still comes a poor second.

Take the latest bid by Woodside Energy to clear a new site south of the sprawling North West Shelf complex to build a \$5 billion processing plant for its offshore Pluto gas field. The National Trust says it is one of the densest petroglyph sites on the Burrup and that more than 100 petroglyphs would need to be destroyed or moved to make way for Woodside's proposed plant.

Any such disturbance must get the approval of WA Indigenous Affairs Minister Sheila McHale, who is advised by a 10-member Aboriginal cultural material committee. Its job is to protect sites under the state Aboriginal Heritage Act; Casey and a senior archeologist from the WA Museum are listed as committee members.

In September, McHale gave Woodside approval for its onshore Pluto development amid rumours that almost all cultural material committee members opposed the decision.





Perrigo says the National Trust is "extremely concerned about the transparency of the [committee's] decision-making process". And he asks why McHale, who as Arts Minister is also responsible for museums, is giving the nod to destruction of the unique cultural assets she is supposed to protect.

McHale tells *The Australian* that Casey has not attended any committee meetings. As for the Pluto site clearing, "it's impossible to have development without impacting to some extent on Aboriginal sites".

Sources familiar with the cultural material committee's operation say the state's heritage laws are almost calculated to disperse Burrup's artefacts. Only individual petroglyphs are worthy of protection, not the entire cultural landscape in which the artefacts, their relationship with each other and with the location are given weight. Critics argue that it's like preserving a dismantled Stonehenge stone by stone.

Burrup is a victim of deep-seated problems with Australia's heritage laws, says Robert Bednarik, a passionate archeologist and convener of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations.

"Under our heritage laws, the developer controls the impact studies because he has to hire [and pay for] archeologists," Bednarik says. This onus on the proponent to assess the damage it might do saves governments money but is profoundly corrupt, he says, because it delivers control of a threatened site into the hands of its potential destroyers.

"Only a few weeks ago, Woodside complained about paying out \$5 million to archeologists [researching the Pluto site]," Bednarik says. "That's why there have been no publications, only dozens of unpublished internal reports, some of which are quite substantial. It suits them to keep quiet."

The only booklet on the Burrup was published by Bednarik in June: "I've had people ring me up and say: 'Why have we not been told about this before?'"

Bednarik's conspiracy theory sounds far-fetched until one tries to extract information or opinion from the experts. A half-dozen archeologists and academics declined to speak to *The Australian* on the record, citing contracts with resource companies or West Australian government agencies that, in some cases, have required them to sign confidentiality clauses.

"I don't want to be quoted. You're not recording me, are you?" one asked.

The hesitation to speak up is because the Carpenter Government has made it clear it is opposed to "all or any part of" the Burrup being placed on the National Heritage list, a possibility that federal Heritage Minister Ian Campbell is considering. Giving the Burrup the protection of heritage listing would have "potentially grave consequences" for Australia's economy, argues the resource-dependent state Government, and impede plans for extensive industrial expansion of oil and gas facilities on the Burrup.

Campbell, a West Australian, was clearly affected by what he saw on his first visit to the Burrup rock sites in July, when he was guided by Bednarik. "They're just absolutely fantastic," Campbell told *The Australian* after his trip. "What was amazing to me was the clarity of the illustrations, some of which are as sharp as computer drawings: emus, lizards, turtles, kangaroos, people. On the face of it, this is of incredibly high heritage value to Australia."

But hopes that Campbell may usher in a new era of protection for the Burrup have faded. He has deferred a September deadline for a decision on its listing to next February. More ominously, a bill to amend the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act is likely to have gone through federal parliament by then. Those amendments will allow Campbell to indefinitely defer any decision; he could even be permitted to remove it from consideration.

Paul Tacon, a Griffith University archeologist whose team recently discovered 5000-year-old rock art at Wollemi National Park northwest of Sydney, says the Burrup dilemma underlines the need for a new approach to protecting rock art.

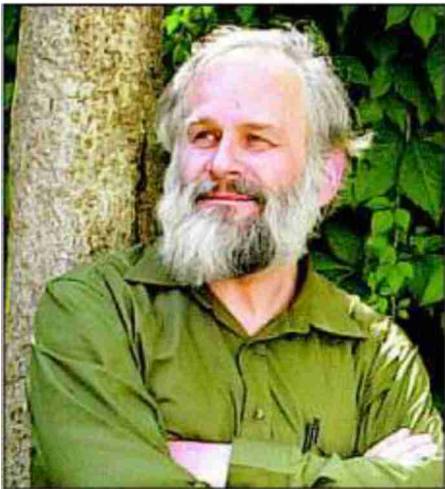
"If these amendments go ahead, it's a disaster for the Burrup and for the country," Tacon says. "We need to bring together federal and state governments, Aboriginal communities and rock art agencies to negotiate a solution." Without it, "it might come down to people throwing themselves in front of bulldozers".

Ironically, the next field study into Burrup rock art will be funded by Woodside; a \$30,000 scholarship awarded to a University of New England student. The cash-strapped WA Museum has no rock art research program; it has a four-year partnership with Woodside, but the funds are for marine research in waters surrounding the Burrup Peninsula. The museum's present focus is on an expensive exhibition about cricket.





Etched in stone: Aboriginal rock art at Western Australia's Burrup Peninsula is thought by some to be the world's oldest



On the rocks: Archeologist Robert Bednarik



Trouble brewing: A proposed expansion of the North West Shelf gas plant worries activists