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The Burrup

Are we condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past?

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This evening, I want to draw your attention away from the charms of Fremantle to contemplate the history of another port, another coastline which most of you will know – if you know it at all – through stories of the “miracle” resources boom. You will most probably have seen TV footage and photographs of the gas tankers powering through the apparently pristine and impossibly blue channels of the Dampier Archipelago delivering gas to an energy hungry world from the processing plants on the remote North West coast.

What you probably did not appreciate, was that in the background of those images was the most significant heritage site in Australia and, sadly, the only one on the World Monuments Fund’s list of the 100 most endangered places. For on the Burrup – or to give it its indigenous name Murujuga – is the densest concentration of rock art in the world, estimated at perhaps as many as a million petroglyphs. What some have described as “the world’s largest gallery of engraved prehistoric art.”

And most Australians are entirely ignorant of its existence. Rock carvings – more precisely sgraffiti - are scattered through the barren rocky ridges and steep-sided valleys of the peninsula and the surrounding islands. The oldest of the art work is believed to date from the period when the Burrup was an inland range, before the inundation which drowned much of the surrounding landscape over 9000 years ago.

Amongst the distinctive images are geometric designs, tracks of humans, animals and birds, and a huge variety of both naturalistic and figurative representations of humans and animals, some so detailed that they can be identified as particular species. The rock art includes depictions of Thylacines or Tasmanian tigers, extinct on the mainland for over 300 years. Some of the rocks form panels and composite images of daily activities such as hunting, and have clearly been added to over long periods of time.

A number of different styles of engraving are represented – scored lines made with a very fine pointed rock, pecked marks, abraded lines and indents in the dark red-black glossy patina that covers the rocks in this area. The “fine execution”, the “dynamic nature” of the images and the high degree of creativity have often been admired by those fortunate enough to have visited the site. For some it has been a revelatory experience.

As anthropologist Pat Vinnicombe, who studied the area for over 15 years before her untimely death, told Nicholas Rothwell

“I have the sense these carvings were bound up with instruction, initiation (that) the entire peninsula was a place of revelations, a teaching site linked to myths. There’s a sequence of images that leads from the ground level to the heights. I’m convinced this is what the Burrup is all about – all the sites are associated with stories, songs.

We tend, of course, to dissociate these things and see it as an art gallery. You might as well tear a chapter from a book and hope to catch its plot as understand this place piece by piece.”

The site has rightly been described as “the richest and most exciting region of rock engravings in Australia”, providing an “unusual and outstanding visual record of the Aboriginal responses to the rise of sea levels at the end of the last ice age”. It tells the story of the long history of contact and shared visual narratives between Aboriginal societies in the region and the inland area of Australia. With European settlement, as was so often the case in our history, came devastation for the original inhabitants of the peninsula, the Yaburara people, from disease and, most notoriously, as a result of so many being killed in the 1868 Flying Foam Massacre.

All who have seen even part of this extensive precinct – covering 42 islands over a 45k radius – marvel at the range and diversity of the art work which, together with camp sites, middens, quarries and standing stones form an irreplaceable record of the lives of the Indigenous people from the first arrivals to the recent past.

And it retains great cultural and religious significance for the Aboriginal people of the area. As Caroline Bird and Sylvia Hallam describe it in their report to the National Trust, “the entire Archipelago is a continuous cultural landscape providing a detailed record of both sacred and secular life.” We are privileged to glimpse the minds and identities of individual artists and communities. The National Trust has described the Dampier Rock Art Precinct as “one of the world’s pre-eminent sites of recorded human evolution and a prehistoric university.”

It should be obvious that such a site is a precious part of our heritage, of the world’s heritage, deserving of careful study and preservation. Instead of the care and reverence which we would expect to be shown to a site with the significance of Stonehenge, the painted caves of Lascaux in France or the structures of Machu Picchu, the rock art precinct on the Burrup has been scandalously abused, taking second place over more than 40 years to resource exploitation.

An unknown number of petroglyphs were turned to rubble when the Hamersley iron port and rail infrastructure, the town of Dampier and Dampier Salt facilities were constructed in the 60s and 70s. Without a thorough heritage assessment, thousands more were destroyed when Woodside’s North West Shelf LNG plant and the associated port was constructed in the 80s, while others were shifted from their original sites and placed in a temporary compound, left undocumented and without proper conservation for 20 years.

Despite persistent pressure on the government to properly assess the cumulative effects of the sulphur and nitrogen emissions from the LNG plant, this research has only just begun and has already been criticised for failing to deal explicitly with the question of the effects of the emissions on the rock surfaces, since it is the colour contrast between the patina and the engraving which gives the carvings their distinctive character.

The most recent assault on the rock art occurred during the construction by the DOIR of an infrastructure corridor to facilitate further industrial development on the Burrup. Every day, many of the petroglyphs are exposed to possible theft and to vandalism - access to the site is not managed and there is no surveillance to prevent further desecration of the site.

Although there have been a number of partial surveys of this matchless site, many of them undertaken as part of the development approval process, it has never been the subject of a comprehensive inventory or analysis. As a result there is no generally accepted framework for understanding the various locations and cultural elements within the site. Nor has a heritage management plan of any kind been devised. Indeed the site is plagued by a proliferation of plans and a lack of overall co-ordination.

To add insult to injury, the recently released Department of Conservation and Land Management Plan for tourism and visitor facilities on the Burrup Peninsula Conservation Reserve shows a truly astounding disregard for even the most basic cultural heritage management principles. There is no reference, for example, to either the Burra Charter or the ICOMOS code of ethics which should govern such plans. Camping on previously inaccessible sites, the construction of visitors' facilities ruining the integrity and ambience of the site and uncontrolled visitation to areas which should be protected all point to a signal failure to understand the responsibilities of heritage protection.

This omission is not unique. The numerous government reports and management strategies all share a surprising lack of understanding and concern about the heritage and scientific value of the area or of cultural resource management more generally.

Successive governments – my own included - have failed to appreciate the global significance of the site. Indeed the current government opposes heritage listing of “all or any part” of the Burrup because of “potentially grave consequences” for the resources sector. No mention of the potentially grave consequences for our heritage. Although lip service is sometimes paid in government documents to the site's heritage significance, it has not been matched by any serious attempts to reconcile the conflicts between industrial development and this priceless site. Cultural resource management

seems to be a foreign country to both the bureaucrats and their ministers and the W.A. Museum seems to have gone missing in action.

As if these problems were not grave enough, Woodside now proposes further destruction of the site to accommodate a new LNG plant, a wharf and storage facilities. They have promised not to destroy more than 10% of the rock art (as if it is a series of unrelated elements) – although much more will be stranded in the moonscape that is the LNG plant. Tragically, the State Minister for Indigenous Affairs has already given her approval for the company to destroy or move the ancient rock art, affecting up to 150 rock art panels.

While it is probable that any further concentration of industrial activity in the area will pose a pollution threat, there is already a cleared site adjacent to the existing plant that the government could insist be used by Woodside instead of allowing them to undertake further destruction and removal of petroglyphs. Woodside claims that the other Joint Venture Partners are refusing to allow access, but in letters to the National Trust, Shell, Chevron, BHP Billiton and BP all indicate that they are willing to negotiate. In any case, should they fail to show good faith in these discussions – Woodside is now on a tight timetable – the State can easily intervene to force an outcome. It is not clear to me why Onslow, which seems to be a far superior location and already selected by BHP Billiton for similar activity, should not be fully evaluated and costed before the Burrup is sacrificed yet again to the great God Mammon.

There is no limit to the ways in which money can be made. And we are in the midst of an unprecedented boom. But every petroglyph that is destroyed on the Burrup is destroyed forever. Woodside could – and still can, with the assistance of the State Government – put all its considerable financial and intellectual resources into building an adequate LNG processing plant somewhere else. But if you wanted to re-create even a single petroglyph you would need at the very least a time-machine; you would need to become the appropriate custodian of the cultural meaning of these rock

engravings; then you would need to learn how to make them; and finally, with the hard work finished, you would only have to wait 10,000 years.

Former Liberal Resources Minister Colin Barnett has come to a similar understanding. He said in a recent parliamentary speech,

“What was regarded as acceptable in the 1960s and 1970s and perhaps even in the 1980s is now unacceptable. We cannot tolerate that type of approach for the future. We have a responsibility to protect his most significant and impressive asset.”

Local aboriginal people too have clearly stated in meetings with government officials that they do not want any further development on the Burrup, although they feel constrained from publicly stating their objections because they believe the agreement they have with the State Government precludes them from doing so. They fear they will incur severe financial penalties if they object.

There is a glimmer of hope that placing the site on the National Heritage list, following the recent strongly argued recommendation from the Australian Heritage Council, will force a belated heritage management plan. The assessor described the Dampier Archipelago site as “exceptional”, “outstanding” and “the richest and most exciting region of rock engravings in Australia.”

But the Burrup may again be sacrificed to industrial imperatives; the Minister has delayed his decision to allow for “greater public consultation”, saying that some rock art will have to be destroyed. At the same time he has rushed through amendments to the relevant Commonwealth legislation to allow him overrule the Council’s recommendations if he – or the government - so chooses. Meanwhile, Flemington Racecourse has been listed with alacrity and the Prime Minister has demanded that the PNG government not allow a mining proposal on the Kokoda Trail because of its value to Australia’s heritage. At the same time as the Burrup is squarely in the firing line. It’s all about **what** you value.

Anyone who's been paying attention to Australian politics over the last few years, can't have failed to notice that there's a lot of talk about values: Australian values; lists of values posted on classroom walls – together with the flags on functioning flagpoles - a condition for receiving Commonwealth funding; values required to be recited as a condition of receiving a visa to visit Australia. The tragedy with a lot of this talk is that the actions of those reciting the values are often at odds with their prescriptions; and, as my mother used to tell me, actions speak louder than words.

So too it is with heritage. Heritage, of course, is about values – or more precisely, what we value from our past, what we are prepared to protect and conserve and to pass on to future generations. Knowledge and experience of our heritage gives meaning to our lives, inspires us and contributes to our collective sense of identity. The sites, landscapes and places which we can be galvanised to protect are, in some ways, an indication of what matters to us and what we think of ourselves. Our actions speak louder than words. As they do on the Dampier Peninsula.

I think it is no accident that successive generations of West Australians and their governments have not seen fit to protect the precious heritage that is the Burrup rock art precinct. It is not that voices have not been raised in its defence, but that they have been overwhelmed by the siren call of development – louder and more seductive here than in any other part of the nation. And far more important to most people than our Indigenous heritage. As one commentator put it, “indigenous significance isn't significant enough” to galvanise us into action. But what is at stake here is even greater than the value of the site to Aboriginal Australians – great though that is. This is a unique site whose value is to all of us, to humankind. Its desecration and neglect constitutes a “measurable impoverishment” of our world.

Surely, in the light of our previous mistakes, it is possible to avoid repeating them. Ignorance can no longer be an excuse.