

WWF objects to gas project on coral reef

By Tim Domin

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CONSERVATION group WWF Australia says the development of a gas project on a coral reef off the Western Australian coast will spark global outrage.

Woodside Petroleum is considering building a processing plant on Scott Reef for its \$12 billion Browse gas project.

The company said yesterday it might build a lagoon-based plant on the reef, halfway between Indonesia and the Kimberley coast rather than a facility on the environmentally-sensitive coast.

But WWF Australia chief executive Greg Bourne said his organisation did not believe there was any place for a gas plant in such a sensitive area.

"We do not believe that everywhere can be up for grabs ... some places are indeed off limits," Mr Bourne told the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association (APPEA) conference.

"Coral reef systems such as this represent an important and increasingly threatened marine ecosystem.

"To construct a facility there would attract global attention, generate global outrage."

Mr Bourne said he wanted Australian oil and gas operators to be known for their legacy of sensible development and environmental leadership.

"And not to be known as the first to dismantle a coral ecosystem such as Scott Reef in the name of purely economic progress," he said.

Mr Bourne said Woodside knew of the WWF's objections.

But his comments were still likely to widen the divide between the oil and gas sector and environmentalists over more general development of Kimberley resources.

He described the area of extraordinary natural value and urged governments and all involved to resist moves to fast track development of gas reserves.

"To me it is simply inconceivable that major developments should occur without rigorous assessment of the cumulative impacts and a careful analysis of the options," he said.

"The goal should not be just to reduce the (environmental) footprint of a particular project but it should also be to enhance the social and environmental heritage we have.

"That's our framework for sensible development."

More generally Mr Bourne also expressed concern at the wide gap that remained between the seriousness of the impacts of climate change and the seriousness with which it was being addressed.

The gap needed to be bridged, he said.

"The oil and gas industry has a tremendous opportunity to lead this debate and ensure that gap is closed and closed quickly."