

# BLACK OUT

The preservation of sacred Aboriginal art on the Burrup has become a high-stakes game. **Paul Murray** went north and discovered that a 19th century massacre is underscoring this epic fight.

**J**UST LIKE THE FIRST TIME, SO LONG AGO, the blackfellas saw the ambush coming. It didn't save them. But this time, the government men didn't come with guns. In the new millennium, it's done with lawyers, bureaucrats and money.

And once again, blackfellas face the painful truth that their culture can be wiped out quietly, but brutally. This time, some are getting more than a bag of flour, the price of the first massacre. But most of them will probably get nothing, just like the long-lost Yaburara tribe, who, for tens of thousands of years, lived on this country, ritualistically carving their stories into the landscape.

The first white settlers to land on Murujuga, later to be known as an economic miracle called the Burrup Peninsula, had no idea of the incalculable riches they were unlocking. They just wanted to plunder the rich pearl beds and grab some land to farm. How could they envisage an energy-hungry world thirsting for the gas that lay below the sea, just over the horizon?

In 1861, the Yaburara welcomed those white faces to their country, a handful of fingers of red rubble laced with grey-green narrow valleys, thrusting into a sapphire sea. But within seven years, the black faces were all but gone.

Over several weeks in 1868, settlers sworn in as special constables and a police party from Roebourne slaughtered the Yaburara in a series

of retributive raids known as the Flying Foam Massacre. And ever since, Murujuga has been a dark place of secrets, greed and death for many Aboriginal people. We've even transformed the topography, turning an island into a peninsula by building a causeway to ship iron ore from what is now Australia's second-biggest tonnage port, Dampier.

Nowhere in our wide brown land — where the story of this massacre is scarcely known — do black spirituality and white pragmatism collide so spectacularly.

In the latest chapter of this bleak history, the world's biggest gallery of prehistoric rock art ends up fighting for existence against one of the world's most important fossil fuel sources, already providing 1.5 per cent of Australia's gross domestic product. The current battle is over Woodside's Pluto project, predicted to pay over its life \$8.5 billion in State and Federal taxes with a claimed total contribution to the WA economy of \$28.6 billion.

Last month's national heritage listing of the Burrup Peninsula by the Howard Government excluded the land being developed for the Pluto plant and several nearby sites being eyed off by prospective petrochemical ventures. Anyone who thinks the listing will stop gas-associated industrial development on the Burrup is living in the Dreamtime. It just makes it incrementally harder.

"Listing is the first positive sign of real accountability for what is happening there," says the National Trust's Tom Perrigo. "It will force more accountability from the State Government."

The subplot here is rich in irony. Climate change and rising sea levels are at the heart of the Pilbara rock art story that stretches back more than 20,000 years.

About 6000 years ago, the last Ice Age ended and the seas, about 100km distant when the first petroglyphs were carved high in the rugged ranges, flowed in to form the modern coastline. But this cultural collision on the Burrup happens just as we fear that our energy appetite is endangering our very existence on the planet, feeding its own climate change and rising sea levels.

One of the saddest parts of this grim story is that which should have

**Nowhere in our wide brown land  
- where the story of this massacre  
is scarcely known - does black  
spirituality and white pragmatism  
collide so spectacularly.**

brought at least some prosperity to the dirt-poor Pilbara Aboriginals. But the quest for native title, which flowed from the High Court's landmark Mabo decision in 1992, has fractured the local communities. The legal process forced them into tribal groupings, some real and some manufactured, to support their claims. That effectively pitted them against each other. In turn, it has shifted the focus of native title, certainly as it affects the Burrup Peninsula, to money. Unable to protect the ancient, spiritual art, many are now chasing dollars.

And that's where the second ambush happens. In 2002, with judicial determinations on the Pilbara native title claims imminent, the Gallop Government herded the Aboriginal groups together to do a deal over access for more industry to the Burrup. Faced with the prospect of the Government grabbing their land rights through compulsory acquisition and losing power to influence what happened to the peninsula's rock carvings, the native title claimants were forced into a \$15.6 million deal, little of which goes directly to them. Once again, the white men from the Government had a gun at their heads.

In the biggest irony of all, none of the groups — Ngarluma, Yindjibarndi, Wong-goo-tt-oo, Mardudhnera and a family claiming links to the Yaburara — was later given land rights on Murujuga. The courts found that native title was extinguished, along with the Yaburara, in the massacres of 1868.

“**T**he natives continue quiet and peaceable,” Roebourne's government resident, Robert Sholl, reported in Perth's Inquirer newspaper on May 16, 1866. “In no part of this colony ... have the settlers been so secure from plunder or attack.”

The Flying Foam Massacre, just two years later, either started with the theft of a bag of flour from a pearling boat or the rape of an Aboriginal woman by a policeman — or both.

Whatever the case, on February 6, 1868, Constable Griffis arrested for the theft of the flour, Coolyerberri, the husband of the woman he is alleged to have earlier “taken into the bush, with a rifle”. That night on the east side of Murujuga, near the shore of Nickol Bay, Griffis, an Aboriginal aide and two white pearlers had chained the captive by his neck to a tree. A big party of Yaburara — later estimated by Sholl to be 100 — arrived to free Coolyerberri and in the ensuing fight, the arresting party was speared to death. Within days, Sholl got the names of nine suspected murderers from Aboriginal sources and dispatched to the archipelago 19 special constables in two parties, one of them in a cutter, headed for Flying Foam Passage at the northern end of the island. The official records chillingly show the search parties had no chains or handcuffs to hold prisoners. The retributive killings started on February 17.

The records of the Colonial Secretary's Office suggest a cover-up. Historian Tom Gara has pieced together the details from the official accounts, a controversy over mistreatment of Aboriginals two decades later and stories told by Aboriginal elders to contemporary anthropologists. “The special constables' reports indicate that only 5-10 Aborigines lost their lives,” Mr Gara says. “Other estimates are larger, ranging from the 30 or 40 that (Ngarluma elder Coppin Dale) thought had been killed up to the clearly exaggerated figure of 150 deaths mentioned in one of the early accounts.”

One of the best sources is a version given in 1886 by David Carley, a settler at Roebourne: “It is very well known by all old hands around Nickol Bay and the Flying Foam Passage that in one day, there were quite

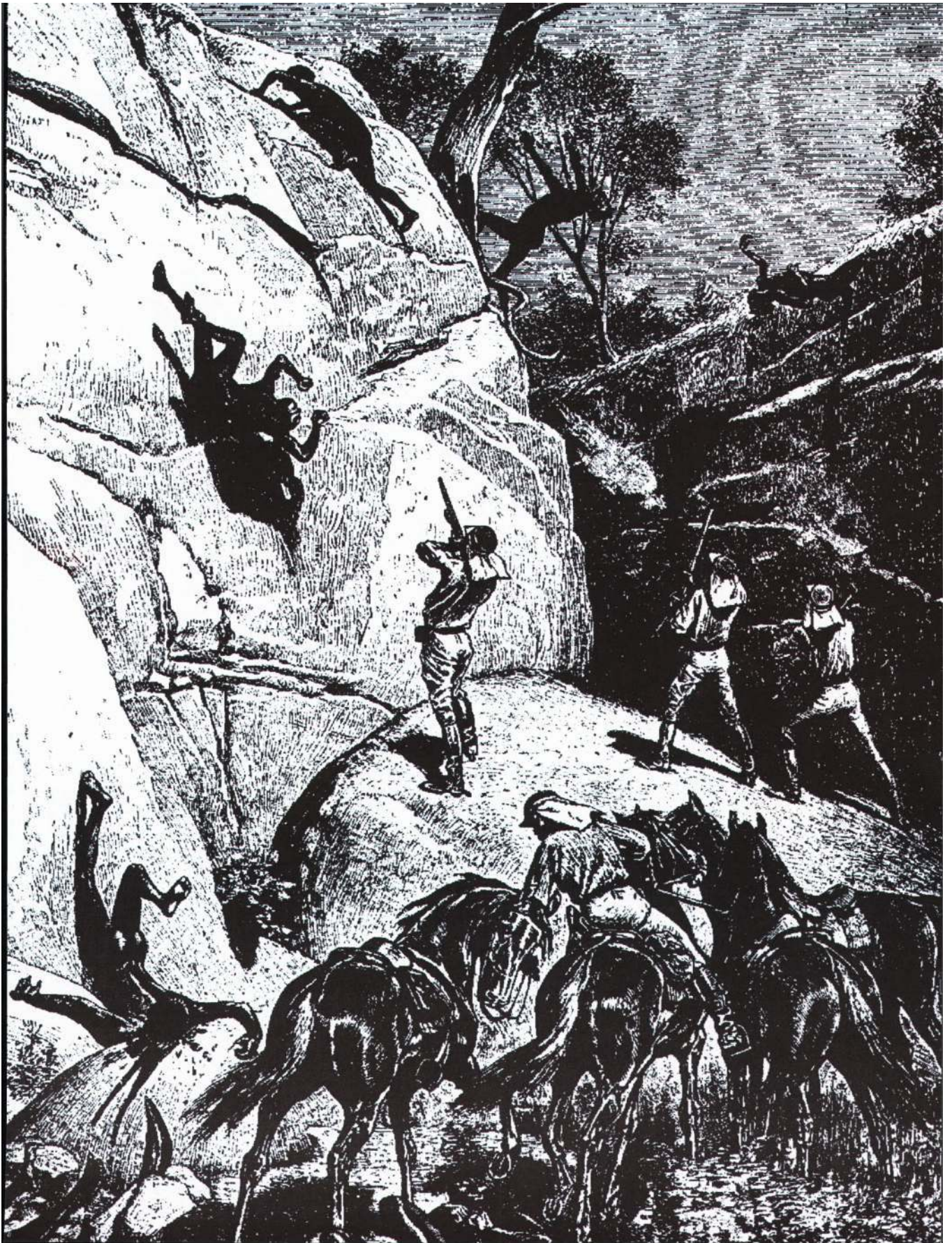
sixty natives, men, women and children shot dead. The natives have shown me the skulls of 15 who were shot dead. Three of the skulls were those of children and two of these small skulls had bullet holes in them.”

This is supported by a letter written by a Roebourne settler, W. Taylor, to the Colonial Secretary early in 1869, unearthed by Mr Gara: “Taylor claimed that Griffis’ death was in retaliation for the policeman’s abduction and rape of an Aboriginal woman, and he also alleged that the special constables had subsequently committed ‘the most cowardly and diabolical acts both on innocent women and children’. The Colonial Secretary apparently took no notice at the time of those claims.”



**Far left** An etching from the period, depicting an aboriginal massacre.

In 1868, up to 60 men, women and children of the Yaburara people were shot dead by soldiers on the Burrup Peninsula in the Flying Foam Massacre.



The February 17 ambush occurred on the southern shore of King Bay, in mangroves that look across to what is now the Burrup Peninsula's main industrial supply base.

Alex McRae, a white settler who headed a party of seven special constables and two Europeans, takes up the story: "(The Yaburara) were camped on a clear sandy beach a few yards from the mangroves but before we could get within reach of them, they saw us and made for the mangroves and the hills at the back of the camp. ... they would not stop to be arrested so we had no alternative but to fire upon them, when one of the murderers was shot dead and several others wounded. I regretted much to have to take this step with these misguided creatures ... but their escape without a lesson would only lead to further outrages." McRae's party then linked up with the group on the cutter and they headed north to Flying Foam Passage. On February 19, they found a group of Yaburara crossing on logs to Dolphin Island and shot them in the water.

One of the first settlers in the region, John Withnell, reported that the next day there was "a sharp skirmish" on another island that led to further deaths, not accounted. There are official reports of further raids in the following months, with two Yaburara later sentenced to 12 years' jail on Rottnest Island for murder.

The beach by the mangroves on King Bay is an eerie place. Shortly after the killings, standing stones — upright thin slivers of rock — appeared on an outcrop that rises up sharply behind it. The stones were used to signify significant places, like billabongs. International rock art expert Robert Bednarik counted 138 standing stones there in 1970, which he suggests represents the massacre's true toll. He says the standing stones were vandalised over the past five years, with about 40 remaining.

The shootings didn't wipe out all the Yaburara, but blackbirding by pearlers and a smallpox epidemic drove the survivors to Karratha and Mardie stations, where Tom Gara says they settled down with other Ngarluma and Mardudhnera people and were absorbed into the pastoral industry.

He notes a dispatch from Sholl to the Colonial Secretary early in 1869: "One of the pearling boats proceeded lately to Flying Foam Harbour ostensibly for the purpose of fishing the banks in that direction. Some 15 or 20 natives were induced to embark, supposing that their services would be required in their own country; but during the night, sail was set for the Eastward, and now they are some 200 miles from their home and friends."

**S**kip ahead one and a half centuries and Woodside says there will be jobs for 30 Aboriginals at its new Burrup LNG Park.

Company archaeologist Warren Fish is standing on Site A, where five huge tanks will be built to hold the gas that comes ashore from the Pluto field. You get the impression of vast expanses in the Pilbara, but this is just 60ha squeezed into the Burrup's rocky valleys, of which 20 is being cleared. One hundred metres away, on the other side of an access road is the 130ha Site B, where the gas trains will be built if the Environmental Protection Authority gives approval, expected soon. Just behind us is a crane pad which was used to lift 42 pieces of rock art and relocate them just metres away. They are then protected by sandbags during construction work. There are 2500 petroglyphs here, living cheek by jowl with industry. There are 500 on Site B.

Fish explains how Aboriginal elders employed by the company

chose the new sites and the aspect for the boulders being shifted. When that group came under criticism in January, they put out a statement through anthropologist Ron Parker: "We are against any further development on the Burrup that impacts on any of our places of cultural importance," they said. "However, as a result of the agreement entered into with the State Government several years ago, and from the demonstrable fact of development going ahead in the past in spite of our objections, we are of the opinion that our cultural interests are best served by maintaining a negotiated presence in the ongoing developmental process and to that end, we have entered into an agreement with Woodside that has resulted in the minimum of our sites being disturbed. Of those individual motifs that will be displaced, only a small number are of great significance to us."

Woodside spokesman Niegel Grazia says the LNG Park is designed to handle gas from other companies' fields. That allows so-called "stranded" gas from reserves too small to support their own processing plants to be exploited. Woodside looked at 12 plant sites within a 200km radius of Pluto and refined it to two, Onslow and Burrup. The Maitland industrial estate near Karratha was knocked out in going from four to two. The existing deepwater channel leading to the Dampier port was important in that decision.

"For us in Onslow, the big issues are marine — a significant amount of dredging and a very, very long jetty and there are a lot of issues in planning and marine costs and whether or not the channels would be prone to silting," Grazia says. "There is also the added issue of the

Onslow community and the available social infrastructure there being able to support a project of this magnitude.

"The other site we looked at was the Maitland industrial estate which is nice and flat but it's low and prone to flooding and it's a long way back from the waterfront. LNG plants typically want to be located within a couple of thousand metres of the shoreline so that we can keep the LNG cold as it's going to the ships.

"The other issue at Maitland is environmental because we would need to cross the Maitland River delta and there is significant mangrove country there. We would need to build a very significant 50m-wide causeway to provide for road access and our service lines. It was deemed to be unacceptable from an environmental point of view and thirdly, from a cultural heritage point of view, we would have had to go across West Intercourse Island which everybody knows has a lot of heritage value attached to it.

"That left us with the Burrup site here. It is within an established industrial node where we have a lot of technical information, in close proximity to the North-West Shelf plant which we already operate and we have community infrastructure in Karratha that can support the facility."

So industry begets industry. That's the story of the Burrup, one of compounding bad decisions.

It started in the 1960s when Dampier was chosen as the iron ore port rather than Depuch Island, about 100km east. The WA Museum said the island was rich in Aboriginal engravings. So the port shifted to an area even richer, without any significant studies. As the focus switched to gas, another report done in 1981 ludicrously concluded there was no serious conflict between industrial needs and conservation issues on the Burrup, again without any real assessments. From there, the die was cast.

**N**garluma Aboriginal Corporation chairwoman Jill Churnside is sitting at a well-worn boardroom table in the group's run-down Roebourne headquarters. Her Auntie Pansie is at the head of the table. Of the five local Aboriginal groups who filed native title claims, only the Ngarluma and the Yindjibarndi, were successful. Both groups are based in Roebourne and have rights over neighbouring land, but neither established title on the Burrup, even though they have legitimate interests over the rock art there. Woodside says it's dealing with Ngarluma elders but it's not talking to the NAC which is the prescribed body corporate under the native title process.

And Ms Churnside says no Ngarluma people should be dealing with Woodside until the company's bosses sit down and work out a way of helping the whole community. "Why did they give permission to destroy rocks that tell the first story?" she asks angrily. "The first stories that our people in the very, very early days carved. I can't see their commitment to their own culture. They have been happy to stand out there and get \$500 a day for two weeks at a stretch or however long it goes. Money talks. As with everybody. It doesn't just apply to us.

"They are just cutting things up. It loses its cultural value. It's never going to be the same. Then all of a sudden Woodside agrees to national heritage listing. It's too damn late. We are powerless — absolutely powerless. We have tried everything. We just can't protect it."

And she's angry that the Carpenter Government plans to spend more than \$10 million from the 2002 agreement to build a visitors' centre to

attract tourists to the now-inaccessible northern Burrup. "I'd like that money to come to our community, into our medical services so our people can live past 50 years old and to go into schools so our kids get a decent education," she says. "If you look at us, we're probably the poorest community around. If you look at all the infrastructure, deepwater port, railway lines, gas lines, powerlines ... we've got nothing."

After the 2002 agreement was signed, three Ngarluma elders died. Just recently, another elder who was helping at the Pluto site died in a violent incident.

"A lot of people don't like going on the Burrup because they see things and they are superstitious and things follow you home," Ms Churnside says. "You know these scary movies that they make when bad things follow you home. Well it's very much like that." And she turns to the old woman at the end of the table. "What do you say Auntie?" Pansie shuts her eyes: "You can hear people cry." ❧

**“(Burrup) is in close proximity to the North West Shelf plant which we already operate and we have community infrastructure in Karratha that can support the facility.”**

Warren Fish



**Above** Woodside archeologist Warren Fish standing atop rock art protected by tarpaulins and sandbags

## Art behind bars

Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo elder Wilfred Hicks says the ancient rock art is "locked up in a jail."

Twenty-seven years ago, about 1800 important petroglyphs were moved from the first LNG plant site and temporarily placed in a fenced

**"We've got to get them and turn them over and face the right way out on that site. We don't want to move them any more."**

compound near Hearson's Cove, now under the control of the Department of Indigenous Affairs.

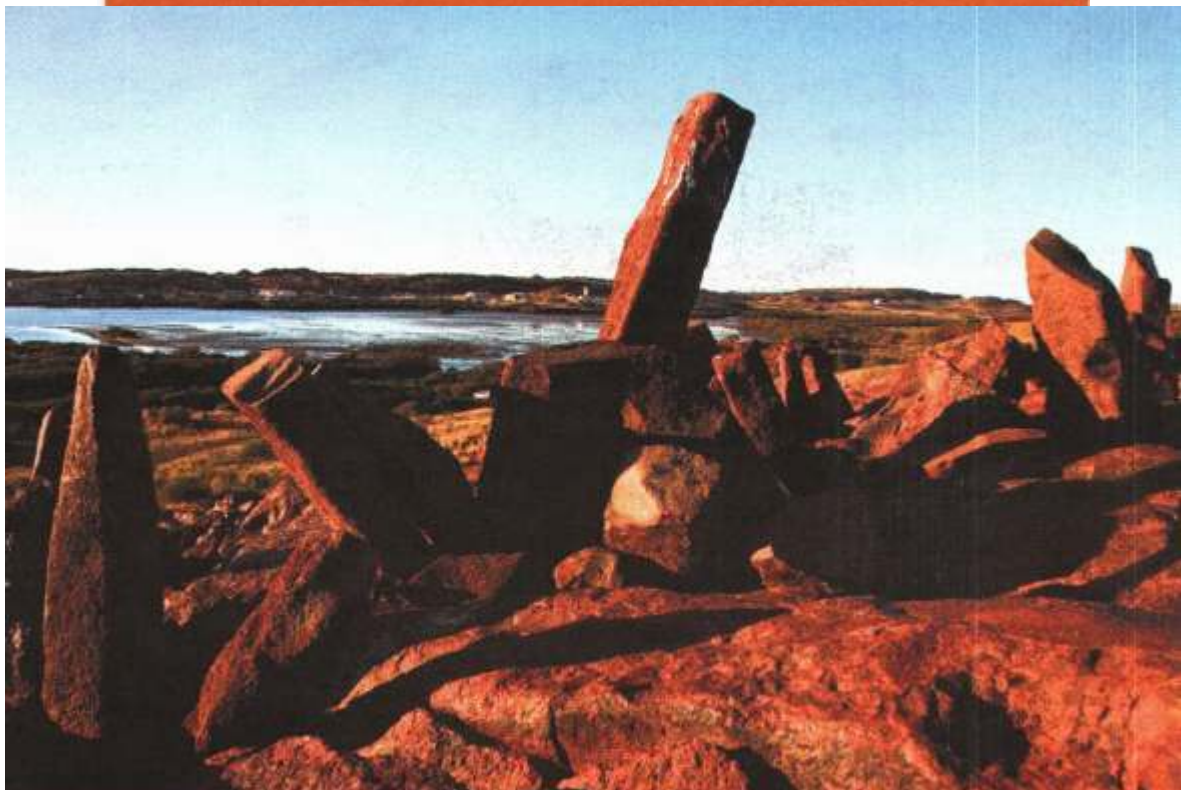
There is still no agreement about what should happen to them. Because many of them involved "men's business" they are lying face down in the dirt, deteriorating. DIA at first agreed to allow The West Australian to visit the compound, but

later failed to co-operate. Champions of Burrup Rock Art head Gary Slee took us to the compound, disgusted at the years of inaction.

Wilfred Hicks, an opponent of industry on the Burrup, agrees.

"That material there is very important. (Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo elder Tim Douglas) and ourselves keep saying they shouldn't be moved any more. There's men's business up there that we might be able to put on one side.

"We've got to get them and turn them over and face the right way out on that site. We don't want to move them any more. Just get rid of the fence. Nobody hardly knows it's there and it will stop it from being locked up in a jail and lying face down in the ground. But you just can't keep on moving them. It's not right."





**Clockwise from left** The King Bay Standing Stones which began to be erected after the massacre  
Burrup Petroglyph  
The famous climbing man petroglyph  
Wilfred Hicks

