

Pluto ploughs on as art is moved

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AUSTRALIA'S biggest corporate investment, the \$12 billion Pluto development on the Burrup Peninsula in the Pilbara, was inaugurated yesterday amid continuing controversy over the future of 30,000-year-old rock art in that part of the peninsula.

On a site that contains 3000 examples of irreplaceable Aboriginal petroglyphs, West Australian Premier Alan Carpenter said the development would establish a global benchmark for investment in sensitive areas.

The site has been excised from an Australian Heritage listing of the peninsula and the adjacent Dampier archipelago under federal Government legislation designed to protect up to 1 million examples of ancient Aboriginal petroglyphs.

Woodside, which owns the Pluto development, has relocated about 150 inscribed rocks, and chief executive Don Voelte has suggested it would take several months to finish moving another 50 rocks.

Mr Voelte said the Burrup site might contain up to four LNG trains drawn from the North West Shelf, and possibly as far away as the Browse Basin, which is 900km away, north of Broome.

Woodside says it will take several months to relocate the ancient Aboriginal works

The North West Shelf project, which is adjacent to Burrup, has four trains operating, with a fifth scheduled to start production late next year.

The initial Pluto development involves a single production train with capacity of 4.3 million tonnes of LNG annually, most of which has already been sold to Tokyo Electric and Osaka-based Kansai Electric, which have exercised their option to take a 10 per cent equity stake in the Pluto project.

So far, Mr Voelte said that so far, "thanks to God", there had been no problems in relocating the petroglyphs with either cracking of the rocks or scraping of the images.

Huge 100-tonne cranes have been used by Woodside to relocate boulders weighing up to 15 tonnes, which Aboriginal elders have identified as being important. No petroglyphs have been destroyed.

When the North West Shelf project was developed in the early 1980s, Aboriginal rock art was collected and placed in a compound. In the succeeding decades,

that approach has been strongly criticised and Woodside and the state Government have faced an intense campaign to have the whole of the onshore element of the Pluto development moved elsewhere.

Both Mr Carpenter and Mr Voelte noted the speed with which the Pluto development had been approved, from the discovery of the Pluto gas reservoir 190km offshore only made in April 2005.

Mr Carpenter declared this was "a world record" for approvals of a project of such magnitude.

Pluto is expected to be producing LNG in late 2010.

Woodside expects the project to be the foundation stone of the Burrup LNG park, which will be a hub for future LNG projects based on North West Shelf gas reserves.

The processing plant will cool the gas to minus 160C, reducing its volume to 1/600th by converting it into a liquid, which will be pumped into specialised tankers for delivery to export markets.



Record pace: Alan Carpenter with Woodside's Don Voelte and Fred Riebeling at the Pluto site yesterday

Picture: Billie Fairclough