

Balance plea in developing Kimberley

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A Government plan for co-ordinated assessment of development in the Kimberley will not go far enough if it is focused only on gas projects, the Greens have warned.

An industrial hub must cater for all industries if there is to be any hope of the area's vast natural and cultural heritage values being protected.

Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett announced yesterday that together with the WA Government, the Rudd Government would instigate a "big picture" strategic assessment of the Kimberley to ensure the area was not spoiled by development.

The assessment will be aimed at resolving the tension between development and conservation. A site for a liquefied natural gas hub for the Browse Basin could be selected as soon as the middle of the year.

Mr Garrett made the announcement via video message at the start of a three-day conference in Broome hosted by conservation group WWF to map out marine and coastal ecosystems that would need to be factored in to development considerations.

"We are making sure we understand in advance the region we wish to protect, before choosing a site for future industrial development," he said.

"The Kimberley has outstanding landscapes and wildlife, glorious coastal stretches and invaluable indigenous and historic heritage. It also contains massive reserves of oil and liquefied natural gas, which are of huge economic value to the nation and offer financial benefits to local indigenous communities.

"Neither government wants piecemeal project development, with multiple ports and processing plants along the Kimberley coast."



Big picture: Peter Garrett.

But Greens Senator Rachel Siewert said a comprehensive long-term planning approach that properly engaged with all stakeholders in the Kimberley was vital.

"We want to see a single hub that caters for all industries, not just gas projects. We cannot afford to identify and develop a hub site that cannot also handle the siting and transport needs of downstream industries," she said.

"We do not want to repeat the mistakes of the Pilbara.

"The Kimberley is part of the last great savannah in the world and its coast is one of the most magnificent on the planet. We are extremely concerned about industrialisation of this unique environment."

The Australian Conservation Foundation said the Government's announcement was a welcome first step.

WA Chamber of Minerals and Energy director of policy and external affairs David Parker supported the co-operative approach but said gas from the Browse Basin must be commercialised as a priority.