

Tempers fray in gas debate

By FRIEDA Mc LOUGHLIN

THE Kimberley Land Council faced staunch criticism last week when it branded environmental group Save the Kimberley as "mischievous" and accused them of misrepresenting traditional owners.

KLC executive director Wayne Bergmann alleged the environmental group was attempting to pass off two Kimberley Aboriginal men as traditional owners for the Maret Islands. He said their actions jeopardised KLC negotiations with Inpex.

Last Wednesday conservationists protested outside the Perth offices of Japanese company Inpex which wants to build a controversial LNG plant on the remote Maret Islands to process gas.

During the rally, Kimberley men Albert Wiggan and Neil McKenzie hand-delivered a letter to Inpex managing director Jiro Okada, telling him why they objected to development on the islands.

But Mr Bergmann attacked the approach and said the green groups should be ashamed of themselves. He said the KLC was engaged by the traditional owners of the islands, the

Wunambal Gaamberra people, to represent them in negotiations.

"Neither Albert Wiggan nor Neil McKenzie is a traditional owner for the Maret Islands," Mr Bergmann said.

"It's not excusable for anyone, including environmental groups, to use this tactic."

However, Mr Wiggan said he was outraged by Mr Bergmann's remarks and called for an apology.

"I was very offended and very hurt by the accusation," Mr Wiggan said.

"I have never, ever in my whole involvement with Save the Kimberley speculated that I am a traditional owner of the Maret Islands.

"KLC has no right to pre-judge me, I was simply expressing my feelings as a Kimberley representative."

Meanwhile the Kandiwal Aboriginal Corporation at Ngauwudu Mitchell Plateau and the Mindi Mindi Aboriginal Corporation accused the KLC of sabotaging their native title claims. A KAC spokesman said the Wunambal community was the closest thing to traditional owners of the

Maret Islands, since all direct descendants were deceased.

The spokesman accused the KLC of constructing the Wunambal and Gaamberra Aboriginal Corporation (WGAC) to consolidate KLC power in the north Kimberley and holding secret discussions with the State Government and mining companies.

He said their tactics were dividing tribes by picking and choosing so-called Maret Islands traditional owners.

KAC chairwoman Catherine Goonack said the Ngauwudu people were struggling to keep their community going and had been disadvantaged by the KLC and WGAC domination of their affairs and their land tenure.

"KLC and WGAC are the same mob," she said.

"They took our country and they won't give it back.

"They do not speak for the Ngauwudu people.

"Us small people (groups) don't get listened to. They only go with the money and do what's good for them, what makes them happy, not what helps our community."



ACTION: Albert Wiggan leads the Save the Kimberley demonstration in Perth. PICTURE: HUGH BROWN