Weekend Australian
Saturday 15/3/2008
Page: 20


PHOTOGRAPHY NICK CUBBIN

# ON THE BRINK

## It's our last great wilderness, yet the Kimberley has never been so vulnerable, says *Nicolas Rothwell.*

White sands and pale green mangroves, winding rivers, jigsaw islands, cliffs, peaks, bays, promontories – not only is the coast of the north Kimberley all these things, it wears a hundred further faces: it is the playground of turtles and humpback whales, it is a museum of rock art styles, it is a chain of ecosystems folding into each other – so perhaps it should come as no surprise that Australia's most precious, most majestic coastline is also its newest energy frontier, and the stage-set for a looming environmental struggle. But, this being the start of the sophisticated 21st century, it's all, of course, going to be done in the most reasonable, strategically managed, win-win fashion, with cascades of subtle consultations and negotiations leading, as the visionaries of this dewy future insist, to a sustainable, sensitive kind of industrial development.

Let's take a quick flight up the coast from Broome, that once-sleepy port town now throbbing with speculative construction works. There's Cable Beach: its sands give way to the curve of the Dampier Peninsula, all bright-red pindan soil and flat scrub and tempting harbours. There's the pointillist pattern of the Buccaneer Archipelago, home to some of the richest iron deposits in the world; then, beyond, begins ancient, sharp-ridged country, bare rock, coastal features named in fear: Doubtful Bay, Deception Bay, until, abruptly, the glare of St George Basin dazzles the eye. Soon a tall, flat-topped peak rises – Mount Trafalgar, the roof of north Australia, and at last the stabbing finger of Cape Voltaire juts out into the hazy ocean, towards a line of sand-surrounded slivers – the Maret Islands, shaped oddly like little starfishes floating in the turquoise blue.

It is here, on the outermost margin of the continental shelf, that Inpex, a Japanese multinational, wants to build a liquid natural gas processing plant at the end of a 200km pipeline leading to its vast sub-sea reserves. Inpex is only the first of several oil and gas giants queuing to develop the resources of the Browse Basin, a gas field that lies off the Kimberley coastline, in deep water, and which holds about the same amount of energy as the Northwest Shelf: perhaps $200 billion worth, at today's prices; perhaps much more. The race to bring this bonanza to market has triggered the most hectic bout of resources diplomacy in many years.

It is a contest marked by high stakes and strange alliances, by wild demands and eagerly pledged promises, as the oil majors and government spin-doctors case the Kimberley, and wonder how best and most suitably to execute their moves. Adding spice to the drama is the new nature of land-holding in remote Australia – for the whole of the north Kimberley is now Aboriginal native title land, or under registered claim. This has made for unusual, not to say surreal, negotiations.

First, the cast of characters, and their roles in the drama. At the heart of this story, and increasingly in the headlines, is the energetic, personable executive director of the Kimberley Land Council, Wayne Bergmann, a new-generation Aboriginal leader, still in his 30s, and full of vivid new ideas. No matter that those ideas shift by the month, and even by the day: Bergmann holds them in a constant flux inside his head, where they trace out ever more elaborate blueprints of the indigenous Kimberley's future: a conservation economy, an education trust, a fretwork of cultural and natural reserves. "The things I'm going to be fighting for are going to test people's assumptions and their expectations," says Bergmann, a certain restrained glee entering his voice. This can make him a slightly baffling negotiation partner for the business executives who come to pay court – but pay court they must, for the KLC is, by law, the only Aboriginal organisation they are allowed to deal with. It is thus in a position to set the terms of any development, and fix the entry price: the compensation payment to traditional owners, which is expected to be around a quarter of a billion dollars.

Leading the team of petitioners for Inpex is the venturesome Shaun Kildare, who has been quartering the Kimberley's remote communities in the year and a half since the dream of the liquid natural gas plant on the north coast first shimmered into view. Kildare and his team have few weapons, beyond largesse, which they deploy in rather lateral-thinking fashion: the company sponsored, last month in Perth, a new play about Kimberley Aboriginal outlaw Jandamarra; beside the customary blandishments it distributes to key traditional owners, it also offers their families little dillybags as tokens of its cultural sensitivity. Kildare, who has a background in environmental science, plays his hand with some bravado, and regards the challenge as a new chapter in the saga of the remote north.

WATCHING THIS ENGAGEMENT WITH scepticism are the Green groups, whom you might expect to be dead against all plans for development on the near-pristine coast. But you would be spectacularly wrong: for in December, at an extraordinary public event, the chief environmental organisations of Western Australia gathered to announce their conditional support for a single gas "hub" in the Kimberley. They were against the Maret Islands as a site, but all agreed that somewhere more appropriate should be found. In the words of Paul Gamblin from WWF-Australia: "Some of the Browse Basin gas will be exploited. We're not campaigning against the gas, but about how it happens." Black, in short, had trumped green: and the key campaigners for the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Conservation Council of WA, WWF-Australia and Environs Kimberley all lined up beside Bergmann to back the idea of a sacrificial development, provided a substantial benefits package flowed to indigenous groups, and provided the Kimberley coast was thoroughly surveyed.

From their eyries in St Georges Terrace, West Australian government ministers gazed on in happiness: the prospect of a ruinous eco-protest campaign against the state's largest new resources venture seemed to have vanished, and with perfect timing. For, by chance, a special task force on northern development, headed by Dr Jim Limerick, director-general of the WA Department of Industry and Resources, was just then readying its own report, which is due out this month, and is widely expected to provide an authorised shortlist of three preferred "hub" sites on the Dampier Peninsula above Broome. Limerick's dream is that the rival gas developers will come on shore together, and their competing projects will be laid down like lambs alongside each other, using common, compact infrastructure: "The cost-sharing," he murmurs, "could amount to billions of dollars of savings." For Australian gas giant Woodside, the operator of the Northwest Shelf project, this enthusiasm is good news, since it has its own slice of the Browse Basin, and has been tactfully eyeing the Dampier Peninsula for some years.

At federal level, too, there is discreet bipartisan support for resource development in the Kimberley. The glory days when Wilson Tuckey, as minister for regional services, used to fly reporters in light planes over the coast, rhapsodically pointing out the sites of future tidal power stations, bauxite mines and alumina refineries may have passed, and Kevin Rudd's greenish-tinged Labor may have signed the Kyoto accords, but the projected revenue flows from offshore gas are crucial to its future plans. In early February, Environment Minister Peter Garrett announced a comprehensive environmental study of the entire Kimberley region, with the avowed aim of finding a single gas-processing site.

There is, then, a distinctly pragmatic consensus around the notion that the north Kimberley, Australia's last coastal wilderness, should be subject to a modest, calibrated degree of development. Committed, uncompromising opponents of the gas projects are hard, in fact, to find within the region: there's a ginger group of eco-tourism operators, banded together as "Save the Kimberley", but they are late into the field, and their "invitation only"

Sydney harbour campaign launch in January on board a luxury cruise-boat may not have struck quite the right note for a popular protest movement.

Who speaks, then, for the conservation interests of the locals, and for Broome itself? The bitter truth is that old Broome town, the dreamy Broome of listing pearl luggers and creaky, lattice-shaded verandas, is long since gone, and even the "new", touristic Broome of the '80s and '90s has been progressively pulverised and shattered, though its bones still stand. Hotels and resorts have closed whole wings because they can find no staff to man them. The Pilbara resources boom has stripped the town of all its labour: almost anyone who can walk has shifted to the mines, or taken high-wage, fly-in, fly-out work: one side-effect is a near-doubling of house prices and rental rates in the past three years. Old-time residents have moved on, while many of the Aboriginal families who were the central thread of Broome life have begun shifting to the peninsula, edged out by the rising prices and the changing feel of the town.

There's a dull, fatalistic acceptance that resources development will come: the local council has begun a program of infrastructure works that envisages a vast population increase, while huge mansions are already rising in new suburbs cut from the scrubland behind Cable Beach. All across town, contractors, barge operators, pilots and indigenous affairs consultants are making money beyond their wildest fantasies as the resources-related work rolls in. Within a decade or so, Broome will be another Karratha – a mining and resources industry service centre with a handful of luxury resorts attached. It may be sited in a place of the most tranquil beauty, with its turquoise shallows and curving, deep-red cliff-lines, but no grass-roots campaign to "save" Broome's environs, on the lines of the spectacular campaign mounted by West Australian activists on behalf of Ningaloo Reef and the nearby town of Coral Bay, seems in the offing.

"Of course the Kimberley is widely loved," insists WWF's Paul Gamblin, who was himself at the centre of the Coral Bay campaign. "At least I'm finding it a lot easier to get people's attention for the Kimberley than for the Pilbara." But that's not saying much, and there's no obvious Broome equivalent to the popular West Australian novelist Tim Winton, who spearheaded the 2003 protests that blocked development on Ningaloo. Perhaps the closest match is the elfin Pat Lowe, a clinical psychologist turned author, a former Green candidate, and a figure who deserves to be more widely followed in southern Australia. Lowe knows the Aboriginal world well: indeed, she lived for years with the late Western Desert artist Jimmy Pike. Her rejectionist stance is striking and clearly argued, and proceeds from the vast emissions produced by natural gas plants: Woodside's Northwest Shelf facility on the Burrup Peninsula generates 12 million kilos of nitrogen oxides annually, and has been Australia's largest emitter of airborne pollutants for the past 25 years.

"I don't think anyone here in Broome has quite grasped the magnitude of the proposed plants," Lowe laments. "The environmentalists are saying this development is inevitable – but describing it as inevitable of course makes it become inevitable." She also believes Aboriginal groups are being placed under fierce financial pressure to trade their country away, when a more sustainable future might well be one crafted from small-scale enterprises. "We have to be blunt about this," says Lowe, pausing, then pushing on to say the near-unsayable: "Aboriginal people haven't necessarily got a greater long-term wisdom about things like global warming."

But what do the region's indigenous people really think about the projects? What do they want to happen? Things get rather blurry at this point. The Kimberley Land Council is not only the recognised body that speaks for the traditional owners of the region; it is also the body that "finds" and designates those owners. When Inpex first proposed siting its gas plant on the Marets, the KLC selected a group of traditional owners, some of them based in the troubled community of Kalumburu, and engaged in exhaustive consultations. Those talks seemed to be edging towards a green light, but have now stalled. Behind the scenes, members of other tiny communities in the remote north are bitter at their exclusion from the list.

Meanwhile, the new focus on the single gas hub plan has brought Wayne Bergmann and his team to turn their eyes back to the Dampier Peninsula, the logical place to site such a facility. This peninsula, like much of remote indigenous Australia, has a highly complex history and social map. The north part is land held by the Bardi and Jawi people; the middle belt is Nyul-Nyul country; south are the Djabera-Djabera and Goolarabooloo; lower still, near Broome, one enters the world of the Yawuru. Men and women of many backgrounds live in the peninsula's communities and outcamps; people whose ancestors lived there, people who were brought there to missions, people who descend from the pearl-diving families of Broome, people from other parts of the Kimberley who have family or ceremonial connections there. These groups have intermarried, and form a net of porous alliances. A very crude social X-ray would show the KLC's support and authority solid at the top of the peninsula, and rather less secure in the middle, where moves are afoot to set up a new umbrella group, the Dampier Peninsula Economic Development Committee. The whole region has its difficulties, despite the proximity of Broome, and the economic boom there. Through much of the West Kimberley, health and education standards are falling, the suicide rate is high, and the noxious effects of alcohol and drugs are all too plain.

Many family groups on the peninsula, which has

a population of some 1500, have turned to ecotourism as a way of crafting a modern life on the land. No fewer than 23 small-scale tourist ventures are now in place on the coast, many started up with seed money from Indigenous Business Australia. Some of these lie adjacent to the most likely gas plant sites, such as Perpendicular Head, just north of Pender Bay. There are specialist whale-watching camps, small boat charter operators, and marine cultural tour specialists. Unsurprisingly, they are opposed to the arrival of a large, polluting industrial complex on their doorstep.

For all Kimberley Aboriginal groups and their leaders, it is a Faustian choice that confronts them: money, the one thing that has most bred rivalries and disasters in their midst, for land, the one thing that is felt to make them strong. How this bonanza is spent, where, over how many years, becomes a critical test of wisdom. Indeed, the long-term survival of a distinct Aboriginal society in this region is bound up with it. At the KLC, Wayne Bergmann, his board of traditional owners and his band of advisers and anthropologists battle with these questions, as do other prominent Aboriginal leaders of the region, such as Peter Yu, the former land rights campaigner who now places his hopes on an education foundation.

The problem is the same across indigenous north Australia: in Cape York, in the Pilbara and in Arnhem Land. But remote area Aboriginal leaders, focused as they are on the devastating levels of disadvantage in their societies, and the abject failure of governments over the years to fund their regions adequately, rarely stop to ask the dark question that hides in the thickets of recent indigenous experience: can unearned money ever be beneficial to their societies? Does it ever lose the taint of morale-sapping, passive welfare? How to turn modern Kimberley people into grand, proud aristocrats, living smoothly off their assets?

ON GROOTE EYLANDT, IN THE GULF OF Carpentaria, a far-seeing land council has channeled its own thin stream of royalty payments into scholarships for its young students, enabling them to escape the wreckage of the Territory's education system. On Cape York, Noel Pearson has made the argument for boarding schools as the best route for the young out of social chaos. The KLC, however much it strives to craft a long-term mechanism for dealing with the prospect of large resources royalties, is itself inevitably part of the cantilevered system of Aboriginal politics, and must first sell the deals it negotiates to traditional owners. As community sources make very plain, the goodwill and support of traditional owners and cultural leaders for resources plans is procured with goods and payments: this causes fierce tensions within communities, and fosters the expectation of unceasing supplies of income from outside.

Such disquieting reflections soon modulate into a wider, more encompassing question for Australia at large, a question that goes to the heart of Aboriginal land tenure in the native title era. Is it entirely fair to expect a small, threatened, deeply troubled society to make wise decisions affecting the long-term health of the environment, when vast financial inducements are dangled before them? Does the intense pressure placed on them actually feed the social chaos? Is there not a case for the West Australian Government to offer the Kimberley's Aboriginal people a substantial development package even if they rule against a gas plant? State Premier Alan Carpenter likes to boast that development will not take place without Aboriginal consent: perhaps he should ensure the decision is made on a level playing field.

And behind the vexations of finance, another, final question lurks: it concerns wilderness, and its meaning. The far north Kimberley is one of Australia's last great untouched provinces. As yet, there are no mining or resources ventures here, with the exception of a pair of small island-based operations; indeed, there is scarcely any settled human presence. Cattle stations have not proved successful north of the dividing King Leopold Range; almost the only viable economic activity has been pearl-farming. The counter-example is the Pilbara, 600km southwest, which was opened for large-scale exploitation 40 years ago and is now covered in mines and gas plants, and criss-crossed by rail and power-lines. Whatever one's feelings about the Pilbara, which preserves a kind of terrible grandeur, it is not pristine, and it will never regain its initial beauty. Development has taken something from that land. What value do Australians place on the Kimberley, a landscape with grand peaks that make Uluru look like a pebble, and river gorges that dwarf the falls of Kakadu? How much of that value would be eroded if a large gas project, even one sited with the utmost tact, and on the fringes of the region, were given the go-ahead? It is not the scale or nature of any project that are the point here, but what it would say about Australia's attitude to the Kimberley, and to a landscape that still survives on its own terms.

The most intriguing thing about this question, though, is that it's never asked. It's not even on the radar. There is simply no serious debate about the zero development option, because the new West Australian establishment has already sketched out the lines of an emerging compact: a mesh of subtle compromises, a solution that meets the minimum aims of all the parties while allowing all to claim a degree of victory: governments, environmentalists, developers, indigenous leaders. The processes by which political, legal and economic power are deployed and their interplay managed in this new order are at once quite open and utterly veiled by side-negotiations between stake-holders. Thus the

gas companies spend days on end briefing their environmentalist opponents, or holding consultations with Aboriginal groups, while government task force teams devise the most elaborate social impact strategies and agonise about turtle movements.

At the centre of the cyclone stands Wayne Bergmann, the designated mouthpiece for Aboriginal land-holders. He appreciates the drama inherent in his role. "We've moved on from the choice," he says, adjusting his stylish new black sombrero. "The point is now not whether gas, but where? The senior leaders have agreed, the cultural leaders, but we want to make that agreement wider, because it's so important. We will find the right place for the plant in the Kimberley."

Bergmann, as a big-picture man, is particularly tempted by one aspect of the deal being held out before the Aboriginal people: the degree of autonomy a large-scale payment would bring. "People will say the benefits are too serious for us to turn our backs on them – for the sake of our young people. I don't see any government departments knocking on our door and talking in any meaningful way about improving our education or employment levels."

And in his words lies one of the submerged keys to the new debate about the future of remote indigenous Australia. Men of Bergmann's generation have refined the ideas of the first, campaigning group of land council leaders, and have decided to opt for direct control over the social programs that shape their world. Bergmann is quite serious when he envisages a new kind of remote Kimberley, patrolled and staffed by conservation rangers, a world with high educational standards; one that has largely opted out of the dependency economy. It is the dream of governments, too, which yearn for the large payments made by resources companies to create a revolution in the remote world, and free them from obligation to pay for the bush.

HUGH BROWN

EVEN THE MOST ARDENT CONSERVATION activists have come to accept that long-term environmental defence depends on the presence of a successful indigenous society living in the landscape. Maria Mann of Environs Kimberley sees the way the "conversation" is heading: "Aboriginal leaders now need to convince governments and companies to provide them with the resources so that indigenous communities can be made healthy again in time. This isn't just about environment, and culture, it's about deep-seated social problems and damage, and in all of this, I wish for the dignity of Aboriginal people to win out."

Amid all this harmony and concord, the terms of the looming deal between interest groups can be pretty clearly made out: the north Kimberley coastline will be declared sacrosanct, in return for an industrial zone on the peninsula. This will satisfy the progressive-minded corporate chieftains who hover like an unseen chorus in the wings of this muffled debate: the network of grey eminences marshalled by the social queen of the Kimberley, Susan Bradley, who manages two cattle stations on the high plateau near Kalumburu, and is keen to see full national protection for the rock-art glutted coast and hinterland between Derby and Wyndham.

"The new Federal Government was elected on a platform of strong environmental responsibility, and this is their first big test," says Bradley. "What better legacy for Australia could there be than to have the whole northwest Kimberley listed as a World Heritage area, whilst the natural gas resources are delivered to a hub-port on the Dampier Peninsula? And it can be a win, too, for the Kimberley's Aboriginal people, if royalties are placed in an indigenous health and education foundation."

The consensus is deafening; the script is almost complete. This is how development works in the new age: it is not coercive, but persuasive, and reasonable. Even the gas giants speak the language of social capital, and have consultants to seek out development models for the indigenous communities whose land their projects will affect. And so the process cascades forward. By late this month, the approved sites for the hub will be announced by the West Australian task force. In six months, an assessment of the Kimberley coastline will eulogise its natural and cultural values. By the end of the year, there will be a green light for construction. As Jim Limerick, the state bureaucrat in charge of the process, argues: "The Kimberley is a very important place, and we're in sufficiently early to be able to get true sustainability. We can have development of that resource, we can have the benefits to the community and also protect the environment. If we do this in the right way it will be a new model. Instead of seeing this as a battle, what we're seeing is a coming together of the various forces all pushing towards a pragmatic outcome."

And just in case anyone gets any uppity ideas about not signing on the dotted line, or not granting the necessary approvals in time, there's a discreet element of pressure in the air. Japan needs its energy supplies; China too, and quickly. Gas has one unusual attribute – it is relatively easily moved about, and the giant companies hoping to bring their Browse Basin reserves to market have contingency plans. Woodside could moor an aircraft-carrier on remote Scott Reef above its gasfields and run a floating platform, or sink a pipeline to its existing Burrup Peninsula plant in the Pilbara, while Inpex has a distant option to pipeline all the way to Darwin, where the Northern Territory Government pants for more gas-processing plants in the city's harbour. Either way, failure is simply not an option in a game with stakes like this: the gas supplies, and the money, will flow. ⦿

*Nicolas Rothwell is north Australia correspondent for The Australian. His previous magazine story was "Slow train to Kallakoopah" (August 18-19, 2007), about an Outback trip.*

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Page: 20

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Weekend Australian
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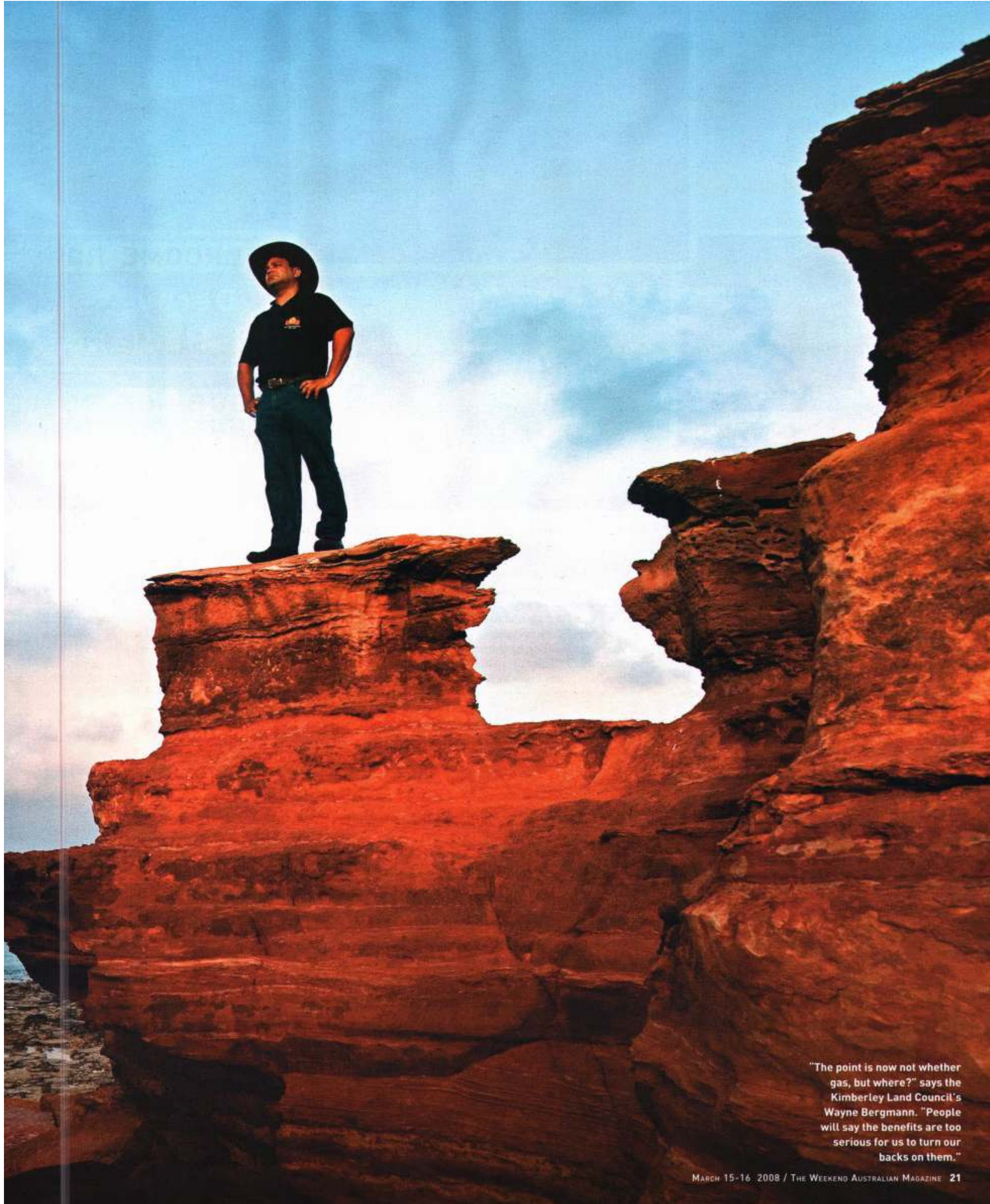
Page: 20



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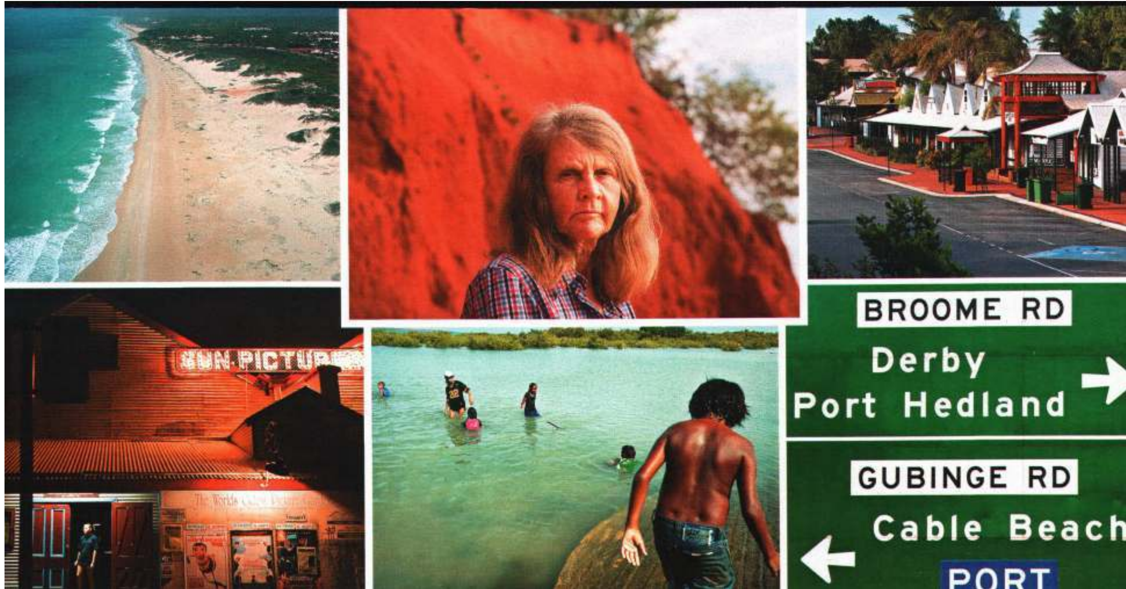
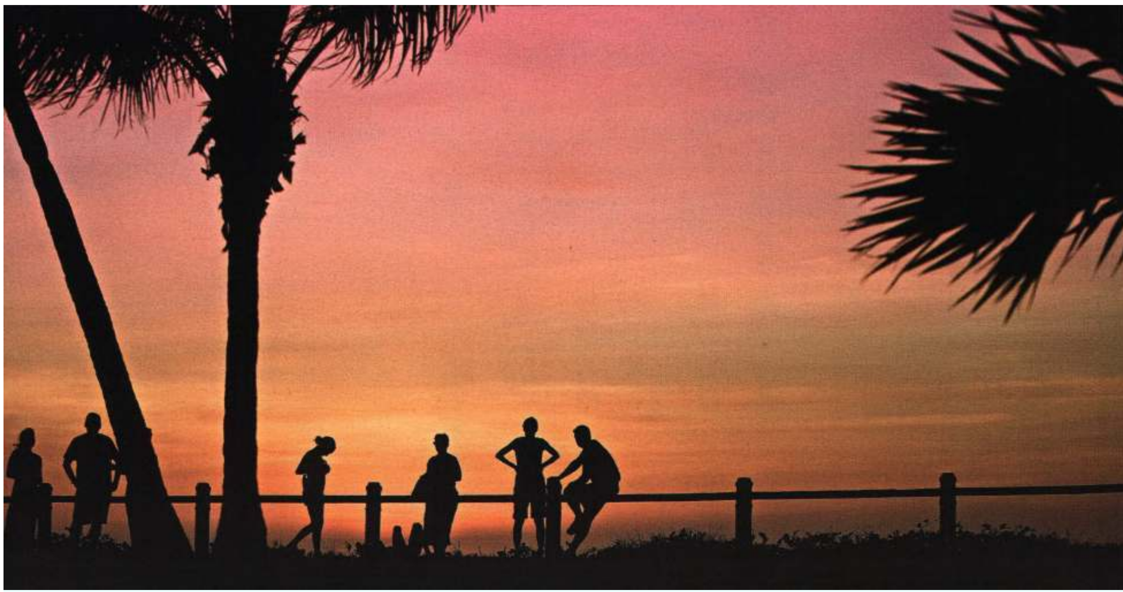



"I don't think anyone here in Broome has quite grasped the magnitude of the proposed plants," says Pat Lowe (top, centre), a rare voice of dissent. "The environmentalists are saying this

development is inevitable – but describing it as inevitable of course makes it become inevitable." This page and opposite: images of Broome, the once-sleepy town that looks set to cash in.

Environmentalist Maria Mann, above; pastoralist Susan Bradley, top, says it's the "first big test" for the Rudd Government; (right) tourist operators protest against drilling on the Maret Islands.



The dreamy Broome of pearl luggers and lattice-shaded verandas is gone: in anticipation of a vast population increase, new suburbs are being cut from scrubland behind Cable Beach (above)