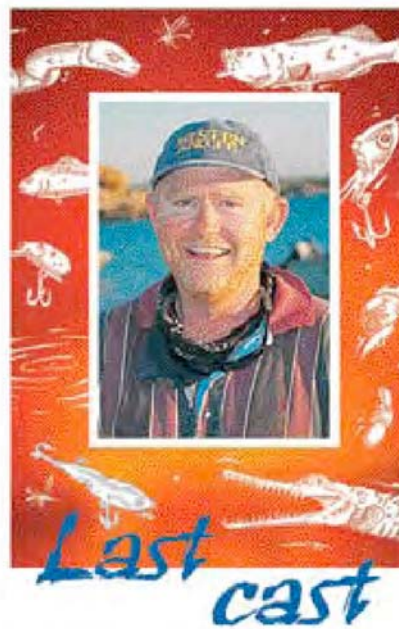


# Fighting for the Kimberley

I TRUST readers of *Western Angler* will remember my back-to-back pieces (Apr-May, June-July '07) titled *You Want To Put What? Where?* They were to do with plans for industrialising the Kimberley coast. Well, since then those plans have progressed steadily, and if you've been paying any attention to the television news you've probably seen the Federal Minister for the Environment, Peter Garrett, pitching a plan in tandem with our State Government to find a site to build an industrial hub somewhere up north. The broad focus is from Karratha in the south to Darwin in the north. The sharp focus is on the Kimberley coast, a marine wilderness like no other on earth.

To recap, the biggest reserves of natural gas and light oil (condensate) ever known to exist have been discovered not far off shore from the Kimberley coast. First to be tapped is the Browse Basin, which alone holds 30.3 trillion cubic feet of fuel. But that's not the lot of it. East of Browse is the Carnarvon Basin and near it are other basins. And every player in the oil and gas industry, big and small, wants a slice of the action. So do both federal and state governments, so do all the other industries that hang off oil and gas, so do local government, so do the Kimberley Land Council and so do many unemployed hopefuls. Of course, this is all about money.

And how much money you may well ask? Too much for this fishing guide to get his head around, so I'm just going to leave that



to your imagination.

Right. Money. Which is why, in spite of runaway climate change, a melting ice cap, rising sea levels, super storms and cataclysmic wild fires, thanks to a couple of hundred years of burning fossil fuels, plans are afoot to get that oil and gas out of the ground and into furnaces quick smart.

I'm not about to waste much of my own energy protesting against the oil and gas being exploited, because to stop it would require Almighty intervention, such is the power of oil and gas. It seems that reaching 'peak oil' – that alarm bell-ringing point in time when less fossil fuel is being discovered than the current rate of consumption – was only the signal to go harder. Like kids devouring a jar of Smarties and suddenly realising the Smarties are running out. They speed up,



*Tourists, tour operators and Kimberley locals protest INPEX's grab for the remote Maret Islands.*

gobble faster, stuff their cheeks, hide some in their pockets. Peak Smarties.

Back to the industrial hub. Given that we are going to get one, like it or not, the hub idea has merit, but not if it's at the expense of priceless environment. One industrial footprint where companies share technologies and infrastructure "in train" to refine and process the natural gas and condensate instead of many stand-alone plants spread out over the Kimberley region like a dog's dinner. Such as Japanese oil and gas company INPEX's grab at the remote Maret Islands in the north Kimberley where, with an arrogance matched only by its countryman's attitude to whaling, it has begun the process of building a gas plant to service its own Browse Basin assets. It is hoped the Garrett announcement to develop this resource in an environmentally sensitive way and not in an ad hoc manner will convince INPEX to go back to the well-head and make other plans. Incidentally, INPEX has been invited to join discussions on the hub concept, but has declined. Up to now it has gone the way of decide and defend, while buttering up the traditional owners. Its largess is reminiscent of the old days when miners swindled land off the natives in exchange for beads and blankets.

If the hub idea was around in the 1950s the Kwinana eyesore wouldn't be splattered from one end of Cockburn Sound to the other. Indeed, if site selection and the environment were given any credence back then Kwinana wouldn't be in Cockburn Sound at all. A more recent example of reckless exploitation versus future planning is the Burrup Peninsula in the Pilbara, where it's obvious reckless exploitation won.

I said in earlier writings, this is not about what, it's about where. Actually, I'd like to rephrase that: it's about WHAT and WHERE. Here's my take on the what. An industrial

giant that when up and running will consume an area of over 1000 hectares inside a two-kilometre-wide buffer zone. It will stand as high as a city, make as much noise as a rock concert and shine brighter than all the lighthouses in the world. Oh yeah, it will stink, too. And belch and fart and gurgle around the clock. It will be umbilicalled at one end to a massive sea port sending and receiving thousands of shipping movements annually, and at the other end to road works over which countless heavy vehicle movements will travel per year. A township of human resources will be annexed to it, but that won't provide enough hands on deck, so an airport will be needed to cater for fly in/fly out labour.

Before I give you my view on where, take into consideration I'm part of the SAVE THE KIMBERLEY (STK) organisation, a group of fair dinkum stakeholders in the Kimberley's wilderness who are fighting tooth and claw to save the Kimberley's wilderness from industrialisation. And it's a fight with serious potential to get dirty. Already INPEX have slung mud at STK, but that's its mistake, because you shouldn't bring mud to a shit fight.

I've been invited to contribute advice and opinion to the Northern Developments Taskforce (NDT), the State Government outfit given the job to find a hub site, and in the week before writing this I'd been participating in a World Wildlife Federation (WWF) science forum in Broome to determine the environmental values of the Kimberley coast and its vast savannah hinterland, reporting back to government regarding hub site selection. And, as y'all know, I'm a fishing guide.

So, where then? This is where things get very tricky, very political, very personal. Head honcho of the Northern Developments Taskforce, Jim Limerick, is also the director general of the Department of Industry and Resources

(DoIR) and many of his advisors in the hub site selection process come from the resource and industry sector. I didn't notice any Attenborough types on the board. So if you had even a smidgen of green blood in you, you'd be forgiven for thinking the State Government has allowed the goats to tend the cabbage patch. After all, we're talking about the same kind of gene pool who decided Cockburn Sound would make a rather nice spot for an industrial city. OK, so that was 60 years ago, but the Burrup was only 25 years ago, and this crew's fingerprints are all over the Burrup. Limerick appears to be a decent bloke. There's no doubt he's industry savvy, and he talks like a pro when handling prickly questions. But he strikes me as the kind of person who'd see beauty in a 10,000 tonne dragline excavator at work on the Mitchell Plateau.

In any event, at the time of writing (February '08) nobody was prepared to say where. SAVE THE KIMBERLEY, however, were screaming from the roof tops where NOT. And for the record that's the Kimberley coast, Broome to the Northern Territory border, a masterpiece of intact marine biodiversity. Eric Ripper, Minister for State Development and another one who loves a good quarry, said that an industrial development on the Kimberley landscape would only take up 0.2 per cent of the map. He might like to ponder that a hairy black wart scribbled on the Mona Lisa's chin would only take up 0.2 per cent of the canvas. The Liberal member for Kalgoorlie, Barry Haase, wants to see multiple industrial warts spread all over the Kimberley and recently blurted out on the front page of the *Broome Advertiser* that "...gas plants may themselves become tourist icons in the future". I suggest a few days fishing and camping in the Kimberley wilderness to clear his head of Haulpak fumes.

Along the line a handful of possible sites have been long-listed between Darwin and Karratha. Included in the chop

up were the already established industrial precincts in the Pilbara which, on face value, seem like an obvious choice. Also in the mix is building it out on Scott Reef, and also included is the option of an offshore floating facility, which apparently is doable in this petro-age of anything's doable. But what staggers me as doable is the NDT's announcement that a site must be chosen at the end of a six-month period of appraisal. You heard right. Six months! Hell's bloody bells. Most people take longer deciding what colour to paint their porch.

So why the friggin' rush, I asked. After all, it's fossil fuel, it's not likely to go off. The answer, or answers, were political and hard to understand while sober, so I hooked up with fellow STK warrior, Peter Tucker, and headed to Matsos to nut this out. Tux is also a fellow fishing guide and runs his own remote fishing camp in the west Kimberley known as Freshwater Cove. He's been a driving force in STK since the get-go and is only too aware that two of the possible sites are within sight, sound and smell of Freshwater Cove.

With a resolve to fight for wilderness, and the clarity that comes from drinking a few schooners with a mate, we concluded it's the politics of oil and gas running this show. The big players in the world's resource game know the Smarties jar is running low and they want what's left now. Right now. Deals have been struck. Contracts have been signed. Big money has changed hands. And bigger money is at stake. It's ALL about money.



• Rob Vaughan has been writing his Last Cast column since 1991, and has contributed features to *Fishing World* and *NAFA* magazines. He lives in Broome and operates a remote fishing safari camp, Kimberley Fishing, which is based in Admiralty Gulf at the top end of the Kimberley. He has dedicated the rest of his life to meeting column deadlines.