

Resources boom must benefit all: Kimberley Land Council

Karlis Salna

April 30, 2008 05:00pm

PROTECTING indigenous Australians' cultural heritage must be balanced against chances to secure their economic future, Kimberley traditional owners say.

The Browse Basin off the Kimberley coast has massive gas reserves potentially worth hundreds of billions of dollars.

The pristine coastline is also home to turtles, dugongs and sensitive coral reefs, and is precious to the traditional owners of the Kimberley region, represented by the Kimberley Land Council (KLC).

Balancing the economic benefits against protecting the land and the cultural heritage of his people is a huge challenge and one that is not taken lightly, KLC executive director Wayne Bergmann says.

"This is a challenge, it's at the heart of what we're trying to do, to weigh up and balance the environmental and economic (concerns)," he said in a speech at the National Press Club today.

"We're not afraid to say: 'No' (to development). If anyone knows anything about the history of the land council - we've said 'No' often."

However, Mr Bergmann also says economic empowerment for Aboriginal communities is the best way to ensure responsible development.

"The resources boom must deliver for all Australians, and, in particular, the Aboriginal people on whose land it takes place and who are directly affected," he said.

"Development of gas reserves off the Kimberley could deliver revenue of \$20 billion per year for up to 100 years."

The KLC has called for the state and federal governments to support the traditional owners in finding the balance between economic, environmental and cultural values.

"In the Kimberley we are pioneering a new way of doing business with mining companies," Mr Bergmann said.

"Our focus is on building economic partnerships that give us greater control and responsibility and mean we don't rely on government the way we do today."

He said it was unacceptable that there be world class resource development in the Kimberley region while its people live in third world conditions.

It was also no longer acceptable to traditional owners or the general community for development to go ahead at the expense of people or the environment, he said.

"The way to make the mining boom pay is to allow Aboriginal people to look after the country and have an economic stake in resource development," he said.

"That way we will ensure social and environmental benefits."

AAP