

Pub baron to bankroll Kimberley eco resort

FLIP PRIOR and GARY ADSHEAD

Multi-millionaire publican Martin Peirson-Jones will be a major financial backer of a controversial new luxury resort planned for one of the most remote corners of the Kimberley.

The West Australian has obtained documents outlining the secretive ecotourism development at the mouth of the Berkeley River — 120km north of Wyndham and accessible only by boat, sea-plane or helicopter.

While Mr Peirson-Jones' name does not appear on any official documentation, the Aboriginal leaseholders of the pristine coastal dunes area confirmed that the Broome developer, whose properties include Halls Creek's Kimberley Hotel, Matso's Brewery and the Kununurra Hotel, would be a key player if the development plan was approved. A spokesman for Mr Peirson-Jones confirmed his link to the project.

"I've got no funding for this," Jiamiddie Aboriginal Corporation spokesman Eugene French said. "He's (Mr Peirson-Jones) got to pay

rent. We have to be in a partnership. It's my land and he's sub-leasing."

The corporation was granted a free 50-year lease on the land by the State Government in 2003 and it now wants to sub-lease some land to Mr Peirson-Jones for the development. It says less than one hectare will be cleared.

Before the sub-lease can be approved, the existing lease must be amended by the Aboriginal Lands Trust to allow construction for anything other than the needs of the indigenous leaseholders.

But after details of the plan were revealed late last month, WA conservation groups started forming a plan to stop the resort from going ahead.

Working on the development for Jiamiddie is the former chief executive of Northwest Tourism, Grant Smart, now a director with consultant Kadar Pearson and Partners.

"At this stage the plans include 20 eco-cabins, a common facilities area, four staff units, one manager's unit and a workshop facility," reads a KPP briefing document sent to the Department of Environment and Conservation.

"The concept so far is that the cabins will be anchored off the ground, boardwalks will be constructed for all pedestrian access and a one-way service road will loop around the development. We realise that the remoteness of the site and the proximity to the coast create environmental aspects that need special consideration."

WA Tourism Council member Cath Sutherland raised concerns about the location of the resort in a discussion paper, describing it as "remote and untouched".

"The key selling point for the Kimberley is its wilderness value," she told *The West Australian*. "If this development goes in a position right by the Berkeley River, it's sort of like taking up a position in the botanical gardens next to the Opera House in Sydney."

Hugh Brown, spokesman for Save the Kimberley, which has urged the Environmental Protection Authority to assess the plan, said any development had to be done in the right way.