

Accord aimed to keep our heritage safe

By GILLY LLEWELLYN

ONE of the most spectacular coastal environments in the world could be the backdrop to an unprecedented accord between governments, petroleum giants, indigenous leaders and environmental groups.

The Kimberley-Pilbara coast is an epicentre of indigenous culture. It is also home to rare turtles, dugong, whale nurseries, coral atolls and islands completely free of weeds and feral animals.

Around these natural and cultural wonders lie massive gas reserves, setting the scene for an archetypal clash of interests. But WWF-Australia believes that things could be done differently here.

Over the past two years, we have worked with other environmental groups, indigenous leaders, companies and governments to create a vastly improved process for major project assessment in this country.

At the recent 2008 Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association (APPEA) Environment conference in Queensland, WWF called for resource companies and governments to invest in the last crucial phases of an environmental and cultural assessment of the Kimberley-Pilbara coast.

Important elements of this process are well underway but these have been coming under fire, particularly from the new Western Australian Government.

A full assessment would efficiently create a regional blueprint that would give companies a clear overview of what could and could not be done along the Kimberley-Pilbara-Top End coast.

It would avoid the standard process where each company navigates a string of isolated approvals. Instead, much of this work would be done as part of the overall assessment, creating certainty, sooner, for all stakeholders and bringing greater transparency and information.

The process would take into account the cumulative environmental impacts of a variety of developments on the Kimberley-Pilbara coast as a whole and make clearer the opportunities for shared infrastructure, including sites for the geosequestration of greenhouse emissions.

This bigger picture analysis would identify the most precious natural and cultural areas which would be off-limits

for industrial development – places like Scott Reef and large intact areas of the Kimberley-Pilbara coastline.

Companies that choose to encourage the preservation of such magnificent endowments to the planet, could deservedly take pride and credit for their efforts.

It is self-evident that the indigenous people of the region must continue to have a powerful voice in this assessment.

The Kimberley Land Council deserves credit, not criticism, for supporting the kind of process described here.

WWF believes an overall plan will minimise the eco-footprint of any developments that do go ahead through appropriate co-location within an existing industrialised precinct or in a single hub.

Such a farsighted investment by resource companies can help Australia avoid the mistakes of the past.

More importantly, it is a chance for petroleum giants to build constructive, transparent relationships with environmental organisations and the community and, through this, to enhance their reputation.

Australians are worried about climate change and the damage to the environment. Petroleum companies are seen by many people as being a big part of the problem.

An environmental investment on a scale that helps preserve the integrity of the Kimberley-Pilbara coast, an area that is unique in the world, would bolster the reputation of these companies and their 'license to operate.'

The access we all have now to information about companies and their projects reduces the distance between spin and reality, and can lead very quickly to strident opposition against companies that clearly care little for the environment or community.

Mature players in industry have become sensitive to this and are building a reputation through active engagement in responsible development assessment.

The Equator Principles – where banks apply principles similar to those described here to major projects – are an additional benchmark to evaluate conduct.

● Gilly Llewellyn is WWF Australia's Oceans Program Leader.

