

# Historic Beagle Bay divided over gas hub

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The exquisite Sacred Heart chapel at the Beagle Bay community, with its intricate pearl shell decoration, is the most obvious link between past and present.



It represents Beagle Bay's religious foundation and is much loved today by the Catholic Church, local schoolchildren, their families and tourists making their way along the Dampier Peninsula to One-Arm Point.

When the chapel's belltower collapsed in 2000 an Australia-wide appeal produced the money to rebuild it. Emily Charles, whose grandmother collected shells for

the chapel when it was originally built by missionaries and Aboriginals in 1917, is reported to have wept with joy when she heard the bells ring again two years later: "I thought 'bugger going fishing with my nephew, I'm going to church'."

Beagle Bay finds itself in the news again as the closest community to North Head, Colin Barnett's preferred site for an LNG processing plant.

Some residents have no objection to it and believe that the project could provide the much-needed employment for Aboriginals.

Others are vehemently and vocally opposed and fear that the 1000ha site will be a blot on one of the world's most remarkable and pristine coastlines. Their protest led to a blockade of the road into the community last week when members of the Northern Development Taskforce were due to visit.

But there are other complications at Beagle Bay, intertwined with debate over the LNG site and connected with the community's history.

The first Catholic school in the Kimberley was established by the Trappist fathers at Beagle Bay mission in 1892 and handed over to the German Pallottines in 1901. In 1907, the St John of God sisters arrived and stayed at the mission until the 1975 when Beagle Bay became a self-governing community. The community asked the Catholic Church to continue to operate the Sacred Heart School, next to the church and the Pallottines left in 2002.

In 2005, however, the community was found to be dysfunctional, riven by feuds and rumours of abuse and missing money, and was placed into administration. And there it remains, the administrator now referred to as a "place manager" with

the task of managing day-to-day affairs but with no right to speak for the community.

The community is, in fact, voiceless.

During last week's roadblock, resident and protester Albert Wiggan referred to the fact that the community has no legitimate governing body. He believes that the community, therefore, is hamstrung in its ability to negotiate over the plant. There are further complications in that the community's land is held by the Aboriginal Lands Trust.

There is another problem, too. Many, if not most, of the residents of Beagle Bay are not traditional owners. Because the community has grown out of a mission, its inhabitants either are descendants of the stolen generation or moved to the community for other reasons.

Negotiations over finding a place for the LNG hub have been conducted by the Kimberley Land Council with traditional-owner groups from along the Kimberley coast. And so, many of the residents of Beagle Bay feel, rightly or wrongly, that their wishes are not being heard and that they have not been given enough information about the project to form a view.

Everyone seems to agree that it's a mess, including Beagle Bay-born Kerriane Cox, a musician and songwriter who was elected chairwoman of the Beagle Bay community in 2004 and was instrumental in having it declared a community in crisis the following year. She continues to be involved in the long process of uniting the disparate groups and helping build a local economy and does not see a gas hub as being helpful.

A Joint Government Action Plan for Beagle Bay was adopted when the community failed, with one of its aims the creation of a governance plan. It is, she agrees, a painfully slow process.

But, she says, she's focused on the vision, not the negativity — as the religious orders which have been part of the community for more than a century have done.

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