

World's oldest portrait in peril

An explosives factory in Australia threatens a rock carving of a human face dating back to beyond the last Ice Age

Paul Ham, Sydney

The world's oldest depiction of a human face could be threatened if Australian mining companies are permitted to build an explosives factory on the remote Burrup peninsula in the northwest of the country.

A bulbous image of indiscernible sex, with huge eyes and sunken cheeks, the 10,000 year-old carving is chipped out of hard rock. Thousands of other carvings, mostly of plants and animals, which date back to beyond the last Ice Age, are scattered about the peninsula.

Archeologists believe that aboriginal tribes made the distinctive carvings up to 30,000 years ago. They could be nearly twice as old as the Lascaux cave paintings in the Dordogne, France.

Last year the mining company Woodside Energy won permission to move 170 pieces of rock art to a new site to make way for a liquefied natural gas plant. Next year Burrup Nitrates is planning to build an explosives plant on the site.

Opposition to the development is led by Robin Chapple, a British-born Green MP, whose seat in the Western Australian parliament is the world's largest at 860,00 square miles.

"The Burrup has the highest density of carvings of rock art in the world," he said. He attacked Woodside's decision to move some examples. "What Woodside has done is like taking a couple of pillars out of Stonehenge and putting them somewhere else. If you do that, you lose the integrity of the site."

The value of the carvings lies in their unbroken depiction of ancient tribes' adaptation to thousands of years of climate change. "This rock art represents the longest art tradition anywhere in the world," said Ken Mulvaney, who is writing a doctoral thesis on them.

The site is sacred to the local Yaburara aborigines, whose ancestors' carvings tell how the tribes changed their hunting and gathering methods to survive. Some carvings from 25,000 years ago show they hunted mammals and flat-tailed wallabies; in more recent times, as the ice melted, they turned their attention to turtles and the Tasmanian tiger.

Chapple, 62, hopes that Colin Barnett, the new premier of Western Australia, may "stand up" to the developers but it appears to be a forlorn hope.