

Broome ready for fight as gas hub polarises town

The battle to protect the Kimberley coast is shaping as a stoush rivalling the SW logging struggle, writes **Ben Spencer**

Broome residents are bracing for the fight of their lives as Colin Barnett's plan for a gas hub on their shores polarises the Kimberley town.

The Premier's choice of James Price Point, 60km north of Broome, as the site for a lucrative liquefied natural gas precinct has intensified already heated political, environmental and cultural debate in the tourist town.

The fight to preserve the peaceful waters of the Kimberley coast is now the latest in a long history of battles over industrialisation in Australia.

Indeed, it is showing signs of being just as fierce as those fought to preserve old-growth forests in WA's South-West.

Signs saying "No Gas" and "Back off Barnett", erected just hours before Mr Barnett flew over James Price Point last month, pinpoint the new battleground.

"This is a long way off from being an industrial site, I can tell you,"

says Robert "Bluey" Vaughan as he uses an axe to smash one of the signs deeper into the red earth. "There is plenty of fight left in us."

Mr Vaughan, a seventh-generation West Australian, has lived in Broome for 20 years and runs sport fishing camps off the Kimberley coast. His group, Save the Kimberley, is one of nearly a dozen conservation groups locally and nationally who are leading a push to keep the Dampier Peninsula free from industrialisation.

Whale researchers Richard Costin and Annabelle Sandes say the area is the maternity ward of the Kimberley for the threatened humpback whale. The couple recently counted 26 adult humpbacks and nine calves during three hours of whale watching off James Price Point.

Australian singer-songwriter Missy Higgins, who moved to Broome a year ago after falling in love with the tourist town while on holiday there, and veteran actor Jack Thompson have lent their voices to the conservationists' cause.

But local businesses and indigenous MP Carol Martin are among many who believe a gas hub could be the saviour for a community struggling from a fall in tourism, the decline of the pearling industry and Aboriginal poverty.

In the two weeks since Mr Barnett announced his plans for James Price Point, the Broome Chamber of Commerce has been flooded with emails supporting the decision.

This week, experts warned Australia's international tourism

market was headed for its worst downturn in two decades, a forecast not lost on proponents of a Broome-based gas hub.

"We need another industry," Broome property developer and former Ansett Australia regional manager Ron Johnston says. "We had the meatworks and they closed, the pearling industry is going through tough times and tourism is on a downslide. We need to take advantage of this opportunity."

At first glance, James Price Point is a pretty remote place. It is only accessible by four-wheel-drive vehicle and seasonal downpours can close roads for days at a time. The jagged, red-earth cliffs unique to the Kimberley glow like fire at sunset and are often pounded by massive waves during the cyclone season.

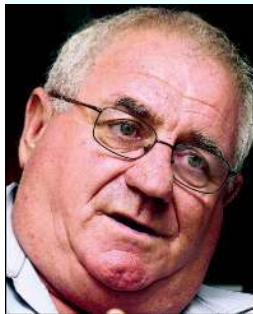
During low tide, when the shoreline is sucked hundreds of metres out to sea, mud crabs and other sea life can be seen scurrying across exposed rock and coral.

But while Aboriginal groups and environmentalists trumpet a supposedly pristine environment, there are obvious signs not all feel the need to look after it. Broken beer bottles and cans can be found in much of the red earth leading up to the shoreline, the likely result of tourists flocking to the area to fish and camp during the tourist season.

About 400km out to sea lies the cause of all the debate, the Browse Basin. Overall recoverable reserves in the Browse are estimated at more than 50 trillion cubic feet, or more



Neil McKenzie



Graeme Campbell



Sign language: Fishing tour operator Robert Vaughan expresses his opinion on the gas hub proposal. Pictures: Ian Ferguson

than a third of Australia's known offshore gas reserves.

Not surprisingly, it has attracted the attention of numerous multinational companies like Woodside Petroleum and Japanese group Inpex.

In Broome itself, such is the evenness of the split in support for a gas processing facility that Broome council recently voted 5-4 to oppose any such development within its borders. Shire president Graeme Campbell, who sees huge economic opportunities in the gas hub proposal, fears the council will now be frozen out of negotiations.

Mr Campbell says the social impact of any development could be "horrendous". He cites Karratha and Ravensthorpe as towns ill-prepared for the onset of the mining sector and is determined to ensure Broome doesn't join them. In 2007, Broome's median house price of about \$800,000 was the highest in the State, though that has fallen back to \$665,000 in the wake of the global financial crisis.

"This has polarised the town, no doubt," Mr Campbell says. "It certainly is a big issue. People are talking about it around town and in typical Broome style that shows to

me that people are concerned about it one way or the other."

While Mr Barnett will be bracing for inevitable hostility, one of his biggest challenges looks to be the apparent unravelling of the Kimberley Land Council.

The former Labor government handballed to the KLC the job of consulting traditional land owners on a site for a gas processing precinct on the coast and paid them \$7 million to do so.

But the native title representative body has since come under fire for failing to come up with a single location, instead recommending four possible sites (a figure it narrowed down from nearly 50).

In Broome, many believe the criticism is warranted and that it has left the KLC increasingly gun-shy. Its director, Wayne Bergmann, did not return *The West Australian's* calls this week, while no other KLC representative was made available to speak on the issue.

Joseph Roe, a Goolarabaloo lawyer whose community has a joint native title claim over James Price Point with the Jabbir Jabbir people, is at odds with the KLC.

Mr Roe, well-known around town for his strong beliefs and fiery

temper, met Mr Barnett when the Premier was in Broome last month.

He is cautiously supportive of the gas precinct being located on his land (he would prefer it be at the most southern point of James Price Point), but has warned Mr Barnett to have his lawyers ready should the Premier follow through with a threat to compulsorily acquire the land if an agreement isn't reached with traditional land owners by March.

Mr Roe referred *The West Australian* to his Perth-based lawyer, Marcus Holmes, this week, saying he would get himself "into more trouble than it's worth" if he spoke out on the issue.

Mr Holmes believes there is little hope of an agreement by Mr

Barnett's March deadline and has written to Bill Gray, the Commonwealth-appointed facilitator charged with negotiating an agreement over acquiring the site, to outline his concerns.

Mr Holmes says the KLC has

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ABORIGINAL ELDER NEIL MCKENZIE

closed the door in Mr Roe's face and failed to represent his views. He claims other Aboriginal law bosses are also unhappy with the KLC's handling of the issue.

But for Neil McKenzie, a traditional Jabbir Jabbir custodian of the James Price Point area, the politics of it all is merely an afterthought. It's the idea of the coastline being dominated by machinery that is keeping him up at night.

"My hair stands up on the back of my neck . . . I am really scared, just sick in the stomach at the thought," he said.



Hands off: Gas hub opponents Robert Vaughan, activist Martin Pritchard, Annabelle Sandes, Richard Costin and Neil McKenzie make a stand at James Price Point