

Conservationist fights to preserve Kimberley whale song

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More than half a century ago, in a cold, wet and mountainous corner of Australia, Alec Costin was known as the real Man from Snowy River.

Considered the father of alpine ecology in Australia, Dr Costin's efforts to conserve and manage Mount Kosciuszko in the Snowy Mountains were legendary.

Today, thousands of kilometres across the country in Broome, his son Richard is fighting on a new conservation frontier.

As The West Australian accompanied the khaki-clad whale researcher to James Price Point this week, his partner Annabelle Sandes suggested he might be a cross between Steve Irwin and Les Hiddins, aka the Bush Tucker Man.



That comparison might not sit well with Mr Costin but it is an easy one to make.

He regularly embarks on three-week treks through the rugged terrain of the Kimberley, taking nothing more than a fishing line and a box of matches.

But it is his knowledge of the endangered humpback whale — gathered while studying their migratory activities along the Kimberley coast for the past 15 years — that he hopes will change the course of the Broome gas hub debate.

Mr Costin says a gas precinct at James Price Point would put a brick wall in the migratory path of the humpback.

A recent Environmental Protection Authority report found North Head, 125km north of Broome, was a humpback whale breeding ground. This was enough to deter Colin Barnett from naming North Head as his favoured site, opting for James Price Point instead.

But Mr Costin says the same detailed research that formed the basis of the EPA's advice has not been done at James Price Point.

In September, Mr Costin and Ms Sandes began a spot survey of humpbacks between the Maret Islands and Broome.

They saw an average of 11.2 humpbacks per hour at James Price Point — a figure only behind the 22 spotted at Camden Sound, one of the Kimberley's largest bays.

While Mr Costin believes there would be ship strikes of whales if a gas hub were built at James Price Point, his biggest concern is interference to the communication between mothers and their calves.

His research has revealed an "acoustic curtain" whereby humpbacks communicated with others in calving areas hundreds of kilometres up the Dampier Peninsula.

"Each boat would have its own sound signature and that would basically drown out the whale song."

Mr Costin says it is the deep waters off the point — one of the requirements for building a gas precinct — that attracts the whales.

Recognising that a gas processing plant will be built, he advocates a floating plant off the coast.

With Woodside focusing on a plant in either the Kimberley or the Pilbara, that option appears unlikely.

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