



LOCATED NEAR THE PLUTO NATURAL GAS
FIELD, THE CARVED PANEL BELOW AND
THE ENGRAVINGS ON THE FACING PAGE
ARE JUST A FEW OF THE HUNDREDS OF
ROCK ART SITES AT RISK AS INDUSTRIAL
DEVELOPMENT OF AUSTRALIA'S BURRUP
PENINSULA CONTINUES.

It's hard to imagine a more impressive—or more endangered—cultural landscape in Australia than the Dampier Rock Art Site. The largest, and quite possibly oldest, rock art precinct in the world consists of thousands of jagged red Pilbara rocks which, on closer inspection, reveal in their shadowed crevasses or sun-beaten surfaces the images of lively humans, animals, and plants. Some are darkly outlined images of the now-extinct Tasmanian tiger, each so individual in their sleek stripes or wolfish mien that they hint at myriad artists and several millennia of rituals involving the carnivorous marsupial. Others resemble photo negatives, faces created by tapping down through mineral-darkened surfaces to reveal pale rock. They are mysterious, often beautiful clues to generations of industrious artists who, over a period spanning perhaps 20,000 years, roamed this remote archipelago on the northwest coast of Western Australia, which juts into the Indian Ocean.

2006 WATCH SITE UPDATE

Yet, unlike the more famous Bradshaw paintings found further north in the Kimberley region, no book has ever been published that celebrates the importance of Dampier and conveys its ethnographic and aesthetic qualities to the public. Nor is there any hint that the reverential care and protection accorded England's Stonehenge, Cambodia's Angkor, or the painted caves of Lascaux, France, will ever be enjoyed here, despite the site's inclusion on WMF's 2006 list of *100 Most Endangered Sites*.

Just why Dampier's rock art has failed to attract the kind of advocacy that has propelled the Bradshaw paintings into prominence over the years lies squarely in its location. While the Bradshaws are found in caves on pastoral leases held by sympathetic owners, Dampier's artifacts blanket a 20-kilometer-long sliver of land and sea on which multibillion-dollar industries have set up shop.

When construction of the Northwest Shelf Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) processing plant began on the

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

by VICTORIA LAURIE

The fate of Australia's Dampier Rock Art Site hangs in the balance



Burrup four decades ago, thousands of petroglyphs were destroyed or removed to make way for the installation and its extensive port facilities, which have since grown into a \$30 billion industrial precinct. Recently, one of the six multi-national resource partners in the Northwest Shelf project, Woodside Energy, announced plans to build its own gas processing plant for its nearby offshore Pluto natural gas reserve on an uncleared site south of the LNG complex, where 165 rock engravings will be disturbed. Most of these, Woodside says, are to be relocated to make way for the plant.

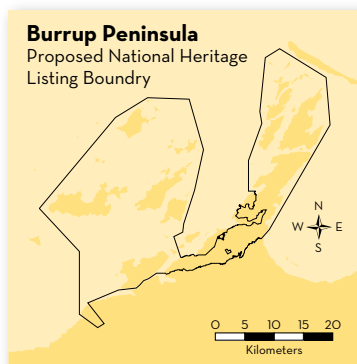


Robert Bednarik, convenor of the International Federation of Rock Art Organizations, says Burrup's problems arise from Australia's flawed heritage legislation. Companies are compelled to conduct impact studies and pay for them, meaning that hired archaeologists conduct surveys that never reach the public domain. "That's why there have been no publications, only dozens of unpublished internal reports, some of which are quite substantial."

In 2006, he self-published the only booklet on Burrup's rock art as part of his advocacy effort. "I have people ringing me up after seeing my book and saying 'Why have we not been told about this?'"

In early December, Labor MP Carmen Lawrence, a former Western Australian premier, Federal Greens senator Rachel Siewert, and Independent MP Peter Andren—aware of growing concern over the fate of Dampier—lodged an emergency application to halt any more disturbance on the Burrup in a bid to hasten a formal decision by Federal Environment and Heritage Minister Ian Campbell to place the rock art site on Australia's National Heritage List, a move that would give the area greater protection under federal heritage laws.





Minister Campbell was palpably moved by what he saw when he visited the Burrup last July. “What was amazing to me was how the illustrations in some cases had the clarity of computer images—emus, lizards, turtles, kangaroos, and people. They are so sharp and absolutely stunning, and one of the big things is going to be tourism,” he told *The Australian* shortly after his visit.

Yet it seems Campbell was furious at the opposition MPs’ emergency application, saying it jeopardized ongoing talks between government and industry to find a compromise position, and has since announced that he may delay making any decision on the site. Amendments to the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Act currently before the Australian parliament will allow him to defer any decision to list Dampier indefinitely.

In the interim, Campbell’s office has been flooded with thousands of protests against further destruction of Burrup’s rock engravings. The National Trust of Western Australia said public protest and media focus—prompted in large part by the site’s Watch listing—had led to a dramatic twist in December in which both resource giant Woodside Energy and the Western Australian government dropped their opposition to National Heritage Listing of the Burrup peninsula.

Both had previously opposed listing “all or any part of” the Burrup on the grounds that heritage protection laws could limit industrial expansion of Australia’s largest—and one of the world’s most lucrative—resource projects, the Northwest Shelf. But in a move viewed as an effort to placate public sentiment while clinging to their industrial objectives, both Woodside and the state government have signalled support for listing as long as certain industrial areas—including their proposed Pluto site—are specifically excluded from heritage protection.

Woodside director Keith Spence said strong public support for protection of rock art had prompted the company’s change of heart regarding National Heritage Listing. “We recognize there are a lot of opinions out there—we’ve listened to stakeholders, to the public, and to our own employees,” he said. “We can up our game in looking after this national treasure.”

The Western Australia National Trust welcomed Woodside’s decision, but pointed out that it did not change the fact that hundreds of rock art artifacts were still destined for demolition to make way

**A DEEPLY ETCHED CARVING
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for the Pluto plant. “They are trying to make the best of a bad situation, and grudgingly giving ground,” said National Trust spokesman Robin Chapple. “They can see the writing is on the wall in terms of future development on the Burrup and they are trying to grab their little piece [of land].”

In another partial conservation gesture, Woodside also signalled it is considering funding a comprehensive survey of all Burrup rock art, which has never been done. It would require the documenting of up to a million rock etchings and could cost several million dollars. The company claims that it already spends around one million dollars a year on rock art management, and has redesigned its Pluto LNG plant. “As a result, Pluto will avoid more than 90 percent of rock art and we are working with local Aborigines to minimize impact on the remainder,” a recent company release reported.

The local Aboriginal custodians—the Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo, Ngarluma Yindjibarndi, and Yaburara Mardhudhunera peoples—had signed an agreement in 2003 that permitted further industrial development on parts of the Burrup in return for compensation monies and land access. A “no objection” clause in the agreement effectively prevented them from public utterances against rock art removal.

But in January, Woodside was informed by two out of three local indigenous groups they would no longer acquiesce to the destruction of rock art. Their decision was prompted by news that Woodside proposed to shear off rock carvings from the face of large boulders that were too big to move. “They can’t slice the rock because it’s not right—it’s a spiritual issue,” said Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo elder Wilfred Hicks. Ngarluma spokesperson Jill Churnside said it was a rampant act of vandalism towards indigenous culture. “We have rights under Section 7 of the Aboriginal Heritage Act as traditional owners to veto destruction of sites but the government refuses to acknowledge this,” said Churnside. Rock art supporters say this goes to the heart of the problem raised by the Burrup—that Australia’s system of protecting heritage sites, and priceless heritage is expendable in the face of development. The National Trust says the only way to balance the preservation of cultural treasures and building resource wealth for the state will be to create a single, independent authority to manage the Burrup peninsula and surrounding islands.

Western Australian premier Alan Carpenter says the state government has long acknowledged the significant heritage values of Dampier. “Nevertheless, we strongly believe that it is possible to protect these values of the archipelago and that industry and heritage may co-exist in the area.”

Only time will tell. ■

THE ENIGMATIC ARCHAIC FACES, ABOVE LEFT, FOUND IN LARGE NUMBERS OVER THE BURRUP ARE AMONG THE EARLIEST ROCK ART WORKS IN THE REGION. THOUGHT TO HAVE BEEN CARVED SOME 25,000 TO 30,000 YEARS AGO, THE IMAGES WERE RENDERED IN NEGATIVE RELIEF. ABOVE, TWO OF THE INDUSTRIAL INSTALLATIONS ON THE NORTHWEST SHELF THAT HAVE PUT THE DAMPIER ROCK ART SITE AT RISK.