

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Acid Rain Kills The World's Greatest Ancient Art Gallery: Dampier, Western Australia

Time is running out fast for the greatest concentration of ancient petroglyphs in the world. Over the course of some 10,000 years, one million figures were incised onto the rocky outcrops of Western Australia's Dampier Archipelago, a web of 42 islands. Now earth's greatest outdoor art gallery is being destroyed by a downpour of man-induced acid rain - the tears of the ancestors. On the main island alone, 100,000 of a total estimated 500,000 images have already been destroyed.

In an act of extraordinary myopia, Western Australia's government is shoe-horning a dozen petrochemical plants onto one small island at Dampier. The government has already committed \$185 million to the infrastructure, which is believed to have attracted a further \$30 billion of corporate interest. The golden scheme, however, is a catalogue of planning disasters, and a major battle is currently being fought between the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO), under the brilliant and passionate guidance of its president, Robert Bednarik, and an extremely defensive government.

Dampier's rock art is uniquely diverse, featuring no two identical motifs. Fauna is very common (whale, dolphin, dugong, fish, turtle, crab, water fowl) as are macropods, extinct Thylacines (Tasmanian wolf), birds, and smaller mammals. Humans and a variety of sacred spirit beings proliferate, many of which may not be viewed by the uninitiated or females. A unique motif, unattested anywhere else, is the 'negative petroglyph' (a dark patina delineated by dressing), forming intricate patterns of highly stylised faces. The rock art is broadly attributed to the Holocene, up to 10,000 Before Present.

IFRAO certainly occupies the moral high ground through the support of the World Monuments Fund, which has listed the Dampier Rock Art Precinct among its 100 Most Endangered Sites, and the strong backing of the National Trust of Australia, ICOMOS, four local Native Title Claimants, the environmentalist movement, and all the political parties of Western Australia - except the one in power.

Dr Geoff Gallop, the Premier of Western Australia, has clearly been caught in an uncompromising position, having failed spectacularly to safeguard both national and global ancient cultural heritage. The great tragedy is that this catastrophe could have been so easily avoided. The Dampier Archipelago has one of the lowest population densities on earth and contains no resources of any description, no ores, gas, or oil. The petrochemical industry could have been established at any number of other locations in the vicinity (Western Australia covers one million square miles of largely uninhabited land), yet the government has insisted on building over the world's largest concentration of ancient rock carvings.

As if news of this cultural Armageddon is not bad enough, the scheme is also environmentally unsound. The plants already built on Dampier contain the explosive power of 58 Hiroshima atomic bombs. Any accident could light the fuse of the greatest man made explosion in history.

Meanwhile, the trebling of toxic and greenhouse gas emissions has blanketed the ancient art with acid rain. The Dampier Woodside plant alone emits at least 11,000 tons of nitric oxides and 15 million tons of greenhouse gases each year. If continued unabated, the 21st century will witness the wholesale disappearance of 10,000 years of ancient art.

Quite incredibly, no management plan exists for either compilation of an inventory of the endangered rock art or to protect this irreplaceable heritage. The Western Australian government's

assertion that it 'would be finished as a provider of secure investment opportunities, and this would ruin our sovereign integrity irreparably' if it reversed its policy over Dampier is, in itself, a gross admission of failure and guilt.

In a modern era dogged by Best Practice manuals to check and balance protocols in work places, invariably accompanied by fines, it is scandalous that a government agency can get away with failing to initiate pre-disturbance environmental and archaeological pilot studies. In a third world country perhaps, but in Australia with its proud love of the great outdoors?

Dr Robert Bednarik, president of IFRAO, confirmed to *Minerva* that 'The rock art is the creation of the Yaburarra, a tribe that was completely exterminated in a series of police massacres in 1868, and the government simply does not wish to be reminded of how it gained sovereignty. It is history's greatest rock art vandal, exceeding the Taliban in its fervour to destroy cultural heritage'. With this in mind, IFRAO and the Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA) have established an Internet Petition to try and persuade Western Australia's government to reconsider its policy, to relocate the planned petrochemical plants, and to assume accountability for protecting the rock art. Readers of *Minerva* are urged to sign this document (see www.petitiononline.com/dampier/petition.html). *Sean Kingsley*

One of an estimated million endangered petroglyphs at Dampier, Western Australia, depicting climbing men. Date unknown, but up to 10,000 Before Present. Photo: Robert Bednarik.



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