

## Our largest art museum threatened

Australia's most extensive Aboriginal art site may be severely damaged as plans to build several new petrochemical plants on the site proceed.

Murujuga, in the Dampier Archipelago in the Pilbara, is believed to have as many as 250,000 individual petroglyphs, or engravings – that's more than twice the number of works in the National Gallery's entire art collection. Spanning more than 10,000 years, the art includes precious images of thylacines.

Amid calls for the area of the Burrup Peninsula to be World Heritage-listed and protected forever, the WA Government is proceeding with the development of a \$5 billion industrial estate there, including the world's biggest ammonia plant. The WA Department of Mineral and Petroleum Resources believes it's the best site for the industrial estate because it has deep ports and the gas pipeline from the North West Shelf coming ashore there (AG 33). According to

the department's Roger Buddrige, "it also has all the infrastructure – roads, communication, power, all that sort of stuff is available close by."

President of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations, Victorian Robert Bednarik, is distraught about not just the immediate effect of building a large industrial estate on the peninsula – and the destruction or removal of petroglyphs – but the likely long-term damage due to increased acidification of local rain, when industrial gases are released into the air. He has studied the long-term deterioration of the works since 1967. "By 2025–2035 the rock art will begin to disappear," he said.

No complete study of the site has ever been undertaken, so the precise number and extent of the petroglyphs are unknown. Robert believes there are probably 250,000 individual motifs, although some estimates are as high as 1 million.

PIC TO COME

## Power plant

A weed that's invading large areas of the Top End and northern Queensland may be harvested and turned into electricity.

Northern Territory Power is planning a 350 kW power station run on a gas made from catclaw mimosa. This fast-growing weed reaches 3–6 m tall, has pink, ball-shaped flowers and nasty 5–10 mm long thorns. "When it's in full bloom, you can't even walk through it," says Malcolm Keeble, from Northern Territory Power.

Harvesting proposals include chipping the mimosa and turning it into dried briquettes at the point of harvesting, to prevent the spread of seeds. The briquettes would be gasified – heated in the absence of oxygen – to create a gas that would then be burnt to generate electricity.



MURUJUGA

- **Location:** Burrup Peninsula, Pilbara
- **Estimated petroglyphs:** 250,000
- **Estimated age range:** Post-European to last Ice Age
- **Motifs include:** Dugong, whales, fish, turtles, birds, humans, sacred designs
- **Site first developed:** 1960s
- **Boulders moved at that time:** 2000

## Caged nut

What business does a steel-barred cage have in a botanic garden? In Coffs Harbour it protects a rare and endangered seedling – the nightcap oak (Bush Telegraph, AG 63), an ancient cousin of the native macadamia tree. Discovered in 2000, the nightcap oak had a total population of only 23 trees in a volcanic crater on the NSW far north coast and propagation trials have been under way ever since. According to Coffs Harbour Regional Botanic Garden's Ron Powell, growing the tree from its nut has been painfully slow. "Now that's done, we'll be giving the little plant the best possible future," Ron says. "It's enclosed in a heavy steel cage and will have round-the-clock security."