

DAMPIER ROCK ART UNDER SIEGE

One of the largest Australian concentrations of rock art is on the Burrup Peninsula, in the Dampier Archipelago of Western Australia. It has to share the peninsula with the industrial town of Dampier, its iron ore pelletising plant and port facilities, and the North West Shelf gas facilities. Your editor was the first European to examine the complex of several hundred petroglyph sites when he re-discovered almost 600 sites in the course of a three-year study in the 1960s, and in 1969 sought to involve the Western Australian Museum in their protection. An occupation site on the western Burrup, close to a major petroglyph concentration, was subsequently dated to the late Pleistocene by Michel Lorblanchet from France. It is highly probable that some of the petroglyphs also date from that period. In part, this was assumed due to the rock varnish covering many of the motifs, which geologist John Clarke thought to relate mainly to Pleistocene formation.

There are very strong competing interests involved on the Burrup, and while the power relationships may be a microcosm of what is happening elsewhere in Australia, the issues are perhaps more acute: not only is the area of the Burrup quite small (just over 100 square kilometres), the 'stakes' are unusually high, on both sides of the controversy. Dampier is the largest tonnage port of Australia, and a key element in the Western Australian economy. On the other hand, the Burrup Peninsula contains the largest concentration of petroglyphs in the world. Lorblanchet suggested that there may be 500 000 motifs on the peninsula, and while Patricia Vinnicombe's findings in the 1980s indicate a somewhat lower figure, it still remains the largest site complex in the world.

The second-largest petroglyph concentration, according to your editor, is in southern Peru, at Toro Muerto on the Rio Majes.

Recently, the conservationist group Friends of the Burrup was formed in Karratha, which campaigns against further expansion of industrial leases on the peninsula. In targeting the present Burrup Peninsula Draft Land Use and Management Plan it has sought the help of your editor. He in turn has involved the International Federation of Rock Art Organizations, and he petitioned three federal ministers on its behalf.

There are no professional rock art conservators employed in Western Australia, even though all formally accredited rock art conservators of the world were trained in Australia. The Burrup Peninsula Management Advisory Board in Karratha has been informed that it has not been advised by knowledgeable people. Even the most 'environmentally friendly' parts of its Draft Management Plan are only concerned about tourists and recreational use of the area, except for the occasional reference to the natural environment. There is a need for much clearer directives concerning the management of the rock art sites. We know from past experience to what destructive practices previous encounters between powerful commercial interests and meek conservationists led on the Burrup, including the wholesale destruction of rock art in several places, and the relocation of engraved boulders and their dumping in an ugly pile within a fenced compound at another sites. A more adequate management plan is required, which should include the following components:

1. Nomination of the Burrup to World Heritage status.
2. The return of all untenanted land to the surviving Aboriginal community (Ngaluma), perhaps with a proviso that they lease part of it as a National Park to the Commonwealth.

3. The permanent installation of a rock art ranger, who should have full jurisdiction over any rock art on leased land, besides assisting the managers of the conservation zone and liaising with traditional custodians.
4. That the perpetual conservation and cultural integrity of this

enormous cultural asset be safeguarded and supervised by a federal government agency of scientific repute, preferably the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

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Anthropomorphous petroglyphs at Watering Cove, Burrup Peninsula, Western Australia. This photograph was taken in 1968, at the time of the site's European 'discovery'.

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