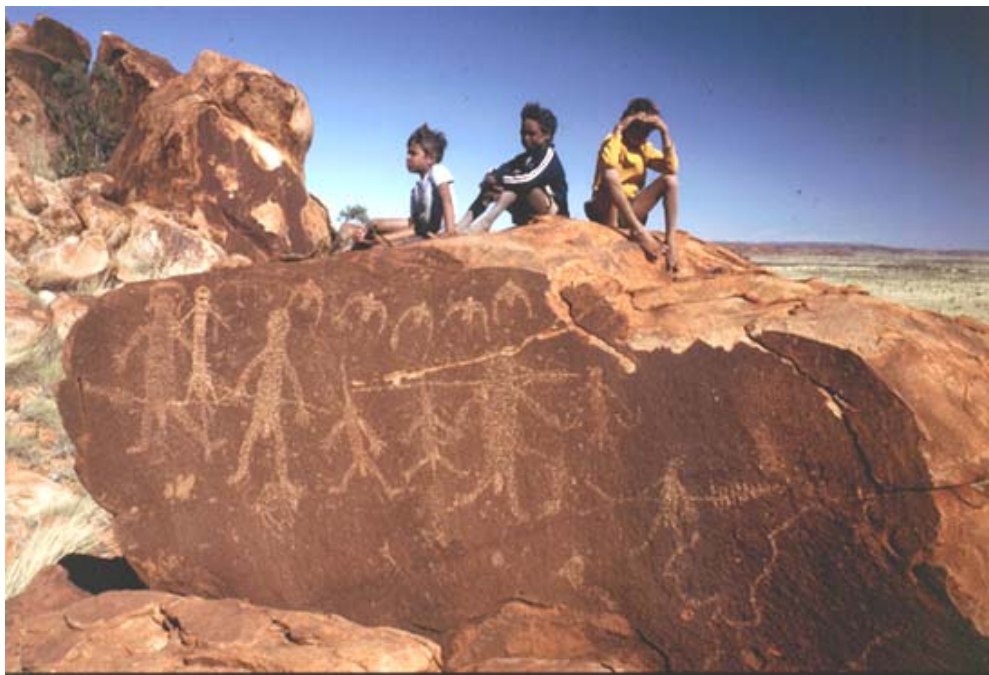


# Proposal for Dampier

**Towards a resolution of the problems facing  
the Dampier Archipelago, Western Australia**



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## **Preamble**

In relation to the issues of the land management of the Dampier Archipelago, there may be considerable disagreement among the various stakeholders, but there appears to be one area of almost universal consensus: the ad hoc approach of the past forty-three years has resulted in conditions most of the relevant stakeholders define as unsatisfactory. There is no management plan for Australia's largest cultural monument, nor is there any effective protection of it. Nobody has any idea of how many more industries will be established in the Archipelago, if indeed any, yet there is massive development of infrastructure occurring now. At no stage has anyone attempted to articulate corporate aspirations along the entire north-western coast with any form of integrated resources management plan. For instance, the idea has been floated that the Western Australian (WA) natural gas pipeline grid be connected to that of eastern Australia, yet no blueprint for such an energy resources plan exists for WA. It is well known that there are great deposits of hydrocarbons offshore, along much of the coast, but there is no integrated plan of how they will be exploited most beneficially. It is particularly because of this unplanned, unco-ordinated and piecemeal approach that so many stakeholders are critical of the current policies, particularly those concerning the Dampier Archipelago.

This proposal is an attempt by an international NGO that has been deeply involved in similar issues abroad to initiate a debate intended to ultimately lead to the formulation of equitable solutions. Before addressing the possibilities of resolving the Dampier issues to the satisfaction of almost all, if not all the stakeholders, it is necessary to review the historical developments thus far, and the principal problems with the existing approach. This is not intended as criticism for its own sake, but simply an attempt to explore the issues in order to determine common themes and areas of agreement. Interestingly, most of the stakeholders have many common concerns, preferences and mutually reinforcing positions. The lack of dialogue between some of them is therefore surprising, because there are obvious advantages in determining common goals and aspirations. This alone would go a long way towards resolving the main problems, some of which should be of extreme concern.

## **The stakeholders**

First, the principal players need to be identified. They are:

1. *The indigenous owners*: The principal management issue at Dampier concerns the gradual destruction of the Dampier Rock Art Precinct. It comprises the world's largest concentration of rock art and Australia's largest collection of stone arrangements and sacred sites. All of this, undeniably, represents the traditional heritage primarily of specific local Aboriginal groups. Until now, they have had almost no voice in decision making, they have no title to the land, and they have received no apology or compensation for the series of massacres in 1868, perpetrated by the police at Dampier.
2. *The state government*: Consecutive state governments have commissioned a series of management proposals since the 1970s. None was ever implemented; instead the government has sought to develop the region's major commercial resources by inviting proponents and facilitating their operations. In 1996, in response to my requests to preserve the cultural monument at Dampier, the government of the day announced that all new industrial development would be at an alternative site, at Maitland Heavy Industrial Estate. However, the present government reversed this decision and reserved all suitable land at Dampier, 38% of the land area, for industrial purposes.
3. *The Commonwealth*: The national government of Australia has only limited influence, but it appears to be supportive of the calls by the Indigenes, the scholars and the conservationists for nomination of the Dampier precinct to World Heritage. Ideally, the area would become a National Park and be managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, which has the heritage management skills the state government lacks.

4. *The appointed land managers*: The remaining land at Dampier Archipelago, i.e. that which is not reserved for industrial use, is under the notional control of the Department of Conservation and Land Management. That body is severely starved of funds and support and currently lacks the resources and expertise to protect a world-class cultural monument. This is unlikely to improve unless there is public pressure.
5. *The environmentalist bodies*: These include the Greens and a number of NGOs involved in the preservation of the environment. Their principal objective is to preserve what is left of the natural and cultural values of the Archipelago, as well as of its landscape and aesthetic ambience. On the whole, the environmentalists have not expressed opposition to the exploitation of the economic resources of the Pilbara region, but they demand that this should occur in a well-planned fashion and without endangering the equally important other values of the area.
6. *The hydrocarbon processing proponents*: They include a few currently operating companies, primarily in the business of processing the offshore natural gas deposits, and a much greater number of potential future players of various sizes. Their installations can be established anywhere a gas pipeline can be taken to, but most of them also need ready access to port facilities. This industry presents considerable dangers to the rock art, because of its very substantial acidic gaseous emissions, and it also works with immense quantities of explosive, volatile and often highly flammable substances, therefore it is not in the interest of any such company (or any other stakeholder) to have similarly dangerous plants established nearby.
7. *The other major industries*: The principal other industries are concerned with the mining, processing and loading of iron ore, and with the production of solar salt. Provided that care is taken in locating their installations and developments, they seem to present no conflict with the interests of other resources of the region.
8. *The local communities*: The several local communities, mostly along the coast, have a variety of priorities. While in Karratha, Dampier and Port Hedland there is a shortage of skills, other centres suffer from chronic unemployment or have an under-employed workforce. The Karratha and Dampier communities, represented by COBRA (the Champions of Burrup Rock Art) are overwhelmingly in favour of effective preservation of the rock art at Dampier, and need to be concerned about the huge explosive power of the petrochemical industries as well as the carcinogenic emissions of the petrochemical industry.
9. *The scholars*: Their interests are represented by the Australian Rock Art Research Association Inc. (AURA) and, internationally, by the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO). They are biased in favour of custodianship by the Indigenes, and they demand that development be conducted without further destruction of cultural heritage.
10. *The heritage managers*: A number of state, national and international bodies are involved, among them the WA Heritage Council, the National Trust of Australia, the World Monuments Fund, ICOMOS and UNESCO. The first-named is at significant odds with all others, in that it systematically excludes indigenous cultural heritage from its responsibilities. All others demand effective protection for the cultural precinct of Dampier, including listing on the national as well as state registers of heritage sites, nomination of the precinct as a National Park, and nomination to the World Heritage List of UNESCO.
11. *The tourism industry*: Much the same is demanded by the fledgling tourism industry. The rock art and stone arrangements of the Dampier precinct are the core element of the local tourism industry, and while it is in an early stage of development, it should be noted that even without any significant infrastructure or promotion, the Dampier rock art is visited by about 40,000 tourists a year. Bearing in mind that three other, much smaller rock art concentrations in other remote parts of Australia attract up to 200,000 tourists annually, it is obvious that there exists great potential for a thriving tourism industry at Dampier. While this will not match the economic influence of the natural gas and iron ore industries in the short term, it may well be capable of supporting comparable levels of employment.

## The problems

The perhaps most obvious problem concerning the Dampier Rock Art Precinct is the determination of the state government to place a dozen or so petrochemical plants within a limited area of land near Dampier. Already the area is the greatest single-location polluter of Australia, but the government's proposed three-fold increase in gaseous emissions will significantly accelerate the deterioration of the rock art through atmospheric acidification. It will not only 'bleach' the engraved rocks, it will devastate the sensitive endemic flora and marine fauna. More importantly, it will roughly treble the size of the stockpile of explosive, flammable, volatile and dangerous substances at Dampier. These include currently ammonium nitrate, hydrogen, liquid propane, butane, ammonia and light oil, totalling an explosive potential equivalent to 760 kilotonnes of TNT (or 58.4 Hiroshima atomic bombs). To concentrate such potentially destructive energy in one place is reckless, but to advocate its trebling while at the same time excluding adequate safety corridors between individual plants is an inexcusable planning blunder by the state government's agency, the Department of Industry and Resources. In addition, there is the issue of the carcinogenic emissions from the petrochemical industries: over one thousand tonnes of both benzene and cyclohexane per year, as well as 2200 t of n-hexane, 1500 t of methylbenzene and 620 t xylenes.

Another very significant problem concerns the entirely anomalous view of the state's Heritage Council of what constitutes cultural heritage. Until April 2005, that agency was of the opinion that, in WA, 'heritage' refers to European heritage only. The heritage of Indigenous Australians or other people (e.g. the Macassans) was not considered to be part of the State's heritage. Notably, even in cases of non-British European heritage (such as the limited early Dutch history of the State), state involvement has often been appalling. It appears that the state heritage management agency's narrow definition of the term 'heritage' is at significant odds with that of any other country or state in the world. Under such anachronistic conditions of administering heritage legislation it is understandable that the massive Indigenous heritage values of Dampier were of little if any concern.

These two fundamental problems have been aggravated by the lack of continuity in any planning process in the entire Pilbara region. Development was generally proponent driven from 1962 to the end of the century, which obviously accounts for the substantial destruction of heritage sites, especially at Dampier. However, the recent trend towards government initiatives has only made matters worse. Not only has the destruction of heritage sites accelerated since the decision to defer the development of alternative industrial areas, much of it is now occurring in areas previously spared because of their high concentrations of rock art (e.g. at King Bay). Moreover, most of this destruction occurs in the course of quite unnecessary work. Especially the service corridors and new port facilities now being constructed by the government may never be used, as most potential proponents refuse to establish their industries at Dampier. Construction costs are considered too high on the rocky exposures, the flat land available is subject to occasional inundation by the sea and accessibility is relatively poor. The government, which is establishing the infrastructure specifically to entice proponents to Dampier, has in effect already driven most of them away. It threatens any company planning to construct new plants elsewhere in the region with punitive action (consider the example of BHP Billiton, their expressed preference for Onslow and the government's threats to that company). Thus the action of the state government, which is investing in the order of \$200–250 million in Dampier infrastructure, is not only counterproductive, it is actually contrary to the interests of the very companies it is trying to entice to Dampier.

This is one of many examples of the effects of lack of consultation, and the rise of bureaucracy in the Pilbara. Practically all of the non-government stakeholders listed above are strongly opposed to the policy of the state government, and even the Commonwealth government would prefer to see the cultural resource management replaced by a system as it applies in the rest of Australia and the world. At least half the stakeholders are of the view that the state government is secretive and that the specific departments dealing with Pilbara development are dogmatic and poorly briefed.

There are countless further problems caused by the state government's bureaucracy, ranging from tendering policies to inadequate technical competence (a recent example being the faulty welding of an entire pipeline designated to convey a dangerous substance). But this is not intended

as an exercise in apportioning blame; rather, it is intended to help resolve problems in macro-planning. Few would suggest that improvements should not be welcomed, and in their design it is essential that all the stakeholders have an effective voice.

### **Towards a solution**

Significant improvements are in fact quite easy to implement, and some basic issues seem to be almost self-evident. For instance, it is obvious that the greater Pilbara region will be the economic powerhouse of WA at least for this century, and quite probably beyond. Similarly, the wealth of hydrocarbon deposits along the coast has obvious attractions to the rapidly growing economies of Asia, and it can safely be predicted that they will be increasingly utilised. It is essential that the exploitation of the wealth of the Pilbara and nearby regions be undertaken within the framework of a long-term blueprint for the various industries operating in the Northwest, as well as those likely to do so in the course of this century.

An inventory of the known and predicted resources in the earth can be compiled fairly easily. A similar register of cultural and natural heritage sites and areas will be harder to establish, because of the relative neglect of this resource so far, but it is equally essential. As this information becomes available, resource infrastructures can begin to be designed, not on the basis of immediate needs, but on how the various resources can most economically be used, and within guidelines provided by the heritage managers. With the exception of the actual points of extraction (mines, oil or gas wells), all of the structures required for development (processing plants, loading facilities, towns etc.) can be located almost anywhere within the landscape. There are some considerations concerning the locations of ports, airfields, roads, pipelines, railways and water supplies, but on the whole, much flexibility pertains. For instance, there are hundreds of suitable locations for ports along the coast from Carnarvon to Broome, and either dredging or jetties are required in practically all places. The prime heritage sites, on the other hand, occur only at very specific features, taking up less than a thousandth of a per cent of the total land area of the Northwest. Therefore, with appropriate planning, it is perfectly possible to avoid significant detrimental effects on them.

At present there are three basic models of future development in the region:

1. The state government model: all industries are to be established at Dampier until there is virtually no room left there, at which point further proponents will be sited at Maitland.
2. The Maitland model: all new industries are to be located at this alternative estate, which measures 160 square kilometres, or about twenty times the size of the remaining land at Dampier.
3. The nodal model: instead of placing all new industries at either Dampier or Maitland, several nodes are to be established on a pipeline grid extending along the coast, each in the vicinity (within 20 or 30 km) of an existing town, including Karratha/Maitland, Port Hedland, Onslow, Exmouth, Carnarvon and Geraldton. Where appropriate, new population centres could be established as well. Each of these nodes would accommodate only one, two or, at the most, three plants.

The first model is by far the most problematic. It is impossible to implement without widespread further destruction of rock art sites and stone arrangements. The proposed trebling of gaseous emissions will correspondingly accelerate the destruction from acidic precipitation; the natural environment will be devastated. The enormous increase in explosive potential, both in overall size and density of installations, will present a realistic expectation of a mega-disaster, the largest man-made explosion in human history, with the attendant man-made tsunami. The latter alone, estimated to be 52 m high at 50 km from the centre of explosion on the presently stored quantities of chemicals, would have devastating consequences for many nations around the Indian Ocean, particularly the southern coasts of Indonesia. In that sense alone, the first model is realistically unacceptable to any party. Moreover, nearly all the approximately fifteen original potential Dampier proponents listed in 2002, which have since withdrawn or left the negotiating table, have rejected it. Because of the enormous problems with this plan, it is anticipated that the planned Dampier

industrial estate will never be filled, and the current construction of infrastructure is in vain and a waste of public funds.

The second model, preferred by some of the proponents, offers considerable benefits. Maitland presents a huge area of land, very accessible, perfectly flat and free of surface rock exposures, all of it at least 6 m above sea level. There is negligible heritage value, and the port required can easily be built by skirting around the north-eastern shore of West Intercourse Island. The cost of the Maitland infrastructure, \$106 million, is much less than half the equivalent cost at Dampier, and this level of saving can be extrapolated to the construction costs of the companies. Most importantly, even the government's plan admits that Maitland will be developed eventually in any case, so the expenditure of \$200–250 million at Dampier is completely unnecessary and even under the government's plan a complete waste of money. The only obvious drawbacks of Maitland are that it will still draw on the resources of just one town, Karratha; that the source of emissions is still close to the valuable Dampier precinct (eventually, one would predict, in close vicinity of a National Park); and that the concentration of explosive industries would still be excessive.

The enormous benefits of the third model are obvious. The two other models are demographically, sociologically, politically and even economically undesirable. Why should the economic benefits from large-scale development only be available to one town, Karratha? The natural gas fields are distributed between Broome and Carnarvon, and it seems only fair that other towns in the region should share in these benefits. The nodal model would break up the otherwise enormous concentrations of both pollution and explosive powers, and thus sharply reduce both local emission levels and the dangers of a chain reaction of explosions. And with a reasonable level of forward planning, it would facilitate broad protective measures for the region's outstanding cultural heritage.

In a comprehensive long-term plan of this format, numerous further issues could be considered. For instance, is the proposal of diverting water from the Kimberley via the Pilbara feasible? Irrespective of its economy in Perth, it is very likely much more economical in the Pilbara, where both surface and aquifer deposits are not adequate to service a significant growth in population. Similarly, the establishment of a major natural gas grid would facilitate its connection, via a trans-continental pipeline to Moomba, to the eastern states. The Longford explosion (1998) and the two Moomba explosions (2001, 2004) have demonstrated the exposure of the economy to the severe effects of LNG plant failures. Thus in planning a statewide hydrocarbon policy it is advisable to consider the national perspective as well. It is from this base that the planning of individual projects needs to proceed, rather than from the often-vague preferences of the proponents themselves. Their aspirations probably exclude consideration of those of local communities, Indigenous or heritage values. Yet so far this has been the basis of all resource development in the region since 1962. But by the same token, the preferences of the companies have also been ignored by the state government, as those companies who have tried to establish themselves at Maitland have discovered. They were told that, if one or some companies were to be allocated land at Maitland before the Dampier quota was filled, "all others would want to go there too!" Thus the insistence of the government, best exemplified by its public brawl with BHP Billiton over that company's preference to be at Onslow rather than at Dampier, has already driven most proponents away. In short, it is primarily the state government that has retarded development, not because this is its policy, but because of the intransigence of certain parts of its public service and the refusal to address the issues discussed here.

The overriding feature of any future plans should therefore be that the government agencies should be facilitators rather than initiators of policies, and that the primary impetus must come from the other stakeholders. One of the most detrimental features has been the government's reliance on paid consultants that, generally speaking, are servants of the government and are obliged to translate its directives into policy details. The complete inability of NGOs to have any influence in this process is not just frustrating for them, it is also undemocratic and it adds to their perception of a dogmatic administration. It fuels discontent and excludes fair consultation. Replacing it with a

process of due consultation would not just pre-empt public dissatisfaction, it would also result in more appropriate policies.

### **Discussion**

If it were our intention to create the world's largest concentration of explosive and volatile substances, one of its largest pollution centres and a great deal of dissatisfaction among the stakeholders (particularly the Indigenous traditional owners, the scholars, environmentalists and heritage managers, but also, for different reasons, among the companies, local communities, tourism industry and Commonwealth agencies), then no change is needed and we can proceed according to the government's current plan. If improvements were preferred, the Maitland model would provide some relief and a temporary solution, in the sense that it would suffice for perhaps some decades. If we favour a long-term solution that finds the approval of all stakeholders, and will serve WA well for perhaps centuries, then an integrated nodal model is the only viable alternative.

To determine the various given factors, it would suffice to begin with a summit meeting of all stakeholders and request that they all provide the required data, ideas and proposals. Once all relevant resources (mineral commodities, hydrocarbons, water, natural and cultural heritage resources) are compiled, the relative timing of their development is known and other relevant factors have been established as far as this is possible, a blueprint for the continuing development of the Pilbara and nearby regions is likely to emerge quite naturally. Port locations can be determined; land can be assigned to one of several possible designations as is normal practice, taking care that there are adequate buffer zones between areas of incompatible designations (e.g. cultural heritage vs high-pollution plants, or urban areas vs explosive industries). At the same time, questions of co-ordinating this master plan with national energy planning can be addressed. The potential industrial players need to declare their individual intentions, the aspirations of the Indigenous can be accommodated, as can the concerns of population centres. Such care would prevent the disheartening loss of potential proponents of industry that we have so far experienced. Companies are not interested in establishing expensive installations where there are prospects of heritage-driven restrictions, or unforeseen land claims by Indigenous people, or submergence by a surge tide. They need to know all the factors that determine the level of profitability of an operation, but the current system tends to leave out many of these potential factors. The tourism industry of the region might be considered only a minor stakeholder, but it must be appreciated that the petrochemical and ore industries will only last a century or two. The rock art has survived for millennia, and if it were allowed to survive a few thousand more years, tourism would economically outperform mining in the long term. Moreover, it tends to provide far more employment relative to investment, therefore it should not be ignored at this stage. However, if we allow the country's largest monument to be gradually destroyed, as is currently the case, we will have pre-empted any possibility of including it in any future tourism plan.

The purpose of this proposal is to initiate the kind of constructive dialogue that we believe is required to determine an outcome that is satisfactory to all concerned. We thank you for reading this proposal, and for considering it in the same spirit as it is being offered.

**Robert G. Bednarik**

Convener and Editor

International Federation of Rock Art Organisations

**This proposal is being widely circulated among the stakeholders identified in it, and to thousands of other interested parties. It is being updated with the feedback received, please send feedback to the address given on the front page. Thank you.**

Please help us to  
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