

**THE DAMPIER ARCHIPELAGO AND THE BURRUP PENINSULA:
THE VALUES OF INDIGENOUS HERITAGE**

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THE DAMPIER ARCHIPELAGO AND THE BURRUP PENINSULA

The Heritage values of the Dampier Archipelago

There is little evidence of early understanding of the heritage values of the Dampier Archipelago, though in 1964 the West Australian Sub-Committee of the Australian Academy of Science National Parks Committee requested that the Dampier Archipelago become a either a Reserve or a National Park. They wished to see the area vested in the National Parks Board of W.A., and had applied to the Under Secretary of Lands for such a decision. In January 1967 the matter was shelved at the request of Mines Department (Under Secretary for Lands, 1967).

In 1964, the first contracts for export of iron ore from the Pilbara region of W.A. were signed, thus starting an intense period of industrial development in that region. Before this time, very few white people had ever set foot on the islands of the Dampier Archipelago. As time has gone on, the vastness and complexity of the petroglyph²-strewn landscape has become more readily apparent.

By 1973, Enzo Virili had recorded 6,000 carvings in a five square mile area, and 4,000 of these were in Gum Tree Valley alone (F L Virili, 1973). As industry has moved into the area, heritage reports continue to confirm the world significance of the area's heritage values.

There is now general consensus that the Dampier Archipelago is a place of outstanding importance because of the extraordinary diversity and density of its archaeological remains, and particularly because of the richness of its rock art. The area is also of huge significance to contemporary Aboriginal groups in the Pilbara region, particularly the recognised Native Title claimants, for its cultural and spiritual associations. It is clear that the Dampier Archipelago has been occupied for a long period of time, and occupation of the site can be unequivocally demonstrated archaeologically over the last 9000 years. But there are also strong grounds for inferring that occupation goes back much further than this, to the earliest colonisation of Australia's arid core some 30,000 years ago (Bird, C. and Hallam, S.J. 2006 - McDonald, J, 2005 - McDonald, J, 2006).

The association between different cultural elements and the natural environment means that the Dampier Archipelago forms a unique and effectively continuous cultural landscape. This landscape was formed as sea levels rose at the end of the last Ice Age over several thousand years ago. The archaeological evidence documents the adaptation of Aboriginal people to this changing environment, since the area was probably a focus for human activity throughout much of the occupation of the Australian continent.

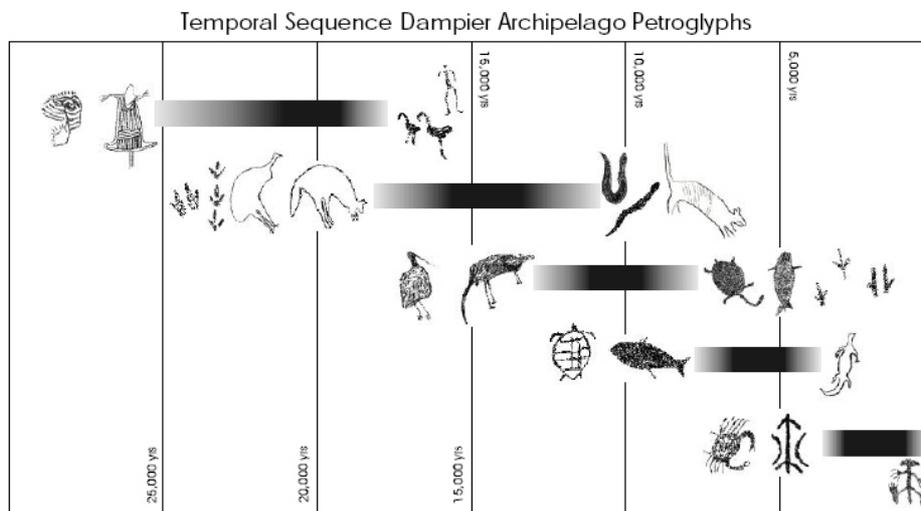
There are hundreds of thousands of petroglyphs in the Dampier Archipelago, only a fraction of which have been recorded, but the total number has been estimated at a million (McDonald, J., 2005) Some complexes (sites) contain tens of thousands of images. This may well be the world's largest concentration of rock art and possibly the only site that provides distinct evidence of the changes to environment, culture and society over such an extended period.

¹ Friends of Australian Rock Art Inc (FARA) was established on 23 November 2006. It has the objective of raising 'public awareness in Australia and internationally of the significance of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage as manifest in rock art and in other material of cultural significance.'

² Images created by removing part of a rock surfaces by incising, pecking, carving, and abrading

The archaeological material provides evidence of complex adaptations to a distinctive and unique coastal environment on the margins of the present arid zone over the last 9000 years. The long time span of occupation provides an opportunity to document human adaptation from when the 'Dampier Ranges' was part of the Ice Age mainland, through the period of rising sea levels and long-term climatic changes, and thus throws light on our understanding of the long term colonisation of the Australian continent by Aboriginal people. The Burrup rock art has the potential to reveal complex associations between different cultural elements and yield insights into the relationships between sacred and secular aspects of life over a huge time span.

Possibly the oldest and most unique material that remains visible on the Burrup are the Granophyre³ galleries with their 'archaic-face' motifs. Their most distinctive features are the concentric circle patterns representing eyes and the fact that the carving methodology used reverses the normal technique used to produce rock art by removing surrounding rock to expose the petroglyph features in relief.



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Industry on the Burrup

The Burrup Peninsula, as it was named in 1979, or Dampier Island, as it was originally known, was first considered for industrial development in 1963. There seems to be no documentation which would indicate there was any awareness of the heritage values of the area at this time.

As early as 1908, the State Mining Engineer, (Montgomery, A, 1908) suggested that Depuch Island might be a satisfactory port for the region's expanding minerals industry, as long as it could be connected to the mainland by a causeway. Depuch was surveyed by the Department of Harbor and Rivers in 1961-2, as a result of interest shown in port facilities by Hamersley Iron and Mount Goldsworthy Mining Associates,.

Depuch was already known to have a large number of petroglyphs, so as a result of the proposed development, the WA Museum Board offered its services to the Government to survey and record them. The survey of Depuch lasted 22 days, with the zoologists and botanists leaving after six days and heading to the Dampier Archipelago to prepare a report on the flora and fauna of the area, which they described as being of very great richness.

It is surprising is that the *WA Museum Special Publication No 2* published on the Depuch expedition states that researchers had discovered approximately 5000 engravings on the

³ Porphyritic granite, an igneous rock that contains quartz and alkali feldspar

11.7 sq km of Depuch, but only 200 engravings in the Dampier Archipelago (WDL Ride, IM Crawford, GM Storr, RM Berndt & RD Royce, 1964).

The Depuch proposal was subsequently rejected, and instead, the port development at Parker Point on the Burrup commenced in 1965, this resulting from the 1963 agreement between Hamersley Holdings and the W.A. Government for the development of Mount Tom Price, The first shipments of Iron ore left the Port of Dampier in August 1966.

The objective of industrial development on the Burrup were first enunciated in 1973 (Graham, Hon HE, Minister for Development, 1973), and by 1978, Woodside had begun investigations for the location of an LNG facility. Two sites on the Burrup, Sloping Point at the north-east tip, and Withnell Bay were compared, though it is not known if any locations off the Burrup were considered.

Today the Burrup remains the main focus of the WA Government for development in the Pilbara region. Even though the heritage values of the Dampier Archipelago are now clearly understood, there has been no major development of the nearby Maitland industrial estate area which is devoid of rock art.

The official position of the WA Government was clearly articulated in 2006 by Fred Riebling, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly: "we've dreamt of this area (Dampier Archipelago) becoming the most important industrial region in the southern hemisphere for twenty to thirty years, and finally the realization is starting to happen" (Riebling, F, MLA, 2006).

Others now seem to be wiser. The Former Premier of Western Australian, Dr Carmen Lawrence states, "successive governments — my own included — have failed to appreciate the global significance of the Peninsula. Indeed the current Federal Government opposes heritage listing of 'all or any part' of the Burrup because of 'potentially grave consequences' for the resources sector. No mention of the potentially grave consequences for our heritage" (Lawrence, Hon, C., 2006).

This position is also shared by the Hon Colin Barnett MLA, former Minister for State Development and Opposition Leader: "World heritage listing [of the Archipelago] is inevitable. [But] you would not think we are some struggling Third World country which needs to be dictated to as to how it deals with heritage. The status of the rock art [makes it] in my opinion without doubt the most important heritage site in WA and possibly the nation. However, today with our level of knowledge, enlightenment and sophistication, the challenge we face is to reconcile them where those conflicts exist. We certainly cannot use ignorance today as an excuse. If there is one part of Western Australia where this conflict between conservation and development is most apparent it is on the Burrup Peninsula" (Barnett, C J, MLA., 2006)

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Recent heritage controversies including the abolition of the Aboriginal heritage protected status of Abydos/Woodstock and the ongoing destruction of Aboriginal rock art on the Burrup Peninsula in the Pilbara suggest there are good grounds for arguing that Western Australia's Aboriginal heritage protection regime represents the nation's worst practice.⁴

In 1996, Justice Elizabeth Evatt presented a report into state and Commonwealth Aboriginal heritage processes commissioned by the Federal Government. None of her recommendations for reform of WA heritage legalisation and processes have ever been adopted by the State Government. (Evatt, E. 1996).

⁴ See Special Heritage Issue, *Indigenous Law Bulletin* Volume 4, No. 16, November 1998. Available at: [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/ILB/1998/#4\(16](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/ILB/1998/#4(16)

Aboriginal writer and academic Sally Morgan has described from firsthand experience as a member of the Balyku native title group negotiating with FMG Resources over protection of her country in the Abydos/Woodstock region how the odds are stacked against Aboriginal people in WA. (Morgan et al 2006).

Deficiencies in the WA Aboriginal heritage protection regime have economic, political and legislative origins. In a devastating critique of the State's flawed WA Aboriginal Heritage Act, 1972, former Yamatji Land and Sea Council principal legal officer David Ritter argues that

'It is a myth, expressed by the objects of the *Aboriginal Heritage Act*, that the main purpose of the legislation is to protect Aboriginal heritage. It may be more accurate to describe the AHA as an act to regularize the obliteration of Aboriginal heritage. ... It is legislation by the non-Indigenous community for the non-Indigenous community that creates a superficial veneer of protection for Indigenous interests. The result is that the colonizing power can continue to do with Aboriginal places and materials exactly as it wants' (Ritter, D, 2003).

Bird and Hallam reveal that the State's management of Aboriginal heritage in the Dampier Archipelago is locked in crisis mode as it responds ad hoc to individual applications for the destruction of Aboriginal sites under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act (1972-1980)*.

Under section 18 of the Act, a developer may apply to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs for permission to destroy any Aboriginal site. The Minister is required before making an s 18 decision to consider advice from the Department of Indigenous Affairs' Aboriginal Cultural Materials Committee. In the rare cases in which the ACMC has recommended against site destruction, the committee has been overruled by the Minister, most notably in the Windarling/Mt Jackson, Abydos/Woodstock and Pluto decisions.

A 2004 parliamentary question in relation to s 18 applications established that the current Government had received and approved 208 applications to destroy Aboriginal sites since coming to power in 2001. Only three of these had been opposed by the ACMC, but each of these recommendations were subsequently overruled by the Minister. (Chapple, Hon., R 2004)

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