



Partners in protection:
Conserving the culture of
Burrup Peninsula

by Samille Mitchell, Laurina Bullen and Simon Choo

Aboriginal traditional owners have joined forces with the Department of Environment and Conservation to protect the remarkable cultural history of the Burrup Peninsula. Together, they will manage the state's newest national park—Murujuga.

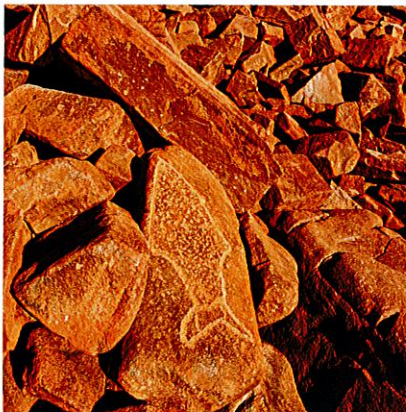


Wander among the rust-red boulders of the Burrup Peninsula and you'll note images that seem to materialise from the rocks. They are faint at first sight—emu footprints in one place, extinct Tasmanian tigers in another. But as your eyes recognise what you are looking for, you'll spot yet another image, and another.

These images are the cultural signature of Aboriginal people who have lived here for many thousands of years. Some estimate up to a million rock engravings, called 'petroglyphs', adorn the rocks here and on the nearby Dampier Archipelago, making it the world's biggest gallery of Aboriginal art.

While dating the images is tricky, they are believed to have been carved anywhere between 6,000 and 30,000 years ago. Indeed, there is archaeological evidence that Aboriginal people have lived here for the past 9,000 years, with more recent evidence suggesting they may have lived here up to 60,000 years ago.

But what of the engravings' meaning? What secrets can they reveal of the area's past? Aboriginal people of the area, collectively known as the Ngarda-ngarli, believe the images are the work of creation spirits known as marrga. During the Dreamtime, these



spirits formulated the rules for social conduct and left the engravings as a visual reminder of how Aboriginal lore should be followed. Such sites were possibly also associated with rituals, ceremonies and initiation rites. The stones are the bible of local Aboriginal lore and have meanings beyond the descriptive interpretations of modern archaeologists.

Given the immense significance of such sacred sites, Aboriginal lore dictates an obligation to protect them, a responsibility passed on through the generations.

The inherent need to protect the country is at the heart of the recent creation of the 4,913-hectare Murujuga National Park—Western Australia's 100th national park and the first to be owned by Aboriginal

traditional owners and truly managed in joint partnership between the state and Aboriginal custodians (see 'Partners in management' on the next page).

An ancient land

The towering piles of boulders that characterise Murujuga National Park give a striking visual sense of the land's age. The raw, stark form of the rocks set against a seemingly desolate landscape appear as ancient jagged monuments of the Pilbara Craton, where the 3,600-million-year-old landscape was formed during Earth's earliest days, the Archaean period.

The Ngarda-ngarli people of the area believe the rocks here mark the path of a large number of waramurrungkas, or flying foxes, that emerged from the sea during the Dreamtime and travelled southwards along the Burrup Peninsula, across the salt flats and coastal plains and over the range of hills near Mount Leopold. A line of dark rocks on the hills marks the spots where the flying foxes crossed the range. From there the waramurrungkas travelled up the course of the Fortescue River to Millstream.

Rocks at the highest point of the southern peninsula are the metamorphosed bodies of the ancestral flying foxes that were turned into stone there by a vengeful spirit. An exposed dolerite rock outcrop running down the face of the hill south of Karratha forms part of the mythical path of the waramurrungkas as they passed from the Burrup Peninsula to the Fortescue River.

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Main Ancient Aboriginal art adorns towering piles of boulders in Murujuga National Park.

Above A fish figure carved in stone.

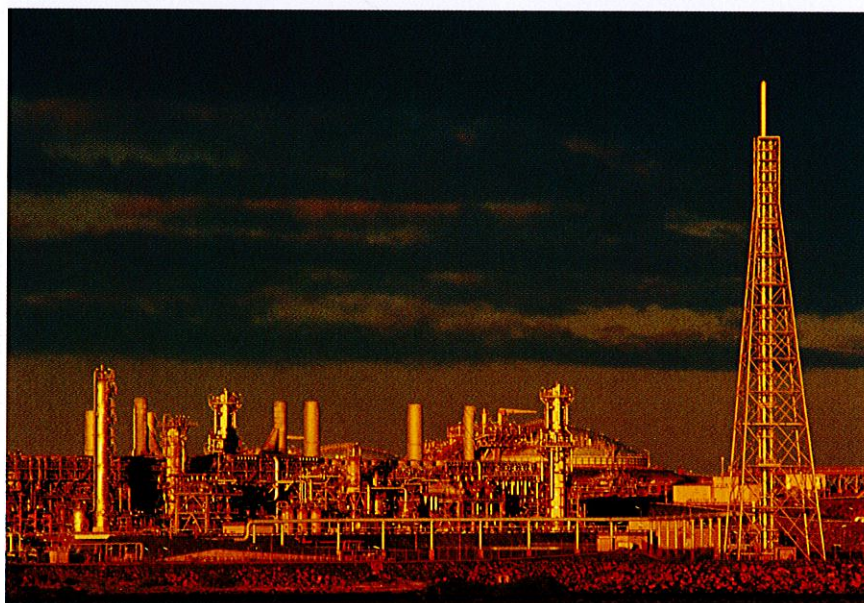
Left The land exudes a feeling of timelessness.

Photos – Sallyanne Cousans





Above North-west Aboriginal stockmen played an important role in the region's pastoral history.
Photo - Jiri Lochman



Left Woodside's North West Shelf Project at Burrup Peninsula.
Photo - Marie Lochman

The Yaburara people, already a small group, declined in number following European settlement of the area, most probably due to introduced diseases and some displacement from traditional lands. The remaining people were decimated by a series of violent clashes in 1868, including what has become known as the 'Flying Foam Massacre' in February of that year. The conflict was initiated after a young Aboriginal woman was captured by a police officer and the Yaburara men made subsequent attempts to free her. This resulted in the killing of a police constable and two other men. A series of reprisal raids conducted by local police and 19 especially sworn-in constables followed. The records from the time are vague and inconsistent

but it is clear this campaign resulted in the near genocide of the Yaburara people. Although it is more accurately recorded as a series of events, and though it occurred at various locations rather than a single site, 'Flying Foam Massacre' has a single meaning and memory. The Ngarda-ngarli feel strongly about seeking to have an area at King Bay recognised for the events that took place there.

Industry arrives

Apart from intermittent activity sparked by gold and other mineral discoveries, the establishment and expansion of the pastoral industry dominated the history of the west Pilbara for the next 100 years. Aboriginal people played a key role in

the industry, providing cheap labour, knowledge of the country and the ability to work in the demanding environment.

In spite of the well-documented exploitation of Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry, the 'station days' are still fondly remembered by many older Ngarda-ngarli. These positive memories are built on the fact that, during this time, they were able to maintain their physical and spiritual interaction with their country traditions, language and culture, and avoid many of the social and health problems related to poverty, unemployment and discontent that characterise the more urban lifestyle of many Aboriginal people today.

While pastoralism remains in the region today, it is now mining that dominates industry. The Pilbara is the economic powerhouse of the state, with iron ore mining bringing immense riches to the country and posing challenges for environmental and cultural protection.

Into the future

Given the area's remarkable history and its world significance for ancient Aboriginal art, it is perhaps surprising

Right Nickol Bay, Murujuga National Park.
Photo - David Bettini

Below right Hearson Cove, adjacent to Murujuga National Park, is a popular day-use site.
Photo - Samille Mitchell/DEC



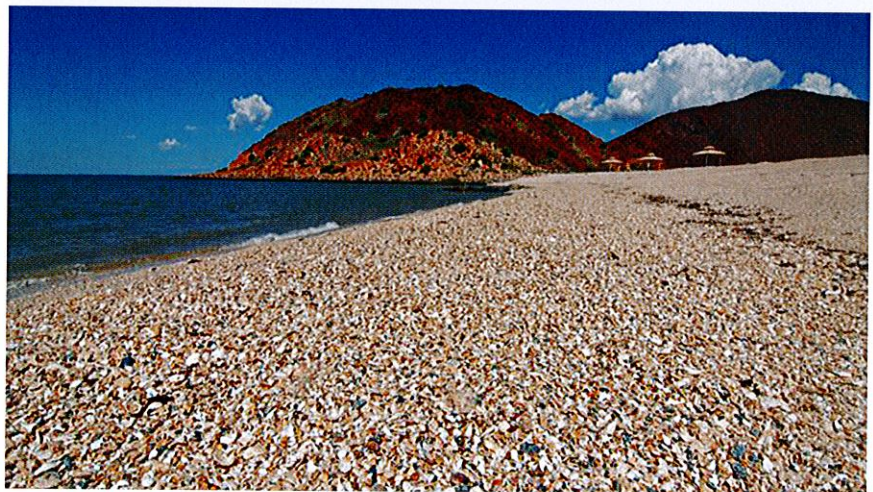
that it is not more widely visited. But the increasing knowledge of the area's treasures is bound to result in more visitors. The joint management of Murujuga National Park is designed to guide this visitation in a culturally safe way that enhances the experience for visitors, while also protecting the area's culture and environment.

Among management aims is a desire to enhance visitor awareness and understanding of the cultural heritage of the area, and protect particularly sensitive or vulnerable rock art areas. An area known as Deep Gorge near Hearson Cove has been earmarked for possible interpretive trails and facilities.

To inform such interpretation and better document the importance of the land to its traditional owners, a management plan for the area points to the need to protect the less tangible side of cultural heritage. Most current research into cultural heritage has been into use and occupation rather than the knowledge and deeper associations between people and land. The Ngardangarli are keen to better document this knowledge and share it with visitors.

The Murujuga Park Council (MPC) is now investigating which areas can be safely opened to the public. The southern portion of the park will be the first main focus, while MPC consideration will be given to construction of management infrastructure and a visitor centre at a culturally appropriate location. The Murujuga Ranger Program (MRP) will present these plans to the 'circle of elders' who provide cultural advice to the rangers (see 'Partners in management' on page 13).

Vehicle access is also to be better managed, with plans to guide vehicles to interesting areas, while leaving particularly culturally sensitive or environmentally vulnerable areas less accessible.



The plan also recognises visitors' enormous interest in Aboriginal culture and lifestyle, and consequent opportunity for the Ngardangarli to develop tourism enterprises. Guided walks, activities, vehicle-based tours, camping and nature study tours, including reference to Ngardangarli languages, stories and songs, are just some examples of activities which can be run by the Ngardangarli, with help

from DEC. The development of such ventures will provide both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people the opportunity to learn more about this remarkable area and its history.

With such plans in place, together DEC, MAC and MRP will be honouring the cultural obligation to protect this very special piece of country.

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Material for this article was gleaned from the Murujuga National Park Management Plan 2013, available from the DEC website (www.dec.wa.gov.au).

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