

MEDIA RELEASE

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Statement by the Rt. Hon. Malcolm Fraser AC, CH, Prime Minister (1975-1983)

I wish to express my strong support for the preservation of the ancient rock art on the Burrup ("Murujuga" as it is known to its Aboriginal custodians), once Dampier Island, and the other islands of the Dampier Archipelago.

For too long, Australian governments and industry have failed to recognise the importance to all Australians and to the world of the cultural heritage of the first peoples of Australia.

The earliest rock art at Murujuga is believed to be amongst the oldest art in the world. It includes representation of extinct species like the thylacine, and perhaps the oldest representations of the human face.

The art of the archipelago has much to tell us about what it means to be human. The earliest groups of our own species to reach these shores showed their sense of the sacred in ceremonial gatherings. Symbols carved on the rocks record their acknowledgement of reality beyond the everyday. Over tens of thousands of years this continued to be a highly sacred place, and is still treasured by its Aboriginal custodians.

As global warming melted the ice sheets of the northern hemisphere, Australians had to cope with rising seas, and what was once an upland hundreds of kilometers from the sea became a group of islands. Marine motifs were added to the land animals in the art, and shell middens show how people adapted to environmental change.

There are very few rock art landscapes in the world so old or so extensive. The Burrup/Murujuga and the rest of the Dampier Archipelago should be protected by World and National Heritage listing.

It is a mistake to think that the industrial development of the northwest depends on using the Burrup/Murujuga. The peninsula is so rugged and precipitous that it is hard to understand how it ever came to be used for industrial development. It makes no economic sense. Onslow, where BHP Billiton is locating its LNG plant, lies more central to the whole chain of offshore LNG sources and there, spinifex flats offer no costly impediment to construction.

The Western Australian Government made a mistake by putting industrial infrastructure on the Burrup. That mistake should not be compounded by allowing, or encouraging, Woodside to build its "Pluto" LNG plant there.

The Australian Government was one of the loudest voices protesting the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas in Afghanistan. If Woodside's LNG plant is allowed to proceed, Australia's reputation as a defender of world heritage would be severely damaged.

The Burrup/Murujuga is part of the world's heritage. It is to our national shame that the art has of the Dampier Archipelago not yet been fully catalogued.

I congratulate the Friends of Australian Rock Art for its global "Stand Up for the Burrup" campaign. I wish the campaign success, and assure you that I will be raising my voice, where I can, in support of your efforts to prevent any further destruction and desecration of the irreplaceable art on the Burrup/Murujuga

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Media inquiries may be made from Monday onwards to Mr. Fraser's office

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