

## **History of neglect undermines us all**

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## History of neglect undermines us all

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I am fortunate to have worked in incredible natural and cultural landscapes around the world, many **of** them in remote parts **of** Australia. I work closely with indigenous people to study rock art - paintings, drawings, engravings, stencils, prints and designs made out **of** beeswax - found in rock shelters, in caves, on boulders and on rock platforms, **often** in strikingly beautiful locations.

Across the forests **of** Kakadu and Arnhem Land, throughout the deserts **of** central Australia, within the most rugged and wild parts **of** Wollemi National Park near Sydney and in many other parts **of** the country I have documented spectacular images that tell **of** the past in ways excavated archaeological remains will never reveal.

Recently I visited rock engraving sites **of** the Pilbara region for the first time. This area contains the largest complex **of** engraved images in the world, ranging in age from an estimated 30,000 years old to 19th and 20th-century depictions **of** the first European settlers to establish homesteads in the harsh, windswept environs **of** this part **of** Western Australia. This engraved complex is a testament to thousands **of** years **of** struggle and survival, **of** Aboriginal people, and recently Europeans and Asians.

But now it is the rock art that struggles to survive as the hunger for the land's resources threatens to consume not just the land, but also the engravings.

In parts **of** the Pilbara, such as the Dampier area **of** the Burrup Peninsula, the landscapes have been horrifically altered and many rock-art sites destroyed. In the 1960s and 1970s Aboriginal Australian rock art was not considered as important as it is today so many sites were bulldozed. At other locations boulders with engraved designs **of** extinct animals, human figures and mythical beings were rounded up like sheep to be herded into compounds where they remain today. One would think that in the 21st century this would have stopped, but since 2000 the process has accelerated because **of** the resources and development boom which state and federal governments have encouraged.

I am not anti-mining or anti-development. Mining and development have provided **us** with a lifestyle - cameras, 4WDs, computers and so forth - that assists with the documentation **of** rock art and other aspects **of** cultural heritage. The problem is that there are many places where industrial development could occur in the Pilbara without affecting the rock art, standing stones and other significant places. Some might argue that by moving the boulders with rock-art heritage is saved but the art's contextual integrity is still lost.

Australia has at least 100,000 rock art sites, more than any other country. This is part **of** the problem: there are so many sites it is impossible to document and protect all **of** them. Each year dozens **of** sites are destroyed by bushfires, vandalism, environmental degradation and development. Most recently, one **of** my favourite sites in the Northern Territory's Keep River National Park was irreparably damaged by fire. And, ironically, within Australia more money has been spent in recent years destroying or contributing to the destruction **of** sites than that spent on studying, documenting and conserving rock art. Less money is also spent within Australia on rock-art research than in South Africa and Kenya, both **of** which have national rock-art institutions, something Australia is yet to even consider.

Perhaps it is time a national rock-art research centre devoted to the study, documentation, conservation and management **of** this priceless aspect **of** Australian and world heritage be established. Perhaps it is time consultant archaeologists across the country refused to move rock art or otherwise destroy rock-art sites while working for industry. Perhaps it is time government and big business worked together to harvest resources and undertake development in more sustainable ways, to protect cultural and natural heritage. Rock art is important because it illustrates not only Aboriginal history, but also that **of** European and Asian settlers. Australian rock art is a significant part **of** world heritage and each region **of** Australia is special in its own way. The Pilbara assemblage is highly remarkable and unique but much **of** it has not even been documented. It is time Australia stood up for contemporary indigenous Australians but it is time we also better respected the achievements **of** their ancestors.



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