INTO THE BEEHIVE

The Destruction of Burrup Rock Art

by ROBYN DAVIDSON

WRITING IS SOMETIMES A WAY OF SORTING OUT WHAT YOU THINK. But if I'm honest, in this case, I don't know my own mind. On the surface, the story is predictable and commonplace: something of incalculable aesthetic and historical value is being threatened by industrialisation and development. The players are the usual suspects: gargantuan companies with almost unlimited wealth at their disposal to oppose, manipulate, buy off or drown out resistance; local government whose *raison d'être* is development at any cost; central government that is often two-faced and opportunistic concerning its responsibilities; workers and their unions; some greenies and activists; and communities of Indigenous people, for whom this 'something' holds meaning unavailable to the rationalist modern, and who are being wooed, ignored or disparaged by various combinations of the above. Versions of this mix can be found throughout Australia and the world, especially in 'rubbish' country – deserts and the like – where the colonised have been pushed onto or left on unproductive land that has now been found to contain different forms of wealth – usually minerals.

We all know what justifications, arguments and perspectives are likely to be heard from the competing interests (competing visions of value). But what, ultimately, is being argued for? And is there ground for fair negotiation or is negotiation really just defeat in sheep's clothing?

An exemplary version of this story is being played out on the Burrup Peninsula (or Murujuga, its Aboriginal name, meaning 'hip bone sticking out'), in the Dampier Archipelago in north Western Australia's Pilbara region. A particularly obdurate bureaucracy – the WA Department of State Development; a state ethos influenced by muscular frontier values and massacres, magnates and mining booms; Aborigines, who have gained some legal rights to land with which to bargain but who are no longer, if they ever were, homogeneous in outlook, history or aspiration, are all important to the story, along with a coterie of scholars, politicians and well-wishers who are creating a small but effective noise regarding the heritage under threat. On the contested land is the largest and, some say, the oldest accretion of rock art in the world.

I have come to see the Burrup Peninsula with members of FARA (Friends of Australian Rock Art), a voluntary organisation, along with Wilfred Hicks, a Pilbara traditional owner and Wong-goo-tt-oo man; Robin Chapple, Greens member of the WA Legislative Council; and Ken Mulvaney, an archaeologist. I have driven down from the Kimberley where I camped for a week at James Price Point, north of Broome. The two places are linked because Woodside Energy has interests there as well as on the Burrup – as does WA Premier Colin Barnett, the Department of State Development and the local Indigenous communities. Superficially, the story is simple. But open the lid and there's a beehive.

A rock mural of pecked fish, dolphins and turtles found in the Dampier Archipelago, Western Australia. Images throughout essay from Mike Donaldson's *Burrup Rock Art*, Freemantle Press, 2010. © Mike Donaldson

The whole of the archipelago is covered in art, but it is the skinny strip up the middle, the Burrup Peninsula – previously known as Dampier Island – that is the main concern. That scrap of land, about 5 kilometres wide and 25 kilometres long, also contains an industrial complex, instigated in the 1960s when companies and governments did not have to worry too much about conservation issues. It accommodates a port (owned by Rio Tinto), a loading terminal, a town, an iron-ore facility and salt plant (Rio Tinto), a fertiliser plant (Burrup Fertilisers) and a gas processing plant, called Pluto (Woodside). All these entities shuffle for elbow room with the rock art and with each other.

The Earth's character, as it is expressed here, is of massive age and vast obliviousness. Extraterrestrial colours – petrol blues and greens of the sea, oxidised reds and purples of broken-down hills; outcrops of dark rock rubble lacing like the spines of submerged beasts through pale spinifex plains. Whales plunge about offshore, and the tides that surge between the islands are terrifying. Emptiness and remoteness are its defining characteristics, and these have been its good fortune, and its ill luck.

Twenty thousand years ago, these islands were hills surrounded by fertile plains. You might have been able to discern the ocean, 100 kilometres away, from the top of those hills. The area was a bountiful garden for hunter–gatherers. They did not have to work hard for their food, and had leisure in which to do that unnecessary thing humans are compelled to do – make art.

Global weather patterns changed, ice melted at the poles, the sea inched its way back in until, 6000 years ago, the hills had become islands. The descendants of the first artists left records of the change in the rocks around them. It is this continuity in change that makes the art of the archipelago so exceptional. It cannot be 'read' piecemeal. It is a *body* of work. What is at risk here is not simply individual images or artefacts, but the integrity of the entire gallery.

We camp in the mining town of Karratha, and drive out each day (over the salt works and causeway that link Burrup to the mainland; past the iron-ore rail line from Mt Tom Price; past the airport where hundreds of company choppers, and a glittering sea of expensive Toyota 4WDs, wait to relay nomadic workers to and from the hub) to visit various sites.

On the first day Wilfred welcomes us to country and asks the ancestral spirits to look after us. Robin and Ken give informal talks as we scramble our way up gullies and over those outcrops of dark rock rubble that turn out to be hill-high mounds of jammed-together, refrigerator-sized, metallic-sounding, rusted granophyre rocks – not round rocks but Euclidean rocks, whose flat planes invite mark-making. Over a couple of million years, the surfaces of these rocks have oxidised, leaving a mineral patina about a 25 millimetres thick. It is hard but it is fractionally less hard than the unoxidised mother rock beneath. So if you were to smash a small rock to create a hand-sized hammering tool, you could, with a lot of time and effort, peck or abrade at that 2-million-year-old coating until the paler colour of the mother stone showed beneath. Images would be vivid initially, before the slow, grain-by-grain weathering faded the contrast. There are approximately 1 million of these petroglyphs in the archipelago yet, remarkably, no definitive inventory has been taken.

Every now and then an uncanny piece of monumental industrial architecture comes into view – too close, too noisy, and pushing out carbon emissions at a serious clip. From the gas plant there is a flare like a giant Bunsen burner; occasionally it roars.

I have no animus against these structures per se, as some others in the group do. They, too, are a product of the human capacity to imagine; the hand that fashioned the first hammering rock is the same species of hand that built these. Besides, it is unreasonable to despise industry when you drive a Toyota and use a mobile phone. But they should never have been allowed here, and they must not be allowed to expand. If the rock art represents mythos, these structures are pure logos. And the juxtaposition is brutal.

Away from the noise of machinery, wandering alone in the gullies, it is easy to imagine sadness in the silence. All this human work, continued over unimaginable time, makes you acutely aware of what is missing: the people who made it. The last petroglyph was pecked out in the 1860s, only five years after the arrival of European settlement. First a smallpox epidemic decimated local populations. Then a massacre finished off what was left of the Yaburara people living on the peninsula. They and the other Pilbara Indigenous groups – the Mardudhunera, Ngarluma and Wong-goo-tt-oo – do not claim to have made the engravings. They say they were a gift from their ancestral spirits, to care for and learn from. It remains a highly significant place in Indigenous cosmology, and many of the motifs and standing stones are still used in ceremonial life. This gives the gallery a heightened preciousness – unlike many rock art precincts in the world, this one can to some degree be 'read' by living human beings. This isn't a dead museum; it is a living cultural landscape.

The images are staggering in their variety and quantity – from haunting, mouthless faces (possibly the oldest engravings of the human face), to a quaint sort of smiling face, to men with bobble heads appearing to climb up rope, to various species of turtle, to animal tracks, to human feet, to kangaroos pierced with spears, to now-extinct thylacines and echidnas, to abstract iconographies, to whale tails and fish livers, to anthropomorphs caught in the process of trans-

The northern end of the Burrup Peninsula, with a view to Dolphin Island. © Mike Donaldson

formation, to tracks of birds that no longer exist – and might well be megafauna – to what looked like, to me, a frog with a hula hoop.

Some are narrative in style – figures seeming to chase one another near groups of bystanders, for example. Local Aborigines request that these not be photographed as they are Dreaming stories, containing layers of concealed meaning. There are birthing scenes, too, and high up on the rocks we come across grinding patches on flat rock, indicating that women worked and made art here. (The noise they made might almost have equalled the gas plant.) There are ancient camp sites and shell middens, quarries and hunting blinds, standing stones, and stones laid in such a way as to entice lizards – a kind of larder.

I am brought up short by something so recognisably the product of an uncommon aesthetic talent that it brings tears to my eyes: a group of wading birds. Or perhaps by the time I see those birds, I am overwhelmed by the cumulative effect of what I have already seen – and by the aeons that saturate the Burrup – so that I am not prepared for something so tenderly human, so close to me.

What is the relationship between them and us, their time and our time?

All rock art is ultimately unreadable because the people who made the work are, in almost all cases, lost to time, and the art itself is a finished form. Engraved art is difficult even to date as there is no organic residue, though weathering patterns might provide broad-spectrum time lines. Archaeology is therefore largely speculative. Experts construct hypotheses around such clues as stylistic changes through time, where one image is superimposed on another or seems to be in dialogue with another.

Ken Mulvaney's hypothesis is that five distinct cultural pulses washed over the archipelago, from 30,000 to 20,000 years ago, reflected in five stylistic changes, each of them visually 'commenting' on what came before. Previously it was thought that Palaeolithic art began rather crudely and grew more sophisticated with time. We now know that this isn't so. In fact, here on the Burrup the oldest art is the most complex.

"Pre the ice maxim, when this place was lush and hugely sustaining, the art tends to be 'cultural'," Robin Chapple says, interpreting these changes. "Afterwards, as existence becomes a little bit trickier, it becomes more rudimentary, focusing more on sexuality, on hunting and gathering – spearing animals, depicting animal body parts, fish livers for example, because they were a really important source of energy. So the carvings more or less say, 'This is where you get fish livers.' In other words, the later work shows an increasing preoccupation with survival, whereas pre-ice age people's focus was on developing culture. This place gives you something nowhere else in the world does – the continuity of societal behaviour during different climatic conditions."

The destruction of the petroglyphs began in the 1960s. The WA government was searching for a port site to service the mining boom in the Pilbara. Various proposals were put forward; strangely, the Burrup was chosen. After the port, the loading terminal, the town, the iron-ore and salt operations came the North West Shelf Venture gas project, initiated in the early 1980s; petroglyphs in their thousands were bulldozed during each wave of industry. A fertiliser plant is the latest arrival, a desalination plant is planned, and no one knows how much more is in the queue, waiting on the vagaries of politics, international finance and corporate play.

While those days of cowboy development are in eclipse, and while corporations today have varying levels of cultural awareness (Rio Tinto, which runs the iron-ore loading operation and holds leases over much of the peninsula, funds excellent archaeological work in the Burrup and takes its conservation responsibilities rather more seriously than some),

This 2-metre figure rests high on a rocky hill on the Burrup.

nevertheless all must act according to their imperatives: to generate as much profit as possible, to defeat competitors, to expand.

You would think that after such an initial calamity – a reported 10,000 rock art carvings have been destroyed or relocated – a comprehensive management plan would have been put in place. Not at all. The art is still under threat from encroaching industry (including potential acidic emissions), acts of theft and graffiti. The latest threat is from Burrup Fertilisers, which wants to build an ammonium nitrate factory beside its present fertiliser plant. Should an accident occur, the stored explosive could remove entire valleys of art, not to mention a large number of humans.

Woodside, on the other hand, when it came time to develop its Pluto B site in 2007, did not bulldoze the art but carefully relocated 170 pieces and built a fence around them. Many conservationists, archaeologists and Indigenous people consider this an act of violation, arguing that when such a place is fragmented, it loses its integrity, its essential meaning. The body has been dismembered.

The Burrup has been listed in the National Trust of Australia Endangered Places Register and, in 2004, 2006 and 2008, on the World Monuments Watch List. Woodside, once opposed to national heritage listing, prefers now to cultivate a concerned and accountable public profile. After a conservation agreement with the federal government, it has made $34 million available for conservation programs. The pragmatist's position is that, as industrial activity is not going to go away, Woodside must be encouraged to use that money to make a master plan involving all the interested parties: protect the art, build an information centre from which to administer the area and educate visitors, perhaps even celebrate the unique juxtaposition of the rock art and the industry.

While I was there, Woodside was still in negotiation over the location of its Browse Basin processing plant. Its venture partners wanted it on the Burrup; Woodside wanted it at James Price Point, 60 kilometres north of Broome, where I'd been camping. Colin Barnett, who was plucked from imminent retirement to the seat of power in late 2008, has championed the Burrup and would genuinely like to see it protected. However, he also wants to go down in history as the man who began the industrialisation of the Kimberley. Consequently he has pushed for the James Price Point site, on country that is in some ways no less precious than the Burrup. Building that industrial site will be the thin end of the wedge; despite government statements to the contrary, everyone knows that the point of placing the Browse plant north of Broome is to make way for further industry, particularly bauxite processing and shipping. When Barnett defends his choice of James Price Point, he pulls out his Burrup card, as if it could only ever have been a choice between the two.

That there are alternatives – the Maitland industrial site further inland, for example, or Port Hedland further north – goes without saying. But to assume that such seemingly 'sensible' alternatives could be reached would be to misunderstand the machinations of companies and their interplay: the beehive.

Woodside is the manager of the North West Shelf Venture gas project; its venture partners include BHP Billiton, BP, Chevron, Japan Australia LNG (Mimi) and Shell. However, Shell owns 24% of Woodside, so Woodside, although the manager, becomes a minority shareholder – and has the least say in the boardroom. Therein lies Woodside's problem.

When Woodside decided to build Woodside Pluto on the Burrup to process offshore gas, it assumed it could use an empty piece of land that no one else wanted. The chosen site contained no rock art. But Woodside's partners voted against it due to inter-company conflict around the project. Woodside Pluto was forced to go to another site, Pluto B – its current location – from which it had to lift and shift quantities of rock art.

Pluto was to be big enough to process other companies' gas, as well as Woodside's. The money earned this way would offset the expense of construction. Woodside began development on that basis but the other companies backed out and decided to build their own processing plants further south, in Onslow. Woodside, now under a lot of financial pressure, had a shortfall of gas for its plant, which was wildly over-capitalised. Meanwhile BHP was sniffing around for a company to buy and was hovering over Woodside, ready to pounce.

Woodside wanted to develop further gas fields in the Browse Basin off the Kimberley coast. To do this, Woodside needed an onshore processing plant. Various sites were considered but James Price Point in the Kimberley appears to have the go-ahead: state government has declared its support and the final decision now lies with the federal government.

According to those in its favour, the project will create thousands of jobs and boost the national gross domestic product by $65 billion over its lifetime. Kimberley traditional owners will get a $1.5 billion package of benefits over 30 years in exchange for use of the land. But this has been a hugely divisive issue; James Price Point is a stretch of particularly glorious coastline, and is an important segment of Dreaming story. The gas plant will also turn Broome into a mining town, with all the associated economic and social changes, such as increases in rental prices and the cost of commodities, and a shift to a mostly male and nomadic population, with little commitment to the community.

Gas will be brought from the Browse Basin via pipeline to this plant, where it will be liquefied and loaded onto LNG tankers for shipping to Asia. The project will need up to 14 pipelines, a breakwater extending several kilometres out to sea, the removal of 1 kilometre of shoreline and 21 million cubic metres of seabed dredging. It will also produce up to 39 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions per year, which will amount to 50% of WA's total emissions.

It could have come by pipeline to the Burrup but Woodside would have to have built three or four more 'trains' (the capacity of a plant is measured in trains), and that would inevitably mean more desecration of rock art. The gas could also have gone to Port Hedland, an ideal industrial estate, closer to the Browse Basin itself (about $100 million closer, if you look at the length of pipeline required), and the Port Hedland council had actually requested that the development go there. But if the plant were to come south to the Pilbara, rather than the Kimberley, BHP Billiton and Chevron would want to place it adjacent to their existing facilities.

Woodside has its own reasons to wish to build its Browse plant in the Kimberley. In the Browse joint venture – with BHP Billiton, BP, Chevron and Shell – Woodside is the single largest shareholder, so it can escape being the lackey of the partner corporations as it is down on the Burrup.

The state government's interest in pushing the James Price Point site is to open up the Kimberley to bauxite mining, aluminium smelting, coal shipping, a gas pipeline to the eastern states, and more. In this scenario, Colin Barnett gets to protect the Burrup rock art *and* be the new Sir Charles Court (former WA premier and industry pioneer) – a win-win for him. The federal government doesn't appear to care much either way as long as WA continues to sell off its resources to keep the economy buoyant. You could discern its priorities, however, when the cement company CEMEX destroyed some rock art on the Burrup in a heritage protected zone in 2009. The company could have been fined up to $5 million and individual managers could have faced up to seven years in jail. What happened? The company was fined $280,000 – worse than insignificant because it sent out a message that any company could ignore heritage protection zones with virtual impunity.

The Department of State Development is actively seeking to capitalise on WA's resources industry and is also pushing for the Kimberley site. It is important to understand the power the Department of State Development wields, as it is unique in Australia. It was set up in Sir Charles Court's time and, until 2003, was not formalised by a constitutional arrangement with the state, so there was no way of knowing exactly what it was up to. Only after Labor amalgamated it with the Department of Minerals and Petroleum did it lose that opacity. It exercises enormous influence.

It is said that when Apache Energy went to the Department of State Development to ask where they could build, they were told, "You can build on Burrup wherever you like. Pick a spot." Somewhat taken aback, the executives asked, "What is the air shed?" (the pollution allowance). To which the response is alleged to have been that no one knew.

A further complication in all this horse-trading is peak gas. Former CEO of Shell, Jeroen van de Meer, spoke in 2009 on the implications of peak oil and gas, and the actions companies are taking to prepare for a phenomenon many consider inevitable. Companies have to try to get all their small reserves producing now, because as gas runs out worldwide, small gas fields will be uneconomic to operate. Only large fields will be worth the capital expenditure.

Mining money might only increase dependency – a sexier version of welfare.

Australia's gas fields are minnows compared to those of Norway, Russia and Saudi Arabia, for example, so they have a short lifespan. The rush is on to get all those stranded assets onto the market before the market starts collapsing.

China's fields are substantial, and China is clever at manipulating the global scene to its advantage. For example, it has purchased all of WA's gas, as well as all of Indonesia's and Korea's gas, while spending $17.5 billion to build a pipeline to take its own gas to the coast, so that when other countries run out, China can sell its own on the open market. It can do this sort of long-term strategic planning because it doesn't have electoral cycles to get in the way.

Somewhat less conspicuous in the beehive are the interests of local Indigenous communities, though no less complicated.

There has been an ideological shift in Aboriginal politics over the last decade or so away from the welfare state, which is seen to have been crippling to Aboriginal self-respect and economic participation. According to this view, the old leftist agendum hasn't worked; now Indigenous Australians have to think individually, they have to be realistic about how to survive in modern Australia, and part of that thinking is how to profit from the land resources gained during the land rights movement. It is labelled a neo-liberal leaning because it welcomes development and mining, and the huge amounts of money these can provide. Once upon a time mining companies were unequivocally the enemy; now they are likely to be seen as potentially providing what government and previous ideologies failed to – a way up and out of the crippling social problems plaguing many remote communities.

Previously the Commonwealth provided a counterbalance to the colonialism of the state. But now, state and federal agencies – the architecture and machinery of government – are combined as never before to promote development. Consequently there is huge pressure on Indigenous communities to conform.

Mining companies not only provide payouts for use of Indigenous land, they might also involve themselves in Indigenous affairs. For example, Rio Tinto is training Indigenous people in money and family management: essentially, how to say 'no' to freeloaders. On the one hand, this cuts to the root of cultural duties and obligations along kinship lines; on the other, it helps individual families and groups 'get ahead', to pull themselves out of poverty and welfare dependency.

Around the James Price Point area, there is a spectrum of perspectives on the industry reflected in the diversity of backgrounds among the Indigenous community. There are people who remember first contact, to whom the idea of breaking a Dreaming story as it weaves through landscape is unthinkable. There are others who have worked in the pearling industry, or are descendants of pastoral workers who see the potential in welcoming industry. Others are swayed by the prospect of vast sums of money, not understanding that funds will not be administered to individuals but to the community at large. Overall, there is a lot of confusion about how the money will be distributed.

Indigenous people are not powerless in these shifting fields of interest but the complexity of their different situations, the obstructions to acting in accord, can be manipulated by government and corporations to their own advantage.

The Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation is a good case in point: when they signed the deal with state government in 2003 to allow industrial development on their native title land on the Burrup, they were supposed to get an immediate settlement of $1.3 million. Other commitments in the deal were that the Murujuga community would have joint management of the area and that it would receive 50% of the rates levied on the Woodside joint-venture site and any other industrial development to follow. It was assumed this would be 50% of millions. However, Woodside rents the site from the state government for $190,000 per year, which means the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation received about $80,000 – not enough to pay for their administration.

To date there is no joint management in practice and until Robin Chapple made enquiries on behalf of the Murujuga community in 2010, very little of the money had been paid, despite continuing applications. Chapple discovered that a different application procedure was required, which had never previously been mentioned. Once that had been done, the money arrived the next day.

A national park covering much of the Burrup Peninsula was due to be declared in 2008, but that is waiting for other preliminary legislation to be passed. In any case, a national park in that landscape is going to require intensive management – an Indigenous ranger corps, walkways, interpretation centres. Ironically, if the national park is successful and encourages a large influx of tourism, it could, even with the best management scheme, be a threat to the delicate terrain.

In some cases mining money might only increase dependency – a sexier version of welfare. As for the promised jobs, they are already on offer but Aboriginal people don't necessarily want them. Also, the promised mining jobs are mainly for skilled labourers, and there are few with the right

qualifications in Indigenous communities, so most jobs on offer will be unskilled.

Injections of big money might also increase divisions and imbalances amongst Aboriginal families, fuelling the corruption and dynastic power plays already rife in many communities. But if wealth earned from mining can bring about solutions to community problems, then perhaps it is worth chopping up a Dreaming story, trashing a piece of wild and stunning coastline, fencing off some rock art. The tragedy would be if, in 50 years time, the problems had not been much solved and people had lost those deep connections to country, to that other way of interpreting the world.

"Do you think there's a darkness in it?"

A freckled woman sits opposite me, pen poised, eyes turned up and to the right. She is writing a haiku. We are back in Karratha's caravan park – not a place you'd immediately associate with poetry, other than porn doggerel maybe. (A prostitute checked in yesterday – unmistakable clothes, unmistakable fatigue. The mining town is 70% male.) But nothing as elliptical as haiku.

It is the last day and we are all, in our different ways, trying to process what we have seen.

Where the poet finds the possibility of darkness (and there are some anthropic figures whose joints *are* depicted as swollen, possibly indicating ritual magic to kill or punish an enemy), another sees only an Edenic human goodness, free of modern corruption; a "co-operative people, they weren't cruel, or greedy, they looked after each other, they had to".

In this view we moderns are like a new species, mere burglars and bunglers compared to our better Other. It is ironic that once upon a time 'primitive' cultures were used to illustrate the teleological notion endorsing advanced industrial societies. Now they provide a source for nostalgia.

Though not for the man I greet every day, who is possibly the owner of the caravan park. He wears tight stubbies, a khaki shirt and an akubra that probably only comes off at bath time. His legs are thin and muscular, like a grasshopper's. He is ceaselessly at work, vacuuming the already sparkling pool, hosing the lawn, cleaning the laundry. Work is perhaps his version of the sacred. One day he saw me sitting at the camp table with my papers. "What are you doing?"

"I'm writing about the rock art on the Burrup. They say it's been there for 30,000 years."

His face registers a kind of hurt bitterness. "Why don't you people ever write a paper about this: 'Fuckin' Abos have been here for 30,000 years and they still haven't got it together.'"

The haiku poet continues.

"Heroic, what about heroic?"

She has got my attention: 'heroic' – not implying grandiosity, as it might be used to describe, say, the Egyptian pyramids. She means, I think, that the motivations of the people who made the petroglyphs would not have been trivial.

These aesthetic expressions are the residuum of a philosophical synthesis that embraced cosmos, natural phenomena, society and the individual, and that is the principle difference between their time and my time, their mind and my mind. Thirty thousand years is a long time to think of as 'one time'. It encompasses the recession and return of the oceans. Still, there is a chasm between the vision of life that united those aeons (religious belief, a sacred unity with nature, mythos) and the Weltanschauung of modernity (science, 'the God-shaped hole', logos).

Which is perhaps why places such as this attract not just projection, but yearning, as if they might provide a conduit to a previously sacralised nature. The glitch being that the privileged comforts we enjoy, and that one would hope all humans might one day enjoy, evolved from and are dependent upon industrialisation and technological advance – logos.

What is privilege? Surely it's not only the accumulation of goods, not only the assumption that one will have a comfortable, relatively safe and healthy life cushioned by technological advance. Surely it should also include the possibility of standing on a beach, backed by red cliffs, facing an ocean where you can see whales and their calves thrashing up foam, schools of flying fish shooting across the water like handfuls of flung tinsel and frigate birds plunging into the flat blue, and knowing there is not another footprint on this beach for miles in both directions. It is something, as Friedrich Nietzsche said of music, "for the sake of which, it is worthwhile to live on Earth".

What can ultimately be said of the Burrup rock art, of the coast north of Broome, of all such priceless and pristine areas, and of other cultural thought forms, is that once they are gone, they are gone forever.

When I was in Broome I talked with a friend who has been involved in Aboriginal politics for many years, and who has not let go of the 'old' ideology. He told me, "In this area of the world, in fact from here right across to Cairns, there is a substantially intact ecosystem and a culture that's very ancient and there's not much of that or those left in the world. There is something important inherent in these knowledge systems for the survival of humanity. I think there's enough evidence to suggest there's a future economy here around managing these landscapes with traditional knowledge. This area is so important to the world – as the Amazon is important, or the outer Arctic rim – we could pay the traditional custodians to manage it …"

Dream on. M