

MURUJUGA: WHERE A 50,000 YEAR CULTURAL LANDSCAPE MEETS THE INDUSTRIAL AGE

Ken Mulvaney
Centre for Rock Art Research and Management, Australia

Abstract

Murujuga, with a cultural occupancy spanning some 50,000 years, has for the past 50 years been exposed to the destructive force of the resource industry. Back in 1964, with no legal authority, the Aboriginal custodians of this place could not prevent the development of a port to export iron ore from the inland mines of this remote part of north-western Australia. Some 50 years later, the estimated one million images that are engraved into the rock surface of this landscape are exposed to the changing conditions brought on by the industrial expansion of petroleum and allied chemical processing plants.

The footprint of industry had removed upwards of 10,000 petroglyphs; however a far greater number are at risk of obliteration. The chemical emissions from industry is altering the ph of the rock surfaces, changing the chemical and biological patterns which have protected the rock art for tens of millennia. It has fallen to a dedicated few concerned citizen, with the support of the Aboriginal custodians, to force industry and government to take seriously the adverse impacts that have been imposed.

Short of shutting down the resource sector operating on Burrup Peninsula, options for the protection of the petroglyphs require financial and physical effort by industry to eliminate harmful emissions. The Murujuga petroglyphs are a globally significant and irreplaceable cultural treasure; alternatives exist for industry, not so for the survival of the rock art.