

Breaking the spirit of the rock

Over the past four decades, indigenous elder Wilfred Hicks has enjoyed showing his children and grandchildren the wonders of the Burrup, which he describes as "the Bible for the Aboriginal people". But Hicks, 70, says that after decades of gradual destruction of the rock art, and the threat that industrial emissions may pose to the engravings, he fears that one day there will be nothing left to show.

"This rock art is highly significant to Aboriginal people," says this elder of the Wong-goo-tt-oo people, who was first shown the ancient etchings as a young man by his father. Hicks says the thousands of panels on the Burrup, which is known to Aborigines as Murujuga, tell stories about ancient indigenous culture that are still relayed to young people today.

Many of the images are of ancestral beings and spirit figures, while others relate

to sacred ceremonies and songs, and many feature representations of the everyday life of traditional ancestors. But Hicks not only blames governments and industry for the plight of the Burrup, he also directs criticisms towards other Aboriginal groups in the Pilbara, which he claims have failed to stand up for the artworks.

It is well known that many local Aboriginal people have received \$500 a day for acting as "heritage consultants" to Woodside to help supervise the removal of rock art. "What they [the other Aboriginal groups] are doing is breaking up their own culture," says Hicks, as he sits on the Burrup, looking at construction work for a fifth processing plant at the Woodside-operated North-West Shelf gas project. "It won't hold its significance – once the rock has been moved the spirit of that rock has been broken. It makes me feel sick."

The tragic history of the Burrup goes all the way back to 1868 when the peninsula's original inhabitants, the Yaburara people, were killed off in a series of massacres. Today, the Ngarluma, the Wong-goo-tt-oo and the Yindjibarndi people are among the last of the Burrup's custodians. In 2003, the West Australian government signed a \$15 million native title agreement with these groups that cleared the way for further industrial development and allowed land not needed for industry to be handed over to the traditional owners.

Today, Ngarluma custodian Robyne Churnside says many of her "old people" who signed the agreement were illiterate and did not understand the terms of the deal. Mysteriously, most of the elders who signed the agreement with the government died soon after. "I still mourn for my old people who signed that agreement," says Churnside.