

Greens confront traditional owners on coalmine plan

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A PLAN to mine coal on Cape York peninsula looms as the next battleground between the green lobby and pro-development Aboriginal leaders, including Noel Pearson's brother Gerhardt.

Aust-Pac Capital, owned by entrepreneur John Benson, has referred to the federal government its plans to construct an underground coking coalmine on Aboriginal land 320km northwest of Cairns. This would be the first coalmine on the peninsula.

The company says the proposal arose from an approach by the Aboriginal traditional owners, the Kalpowar people, but the Wilderness Society claims the plan would be an environmental disaster.

Described by the company as a small operation that would mine 1.5 million tonnes of coal a year, the Wongai site is between national parks and requires a barge-loading facility to be built in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The Wilderness Society's Glenn Walker said the mine would threaten endangered species, such as the loggerhead turtle and the northern quoll.

The company said a mine would provide economic benefits for the traditional owners, with minimal environmental disturbance.

Cook Shire Mayor Peter Scott said Gerhardt Pearson, Mr Benson and the Kalpowar traditional owners visited him recently to spruik the mine's economic benefits.

``Anything that provides real jobs and sustainable income for our skinny economy would be welcome," Mr Scott said.

``But . . . they will have to jump through all the hoops anyone does on the Cape."

Mr Pearson is head of Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation, which aims to improve opportunities for indigenous people on the peninsula. He campaigned strongly against Queensland's Wild Rivers laws, which hinder development within 1km of protected rivers.