

## WA cuts loose Burrup rock art monitors for breaching \$7 million contract

By Emma Young  
June 10, 2021

A company awarded \$7 million to monitor industrial emissions on 47,000-year-old rock art in Western Australia's north has been dismissed for breach of contract.

Murujuga (the Dampier Archipelago, including the Burrup Peninsula), near the mining town of Karratha in the state's Pilbara region, is home to the world's largest, densest and most diverse Aboriginal rock art gallery – more than 1 million images across 37 hectares.

On Murujuga's Burrup Peninsula, rock art and industry are a little too close for comfort. It is also home to the major export operations of Woodside Petroleum, Rio Tinto and Yara Pilbara.

Fifteen years' worth of studies over whether industrial emissions, dust, clearing and traffic are accelerating the natural weathering of the art have been hotly contested, including through a federal inquiry, with previous monitoring identifying shortcomings in the science.

Development has only intensified, with the latest proposal being for Woodside's Pluto gas plant, which some of the art sites overlook. If the oil and gas giant's Scarborough project is approved, with only one environmental hurdle remaining, the plant will double in output and operate until 2055.

The Murujuga Cultural Landscape was added to Australia's World Heritage Tentative List in February 2020 and the monitoring program is crucial, as the government must demonstrate commitment to protecting and monitoring the art.

The Department of Water and Environment Regulation in February 2020 announced the appointment of Sydney-based Puliypang, a joint venture between Calibre Ventures and Tocomwall, partnering with experts from Curtin University, Artcare and the ChemCentre for the new program.

Woodside, Rio and Yara put up most of the funding with the state also providing some. The tender was meant to be until February 2025. Puliypang was to evaluate existing studies, design and implement the new program, upskill local Indigenous rangers to eventually take over, hold quarterly stakeholder workshops from three months in, and provide detailed annual reports.



*Rock carvings on the Burrup Peninsula, near Karratha, Western Australia, includes this image of the extinct thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger.*

The department terminated the contract on April 30, not long before the first annual report was due. It has declined to provide more information on the reason but *WAtoday* was told by a source close to industry that the department, and then the funding companies, became aware the work was not being done.

A department spokeswoman said a procurement process was under way and the department was working to ensure minimal delays and a smooth transition. It was anticipated field and laboratory studies would still commence late this year.

Asked if this affected final approvals for Woodside's Scarborough project, she said the Environmental Protection Authority would always provide recommendations and advice based on the best scientific information available at the time.

Questions about how much had already been paid to Puliypang, and whether this was recoverable, were not answered for reasons of commercial confidentiality.

The stakeholder reference group expects the department to update them on the contract and timeline at the next meeting in early August, if not before.

*WAtoday* contacted Puliypang – Tocomwall chief executive Scott Franks and Calibre operations manager Mike Buchan – but received no reply.

Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation remains committed to ensuring the program's success.

“MAC’s priority is to protect Murujuga’s ancient rock art, heritage and culture, and MAC supports necessary actions to ensure that the program delivers this,” chief executive Peter Jeffries said.

“If a new contractor is required, then MAC supports this decision.

“A change in contractors ... will in no way affect the progress of MAC’s application for World Heritage Listing.”



*New boardwalks for the Murujuga rock art cultural tour.*

Friends of Australian Rock Art co-convenor Judith Hugo hoped the Curtin scientific team sub-contracted would receive the contract.

“It just needs the WA government to finalise arrangements as soon as possible,” she said.

“It is imperative for the World Heritage nomination process that the WA government can demonstrate to UNESCO its sincerity about protecting the unique and irreplaceable petroglyphs from acidic industrial emissions.”

A Woodside spokeswoman said the company was doing its own emissions monitoring meanwhile. The final investment decision target for Scarborough remained at the second half of 2021.

A Yara Pilbara spokeswoman said the company took its obligations to operate on Murujuga seriously and every year since 2017 had actively monitored the art, with independent specialists working in partnership with traditional owners to do annual sampling and analysis of seven rock art sites near Yara's operations.

Given the Puliypang contract termination, Yara expected it would be undertaking the monitoring program again in 2021.

A Rio Tinto spokesman said the company was a strong supporter of the monitoring program and looked forward to a new contract being implemented.

*Emma Young is a WAtoday reporter focusing on environmental issues, urban planning, social justice and the arts*