



### Western Australia

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## 'Cultural genocide': Australian state putting industry before heritage, Indigenous women tell UN

**Traditional owners urge Geneva panel to hold Western Australia and business accountable for cultural damage and fostering 'chaos' in Burrup Peninsula**

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Two Murujuga traditional custodians have told the United Nations that the Western Australian government is putting the interests of industry above the protection of Indigenous heritage on the Burrup Peninsula.

Raelene Cooper, a Mardudhunera woman and former board member of the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation, and Josie Alec, a Kuruma Mardudhunera woman, urged the UN expert mechanism on the rights of Indigenous people in Geneva to “hold the governments of Australia and corporations to account”.

Cooper, who spoke late on Tuesday evening in Australia, alleged the Western Australian government and industry had acquired land “under duress” and had been working to create “division and chaos”.

She also pointed to Ben Wyatt, the former minister for Aboriginal heritage in Western Australia, who [allowed the demolition](#) of Juukan Gorge before leaving government to [join the board of Rio Tinto](#), as an example of how government had been compromised by industry and had “done little to protect our heritage”.

“Industry has removed and destroyed our rock art in another form of cultural genocide,” she said. “This has caused loss of our traditional livelihoods, traditional Indigenous knowledge and our spiritual relationship with the land. There has been displacement and ecological degradation.

“The ngurra, our land, is our temple and our parliament. The rock art archives our lore. It is written not on a tablet of stone but carved into the ngurra, which holds our Dreaming stories and Songlines.”

The Burrup Peninsula in the Pilbara - known as Murujuga to traditional custodians - is an outdoor gallery that is home to more than a million examples of Indigenous rock art produced over 50,000 years.

The area was nominated for a world heritage listing in 2018. If successful, this would mean the area is protected in the same way as the pyramids of Giza, Stonehenge and the Taj Mahal.

It is also the site of significant industrial development. Woodside [Energy](#) is currently working on a massive expansion of its gas infrastructure in the area as part of the \$16.5bn Scarborough gas project.



📷 Raelene Cooper (left) and Josie Alec at the UN in Geneva. Photograph: Save Our Songlines

A spokesperson for the WA government said in a statement that it was “critical” these industrial developments could “co-exist harmoniously” with “surrounding cultural heritage” and that the government was “working closely” with the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation (Mac) “to progress the Unesco Murujuga World [Heritage](#) List nomination that has been under way since 2018”.

“The state government expects proponents to obtain informed consent from the approved cultural authorities and associated traditional owners of the land for any activities undertaken in the Burrup strategic industrial area and has been working very closely with proponents and Mac to ensure this is achieved,” they said.

“Further to this, the new Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2021 comes into full effect in mid-2023 and places traditional owners at the heart of decision-making about the management and protection of their heritage.”

A spokesperson for Woodside Energy said the company was guided by the UN declaration of the rights of Indigenous peoples in its dealings with First Nations people.

The company maintained a “close working relationship” with traditional owners and the declaration “provides consultation should occur in good faith with Indigenous people through their own representative institutions”, the spokesperson said.

“Woodside has undertaken its consultations with Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation, which has been established to represent the views of the Ngarda Ngali, including representatives from the Ngarluma, the Mardudhunera, the Yaburara, the Yindjibarndi and the Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo groups,” they said.

The Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation, whose CEO has served as [senior Indigenous Affairs adviser to Woodside since 2013](#), was contacted for comment.

Traditional custodians have previously [raised concerns](#) that the cumulative pollution from these operations is slowly acidifying the rocks, which erodes the art.

Cooper also said that “gag clauses” in the Burrup and Maitland industrial estates agreement prevented traditional custodians and elders from openly criticising new industrial developments.

In March 27 Murujuga elders and custodians signed [an open letter to the Western Australian government](#) calling for the removal of provisions in the Burrup and Maitland industrial estates agreement that they said stopped them criticising proposed industrial developments on their land.

A spokesperson for the Western Australian government said there was nothing in the agreement preventing opponents of industrial development from sharing their views.

Alec will make an address at 6pm in Australia on Wednesday where she is expected to say the Western Australian government and Woodside energy has failed to engage with traditional owners in a way that upholds free, prior and informed consent as required by the UN.

Both want the Unesco World Heritage listing for the site to be fast-tracked.

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