

Ken Wyatt calls for Burrup rock art protection

By [HELEN TRINCA](#)

21 October, 2025

Indigenous leader and former politician Ken Wyatt has warned about the potential damage to the ancient Burrup Peninsula rock art in Western Australia after the federal government's controversial decision to grant a 40-year extension to Woodside Energy's North West Shelf gas project.

Mr Wyatt, a former federal Liberal minister, has been appointed as the first Indigenous chair of Rock Art Australia in what is seen as a significant milestone in the 28-year history of the influential not-for-profit foundation.

[He told The Australian he welcomed the federal government's recognition of the importance of the Burrup art, but said:](#) "More work needs to be done to ensure industry can sit alongside an area but not pollute the area where it damages the artwork. I know from representations to me by leaders in that community, they were concerned industry would damage (the art).

"I would hope Woodside works very closely with Aboriginal communities ... Those artworks have to be protected because if we neglect them, we're neglecting an important part of the history of this nation."

Last month, the North West Shelf was granted approval to continue till 2070 but with strict conditions imposed on emissions. Woodside is now facing at least a dozen legal actions from environmentalist groups.

Mr Wyatt, who has been on the board of RAA for two years, said governments faced challenges in developing resources but also ensuring an equal level of scrutiny and protection of rock art.

"Solutions have got to be found to protect our artwork," he said. "It's about a commitment by science, but there's also an obligation for partnerships between governments; industry that is established in that area, and; traditional owners."

There was legislation to protect art around the country, but there was a need for tougher penalties for individuals who wilfully damaged art that could "never be replaced". Much of the answer, however, depended on education and awareness.

"It's saying to people, this is ancient rock art that is invaluable, and whilst you won't see it in a museum, and communities will allow you to see it in situ, it's part of the landscape of Australia, and what we should do is all make a concerted effort to ensure it's protected," Mr Wyatt said. "We would do it in an art gallery. If a significant painting was damaged, there would be penalties, there'd be prosecutions, and it would certainly be covered at length by media. If you had a Picasso that someone did wilfully spray paint on, then certainly there would be anger."

Mr Wyatt said Australians had to respect the rights of Indigenous communities to control access to some sites to protect them from damage and for spiritual reasons.

"They're quite happy to work alongside somebody who will document the story ... and then once that's done and it's been worked through, then it's published, but the location is not always specified," he said, drawing a comparison with the Vatican: "It doesn't matter whether you're a Catholic or not, you can visit the Vatican, but there are parts of the Vatican you're not allowed into. It's no different in terms of Indigenous owners who are custodians of rock art who in some instances may say no, please respect our right to refuse to share."

Mr Wyatt said he was not concerned about increased tourism in the Kimberley: "It's a great way for tourists from overseas to see rock art. When you talk about a 60,000-year-old living culture - Australians don't appreciate it, but people overseas react very differently."

Rock Art Australia was set up in 1997 as Wandjina Foundation Australia (later renamed Kimberley Foundation Australia) to research sites across the Kimberley. It was renamed Rock Art Australia in 2020 and broadened its interest to rock art across the nation. It has had powerful supporters including the Ian Potter Foundation; the late businessman, Trevor Kennedy, and his wife, Christina Kennedy, and; pastoralist and co-founder Susan Bradley. Maria Myers, the wife of Melbourne barrister and businessman Allan Myers, has been a longtime supporter and former chair, and Andrew Forrest and Nicola Forrest are patrons. While Wandjina elders Paddy Neowarra, Laurie Gowanulli and David Mowljarli were instrumental in establishing the organisation almost three decades ago, and while there have been Indigenous board members since then, Mr Wyatt is at present the only Indigenous director, although there are plans to appoint more Indigenous directors.

Ms Myers said on Monday the appointment of the first Indigenous chair emphasised that rock art was an Indigenous story, an Australian story, and a unifying story that "forms our identity in a way that's unique in the world". But she said Australians, including politicians and governments, still did not really appreciate the significance of rock art to Australia and the world. She said the biggest threat to rock art in the Kimberley was not from mining, in part because sites were so well documented, but "from the natural elements, fire and monsoonal rain and floods, and cattle grazing. The threats are of a physical kind that come from the natural world".