



Concern over heritage Bill

| Ben Leahy

An archaeologist working on one of the earliest Aboriginal settlement sites found in Australia says proposed changes to State heritage laws would make it harder to protect similar sites in the future.

Released this month, the State Government said its draft Aboriginal Heritage Amendment Bill 2014 had been updated to strike a balance between heritage protection and easier land-use approvals for the mining industry.

However, Big Island Research director of archaeology Kate Morse said the draft Bill would make it much harder to have archaeological sites protected under heritage laws.

"They have got very strict criteria about what they are accepting as a (heritage) site, and it is very hard to meet the criteria," she said.

"There is a danger that we will lose a lot of the stories about how Australia was lived in by the Aboriginal people prior to the arrival of white people."

The proposed changes come as Ms Morse and her team revealed that a dig in Ganga Maya Cave, 90km south-east of Port Hedland, had uncovered stone artefacts and charcoal and animal bone remains, the earliest of which date to 45,700 years ago.

Elsewhere in the Pilbara, 41,000-year-old charcoal remains and 35,000-year-old Aboriginal tools have also been found.

Each discovery was made as a result of heritage surveys on proposed mining sites.

Greens MP Robin Chapple said future discoveries were now under

threat because he claimed the new Bill gave the key power to decide whether a heritage site should be listed or not to a public servant rather than a panel of experts.

However, the State Government said the draft amendment was needed because no significant

changes had been made to the Aboriginal Heritage Act in 33 years.

It said the new Bill would greatly increase penalties for damage to heritage sites, while also improving the mining approvals process.

The Association of Mining and

Exploration Companies chief executive Simon Bennison welcomed the changes.

"Some (heritage) surveys can take days or weeks to complete and costs are extraordinarily high for miners and junior explorers to bear," he said.



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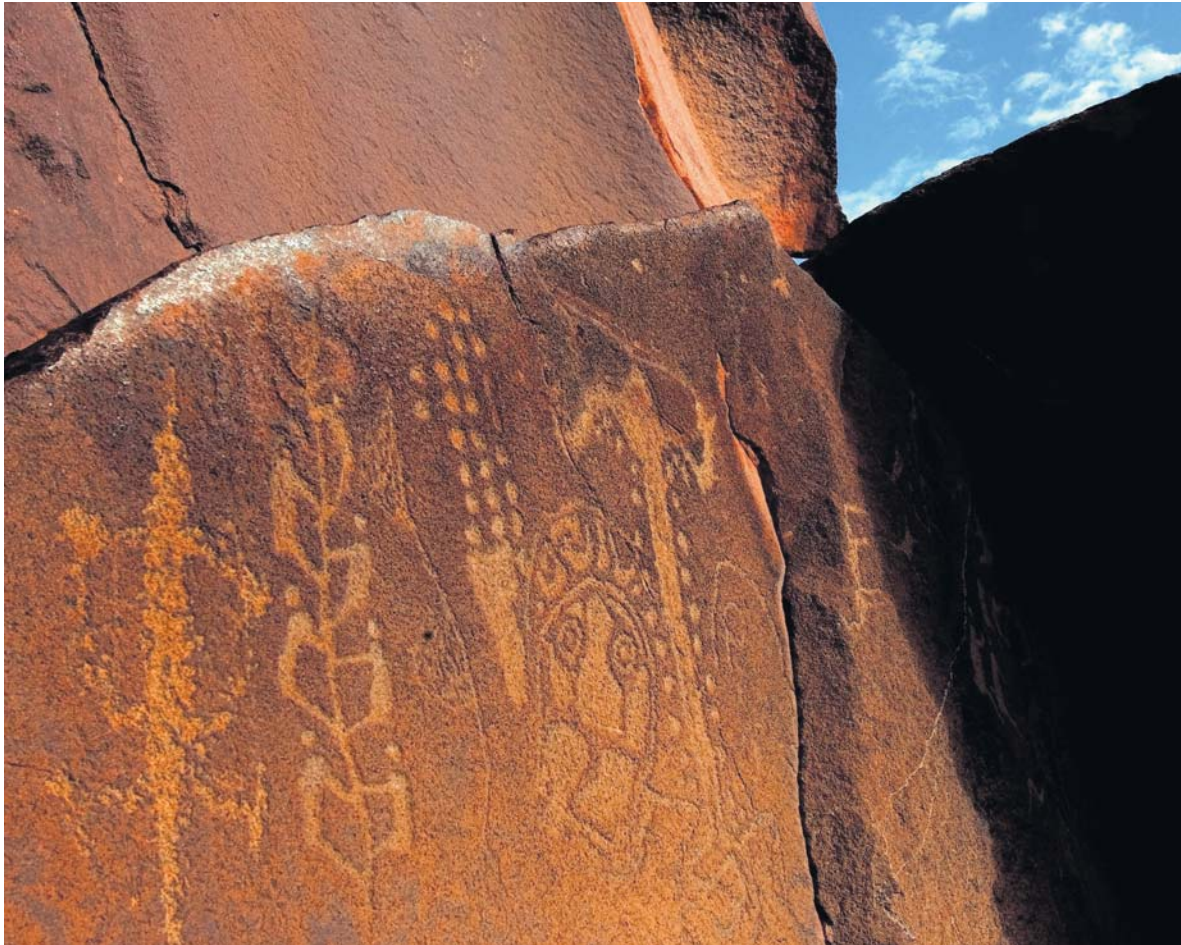
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The Climbing Man rock art on the Burrup Peninsula. The Burrup is one of many protected Aboriginal sites in the Pilbara. Picture: Nic Ellis