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Outrage at WA Govt heritage proposals



MORE than 200 traditional owners have met on Country at Yule River, south of Port Hedland, to add their voice to growing outrage over the Western Australian Government's proposed amendments to the *Aboriginal Heritage Act* 1972. Hosted by the Yamatji Maripa Aboriginal Corporation's (YMAC) Pilbara Regional Committee, the September 26 bush meeting followed a vote the previous day by 400 members of the Kimberley Land Council at its annual meeting in Jarlmadangah, 200km east of Broome, to unanimously reject the reforms, and a rally outside WA Parliament on September 16 by members of Perth's Noongar community.

YMAC co-chair, Njamal Elder Doris Eaton, led the Yule River discussion, along with Banjima Elder Maitland Parker.

Ms Eaton urged those in attendance to unite with one voice.

"These proposed amendments to the *Aboriginal Heritage Act* do not respect Aboriginal heritage and culture," she said.

"Traditional owners must be at the centre of decisions that affect their country. We will stand united, and speak with one voice until our heritage is given the same respect as a built heritage."

YMAC chief executive Simon Hawkins said the WA Government must strengthen the act and engage in a more meaningful way with traditional owners.

"The WA legislation, in its current form, is not at a standard expected in the 21st century when it comes to the conservation and management of heritage sites," he said.

"Modern view"

"We want to see this legislation reflect a modern view and it must be consistent with other similar legislation in Australia."

Aboriginal representative bodies from the Pilbara and Members of Parliament, including Greens MLC and Member for the Mining and Pastoral Region Robin Chapple and National

Party Member for Pilbara Brendon Grylls, addressed the meeting.

Aboriginal Affairs Minister Peter Collier declined an invitation to attend



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In a statement to the *Koori Mail*, Mr Collier described the YMAC's comments on the proposed amendments as "misleading".

"The amendments are designed to improve protection, certainty, fairness and consistency," he said.

Mr Collier said having the chief executive of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs make decisions, as proposed in the reforms, is not something that should be feared.

"Statutory committee"

"The intent of the reforms is to encourage early engagement between land users and the relevant Aboriginal people. The CEO would not, as YMAC suggest, have the discretion to destroy sites, but would be required, as is current practice, to refer the application to a statutory committee who would then make a recommendation to me.

"The amendments reflect the agreement-forming approach to Aboriginal heritage that has proven successful in many parts of WA.

"Regulations that will support the amended act are currently being drafted, and will prescribe a voice for Aboriginal people in protecting their heritage. This will be a significant improvement, and ensures an Aboriginal voice is included in decision making, something that was not included in previous legislation.

"Relevant stakeholders should take the time to consider the benefits to Aboriginal people that will result from these reforms, and not be misled by comments from a small group of stakeholders intent on preventing these important reforms from proceeding."

YMAC now plans to send a delegation to Parliament for talks with Premier Colin Barnett, calling on the Legislative Assembly to form a select committee to develop a new framework to reform the act, "this time including a meaningful discussion with traditional owners".