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Slump in sites for heritage listing

EXCLUSIVE

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A STEEP drop in Aboriginal sites being added to Western Australia's heritage register is leading to "a vast sea of ignorance" that will thwart heritage protection, according to Carmen Lawrence, the chair of the Australian Heritage Council.

The dramatic drop in Aboriginal sites being registered — from 80 per cent of sites recommended to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to only 6 per cent — has occurred over three years, from 2011 to May last year.

At least 27 sites registered under the Aboriginal Heritage Act have also had their status cancelled in the past year.

Ms Lawrence said the failure to register sites would make it even harder to identify the state's heritage, lore and culture, which needed protection. "I'm concerned that we're going back in time to a place we'd abandoned, the respect and protection levels of the 1950s," she said.

"In the case of Burrup rock art in the Pilbara, it was unprotected for many years because nobody knew anything about it and Aboriginal voices weren't heard."

Aboriginal Affairs Minister Peter Collier said some places "presented as worthy of protection" were "of little or no interest" to Aborigines or the broader community and that only "the industry of heritage professionals" appeared to value those sites.

Ms Lawrence said amendments to the Aboriginal Heritage Act, now before parliament, removed the requirement for a

specialist anthropologist to assess sites. She was also concerned a "sacred" site applied only to those places where religious activity was conducted.

"I'm deeply concerned that song cycles and dreaming lines are explicitly excluded from consideration in this state due to a narrowing of definition," she said. "Leaving that out is a major part of indigenous heritage. James Price Point is a good example: there are middens and burial sites along the Lurujarri Heritage Trail near Broome, but a lot of the significance relates to songs and dreaming tracks."

She said a 2011 State of the Environment report found indigenous heritage was neither well protected nor well recorded.

Aboriginal groups are awaiting the outcome of a Supreme Court test case that challenges the state government's decision to deregister an Aboriginal site in Port Hedland Harbour, two years after it had been accepted on to the register. The case was argued by former Mabo case lawyer Greg McIntyre.

He said the proposed amendments did not oblige the head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to "communicate with any Aboriginal people" and lacked any of the provisions for public consultation required by the Australian Heritage Council.

Mr Collier said the system of assessing heritage and issuing permits to disturb or destroy sites had a backlog of 15,000 requests for site assessment. "I have no intention of diminishing Aboriginal heritage, and the intent of the legislation is to provide a more seamless process," he said.