

The Land Down Under
seen through the eyes of Bunna, a native Australian

Part five

This is our final journey across Australia and Bunna, our Aboriginal guide, has led us all the way to Murujuga, also known as Burrup Peninsula in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

It is the world's largest and most important collection of petroglyphs : ancient Aboriginal rock engravings. It is considered the most significant heritage site in Australia.



Burrup Peninsula, Western Australia



Burrup Lookout

At the end of a long bumpy drive along a dirt track, we finally reach Burrup Lookout and are rewarded with fantastic views over this living cultural landscape located off the northwestern coast of Australia on the shore of the Indian ocean.

Bunna, what does the word « Murujuga » mean ?

It means « hipbone sticking out » in the language of Yaburara, the indigenous people of the region. It obviously refers to the huge boulder piles that you see all around us.





Standing stones overlooking the shores of the Indian ocean

Why is this place sacred for the Aborigines ?

According to Aboriginal elders from neighbouring clans, these megaliths are the spirits of the deceased Yaburara. No one really knows what they represent since the Yaburara people who once lived here have been wiped out. It is actually the only surviving legacy of these people who were subjected to genocide by the government of Western Australia in 1868.

Bunna, has anyone done a comprehensive inventory of all these ancient Aboriginal engravings ?

No, unfortunately. We just know that 25 percent of these unique rock engravings have irrevocably been destroyed by industrial activity already.



« It is the world's largest gallery of engraved prehistoric art »

Do you mean that the entire area is bound to disappear under industrial pressure ?

Yes, this is actually what is happening under our eyes. Industrial development started in the 1960's when abundant iron reserves attracted miners. Then, in the 1970's the discovery of substantial natural gas deposits offshore led to the construction of a massive gas treatment plant in this vast wilderness. Some 2,000 engraved boulders were relocated at the time without consulting the Aboriginal owners. In 2003, the World Monuments Funds listed Burrup on the top 100 most endangered heritage places on the planet.



Industrial expansion proceeds on the peninsula



Composite images of daily activities

Actually, the area is so huge that is it hardly protected or managed. Vandalism is a problem. Lots of graffiti have been done on the ancient rock paintings. Air pollution due to industrialization is also damaging this pre-Ice Age sacred site. When you think that some of these engravings record extinct species like the Tasmanian Tiger, we are actually destroying important scientific data of incomparable value.

Bunna, how can you tell the boulders are engraved or not ? I personally find it hard to.

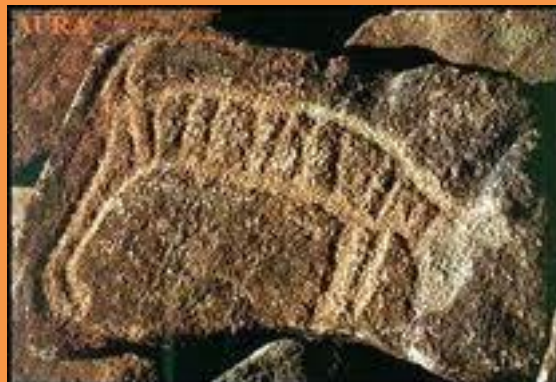
Yes, you are right. Since hundreds of thousands of engravings are scattered over an area of 88 sqkm, you must have a good eye to spot them. If you look for evenly formed rock surfaces either lying horizontally or standing vertically, you have a better chance to see them.



Emus



a kangaroo



The Tasmanian Tiger

Some of these rock engravings display typical Australian animals : emus (left), kangaroos (right), the now extinct Thylacine or Tasmanian Tiger (centre), platypuses and so on. Interestingly, you can also find engravings depicting whales. Some of these images are so detailed that you can even identify particular species !



Large engravings such as those under our eyes represent some kind of corroboree or ceremony.

Some of these are believed to be more than 20,000 years old and this collection has obviously been completed over long periods of time.



Bunna, what kind of animal is this ?

Well, it is not an animal but a human face. Archaeologists have pointed out that there are not only naturalistic representations of humans and animals but also figurative images such as this stylised human face. You must understand that these engravings were done over generations and generations of Aboriginal tribes. So, in a way, this one is more « modern » in style !

Composite images such as this one are harder to decipher. It is believed to represent a hunting scene where human and animal figures are connected to long poles that could well be spears.





a platypus



a billabong

Bunna, what can we do to preserve this unique place ?

The problem is that most Australians are almost entirely ignorant of its existence. So, maybe the best way to raise public awareness is to come and visit it as a tourist ! Tourism can be a source of income for the locals and it may be a good argument to slow down the industrial expansion in this area. I do hope that your visit will help in some way.

I sincerely do too.

I hope that our readers will be inspired by your Dreamtime stories and feel concerned by your vanishing Aboriginal heritage. As teachers, we have the duty to contribute to a collective sense of identity by introducing other cultures in our classrooms.

On behalf of all of us, I thank you Bunna for taking us in the footsteps of your Dreamtime heroes. It was a fabulous journey thanks to all the lessons you taught us !

Thank you for coming all the way to the Land Down Under and showing so much interest in Aboriginal art and culture !



modern Aboriginal painting

If you want to go back to *The Land Down Under* with your students, why don't you set up an interdisciplinary project with your colleagues ?

Here are some ideas to be exploited :

- English and art : *an exhibit on Australian Aboriginal Art of the Dreaming / symbolism in Australian Aboriginal art / ...*
- English and history : *going back to the Dreamtime / Uluru and Lascaux : cave paintings / ...*
- English and geography : *The Land Down Under / The discovery of Australia / ...*
- English and French : *poetry to voice the unsaid / recordings of Dreamtime stories for a sound library / ...*
- English and drama : *dramatizing the myths of the Dreamtime for a class performance / ...*

➤ For book references, go back to Parts 1,2,3 and 4 and see our biography notes.



Aboriginal rock painting