

29th August 2025

The Australian People

&

Senator the Hon Murray Watt
Minister for the Environment and Water
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Wayiba my fellow Australians, Senator Watt,

An Open Letter on Woodside's North West Shelf Extension from Samantha Walker, Ngarluma manga (woman), Ngurrara-ngarli (Traditional Owner) of Murujuga

The North West Shelf project and the State government destroyed thousands of sacred sites when they built the North West Shelf, Karratha Gas Plant in the 1980s. Rock art that has been there since Ngurra Nyujunggamu (when our world was soft - the Dreaming), was destroyed. Sacred ceremony sites, women's places, beaches and creeks that our people called home for millenia - all destroyed by dynamite and bulldozers. This destruction, led by Woodside and the government, caused us harm that cannot be described in words. This trauma is still here. Our people never consented to this destruction. Not only did we not consent, but we were blocked from even coming near the area while dynamite blasted our sacred sites and bulldozers systematically destroyed our Ngurra (Country). For us, this was yesterday. We still feel this pain deeply. Since that destruction, our people have never been able to heal. In fact, our health, our economic wellbeing, and our social fabric have all deteriorated, while Woodside and the joint venture partners have made billions of dollars from our loss. In our culture, we mourn. We cry for this place. We have been crying for decades.



Figure 1 A sequence of Murujuga sacred sites being destroyed with explosives during the construction of the North West Shelf Karratha Gas Plant

What troubles us, is that the public record appears to have been scrubbed of the truth of what happened when Woodside built the gas plant. Many of the Elders who witnessed this destruction and were blocked from protecting the rock art, and the Country, are now dying, but they have passed their wangka (stories) on to us. We were raised on those stories.

Country and culture are our lifeblood, and the story of that place is one of devastation. It is the story of Woodside and the State government systematically destroying sacred rock art and marnda-ngarli (stones) for profit. Since then, they have prospered, while our people live in poverty. On the doorstep of these gas plants. We still live in poverty. My Nana died recently living in poverty, despite her and her late husband being Elders for a place where billions of dollars are made by Woodside and their joint venture partners. She died fighting for her Ngurra (country). She died in poverty. Those were her words.



Figure 2 A photo of an archaeologist recording sacred sites as the landscape is bulldozed. Aboriginal people were locked out and were unable to protect Country.

Australia cannot call itself a developed nation, a nation of principles, a nation of equality and equity, while allowing this history to be buried. Australia as a nation has allowed oil and gas companies to use dynamite on the most sacred landscape in the country, to make billions from that destruction, and at the same time allowed Ngarda-ngarli (Aboriginal people) to wither in poverty.

Now the government has once again provided permission for Woodside and its joint venture partners, BP, Shell, Chevron and Mimi to continue making billions from that gas plant. In doing so, the government are also permitting emissions that not only destroy our Ngurra (Country) but threaten lands and waters across the planet. The responsibility lies

not only with Woodside and the joint venture partners but also with the government and regulators who give their approval. I ask those who make these decisions to look hard in the mirror. I also ask you to look us in the eyes. To look my children in their eyes when you make these decisions about our Ngurra.

Woodside has told government that they have an agreement with Traditional Owners for the land where the gas plant sits. The land where our rock art and sacred sites were blown up with dynamite. But our Elders could not read or write when they were told to sign that milli-milli (paper) in the 1990s. Many Old People “signed” that paper writing X instead of their name because they were unable to read the 170-page legal document. That is not free, prior, and informed consent. In fact, Woodside only sought a Land Agreement a decade after they built and started selling gas from the Karratha Gas Plant. By that time they had already made billions. How can it be prior consent when they had destroyed our sacred sites a decade prior? Now that many of us can read and write, we can see that this agreement was unjust. So too is the Burrup and Maitland Industrial Estates Agreement (BMIEA), which the State drove our people to sign in the 2000s so Woodside could build yet another gas plant (Pluto) on our sacred Ngurra (Country). My Elders talk about how they were told to sign that agreement or get nothing. Many now reflect that nothing would have been better – as the scraps that have come our way have caused nothing but harm.

We have told the government again and again that we did not consent in the 1990s (how could we, the Land agreement was signed by those who couldn't read, *after* the Karratha gas plant was built), and we do not consent now to its extension. Let me be clear: Woodside and the joint venture partners do not have consent from Traditional Owners for the operation of the Karratha Gas Plant, and they certainly do not have consent to extend its life to 2070.



Figure 3 The carvings in the marnda-ngarli (rocks) of Murujuga are by my Old People. Created in what is often called 'the Dreaming'. These are sacred and are not only part of our Lore, culture and ceremony, but are a part of the story of all humankind.

We are not opposed to resource development. Our people have worked with many major companies in recent years, even where it meant impacts to Country. We know we must be practical. But we cannot give consent to those who have led the systematic destruction of our sacred places without ever showing true respect to our Elders and our community. Now is the time they must show respect to not only our Elders, many of whom are dying, but to our gurlu gurlu (babies/children), who will inherit this pain and responsibility.

And they must show respect to your gurlu gurlu (babies/children), whoever you are, wherever you come from, whatever the colour of your skin. Whether you are a Minister, or a citizen of Australia. It is your children who will inherit the dry rivers near your home, the bushfires that you fear every summer, and the drying earth under your feet. It is not only our Ngurra (Country) that is impacted, the oil and gas leads to the impacts to all.



Figure 4 Sacred rock art of a turtle, which was a message for Ngurrara-ngarli (Traditional Owners) and the Marga (spirits) in the foreground, and Woodside's Gas Plant burning in the background. Sites like the Turtle once covered the Gas Plant area but were destroyed to make way for the gas plant

The government itself has recently acknowledged that Murujuga is *“under threat of injury or desecration.”* Let us be clear — Murujuga has been desecrated for decades. That is our lived experience. Our sacred places have been destroyed in front of us, and the destruction continues.

Minister Watt, you must now take action. You must declare a protection order over Murujuga under Section 10 of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act. We, as Ngarda-ngarli, have already declared such an order in a cultural way through our Lore. You could call it a ‘protection order’. In our Law/Lore, protection orders are binding and sacred. They come from Mingala (the Creator), and we are here to implement these cultural laws. We have done so since the creation, Ngurra Nyujunggamu, or in

western science, for over 65,000 years. But Woodside and the government have ignored our cultural protection orders. They must stop ignoring our culture and our Lore. At a minimum, Minister Watt, you must use your powers to match the authority of our Lore by declaring a protection order across the cultural landscape.



Figure 5 Woodside's Karratha Gas Plant burns over sacred rock art. Approval of the North West Shelf extension will allow operation of the gas plant until 2070.

Minister Watt, you must also tell us — the Ngurrara-ngarli (Traditional Owners) and our representative bodies, and the Australian people — the conditions the government has drafted for Woodside to continue to operate the Gas Plant. The State and Commonwealth have both given Woodside the green light to extend the Gas Plant. These conditions affect our Ngurra, our culture, and our social fabric. Yet once again, we are being locked out of the process, just as we were in the 1980s when our voices were silenced.

How can the government approve an extension to a gas plant that has never had free, prior, and informed consent from our people? How can the government impose conditions on oil and gas companies without ensuring that those companies have first secured our consent? This is not the 1980s. Consent — real consent — that must be the starting point. Consent must be a condition. Stop making us beg. And the government and Woodside must think hard about how a people that have been left to wither in poverty can make informed decisions. We cannot engage on equal footing with the lawyers, consultants, and executives of the billion-dollar companies, when we live in poverty.

This morning, we buried a little baby in Ieramugadu. Tomorrow, our community will bury an Elder. We cannot continue seeing our people suffer and die in such devastating circumstances.

Stop leaving our communities sitting in our dilapidated, overcrowded homes, built from asbestos, down the road from a gas plant making billions of dollars. Don't leave us here wondering what decision you will make about our Country. Stop locking us out.



Figure 6 The view from Karratha of emissions and smoke pouring from Woodside operations at Murujuga

We look at our peers, what we call Ngurrara-Ngarli (Traditional Owners), in places like Canada and Aotearoa (New Zealand), where their government and agreements embed free, prior, informed consent. Many mob in these places have equity and decision-making rights. And these rights lead to a more equitable society. In these scenarios where mob are treated with equality, everyone is better off – not just Traditional Owners. Australia has decided not to join these nations on the global stage by ensuring the right of Indigenous people are taken seriously. Now it is time to join them. For Australia to step up.

We know Woodside and government cannot undo the destruction that has already taken place at Murujuga. But the government can, at the very least, ensure the right protections are put in place now, and that our culture and Lore are respected in every future decision. So, we are not treated like an afterthought. Shareholder profit, and the bonuses of super-rich CEOs must no longer be prioritised over the poorest and most vulnerable who live on the doorstep of a gas plant that embodies the destruction of our culture. Or be prioritised over the Australian people, whoever you are, wherever you are, and your children's future.

This is not only about us, Ngarda-ngarli (Aboriginal people). This is about the kind of future we want for all children. That the Australian people want for their children. It is time

for these companies, and for government, to stop putting profit and shareholders above the rest of us, above Country, and above life itself.

On behalf of my people, we ask the Australian people to stand with us. We ask Minister Watt to do what is right. To address the awful inequity within our community - a community in which Woodside and the North West Shelf joint venture partners have operated for decades. Our Ngurra (Country) cannot speak. So we speak for Ngurra. Enough harm has occurred. It is time to set it right.



Samantha Walker,
Ngarluma manga (woman)
Ngurrara-ngarli (Traditional Owner) of Murujuga

Statement to media: Please understand that this process, these letters and statements are painful for us to make. I will not be responding to texts and calls over the coming days, as I need to focus on my community and children. We are in mourning for our Country, and our people who are dying. Our community is barely able to keep our head above water, and my attention is needed here in Ieramugadu. Thank you for respecting my wishes.