

Jabiluka Sacred Sites Set For Destruction

21 May 1999

Construction of the proposed Jabiluka uranium mine is set to destroy one of the most important Aboriginal sacred site complexes in Northern Australia in the next 24 hours.

Mining company, Energy Resources of Australia, have defied the Federal Government, the Northern Land Council and all acknowledged Aboriginal custodians by lifting a temporary suspension on blasting and drilling within the Boyweg-Almudj Sacred Site Complex.

The decision to desecrate the Boyweg-Almudj Sacred Site Complex has been made despite:

i) ERA failing to complete a Cultural Heritage Management Plan - one of the "strict and stringent" conditions on Commonwealth approval for Jabiluka - despite repeated offers by the Mirrar to assist in this process. Astonishingly, the Jabiluka Project is being constructed without any project-specific assessment of the impact of the Jabiluka Project on Aboriginal people or their cultural values.

ii) Senator Robert Hill's department advising the Minister that:

"There remains potential for significant adverse impacts upon World Heritage and National Estate values, especially indigenous values, but an estimate of the magnitude of the risk cannot be made in the absence of adequate baseline data." (Jabiluka Environmental Assessment Report, p.125)

iii) The World Heritage Committee identifying the Boyweg-Almudj Sacred Site Complex as an "integral" part of the cultural values of the Kakadu World Heritage Area.

iv) All acknowledged Traditional Owners and Custodians for the site, together with Aboriginal people representing Aboriginal communities throughout Arnhemland and Kakadu, publicly pleading for protection of this sacred and dangerous area. (Statements available)

v) The Northern Land Council, party to the disputed Jabiluka Mining Agreement, calling for construction to halt before entering the sacred site complex and recommending registration of the site complex.

vi) The sacred and dangerous nature of the Boyweg-Almudj Sacred Site Complex being identified by anthropologists as early as 1978.

vii) The Senior Traditional Owner for the Mirrar people, Yvonne Margarula, personally explaining the destructive consequences of site disturbance for the Aboriginal people of the region to ERA executives and the Federal Government.

Last minute talks between ERA and the Mirrar broke down after ERA refused to comply with the Commonwealth requirement that cultural values be assessed before construction. ERA demanded that the Mirrar assist in site identification while the sacred sites were being destroyed.

The future of cultural integrity in the Kakadu region now rests with Senator Robert Hill who is currently considering an application for protection of the Boyweg-Almudj Sacred Site Complex under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act. Senator Hill must decide whether the site complex is significant to Aboriginal people and under immediate threat of injury or desecration.

Senior Traditional Owner for the Mirrar people, Yvonne Margarula said through an interpreter:

“We have found this whole process humiliating. Even when we offer everything we cannot even have an assessment of our cultural values before they are disturbed. Now we know how our older relatives felt when they were disbelieved, insulted and destroyed.”

“I asked ERA why they were insisting on desecrating this area when a proper assessment has not taken place and when they know how concerned all Aboriginal people are about this destruction. Mr Shirvington said, ‘Oh, they’re just you’re beliefs’.”

“They have asked us to keep talking while they blast and drill in our sacred areas. We can’t see any point in further talks. They do not take us seriously.”

“They don’t think we’ve learned anything from our elders. They don’t believe our cultural values have any meaning. ”

“They are trying to destroy us, but we will fight until we die.”

For more information, interviews or copies of statements from Kakadu/Arnhem elders contact Jacqui Katona or Mathew Fagan on (0417 814470).