In 2003, it was the first location in Australia to be put on the World Monuments Fund’s list of the 100 most endangered sites. The site was included on the Natural Heritage List in 2007. It was described as being “quintessentially Australian” and — a place of unparalleled artistic, cultural, religious and historic significance, as well as a place of magnificent natural beauty.

Today I want to address concerns about the future of cultural and environmental protections in the Dampier Archipelago, particularly the Murujuga peninsula. I am proud to congratulate Friends of Australian Rock Art on winning the Western Australian Heritage Award this year recognising its contribution as a community-based organisation. The judge’s citation gave the following praise —

The volunteer group’s efforts have helped bring national and international recognition of the global cultural heritage significance of one of the densest concentrations of petroglyphs in Australia.

Considering this well-deserved award and the “global cultural heritage significance” of Murujuga, I would like to address the pressing threats to the area and its history. Murujuga spans some 118 square kilometres located 1 260 kilometres north of Perth in the Pilbara. The archipelago was formed within the last 10 000 years after the encroaching seas of the ice age closure created the 42 distinct islands. Murujuga is home to the world’s densest and most diverse known collection of Aboriginal rock art —that is, petroglyphs. The art is dated at around 30 000 years old, which makes it older than Stonehenge, the Lascaux caves in France and the pyramids of Giza. Both Stonehenge and the Lascaux caves are inscribed on the World Heritage List. The Murujuga petroglyphs embody changes in Aboriginal culture and the environment over the course of tens of thousands of years. The number of petroglyphs at sites throughout Murujuga is estimated to reach over one million, and the petroglyphs include hundreds of different motifs. At other sites of petroglyphs, only handfuls of variations are present. The illustrations of human faces located in the patina red stones are the oldest in the world. The creative designs of people, abstract, geometric patterns, and animals are entirely unique to Murujuga.

As the ice age ended, marine animals appeared in the art joining the Tasmanian tiger and the yet-to-be identified fat-tailed kangaroo in the collection of animals. Not only is this art and the world it describes of phenomenal interest to the scientific community, but the area is sacred to our first peoples. Some of the petroglyphs also serve practical purposes as social records and portrayals of ceremonies that show the influence of contact with other Aboriginal peoples. With standing stones that serve as landscape markers and abundant archaeological artefacts and sites such as middens, quarries, stone fishing traps and hunting hides, the peninsula is a gallery of Aboriginal technology.

Murujuga and its enduring history deserves continued preservation. Murujuga remains under threat from industrialisation that began in the 1960s with the construction of the iron works and the solar salt fields. Until 1972, no protection for Aboriginal heritage was in place, and only after this point were developers required to create impact assessments. In 2002, the National Trust of Australia placed Murujuga on its endangered places list. In 2003, it was the first location in Australia to be put on the World Monuments Fund’s list of the 100 most endangered sites. The site was included on the Natural Heritage List in 2007. It was described as being “quintessentially Australian” and — a place of unparalleled artistic, cultural, religious and historic significance, as well as a place of magnificent natural beauty.

In 2007, Malcolm Turnbull recognised FARA’s outstanding contribution as a group working to raise awareness of Murujuga’s unique heritage. Unfortunately, in 2011, Murujuga was removed from the state heritage list due to its classification that same year as “not a site”. It was no longer under the protection of the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 as a whole site. The Australian Heritage Council conducted a survey assessing the risks and outstanding values of the site. The report estimated that 16.4 square kilometres had been highly impacted by industrialisation in Murujuga. Only three areas on Murujuga have protected area status under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972: the famous “Climbing Men” site, the northern area of Murujuga and sites in the Dampier salt lease. A deadline for an inquiry and a report into the duty of the federal government to protect rock art has been extended three times. The report was initially to be completed by 21 March this year, but that deadline has now been postponed until 18 October.

Murujuga and its turbulent interactions with environmental protections has placed us all at a historical tipping point. With FARA’s award bringing Murujuga to the forefront of heritage discourse once more, it is now clearer than ever that the protection of Murujuga cannot be delayed any longer. In a submission to the inquiry committee, FARA recounted the steady incline in vandalism. Vandalism of the site was confirmed in 2003 and over time several separate instances of vandalism have been reported by the ABC. In 2012, re-evaluation of Murujuga’s eligibility for a UNESCO World Heritage listing found that it was eligible according to two of the 10 criteria. In
2005, a report by the heritage division of the Department of Environment and Heritage found that it was eligible for four criteria. Only one criterion is necessary for World Heritage listing. Of the 19 current World Heritage sites in Australia, four mention cultural significance to Aboriginal Australians. Murujuga would be a historic fifth site.

Under sections 15B and 15C of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, the commonwealth has a duty to protect the Dampier rock art complexes and its inclusive archaeological sites as a national heritage site. If the site were to be World Heritage listed, Murujuga would be heavily protected by international bodies as well. The World Heritage Convention asserts that as a state party, Australia —

… recognizes that the duty of ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations … belongs primarily to that State.

Not only does the heavy industrialisation of the region threaten the integrity of the rock art and archaeological sites, but it also endangers the environment to risk of ammonia leaks, which would also breach the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. Other environmental risks include pollution causing acid rain that would bleach the rock art. Industrialisation of Murujuga and the Dampier Archipelago, simply put, is ignorant and unacceptable. I propose that a nomination for World Heritage listing be submitted to the World Heritage Committee secretariat before 1 February 2018, as that is the deadline for nominations. A listing would phenomenally increase awareness of and education about Aboriginal rock art nationally and internationally.

The responsibility for the protection of Murujuga lies with this Parliament. I thank the Premier, Mark McGowan, for his support for World Heritage listing for Murujuga. He said on the ABC —

… it is a beautiful area and I support World Heritage listing.

Only the federal government can submit this nomination, so I call on members of this Parliament to finally do the right thing and nominate Murujuga to the federal government.