Watarrka National Park is the first test of new NT oil and gas policy

The Central Land Council congratulates the traditional owners for taking their long battle against oil, gas and mining operations in their park to Canberra on Tuesday, 24 November, where they are lodging an emergency application with Commonwealth Environment Minister Greg Hunt.

CLC Director David Ross has called on Northern Territory Chief Minister Adam Giles to urgently clarify whether exploration and mining in Watarrka (Kings Canyon) National Park would be allowed under the NT’s new oil and gas policy.

“The Chief Minister’s announcement about tighter regulation of onshore oil and gas development, while short on detail, seems to imply a welcome reversal of the government’s refusal to prohibit oil and gas exploration in the iconic park,” Mr Ross said.

“The traditional owners of the park have long voiced their strong and consistent opposition to the granting of exploration licenses to Palatine Energy covering the whole of the park.”

“After asking the NT government to rule out exploration there since 2012 they have just won the support of NT opposition leader Michael Gunner,” he said.

Mr Gunner has given a firm undertaking at the CLC meeting at Utopia not to allow mining in Watarrka against the wishes of the traditional owners.

“For three years their concerns have fallen on deaf ears with Mr Giles. Here’s a chance for him to match his opponent’s clear commitment,” Mr Ross said.

Today’s heritage application asks Minister Hunt to intervene to protect the park, which is vulnerable to exploration and mining under current NT law.

Mr Hunt supports Mr Giles’ intention to make ‘areas of ecological value’ and ‘areas of cultural significance’ off limits for oil and gas exploration.

Watarrka National Park qualifies on both counts, according to the NT government’s own plan of management. The plan identifies the park as an ‘internationally significant conservation area’ and a ‘living cultural landscape’.

A decision to exempt the park from exploration and mining will be the first test of the strength of the Chief Minister’s commitment to the policies he has announced.

“After three years of stonewalling it’s time he made a decision on the future of the park,” Mr Ross said.

“The CLC and traditional owners of the park will accept nothing less than a decision to protect the park for future generations by prohibiting exploration or mining within its boundaries.”

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