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Banjima elder voices dismay over proposed Wittenoom memorial in Karijini as online petition gains traction

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📷 A warning sign at Wittenoom. Credit: @juliigee/ Instagram/@juliigee/ Instagram



A Banjima traditional owner has expressed his dismay over a proposal to construct a permanent memorial at Karijini honouring those who have died from Wittenoom's asbestos pollution.

An online petition launched by the Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia has received more than 4600 signatures of the 5000 goal as of December 14 and calls for a memorial at Karijini National Park with the names of Wittenoom workers, residents, traditional owners and family members who have lost their lives to asbestos-related diseases.

Senior Banjima elder Maitland Parker said the petition provided no real emphasis on the lives of Aboriginal people who have contracted mesothelioma because it was their home and cultural site to care for.

“The Banjima people are dismayed that there is a proposal to erect a monument to commemorate the impact that Wittenoom had on mostly non-Aboriginal people ... and that monument potentially is going to be erected on our native title lands without any consultation,” he said.

“This just adds to our dismay of what has taken place in the Parliament this week with the passing of the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Bill.

“This highlights the fact that Aboriginal people continue to not be considered or consulted properly when we have been fighting hard to protect our sites and country for so long but we are prevented from making decisions.”

It comes as a petition calling on the State Government to identify who was responsible for the contamination of Wittenoom, the cost of the clean-up and to communicate when and how they would do this was tabled in State Parliament in October.

“The Banjima people have been petitioning the Government to identify who is responsible for cleaning up this dangerous mess and who is going to pay for it,” Mr Parker said.

“Building a monument does not address the underlying issue that there is still a dirty great mess that needs to be cleaned up before it causes more sickness and loss of life.”

ADSA chief executive Melita Markey said the memorial would serve a dual purpose.

She said it would acknowledge the lives lost for mining development and deter people from visiting Wittenoom.

“You might drive around the streets of Perth and see those crosses with flowers on it if someone has passed away from a vehicle accident and people have somewhere to go and grieve, but with people lost from Wittenoom, you can’t go back there because it’s completely contaminated,” Ms Markey said.

“And we really see it now as critically important when we realised the absolute enormity of the tourism going on there.”

Considered to be the most contaminated site in the southern hemisphere, the town has more than 2000 deaths linked to its blue asbestos mining operations in the 1960s.

In August, the Wittenoom Closure Bill was reintroduced in State Parliament to enable the compulsory acquisition of 14 remaining privately-owned properties in the town.