Sacred sites set to lose status

AUSTRALIA’S sacred site of Uluru would not qualify as a heritage site under new definitions by the WA government applying to sites requiring protection.

Thousands of sites could be struck off the state’s heritage register and stripped of protection under a new requirement that religious activity be performed on the site in order to qualify as a site under WA’s Aboriginal Heritage Act.

The new definition only came to light in a letter to the Widi native title group about the Mongers Lake Waterway, a large series of lake systems 260 kilometres northeast of Perth. The letter from the state heritage registrar declared the area was no longer recorded as an Aboriginal site under the act because it lacked evidence that “religious activities” had occurred there.

“For the place to be considered a sacred area it requires that a religious activity had to occur at this place rather than just a belief or the presence of an Ancestral Being,” registrar Tanya Butler told the Widi group.

But in expert reports lodged with the registrar in 2005, 2008 and 2010, the lakes were described as “highly significant” as a mythological route for the Beemarra, an ancestral snake.

Yamatji Marlpa chief executive Simon Hawkins, for the Widi, said the clause was a surprise to everyone and “a gross misunderstanding of Aboriginal spiritual and cultural practices”.

“Many places that are sacred to Aboriginal people are not meant to be accessed, either by a specific gender, or at all,” he said.
A famous example was Uluru, where the Anangu people of Central Australia did not perform ceremonies on Uluru, and preferred that visitors didn’t climb it. He said proposed amendments to the Heritage Act would further strengthen the government’s power to unilaterally decide what constituted Aboriginal heritage.

Aboriginal leaders from across the state gathered on the steps of WA Parliament House yesterday in a protest against changes to the heritage laws and plan to close dozens of remote Aboriginal communities.

Pilbara leader Doris Eaton said Aborigines were “not saying no to mining companies on our land but we want them to come and discuss our concerns”.

WA Labor Indigenous Affairs spokesman Ben Wyatt said the new heritage definition was calculated to deliberately exclude sites of significance to Aborigines. “There is no requirement for a non-Aboriginal ‘sacred’ heritage sites, like a Christian church, to be in constant use in order to have heritage value,” he said.

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