

THE AUSTRALIAN

Preserve underground wonder

Until now, few Australians knew of the extraordinary world beneath the arid Nullarbor Plain. Saturday's photographs revealed a spectacular subterranean world of ancient caves, lakes and rock holes rich in scientific evidence of past environmental events. As Christine Middap reported, scientists are leading opposition to a proposal to build one of the world's largest green energy hubs above the caves that would involve 3000 wind turbines and 60 million solar panels across 2.29 million hectares of crown land and pastoral leases.

The proposed development raises serious concerns about the impact of renewable energy projects on pristine environments and ancient heritage, as well as practical economics.

As Chris Uhlmann wrote recently, building a grid based on widely spread wind and solar generators connected by 10,000km of transmission lines, backed up with pumped hydro, batteries and gas will be preposterously expensive. Costs will fall on business and households, and hurt the poor. Wind turbines and new transmission lines are highly disruptive. Communities in areas of rich agricultural lands threatened by such infrastructure are pushing back.

Stefan Eberhard, a cave scientist who has spent 42 years exploring the extensive underground network of caves and lakes

harbouring fossils, fauna and Indigenous rock art beneath the Nullarbor, told Middap the effect of such intense industrialisation on the plain would be akin to dropping a brick on a meringue. The shallow soils and thin crust that protect the giant limestone karsts (topography formed from the dissolution of soluble rocks such as limestone and dolomite), which honeycomb under the surface of the ground from years of seeping rain, are vulnerable to erosion. The formations reach back to the Pliocene epoch, 2.5 million to five million years ago.

Dr Eberhard and his fellow scientists are pushing for the site to be recognised as a World Heritage area. Twenty scientists have signed a letter to Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek, calling on the federal government to deal with the Nullarbor in the same way the federal government saved the Franklin River and the Queensland wet tropics.

They have a strong case. As cave scientist David Gillieson said: "The caves have preserved ancient underground landscapes, environmental histories and fauna that have remained frozen in time for hundreds of thousands and even millions of years."

It is too rich a heritage to sacrifice for energy technology that may not stand the test of time. If destroyed, the caves beneath the Nullarbor would be irreplaceable.

