

From Sacred Mountain to Open Pit: Mining in the Grasberg Mine in West Papua by Freeport McMoRan

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Figure 1. Artwork by Udeido Collective and Kevin ter Braak, Photograph by the authors, Wereldmuseum Leiden, June 2026.

Introduction

Papua, or West Papua is the Western half of an island located on the Australian continent (Free West Papua Campaign 2016). The land was claimed by Dutch settlers in 1828 and was later incorporated into the Dutch colonial empire as Dutch New Guinea. The island is now known as a province of Indonesia. When Indonesia gained independence in 1949, the Dutch refused to transfer sovereignty over Papua to the newly established United States of Indonesia. The Dutch government started to prepare Papua for their own independence, as the Papuans were ethnically and geographically seen as different from Indonesians. Dutch policy was framed as a mission to prepare Papuans for eventual self-determination, instead of immediate integration into Indonesia.

At the same time, West Papua was also known to have natural resources. These included the Ertsberg and the Grasberg, which are the biggest gold and the second largest copper mines in the world, which would later become important to one of the world's largest mining operations. The documentary *The Promise* (2025) includes the story of how the Grasberg mine started. In the documentary, the discovery of the Grasberg mine by the Dutch was described as a "large black wall with blue and green spots," which indicated a massive "copper-gold deposit". This was thought to be the "largest above ground outcrop" of the metal ore in the world at the time, and it remains one of the largest. The American company Freeport-McMoRan had planned to investigate the area as early as 1961, even negotiating with the Dutch government to ensure they could keep the mine if the area ever came under "Indonesian political control".

After the land was officially transferred to Indonesia in 1963, Freeport-McMoRan became closely intertwined with the Indonesian state. The company became a "key political actor" for the new Indonesian regime rather than just a mining company (Kusumaryati 2021). Freeport-McMoRan signed a special contract with the Indonesian government. The company had so much influence that its own legal team actually helped write Indonesia's 1967 investment laws to ensure the mine would be protected as a "Vital National Asset". The Indonesian army is permanently stationed at the mine to guard the company's property. Major environmental changes resulted from the Grasberg mine's development, including river pollution, changed landscapes, and the displacement of Indigenous communities. These developments act as the basis for this research.

Despite West Papua's historical and colonial connection to the Netherlands, it remains relatively unknown among the Dutch public. Activists and advocacy organizations have argued that the region receives limited public attention, despite ongoing environmental, political and humanitarian conflicts (Doolan 2021). This limited visibility provides an important context for understanding contemporary West Papuan (ecological) activism. The foreign journalists are not let into the country and many activists have been tortured, and killed, or face jail time for raising the West Papuan flag (Harsono 2023).

Within this research, we will look at the question: *How does mining by Freeport-McMoRan at the Grasberg mine produce ecological injustice within extractive practices and Indigenous marginalization in West Papua?* To answer this question, we first analyze how Freeport-McMoRan has transformed and disrupted the relationship between Indigenous communities and, land, nature, identity in West Papua. Thirdly, we will explore the political, economic, and extractive mechanisms that produce these environmental transformations. Lastly, we will look at how activists, public initiatives, and cultural representations show resistance and challenge the ecological injustice caused by Freeport-McMoRan in West Papua.

We will do this by using multiple methods, such as literature research to support and contextualize our findings, we will conduct two interviews with people who are professionally and activistically involved with this topic: Raki Ap, the international spokesperson of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) and Indigenous consultant on biodiversity, and Fadjar Schouten-Korwa, a lawyer with expertise in climate justice and Indigenous rights law, and Chair of the Cooperating Organizations for West Papua Foundation. Furthermore, we visited the Wereldmuseum Leiden to explore the exhibition about West Papua's cultural and historical representations. Lastly the documentary *The Promise* was analyzed, which addresses the colonial history and ongoing ecological and social consequences in West Papua.

Theoretical Framework

To examine the ecological injustices associated with Freeport-McMoRan's Grasberg mine in West Papua, this research draws on five interconnected concepts: Capitalocene, Cosmological Desiccation, Other-than-Human Persons, Plantation logic, and thick solidarity. Together, these concepts offer an analytical lens to look at how ecological injustice is produced, transformed, maintained, legitimized and challenged.

This framework begins with the term *Capitalocene* (Miéville 2014) because it highlights the broader picture of the dynamics at play in what is happening at the Grasberg mine. Capitalocene derived from the term *Anthropocene*, which is a new geological period of time when human activities have had an environmental impact on the Earth. With its implied "we", claiming that all humans are equally attributed to environmental destruction, critics of the term prefer to use the term Capitalocene. This emphasizes that environmental destruction is driven by capitalistic systems organized around extraction and economic growth. Viewed through this lens, the Grasberg mine is a clear example of this: local Indigenous communities and their environment are forced to become sources of extraction for economic growth (Kusumaryati 2021). Furthermore, to understand ecological injustice it is important to look at more than economic structures alone. It's also important to look at how communities understand and relate to the environments in which they live.

In addition to looking at capitalist systems, it is also important to examine how certain Indigenous communities relate to the environment they have lived in for centuries in order to address ecological inequality at the Grasberg mine. Here is where the term *Other-than-Human Persons* comes into play (Willerslev 2004). Instead of viewing mountains, rivers, forests and animals as 'passive objects' separated from humans, many Indigenous communities see them as living and breathing entities equal to humans. With the idea that they should live in harmony with each other. This ontology stands in contrast to the extractive approaches that view the environment as a source of economic value. Ontology shapes cultural understanding of existence, categorizing relationships with humans and non-humans (Schnegg 2021). The reduction of the mountain to property creates the conditions for the next term. Building further on this idea, the concept of *Cosmological Desiccation* helps explain what is lost when these relationships between Indigenous communities and their environments are disrupted (Chao 2022). While the previous concepts explain the broader economic structures and their ecological, cultural and spiritual consequences, the following concept *Plantation logic* is introduced. In addition to changing labor relations and land ownership, the material and political structures outlined by *Plantation Logic* also change Indigenous perspectives on the world.

Plantation Logic is a way in which material and ideological structures, such as extraction, racialized surveillance, and economic accumulation, continue and move into current spaces (McKittrick 2013). While originally associated in relation to plantation economies, this can also be applied to current extractive projects. In the context of the Grasberg mine, Plantation Logic shows how environments get transformed as sites of resource extraction and economical gain. This concept functions as a bridge between the structural focus of the Capitalocene and the lived consequences seen through Other-than-Human Persons and Cosmological Desiccation. Chao 's (2022) idea of the disenchanted landscape, which builds on the ideas of Other-than-Human Persons and Cosmological Desiccation, illustrates how extractive practices turn landscapes from dynamic social and spiritual realms into commercially viable areas.

As a final concept, this research uses the concept of *thick Solidarity* to understand how ecological injustice is challenged. Thick solidarity refers to a form of allyship that goes further than symbolic support and instead focuses on acknowledging the irreversible nature of (past) racist and colonial experiences, instead of minimizing differences (Fitz-Henry 2021). This concept can specifically be applied to the work of Papuan activists, cultural institutions, public initiatives, cultural representations within the media and exhibitions.

Indigenous relationship with nature and their disruption

The Grasberg mine is, as mentioned, not just an ordinary mine, but the biggest gold and the second largest copper mine in the world. Physically, it is big enough to be seen from space. This massive transformation from a sacred peak into an enormous artificial crater illustrates the Capitalocene in action: a system where economic profit and resource extraction are prioritized over the survival of both human and non-human life worlds.

The Indigenous Amungme and Kamoro communities have lived in harmony with this landscape for over 60,000 years (Ap 2026). Schouten-Korwa (2026) mentions that the community doesn't see a strict distinction between human and nature, they see the mountain as "their mother and the river as its arms". In this ontology the mountain is an other-than-human person, a 'holy ancestor' that provides both physical sustenance from the rivers and spiritual wisdom. This aligns with the concept of *dispersed ontologies*, where the land is not just territory but a vital source of identity and spirituality (Chao 2022).

On the other side, the Indonesian government and Freeport-McMoRan see the mountain as a 'passive object', a collection of gold and copper worth billions (Kusumaryati 2021). The mountain was given "Vital National Asset". This means that it has legally been reduced to a strategic property owned by the state in which Freeport-McMoRan now owns 49% of the shares. The ontology of the company is based on the Enlightenment thought in which nature consists of mechanical 'objects' that can be exploited for profit, rather than 'subjects' (Fitz-Henry 2022). Just like nature, the Indigenous Amungme and Kamoro communities are also reduced to "material objects". As they have different opinions and values, they are seen as obstacles that stand in the way to 'economic growth'.

This is driven by what McKittrick (2013) described as Plantation logic. The blueprint of the plantation still exists in modern communities. It shows that the plantation is not a static historical event but a "migratory idea" that continues within modern ideologically and materially society. In West Papua, this blueprint is visible in the transition from Dutch to Indonesian rule, a process Schouten-Korwa calls a "copy-paste of the (colonial) system".

Although Indonesia emerged as a postcolonial state, its governance of West Papua functions as a "re-colonization," where it inherited and maintained the Dutch colonial structure of a layered, racialized society (Schouten-Korwa 2026). Within this "copy-paste" framework, the hierarchy remains intact: the former colonizer is simply replaced by a new central power, while the Indigenous Papuans remain at the bottom of the ladder. The territories of the Amungme and Kamoro were labeled as "uninhabitable" or "no one's land" to justify the transformation into industrial property. While the mine generates billions, less than one percent of this goes to the local population (Ap 2026). This suggests that the company does not

view the Indigenous peoples as equal partners, but, as Ap (2026) calls it, “second-class citizens” in their own country. The land and bodies are reduced to mere "material objects" that are valued solely on the basis of their capacity for extraction, productivity, and profit (McKittrick 2013). Freeport-McMoRan determines the definition of ‘human’ and who are made *Less-than-human* (‘objects’).

As in the historic plantation where violence was the “normal way of life” to ensure extraction this plantation logic is maintained by the ‘business-state-military nexus’ through surveillance and violence (Kusumaryati 2021). Freeport-McMoRan pays millions of dollars to Indonesian military forces for protection and to ensure economic stability. Schouten-Korwa mentions that his militarization is extreme, with an estimated ratio of one soldier for every 100 citizens. The Indigenous are treated as “Beasts” and are “dehumanized” (Schouten-Korwa 2026). This exclusion continues to shape contemporary relations between Indigenous communities, the state, and extractive industries. The State, Freeport-McMoRan and the army together produce the conditions under which their ontology becomes superior.

This enforced superiority directly causes what scholar Sophie Chao (2022) terms *Cosmological desiccation*. A progress where Indigenous people slowly lose the social, spiritual, and ecological bonds that sustain their way of life. Mining by Freeport-McMoRan inflicts cosmological violence by severing this social and spiritual bond between the Grasberg mine and its Indigenous caretakers. To turn the land into productive property for Freeport-McMoRan, the spiritual and reciprocal relationship between the Indigenous and the mountain must be violently broken. As activist Raki Ap (2026) notes, by destroying the mountain, Papuans lose both their "supermarket" (the river) and their cultural center. Through this process, they lose their autonomy and are forced to survive as “second-class citizens” within a colonial plantation system that has annexed their land for gold and copper. Within this Capitalocene logic, the destruction of Indigenous spiritual life is simply seen as an acceptable cost of doing business. Ultimately, they lose not only access to land but also access to the relationships through which personhood, memory, and belonging are constituted.

Extractivism and environmental transformations

Building on the previous section, which explored the disruption of Indigenous relationships with nature, this section examines the physical transformation of West Papua's landscape. Through mining, mountains, rivers, and forests are reconfigured according to the logics of extraction and profit. The ecological consequences of these transformations reveal how the Capitalocene operates in practice.

Because Freeport-McMoRan and the Indonesian government legally own the land through its status as a "Vital National Asset," they treat the landscape as an object to be possessed rather than a subject with rights (Kusumaryati 2021). Just as in the hierarchical structure of a historical plantation, nature is placed at the bottom of the rank, valued for the resources it contains. Within this framework, the mountain has been stripped of its status as a "holy ancestor" and reduced to a commodity or "strategic property". Before industrial mining began, the mountain was a unique geological marvel, appearing as a massive "great black wall with blue and green spots" of copper ore (Veldhuizen 2025). This process of objectification has transformed the "Sacred Mountain" into a literal "Open Pit".

The physical removal of the mountain can be understood as the materialization of the Capitalocene. While this system prioritizes profit, environmental justice requires acknowledging China Miéville's (2015) argument that there is no "we" without a "them". In West Papua, Indigenous communities and nature itself are the "them" who bear the material costs of state violence and pollution, while the state and Freeport-McMoRan are the "we", earning billions in profit (Ap 2026).

However, the transformation of Grasberg does not end with the removal of the mountain itself. The extractive logic extends into the surrounding ecosystems, where rivers and forests are also transformed into spaces of industrial production and waste disposal. The river system, seen by the Indigenous people as the "arms" of their mother, is used by the Freeport-McMoRan as a disposal site for industrial waste. Only 1% to 1.5% of the ore that is taken out of the mine is actually usable copper (Alonzo, Van Den Hoek & Ahmed 2016). The remaining 97% is discharged into the river system as mine tailings. This includes approximately 167 million metric tons every single day (Kusumaryati 2021). It is predicted that by 2041, a total of three billion tons of tailings will have been discharged into West Papua's waterways. Because the river cannot process this enormous amount of sediment, the river rises rapidly (Alonzo, Van Den Hoek Ahmed 2016). With a result of them overflowing and suffocating essential palm trees and local fruits. In the surrounding village of the mine concentrations of dissolved copper are now four times higher than natural background levels. This has severely damaged aquatic ecosystems, killing aquatic plants and disrupting the reproduction of fish and other freshwater species. According to

Schouten- Korwa (2026) and Ap (2026) this has led to cases of poisoning and skin conditions for humans. After all, they eat and bathe in this same river. Next to the pollution of the river an estimated 138 km² of forest was lost due to the mine's operations (Alonzo, Van Den Hoek Ahmed 2016). This is an area more than 42 times larger than the mine itself.

Chao (2022) calls this a transition to a "disenchanted landscape". This can be seen in the change from a lively forest into a silent industrial zone. Where nature was once a place of "polyphony", where the voices of humans, birds, and ancestors harmonized, there is now an "uncanny silence". The birds are gone, the rivers are toxic, and the sounds of the forest have been replaced by the sounds of bulldozers and machinery.

Within this Capitalocene, the nature of West Papua is treated as a collection of commodifiable units of exchange that may be sacrificed for global profit. Raki Ap points to the paradox that ecosystems in West Papua are also being transformed to support the global green energy transition. Copper from the Grasberg mine is used in technologies such as batteries and wind turbines, meaning that the mining is justified as a necessary price for the sustainability of the 'West'.

However, this definition of sustainability often doesn't show the environmental damage, displacement of communities, and damage to the spiritual connection between the local Papuans and nature. As a result, ecological injustice is not only visible in the damaged landscapes of West Papua, but also in the fact that these impacts often go unnoticed in global discussions about development and sustainability. It is this lack of attention that activists, cultural institutions, and public initiatives seek to challenge.

Resistance and Activism

Ecological injustice is not only experienced, as earlier mentioned, it is also challenged. Activists, cultural institutions and public initiatives play an important role in making invisible forms of ecological injustice visible. The final section of this research looks at how ecological injustice is challenged through activism, cultural representation, and public engagement.

Raki Ap claims that invisibility continues the ongoing ecological injustice in West Papua. Breaking the "dangerous silence" about West Papua in the Netherlands and around the world is the primary goal of this activism. He argues that "people cannot act if they do not know what is happening" (Ap 2026). This argument is further reinforced by Korwa-Schouten, who states that lack of visibility is not accidental; it is simply a conscious decision to gloss over a dark chapter of the colonial past (Schouten-Korwa 2026). As a result, many people are unaware of the environmental consequences of extractive industries such as mining at the Grasberg mine by Freeport-McMoRan. The question of (in)visibility also raises the issue of who gets to be seen and heard. During the interview, Raki Ap critiques Dutch environmental NGOs for focusing on endangered species like orangutans while remaining silent about the "ecocide" and the deaths of over 500,000 Papuans. This selective attention adds to the continued marginalization of Papuan experiences and their land. This supports Fitz-Henry's (2021) argument that a one-sided focus on multi-species justice, where the focus lies on only animals or ecosystems, voices of marginalized groups who fight for (ecological) justice can overpower. From this perspective, activism for the Papuan cause and their land can be understood through Fitz-Henry's concept of thick solidarity. Rather than simply demanding recognition, activists seek to build relationships between Indigenous communities, environmental organizations, scholars, and wider publics. As Ap argues, "Power is knowledge", suggesting that every conversation, regardless of setting, contributes to the "snowball effect" which can lead to a "revolution". For Ap, the setting is not important; what matters is mobilizing hearts and minds to dismantle the myth of powerlessness.

Cultural representations also add to this process of gaining more visibility. The documentary The Promise (2025), which was analyzed as a part of this research, shows the history of West Papua through the intertwined stories of colonialism, resource extraction, and Indigenous resistance. The documentary challenges current perspectives that show mining primarily as a source of economic growth by exposing the history of the Grasberg mine and the political dynamics that led to its development. Instead, it shows the environmental and social costs of extraction and foregrounds Papuan perspectives that are often missing from mainstream discussions. The same dynamic can be seen in the biggest exhibition (to date) on West Papua at Wereldmuseum Leiden. Instead of showing West Papua only as an object of

anthropological interest, the exhibition seeks to create space for contemporary Papuan voices and perspectives. Through contemporary artworks, newspaper articles, stories, videos, timelines, and cultural artefacts, visitors are encouraged to reflect on ongoing environmental and political issues in the region. Schouten-Korwa (who was directly involved in the exhibition) adds that a lot of information about West Papua is written from a “white perspective”, that’s why it’s important for Papuans themselves to tell their story. These types of representation can be thought of as steps in the emergence of public knowledge.

In conclusion, resistance against ecological injustice extends beyond political protest. Through activism, cultural representation, and public initiatives, Papuan voices are made more visible within dominant environmental narratives. These efforts contribute to ecological justice by highlighting that struggles at the Grasberg mine are not only about land and resources, but also whose knowledge and experiences are recognized.

Conclusion

This research has shown that mining by Freeport-McMoRan at the Grasberg mine produces ecological injustice through extractive practices and Indigenous marginalization in West Papua. By drawing on the concepts of the Capitalocene, Plantation Logic, Other-than-Human Persons, disenchanted landscape, Cosmological Desiccation, and thick solidarity, it becomes clear that the impacts of mining extend far beyond environmental degradation alone.

From Sacred Mountain to Open Pit. This reflects the broader processes explored throughout this research. For the Amungme and Kamoro people, the mountain is not merely a physical landscape but a living ancestor that forms part of a wider network of social, spiritual, and ecological relationships. Through mining, this relationship has been fundamentally disrupted. By reducing the mountain to a strategic resource and source of profit, Freeport-McMoRan and the Indonesian state have transformed a sacred landscape into an extractive space. In doing so, they undermine Indigenous connections to land, nature, and identity, while reinforcing forms of marginalization rooted in colonial and extractive power structures.

At the same time, mining has transformed the environment significantly. The removal of the mountain, the disposal of mine tailings into river systems, and large-scale deforestation have reshaped the ecosystems of West Papua to a 'new nature'. Rivers have become polluted, forests have been destroyed, and biodiversity has been severely affected. These changes illustrate how extractive practices transform living environments into what is described as a "disenchanted landscape" (Chao 2022). Yet the consequences of these transformations are not experienced equally. Indigenous communities bear the biggest environmental and social costs, while the economic benefits largely flow to Freeport-McMoRan, the Indonesian state, and global markets. Ecological injustice therefore emerges through both environmental destruction and the unequal distribution of its impact and benefits.

Papuan activists, cultural institutions, documentaries, and public initiatives challenge ecological injustice to make these processes visible. Most of these facts are absent in dominant narratives of development, sustainability, and green energy transitions. By centering Indigenous experiences and exposing the consequences of extraction, these actors challenge the silence surrounding West Papua and contribute to broader forms of solidarity and public awareness.

Ultimately, the Grasberg mine illustrates how ecological injustice is produced through the intersection of extractive practices, colonial power relations, and Indigenous marginalization. The transformation from sacred mountain to open pit is therefore not merely a physical vision of the landscape. It represents the conversion of a living world of mutual relationships into a site of extraction, where Indigenous identities, ecosystems, and ways of life are treated as acceptable sacrifices for economic growth and global demand for resources. From this perspective, the transformation from sacred mountain to open pit is not only the destruction of a landscape, but the disruption of a world in which humans, nature, and other-than-human beings exist as part of an interconnected whole.

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Appendix 1: Individual Reflection by Lisa Appels (2770504)

To be honest, I barely knew anything about this topic before we started. One of my teammates actually came up with the idea and was completely enthusiastic about it from the start. I hadn't really heard much about it before, but after doing some preliminary research and watching the documentary, I was totally hooked and fired up too. It was so exciting to dive into something completely new and just fully go for it, which allowed me to bring a lot of fresh energy into our research.

The interdisciplinary side of the project was a nice experience. We started out as a group of three: two anthropologists and one ISW student. Even though we mostly stuck to anthropology, we ended up bringing philosophy into it too (because it is in the course). I had never done philosophy at this high before, and I noticed that I really needed to make sure I kept my feet on the ground. Luckily, that was exactly the point of our topic since we were dealing with ecological and Indigenous justice, so keeping it grounded worked out perfectly and gave our research another turn.

As for the teamwork, it was a bit of a rollercoaster. In the beginning, we were all super motivated, and visiting the exhibition together was a really nice and fun way to start. My teammate was incredibly enthusiastic and hands-on throughout the whole thing, which made me enthusiastic too. But the final stretch went a bit rougher. At the very last moment, communication was lost with one of our group members and didn't deliver her parts. It caused stress and uncertainty, which is why we ultimately reached out and asked Aditi for help. We managed to get an extension, but since my other teammate was on vacation and I had another deadline, we had to be flexible. In the end, we just split the missing work between the two of us and got it done.

Looking back, I definitely learned that in future group projects, I need to check in with my teammates more often. If we had communicated more, we probably would have noticed things were going wrong earlier and could have adapted before it became a last-minute crisis. In the end, I am very happy with the result and glad that everything worked out, even though there were a few bumps on the end of the road.

Appendix 2: Individual Reflection by Olivia Klein Hesselink (8180148)

I was part of every stage of the research for this project. Before we started, I already knew some people in the Papuan community in the Netherlands because I went to a screening of The Promise documentary. This helped me shape the project and get in touch with people in the community.

My task was to set up all the interviews and help decide what we were going to research. Before the interviews I talked to Fadjar Schouten-Korwa to figure out what we were going to focus on. I also interviewed Raki Ap, went to Den Haag, wrote down what we talked about and worked with the interview recordings when we were analyzing the data. I also did part of our paper, helped with the literature review and took care of a lot of the practical things like scheduling meetings and making sure everyone had the information they needed. Throughout the project I made sure to keep everything moving forward. That we had all the information and materials we needed.

What I liked most about this project was that I got to work on something I really care about. I was happy that my group members were also excited about the topic when I first told them about it. Researching West Papua helped me learn more about colonialism, ecological injustice and Indigenous rights. It was also great that we could connect what we were learning to the literature from the course. I got to meet some inspiring people from the Papuan community and hear their stories. Talking to people who are actually involved in these issues made the project feel really meaningful and important. I am happy that because of our project some of my students now know a little bit more about West Papua and that it used to be a Dutch colony.

I learned that working with others on a research project can be good and bad. Sometimes I got frustrated when my group members did not do what they said they would do. For example, I needed some written work from my team member to do my part. It was often late even after I reminded them. This slowed down our project. There were times when we all agreed on tasks. Some people did not do them, so Lisa or I had to do them instead. I can understand that since I am an outgoing person who already knew a lot about the subject, I ended up doing more of the organizing.

This made me feel annoyed. Not because I did not want to do work but because when you work with others you need to be able to count on each other and talk to each other. As I am writing this on 17 June, we were supposed to have a meeting to finish the project. One team member did not show up and did not tell us anything. Maybe she had a reason. This shows how important it is to communicate clearly and be reliable when you work in a group.

With all the difficulties I thought this experience was really worthwhile. I learned a lot about working with people being part of a team and what it is like to do research with people involved, also from different educational backgrounds. I love working interdisciplinary because you get different insights and learn more. Importantly I got to work on a topic that I really care about and contribute to a conversation that I think is not happening enough in society and universities. Working on this project with my group taught me a lot about research within the context of Political Ecologies. I think that doing research together with different academic backgrounds like this is very valuable.