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Ruined Landscapes, Sweaty Bodies

ANNA TSING
Distinguished Professor of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Cruz; Professor of Anthropology, Aarhus University, Denmark
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0411-959X

FEIFEI ZHOU
terriStories
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3906-2376

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Abstract

This photo essay examines the ecological, social, and existential transformations wrought by sand mining in Sorong, Papua, where the relentless demand for concrete has reshaped both landscapes and human lives. Sand mining, driven by the forces of industrialisation and colonial legacy, fuels the growth of cities built on ecological ruin. Through the intertwined stories of settler miners and indigenous Papuans, the essay reveals how mining reduces both land and labor to extractable commodities: hills into sand and men into muscle and sweat.

Keywords

Concrete, sand mining, ruined landscapes, colonialism, Indonesia, indigenous Papuans, urban infrastructure, multispecies refuge.

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Concrete is made, in the main, from sand. As long as industrial civilisation makes concrete, along with fossil fuels, its basic building material, the search for sand must serve the obsession for building.

Where does all that sand come from, and what does its mining leave behind? Riverbanks are eroded, beaches disappear, and sandy hillsides become moonscapes. Cities rise up from ruined landscapes; eventually, we stop seeing the scars. It takes the grittiness of the frontier to refocus our attention. In the frontier town of Sorong on the coast of Papua, sand is mined in the hills behind the town, which faces the sea. Since Indonesian occupation replaced Dutch colonialism in the 1960s, miners have ventured into the sandy hills to bring out sand for the city's construction. Around 2000, the trickle of miners became a roar. What once were watersheds are now rushing drains of mud; what once were forests, gardens, and orchards are now scraped bare.

Mining is an encounter that changes both human bodies and land, transformed together. Men – and the miners are mainly men – are reduced to muscle and sweat, just as the land is reduced to sand and sediment. We have learned to glorify men as muscle and sweat – but consider how much more men can be. The sand miners in Sorong are both settlers from other parts of Indonesia and indigenous Papuans. The settlers told us of the places from which they had been amputated, their lives reduced to work and money. The Papuans told us of the birds, the plants, and the ancestral spirits that once occupied these ruined hills. Like the hills, they have been reduced. Muscles and sweat, abstracted, are hardly enough for a full life.

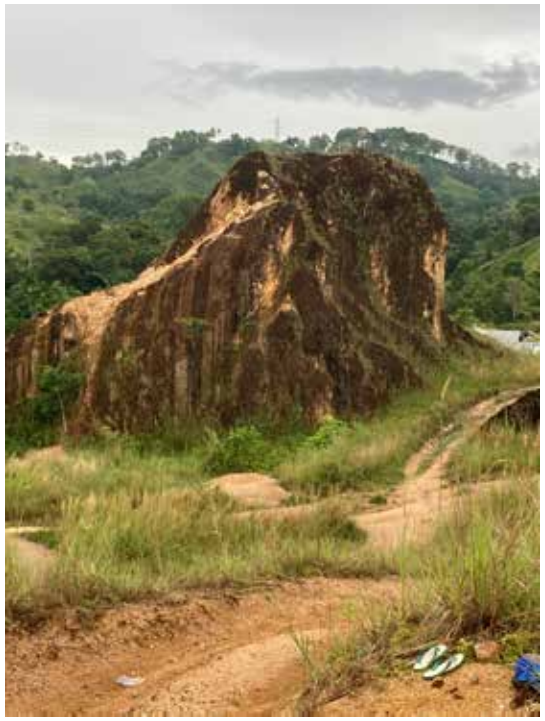
Sand mining in Sorong takes a number of forms. Those with access to capital use excavators, which most quickly and efficiently destroy the hillside. The sand, still mixed with clay and silt, is loaded on trucks to be washed at a commercial washing site. At the opposite end of the spectrum are villagers who dig sand – loosened from the hillsides by more destructive miners – out of their village stream. For the latter, digging is a necessity as well as a source of income. The sediment-filled water will flood the village if they don't keep removing the sand. They dig not just to sell sand but to avoid the ruin of the village.

Between these two ends of the spectrum is artisanal mining using high-pressure hydraulic hoses. Since the city government began to regulate the use of excavators, most mining has moved into this sector. The person who claims the land (itself a quagmire in this frontier setting where indigenous land claims conflict with national and settler acts of possession) contracts with the person who will manage the mining. Miners call the land claimant 'Boss One', and the mining manager 'Boss Two'. The latter puts forward money for the water pump, gas to run it, hoses, and building supplies for sluices and sandboxes. The latter also recruits labourers, who work for a percentage of the proceeds. These miners 'shoot' the hillside with high-pressure hoses. The water takes down the sandy soil, which runs through raised sluices into sand-holding boxes. The unregulated waste water washes off the lighter silt and clay, leaving most of the sand in the boxes. The miners then shovel it into trucks, which bring it to contractors. The sandy hills collapse; the concrete city rises.

In these photographs, we ask you to look at the colours and textures of transfigured men and landscapes as they are reformed together by the mining of sand in Sorong's hills.

In the encounter, landscapes
and bodies are made together.

Men, in all their destructiveness,
become a hard-to-perceive feature of
the cracked and battered landscape.



Many settler miners are from Timor and Flores, Indonesian labour-exporting areas of long precedence. Peter is a Catholic man from Flores who has been digging sand for many years. Now he works at a former excavation site, reduced to sandstone too hard for excavators or hydraulic hoses to easily pulverise. Some men smash the top of the rock with crowbars and wait for the rain to wash the sand down, where it can be piled and shoveled into trucks (see scraped sandstone). But Peter shovels sand from the sediment-filled stream that flows through the ruined area. His son died in a sand-mining accident. If his now-married daughter does not bring him food in the evening, he says, he eats nothing but rice and salt.

Settlers recruit each other, drawing same-ethnic fellows into mining. In the commercial sand washing businesses in Sorong, men from southern Sulawesi work together, living in meagre huts next to the sand-washing together with their wives and children and chickens. They spend their days covered in mud – and washing sediment-filled water into town, where it floods the streets and runs into the houses of their more fortunate compatriots in nicer parts of the city.

Mud and sand, arms and backs: these are the components of this transformation of bodies and landscapes.

Rugged and exceptional: one entrepreneur thought this could be a place for tourists. After all, clearing out impediments, living and nonliving, has left panorama views of the city below. Yet, of course, there are leavings, human and not human: gasoline jugs; abandoned lives.

The ruins are haunting. Past lives are turned to stone. We see gnomes and giants in the trash. And the spectres of lost villages. Fruit orchards; sago groves. The communal nests of shy megapodes and social wasps. The nasal cries of birds of paradise, dancing in high trees. The leap of a tree kangaroo. The stem-growing profusion of sweet langsat fruit. She said, telling of hiding from Indonesian soldiers in the forest: 'The cassowary ate langsat on one side of the tree; on another side it was the snake, and on the third side it was us.' Are those multispecies refuges gone?