

Report on 'At the Intersection: Pacific Climate Change and Resource Exploitation in West Papua' conference

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On November 3rd and 4th 2016, Western Sydney University (WSU) was host to the interdisciplinary conference 'At the Intersection: Pacific Climate Change and Resource Exploitation in West Papua', facilitated by the West Papua Project, a joint initiative of the University of Sydney and WSU. Generously funded by WSU's School of Humanities and Communication Arts, the conference was dedicated to the memory of Professor Peter King, co-founder of the West Papua Project and committed advocate for West Papuans' human rights, who passed away in August 2016.

The conference was prompted by increasing concerns amongst observers of the Pacific region that while West Papuan politics were boiling over, other Pacific Island territories were going under (water). The causes of each, we as organisers hypothesised, were related. West Papua's decolonisation movement centres on the politics of Indonesia's occupation of the territory which itself is driven by the exploitation potential of West Papua's land and mineral wealth. And resource exploitation in the Pacific, including mass deforestation in New Guinea, is one of the key drivers of climate change that is leading to the rising ocean levels submerging Oceanic islands. The conference enquired whether both catastrophes, since related, could be tackled using similar approaches.

'At the Intersection' had participants from West Papua, Indonesia, Australia, Vanuatu, Germany and Belgium. Presenters included climate scientists, social scientists, political scientists, politicians, human rights advocates, and climate change activists. Organisations and institutions represented included WSU, the University of Sydney, Cenderawasih University, the University of Queensland, the University of New South Wales, the University of Indonesia, the International Coalition on Papua, 350.org, Forest Peoples Programme, the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, AwasMIFEE and Jarat Papua.

The island of New Guinea, the most bio-diverse island on earth, contains vast swathes of rainforest, the world's third largest after the Amazon and the Congo. We heard from presenters that the western half of the island of New Guinea— West Papua—, is losing its forests through legal and illegal logging at breakneck speed and through clearing of land for palm oil estates, while mining of its extensive gold, copper and natural gas resources is taking a huge environmental toll in the highlands and along the coast. In addition the Indonesian government and transnational corporations have lodged over 50 licenses for coal mines in addition to substantial investment in drilling for oil. Land grabbing, intentional forest fires, timber cutting, palm oil plantations, mining and oil production are all accelerating climate change. At the same time the embroilment of Indonesian security forces in the plundering of West Papua, a process driven by military rackets and commercial interests of politicians and foreign-owned companies, is aggravating West Papua's independence movement as an entire people envision the imminent destruction of their lands and ways of life.

The second day of the conference made use of open space technology facilitation to elicit strategies for addressing these catastrophes and for forming discrete issue-based action groups. A set of plans for action were formulated, including to draw public attention to the foreign companies profiting from resource exploitation in West Papua, lobbying to include West Papua in international anti-palm oil campaigns, establishing a West Papua Forest Action Project network in Australia, supporting at least one West Papuan colleague to travel within the Pacific to facilitate inter-Indigenous networking on resource exploitation and climate change, producing a West Papua climate change video (this is something that 350.org is working on), and developing a campaign to take the issue to the United Nations.

As a result of the conference, ABC's 7:30 program ran a story on the destruction of palm oil plantations in Indonesia – with a feature on West Papua ('CSR Sugar Owner Linked to Palm Oil Deforestation': <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2016/s4589563.htm>), Radio International New Zealand ran an interview (West Papua Resources Fray Discussed Alongside Climate, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/317189/west-papua-resources-fray-discussed-alongside-climate>) and Dateline Pacific published a news article (Climate Change Link to West Papua Resource Exploitation Probed: <http://www.radionz.co.nz/international/programmes/datelinepacific/audio/201822386/climate-change-link-to-west-papua-resource-exploitation-probed>).