

Pacific: For indigenous communities, new seabed mining technologies could begin ‘the biggest land grab in history’

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Indigenous peoples in the Pacific have repeatedly mobilized to protect their ocean, rooted in their cosmological relationship with the liquid continent. Now there is a new challenge for those aiming to preserve the Pacific Ocean, with a looming deadline that will determine the fate of the largest and most mysterious habitat on Earth – the deep seabed.

The people and the Pacific are inextricably interconnected to one another: it is a symbiotic relationship of sacredness and respect. What happens to the land and in this case the sea directly impacts the inhabitants of the Pacific Islands. Deep seabed mining will result in social destruction, economic disruption and spiritual devastation. As the Clan Chief of Duke of York Islands in Papua New Guinea, has put it: ‘When they start mining the seabed they’ll start mining part of me.’

On the frontline of a new ‘gold rush’

Local communities and cultural practitioners whose livelihoods and existence on Earth depend on their relationship to the Pacific have organized against the latest wave of exploitation of their sacred homelands in Oceania. They are confronted, however, by powerful corporate interests. Around 30 contractors have already acquired exploration licences from the UN International Seabed



Using a *larung*, a shark caller rattles coconut shells in water to improvise an irritated school of tuna, a sound that sharks notice from many kilometers away. Shark Calling is an ancient fishing tradition deeply rooted in the ancestral wisdom of the Kontu inhabitants. Kontu, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. Credit: Claudio SieberCredit:

Authority (ISA) and are eagerly awaiting the decision on a new mining code at the 26th session of the ISA in July 2020. The session has now been postponed until later in the year, due to the coronavirus pandemic.

In most of the contractors' sights are the large deposits of rare earths and minerals on the seabed of the Clarion-Clipperton Zone, an immense and largely uncharted area in the North Pacific Ocean teeming with an array of marine life, including many unknown species. It's already being dubbed the new global gold rush, though the valuable metals here are nickel, cobalt, manganese and copper – all materials that play a central

role in the production of batteries, electronics and other technologies.

Yet their planned extraction collides directly with the cultural belief systems of the indigenous population, who believe the minerals mined from the seabed are constituted by the spirits originating from the Pacific Ocean. Once again, a pristine indigenous sacred space is being plundered for profit, with little or no regard for the human rights of the inhabitants and the wider Pacific.

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A living universe beneath the waves

Commercial extraction by the contractors has so far been put on hold pending agreement on the mining code. When the ISA votes on whether to grant commercial-scale exploitation licences to these companies, what will their decision be based on? Not the views of the Pacific peoples themselves, at least not directly, as this body still lacks indigenous representation despite calls to include them in decision-making. Will they factor in the profound spiritual value of this unique seascape to the communities who depend on it? Will they recognize that this area remains one of the last great enigmas of the natural world, an area that is still less well known and understood than the moon? Will they acknowledge that at present it is impossible to predict the damage that will be wrought on the ecosystem by these largely untested, highly invasive mining technologies?

While the mining industry regards the Clarion-Clipperton Zone as a potential windfall of commodities waiting to be extracted, indigenous peoples view it as a living system.

Its 'nodules' – the potato-sized lumps of rock lying on the seabed that the mining companies seek to uproot for the minerals and metals they contain – are themselves vested with meaning. Scientists and indigenous peoples both understand that the deep seabed is alive. In the words of Sylvia Earle, 'These living rocks are not dead stones – they are living systems.'

A way of life under threat

Solwara 1 was operated by Nautilus Minerals, a Canadian corporation, in Papua New Guinea and was – until the project's high-profile collapse in late 2019 – the world's first commercial deep sea mine site. It demonstrates the impact that mining has already had, even at the exploration stage, for indigenous peoples in the islands of the Pacific.

New Ireland's West Coast communities have been home to shark callers for centuries. Armed only with a *larung*, a rattle fashioned out of coconut shells and bamboo, the shark callers connect with various breeds of shark who then come to their boat before being caught by hand. This ancient fishing tradition, besides providing an essential source of protein, is deeply rooted in the ancestral wisdom of the Kontu inhabitants and their close connection to the sea.

In recent years, however, while exploration by Nautilus Minerals has been under way, the sharks have not returned. The noise from ships and large equipment, as well as contamination of the waters where the callers communicate with the sharks, now threatens this long-established practice. For local inhabitants, whose livelihoods and spiritual beliefs are intertwined with shark-calling culture, the effects have been devastating.

Many other indigenous peoples in the region face the threat of corporate colonialism. From nuclear testing to climate change, the Pacific – despite the deep-seated traditions of responsible stewardship of its communities towards the natural resources that sustain them – has been ground zero in the global environmental collapse brought on by excessive consumerism, unregulated growth and profiteering. Yet, though the catastrophe now playing out in many of the islands is plain to see, foreign companies and governments still plan to aggressively mine the seabed for anything they can find. This may or may not make their investors richer, but the world will undoubtedly be poorer as a result.

Conclusion

Is it easier to bulldoze than to build a culture of respect for nature? What has happened in Papua New Guinea is scheduled for major parts of the Pacific Ocean, with large machines to be lowered to the seabed floor to excavate the rare minerals and metals there. Since so much of its extraordinary variety of marine life is still unrecorded – scientists working there note that many new species are found on every

single dive – we may never know how much we lose in the process: the countless life forms we never even discovered before we destroyed them.

Looking ahead, the challenges now facing the Pacific Ocean are as much to do with indigenous rights as environmental protection. It is evident that environmental impact assessments are essential before any extraction can be allowed, but these must also take place in line with the recognized human rights standards of free, prior and informed consent as well as the precautionary principle. This should also include placing the views and knowledge of indigenous peoples at the heart of this process through meaningful, equitable representation in decision-making, particularly in relation to the new global treaties now being forged at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), as well as specific decisions at the ISA on deep sea mineral extraction.

Aside from the negotiations at the International Seabed Authority, there is another significant process currently on the global docket regarding protection of our oceans. Since 2018, an Intergovernmental Conference convened by the UNGA has been negotiating a binding instrument to govern Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ). The Intergovernmental Conference had been intending to meet in March–April 2020 for a fourth and final round of negotiations on the 350-page text covering the seas beyond the national jurisdiction of coastal states; however, the session was postponed on account of Covid-19. Governments are hoping that the delay may give them time to

agree on a number of disputed topics, including benefit-sharing between the private sector and coastal states. Most crucially though, it is vital that the principles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples inform this global dialogue, with a long-term moratorium on seabed mining in the meantime to allow for careful and respectful research.

The deep seabed is an international territory that, like Antarctica and the Arctic, should be preserved for future generations with no military or commercial activities allowed. It is also a common heritage of humanity. Yet, much of what is being proposed is couched in the language of development and technological innovation. While extractive industries have long desired to excise these natural resources from the seabed, the refinement of new and more powerful machinery has now given them the means to do so.

But there are other forms of technology besides the extractive equipment of the mining corporations, including the unique knowledge systems of the Pacific, that offer an alternative vision of progress rooted in sustainable environmental management, conscious consumption and circular economy approaches. Deep seabed mining, on the other hand, would steer global civil society in the wrong direction, undermining the UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12 (to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns) and SDG 14 (to conserve our oceans while caring for life below water).

'We must not take more from the ocean but find the balance,' says Silvia Earle. 'Let's respect the ocean for what it gives us – life.' Though she is merely echoing what most indigenous Pacific islanders would tell you, this simple but important warning continues to be ignored.