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## [West Papua: Biodiversity and freedom](#)

Earlier this year, a rare thing happened: West Papua hit the headlines. The news was the discovery of a new species of honeyeater bird, a "lost" bird of paradise, a nearly extinct tree kangaroo, 20 new species of frogs, four new butterflies and five new species of palms. The species were found during an expedition to the Foja Mountains organised by Conservation International and the Indonesian Institute of Sciences. "It's as close to the Garden of Eden as you're going to find on Earth," said Bruce Beehler, co-leader of the group. His words were dutifully reported in newspapers around the world.

The fact that West Papua is an occupied land rarely makes the news. It should do. The 250 tribes who have lived there for around 40,000 years do not have the right to choose their own government. They have little control over their land and resources. The country is flooded with Indonesian soldiers on the look out for the slightest sign of resistance. Anyone suggesting that the Papuans should be free is tortured or killed. Filep Karma and Yusak Pakage are serving 15 and 10 year prison sentences for raising the West Papua flag. The country is closed to journalists and human rights monitors.

West Papua remained under Dutch control when Indonesia became a new nation state in 1949. It remained so until 1961, when West Papua held a congress and declared the country independent.

Indonesia invaded a few months later. John F Kennedy approved the Indonesian government's occupation, describing the Papuans as "living in the stone age". The UN intervened. In 1969, seven years after Indonesia invaded their country, West Papuans got to vote. That is, about 1,000 of them, handpicked by the Indonesian military to represent the population of one million, got to vote. Before the vote, the soldiers threatened them and their families with death if they voted the wrong way. The result was a unanimous vote for Indonesian rule. To its shame, the UN ratified the result.

Since then Indonesia has attempted to wipe out Papuan culture. Estimates of the numbers killed since the occupation range from 100,000 to 800,000. In an attempt to dominate Papuan culture, the Indonesian government has moved about one million people to transmigration camps cut into the forest.

Indonesia sold West Papua's oil, gold, copper, timber and gas to foreign or Indonesian companies.

West Papua's forests cover an area of about 34.6 million hectares. Of this, Indonesia declared almost 28 million hectares as production forest. Logging companies moved in with military support and associated human rights abuses. In recent years the logging has accelerated as the forests of Sumatra, Sulawesi and Kalimantan are becoming logged out.

In December 2005, the Asian Development Bank approved US\$350 million towards a proposed US\$5.5 billion gas extraction and liquefied gas processing plant, which is being developed by multinational oil giant BP in Bintuni Bay. BP's project threatens mangroves, fisheries and local livelihoods. It is opposed by many Papuans on the grounds that Indonesia has no right to make decisions over the resources on their territory.

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The Grasberg mine in West Papua is the largest gold and copper mine in the world. It is operated by a subsidiary of US-based Freeport-McMoRan. Freeport is the largest taxpayer to the Indonesian government. But few Papuans see any benefits. Thousands of people have been displaced or killed to make way for the mine. People living near the mine suffer from human rights abuses carried out by the Indonesian security forces hired by the company to protect its operations. Freeport has removed a sacred mountain, leaving a vast crater and a poisoned river system.

On 16 March 2006, five members of the security forces were killed after a peaceful demonstration in the capital Jayapura against Freeport turned violent. A civilian was also killed. Reports on the TAPOL Indonesian Human Rights Campaign website indicate that the violence started when police shot at demonstrators, possibly with rubber bullets, and used tear gas and armoured vehicles to clear the demonstrators. At least 57 people were arrested. In the days following the demonstration, police shot at student dormitories and beat people they had detained. About 1,200 students fled into the mountains around Jayapura to escape reprisals from the police.

In a message of support to the UK-based Free West Papua campaign, Noam Chomsky writes, "The crimes committed against the people of West Papua are some of the most shameful of the past years. The Western powers have much to answer for, and at the very least should use their ample means to bring about the withdrawal of the occupying Indonesian army and termination of the shameful exploitation of resources and destruction of the environment and the lives and societies of the people of West Papua, who have suffered far too much."

Perhaps Bruce Beehler, co-leader of the Conservation International and Indonesian Institute of Sciences expedition, should take a closer look at West Papua. He might then discover that the country looks a little more like hell on earth than the Garden of Eden.

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