
Contesting a “Blue” Pacific: Ocean and Coastal Territories under Siege

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Global powers including governments and transnational corporations backed up by multilateral financial institutions, together with Pacific Island nations are racing to divide up the ocean under the narratives of so-called sustainable Blue Economy and Blue Growth in order to justify its exploitation. Technology advances make once-unfeasible exploiting of the deep depths of the ocean increasingly viable. This will allow corporations to **plunder oceanic resources in a bid to supposedly secure food security** (with industrial fishing, shrimp farms, etc.) **and to obtain minerals needed for developing so-called “green” technology and renewable energy** for the global Northern economies and emerging powerful economies in the South, such as China.

Covering approximately 59 million square miles (over 15 billion hectares) and containing more than half of the free water on earth, the Pacific is by far the largest of the world’s ocean basins and is home to the Pacific Island countries and its peoples. (1) **The ocean, for indigenous peoples in the Pacific islands, includes both, coastal land and the deep ocean.** For the Pacific people, who have a spiritual relationship with the ocean, its industrialization reshapes once again the way the ocean has been defined: from that of its former colonial rulers (vast, far flung, inaccessible, underdeveloped and underexploited) into that of transnational corporations and multilateral financial institutions. Both definitions must be resisted.

Ocean territories have been a pillar of trade and economic activities and a major source of food, energy and livelihood for centuries. (2) The UN puts the economic value of the coastal and marine “resources” at 3 trillion US dollars. (3) The OECD suggests that the ocean economy, which includes industrial and coastal fisheries, aquaculture, tourism and renewable energy as well as new areas including deep sea mining and genetic resources, is likely to outpace the global economy in the next 15 years.

Besides the economic valuation, oceans provide 50 per cent of atmospheric oxygen and absorb 25 per cent of CO₂ emissions and this ensures a habitable planet. (4) **Oceans and coasts are home to extraordinary biodiversity and unique ecosystems.** Coastal coral reefs and mangroves alleviate the impacts of storms and protect beaches. Coastal forests provide habitats, food and livelihoods for many communities in the Pacific Islands.

At least 40 per cent of our oceans however are already **heavily polluted and showing signs of ill health.** (5) In the past decades, as scientific understanding increases, concerns over how to manage and conserve the areas beyond national jurisdiction have increased. Scientists admit they have a poor understanding of the deeper parts of the ocean; more is known about the surfaces of the moon, Venus and Mars.

The **Blue Economy** concept, which grew out of the broader green growth idea, heralds a new race to

carve up the Pacific, turning it into a crowded and disrupted space. Pacific state leaders are courted with economic gains that are a fraction of the value of the ocean resources that will be extracted. Already some Pacific Island governments, without the consent of their peoples, have **issued commercial as well as exploration licenses to significant parts of their territories for experimental mining of deep-sea minerals**. (6) These explorations pose serious threats to the ocean and coastal territories.

The prevailing perception, argued by many Pacific thinkers (7) and writers, is that smallness in terms of land size has meant that Pacific island countries are forever vulnerable, lacking power and therefore dependent on the former colonial powers, industrialized states or any country with technical resources, and new and emerging development partners, for their long-term survival. (8) However, that misleading perception should not enable our ocean territories to be handed over, destroyed or ceded to external interests.

Cautionary tale of deep-sea minerals and ocean's "untapped riches"

The depletion of land-based minerals, with associated devastating impacts on forests and communities, coupled by a **higher demand for "green" technology (9) and infrastructure**, is set to make the ocean the next frontier for exploitation of minerals such as copper, lithium, rare earth minerals, cobalt, and manganese nodules. The exploitation of minerals on the sea floor at around 400 to 6000 meters below sea level is set to take place in the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean and the Clarion Clipperton Zone. In total, the area covered by deep-sea minerals licenses is astonishing: over 1.3 million square kilometres of seabed (around 130 million hectares).

In the Pacific, **deep-sea mining is perceived as an imminent venture** with countries like Cook Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Tonga, seen as some of the pioneers. Despite the experimental nature of the industry, **exploration has already begun** within the territorial waters of these countries. **PNG issued the world's first commercial license in 2012** which was set to commence exploitation in 2019. However, due to lack of investor interest in PNG's Nautilus Mineral Solwara project linked to the enormous risks and associated costs, the miner was forced to close operations after being de-listed from the Toronto Stock Exchange.

The elaboration of **a model legislation for Pacific Island countries sponsored by the European Union Commission** signalled the "readiness" of the Pacific. (10) Unsurprisingly, a review of this model legislation found that it focused more **on ensuring a clear licensing regime and conditions that are favourable to industry** rather than to ensure the defence of the Pacific peoples and their environments (11).

Industry has long argued that nothing lives deep in the ocean, but the very opposite is true. This framing of deep sea mining as having social and environmental low risks while ensuring a high return ignores several pertinent realities. For example, **we are just learning based on scientific evidence about the impacts that mining will have on the deep seabed and the waters there, while early impacts are being felt by coastal territories and villages less than 30 km away from some of these sites**. In addition, several studies have found that the economic value of minerals is highly speculative in nature due to the price fluctuations.

There is increasing evidence that deep-sea mining poses a grave **threat to the vital balance of different planet's functions**. Most studies also found that there will be little to zero recovery of biodiversity after depleting the mineral reserves. More disturbing is that given these industrial scale operations (both in terms of size, intensity and duration), the **results would be devastating** and its

effects would cover large areas of the ocean floor and beyond.

In the Pacific, **coastal communities in New Ireland and East New Britain in PNG are already experiencing the negative impacts** from the exploratory mining and drilling occurring 30-50 kilometres from their communities. Villagers have reported an increase in frequency of dead fish washed up on shore, including a number of deep sea creatures hot to the touch, as well as excessively dusty and murky waters.

Role of the Pacific Peoples Resistance

Pacific Philosopher Professor Epeli Hau'ofa, in his paper *Our Sea of Islands*, argued that there are no more suitable people on this planet to be guardians of the world's ocean than those for who call it home: *"Our roles as custodians in the protection and the development of our ocean is by no means a small task; it is no less than a major contribution to the well-being of humanity, a worthwhile and noble cause."*

The irony cannot be ignored. In this era of climate change, **the Pacific People**, who have contributed the least to cause it and are acknowledged to be already bearing a disproportionate burden in terms of the effects, **are also now facing another attack of equivalent if not greater significance.**

Deep sea mining must be resisted. **In 2011, a collective** including feminist and community groups, regional non-governmental organisations and churches (12), **organized research and analysis** to better understand the implications of deep-sea minerals exploitation for the Pacific peoples and the ocean.

In 2012, **8,000 signatures were collected** to caution the Pacific Island Forum Leaders over deep sea mining, while in 2014 the Lutheran church issued a **signed petition representing over one million of its members to the PNG Government** over growing concerns about the impacts of this industry.

In Vanuatu, the collective, working closely with the Vanuatu Council of Churches and the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (cultural centre), persuaded the government to put a halt on the issuance of new licenses after it emerged that over a 140 licenses were issued without the prior knowledge of parliament and let alone the custodians of the ocean. Globally, activists from PNG and Fiji made an appeal in Brazil at the Rio + 20 Summit in 2012 and in Europe in 2014 to garner support for a ban on seabed mining. It took three years of lobbying and advocacy efforts with European partners, before the **European Parliament supported a moratorium in 2017 on deep-sea mining. Palau has placed a ban on commercial activities including fisheries and mining.**

In addition, **the Fiji Government has recently announced a 10 year moratorium on deep sea mining** activities at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders meeting. The moratorium was supported by the governments of Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. Likewise, **the government of New Zealand has rejected applications for deep sea mining** within its territorial waters, whilst the governments of **the Northern Territory of Australia and Chile** have a ban in place against seabed mining.

Much of the shift to a more cautionary approach has been **the result of resistance by local communities supported by a wide cross section of actors** including concerned scientists, academics and civil society organizations.

The Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG), www.pang.org.fj

A regional watchdog promoting Pacific peoples' right to self-determination. PANG mobilizes movements and advocates based on substantive research and analysis to promote a Pacific peoples' development agenda.

- (1) There are 26 Pacific island countries of which 16 are sovereign states, while 8 are still territories including disputed colonial territories of France (New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna Islands), Indonesia (disputed West Papua), USA (Guam, Hawaii, CNMI, American Samoa). Altogether, these countries represent a population of close to 20 million people.
- (2) The ocean is a primary source of protein for over 3 billion people (www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/oceans/).
- (3) European Commission, [Blue Growth](#)
- (4) IISD, [High-level ocean and climate conference bulletin](#)
- (5) UNDP, [Life Beyond Water](#)
- (6) Almost all Pacific Island Countries with the exception of Samoa and Palau have issued exploration licenses to transnational corporations whilst Papua New Guinea is the first country in the world to have issued a commercial license.
- (7) Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands', in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, ed. Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu and Epeli Hau'ofa (1993), 2—17.
- (8) <http://fijisun.com.fj/2018/09/12/opinion-china-the-pacific-islands-and-the-wests-double-standards/>
- (9) [The Copper Alliance argues](#) that every mobile phone needs 0.02kg of copper; for cobalt it is estimated that Volkswagen will need at least one third of the current entire global supply by 2025 for its energy efficient cars; geologists suggest that if all European cars are electric by 2040 (using Tesla Model 3), they would require 28 times more cobalt than is produced now.
- (10) The SPC-EU Deep Sea Minerals Project has 15 Pacific Island Countries: The Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. See the [SPC-EU DSM Deep Sea Minerals Project](#), Secretariat of the Pacific Community
- (11) Blue Ocean Law (2016): [An Assessment of the SPC Regional Legislative and Regulatory Framework for Deep Sea Minerals Exploration and Exploitation](#). Guam.
- (12) In 2012, Act Now! PNG; Bismarck Ramu Group (BRG); DAWN (Southern Feminist Group); Pacific Conference of Churches and the Pacific Network on Globalisation started to organize and mobilize around the issue. [See updates on the role of Pacific Peoples resistance updates](#).