

A TRADITIONAL DANCE IS PERFORMED
IN KAPIN, A VILLAGE ALONG THE
WATUT RIVER IN MOROBE PROVINCE,
PAPUA NEW GUINEA



qualms + quarries

THE WATUT RIVER IN THE LIFEBLOOD OF MANY COMMUNITIES IN
PAPUA NEW GUINEA'S MOROBE PROVINCE, BUT MINING IN THE REGION
HAS HAD A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON LOCAL PEOPLE AND THEIR WATER SUPPLY.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT VILLAGERS FROM MATUPIT STAND AT THE BOTTOM OF TAVURVUR VOLCANO; THE HIDDEN VALLEY GOLD MINE ON THE WATUT RIVER, WHICH HUNDREDS OF COMMUNITIES DEPEND ON; A MINER NEXT TO CORE SAMPLES FROM AN EXPLORATION PROJECT IN THE PAPUA NEW GUINEA HIGHLANDS; GUARDS LEAN ON THE GATE SEPARATING THE EDIE CREEK MINE FROM THE HIDDEN VALLEY GOLD MINE; THE FEET OF MARIA METE, WHO CLAIMS HER SKIN CONDITION IS THE RESULT OF WASHING IN THE WATUT RIVER; A MEETING IN KAPIN VILLAGE TO DISCUSS THE IMPACTS OF THE HIDDEN VALLEY GOLD MINE

OPPOSITE PAGE AN ALLUVIAL MINER PRESENTS HIS FINDINGS

IN FEBRUARY THIS year, Jessie Boylan flew over the mountains in central Papua New Guinea to photograph the Hidden Valley gold and silver mine and the communities who oppose it. “Many villagers in that area have been complaining of sedimentation build-up in the Watut River,” Boylan explains. “Hundreds of communities depend on the river for fish, crops, cleaning and washing, and for their own small-scale mining practices.”

Boylan, a Melbourne photographer, travelled with the Mineral Policy Institute, a Perth-based organisation that monitors mineral companies’ environmental and social responsibility performances and promotes ethical mining practices.

Boylan passed through remote territory, traversing log bridges over rivers, as she visited communities. In the village of Kapin, she spoke with a woman who complained of skin irritation on her feet after bathing in the river. Others told her they could no longer pan for gold because of the sediment. “It’s very humbling to be welcomed into people’s homes and communities,” Boylan says. “They performed traditional dances and held a public meeting about how international people can help.”

Boylan, 25, hopes her photographs will raise awareness about the impact of the practices of Australian companies abroad. “I want to make shareholders in those companies aware of where their investments are going,” she says.

The Hidden Valley mine is a joint venture between an Australian company, Newcrest Mining, and Harmony Gold

Mining Company from South Africa. In 2010, an independent environmental audit of their operations discovered, among other things, significant erosion issues, high concentrations of sediment, and pollutants in the water in excess of permit requirements. A subsequent review found the joint venture had made significant progress in responding to those criticisms. The company has also paid compensation to 3700 Watut River landowners for flood damage to crops and gardens.

Boylan argues that a long-term perspective is needed; mining should be considered a means rather than an end in itself. Depending on the circumstances, she believes, mining projects can improve or worsen living standards in local communities. “People want jobs and development, but the communities facing mining developments need to be making decisions with free, prior and informed consent, and with the understanding that they can get involved in making a better deal for themselves, or oppose the development if that’s what they choose,” Boylan argues. “Either way, the Papuan people in the area should be deciding for themselves.”

by **Michael Green**

For more of Jessie Boylan’s work, see jessieboylan.com and pngmininglegacies.wordpress.com. For Mineral Policy Institute information, see mpi.org.au.