

Southeast Asia Getting Killed by Logging and Mining

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When an airplane is approaching Singapore Changi Airport, it makes the final approach either from the direction of Peninsular Malaysia, or from the Indonesian island of Batam.

Either way, the scope for natural disaster under the wings is of monumental proportions.

All the primary forest of the Malaysian state bordering Singapore –Johor – is now gone and the tremendous sprawl of scarred land, mostly covered by palm oil plantations, is expanding far towards the horizon. The predictable plantation grid pattern is only interrupted by motorways, contained human settlements, and by few, mostly palm oil-related industrial structures.

On the Indonesian side, the Island of Batam resembles a horror apocalyptic movie: there is always some thick smoke rising towards the sky, and there are clearly visible, badly planned and terribly constructed towns and villages. Water around the island is of a dubious, frightening color. The environmental destruction is absolute. Batam was supposed to be the Indonesian answer to Singapore. Indonesia was dreaming about a modern mega city with a super airport and port, dotted with factories, research centers and shopping facilities. But the turbo-capitalist country hoped that all this would be created by the private sector. That was of course, unrealistic. What followed was an absolute disaster.

As it is now, Batam is nothing more than a series of ‘Potemkin Villages’, complete with several potholed four-lane roads that lead nowhere. As for the research: there is hardly any science even in Jakarta or Bandung, let alone here. After several attempts to ‘save face’ and to cover up this massive failure, the island has been allowed to ‘sink’ back to where it had already been for several decades: a huge warehouse for predominantly Singaporean and Malaysian sex tourists; a cheap shopping district selling mainly counterfeit goods, a place notorious for lacking even the most basic public services.

No heads were made to roll for this monumental and thoroughly stupid set of failures. The obedient business-owned media is hardly ever critical of the Indonesian regime and its business ‘elites’. But the impact of the ‘Batam experiment’ is enormous – there is no intact nature left on the entire island.

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What goes on in the Southern Part of Southeast Asia?

Is nature of absolutely no concern to the Malaysian and especially Indonesian governments, business conglomerates and society?

The problem here is that everything above and below the ground has been, for years and decades, viewed as a source of potential profit. It is only valued if it can be exploited, if there can be a price tag attached to it. No sentimentality, no thoughts about beauty! Here, greed has already reached insane proportions.

Like in the West, big companies in several Southeast Asian countries are now running and selecting the governments. They are also controlling the mass media, infiltrating social networks. To criticize great logging and palm oil companies in Malaysia is lethal, literally suicidal, and almost no one dares to do it. In the past, some did, and died. The same can be said about 'illegal' gold mining, logging and other extraction ventures in Indonesia, where much of the unsavory mining and logging enterprises are in the hands of the police, military or of government officials (the interests of all three branches are also often intertwined).

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Places like Borneo and Sumatra are finished; almost all of their legendary wildlife habitats are devastated. Hundreds of species are gone or almost extinct. The once mighty, primary forests are squeezed into a few national parks, and even those are often being used for commercial farming, and also for palm oil plantations.

It is not just an issue of 'disappearing beauty' and biodiversity. Borneo (known as Kalimantan in Indonesia) used to be on par with Amazonia, functioning as the lungs of the Earth. It is the third largest island on our planet (and the largest one in Asia), and it is fully and some would now say irreversibly plundered. In Indonesia, deadly chemicals used on the palm oil plantations are killing tens of thousands of people with cancer, although you'd have to work deep in the villages to figure out the truth, as no reliable statistics exist and the issue is highly 'sensitive', as is everything that is horrible and sinister in this part of the world. Many rivers, including Kapuas, contain ridiculously high levels of mercury, the result of illegal but openly practiced gold mining.

To see some parts of Borneo from the air is like observing an enormous, nightmarish and rotting wreck of a ship: black scars, brown scars, and dark zigzagging open veins of what used to be, a long time ago, tremendous and proud, as well as pristine, waterways.

What has been done to Indonesian-controlled Papua by Indonesian companies and by Western multi-national mining conglomerates is indescribable. Apart from committing genocide against the local population, the entire half of this tremendous island, which used to be inhabited by hundreds of local tribes, is now being 'exposed', forced open, and literally raped. Of course, as an anti-Communist warrior and obedient pro-business client state, Indonesia is almost never criticized by the West. The genocides it has been committing since 1965 are either sponsored or at least supported from Washington, London and Canberra.

Malaysian and Indonesian logging and mining companies do not stop at committing crimes at home - they go far, to other Asian countries, but also deep into Oceania, places like the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea (PNG), where I witnessed on several occasions the full destruction of both nature and human cultures; a nightmare which I described in detail in my book [Oceania](#).

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I am relentlessly documenting what is happening to Southeast Asia in the books that I am writing (alone and with local authors), as well as in my upcoming films. I'm in the middle of producing a [film about the fate of Borneo island](#), a place which is becoming dearer and dearer to me, the more devastated it gets.



The more I witness and the more I document, the more hopeless I often feel. It is because there seems to be almost no place which is capable of resisting the onslaught.

I am writing this essay on board Malaysian Airlines flights. The first one took me from the city of Miri (a state of Sarawak in Borneo, Malaysia) to Kuala Lumpur, the second from Kuala Lumpur to Bangkok.

After filming on several occasions in the totally violated Indonesian Kalimantan, I hoped to see something optimistic in Malaysian Sarawak; something that could be used as an inspiration for the future of the incomparably poorer and much more corrupt Indonesian part of the island. This time I drove all around the city of Miri, and then I crossed the border and drove further into Brunei. I flew inside tiny propeller planes over the jungle, or what is still left of it. I took a narrow motorized makeshift canoe.

Yes, I saw few beautiful national parks and traditional longhouses. And I was surprised to find out that the filthy rich but politically and religiously oppressive sultanate of Brunei Darussalam, with its brutal and extreme implementation of *Sharia Law*, unbridled consumerism and worshipped oil industry, is actually doing incomparably better job than Indonesia and even Malaysia, at least environmentally. It is at least protecting its nature, including the rainforest. Brunei's untouched, pristine native forest begins just a few miles from the coast, from its oil wells and refineries.

But when I rented a narrow shabby longboat, deep in the interior of Sarawak, I encountered total misery and devastation. The road was great, most likely constructed precisely for moving quickly and efficiently, both timber and palm oil fruit. Several schools and medical facilities looked modern. But most of the locals do not live near the roads - they dwell, traditionally, along the rivers. And there, the situation is totally different: people residing in poor, primitive shacks, children and adults swimming in desperately polluted waterways, while stumps of trees 'decorating' stinking, muddy shores.

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Some would say that Southeast Asia is not alone. In many ways, the West already 'rearranged' its nature decades and centuries ago. In densely populated countries like Italy or Netherlands, very little of the original nature is left today. In the United States, the original meadows and pristine grasslands gave way to commercial fields; to agricultural mass production.

What shocks in Southeast Asia is not the fact that people want to make a living out of their land. It is the brutality of the systematic destruction of majestic mountains and hills, of mighty rivers, lakes, shores as well as the irreversibility of the changes that come with cutting down almost all native rainforest, replacing it with chemically-boosted palm oil and rubber plantations.



Most of those who would be allowed to see those monstrous coal mines dotting Indonesian Borneo would be terrified. Endless sprawls of palm oil (and literally imprisoned villages, squeezed by it as in a straight jacket) could perhaps outrage even the most hardened pro-market fundamentalists, who would bother to visit from other parts of the world.

Or maybe not... The multi-national 'mining horrors' that are being described to me by my friends and colleagues, who are presently working in Peru, are somehow comparable. What I saw in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) shows the same spite that many Western companies and governments have for the local people.

What I find truly 'unique' in Southeast Asia, is the totality of destruction. The number of animal and bird species that are already gone, or are disappearing or have been simply hunted down, or the number of hopelessly polluted rivers; the forests and jungles that are stolen from the native inhabitants.

The speed is yet another shocking factor. It is all happening extremely fast. No wonder that Green Peace put Indonesia on the list of the Guinness Book of Records as the fastest destroyer of the tropical forests on Earth.

What is left of the Indonesian forests is being either logged out or is systematically burning. Thick smog travels, periodically, from Sumatra to Singapore and peninsula Malaysia, creating a health hazard, shutting down schools and tormenting people suffering from asthma and other respiratory problems.

But Indonesia is big, the fourth most populous country on Earth. It does what it wants, and it appears that it cannot be stopped. Or more precisely, its rulers and business elites are doing what they want. And, as long as it fits into the agenda of their Western handlers (and it usually does), the country is enjoying almost total impunity.

Of course, those who are suffering the most are the local people themselves, as well as countless defenseless species, be they animals, birds, fish, trees, or plants.

Soon, nothing original will be left here. Billions of dollars will be made by those very few rich, and the poor majority will be stuck with the coolie's jobs. The plundering of the environment is creating dependency syndrome and very little advancement for the society. The money flows, but not where it is supposed to flow.

Like in the Gulf, almost nothing or very little is being invested into science, technology, the arts and creative sectors.

Ruined islands and peninsulas will keep producing 'blood fruits'. Land owners, corrupt politicians, middlemen and traders will keep getting outrageously rich. But the great majority of people will have to get used to living with a polluted and totally unnatural environment. They'd be stuck, in fact most of them are already stuck, in some sort of depressing concentration camps surrounded by unnatural, hostile crops, and by the chemically-contaminated land.

All this will continue until who knows what terrifying and bitter end, unless, of course, the people of Southeast Asia will finally wake up, and instead of accepting this present turbo-capitalist model, begin to think and dream about the "Ecological Civilization" and other

marvelous cutting-edge philosophies that are flowing out from China and other non-conformist parts of the world.

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Andre Vltchek is a philosopher, novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He has covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. Three of his latest books are his tribute to [“The Great October Socialist Revolution”](#) a revolutionary novel [“Aurora”](#) and a bestselling work of political non-fiction: [“Exposing Lies Of The Empire”](#). View his other books [here](#). Watch [Rwanda Gambit](#), his groundbreaking documentary about Rwanda and DR Congo and his film/dialogue with Noam Chomsky [“On Western Terrorism”](#). Vltchek presently resides in East Asia and the Middle East, and continues to work around the world. He can be reached through his [website](#) and his [Twitter](#).

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