

Tension and grievances in Raja Ampat:

A government study in 2022 estimated that a deposit of 482 million tonnes of nickel ore can be found under the calm waters of Raja Ampat, Southwest Papua. The Jakarta Post visits the archipelago to delve into a recent mining controversy that has triggered tension among residents and damaged the environment. Deni Ghifari (The Jakarta Post)

Administrator's note: This following is a three part investigatory study conducted by Deni Ghifari (The Jakarta Post)

Introduction:

Raja Ampat, home to 75 percent of the world's coral species and a popular diving spot known to be "the last paradise" became the subject of a global conversation in late May when the environmental group Greenpeace managed to draw the public's attention toward an imminent threat to its marine biodiversity from nickel mining.

This threat is blindingly apparent: Research conducted in 2022 by the Energy and Mineral Resources Ministry estimated that a deposit of 482 million tonnes of nickel ore can be found right under the calm waters of Raja Ampat in Southwest Papua province.

For perspective, latest figures show that the national production of nickel ore reached 137.8 million tonnes in the entirety of 2023, the peak year for nickel mining.

Following the Greenpeace Indonesia campaign in May, which included activists from the organization storming a national conference on minerals, the public learned that the government had granted permit for five companies to carry out nickel mining operations in Raja Ampat, with some already running ground operations there for years.

The campaign went viral and following a massive outcry the central government decided to revoke four of the five permits granted to local companies.

Raja Ampat's mining operation is controversial as it is considered a violation of the 2014 law on the management of coastal areas and small islands, which prohibits mining activities on small islands. Articles in the law stipulate that only activities for conservation, education, research, marine cultivation, tourism, fisheries, organic farming and national defense are permitted on small islands.

The law defines a small island as a piece of land with a size less than 2,000 square kilometers surrounded by a body of water. Companies operating in Raja Ampat are mostly mining on islands that are just 6,000 hectares, or 60 sq km in size.

Legal definitions aside, public outcry has been directed toward the mining operation's impact on the environment in and around Raja Ampat.

Due to the characteristics of the nickel deposits found on islands in Raja Ampat, mining methods involve the clearing of pristine tropical rainforest and the waste material of the mining process risks the irreversible destruction of the maritime habitat.

These potential impacts have become the source of contention for two camps in local communities in Raja Ampat, those who benefit from mining versus those who champion nature conservation.

On the one hand, the financial gain brought by mining firms to local communities is a tangible benefit but on the other, mining activities could threaten the livelihood of those who rely on tourism and fisheries, as well as the wellbeing of the ecosystems on which we all rely.

This tension came to a head soon after the energy ministry revoked licenses for four mining companies operating in the area, with one camp attempting to stymie the progress of the other.

Some members in the community have made peace but others are still fighting for what they deem is best for their people.

It is against this backdrop that The Jakarta Post visited Raja Ampat in late June to see what actually happened on the ground, talk to relevant stakeholders in the conflict and experience the tension first hand.

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Part 1:

'Slitting open earth's skin': Mining divides, damages Raja Ampat

The Jakarta Post visits Raja Ampat, Southwest Papua, to take a closer look at the recent nickel mining controversy that threatens to unravel the archipelago regency. In addition to causing irreversible damage to forest and marine ecosystems, the extractive activities have also created tensions among islanders. Deni Ghifari (The Jakarta Post)

This is the first part of three stories.

At a serene harbor on Gag Island, Southwest Papua, a barge and several tugboats have been moored for weeks. Although the barge was fully loaded with nickel ore and ready to sail west to a smelter in Weda Bay, North Maluku, there were no signs it was going to leave the island.

The vessels belong to PT Gag Nikel, a subsidiary of state-owned mining firm PT Aneka Tambang (Antam), which operates one of the five nickel mines in the archipelago regency of Raja Ampat.

All mining activities in the regency have been halted since a recent international uproar over nickel extraction in the islands, which have been described as heaven on earth for their marine beauty and rich biodiversity.

The government has also revoked all mining permits, with an exception of the one in Gag, creating anxiety which has reverberated among residents of the islands, who have been disturbed by the emerging nickel rush of the last few years.

In Gag, despite dodging the revocation bullet, the mining company is still under government scrutiny with officials from multiple government institutions visiting the island over the past month.

Haerul, a 40-year-old worker of Gag Nickel, met with The Jakarta Post during a visit to the island in June. He said Gag residents have been coming over to his office asking for clarity on when the operation would recommence. Haerul's department was the only one still running, since it deals with external parties.

"What we tell them is that we're awaiting the government's decision, that we are hoping the operation will continue. If it won't, well, what else can we do?" said Haerul, who is also a native resident of the island.

Seven out of 10 workers of Gag Nickel are native islanders, who support the operational continuation of the mine. The company still pays the workers in full but rumors have spread among the workers that a layoff is in the cards should the suspension be prolonged.

Nickel mining in Gag was established long before the nickel rush that started in 2020, after former president Joko "Jokowi" Widodo announced a ban on nickel ore exports and started a national drive of downstreaming to make Indonesia a global hub of electric vehicle battery production.

Exploration on the island was first conducted in the 1920s during the Dutch colonial era and a series of other ventures were undertaken in the 1970s.

In 1998, the government granted the company a 50-year contract of work (KK), a special contract granted to mining operators. Antam acquired the entire operation of Gag Nickel in 2008 and received all of the required permits in 2017, which allowed them to start production in 2018, when the nickel price was wildly different.

Contempt for strip mining

But not all residents in Raja Ampat share the sentiment of Gag islanders.

Much like most of Indonesia's nickel, Raja Ampat's deposits sit close to the surface, making strip or open-pit mining, whereby miners excavate the entire topsoil before further processing, the most efficient way to extract the metals.

This method involves deforestation since getting the topsoil requires clearing the land off trees or any object. The practice also gives rise to surface holes that, left untreated, will become mostly just that: holes, if not uninviting reservoirs.

Beside leaving a gap on the surface, open pit mining may ruin nearby waters since it involves storing the topsoil in piles or pits, which could ultimately cause sediment runoffs.

In Raja Ampat's cases, the sediments from the piles can easily seep into the ocean given that the mines are mainly located on steep-sloped islets that have little to no space for the sediments runoff except for the open water.

These sediment runoffs often contain contaminating chemicals that might shift the water's nutrients, which pose existential threats to the area's marine species, especially the corals that build up habitats for other species.

Since ecotourism has blossomed in the islands long before mining, the Post met residents of other islands that reject mining activities.

“You take care of nature, then nature will take care of you,” Maria Marlince Duwit, a 24-year-old tourism-based business manager in Waigeo, the largest island in Raja Ampat.

Maria is a member of the Maya tribe, many members of which now reside at the Teluk Mayalibit district, an area at the southern part of the horseshoe-shaped island. The district is known for its rugged terrain and narrow bay, so narrow an athlete could swim from one side to the other without wasting a breath.

Maria told the Post that her mother is a Mentansan, a clan in the line of the Maya, believed to be Raja Ampat’s original native people, residing there for centuries before other bloodlines stepped foot on the archipelago.

Many of Teluk Mayalibit’s residents now work at the Kalibiru tourist attraction, a sacred river with clear blue water that the Maya tribe uses for various rituals and divinations. They believe that changes in the river’s color signify events to come. A 150 to 200 meter section of the river has been opened up for tourism since 2015 but outsiders are not allowed to venture further upstream.

Much like the Maya tribe, most Raja Ampat locals have maintained a hunter-gatherer lifestyle for generations, which in a maritime context makes them expert fishermen, until a novel economy based on tourism came about in recent decades, and many made the switch.

Maria’s uncle, Musa Mentansan, a patriarch in the clan who opened Kalibiru for ecotourism, called strip mining practice a mutilation of “the earth’s skin”, which leaves irredeemable, environmentally damaging surface holes that would ruin his clan’s tourism and fishery-based livelihood.

“We want to protect sustainability so our descendants down to the seventh generations can still enjoy our place, which does not belong just to us, but also belongs to the world, belongs to Indonesia and, above all, belongs to Papua,” he said.

No recognition of customary rights

Musa is among the four patriarchs in his clan who hold customary rights to a patch of land and sea toward the south of Waigeo, where another nickel mine concession, owned by PT Nurham, is located. The company had not operated the mine when the permit was revoked by the government.

Musa accused the company of attaining the permit illegally since his clan never granted the customary right to conduct strip mining in the concession area in Yensner village, located east of Mayalibit bay. Musa’s brother, Alfred Mentansan, told the Post that not one of the four Mentansan patriarchs who hold the customary rights were aware of PT Nurham’s existence or its plan to open up a mine in their territory before the issue entered the national spotlight.

Nevertheless, PT Nurham was in possession of a mining operation permit (IUP) until the recent revocation by the government. The company’s IUP was issued by the Raja Ampat regent, which on paper would allow PT Nurham to mine nickel on 3,000 hectares of Waigeo’s land until 2033.

Musa suspected that the Wejo, another clan who lived in Yensner, was behind the permit grant.

Customary rights of indigenous peoples in the country are protected by the Constitution and the 1960 Agrarian Law. The laws recognize customary rights, by which a business entity has to earn permission from the right holders to utilize a land. The permission can manifest in a contractual, paper-based transaction but it can also be as simple as a verbal greenlight, without which running a business is a violation of the law.

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Part 2:

Environmental losses outweigh economic gains of mining in Raja Ampat

The Jakarta Post visited Raja Ampat, Southwest Papua, to take a closer look at the recent nickel mining controversy taking place in the archipelago regency. Tensions have erupted between pro-mining inhabitants and those who have benefited from fishery and ecotourism activities. Deni Ghifari (The Jakarta Post)

This is the second part of three stories.

Spanning an area slightly larger than Florida in the United States, Raja Ampat is the crown jewel of the Coral Triangle, an area in the Southeast Asian seas that nurtures three-quarters of the world's coral species.

The archipelago's waters are not only rich in corals as it also contains numerous endemic coral fish species alongside pelagic megafauna like the manta rays and sperm whales. Recognized by UNESCO as a Global Geopark in 2023, its dense tropical rainforest also shelters thousands of terrestrial species, a portion of which are endemic like the red and bald cendrawasih, colloquially known as the bird of paradise.

Edy Setyawan, a marine scientist who has been researching the cartilaginous fish of Raja Ampat for more than a decade, told the The Jakarta Post that mining can kill coral reefs outright, whether from direct chemical contamination or high water turbidity that disrupts the photosynthesis of zooxanthellae, an important algal symbiont for corals.

"[Sediments] can also directly bury [the corals]. Imagine getting buried alive," said the lead conservation expert at research body Elasmobranch Institute Indonesia.

The destruction of coral habitat will directly impact the existence of one of the area's icons, the endemic "walking shark" *Hemiscyllium freycineti*, who tend to remain in one small coral area in their 20 to 25 year lifespan, said Edy.

He went on to explain that mining activities could jeopardize another iconic species of Raja Ampat, the globally threatened reef manta ray, since important habitats of their life cycles are in the proximity of Kawe island.

Mining company PT Kawei Mining Sejahtera (KSM) had been in production on Kawe since 2023 before its permit was revoked recently. There have been reports that the mining operation on the island has deteriorated its nearby environment.

Given Raja Ampat's complex biodiversity, Edy said restoring a damaged habitat to the original condition there "is impossible", approximating that the endeavor will take dozens of years with no guarantee of success and cost millions of dollars that no one can guarantee is available.

"In general, the loss caused by mining will be far greater than the economic benefit reaped from the mining output," he said, listing environmental mutilation, public health, job loss and land conversion as the inevitable damages mining will bring, however unwanted and unintentional.

Residents turn to activism

Tourism industry workers held a demonstration in front of the Raja Ampat Legislative Council in May, specifically speaking against potential mines in Manyafun and Batang Pele islands. The protest occurred before the government revoked the mining permits in the regency and before the mines on both islands had begun operation.

Edison Mambrasar, 59, and his brothers Ronald, 41, and Esron, 32, all of whom are fishermen, joined the protest and were relieved when the government announced the revocation of the concession permits held by PT Mulia Raymond Perkasa (MRP).

They juggle between fishing and operating tourism spots since they opened floating lodges, locally known as "homestay" on Arborek, an islet roughly the size of just 10 soccer fields that some 300 members of the Mambrasar and Mambraku clans called home.

Ronald, who is also an environmental activist, said the damage from nickel mining is irreversible as can be observed in Halmahera, the island where Weda Bay smelters are located in North Maluku. He said the island will become a "dead island" that will turn worthless once the deposits dry up.

"The people who live [in the mining area], where would they go once the mining is over? They can't go back to being fishermen because the environment is destroyed, and tourism is not an option either," said Ronald.

He emphasized that Arborek, which has become a main tourism spot in Raja Ampat, went through a long, hard process to become one.

"My friends, who reside near the mines and are thinking of money, they have to understand that speaking about anything long-term is speaking about sacrifice, it's speaking about waiting and we have to be patient," Ronald told the Post.

Blocks of resistance

Maikel Sada, a 40-year-old tour guide who was among the coordinators of the May protest, revealed that the recent mining debacle has created tension between pro-mining inhabitants and those who have benefited from fishery and ecotourism activities.

The pro-mining residents who live near potential mines, like those in the Manyafun and Batang Pele islands, erected symbolic blockades that bar outsiders from making landfall, effectively stopping any

tourism activity. A similar blockade was also erected by the clans that hold customary rights of the Kawe island.

Maikel argued that the people just have not feasted on the tourism harvest since the related areas are relatively underdeveloped in the sector. He said the tourism community is ready to come to the mining residents and help them develop tourism on their islands “once they are no longer angry” because “they are still our brothers and sisters”.

Syafri Tuharea, head of Raja Ampat’s public service agency (BLUD), a governmental body that manages the area, told the Post that to mine or not to mine is a choice, and it is a tempting one at that given the instant reward.

“But clearly, the mines will run out [of resources] and when it runs out, we can’t rest our hopes on the seas or the land anymore,” said Syafri, stressing the high likelihood of permanent ecological damage that mining will bring and the long-term economic disadvantage that comes with it.

He said the KSM mine could endanger nearby conservation areas, Wayag island and Mutus and Meosmanggara villages on Waigeo island. The mining location is considered as a buffer zone, and when compromised “will in turn degrade” the protected areas.

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Part 3:

The long, suspenseful journey to Indonesia's nickel 'paradise'

The Jakarta Post's recent trip to Raja Ampat late last month revealed the complex currents rippling and colliding beneath the mining versus tourism issue, conflated by environmental and indigenous concerns surrounding the global marine haven in the country's far-flung, easternmost region. Deni Ghifari (The Jakarta Post)

This is the last part of three stories.

The recent brouhaha over nickel mining operations in Southwest Papua’s Raja Ampat regency, a UNESCO Global Geopark known as the “world’s last paradise”, exposed the stark contrast between tourism and mining, and that the two industries should not exist in such close proximity.

The stories gathered by The Jakarta Post from a trip to Raja Ampat in late June, only two weeks after the controversy broke out, paint a complex picture of parties with multiple interests who were convinced that mining and tourism could coexist, insisting that the tensions had arose over ways to make this possible.

The tension is very much palpable on Gag Island, home to the mining operation run by PT Gag Nikel, the only company that was allowed to continue with its activities despite their closeness to the popular marine tourism haven.

Getting to Gag Island was not easy, as it is only accessible by sea but beyond the reach of scheduled passenger boats, making chartering or “piggybacking” the only options available for visitors.

Gag Island is located far to the west of Waisai, Raja Ampat’s main transit town on Waigeo Island, making the trip unnecessarily long and expensive. It takes around five hours to make a one-way trip on a small boat equipped with twin 1-liter, 50-horsepower Yamaha outboard motors.

The water around Raja Ampat is calm, especially during the peak season between October and April, but boats still have to slow down at certain spots to dodge reefs or floating woody debris, sometimes massive, which can puncture the hull, if not damage the outboard’s propellers.

Outside the peak tourist season, the winds can be more unpredictable, the seas choppy and storms more likely. Yet the small islands and reefs in the region serve as natural barriers for potentially high waves, making the trip relatively comfortable.

The biggest challenge in traveling to Gag Island is the uncertain weather. When the Post traveled to the island on June 19, a massive downpour hit as soon as we set sail, bringing visibility to just 150 to 250 meters. As visual navigation was impossible we veered off course several times, only finding our way back after the rain had stopped.

We weren’t sure if five hours should be enough time to reach Gag Island, since the local residents varied in their answers as to how long the journey would take from Waigeo.

Barred entry

Before setting out, we secured permission via text messages from Mustajir, Gag Nikel’s Jakarta-based legal manager. But this turned out to be a fruitless effort, as workers at the mine denied us entry.

We docked at a pier next to an entrance to the workers’ quarter and adjacent to the loading bay for barges transporting nickel ores, where the company’s security personnel were the first to greet us.

Our arrival appeared to cause quite a commotion, with security officers squawking their walkie-talkies multiple times while others checked their phones constantly, trying to obtain confirmation for our visit. No one had the authority to speak to us, and our attempt at small talk only elicited the same response: “The company’s representatives will answer that.”

In the end, three staffers from Gag Nikel’s community development team agreed to spare a few minutes for an interview, but the mine was strictly off-limits. They offered no clear reasons as to why we weren’t allowed in, other than saying that it would be a hassle to give us the required safety briefing and protective gear.

One employee named Haris gave the most intriguing reason: Driving to the mine could invite unwanted attention from outside parties. He also recounted a mysterious incident involving an unidentified helicopter doing flybys over the island in the last few days.

Gag Nikel may have kept its license, but it had to suspend its operations on June 5 to make way for what the government’s so-called “evaluation”. As a result, most of the company’s divisions temporarily stopped work, especially those related to nickel production, the staffers said.

Suspicion abounds

We discovered our ordeal was far from over when we decided to leave the island. As we sailed away, we stopped by a barge loaded with nickel ore to snap a few photos when we were intercepted by a verbally irate resident: "Go away already! The villagers are angry!"

Curiously enough, we looked around only to see an empty beach without the presence of a single person, let alone an angry one, leading us to surmise that whoever yelled had been one of the company's workers.

That incident over, we sailed back the way we came as a man on a longboat tailed us, but diverting slightly further south to see if we could get pictorial evidence of the island's mining operations. Our unknown companion soon caught up with us, however, and we immediately made our way out of the bay.

The mine is located inland, so nothing but an old pier and the road leading to the mine can be seen from the sea to the island's southeast. Very little is visible of the environmental impacts from the mine's activities, except for a few deforested patches of land.

The man continued to tail us on his longboat but before he could close the distance in any significant way, we pretended to sail eastward and the trick prompted him to head back to the bay.

Sailing on southward again, we took some more pictures until we spotted an unidentified ship coming toward us: That was our cue to head back to Waigeo.

It turns out we were not the only ones treated with intimidation tactics. A similar experience happened to Greenpeace Indonesia activists when they visited Kawe Island, where PT Kawei Sejahtera Mining (KSM) operates a nickel mine.

This only reflects the tension brewing in the area after the government revoked the permits of some mining companies, especially the strain among those that fought for the smooth operation of their businesses in both mining and tourism.

Local protectionism

The local community that holds the customary land rights to Kawe Island have installed barricades to prevent outsiders from reaching the area, effectively stopping any tourism activities in their territory. Since they also have authority over Wayag Island, the community has closed off visitors to the popular tourist spot known for its majestic karst formations.

These barricades are indiscriminate, and the community even denied access to a local legislative councilor when he attempted to visit Kawe. In fact, Southwest Papua Governor Elisa Kambu canceled her planned trip to the island on June 11 due to security concerns.

A similar blockade was also put up by the inhabitants of Manyafun Island, where PT Mulia Raymond Perkasa (MRP) had started exploration for mineral deposits before the government moved to suspend the activity.

On June 25, the opposing sides on the island agreed a truce brokered by local police officers and took down the barricade.

It seems calm has returned to parts of Raja Ampat, at least for now.

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