



Arrows Against the Wind

1993 • Running time 52 minutes • Directed by Tracey Holloway
• Produced by Land Beyond Productions

West Papua, which is also called Irian Jaya, is known as the “Amazon of Asia.” It is a land of vast jungles and tropical rainforests where, for 25,000 years, numerous indigenous tribes have lived in spiritual harmony with their environment. Filmed secretly, this documentary tells the story of the rich lives of two tribes. While the Dani tribe’s future is threatened by Indonesia’s assimilation program, the Asmat tribe has faced the destructive invasion of their land so the valuable resources of the forests can be exploited.

TEACHER’S GUIDE



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Arrows Against the Wind



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“A unique and provocative examination of colonialism and humanity’s relationship with nature.”

—Video Rating Guide for Libraries

WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

In courses covering an introduction to environmental science, students learn that the main cause of biodiversity loss is habitat loss. They also learn that the increase in population and of per capita resource consumption are the drivers of that habitat loss. However, it is usually not made clear that bad policies, repressive and corrupt governments, racism, and complicit international institutions exacerbate these factors. Its age notwithstanding, this film shines a bright light on all these issues, and, as such, it is a valuable pedagogical tool.

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Anthropology	History
Environmental Science	Media Studies
Ethnography	Political Science
Geography	

SYNOPSIS

The film *Arrows Against the Wind* is a documentary about the horrors of social injustice perpetrated by the government of Indonesia upon the indigenous peoples of West Papua through environmental destruction and forced assimilation. Indonesia annexed West Papua as a province in 1963, renaming it Irian Jaya, to acquire land for its burgeoning population and to exploit the country’s mineral wealth.

Often called the “Amazon of Asia” for its biological diversity, West Papua is also a treasure trove of cultural diversities. There are more than 300 different tribes whose unique ways of life are tied to the biological diversity of the land. The film exemplifies these unique ways of life with the story of the Dani people, one of the largest tribes in West Papua. The Dani have lived in the Baliem Valley for more than 25,000 years, but two policies that the Indonesian government is implementing present a grave danger to their customs and culture. The first is the aggressive push to “Indonesianize” the Dani. But the second policy, one of transmigration, poses a far greater threat. Vast areas of the rainforest are cleared to make way for camps and farms that will accommodate people from the crowded Indonesian islands of Bali and Java. The consequences for indigenous people will be tragic losses: of hunting and fishing grounds, sago trees, means of cultural expression, and much more, all without cause or compensation.

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While the losses and inevitable marginalization are in the near future for the Dani people, they are reality for the Asmat tribe. By way of archival footage, we learn that the Asmat were fierce, proud, and artistic people for millennia. Then the Indonesian government implemented its policies of transmigration and rapacious resource exploitation, ruining everything for the Asmat. The change and losses documented in the film were recent, quick, and devastating. It is a sad story and quite difficult to watch, but it is one that is being repeated in other parts of West Papua even now.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

This film is about environmental justice because the communities, which are the subjects of the documentary, are experiencing environmental degradation and suffering the effects of pollution due to resource exploitation. Furthermore, the communities in West Papua were not involved in making important decisions about the mining on their land, and the government does not seem to take their concerns seriously.

REVIEWS

“Loaded with vivid images and rare archival footage.” —*The London Times*

“With stunning visual acuity, this video documents the tragic social and environmental consequences when a natural relationship becomes unbalanced...This important documentary clearly illustrates the inter-connection between political, social, and environmental actions. Bound to be a good discussion starter, it is highly recommended, especially for high school and academic library collections.” —Video Rating Guide for Libraries

KEY LOCATIONS AND PEOPLE

Indonesia

Irian Jaya (formerly West Papua)

Carstensz region

Baliem Valley

Jayapura

Bali, Java (the origin of immigrants to Irian Jaya)

Government of Indonesia – the occupying power in West Papua

Free Papua Movement (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, or OPM) – an umbrella term for the independence movement established in 1965 to liberate West Papua

Rex Rumakiek, Henk Rumbewas, Otto Ondawame – OPM members who are interviewed in the film

Dani tribe of the Baliem Valley

Asmat tribe

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"For 25,000 years, our people have understood that nature is the source of life, and they have respected it accordingly."

- Rex Rumakiek, currently leader of the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation

FILM CHAPTERS OR SEQUENCES

- **Introduction**, 00:00–8:10: The colonial past; Indonesia annexes West Papua, exploiting its resources and implementing transmigration policies.
- **The Dani people**, 8:10–21:40: A case study in the ways of the indigenous peoples of West Papua.
- **Environmental and sociocultural impacts of Indonesianization and transmigration policies**, 21:40–28:50.
- **The decline and marginalization of the Asmat tribe**, 28:50–42:30.
- **The conclusions; long-term consequences of environmental destruction and mineral exploitation**, 42:30 - 51:35.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The Global Importance of the Biodiversity of New Guinea

The island of New Guinea, of which West Papua is one-half, is a global biodiversity hot spot that contains the third-largest rainforest in the world. The island covers just 1% of the land area on earth, but it harbors 5% of all the plant and animal species on the planet, of which 60% are found nowhere else. However, the vast tropical rainforests are the most important part of the biodiversity of New Guinea. Rainforests are a global carbon sink, sequestering carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and storing the carbon in wood, slowing global climate change. Because of this, the loss of rainforest in West Papua should be of concern to everyone in the world. Please do a little research, then discuss and answer the following questions on the importance of the rainforests of New Guinea.

1. If New Guinea has the third-largest rainforest in the world, where are the other rainforests located?
2. New Guinea's rainforests used to be even more extensive than they are now. How much of the original tropical rainforest remains there? How much carbon does the rainforest of West Papua sequester per year?
3. There are four main threats to rainforests everywhere. These threats are often referred to as the "evil quartet." What are the four main threats to the rainforest of West Papua, New Guinea, and the other areas you mentioned in your answer to the first question?

The People of West Papua and the Myth of the [Ecologically] Noble Savage

Throughout this film, there is a tendency to invoke the trope of the myth of the [ecologically] noble savage in statements such as "The Dani have one of the most sophisticated systems of sustainable agriculture in the world... They live in harmony and in accordance with the land...".

1. What is the myth of the noble savage, and what are its origins?
2. What are the pitfalls associated with the trope of the ecologically noble savage when considering the threats to biodiversity?

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Here are some sources to help you answer the questions above:

Hames, R. 2007. "The ecologically noble savage debate." *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Vol. 36:177-190.

Nadasdy, Paul. 2005. "Transcending the debate over the ecologically noble Indian: indigenous peoples and environmentalism." *Ethnohistory: The Bulletin of the Ohio Valley Historic Indian Conference*. Vol. 52 (2):291-331.

The Current Sociopolitical Situation in West Papua

This film was recorded secretly in the 1990s. But even today, access for international journalists and researchers to many parts of West Papua is banned or tightly controlled by the Indonesian government. Therefore, a natural question to ask is this: What is the current sociopolitical situation in West Papua? Please do a little research to find out. Start your research with the supplemental material listed below.

SHORT VERSION OR EXCERPT 23:00 - 42:00

Where time is short this excerpt can be assigned for viewing or shown in class. This 19-minute sequence captures the essence of the film and can be screened in a lecture or seminar setting. The excerpt provides an overview of the Indonesian transmigration policy, its consequences for biological diversity—habitat loss and fragmentation—and the dispossession and marginalization of the indigenous peoples of West Papua.

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ACTIVITIES

If West Papua were independent from Indonesia, would the government assure the traditional livelihoods of the indigenous peoples?

Around the world, indigenous people face many challenges and must stand up and defend their lands for cultural survival, their human rights, and the environment in which they live. There is a recent insightful four-part film series titled *Standing on Sacred Ground*, which chronicles the valiant efforts of many groups as they stand against industrial megaprojects, consumer culture, resource extraction, competing religions, tourists, and climate change. You can learn more about this film series and the communities featured [here](#).

Please watch the film *Standing on Sacred Ground: Profit and Loss* from this series, in which two groups of indigenous communities are threatened by the exploitation of vast mineral wealth found on their land. One group is from Canada, a wealthy industrialized country, and the other is from Papua New Guinea. Because Papua New Guinea is the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, it is nearly identical to West Papua in terms of biological and ethnic diversity. However, Papua New Guinea has been independent since 1975, and its constitution enshrines the ownership of the land to the people.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

1) Follow the Resources link at <https://www.freewestpapua.org/> and you will find a list of recent films, books, reports and documents, campaign materials, and information about how you can get involved.

2) TED talks:

Benny Wenda, Indonesia's Hidden Colony:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=FH0Gg8DnX4w

Jennifer Robinson at TEDxSydney, Courage Is Contagious:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=WbkHkjg5Kac