



# MT CARSTENSZ FORUM

PANEL DISCUSSION ABOUT THE DEVASTATING ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL  
IMPACTS WROUGHT BY FOREIGN EXPLOITATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES  
IN MT CARSTENSZ AND WEST PAPUA'S HIGHLAND COMMUNITIES

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RALPH PLINER  
Mountaineer

“Climbing Mt Carstensz, the  
Seventh Summit, in August 2001”

- transcription of audio recording
- powerpoint (of presentation)



FRWP Women's Office  
Suite 211, 838 Collins St, Docklands, Victoria



VICTOR LASA Ralph started climbing mountains in his mid-thirties, and summited Shishapangma at eight-thousand metres in the Tibetan Himalayas in 1998 at aged fifty. He has the dubious distinction of having frost-bitten fingers, which as a mountaineer he's very proud of that. He has climbed mountains in many parts, Africa, Latina, Alaska-US, New Zealand, and of course Mt Carstensz in West Papua 2001. So he's here today to share his experiences there with us.

RALPH PLINER Thanks very much Victor. I must say we went to Carstensz for a totally different reason. West Papua, or Irian Jaya, whichever you like to call it, had no real history for us, or background at all other than Carstensz, which is one of the Seven Summits, and thus attracts a lot of interest from mountaineers. So I knew very little about the area, except that it was remote and it was an amazing mountain to climb. I'd heard about the mine, but didn't really appreciate what it was.

I was very keen in fact to walk in, but in 2001 that was regarded as being very dangerous in terms of security issue. We went with an Indonesian adventure group, and flew from Jakarta to Timika on the south coast of West Papua, which is about 70kms from Mt Carstensz.







Eventually we all got together, and you can see quite a motley crew of people. Franky was our guide. Geoff Robb, who was a very close mate of mine, was trying to do the Seven Summits. I wasn't, I just went along for the ride so to speak. The group had a variety of skills, but at that time we didn't appreciate that Carstensz was quite rocky, quite tricky, that it did have snow, that it did have ice, and that it was rope work to get up there. So I think we were quite naïve about the mountain at the time.





We arrived in Timika, and you cannot believe it, because you've got this deep bush, deep forest, and part of it's been cleared, and this is a good example. This is a golf course. So out of the bush they've got this golf course for the Americans who come to work at the mine, and particularly management, and in fact it's still quite boggy, it's still quite damp, that whole area.





We landed at the American village, and had some R & R before we started off. This is the Sheraton Hotel, with a beautiful pool, and you can see some of the local vegetation. But it was all so carved out. That was the first sense of people imposing themselves on the environment.

We were stuck there for a while, because we had been told by our guides that we were going to helicopter up to the base camp at Zebra Walk. But then we were told that there were new pilots and they didn't like flying that high, to 3800m. What we found out was the army needed the helicopter, so it disappeared. In fact, when I think back on it, we were absolutely unaware of so much that was happening in the background.

Eventually our Indonesian tourist group negotiated with some army people, who in the end provided us with army vehicles, in the dead of night, under the cloak of darkness. We felt like illegal refugees I can tell you. We left at 10.40 in the evening, in vehicles that were blacked out. We were told to pull down our binis, and we went through check points. Outside you could just see, vaguely, absolute desolation. We were driving alongside a river, and it was absolutely clear that this was an area that had suffered from some sort of amazing poison. It was so desolate when it should have been the deepest most significant forest.



Anyway we got to the town which services the mine. We are now about 3000m. And it's wet and boggy. The town looks like blocks of units, and suddenly there are tiered roads. Again under cloak of darkness we are ushered into a little building. Everyone's watching. There's army people with guns. This was not what I was actually expecting on a mountain climb.

Now it is about 3am, and we managed to rest for an hour. But there's a whole lot still happening in the background under this cloak of darkness. Eventually these massive four-wheel drives arrive. We get into them, again very secretly, and off we go, right through the entire mine. It was absolutely amazing, through these huge tunnels that had been dug into the earth. We could see because the four-wheel drives had windows. It was quite extraordinary. I couldn't believe it. The Army was taking us right past security. I never thought that I would depend on the Indonesian army. In fact there were some KOPASSUS people as well. We were totally in their hands.





Here's the mine site. It's massive. It's one of the largest copper-gold mines in the world. Incidentally that is not Carstensz, that's another part of the ridge.





This is the Zebra Wall, which is the first camp. Now we are at 3800m, and although it looks like terra firma, it is extremely boggy and damp. In fact we put down our tent in what we thought was a dry spot, and when we got onto our sleeping bags, they were like water beds just floating along. It is so wet, it's amazing. And the other thing we quickly realized was that it rains, almost non-stop.





That's Vicky, from Scotland, who was doing the Seven Summits. She was one of the real mountaineers, and had brought a fellow from America. It was fortunate that she was there, because our Indonesian mountain guides were okay, but they didn't actually guide. I think it must be a cultural issue. They didn't feel that they could tell you what to do, and how to do it, and when to do it, so in fact they weren't really guiding much. But Vicky set the ropes and helped us enormously.





We had visitors occasionally, they'd just come and we'd serve them food, but there was little communication in terms of language.





We managed to get a few porters—and as you can see they were women—but by the time we got up to the next camp there were no porters so we were carrying most of our stuff. It was pretty deserted at that time.





This just gives you an idea of the incredibly wet and damp conditions, you can see our umbrellas and coats.





It was because of the soggy soil that they had to use helicopters to land massive platforms before they could start building the mine. At that time they tried to build tailing dams, but you can't contain anything up there, because the walls break down with the wet. The tailings are lethal because arsenic is used to leach out the copper and gold. What they do at other mines is put the tailings in massive dams and treat them, but what they ended up doing here, and apparently at Ok Tedi as well, is float the tailings down the river. All that tremendous devastation we saw, the total pollution of the water below the mine, was because of the toxicity of the tailings.





We eventually got to these beautiful lakes where we camped. Now it's interesting because I think Richard Muggleton was quite near here forty-five years ago. But this is now 2001, and as you can see no ice, no snow; all gone.





That was our view from the tent. You can see the conditions: very misty and very grey. I hiked around here to acclimatize, and I asked my Indonesian guide if we could drink the water. He said 'Absolutely'. I said 'But don't people use the water to wash?' He said 'Water for the local people is sacred, and they would never pollute the water ... if you go to the mine, and below the mine, that's where the pollution starts, but you can very safely drink this water, it's the purest water.'





We were camping there by the lake, and now we are going up towards the major plateau for the summit.





Once you get onto the major wall, it becomes rock-climbing and rope work. I think this is also where Richard Muggleton and his crew were in 1971-73, but this is what was left in 2001, and I suspect there's not much of that left now.





That's the glacier across the valley. We never went near the glacier, but I think that gives you a very good idea of where the climb is.





We climbed up one of these rock walls, and then across the plane, and then up to the summit. You think once you are up to here you are almost there, but in fact, that's where the climb gets really very tough, because it's a series of knife-edge ridges. So you are up-climbing, then down-climbing, then crossing crevasses, then climbing up again.





That's a flat plane of ice, about two hundred metres below the summit. At that level you have to cut across onto the knife-edge ridges.





There are some of the ridges that we are starting to climb. As you can see helmets were absolutely essential. It became quite an epic, because some of the people in the group had no technical experience.





After climbing all these gullies and ridges, my friend Geoff Robb and I got to the summit at 2.30 in the afternoon, after a 3.30am start.





After we'd reached the summit, we had to sit on a ridge until 9pm waiting for the guide, because we didn't know where to down-climb. We were so fortunate, because it was the one night when there was no rain. It was a beautiful night on the mountain. It was quite dark, and very beautiful, and you could almost see the stars in the sky. But you know, looking down was like looking over a moonscape, an absolutely desolate landscape. Through the mist we could see these massive dump trucks, with these huge lights, like creatures of the night. It was quite extraordinary. I will never forget it.

We were expecting the army to pick us up, but when the vehicles arrived, they were Freeport security. Our Indonesian guides realized this could be a catastrophe, so they turned to the Scottish girl, and said 'Vicky you are not well, are you?'. She was onto the ruse and said 'Yes I'm very very ill', whereupon the guides told the Freeport men that we were only waiting at the bottom of the gully (on the mine site) because we were hoping they would help us with the sick girl. I need to tell you that Freeport is absolutely hostile to mountaineers and to anyone coming in; they are so scared of negative publicity. They of course said they couldn't help, so we said 'Oh well, we'll get the helicopter tomorrow' and walked away. Our guides were mightily relieved, because if Freeport had known we had been inside their mine we would have been detained straight away.

So we waited in the gully, in the shadows, and eventually the army arrived and took us down to Timika. We were absolutely exhausted, and anticipating a wonderful rest around the pool at the Sheraton Hotel. But at 6.30am, our Indonesian guides suddenly said "We've got to get out of here". 'Why?' "Oh they're expecting trouble." But again it wasn't true. We later found out that some army personnel knew we'd been driven up and some didn't, and questions were being asked, and we were in danger,



again, of being detained. So there was this mad dash, with no luggage, to the airport. I tell you I felt like Humphrey Bogart in Casa Blanca, and it was with absolute relief that we got onto that plane and started taxiing to Jakarta. So my climb of Mt Cartenz was an amazing adventure, where we had to deal with a difficult mountain as well as this entire political social landscape that we were suddenly confronted with.

VICTOR LASA Thank you Ralph, that was really really interesting. When I see mountaineering expeditions, they seem very focused on the climb, and I am wondering whether anything else affects you?

RALPH PLINER You know Victor that's a very interesting question, because I think you start out being very motivated by the mountain. The idea of climbing to those heights, and your sense of self, and the risks that you face entirely absorbs you. You are absorbed by the weather conditions, which are critical, and by the climb, and the daily routine, and also altitude exhaustion. But when you are there long enough, you do become aware, more in the Himalayas than in Carstenz, because of the local people, their porters, their guides that come and help you, and you start building up relationships. And then you start a complete new awareness. It's quite interesting. There here have been a number of fantastic mountaineers who have climbed some of the highest peaks in the Himalayas, who have devoted themselves to helping the local people. Ed Hilary was amazing. After climbing Everest, he spent most of his life raising money and going out himself and building schools in villages in Nepal. Many mountaineers do that. I think once you are in the country, you get touched by the people. But I don't think that's how it starts.

AUDIENCE You showed those knife-edges you had to climb, so I was wondering how big was your last day before you had to summit?

RALPH PLINER We acclimatized at the Zebra Wall for two days, and also did an acclimatization walk up and back from those lakes where the base camp was, so that was from 3,800 to 4,200 metres and back again. The first night we tried it was freezing, it was snowing, and there was no way we could do it. So we were awake the whole night, but didn't go for the summit. I hardly slept the next day, and the next night it wasn't raining, so we went for it. And that was it, straight from 4,200 to 4,800. Once you make the bid, you are pretty well committed, and 600 metres is about as much as you would want to do. That plane of flat ice was probably around 200m from the summit, so we'd done most of the climbing before that.

AUDIENCE You said the group got separated with no communication?

RALPH PLINER Yes, we broke up into three groups. The two Americans, particularly with a technical climber, were the fastest. Then there was myself and Geoff Robb, the guy who's done the Seven Summits, with a guide. And then there was the rest, with all sorts of terrible problems. I tell you, it's quite a dangerous mountain. In fact, the Japanese guy you saw, Kenji, he actually fell about four meters. He didn't clip on properly when he was down-climbing. He was so lucky, because he fell into a little gully, which was full of snow and was ok.