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Multispecies mourning: grief and resistance in an age of ecological undoing

Dr Sophie Chao

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The research, events and operations of the Sydney Environment Institute take place at the University of Sydney, on the Gadigal lands of the Eora Nation. We pay our deepest respects to Indigenous elders, caretakers and custodians past, present and emerging, here in Eora and beyond.

The Iain McCalman Lecture celebrates SEI co-founder and former co-director Iain McCalman's dedication to fostering and pioneering multidisciplinary environmental research.

The lectures aim to highlight the work of early to mid-career researchers working across disciplinary boundaries to impact both scholarship and public discourse.

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Crafting different ways of acknowledging and mourning more-than-human loss is of amplified importance at a time when intensifying industrial processes, combined with increasingly extreme weather events, are undermining conditions of life at a planetary scale. In Australia, protracted droughts, devastating floods, and the overwhelming destruction of non-human lifeforms and landscapes during the Black Summer conjure these losses in all their viscerally palpable yet often also ungraspable enormity, as Professor Danielle Celemajer speaks to so powerfully in *Summertime* (Celermajer 2021).

These losses remind us that non-humans are subjects of harm and injustice, underscoring the urgency of practicing what Philip McKibbin calls a “politics of love” – that is “a values-based politics, which affirms the importance of people, and extends beyond us to non-human animals and the environment and that is anchored in loving values, such as compassion and commitment, which can guide action and inform policy and practice” (McKibbin 2019).

Such forms of multispecies love, care, and kinship have of course long been central to Indigenous philosophies and practices of being-in-just-relation with more-than-human worlds, as Christine Winter reminds us in *Subjects of Intergenerational Justice* (Winter 2021). These philosophies and practices are fundamental not only to sustaining the possibilities of more-than-human life, but also to recognising and mourning the realities of more-than-human death.

Learning the arts of mourning with Myriam

In the field site where I conduct ethnographic fieldwork, it is Myriam, a now-deceased Marind woman from West Papua, who introduced me to the art of multispecies mourning during a journey we undertook together.

One afternoon during this journey, my companions and I sat cross-legged amidst piles of felled trees and pulped vegetation, ripped out of the soil to make way for a 200-thousand-hectare industrial oil palm plantation. Shards of afternoon sunlight reflected off the dark, glossy veins of engine oil trickling down the surface of the shredded bark and spreading in thick pools across the overturned earth. The air, once kept cool by the lush canopy, was stiflingly hot and still. A heavy, deafening silence presided, interrupted every so often by the violent jolt of a chainsaw ripping to life in the distance.

Myriam and her family had travelled 20 kilometres by foot and canoe across swamp, mangrove, and plantation to reach this place, the birthing site of her clan’s ancestral spirit, Yosom.

Day and night, they sang songs, weaved sago bags, and transplanted bamboos. They had shared “wetness” (dubadub) – a Marind expression referring to more-than-human, life-giving exchanges of bodily fluids – with the landscape by touching it, smelling it, listening to it, and storying it (Chao 2022). Here and there, offerings of sago flour, papaya leaves, and betel nut had been left for forest birds to feed on.

Waterways obstructed by felled trunks had been painstakingly cleared to facilitate animals’ movements. The deep ruts left by bulldozers had been filled out, smoothed over, scattered with seeds, and watered. That way, Myriam explained, the scars of the earth can “heal” (*jadi sembuh*).

Myriam’s nimble fingers moved fast as she intertwined the sago fibres collected into a tightly woven sago bag. As she sung and wove, she wiped tears off her cheeks and smeared them upon the soil, digging her palms deep into the damp earth. Myriam massaged the soil repeatedly.

“This soil is born of and births humans, plants, and animals. Now, this soil is sick and dying because of oil palm. This soil, and everything it births, cannot be forgotten. By mourning, we remember, and we refuse. We carry the past in our voices and sweat, in our hands and feet. We celebrate our roots, and we make new ones – with our brother the bamboo and our sister the sago. We remember the past together. We heal the present together. We weave the future together.”

In the last decade, Myriam and her kin in the district of Merauke, West Papua, have seen some 1.3 million hectares of their customary lands converted to monocrop oil palm plantations by state and corporate bodies, in the name of national food security, regional economic development, and the alleviation of rural poverty among Papua’s so-called ‘backward tribes’ (*suku terlantar*).

Monocrop proliferation and land privatisation, compounded with rampant deforestation, biodiversity loss, soil erosion, water contamination, and air pollution, have severely jeopardised Marind people’s forest-based livelihoods, economies, and food and water security. Marind’s intimate and ancestral relations with kindred plants, animals, elements, and ecosystems are being ruptured as forest ecologies give way to monocrop plantations. These transformations are in turn giving rise among Marind to new and different modes of mourning.

This essay constitutes a *tribute* to Myriam, my late weaving instructor, friend, and aunt, whose wisdom has textured the very fabric and fashioning of this text as a story about mourning acts and as an act of mourning itself.

“This soil is born of and births humans, plants, and animals. Now, this soil is sick and dying because of oil palm. This soil, and everything it births, cannot be forgotten. By mourning, we remember, and we refuse. We carry the past in our voices and sweat, in our hands and feet. We celebrate our roots, and we make new ones – with our brother the bamboo and our sister the sago. We remember the past together. We heal the present together. We weave the future together.”

– Myriam, an elderly woman from West Papua.

I also seek to *con-tribute* to a growing body of scholarship in the environmental humanities that examines mourning as a necessary disposition of our times – one that demands that we rethink what does and does not count as a grievable body, that we deal with our complicity in situated and planetary ecocide, that we push against the consequentialist human exceptionalism, and that we expand the subjects and objects of mourning beyond the human in order to craft less violent sharings of suffering across species lines.

Specifically, I unpack the forms and meanings of three Marind practices that I gloss as “multispecies mournings” (Chao 2023) – first, the weaving of sago bags as a form of collective healing, second, the creation of songs in response to encounters with roadkill, and third, the planting of bamboos as part of land reclaiming activities.

Taking place in hidden patches of forest and grove, at the side of empty roads and highways, and on the outskirts of monocrops, these modes of mourning complement the public-facing modes of advocacy that Marind engage in as part of their struggle to curb oil palm expansion. They offer potent avenues for Marind to remember, commemorate, and memorialise the radical loss of lives and relations prompted by capitalist landscape transformations.

Concurrently, I argue that multispecies mournings constitute forms of active resistance and creative refusal in the face of extractive capitalism’s ecocidal logic. Bringing together plants, people, and places, their distributed sentience and materiality offer hopeful pathways for multispecies solidarities in and against the ruin and rubble of agro-industrialism and its necropolitical undergirdings.

Marind multispecies mournings take as their object not a particular organism or species, but rather the *relationship* between lifeforms and their human

counterparts across time, species, and generations. They push against the paralysing politics of despair that can so easily arise when it seems that nothing can be done. These acts of multispecies mourning demand a pause – a slowing down or hiatus in the rhythm of everyday life that allowing us to reckon in sensory and sensual ways with everyday destruction in all its visceral and speculative violence and in doing so, makes of absence something meaningful and present.

Weaving

Of central cultural importance across New Guinea, noken are woven from native rattan palms, sago palms, and gnetum trees. They are used to carry non-timber forest products, as well as clove cigarettes, notebooks, and bibles, and also baby pigs and humans, who are said to grow best by sharing wetness with the plants that hold, protect, and shelter them with their tightly woven bark and fronds.

In the past, noken were woven at the birth of a child, the marriage of a relative, or the homecoming of a distant friend. Now, Marind weave noken for far less felicitous reasons: when they discover unexpected patches of razed forest in their sacred sites, witness toxic mill effluents spewing into the river, hear the grumble of bulldozers approaching, learn of new oil palm projects arriving to their lands, or simply, in Myriam’s words “when our hearts are just too heavy to go on.”

The act of weaving that ensues involves an intimate mingling of human and vegetal limbs – a sharing of wetness. Experienced women squat behind the children and carefully guide their fingers along and across the translucent filaments, one after the other, one within the other.

They whisper gently in the apprentice’s ears.

“This way. Now that way. Now this way again. The threads, like a river flowing. Your fingers, like a river flowing. All of us, like a river flowing.”

When the end of a line of weaving is reached, the weaver tightens the filaments with one, brisk pull and cries out ‘ha!’. An utterance pronounced in response and in unison by other members of the group reverberates throughout the forest: “One with each other, one with the forest” (*satu bersama, satu bersama hutan*).

A spiral of movement and materiality forms across the weavers. In the process, the togetherness of noken weaving takes multiple, interconnected forms – the sturdy yet flexible noken filaments, the sympoietic species from which these filaments derive, and the kin-bound people who fashion and bear them.



Left: Weaving as mourning. Credit: Sophie Chao. **Right:** Handwoven noken from the Papuan highlands. Credit: Shutterstock, by Andraprayoga.

The art of noken weaving is as much about making multispecies relations as it is about mourning them. This relationality manifests in the very materiality of the noken, an arte(nature)fact produced from the intertwining of multiple vegetal ligaments and lifeforms, in the image of their intertwined existences in the forest.

In this regard, noken weaving speaks directly to “the indissociability of the telling and the material” that Teresia Teaiwa and Joannemariebarker identify as central to Indigenous ways of being and storying (Teaiwa & Joannemariebarker 1994). It is this material-semiotic relation – this binding through weaving – that makes the noken strong, resilient, durable, capable of holding many other things and beings. It is this relation – and the sympoietic forms of living it enables – that is threatened by the disappearance of the forest in the wake of capitalist incursions. It is this relation that Marind mourn and celebrate as they remember themselves by weaving-with human and vegetal others.

Singing

Since oil palm arrived in Merauke, Marind have come to know ecological death in many forms. The proliferation of roads and highways has accompanied industrial oil palm expansion – a major driver of forest destruction. Along these vast and winding capillaries of asphalt, concrete, and dust, ecological death manifests in the

remains of native beings whose lives have been violently crushed out of their bodies by passing vehicles: roadkill.

Marind encounter roadkill when they travel by foot to the forest to forage, hunt, and fish, when they journey to neighbouring villages to visit family, and when they ride public jeeps or motorbikes to attend compulsory oil palm promotion campaigns and government meetings in the city.

While I use “roadkill” as a shorthand, it is important to note that this violently neutralising term, purged of all agency and affect, does not come anywhere close to capturing how my friends encounter death on the road. Many describe traveling the road in the silent and haunting company of mangled bodies, leaking entrails, and blood-stained feathers – the almost unrecognisable yet all-too-familiar remains of their cherished other-than-human kin.

At worst, they say they witness roadkill when the killing is not over. Injured animals are often found in the last throes of dying; bodies jerking, gazes panicked, growls and shrieks piercing. Such encounters provoke immense grief, anger, and pain among Marind.

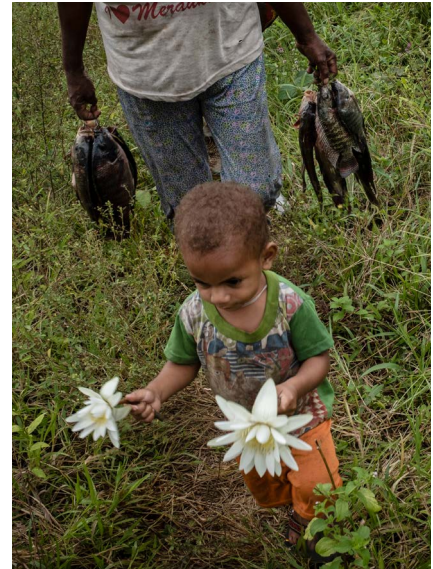
Nothing can be done in the face of these slow and violent deaths. But one must stop. One must turn off the engine – get off one’s motorbike. One must remove one’s helmet. One must stand by one’s agonising kin. One must look. One must not turn away. And then, one must sing.



Above: Sami, the snake sibling, crushed by passing trucks on a plantation dirt road. Credit: Albertus Vembrianto.

*Sami, Sami, you slip, you slide
 Sister of the forest, sister of the grove
 Sami, Sami, you weave, you glide
 Sister of the river, sister of the swamp
 Sami, Sami, you are born of clay and tide
 Your skin is sleek and shiny, patterned by the land
 Silent and shy, you slither across the land
 Moving soil and leaf, patterning the land
 Here you lie, Sami, snake sister
 Your body crushed, your wetness gone
 I cannot bear to look at you, I cannot bear to leave
 The trucks and cars, they took away your life
 Robbed you of your wetness, robbed you of your pride
 Here you lie, Sami, sister snake
 Your blood so dark, your eyes so pale
 Sami, Sami, I was not here to save you
 I could not spare you death*

*But Sami, Sami, I will not turn away, I will not leave you
 In leaves and fronds, I'll wrap you
 With my arms and my legs, I'll take you
 To a quiet, green place, I'll carry you
 To that place your fathers and forefathers were born
 And there, you will find rest
 In the cool shade of the forest, you can sleep
 There, no pain or dust will haunt you
 The rain and soil will hold you
 Sister of the forest, sister of the grove
 Sami, Sami, born of clay and tide
 You and I are kin and skin since days long gone
 Today, I beseech you, accept from me this song
 Through it you will live on*



Left: Siblings of the snake clan – Kosmas (right) with his father Okto (left). Credit: Sophie Chao. **Right:** Villagers bring food and flower offerings to an animal burial site in the forest. Credit: Sophie Chao.

These lyrics were composed by Marind youth Kosmas and his father Okto, upon discovering the pulverised remains of his clan's sibling, the snake, along a recently constructed stretch of the Trans-Papuan Highway. Songs about roadkill, Kosmas explained, commemorate and celebrate the origins and lifeways of Marind's other-than-human kin.

For here, the *form* of dying matters as much as the *fact* of death itself. Unlike organisms hunted in the forest and treated with ritual care, respect, and reverence, organisms killed on the road are flattened into mutilated and disfigured remnants of themselves, left to rot; suffering, alone, humiliated, and gasping for that vital, last breath of air that will not save them. Severed from their forest kin, these organisms undergo what Deborah Bird-Rose calls "double death," or death that can no longer sustain regenerative, ecosystemic flourishing (Bird Rose 2014).

Songs about roadkill come to embody a last rite – a reckoning with the enormity of untimely, more-than-human deaths that repeat over and over and over again.

At the end of the singing, people wrap the remains of these organisms in fronds, carry them to the forest, bury them in the soil, and cover them with offerings of leaves, sago flour, nuts, and shoots.

Each of these beings will be remembered and celebrated through songs that echo the interconnected lifeways of different organisms whose textured pasts and thwarted futures Marind remember with their voices and words.

Planting

Since the introduction of oil palm into Merauke, Marind activists have initiated a range of advocacy initiatives in defence of their land, livelihoods, and environments – including organised blockades and protests, cases submitted to court systems, complaints to international human rights bodies including the United Nations, and reports filed with voluntary commodity certification standards such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil.

Local kinds of grassroots resistance are bringing people, soils, and flora together in multispecies alliance, including through the act of planting.

For instance, harvesting bamboo shoots from the forest and transplanting them along the boundaries of territories owned by different Marind clans, particularly where these boundaries intersect with oil palm plantations.

Multiple forms of agency partake in the act of planting. As my friends explained, they include the collective gathering and transplanting of shoots, roots, and suckers by villagers, the labors of care enacted by previous Marind generations and now embedded in the terrains and textures of the land, the nourishing affordances of the soils and waters that have and continue to sustain plant growth, and the participation of symbiotic species such as pollinator insects and birds that support vegetal proliferation. The agentive materiality of the particular plants planted, too, matters to this story of multispecies solidarity.

These plants belong primarily to the *nastus* genus of the bamboo family, whose stems Marind traditionally consume when soft and fashion into containers when woody. These plants are remarkably fast-growing and highly tolerant of both drought and waterlogging. They develop from short rhizomes and can rise to 30 meters, producing new vegetative shoots throughout the year, all the while seeding profusely.

Many Marind identify meaningful similarities between the flexible, fast-growing, and enduring bodies of bamboo stems and their own strategies of collective resistance. One of these was Mirna, a young woman from Mirav village, who explained:

“Marind use many different strategies to stop oil palm expanding. We protest. We write letters. We organise demonstrations. We sing. We weave. We plant. We talk to NGOs, the government, the companies. We send information to foreign organisations, like the United Nations. When one approach fails, we find another. We look for paths to freedom. We are like bamboos – flexing, bending, but never breaking. Like a bamboo grove, the resistance movement is growing fast and wide. It will not stop, and it will not slow down. And when our generation dies, there will be other generations that take up the struggle. We sow the seeds of futures struggles today –

like the bamboo that scatters its seeds when its own end draws near. Bamboos, people – they grow and fight together.”

Planting is a form of mourning. The acts of rhizome harvesting and transplanting, for instance, are usually marked with solemnity and silence. Villagers get to their knees, dig with their hands, and carefully place the rhizomes into the ground before covering them with a light layer of soil.

The group members utter prayers and thanks to the forest and the bamboo for its presence and nourishment. These utterances are enhanced by physical exchanges of skin and wetness, as villagers rub their tears and sweat onto the rhizome when they bury it. The growth of bamboos signals that the plant has listened to peoples’ voices and imbibed their life-sustaining wetness. It will live on because and for the stories of all those who have died.

The significance of bamboo operates across diverse scales of matter and meaning. They include the evocative emptiness of bamboo’s hollowed body. They encompass the plant’s capacity to proliferate rapidly and widely. They conjure bamboo’s ability to reassert and reclaim spaces of Indigenous territorial sovereignty,



Left: Bamboo shoots are subterranean in the early stages of growth and consequently overlooked by plantation operators. Credit: Shutterstock, by Zulashai. **Right:** Marind villagers utter prayers at a bamboo planting ritual. Credit: Sophie Chao.



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– Mirna, a young Marind woman from Mirav village.

Below: “Stop the intimidation and the theft of our lands”: Marind activists during a land reclaiming campaign. Credit: Dandhy Dwi Laksono.



in what Anna Tsing described as a form of “weedy agency” (Tsing 2017). What frequently goes *unnoticed* – and also *unattributable* – are the bamboo rhizomes planted in the soil at the feet of protest placards: some discreetly surfacing, others still fully underground. These organisms are largely invisible and consequently overlooked. They lie dormant, then erupt in dense proliferation, climbing across each other to form thick, matted clusters that are immune to herbicides and almost impossible to fully eradicate. Moving, cutting, unearthing, and spraying works only if all roots, shoots, rhizomes, and culms are painstakingly broken up and removed. If even the tiniest, stray fragment of a rhizome of root remains in the ground, new growths will occur, and the bamboo will multiply all over again.

In the absence of natural predators that would otherwise contain the plant’s growth in its native forest habitat, bamboos tend to spread rapidly and uncontrollably when planted in or near monocrop concessions, where species compositions are both simpler and fewer. Eventually, the bamboos create physical barriers to the movements of plantation workers and the vehicles transporting oil palm fruit from monocrop to mill.

Once-uniform concessions become overgrown, unwieldy, and therefore more expensive and difficult to manage. In this, too, bamboo’s materiality shapes its weedy affordance as a more-than-human ally within Marind’s struggles for territorial and environmental justice.

Mourning in and beyond the Papuan frontier

The stories and practices of mourning enacted by Marind on the Papuan plantation frontier evoke in powerful ways what Jakelyn Troy describes as “a world of tender engagement and terrible dilemma” – the dilemma, Jakelyn continues, of how to sustain more-than-human worlds that are *not* anchored in the anything-but-*great* “nature-culture” divide, and the dilemma of how to support the agency of other-than-humans in the anything-but-human-only realms of intergenerational, planetary, and deep time (Troy 2023).

In focusing on these Indigenous modes and mediums of mourning, I am however also wary of enacting what Eve Tuck calls “damage-centred research,” or research that represents Indigenous peoples solely through their experiences of loss and destruction and obscures Indigenous forms of survivance, continuance, and desire (Tuck 2009). As Tracy Banivanua Mar notes, damage-centred narratives elide Pacific peoples’ ongoing insistence and persistence in the face of colonization and its regimes of imposed invisibility (Banivanua Mar 2016). They gloss over Pacific peoples’ ongoing efforts, in the words of Epeli Hau’ofa, to “be themselves and hold together” in the face of seemingly unsurmountable odds (Hau’ofa 2000).

Among Marind, multispecies mournings matter as a practice of looking *back* – of remembering those who have been obliterated in the making of ever-more progressivist and productionist capitalist presents. They conjure mourning as a way of at once lamenting, celebrating, exalting, and defending those lives deemed killable and ungrievable under extractive technocapitalist regimes – a mourning of nature “in the active voice,” to use Val Plumwood’s words (Plumwood 2009).

Mourning is a ritual of commemoration for more-than-human *endings*. But it is also an *ends* to something else – a crucial starting point and companion to collective social action, protest, and mobilisation. It offers a collective means of feeling one’s way in, through, and beyond the consequential loss of more-than-human communities of life. It does not necessarily offer a solution to, or resolution of, loss but rather a renewed recognition of interspecies ruination and relation – of what is worth protecting, fighting for, and perhaps even dying for.

In these acts of mourning that blur the line between suffering and survivance, Marind are not alone and voices are never human-only. Plants, soils, fibres, animals, and wetness, too, become participants within multispecies articulations of pain and protest. Generative and in-the-making, grieving among Marind is an active disposition – a “staying with the trouble” of grief that does something *with and of* that grief.

Persisting in grieving, as Marind do, represents nothing less than a form of “radical mourning” – a refusal not to mourn that enables one to hold on to imagined otherwises, in spite of deadly histories and potentially deadlier futures (Hobart & Kneese 2020). Amid violences slow and spectacular, Marind insist on carving fleshly spaces and solemn moments for multispecies grief and grieving. In eschewing resistance to mourning and instead embracing mourning as resistance, they counter another kind of death: the *death of mourning itself*.

When I last visited Merauke in 2019, I learned that Myriam had passed away a few months earlier from pneumonia. I asked her granddaughter, Serafina, if we could visit the clearing where Myriam had taught us how to weave and sing a decade prior. But this was not possible. The birthplace of Yosom had since been planted with oil palm and fenced off with barbed wire.

Instead, Serafina suggested we pay Myriam a visit.

She led me to the boundary of a nearby oil palm concession. Here, in between road and plantation, a row of freshly planted bamboo shoots rose green and translucent from the dirt, surrounded by flourishing clusters of paddy straw mushrooms.

Myriam had planted the bamboos a few weeks before her passing. Short of breath and ridden with arthritic pains, she had painstakingly harvested the shoots from

the birthplace of Yosom before the land was planted, nurtured them in a plot of soil near her home, and finally gave them a new home at the edge of the concession. Myriam had left in her wake a place of meaningful mourning and continuance – of intertwined multispecies death and emergence. Even though she was gone, Serafina explained, Myriam was still present through the arts of mourning.

Coming to life in a remote, out-of-the-way corner of rural West Papua, the multispecies mournings that Myriam once practiced and taught might easily be deemed inconsequential against the sheer scale of planetary unravelings in an Anthropocenic epoch. Indeed, my Marind companions understand mourning alone is insufficient to achieve the urgent social change needed to halt local and global ecological unmakings.

Marind modes of multispecies mourning matter well *beyond* the grounds of their birthing in the way they mobilise multispecies pain, justice, and (failed) responsibilities to resist the trivialisation of other-than-human life and the systemic regimes of violence that naturalise other-than-human death.

Mourning as a form of practice and resistance, as such, is by no means limited to peoples in remote settings like West Papua. It is an invitation and ethic for us all to develop as we think/feel our way through the climate crisis and the rightful sense of outrage this crisis provokes for many among us.

At the Sydney Environment Institute, this outrage is being put to work through the weave of SEI's scholars and students, whether they be working in the space of climate change, conservation, biodiversity, or multispecies justice. This collective work is catalysing transformational pathways in thinking and action, in feeling and witnessing. It is the kind of collaborative and coalitional labour we urgently need in reckoning with ecological loss, its profound impacts on individual bodies and planetary systems, and its affective toll on human and non-human beings.

It is within this distributed and ongoing labour of reimagination that the weave of mournings are embedded, and from which important lessons can be learned by all of us. These modes of mourning are at once modest and resilient, poetic and political. They form a patchwork of "little justices" (Rousell 2020) enacted by plants and people historically marginalized under colonial-capitalist regimes.

They subvert the extractive, reductionist, and homogenising logic of the anthropocenic epoch. They draw in human and other-than-human wetness and worlds through shared planting, singing, weeping, and weaving. And they continue to sprout from the soil, enduring and emerging even as the soil is exhausted and dying.

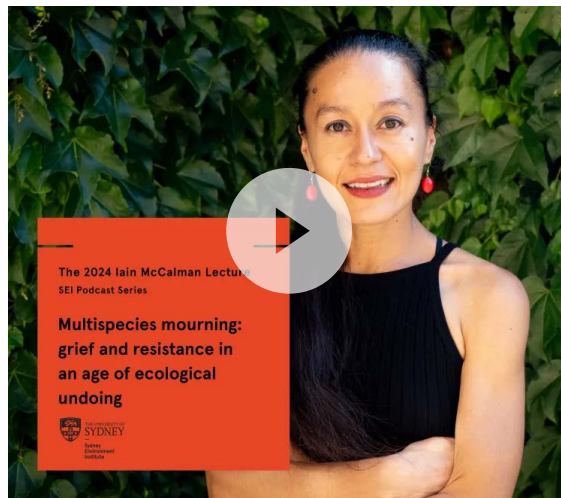


Bottom: The birth site of ancestor Yosom and former forest, razed to make way for oil palm plantations. Credit: Myriam Mahuze.

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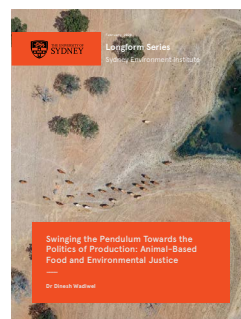
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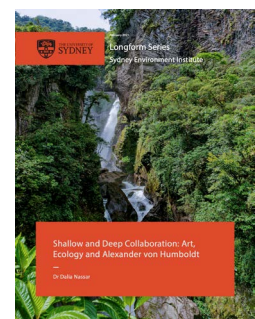
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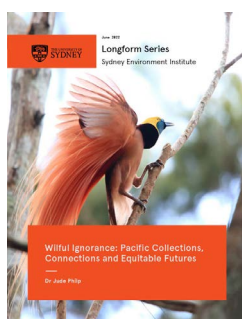
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