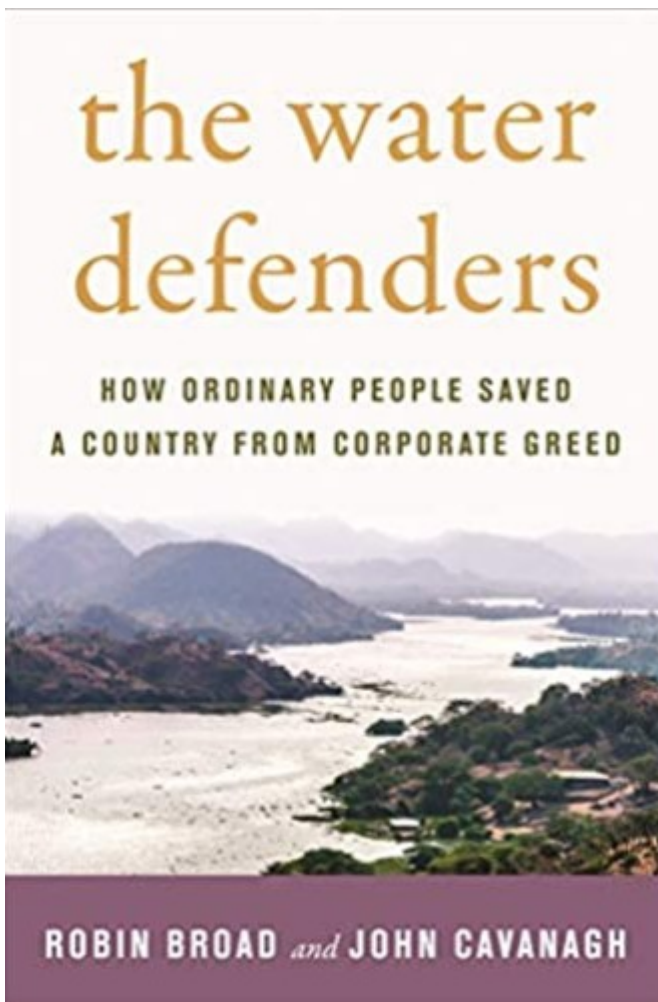


How a small group of activists took down the mining company destroying a Salvadoran watershed

This time, David beat Goliath.

by [Jeannine Marie Pitas](#) in the [May 5, 2021](#) issue

In Review



The Water Defenders

How Ordinary People Saved a Country from Corporate Greed

By Robin Broad and John Cavanagh

Beacon Press

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Twelve years ago, Robin Broad and her husband, John Cavanagh, attended an event that would change their lives. A small group of Salvadoran activists had been chosen to receive a prestigious human rights award from the Institute for Policy Studies, where Cavanagh works. Known as “water defenders,” these activists were members of a group called La Mesa—the National Roundtable on Mining in El Salvador. When they came to Washington, DC, to receive the award, they brought bad news: one of their own, Marcelo Rivera, had just been murdered, his killer unknown.

For the next eight years, Cavanagh and Broad found themselves accompanying Salvadorans in a multifaceted effort to protect their main watershed, the Lempa River, from the greed of multinational gold corporations. The process of gold mining involves using the highly toxic chemical cyanide to extract the metal from rock—a process that all around the world has turned once-lush landscapes into wastelands while polluting countless communities’ water.

Stories of mining companies’ greedy machinations generally make for grim reading. While no less sobering than other such stories, this account differs in that it ends on a note of hope. This time Goliath was defeated. After facing a corporate lawsuit in the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (a branch of the World Bank) in which the company Pac Rim Cayman, a subsidiary of OceanaGold, sued El Salvador for “future profits forgone,” the country emerged victorious. In 2017, the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly voted to ban all mining within its national borders.

“To say that this story of the Water Defenders versus Big Gold holds keys to reversing the outsized power of global corporations today is not an exaggeration,” assert Broad and Cavanagh at the beginning of the book. “You may find yourself surprised by the relevance of the strategies of the water defenders in El Salvador, whether your focus is on a Walmart in Washington, DC, a fracking company trying to expand in Texas or Pennsylvania, or petrochemical companies outside New Orleans.”

This book is an affirmation of the power of Margaret Mead’s “small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens” to stand up to powerful institutions, even in what Eduardo Galeano has called an “upside down world” where corporations are deemed

more important than communities. To anyone tempted to think there is nothing an ordinary individual can do to make a difference, this story offers a powerful wake-up call.

Cinematic in scope, the tale begins in 2002, when “white men in suits” first appear in El Salvador seeking to coax the national government and local communities into opening their country to mining. In a grim but sadly common joke for people who spent 13 years embroiled in civil war, some Salvadorans state that when these visitors first arrived, their hosts thought that by “mines” they meant land mines. A few years later, local environmental activists in a community set to be mined begin to smell a rat—particularly when a corporate rep swears that cyanide is safe and offers to drink some *horchata* laced with it but ultimately refuses to do so when pressed.

The killing of Rivera (to this day an unsolved crime; he is one of 1,700 environmental activists around the world killed between 2002 and 2018) thickens the plot as the Salvadoran Water Defenders’ resistance movement grows, forming an unlikely coalition of allies against mining both within their country and beyond. The story culminates with Pac Rim’s lawsuit, arbitrated in what Broad and Cavanagh argue is a kangaroo court, the ICSID branch of the World Bank. It culminates in the company’s defeat and El Salvador’s subsequent decision to ban mining.

One major question underlying this harrowing story is how we define progress. Pac Rim and later OceanaGold seek to woo the Salvadoran government with promises of “sustainable development” and “modernity.” But as the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has astutely observed, our diverse world offers many models of what modernity can look like, and concepts of progress cannot be divorced from culture and social values. For mining executives, “every piece of mining equipment . . . every drill they brought into the mountains was modernization, progress. . . . For the farmers and townspeople in northern El Salvador, protecting their scarce water is a unifying priority,” Broad and Cavanagh explain. “For these people, ‘water is life’ is not just a slogan. It is everything.”

Another significant aspect of this story is the coalition of unlikely allies that La Mesa was able to build. These included a center-right politician from one of the country’s wealthiest “old money” families, a conservative archbishop who happened to have an undergraduate degree in chemistry—and thus knew the danger of cyanide—and a lawyer with an undergraduate degree from West Point. Environmental protection

proved not to be a left-wing issue, as it is so often construed, but an issue of the common good. From the context of El Salvador, which remains politically polarized two decades after the end of its civil war, this story of coalition building offers lessons that seem awfully applicable to the challenges US readers face closer to home.

An important lesson from these activists is the need to have a strong, clear mission: in this case, to protect clean water. “Some coalitions in other countries . . . have names like the So-and-So Coalition against Mining,” Broad and Cavanagh explain:

the Salvadoran story suggests that, whatever the name, campaigns should lead with a positive goal—expressing what the movements are for—particularly if it is something as vital and popular as ensuring affordable and clean water for everyone.

From 2008 through 2015 I lived in Toronto, a financial hub of the mining industry. (More than 60 percent of the world’s mining companies are Canadian.) While I was there, I got involved in the Mining Injustice Solidarity Network, a grassroots organization that aims to expose these companies’ environmental impact and challenge their influence.

While volunteering at a local hospital one day, I discovered that a fellow volunteer worked in corporate social responsibility for a mining company. “Mining is a necessary evil,” she told me. “I want to help lessen its negative impact.” As much as I appreciated her intentions, I couldn’t help but cringe. Some mining may be a necessary evil, but gold? Don’t we have enough already mined to meet our needs? Broad and Cavanagh argue that we do, and they conclude the book with a discussion of mineral recycling programs around the world.

During my years in Toronto, I also got involved with the city’s Latin American community, and I was fortunate to meet a warm, down-to-earth Salvadoran man named Pedro Cabezas. Around 2013, he moved back to his native country to collaborate with water defenders. When I received this book in the mail, I flipped to the acknowledgments section to see if his name was listed—and sure enough, there he was, as a leader of the International Allies Against Mining.

This book filled me with renewed gratitude for my old friend’s passionate dedication, but it also awakened a sense of personal responsibility. If Cabezas and the other activists—most of them people from the affected communities, people of humble

backgrounds and limited resources—can devote themselves to what Pope Francis has called “the care of our common home,” what’s my excuse?