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Small-scale Gold Mining in the Amazon: Socio-Environmental Issues and Opportunities for Regional Change

The history of South America is closely linked to gold exploration and mining. From the Yamana in Terra del Fuego to the Aztecs in Central America, several pre-Colombian civilizations used gold as a magic symbol. Since the very first arrival of Europeans in the New World, gold was one of the main drivers of conquest and land occupation, at the continental scale: in the South-East (Minas Gerais, Brazil), in the Andes (Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia) and in the Guianas (the myth of El Dorado). After European settlement, gold mining has often been associated with the typical Amazonian cyclical process of boom and bust, well known in the case of the precious metal as gold rushes: following the discovery of the ore by adventurous pioneers, major wealth creation occurs in a short period of time, thus attracting large groups of migrants to the area and giving rise to a free for all in income creation and sharing. In such conditions, gold mining requires almost no capital investment, and, as a poverty-driven activity, can make large groups of people dream of a better life.

Many regions in South America have undergone several gold rush waves over the past few centuries, with varying consequences:

1. The benefits of this activity have been poorly distributed amongst the “shareholders”;
2. Following depletion of the deposit, the overall net impact of the activity has frequently been assessed as poor, if positive;
3. Beyond social and economic considerations, gold mining has been, and still is, closely associated with the use of highly toxic chemicals, leading to major pollution risks.

Nowadays, it is estimated that 100 tons of mercury are released annually into the environment by small-scale gold mining in South America. As a whole, the gold mining sector in the Amazon now faces significant challenges: increased questioning by civil society, a large spectrum of gold mining approaches (from individual gold mining to fully industrialized processes), improved environmental and social legislations, etc.

In 2012, and in the context of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, how far does the myth of gold still exist in the Amazon? What situation can be outlined regarding small-scale gold mining, from a social, ecological and economic perspective?

What was, what is, what could be, then, the real benefit of small-scale gold mining for the emerging economies in the Amazon? What are the lessons learned from the past, the key guidelines to keep in mind, in order to ensure that small-scale gold mining exists for the benefit of the Amazon’s “golden territories”, while controlling the risks?

Discussing these issues appears to be of particular importance in the current context (the 2008 financial crisis has led to the highest gold prices ever) and at the scale of the Amazon (major gold deposits still exist).

In 2012, the Rio+20 summit offers a unique opportunity to draw conclusions from the past and to learn from gold mining players in South America (the small-scale mining sector, local and national political players, international institutions), in order to develop less impacting extraction techniques and ensure more widely shared benefits.

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The side event hosted by the French government,
and organized by WWF-France in cooperation with the French Global Environment Facility (FGEF)
will take place in

**Rio de Janeiro on June 19, 2012, at 3pm in the French Pavilion
(Athletes' Park).**

Duration: 1hour.

Agenda

Introduction: WWF-France.

1. The situation of small-scale gold mining in the Amazon: drivers and socio-environmental issues.

Speakers:

Giorgio de Tomi, University of Sao Paulo, Brazil. 7 min.

Frédéric Mortier, Parc Amazonien de Guyane, France. 7 min.

2. Ongoing initiatives to mitigate environmental impacts and/or to better share the profits of gold mining in the Amazon.

Speakers:

Marta Aldana, MINAM (Ministry of Environment), Peru. 10min.

Ingrid Lozada, The Oro Verde Project, Colombia. 10min.

Lina Villa-Córdoba, Alliance for Responsible Mining-ARM. 5 min.

Laurent Kelle, WWF-French Guiana. 5 min.

3. Perspectives for the Amazon

Speakers:

Claudio Maretti WWF Living Amazon Initiative **Serge Orru** WWF France. 5min.

4. Conclusions:

François-Xavier Duporge, (FGEF) 5min



Notre raison d'être

Arrêter la dégradation de l'environnement dans le monde et construire un avenir où les êtres humains pourront vivre en harmonie avec la nature.

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