

View from the ridge

Jewellery designer JANE THEOBALD learns first-hand the high costs of golden decoration.

The dusty road runs down San Juan Ridge to a one-room former schoolhouse. Here the neighbours gather. It's a Sunday afternoon atmosphere as old friends catch up with each other. But this is no social gathering and an underlying anxiety packs the room. The cause – the potential reopening of an historic goldmine in the heart of this rural community.

This is an arid area constantly under threat from drought and forest fires. Yet the proposed mine will use up to 3.7 million gallons (14 million litres) of water every day throughout its undetermined life. Water that will be sucked out of natural underground aquifers and turned into industrial discharge, threatening headwaters and wetlands and the wildlife that inhabit them. This is the same water the community relies on for its wells.

Sixteen years ago this mine operated for a brief four years. The mining operations hit a high pressure water-bearing fault line, flooding the mine and draining a number of local wells, including that of the neighbourhood school. At the same time the gold price plummeted. The mine closed, leaving behind toxic residues that are still taking their toll.

This scenario, a very real threat to a very real community, is being replicated all over the world. It could be the Oyu Tolgoi goldmine in Mongolia threatening the traditional way of life of Gobi desert herders or the La Puya mine north of Guatemala City where thousands of mostly indigenous people face off regularly against the police to defend their communities. Or it could be the massive Grasberg mine in West Papua, long plagued by environmental and human rights controversy. Even the last frontiers of wilderness – like the rapidly melting Arctic – are poised to become a bountiful treasure chest for the extractive industries.

These days gold is already sold before it is even dug up and then traded around the world's stock markets, feeding a desperate addiction. Communities, powerless to resist the mining juggernaut, watch their environments crumble around them.



Jane Theobald

But here, in this scattered off-the-grid agricultural community in northern California, we have the advantage of being well-educated and highly organized. On this chilly February afternoon the Community Centre hosts environmental lawyers, seasoned political activists and knowledgeable scientists who rub shoulders with local artists and writers. But even this combination of education and dedication may not be enough.

Fetish and addiction

My personal connection to gold is complicated. The necklace I wear has a story to tell: it is a delicate gold chain, handmade by one of my jewellery students when I ran the Applied Arts degree programme at Plymouth College of Art in Britain. This student wanted to work only with ethical materials. Together we set out to find some. I had been incorporating the ethics of mineral extraction into my teaching. Many students found it very hard to use conventional materials once they came to grips with how metals and gems were being sourced. The journey of exploration took me to Bolivia to see my first goldmine – a small but well-run operation accredited by the Fairtrade Foundation deep in the heart of the

Precious blue: water is a treasured resource, but under threat from proposed mining, in the author's northern Californian community.

beautiful Yungas National Park. Then on to the vast, industrial mines of South Africa with their generations of violence rooted in painful inequalities of apartheid. It eventually took me to northern California, the place I now call home, where the gold that made my necklace was dredged by hand by a conservationist intent on removing mercury from the river. Mercury had been used in massive quantities in the original California Gold Rush back in the mid-19th century to separate gold from ore and remains one of many toxic legacies.

Did we ever find ethical gold? Well, no. We found that there is enough gold above ground already to stay in perpetual circulation. We found that goldmining causes more environmental damage than any other form of mining. The amount of ore mined to get one measly ounce of gold is in the order of 20 tons. Quite a statistic to create a mere ornament. We found making jewellery is not the picturesque occupation we once imagined, but one that carries serious responsibilities, being on the end of a treacherous supply chain. Most gold is not used for jewellery but stored as bullion or some other 'investment' to ensure power and privilege remain intact. Gold is not mined because we need it but because we want it. Gold is a fetish – its possession an addiction.

Both Marx and Keynes referred to it as *auri sacra fames* – the sacred hunger for gold. The accepted wisdom has it that addicts cannot begin treatment until they are able to acknowledge addiction. Those addicted to stockpiling gold are in the grip of an ancient obsession. Their denial is deep and time-honoured. The addict is absolutely convinced that the drug is the solution not the problem; the resultant destruction a mere by-product of necessity.

Unfortunately, addiction frequently has the strength of insanity on its side – a desperate, passionate strength. As King Ferdinand of Spain told Christopher Columbus: 'Get Gold. At all costs.' Gold has been a major cause of war, enslaved and decimated populations, changed landscapes forever and usurped and poisoned waterways. When one sees the whole picture, any justification for continued extraction is as hollow as the excuses offered by those in the thrall of heroin or alcohol.

Poisonous Rush

When the abundant gold deposits of the California Mother Lode were discovered in 1848 the resulting dash for gold – 'at all costs' – lacked the monumental cruelty of previous gold rushes. It did not require working slaves to death as Egyptian pharaohs had done to ensure their burial with enough gold to see them into the afterlife. Or the decimation of the

indigenous population of South America to sate the Spanish Crown's gold hunger. The story of California's Gold Rush is less one of systemic insanity, more of individual madness. Gold was no longer a matter for kings and demigods but part of a democracy of the free-for-all.

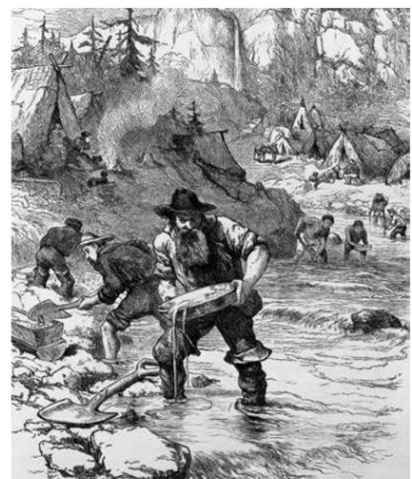
Within days of California being ceded by Mexico to the United States, a gold nugget was discovered near Sacramento. Hundreds of thousands of men and women poured across the California line. The nation desperately wanted to believe it could dig its way to the American Dream. More than 15,000 mines were developed in California during the gold rush, mainly underground. But an ancient

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technique first used by the Romans in Spain, known as hydraulic mining, using water to wash the bedrock, was also refined in northern California. Rivers were diverted to create highly pressurized water jets that removed entire mountainsides. The gold was recovered by complex washing systems involving mercury and cyanide. The remaining rock and silt was left to wash downstream along with the chemical residues. This eventually clogged the plains of the Central Californian Valley, poisoning farms and waterways. In some places the valley floor is buried 150 feet below the rocks.

The Californian Gold Rush lasted two decades. The ruinous effect hydraulic mining had on the farms of the Central Valley eventually brought it to an end. In 2014, although there are still vast quantities of gold in California, the Golden State is fortunate to have many other sources of wealth and could easily relegate goldmining to history. But we live in interesting times. Memories are dimly short and addictions extremely hard to break. The per-ounce price for gold is soaring. This magical source of power and wealth still beckons. And as the residents of the San Juan Ridge already know, there are still those for whom gold is more precious than water. ■

Digging and panning for the elusive nuggets: a 19th-century image of a Californian Gold Rush camp.



Mary Evans/Classic Stock/CP. Cushing

Jane Theobald is a jeweller, woodcarver, educator and restless traveller who left behind the Cornish coast to settle amongst the rivers and mountains of Northern California.