Opinion
Culture



Photo from "River of Gold," taken by photojournalist Ron Haviv (Courtesy of Ron Haviv-Vll Photo Agency)



by Rose Pacatte

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @srrosemovies

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

September 16, 2019
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As I write this review of the documentary film "River of Gold" the Amazon rainforest continues to burn. The fires of 2019 are reportedly human in origin. They were most likely set to clear the land for grazing of beef for U.S. markets and beyond, and raising soybeans as crops and corn for feed.

Free 24-hour online screening of "River of Gold"

A free 24-hour online screening opportunity to see "River of Gold" will take place on Sept. 19-20. Click here for the invitation for the 24-hour free screening and here for the sign up form. Interested individuals or groups can host a screening locally as well; information can be found here. Information about the "River of Gold" Project, including the Clean Gold Buyer's Guide, Education Curriculum, and Youth Warrior Guide are on the home page of both websites. There is also a link for the popular Artists for the Amazon Program.

But losing tens of thousands of acres of the rainforest per day is not the only threat to the Amazon River, the rainforest as a whole, or the nine countries that share it and the tributaries and headwaters of the river. Illegal and unregulated gold mining that destroys the rainforest and pollutes rivers and groundwater with mercury is a threat that is also driven by markets and greed.

Not unlike conflict diamonds of Western Africa, Peruvian gold, however much it glitters, is tarnished from the outset. "With each tree cut down to mine gold," the narration recounts, "carbon dioxide is released into the air, adding to global warming."

"It takes approximately 250 tons of earth to mine enough gold for an average wedding band."

"River of Gold," narrated by Sissy Spacek and Herbie Hancock, opens with the story of the agouti, the only mammal of the rainforest strong enough to crack open Brazil nuts, leaving enough of the seed behind to assure the natural regrowth of trees. But these gigantic trees — home to numerous species of insect and small animal life in

the Amazon rainforest — are being destroyed by new illegal mining operations for gold that have come into existence in the last 20 years.

Mining, through deforestation — digging great pits in the earth to haul the dirt for sluicing at the river — is destroying habitats and creating an imbalance in the fragile, interdependent relationship between the food and animals of the rainforest that has existed for millennia. Mining is also creating a public health problem for the local people due to mercury poisoning, as the metal does not break down and can remain in the rivers and ground water for centuries.

A film crew, including co-directors and producers Sarah duPont and Reuben Aaronson, journeyed into the Madre de Dios region of southeastern Peru, bordering on Brazil, guided by Enrique Ortiz, a scientist turned activist and politician. They start with a macro look at the region, and then hone in on the deforested land, the abandoned mined-out pits, and flatbottom riverboats that can house entire families along with mining equipment. This equipment is used to process the soil for gold, add mercury to bind the gold, and then boil or burn away the mercury, leaving pure gold.



An owner of a gold mine is pictured in this photo from "River of Gold" (Courtesy of Ron Haviv-Vll Photo Agency)

Today, gold sells at approximately $1,600 an ounce on the world market, though the young men and families mining the gold get little enough for their efforts. Many of the gold miners are working out of poverty, and are easily exploited by organized crime mafia and cartels.

Mercury poisoning leads to short lifespan, brain damage and low IQ, and damages the immune system. Indigenous children living in the forest are the most affected.

Making this film was a very risky project, as 90% of the gold mining in this region is illegal, run by organized crime and "the logging mafia." In one gold rush-like town, the film crew was escorted out. Workers move in for six months or a year to make some fast money, creating "smash and grab" towns.

But people who mine gold to escape poverty are only a part of the problem. There is child labor exploitation, intimidation and money laundering, the illegal drug trade, and gold smuggling. The crime bosses that are largely responsible for illegal mining are not in residence, but those who buy the gold from miners are. The film asserts that a global black market sets the price of gold higher than the value of a human person, and its cost to the earth.

The film takes a firm stand against the pursuit of gold through mining that strips the earth and harms the human community and the environment. It is greed and corruption. "Whenever man wants more it has to come from the earth, but limitations of the earth are staring us in the face," the film says. "It is too late to appreciate things once you don't have them to help us understand what we are taking away from the earth." Real riches "are living in respect of all living things."



Photo from "River of Gold" (Courtesy of Ron Haviv-VII Photo Agency)

The content of this documentary is certainly alarming. It is estimated that some 30 tons of toxic mercury are released into the Madre de Dios ecosystem annually. The Peruvian government is now working to try and regulate illegal gold mining in the region, and, as the film states, "Organizations locally and globally are working to produce a clean supply chain for gold." There is hope.

DuPont will be traveling to Rome in early October to present at the Global Catholic Climate Movement's "Voices of the Amazon" event. She is the founder of the Amazon Aid Foundation that produced "River of Gold." DuPont told me via email, "I am a big believer and admirer of Pope Francis and the Catholic Church's mission to tackle the complicated issues surrounding the climate crisis. I remain hopeful."



Sarah duPont meets Pope Francis during the Vatican's international conference on ecology. (Courtesy of Sarah duPont/Vatican Media)

It is also interesting that Francis named Cardinal Pedro Barreto Jimeno, 75, of Huancayo, Peru, as one of the delegate presidents of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon in October. Huancayo borders the Madre de Dios region where the illegal gold mining operations that the film exposes take place. He spoke out on illegal gold mining to Catholic Relief Services in 2016.

"The church takes a position on what is happening in the world today with climate change, and the crisis caused by man through this system that favors money over dignity, life and the natural environment," he said. "Instead of generating a more fair distribution of natural resources and wealth, it is creating two groups that are very, very far away from each other. One very small group holds the wealth and another group experiences poverty."

"Barreto says environmental degradation and climate change is having an impact on global migration," according to reporting on the Catholic Relief Services website. As

Catholic Relief Services reports:

> "[Barreto] says people often leave their homes not only in search of economic opportunities, but also because the natural environmental has been affected. Many have come to Madre de Dios to mine because their soil for farming has been destroyed. Others have left their homes because of an unpredictability in the climate."

There is an important overlap on gold mining, too, with the appointment of Baltazar Porras Cardozo, 74, of Merida, Venezuela, as another delegate president of the Amazon synod. Even with the collapse of Venezuela's economy and internal structures, his country is increasingly involved in the geopolitics of illegal gold mining.

[Sr. Rose Pacatte, a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, is the founding director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles.]

Advertisement