

# Fact Sheet: Illegal Gold Mining in Madre de Dios, Peru

## The Situation

The uncontrolled spread of illegal mining has rapidly deforested wide swaths of lowland Amazonian rainforest in the department of Madre de Dios in southeastern Peru. The worldwide surge in gold prices – a 360% price increase in the last decade- following the financial crisis, draws new miners daily. Recent completion of the Interoceanic Highway has increased access to the area and today more than 30,000 miners are estimated to be operating without legal permits.

## The Impacts

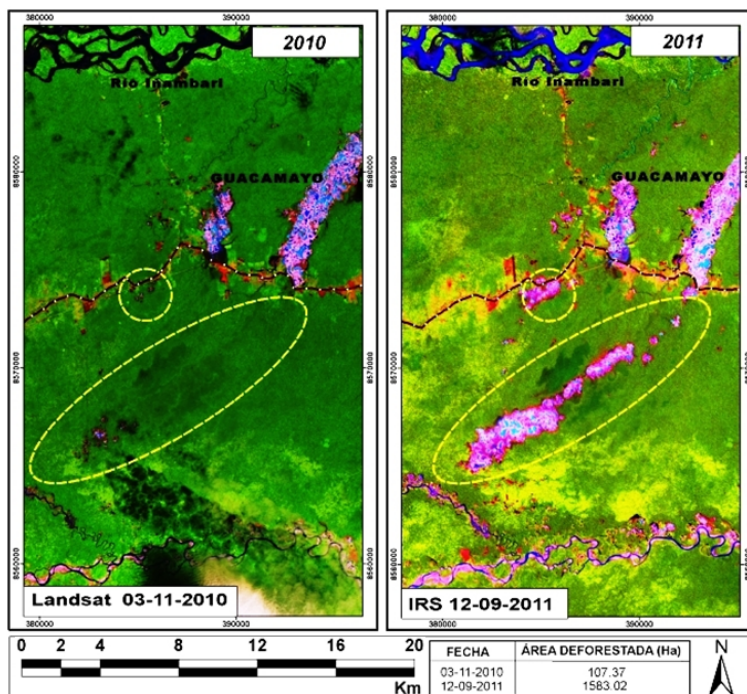
Destructive mining methods raze trees, devastate habitat, contaminate waterways used by communities and fauna alike, and endanger public health.

Worldwide, small-scale mining accounts for one-third of all mercury pollution; in Madre de Dios alone an estimated 30 to 40 tons of mercury are dumped into the environment annually. Mercury, a potent neurotoxin, is used to amalgamate gold particles and then burned off – generally without even rudimentary technology to protect workers’ health or capture waste or fumes. Carnegie Institute for Science researcher Luis Fernandez, who received Amazon Conservation Association (ACA) support, recently conducted a major mercury study which found that:

- 9 of the 15 most consumed fish species for sale in markets have mercury levels exceeding the safe limit set by the US EPA; and,
- 78% of residents of the capital of Madre de Dios have dangerously high levels of mercury in their bodies, with women of childbearing age the most affected.



Destruction from gold mining creates pits polluted with mercury in the middle of once pristine forests in Madre de Dios, Peru; Arial photo by Enrique Ortiz.



In 2010, Peru’s former Minister of the Environment, Antonio Brack Egg, estimated that miners had already cut down over 370,000-acres of forest and this number only continues to climb. **Deforestation even impacts areas which should benefit from heightened protection.** ACA’s satellite imagery analysis (left) shows its rapid advance in the buffer zone of Tambopata National Reserve.

**Weak governance** in Madre de Dios and strong political pressure has allowed mining to continue nearly unregulated, despite the illegality of the operations. Mining creates **conflict over land use rights and land tenure** and many communities and property owners have been **illegally invaded** by miners intent on accessing gold. Miners have resisted efforts at restoration and reforestation and establishment of rule of law.

Time-lapse analysis in the buffer zone of Tambopata National Reserve shows deforestation of more than 3,912 acres in only 18 months. Map produced by Cristina Trujillo, ACA, October 2011.

## How You Can Help

1. **Learn more:** Check out the references at the end of this fact sheet and watch the movie *Amazon Gold* produced by our partners at Amazon Aid Foundation and ACA Board Members Sarah duPont and Enrique Ortiz (<http://amazongoldfilm.com/>).
2. **Urge your representatives to support Peruvian efforts to take action through legislation and development assistance.** The United States prohibits trade in wildlife, fish, and plants that have been illegally taken, transported, or sold under the Lacey Act; similar legislation should be implemented for minerals, making gold illegally-mined in Peru also illegal to import into the U.S.



Impacts of gold mining on rainforest in Madre de Dios; by Sam Abell

3. **Advocate for stricter controls on mercury trade.** Peru does not restrict mercury imports and it's estimated that 95% of mercury is imported for use in unregulated mining. The United Nations Environmental Program and over 140 countries negotiated a global, legally-binding treaty in January 2013 to be implemented with national laws and creative financing to scale-up responses to mercury trade; please ask our politicians to ratify and implement this treaty.
4. **Support organizations working on the ground in Peru to combat gold mining and promote sustainable economic alternatives.** As one example, Amazon Conservation Association (ACA), works in Madre de Dios to mitigate the impacts of illegal mining with its Peruvian sister organization, the Asociación para la Conservación de la Cuenca Amazónica (ACCA), by:
  - Providing sustainable economic alternatives to mining for communities in the region, including agroforestry, aquaculture, and ecotourism
  - Helping smallholders whose land is invaded by illegal miners and working to clarify land tenure and conflicts over land rights – ACA has already provided free legal advice to nearly 100 beneficiaries
  - Providing technical assistance to government authorities responsible for carrying out land use zoning and developing policy
  - Supporting the science needed to help decision-makers and the public understand the impacts of mercury on public health and the environment
  - Piloting reforestation of areas destroyed by mining
  - Implementing a communications strategy, including environmental education for schoolchildren, broadcasting a radio show for rural families, and communicating research results
  - Working with timber concessionaires to strengthen management and reduce invasions by miners
  - Supporting the creation of regional and private conservation areas to preserve forest cover and stronger management of the Tambopata National Reserve
  - Collaborating with a coalition of conservation partners to propose and advocate for a regional mining strategy

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**Selected references:** Swenson, Jennifer, et al. "Gold Mining in the Peruvian Amazon." Nicholas School of the Environment, Duke University, 2011; Coelho, Mario Emilio. "Hijos de Madre de Dios." *O-Eco-Amazonia*, 8 Nov 2010. Online at: <http://oecoamazonia.com/>; Gardner, Elie. "Peru Battles the Golden Curse of Madre de Dios." *Nature Journal*, issue 486, 21 June 2012; Minería Aurífera in Madre de Dios y Contaminación con Mercurio." Institute for Research in the Peruvian Amazon (IIAP), April 2011; Risen, Clay. "A Mega-Dam Dilemma in the Amazon" *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2011; Fernandez, Luis. "Mercury in Madre de Dios." Carnegie Amazon Mercury Ecosystem Project (CAMEP), March 2013; and, Mercury: Time to Act." United Nations Environment Programme, 2013.