



Mercury: The Toxic Legacy of the California Gold Rush

Over 150,000 Native Americans lived in California prior to the start of the Gold Rush in 1849. By 1870 disease, forced relocations and massacres had reduced the Native population to an estimated 31,000.

Miners dug up 12 billion tons of earth, and used mercury to extract the gold ore. The amount of mercury required to violate federal health standards is equivalent to one gram in a small lake. Approximately 26,000,000 pounds of mercury was used in gold mining Northern California, mostly in the Sierra Nevada and the Klamath-Trinity Mountain areas. The amount of mercury lost to the Northern California environment from the 1860's through the early 1900's is estimated at 3 – 8 million pounds. A University of California at Davis study estimated that Clear Lake, the traditional homeland to Pomo Indian fishing communities, contains over 100 tons of mercury today.

Many abandoned gold and mercury mines from the Gold Rush era were never adequately cleaned up, and continue to produce toxic runoff today. The American, Bear, Feather and Yuba Rivers, which join the Sacramento River to flow into the San Francisco Bay, are the four most mercury-contaminated rivers in the state. As of 1999, there were fish consumption advisories due to mercury contamination in 13 Northern and Central California Water bodies, with special warnings for consumption of certain sizes and kinds of fish by pregnant women. But most Tribal members have not had access to adequate information about the health effects of mercury contamination especially for pregnant women, the risks of eating different types and amounts of fish, or effective ways to pressure state and federal officials to begin clean up. They have been denied their “Right to Know” about this serious health situation.

A Threat to Human Health and Unborn Generations



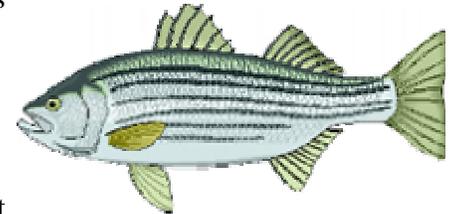
Mercury is highly toxic. Some levels of inorganic mercury are found in nature. Metallic mercury is used in batteries, thermometers and dental amalgams. The largest amount of mercury is released into the environment by mining, coal-fired power plants, paper milling and other industrial processes. The most toxic form is “methylated mercury”, created when mercury is exposed to decaying plant matter, for example in marshes or lakes created by dams. This form of organic mercury “bio-accumulates” or builds up in the cells of fish and other animals, moving up the food chain in higher and higher concentrations. The most common exposure of humans is through eating contaminated fish. No method of cooking or cleaning fish removes mercury. Mercury in fish can be one million times higher than in the surrounding waters. Larger, older predatory fish (the kinds that eat other fish) tend to contain the largest amount of mercury.

In addition to mercury emissions from abandoned mercury and gold mines in areas such as California, South Dakota and Alaska, there is growing evidence that current gold mining and ore processing also produce large amounts of mercury contamination. For example, in 2003, gold mining and processing at Placer Dome's Cortez mine and Barrick's Goldstrike in Northern Nevada released 2435 pounds of mercury into the environment.

Mercury has been linked to serious health problems, including heart disease and neurological problems. The most serious impacts are to the developing brain, kidneys and nervous systems of unborn and nursing babies and young children. Indigenous children from fishing communities are among the most affected.

In 2000, the National Academy of Sciences estimated that 60,000 babies born each year in the US are at risk for learning disabilities and other kinds of neurological damage due to mercury contamination. The Academy concluded that there is “little or no margin of safety” for consumption of mercury by women of childbearing age. In 2004, the US Environmental Protection Agency estimated that over ten times that many babies may actually be at risk. Umbilical cord blood has been found to contain almost twice the level of mercury than that found in the mothers’ blood, further increasing the risks to our unborn generations.

This is clearly an international problem. In British Columbia Canada, the dam holding Teck Cominco’s mercury mine tailings burst in 2004, releasing large amounts of mercury into Pinchi Lake, a traditional source for subsistence fishing. In Northern Ontario, paper mill emissions containing mercury have had devastating effects on the health and subsistence fishing of the Grassy Narrows First Nation Peoples. The UN Environmental Programme estimates that over one million people in Latin America, including many women and children, are currently involved in small-scale mining activities in which mercury is used.



[The Mercury and Tribal Health Project](#)

The International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) in partnership with Pit River Tribe in Northern California initiated the Mercury and Tribal Health Project in 2003 to provide information to Tribal Nations in Northern California. The project has expanded to include information dissemination to Native American and other communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, and to many other Indigenous Peoples in other parts of the United States and around the world.

Pit River leaders have affirmed that they and other affected Tribes need to uphold their traditional responsibilities to their Peoples and protect their traditional subsistence fishing resources by addressing this problem. The focus of the Mercury and Tribal Health Project is not to encourage Indigenous Peoples to abandon their traditional fishing way of life, but to help them to exercise caution, make informed choices and push for cleanup and restoration of the waters in their areas. At the same time, there is an urgent need to inform community members, especially pregnant and nursing mothers, of the dangers of mercury to unborn and young children until such clean-up can occur.

[Building International Pressure for the Elimination of Mercury](#)

The IITC, founded in 1974, is an Indigenous organization working for the protection of human rights, cultures, treaties and traditional lands from the local to the international levels. In 1977, IITC was the first Indigenous organization to receive Consultative Status with the UN Economic and Social Council. The United Nations is currently developing an international Treaty to eliminate the introduction of mercury into the environment. IITC supports this effort, and advocates for the full and active participation of Indigenous Peoples in developing a strong Treaty. IITC is also working so that this issue is addressed by the UN as a clear violation of Indigenous Peoples' Human Rights. But the most important focus of this project is to support communities’ “Right to Know” about this critical health threat, and to build a campaign to demand that contaminated areas and the sources of mercury contamination are cleaned up without delay!

"The only way to keep mercury out of our bodies is to keep it out of the environment. The ultimate goal should be to eliminate mercury use and clean up existing sources of contamination".

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