

WORLD PLACER JOURNAL

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World Placer Journal - 2004 - Volume 4. Overview of the 'Ninja' phenomenon - the gold rush in Mongolia

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ABSTRACT

"The gold rush is poverty-driven, not greed-driven, with sudden waves of recruitment from herders who have lost their livestock... ..and steady influxes from under-paid under-employed rural people and low-paid civil servants."



ASM ENJOYS COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE...

Shafts enable profitable extraction of the 'out-of-balance' resource that legal mining companies cannot get, due to the prohibitive cost of stripping thick overburden.

A rapid growth in the number of illegal artisanal and small-scale miners (ASM) known as 'ninjas' is underway, causing major environmental and sociological impacts. The study documents the growth in placer ninjas.

Our extensive fieldwork indicates that less than 10,000 ninjas existed until 1999-2000, but by mid-2003 the numbers had increased to more than 100,000, of which at least 80,000 are placer ninjas. A paradigm-shift is underway with 'ninja-ing' as the biggest generator of rural employment and rural cash-based income. The gold rush is poverty-driven, not greed-driven, with large sudden waves of recruitment from herders who have lost their livestock in severe winters ('dzud'), and steady influxes from under-paid under-employed rural people (especially farm workers), and lowly-paid civil servants (teachers, doctors, veterinarians etc). We estimate 7 tons of gold was mined illegally in 2003, virtually all smuggled to China and Korea as 'invisible' exports.

Placer ninjas typically mine gravel in terraces or side valleys, and process ore on-the-spot, and mostly live in temporary villages of felt tents (gers = yurts).

In contrast, hard-rock ninjas typically mine hard rock in the hills and process the ore in their own permanent home and village, usually with mercury.



WOMEN ARE VERY ACTIVE AS NINJAS...

Women are reputed to be the best panners.



MINING IN THE WINTER...

By digging a small hole, filling it with slabs of ice and then melting it with a blowtorch, this ninja can pan in the depths of the harsh Mongolian winter.



MINING IN THE WINTER...

Often large groups of people are seen densely crowded together in panning, especially so if water is limited. This is a group of 500 ninja panners, being supplied with placer to wash by a group of 500 ninja diggers a few hundred metres away.

Clusters of placer ninjas can be in pre-existing depressed rural towns and villages (e.g. Bugant, Tsagaan Bulag and Sharin Gol), but most are new 'gold rush' ger settlements (e.g. in the Zaamar Goldfield and in Bayankhongor Aimag). Ger settlements can exceed 100 gers with shops, cafes, slaughter houses, leisure centres (karaoke, satellite TV, billiards, computer games), gold buyers, rent-a-bed hostels and family gers. All types of services exist including transport (cart, jeep, microbus, truck), subcontract panning, subcontract mining, fuel sales, money changing, hairdressers etc., perhaps justifying the term 'ger-towns'.

Placer ninjas are taking advantage of over 20 types of opportunity presented by official gold mines, of which tailings are the initial attractor due to inefficient wash plants. But thousands of ninjas now exploit a comparative advantage, for rapid digging by teams of ninjas of shafts and adits enable profitable extraction of the 'out-of-balance' resource that legal mining companies cannot get, due to the prohibitive cost of stripping thick overburden. Similarly ninjas are now spreading into valleys that have never been mined before, including Protected Areas.

In 2003, lack of water ceased to be a constraint on the spread of placer ninjas, with several groups introducing USA 'dry-blowers' driven by compressed air as an alternative to wet washing.

Contrary to expectations, the 'people's gold rush' may last for many decades: the territory is vast, the population small and mobile, and the gold resource is large.

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