

ORO VERDE

the most loved gold in the world

A travelogue about the visit to the Oro Verde project in Chocó, Colombia September 2009

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Artisanal goldmining in Colombia co-creating a sustainable future

By Mike Angenent - Chairman of the Jeweltree Foundation

On Friday September 11 a small group of jewellers, myself and people from Amichocó took off to visit the Oro Verde project in the Chocó bioregion. An ecological hotspot west of Colombia alongside the Pacific coast.

The visit was arranged for us to see the benefits the program had brought to the mining families and to discuss what else could be done to create more opportunities for the project to expand.

Mining in Chocó is largely done by the Afro-Colombian communities that reside there. They are the descendants of the slaves that were brought in by the Spanish conquistadores to do

the same work they do now: mining precious metals.

Chocó is one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet with a very delicate eco system. And while it may be more efficient to harvest gold in mines using chemicals and heavy machinery, this place isn't a mine. It's a home to thousands.

Every day, the gold from Chocó is hand-collected by families who have owned the land for generations. Oro Verde then buys this gold from certified and controlled miners. This gold is passed on to jewellers and distributors like Open Source Minerals who pay a premium.

Because artisanal and responsible gold has an inherent value intrinsically linked to where it comes from, Oro Verde reinvests the premium back into the communities in Chocó.

Nowadays two city councils, one in Tado and one in Condoto have organised their miners and joined the Oro Verde program certification. This way the program is sustaining about 90 families with over 1300 people, and more are waiting to join.

The program also functions as a pilot project for similar initiatives worldwide and the millions of artisanal miners who wish to create a life and build a home. So we can truly say that Oro Verde is the most loved gold in the world.



The mining communities small scale artisanal mining

Our first meeting would be with the mining communities in Tado. Here we would meet the Mosquera family and other small scale artisanal miners who have been certified to sell their responsibly mined gold to Oro Verde. We've experienced first hand what an incredible hard work it is to mine gold in this fashion. The temperature of 40 degrees and a humidity of 70% didn't help to make it much easier.

This brought to mind all the issues and difficulties we experienced trying to convince customers but even more so potential retailers into buying this gold. They were mostly taken back by the fact that this gold was so much more expensive. However, after seeing not only the hard work but also the commitment these people gave to the program and its environmental and social benefits, we could only conclude that it is remarkably cheap.

It is large scale uncontrolled mining that sets the price and we have come so far as to consider this normal value while doing the same responsibly and with attention for people and environment is considered to be expensive.

In an economic system a mine is most profitable when you can get the minerals out as fast and as cheap as possible. And while it may be more efficient to mine gold using chemicals and heavy machinery, this place isn't a mine, it's a home.

The Mosquera family has been practicing artisanal mining for generations and was one of the first to be certified under the Oro Verde

program. For the last six years they have been working on a strip of land measuring approximately 700 square meters. They have carefully proceeded with their mining techniques, setting apart the top soil layer and replanting the excavated area after the mining was done. By doing so they have minimized their impact on the environment and made an income for their families and a home for their children.

It is quite humbling and at the same time motivating to learn that the average revenue of this artisanal mine is about 40 grams of fine gold a month. Meaning that a pair of weddingrings is sustaining a large family for over two weeks or one person for over half a year.

How is that for economic value!

“The desire of gold, is not for gold. It is for the means of freedom and benefit.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson
essayist, philosopher and poet

Luis Américo Mosquera

Americo is the head of his family, he has his own mine and is working as an artisanal miner for six years now. The average revenue from his mine is 40 grams of gold per month. This is sustaining him and his family of seven brothers and sisters with children.





“Large scale mining is like a search and destroy mission”

- Stewart Udall
Secretary under Kennedy and Johnson that once described his nation's ecological attitudes as 'the myth of superabundance'



Some try to make a living Others make a life...

When flying over the Chocó region going from Medellín to Quibdó we could already see the devastation caused by the illegal large-scale mining.

Large open pits the size of a few football fields that where ones the property of a small family that had rented out their land for a few dollars to entrepreneurs looking for precious metals.

In less than three months time a piece of land that once was someones backyard and could be used for agriculture is turned over into a large open pit. Since the excavation has to be done as quickly as possible the illegal miners don't take the effort of setting appart the most fruitfull top soil layer in order to restore the area after excavation. Obviously they don't recoil for the use of mercury or cyanide either. The specific spot we visited had been totally destroyed and had produced approximately 4kg of gold, a quantity you could easily carry in a small handbag.

It was hard to understand that so little was done to this kind of illegal mining but the local governments cannot do too much as long as they are not able to offer a reasonable alternative for making a living. Renting out your land to mining companies or entrepreneurs is for most people the only way to sent their children to school in hope for a better future. Forbidding this will obviously not help the sitting government to get re-elected and without help and support from the main government there is very little they can do.

In our meeting with the artisanal mining communities we therefore did not so much want to look for problems to be solved, but discussed ways to expand the oppertunities that are already there. For instance, a better filtration system could offer a higher revenue and also deminish the silt load flowing to the river and we would also help to raise awareness for the program in Chocó by sharing our own experiences and making the miners and the rest of the community realise that we share the same dream.



“Never doubt that a small, group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

- Margaret Mead



Investing the premium...

A few months prior to our visit most miners had already received their premium and experienced the benefits of the program they had been supporting for so long now.

It is on the day of sale that the miners who have been certified and audited by Oro Verde get a 2% extra on the london fix price for fine gold. Oro Verde sells this gold to the jewellers involved at a 15% premium. This 13% extra also fully benefits the community. Together they have to decide how to reinvest the premium and then issue a plan to Oro Verde. The premium will be used accordingly. In the case of the Tado community, the miners had mutually agreed to put 40% of the total premium into a pension fund for the older miners to enjoy their old age, should they wish to stop or hand over their mine to a new generation. Other uses for it included investments in light machinery to help in the daily mining activities, and community buildings.

Oro Verde grants the premium in the form of bricks and mortar or buys the machinery for the miners. They do not grant cash directly, just to make sure it is money well spend and according to the plans issued.

This way the mining communities have been able to adapt their lives and focus on other areas as agriculture, better housing and facilities and slowly improve their quality of life.

To persuade people who live on an average of one dollar a day to look at the long term benefits, wait for the premium to accumulate and issue a plan for reinvestment obviously involves a lot of negotiations, hard work and trust. Therefore it was extremely rewarding to see that our involvement and even the little effort of buying one pair of wedding rings is really making a difference.

Maria Cilze

female miner wishing to be certified.

And so our journey came to an end. The last mine we visited was Maria Cilze's. A female miner applying to be certified under the Oro Verde criteria. After a walk through the jungle six extremely sweaty europeans stood there watching, photographing and filming a 55 year old women working in her mine, looking for a bit of gold. None of us where fysically able to move and here she was, digging her way and throwing with rocks. On asking if she worked alone she replied "no, with three." Obviously we wondered, so we asked who the other two where that worked in her mine and left her here all by herself. She replied: "it is me, my dog, and God."



"How wonderful is it that nobody needs to wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

- Anne Frank

Thank you!



Americo



Waldino



Belamina



Fermin



Aristardo



Luigi



Consalez



Luis



Maria



Miguel

credits

picture on page 1
Christian Cheesman

pictures on page 2
Christian Cheesman

pictures on page 3
Mike Angenent

pictures on page 4
Mike Angenent

pictures on page 5
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