

STUDY GUIDE

GOLD, GREED AND GENOCIDE: *THE UNTOLD TRAGEDY OF THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH*

A project of the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC)



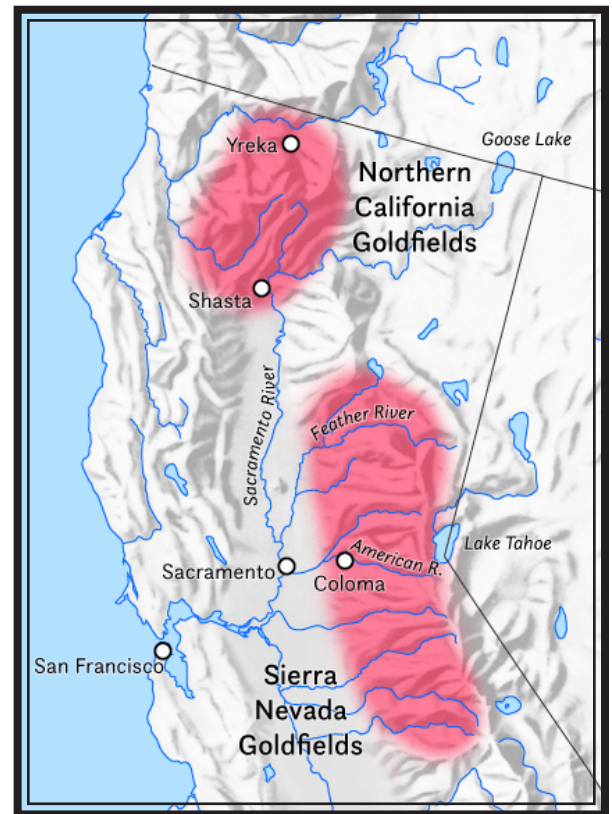
THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH

The California Gold Rush began on January 24, 1848, when gold was found by James W. Marshall at Sutter's Mill in Coloma, California, about 50 miles north-east of Sacramento. Hearing the news, approximately 300,000 people poured into California from the rest of the United States and around the world. The influx of miners reached its peak in 1849, resulting in the term "49ers." California gold reinvigorated the U.S. economy, and the sudden population increase allowed California to rapidly achieve statehood in 1850. The Gold Rush gave rise to the city of San Francisco which remains the major urban hub in Northern California.

The Gold Rush had severe impacts on Indigenous Peoples in California. More than 150 sovereign Native Nations, with over 100 distinct languages and an estimated 350,000 individuals, lived in California prior to the Gold Rush. By 1870, the Native population had declined to an estimated 31,000. Over 60% perished from diseases brought by gold miners and settlers. Those remaining were brutally murdered or enslaved, systematically chased off their lands, and forcibly relocated to missions, reservations and rancherias. Without access to their traditional food sources from hunting, fishing and gathering, many also died from starvation.

In 1851, the California State government paid \$1 million for scalping expeditions. \$5 was paid for a severed Indian head in Shasta in 1855 and twenty-five cents was paid for a scalp in Honey Lake in 1863 to clear the land for settlers. Over 4,000 Indigenous children were sold with prices ranging from \$60 for a boy to \$200 for a girl.

During the California Gold Rush, miners dug up 12 billion tons of earth, excavating riverbeds and blasting hillsides in their fervor. They used mercury to extract gold from the ore and an estimated 7,600 tons of the toxic chemical was released into Northern California rivers and lakes. The amount of mercury required to violate federal health standards today would equal one gram in a small lake.



Elemental mercury is a heavy metal that persists in the environment. It transforms into highly toxic methyl mercury once it is released into waterways. It then bio-accumulates in the tissues of fish, plants, animals and humans with numerous detrimental health impacts including long-term effects on the developing brains and nervous systems of unborn and newborn babies and young children.

Mercury is a global problem. The primary sources of human exposure are contaminated fish, coal-fired power plants, medical and dental procedures and waste, small-scale gold mining still using mercury for ore extraction, and emissions from abandoned mines. In 2013, the United Nations completed the Minamata Convention on Mercury, which calls for countries to reduce the use and release of mercury and to clean up contaminated sites.

The impacts on California's Indigenous Peoples, including loss of land, culture, subsistence, language and political sovereignty, along with environmental contamination, persist to this day. The good news is that the healing, restoration and revitalization carried out by Indigenous Peoples today throughout California is reversing these impacts with notable and positive results.

GOLD, GREED AND GENOCIDE: PROMOTING TRUTH IN HISTORY

In 1999, the State of California celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Gold Rush. The curriculum distributed to public schools completely omitted the historic and ongoing impacts on the Indigenous Peoples and the environment of California. In response, IITC worked with Project Underground to develop the 26-minute video *Gold, Greed and Genocide: The Untold Tragedy of the California Gold Rush* along with a study guide for Jr. and Sr. High Schools.

In 2019, IITC produced a 12-minute annex, *Gold, Greed and Genocide: 20 Years Later the Struggle for Truth in History and Healing in California Continues*. The annex provides updates on two key issues addressed in the first video: the revitalization of California Native cultures and Indigenous Peoples' work to provide information and promote the clean-up of mercury contamination. Both *Gold, Greed and Genocide* videos, along with this study guide and links to additional resource materials, can be viewed at <https://www.iitc.org/gold-greed-genocide/>.



FOR DISCUSSION AFTER STUDENTS HAVE VIEWED THE VIDEOS

Suggested Questions for Grades 6 – 8:

1. Do you know any California Indians? Where do you think they are living now?
2. Do you know the name of the California Indian Tribe that originally lived where you live now? Do you think it's important to know that? Why or why not?
3. Were you surprised about anything you learned in the videos? If so, what surprised you the most? What is the most important thing that you learned from the videos?
4. How did the California Gold Rush affect California Indians? Does it still affect them? In what ways?
5. Does the California Gold Rush affect you? What impacts does it have on you and your family?
6. Do you think it's important that people who live in California know the truth about this part of California history? Why? Who should teach and learn it?
7. Would you like to know more about California Indians? If so, how do you think that could happen?

Additional Questions for Grades 9-12:

8. After gold was discovered in California in 1848, the Gold Rush was in full force in 1849. Who were the original "49ers"? What does that name mean to most people now? How do you feel about that?
9. What does "genocide" mean? Why do you think "Gold, Greed and Genocide" was chosen for the title of the original video? What does the title mean to you?
10. Did you know about the mercury contamination in Northern California before seeing the videos? How does it affect you? Should more information on the contamination be provided to the public? What should be done to address this problem? Who should be responsible for doing that?
11. Do you know that many colleges and universities provide classes and some offer majors/minors in Native American/American Indian/Indigenous Peoples Studies? Your teachers, guidance counsellors or the college/university you are interested in attending can provide information on these programs.

For information or to request in-person or on-line screening please email: iitc@treatycouncil.org.



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The International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), founded in 1974 on the Standing Rock reservation in South Dakota, is an organization of Indigenous Peoples from North, Central, South America, the Arctic, Caribbean and Pacific working for the sovereignty and self-determination of Indigenous Peoples and the recognition and protection of Indigenous rights, Treaties, traditional cultures and sacred lands. In 1977, the IITC became the first Indigenous Peoples' organization to be recognized as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) with Consultative Status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council. In 2011, IITC was the first Indigenous organization to be upgraded to General Consultation Status by ECOSOC in recognition of its active participation in a wide range of international bodies and processes to advance, defend and recognize the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

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