The case for gold panning in Scotland

Neil Clark, Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow

In March 2014, the Hunterian at the University of Glasgow will hold an exhibition of gold in Scotland. Amongst the treasures on display will be the King’s Gold Cup from the Leith races of 1751, Queen Victoria’s gold collar of the Order of the Thistle, ‘cloth of gold’ from the tomb of Robert the Bruce, Bronze and Iron Age gold torcs (especially the hoard from Law Farm, Morayshire), a multitude of Scottish gold coins, modern creations by Scottish goldsmith Graham Stewart, and 10 large nuggets found in Scottish rivers.

Gold has been an important part of Scottish heritage for millennia and makes a significant contribution today with the Tyndrum mine and the more leisurely pursuits of panners at Wanlockhead and Kildonan. Tyndrum is not the first gold mine in Scotland. Extensive mining took place during the reigns of James the IV and V in parts of the Leadhills, mostly between Crawford and Wanlockhead. Nuggets weighing close to 1kg were said to have been found and converted into coinage or used in repairs to royal regalia. Gold mining in the Leadhills ceased in the reign of James VI in the 1620s; only small-scale extraction has taken place since.

In recent times, prospectors for gold in Scotland have been rewarded at some localities previously thought unlikely. Eminent geologists of the 19th Century proclaimed that Scotland had no economical gold deposits as it did not have the right geology. This is clearly wrong as the ore body at Tyndrum proves.

Gold rush fever

Scotland has also had its share of gold rush fever. In Victorian Britain, it was fuelled by stories from the Californian gold rush of the 1840s and the Australian Ballarat discoveries of the 1850s. In 1852, the discovery of gold in Fife sparked a rush on home territory. With gold valued at £4 an ounce and a skilled worker earning less than £50 a year, the prospect of making a year’s wages in less than a month inspired thousands of labourers to head for the hills around Auchtermuchty and Kinnesswood. Unfortunately, most had no clue how to extract gold nor what natural gold looked like. Their sacks full of gold-glimting minerals mostly turned out to be pyrite. The Fife episode became known as the "Fools' gold rush" and was soon forgotten. Ironically, gold has more recently been found in the area by more experienced prospectors.

In 1868, when Robert Gilchrist had returned from prospecting in Australia and New Zealand to his native Sutherlandshire, he looked for gold in the hills near Helmsdale. Granted permission by the Duke of Sutherland, he found it around the Kildonan Burn. As a result 180 people petitioned the Duke asking permission for the local community to prospect in the hills around Kildonan. Soon, prospectors from all over the world started arriving in Helmsdale to visit the more famous gold-diggings of Kildonan, walking the nine miles from Helmsdale each day.

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Two townships were eventually erected for the prospectors: Baile an Or (Town of Gold) at the foot of the Kildonan and Carn nam Buth (the Rock Shop) at the foot of the Suisgiiull. The Kildonan gold rush was certainly more successful than the Fife gold rush but the cold, wet weather, the licence fee and the cost of tools and accommodation, restricted the operation to about the same scale as the other gold rushes. The 10% tax owed to the Crown resulted in few prospectors lasting the year and gold diggings ceased on 1 January 1870. It is unclear exactly how much gold the prospectors recovered as they did not declare all their finds, but it has been estimated that over 400kg of gold was taken over the year – a small fraction of the Australian and American rushes. Since then, prospectors have made several attempts to find the ‘mother lode’ of gold. Francis Scot Campbell of Islay suggested in 1869 that the hills drained by the Helmsdale and Brora rivers may hold the source, but the truth is still to be established.

Today it is possible to emulate past prospectors by gold panning in the Kildonan burn, thanks to the Sutherland Estates, who allow panning for a few days at a time. Panning is also possible on the Mennock Water in the Leadhills, with a Buccleuch Estate licence that can be purchased from the Museum of Lead Mining at Wanlockhead.

Gaining permission to pan for gold elsewhere is more problematic. Guidelines provided by Scottish Nature Heritage (www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A691325.pdf) suggest that the Crown Estates must be asked for permission before gold or silver is panned in other areas. However, the Crown Estates website explicitly bans all gold panning (www.thecrownestate.co.uk/rural/minerals/our-portfolio), using the outdated Royal Mines Act and reasoning that panning is known to “damage the aquatic environment and the wildlife” – although this need not be the case.

So who owns gold and where does gold panning stand within the law? A couple of acts in Scotland may have relevance. The Royal Mines Act of 1492, set out by the old Scottish Parliament, states that any mine producing three halfpennies of silver per pound of lead belongs to the king (I think this works out as five parts silver to 1,000 parts lead by weight). The Mines and Metals Act of 1592 (Scotland) and its amendments relating to the Abolition of Feudal Tenure etc. (Scotland) Act 2000 afford the landowner the right to mines or minerals. There are codes of conduct for panners available from the British Gold Panning Association (www.britishgoldpanningassociation.co.uk), and panners should always abide by the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (www.outdooraccess-scotland.com) when undertaking their healthy outdoor leisure pursuit.

Panning has existed in Scotland since prehistoric times and is an integral part of the rich diversity of uses of the aquatic environment that should be supported, encouraged and protected for the future. The responsible gold panner does little damage to the river ecosystem and may produce more benefits than harm to both geo- and bio- diversity. It would be more productive to develop an environmentally sustainable relationship between stakeholders in the waterways and an agreed code of good practice to include panners, perhaps along the lines of the Fossil Code (http://www.snh.gov.uk/protecting-scotlands-nature/safeguarding-geodiversity/protecting/fossil-code).

Further reading
A rainbow acts as a dramatic natural pointer to the gold-bearing Crom Allt burn near Tyndrum, Stirlingshire, close to the proposed Cononish gold mine. Scotland’s history of gold mining is discussed on page 26.

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