

Bodie balancing gold interests with wilderness enthusiasts

By Mike Anton, Los Angeles Times

BODIE – On a day when the price of gold soared above \$1,700 an ounce, Jack Shipley drove past tourists strolling through this historic Eastern Sierra mining camp and up a rutted road to where a new breed of prospectors have set their sights.

The Bodie Hills hug the California-Nevada line in Mono County – thousands of acres of jagged volcanic summits, thick sagebrush, dry lakes and plunging canyons lined with aspens.

The hills are a paradox: Empty and wild yet shot through with hundreds of untapped mining claims dating to the 19th century.

“I fell in love with this place the first time I saw it,” said Shipley, 66, who lived in Bodie, a ghost town turned state park, for a dozen years as its resident ranger. “But some of the most beautiful places here happen to be in the most concentrated mining zones.”

A bumpy 10 miles west of Bodie, Shipley stops at such a place – one he wishes would be left to heal. The Paramount Mine yielded mercury for two decades, the last big haul in the Bodie Hills.

Left behind are rusted oil drums and pipes, piles of wood and a spooky open pit – signs of abandonment that belie the vast gold deposits some believe remain underground.

With gold prices up more than 600% in the last decade, corporate prospectors are revisiting dormant mines worldwide: a South Carolina mine that funded the Confederacy; abandoned mines in the hills of Transylvania; Roman mines that haven't

been active for 2,000 years.

Among the seekers is Thomas Kaplan, a New York billionaire who's a paradox himself, a shrewd commodities investor with gold mining ventures on five continents and co-founder of a conservation group that seeks to preserve big cat habitat in China and India, among other countries.

"If I'm given a choice between conservation and business, conservation wins, always," Kaplan, an Oxford-educated historian, told Bloomberg BusinessWeek last year. He once spent \$12 million to relocate a Bolivian village – its people, buildings, church, cemetery – to make way for a silver mine.

One of Kaplan's companies, Cougar Gold, is eyeing the Paramount claims in the Bodie Hills, a mix of private and federal land. The interest has reignited a debate in Mono County over whether this raw swath of high desert is more valuable as protected wilderness than as a source of mineral wealth.

The split can be seen in the county seat of Bridgeport, whose fortunes have been tied to the area's mining camps for 150 years.

Some in town see today's gold rush as a lifeline to good-paying jobs. Others sense a rerun of the past when the boom times were relatively brief, the bad times drawn out and the environmental damage lasting.

"There's a reason Bodie is a ghost town. Mining is a boom-and-bust industry," said Stacy Corless, executive director of the conservation group Friends of the Inyo. "There's still pollution up there left behind from mining 100 years ago. I'm worried about the legacy that's left to future generations when this boom goes bust."

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