

Tin mines in the Cordillera Real became gradually more important after the end of the colonial era in 1825, and from the turn of the present century tin became the leading export. From mid-century the state corporation COMIBOL dominated this resource. The most important tin deposits on the Cordillera Real are those at Catavi, Huanuni and Viloco.

It is only very recently that attention has shifted from narrow veins in sedimentary structures to the potential of disseminated metals in the Tertiary intrusives of the Cordillera Real.

The Sub-Andean zone is the fourth major geographic region exhibiting important geological potential. Here, in the eastern slopes of the Andes, Devonian shales host silver and base metals. Although hundreds of prospects have been identified, difficult terrain and lack of infrastructure have so far prevented development. Only one important mine has been established, working a zinc-silver deposit at Quioma.

Foothills north of La Paz and across the border in the Peruvian province of Madre de Dios are drained by a network of tributaries and rivers which run generally northward into the Amazon Basin. This drainage area comprises a fifth geological region of Bolivia, important for extensive alluvial gold deposits. Nuggets have been extracted for many years from the Tipuani fields to the north of La Paz. So far very little attention has been paid to the recovery of fine gold as extraction has been dominated by technically primitive, labour intensive cooperatives. Only one or two dredges have operated in this region of Bolivia. However, several dredges operate upstream in Peru on the Madre de Dios River and small suction dredges work on the Brazilian border to the north. It is estimated that there are 4 billion cubic meters of alluvial with gold potential in this region. The Madre de Dios and Beni rivers are considered promising, but infrastructure is rudimentary and very little exploration has taken place.

The sixth geological region of Bolivia is the least explored and is currently generating some of the greatest interest. Extending in from the Brazilian border, the Bolivian Precambrian occupies about 250,000 square kilometers in the tropical eastern lowlands. Although narrow gold veins and stream beds have been prospected in a small way since Colonial times, the Bolivian Precambrian did not attract serious attention until very recently.

From 1976 to 1986, the British Geological Service worked with its Bolivian counterpart GEOBOL to map the Precambrian region. This study established that the basic geological makeup of the region consists of proterozoic granitic gneisses and granulites, together with schist belts and mobile belts.

Among interesting occurrences found by the survey were gold bearing alluvials and greenstone belts extending over 380 kilometers. Intrusions bearing copper, nickel, chromium, and platinum group metals were identified. Niobium, tantalum, and precious metals were found in pegmatite fields. Tin-granites, iron and manganese formations and an alkaline carbonatite province were also encountered.