

Mountain Top Removal Coal Mining Practices As Witnessed In The Appalachian Region Of Kentucky.

May 1st and 2nd 2007 are two days that will never be forgotten. The impact of what I saw and the realization of just how completely our lifestyle encourages a deep “plunder for profit” motive made me ashamed of our species. Certainly the habits we have embraced requiring insatiable power consumption to satisfy an imprinted “need” to acquire goods and services is not a sustainable way of life.

The more we consume the more we want. From birth to death, from cradle accoutrements to fancy funerals, we buy large houses, inefficient cars which, in turn, leads to wasteful overuse of energy. The potency of the media to suggest needs and thus generate sales of innumerable items which will bring “relief”, “success”, or “satisfaction” is a daily presence to be reckoned with.

Coal is a major source of power. United States power uses over 50% while Kentucky usage is over 90%. Our dramatic over-use of energy and non-sustainable habits is directly responsible for what we see in Appalachia today. The local Appalachian people and the land of their ancestors are literally being treated as sacrificial lambs who are bearing the real cost of the luxurious opulence so prevalent in the US today.

After more than a century of coal mining the people are still among the poorest in the nation. Unemployment is high. MTR mining, using more efficient labor saving technologies, employs about 10% of the former work force- one machine can do the work of a hundred men.

In addition, the environmental impact and long-term devastation is appalling. Hundreds of miles of headwater streams are inundated with toxic waste. A 400 million-year-old legacy is being seriously invaded as mountain tops are being blasted and shoved into the adjacent valleys. The reclamation I saw was far from what I would consider “restoring the land to an improved condition that will provide much needed flatter areas for people and wildlife to flourish”. Instead, the land was a rocky soiless wasteland. No life was to be seen. Active beneficial watersheds were non existent. Any attempts at agriculture would fail.

Here are highlights from testimonials made by local people who are directly impacted by mining operations. We met in the small mining community of Vicco Kentucky.

Karl Buckshot explains, “I have lived 60 years in the mountains and am a 3rd generation disabled coal miner. The mining companies keep promising future jobs and more industry to a population that is living 26% below the poverty level. Unions are actually weakening the coal industry and the safety standards are lower. Years ago the workers knew each other, there was a “bath house camaraderie”. Now the community is missing. MTR mining has changed the land. The former ridge and trees are now missing from his front porch view.”

Niki McCoy,” Sludge lakes are seeping toxic waste into the water table, there is a 72 acre slurry sludge pond near my property which is making water undrinkable. People are flocking out. We must reframe our thoughts and priorities. It is such a sin what is being done.”

A journalist graduate student from Inez, KY returns to the hills- he is homesick for the sheer beauty. He reports,” Many streams and headwater areas are either polluted or buried under valley fill debris.”

He is frustrated at what he terms,” the Coal Czars”.,” Coal companies throw pennies at churches and schools to silence people from rising up against the coal companies. Their land is being permanently destroyed. The water is undrinkable. Appalachia is not a “throw-away” culture. The Earth does not belong to us, we belong to the Earth.

As for reclamation, there is an easement clause that allows variance to the law if a greater use than natural restoration can be found for it such as an airport, shopping mall, golf course, residential development etc. The coal companies are taking full advantage of this provision, however, less than 20% of land set aside for such use has actually been developed. Who wants to live or invest in a business where little will grow and the area is an ugly dead scar?”

John O’Rourke,” I am a retired railroad conductor. I cannot imagine coal mining leaving the area. I have seen the evolution from deep mining through strip mining to mountain top removal- it goes on and on, its terrible. When I speak out against MTR mining I am not out to take jobs but to protect property.

The law enforcement is corrupt. The laws as written are good but are not followed. Of all the problems I see water pollution as being the single most important issue. All in all I cannot find anything positive about MTR. Coal mining should be done underground only. MTR operations are pushing mountains into streams. The topsoil is pushed over and covered with rocks. The watershed is destroyed- only a few hardy species replace one of the most biodiversity ecosystems on earth. The forests can never return, the ecology is ruined.

Mining destroys a much larger area than is actually mined. There are other ways to get at the coal. It is not helping anyone to destroy the mountains. At the present rate of increasing consumption coal reserves will only last another 15 years. We must think of energy alternatives and put money into research. Many people cannot talk who work for the coal companies. They are afraid of loosing their jobs or putting their families in jeopardy. We need outside help to end the destruction.

Erica: Island Creek,” I am not native but married a native KY man. Five years ago the area around my home was very beautiful. Now the trees are cut and pushed over. The animals are gone. The water on my land is contaminated with high levels of arsenic. I am forced to bath my 3-year-old baby in it. There is no other water, I have no choice. The water coming from the original pump in the yard has an oily sheen.

A second well was promised but it took them over a year to drill it. Now the newer well stinks. The insect sounds have ceased. Rains bring regular flooding and mudslides. The soil is so acidic lime must be added for anything to grow. This is an ongoing problem. Dusty coal trucks continuously damage roads. I am surrounded by MTR. I am continuously threatened by mud slides, my house could be washed away at any time. Blasting shakes the house regularly. Now they want to build sludge ponds behind my house. My dreams have been ruined. I wanted to raise my kids in a pristine environment. Both the judges and the coal industry are corrupt. The laws are not enforced. Easements are granted regularly. If the coal companies have their way the whole valley I call home will become a valley fill.

We have been taught to demand convenience and power but at what price? Politicians are former coal operators so violations are let go by. We are tired of loosing land to greed and corrupt politics. The cost of one ton of coal cannot be measured. We are blowing up the most ancient mountains on Earth! 422 headwater streams in KY are covered by overburden. The Bush Administration has eliminated many stream protection laws. Contrary to coal mine ads there is nothing clean or cheap about coal. Alaska is now facing the same developmental issues. They must be given the facts about what has happened here.

PS June 10th 2007

I had a long talk with a close friend from Martin Co. KY. Carla grew up near Inez. Her family has owned land there for generations. Her aging parents have deeded the land to four of the ten brothers and sisters so the land is subdivided four ways. This is a common solution for parents with large families. The sad part is most, if not all, of the children inheriting the land no longer live on it and/or have lost their connection to it. Instead of providing a home and way of life the property is looked upon as simply a financial asset.

Now it seems the inheritors are all considering making a deal with the mining industry to let them strip mine the ridges. They would receive payment for coal extracted from the site. However, the land itself is worth more than the coal that is possibly there.

The harsh fact of the matter is this. Eventually, whatever Carla's family or so many others may wish for or decide, the mining companies will take what is legally theirs to do with as they see fit. Private landowners only "own" the very top of the land while corporations own the mineral rights underneath. That leaves the residents and farmers at the mercy of the coal companies. The choice of cooperating and getting a small share as a business deal resulting in permanent loss of home, water and land is little better than being forced out by encroachment (see testimonials above) of mining companies ever on the lookout for more mountain fodder for their mills.

This is yet another example of what is going on. Another part of an ancient ecosystem will be lost. When I visited Carla's home three years ago I was moved by the open friendliness of Carla's parents. , "No stranger came to their door," All were welcome to

share in the warmth and camaraderie of Appalachian hospitality. The air was full of the sounds of hoot-owls, whip-poor-wills, quail, frogs, insects and more. People ate fresh food out of the family garden and lived as a close family unit.

Alas, this scene now appears to belong to the past. The pristine balance of what nature has fashioned over hundreds of millions of years will soon be gone. In its place will be dead nonfunctional watersheds, poisoned waters, flooding and the endless sound of dozers, trucks, periodic sirens and blasting as the home of the hoot-owl, whip-poor-will, quail, crickets, frogs, and other forms of life too numerous to mention is eradicated- not only on the immediate property but damage will radiate out into the neighboring areas as well.

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