



Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition

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Our homeplace

The lush forests of central Appalachia are among the most biologically diverse temperate forests on Earth. World Wildlife Fund says this area is a biodiversity hotspot that, if saved, will go far in protecting the vast variety of life on Earth. A spring jaunt in the woods affirms that these forests provide habitat and breeding grounds for an incredible wealth of plant and animal life, including a melodious array of flitting, colorful neotropical migrant birds.

These verdant forests, sheltering mountains and stream-fed valleys have nurtured Appalachian culture for over 200 years, and before that were the hunting grounds of native peoples.

For over 100 years, people have mined the coal that lies under the ancient mountains, most likely the oldest mountains on Earth. Coal mining has been the only livelihood for many families, and proud miners gave their lives to open the door for unionization in this country. Although the coal industry has long promised prosperity, the area remains one of the poorest in the nation. Coal Barons deceptively acquired mineral rights and much land in the early 1900s. They view the area like a resource colony, treating the workers poorly, leaving social and environmental devastation and whisking profits from the mineral wealth out of state, while buying the favors of those in political office. Underground mining and “regular” strip mining have their own exceedingly sad legacies, but those pale in comparison to the relatively recent form of strip mining known as mountaintop removal.

What is mountaintop removal coal mining?

Mountaintop removal / valley fill coal mining (MTR) has been called strip mining on steroids. One author says the process should be more accurately named: mountain *range* removal. The coal industry would rather we call it mountaintop mining. We call it ecocide, because it is. Mountaintop removal / valley fill mining annihilates ecosystems, transforming some of the most biologically diverse temperate forests in the world into biologically barren moonscapes. **It's hard to imagine a more egregious assault on the natural world.**

Multiple, thin layers of valuable low-sulfur coal underlie the mountains of central Appalachia. These seams of coal are often too narrow to be mined by traditional deep mining methods. To “mine” this coal, coal companies first raze the forests and scrape away the topsoil, usually without even saving the soil or potential lumber, let alone the understory herbs such as ginseng and goldenseal. Next, they blast up to 800 feet off mountaintops, with explosives up to 100 times as strong as the ones that rocked and tore open the Oklahoma City Federal building. Giant machines then scoop out the layers of coal, dumping millions of tons of “overburden” – the former mountaintops – into the narrow adjacent valleys, thereby creating valley fills. In West Virginia alone, at least 500 square miles of our temperate jungles, home to so much wildlife, have been permanently annihilated. Coal companies have forever buried over 1,000 miles of biologically crucial Appalachian headwaters streams.

The blasting has ruined homes and water wells, as well as people's nerves. "Fly rock," more aptly named fly *boulder*, can rain off mountains, endangering residents' lives and homes. Hundreds of folk and entire communities are being displaced as homes get in the way of the 20-story-high draglines. Heavy rains can gush off the clearcut, compacted MTR sites, flooding the communities below. Coal trucks overloaded with twice the legal weight-limits are out of control, killing people and tearing up roads and bridges which taxpayers have to pay to fix.

Mountaintop removal generates huge amounts of waste. While the solid waste becomes valley fills, liquid waste is stored in massive, dangerous coal slurry impoundments, often built in the headwaters of a watershed. The slurry is a witches brew of water used to wash the coal for market, carcinogenic chemicals used in the washing process and coal fines (small particles) laden with all the compounds found in coal, including toxic heavy metals such as arsenic and mercury. Frequent blackwater spills from these impoundments choke the life out of streams. One "spill" of 306 million gallons that sent sludge up to fifteen feet thick into resident's yards and fouled 75 miles of waterways, has been called the southeast's worst environmental disaster.

Of course, it's not only the people who suffer. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has written that mountaintop removal's destruction of vast swaths of contiguous forests destroys key nesting habitat for neo-tropical migrant bird populations, and thereby decreases the migratory bird populations throughout the northeast U.S.

How could this happen?

The outlaw coal industry has many politicians, from the local to the national level, in its pocket. For instance, Bush received millions of dollars from the coal industry during his election campaigns. Legal challenges are ongoing. Federal judges have ruled that most valley fills are illegal under the Clean Water Act (CWA), but the rulings have been overturned on technicalities or are under appeal. In case the latest appeal doesn't go the way he wants, Bush is trying to change a 25-year-old rule of the CWA; the buffer zone rule change would legalize illegal valley fills. Coal companies continue to buy politicians' support, so they can do whatever they want, choking out the democratic political process just as their frequent spills choke the life out of streams.

What is being done to stop mountaintop removal?

State groups like the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, Coal River Mountain Watch, the West Virginia Highland Conservancy and Kentuckians For The Commonwealth are making strides in reigning in the excesses of mountaintop removal. The groups work with the Appalachian Center for the Economy and the Environment, Earthjustice, Appalachian Voices and others in an ever-growing alliance of groups dedicated to ending the national disgrace that is mountaintop removal coal mining. Check out OVEC's website at www.ohvec.org for more info on ways you can help stop mountaintop removal. Also see www.stopmountaintopremoval.org and www.ilovemountains.org. Together, we will stop this madness!

Contact vivian@ohvec.org to join OVEC's Stop Mountaintop Removal Action Alert! list.