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Mountain top removal

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What is Mountaintop Removal?

Mountaintop removal can be defined as an invasive form of coal mining in which the soil, rock and plant life of a mountain is destroyed and removed through the use of explosives in order to mine the coal seams underneath. The process begins with the deforestation of the mountain, cutting down trees and scraping away the soil and plant life that grows on the rock. Next, powerful explosives are used to remove up to 800 feet of mountain rock which is then hauled to a nearby valley by trucks and large machinery. After the mountaintop has been eradicated, machines called draglines are used to dig into the remaining rock to reach the coal seams that are now much closer to the surface. These machines can be as tall as a 20-story building and are used because of the low amount of labor needed to operate them, allowing for coal companies to hire fewer workers and make a larger profit. These machines dig to and remove the coal from the mountain, creating waste called “overburden” made from yet more of the mountain that has been dug up and broken down. This overburden is hauled away to make for easier access to the coal; it is deposited in valleys, creating valley fills which block or bury headwater streams in the area. When the coal has been removed, the mountain is rebuilt and revegetated using the exploded material as well as soil or soil substitutes; some companies acquire waivers for this process and, rather than attempting to return the landscape to a semblance of normality, leave the mine sites stripped and bare.

This process is neither easy nor sensible. Many mining companies do not attempt to reclaim or revegetate the mountains they have destroyed. Even when the mountain is supposedly returned to a facsimile of a natural landscape, it never returns to a truly healthy state. The process and byproducts of mountaintop removal (MTR) are devastating not only for the communities and ecosystems surrounding the mountains but the nation (and the world) as a whole.
Why should you care?

While much of the current attention paid to MTR is focused on Appalachian mountains and communities, there are similar mining processes taking place wherever coal and mountains combine. The effects of MTR are being felt nationwide, if not worldwide, as the process slowly destroys the environment surrounding the mountains. Not only does the process remove the mountains themselves, detracting from the aesthetics of the landscape, but plant and animal life struggle to survive on the acidic “revegetated” mountains. Coal slurry, consisting of carcinogenic chemicals, toxic metals and water used to wash coal for market, is kept in unstable impoundments that can—and have—spill, contaminating water in the surrounding area. There are 312 of these impoundments in Appalachia alone; in the past decade, the impoundments of one company alone (Massey Energy, purchased by Alpha Natural Resources in 2011) have spilled 24 times, contaminating rivers with more sludge than was produced by the 2010 BP Gulf spill. The deforestation that occurs as a result of MTR destroys vital nesting habitats for migratory birds, decreasing the bird population across the Northeastern United States. And it’s not only the environment that is affected by this process. Andrew Payton, an MFA student in Creative Writing and the Environment and an active MTR protester, says that “the damages of MTR aren’t limited to the ecosystems dependent on the mountain, forests, and watersheds removed,
but the people who live nearby also face polluted water and air. Mountaintop removal is also responsible for displacing typical underground mining jobs, as it requires less labor, and therefore removes jobs from the local economy."

This destruction of community stability, economy and the environment is inexcusable, especially when considering coal itself as a resource. Half of the United States' electricity is produced by coal, the burning of which is the number one source of greenhouse gases worldwide. MTR is not providing a renewable resource, but merely destroying the landscape and community to pollute more of the nation. Payton claims that the effects of MTR are not limited to the short term, but will continue to be a problem long into the future: "In the short-term," he says, "local communities face deteriorating health and economies. In the long-term, ecological health and biodiversity is altered in one of the most biodiverse forest ecosystems on the planet. Local and national communities also lose any available resource the mountains once provided, and are left with only a short supply of coal and an unstable environment unsuitable to any sort of development or habitat." The explosions central to MTR blow chemicals, soil and toxins into the air which cause health problems ranging from asthma to brain damage. Payton also describes the cultural effects of MTR: "As we remove our mountains we also suffer a cultural loss. For communities who define themselves by their landscape, what do they become when that landscape is removed, altered, or polluted?"

In her novel Strange as This Weather Has Been, Ann Pancake describes the psychological changes a West Virginian community faces as their ancestral homes are destroyed by MTR. The community slowly breaks down as families are forced to decide to stay or go, unemploy-
“Mountaintop removal is responsible for displacing underground mining jobs.”

Mountaintop removal is rampant and floods caused by the mining destroy what little the impoverished people have left. Though this is a fictional work, Pancake is an authority on MTR, having contributed to several documentary films on the subject, and her work reflects reality. The novel is a moving, distressing portrait of the effects of MTR both on the ecosystem in the area and the people living there; with evidence such as this not only in books but in films and on the internet, it has become culturally irresponsible not to be informed or incensed about the devastation incurred by this process.

Here in Ames, we are not directly affected by the economic and cultural effects of MTR. However, the pollution and environmental effects are a matter of concern not only for Appalachia but the world, and our silence and complicity in this devastation should not be tolerated. As Payton says: “ISU students should care because we burn coal here on campus. Though we don’t burn Appalachian coal—it comes from the west—similar devastating practices are also done where this coal comes from. We are complicit in an economic system that supports these devastating practices that displace human, animal, and plant communities.” Allowing MTR to continue could have harmful effects not only in the area, but nationwide and internationally. The perpetuation of MTR will lead to yet more destruction that may expand to include more locations; the coal companies’ avoidance of responsibility in the destruction not only of the ecosystem but also of public and private property could have devastating legal effects for US citizens. Currently, legal preference given to the companies’ activities provide support for the notion that courts are favoring the rights of the companies over the rights of the people affected by MTR mining. This extends to absolving coal companies of responsibility when their fills overflow and their dams break, leading to the injury and death of innocent people and setting a dangerous precedent for other potentially fatal waste disposal situations.

What you can do

There are many ways students and people worldwide can contribute to the fight against mountaintop removal. Ways to get involved include signing petitions, writing to congressmen and other governmental officials, and attending protests among other things. Truly devoted people can attend protests and educational camps in Appalachia, sponsored by such groups as Mountain Justice and Appalachia Rising. Payton, who has participated in many of these protests as well as having written letters and signed petitions, says, “We need to ask the EPA to do their job, and support congresspersons and senators who give teeth back to the EPA. We need to ask the President to end MTR right now.”
“This issue may seem very far away, but by increasing the demand for coal, we increase this practice. Those who believe blowing up mountains and poisoning people and ecosystems are a rational practice only speak one language: money. We need to create a system where those corporations and individuals don’t have so much money that they can do whatever they want. Keep the money at home, keep the power at home.” Payton, a native of the East, sees potential for change here in Ames: “ISU students could use their ingenuity to start to recreate a system that does not depend on coal, and develops forms of living alternative to the current model that requires copious amounts of energy from cheap fossil fuels, which causes sickness to people and land in the extraction and burning processes.” As he makes clear, it’s not necessary to be on-site to effect change, and ISU students’ knowledge of science, technology and the environment may well be able to provide an alternative to this dangerous and unhealthy process.

For those who do become involved in the fight against MTR, perseverance is the most important thing. Payton, who consistently raises awareness of MTR and contributes to the movement against it, is hopeful but also cautious about the future. “We’re moving in the right direction,” he says, “but every day another bomb goes off, and another hillside falls into the stream.” Steady, persistent opposition to MTR is the only way to change it, and adding our voices to the thousands already speaking out can only affect change faster.

Several organizations’ websites contributed information used in this article. To learn more, or to get involved in the fight against MTR, visit the following:
http://www.mountainjustice.org
http://www.thelastmountainmovie.com
http://appalachiarising.org
http://ilovemountains.org