Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov – Special Issue
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 12 (61) – 2019
https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pcs.2019.61.12.29

The impact of mountaintop removal surface Coal mining on Appalachian communities

Iulia SALCĂ[1]

The Appalachian area is a major coal producer in the United States of America. Due to the radical methods of extracting the coal, like mountaintop removal, the quality of life in Appalachia has degraded in time and the environment and people's health are deeply affected. The coal industry in Appalachia is notorious for its ignorance of social and environmental justice and people from the affected areas have to start activist work in order to fight them and regain their rights. In my paper I am going to present the negative effects of mountaintop removal, the activists' struggles for social and environmental justice, the psychological implications and the Appalachians' attachment to land.

Key-words: *mountaintop removal, coal communities, environment, social justice, activism*

1. The sacrifice zone

The Appalachian region located in the south-eastern part of the United States is the second leading producer of coal in the country, after the Powder River Basin from Montana and Wyoming. The Appalachians possess amazingly unique landscapes, diverse wildlife and they are rich in natural resources. Economically speaking, the region relies on tourism, resource extraction, and small-scale agriculture.

The quality of life in Appalachia has degraded substantially in time, due to the industry of mining and its 'unorthodox' methods of extracting the coal. This process affected the environment and people's health, and has negative social and economic impacts, especially if we talk about the mountaintop removal mining. The fate of the area is decided primarily by others (whether we talk about New York, Washington, D.C. or other important cities) and the people who actually live there have little to say in this.

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, iulia.salca@gmail.com

BDD-A31280 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)

Appalachia has been deemed a sacrifice zone by the rest of the country. The coal industry is notorious for its ignorance of social and environmental justice and its 'mantra' seems to be: 'Profit trumps people!' What those who live in the affected areas have to endure goes beyond our imagination and it is outrageous that in the 21st century people are still treated with lack of respect and ignorance, all because of money.

2. What is mountaintop removal?

The history of mining in Appalachia dates 150 years back and after one century of underground mining, starting in 1970, the coal companies began to practice surface mining in open quarries. Out of these, the mountaintop removal is the most destructive form of surface mining.

There are a few steps involved in the mountaintop removal process: The first step is the 'clearing' and it occurs before the mining. Here, the entire mountainside is razed, the trees are ripped from the ground and all the bushes and vegetation are removed with massive tractors. What is even more tragic is that the trees that are ripped off are not even used commercially; they are just burnt or dumped into nearby valleys (ilovemountains.org, n.d.). Hardwood timber, the most important renewable resource, is simply eliminated. „Towers of treetops and logs and brush, spiked all through with tires and metal, hung up and quiver" (Pancake 2007, 21).

The second step is the 'blasting'. After the rubbish is set ablaze, in order to reach the coal seams from underneath, deep holes are dug for explosives to be poured into them. Then, the mountaintops are blown apart (earthjustice 2019).

In the next phase called 'digging', enormous machines known as draglines that are able to scoop up to a hundred tons at once, remove the coal and dump the remaining rocks and dirt into the streams and rivers, burying the waterways for good (earthjustice, 2019).

In the last step, the 'processing', the coal is treated with toxic chemicals before it can be shipped to the power plants in order to serve its purpose. All that comes after processing the coal is a mixture of water, chemicals, heavy metals and coal dust, called slurry (ilovemountains.org, n.d.).

It is not hard to imagine why this unconventional mining method is preferred over the traditional methods of extracting the coal. Beside the fact that the coal seams can be completely recovered, the use of draglines dismisses the need for hundreds of miners (ilovemountains.org, n.d.).

BDD-A31280 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)

Various studies have shown the damages that the blasting of mountaintops is causing to the environment and to people who live in the proximity of the affected areas and these damages consist of: water, air and soil pollution, dangerous floods and landslides. The streams and water supplies have been contaminated beyond repair with all the coal sludge that comes from processing the coal; the air contains fine particles of coal dust that people who live in the affected areas have to breathe; the soil has absorbed the slurry water and the toxic waste, and the floods destroyed a lot of houses that were in the way; there is a huge loss of the forest commons, where residents harvested medicinal herbs for their health; then, gigantic overloaded coal lorries that are driving on narrow roads with stiff curves through the communities 24/7, are harming people by causing a lot of accidents, many of them on purpose; and in the end, as if all these were not enough, the burning of coal for electricity produces some of the worst greenhouse gas emissions.

3. Psychological implications and land attachment

Aldo Leopold, the creator of the 'land health' concept, defines it as "the capacity of the land for self-renewal" (Albrecht 2007, 42) but unfortunately, in the case of mountaintop mining, the damages are, in fact, permanent. There is no way that the land can recover from such a traumatic process because right now, it looks like it has a terminal illness, and judging by its grey exhaust smoke colour, I would say it is lung cancer.

When the coal companies started the mountaintop removal mines near people's houses, the majority of them decided to start activist work against the coal companies and mountaintop mining. The people from Appalachia have reached to a point in which they had to choose between fighting for their families' protection and risking threats from community members or not fighting and facing the deathly consequences of the mining process. They had to endure a lot of suffering and bullying, they constantly received life threats, all because they were brave enough to fight for a better life, a safer place and pure air and waters.

The mountaintop removal practice destroys the total natural environment, as well as Appalachians' traditions. The psychological ramifications of the destruction of the natural environment where these people live are real and this disequilibrium in the human-environment relationship has a negative impact and should be

BDD-A31280 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)

treated seriously. Elyne Mitchell, in her book *Soil and Civilization* made a good point in writing that "divorced from his roots, man loses his psychic stability" (Albrecht 2007, 42), because that is what happened with all these people; the factors that define their identity are simply eliminated. And this identity is deeply attached to this sense of belonging to the place they call home and to their families. Moreover, their distress is also connected to the lack of power they feel and with the sense of social and environmental injustice they have.

The coal mining companies gave them two options, one worse than the other: you either decide to relocate and become rootless, or you stay here and suffer the consequences (sickness, material damage, bullying, and even death). So, in these extreme conditions, how could you not feel like you are losing your mind? And in this air of irretrievably clouded minds and irremediable diseases, in the air of those who give the feeling that they have been fired from humanity, how can you still find room for optimism?

People in Appalachia suffer "from both imposed place transition (place pathology) and powerlessness (environmental injustice)" (Albrecht 2007, 44). For many of them, their families date back multiple generations. And the attachment to land is a traditional value of Appalachians; they have very deep roots and it would be harder for them to move than to stay and deal with the consequences. The activists believe that: "The best way to fight them is to refuse to leave. Stay in their way – that's the only language they can hear." (Pancake 2007, 178)

For an outsider, a foreigner, it might be a bit hard to understand this extreme attachment. Glenn Albrecht is saying something similar: "The strength of attachment to country is difficult for people in European cultures to fathom." (Albrecht 2007, 47) Indeed, a lot of Europeans tend to feel like they are tourists, like they belong to no one or to nowhere and do not feel like they have a home. They like to travel a lot and to experience various cultures and cannot imagine themselves just staying in one place for the rest of their lives. Being rootless gives Europeans a sense of freedom and power, whilst for the Appalachians, the sense of power and freedom can only be achieved if their strong and deep roots are not threatened to be severed.

The Appalachian people are not against coal mining; they just want it to be done by using sustainable techniques and for the industry to follow the laws and policies that exist. Some of the activists from Appalachia, interviewed by Shannon Elizabeth Bell for her inspiring book *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed: Appalachian*

BDD-A31280 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)

Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice were explaining that: “Mary: I am not against coal miners, I’m not against mining. But there’s a right way, [a] wrong way, and modern technology—citizens should be protected;” (Bell 2013, 37) “Teri: I’m not an activist against coal, I’m an activist for the preservation of my state, clean water, and clean air.” (Bell 2013, 88) They maintain this idea because most of them come from coalmining families, and as stated earlier, they are deeply attached to their land, customs and old traditions.

4. The lack of trust in the American system and the activist work

A repetitive problem that I noticed in my readings about the social and environmental justice in Appalachia is the one of the people not trusting the system in their country. Most people think the agencies protect them but they are not. The ones that should protect them are in fact the most corrupt ones. And “the power to make decisions that affect people’s quality of life is often held by people living elsewhere” as in McSpirit et al. (2012, 1).

The harsh reality is that the Appalachian area is perceived as the garbage dump of the United States. It is unfair that powerful people decide what to do with a land that does not even belong to them, and when I say ‘decide’ I mean that they are deciding in the worst possible way and into the detriment of the locals whose only fault is that they are poor. To deliberately ruin people’s lives by poisoning their water, lands and the air they are breathing seems like a radical method from the Dark Ages. Therefore, not only that the system does not protect them, but it also puts them in danger by lying to them. For example, an activist from Martin County, Kentucky, made a really good observation:

> We are being told that the chemicals contained in our water are at acceptable levels for ‘non-hazardous’ ingestion. What is an acceptable level of arsenic, barium, beryllium, etc.? After years of consuming these “acceptable” levels of chemicals, will there be any long lasting, extremely painful, physically noticeable or perhaps fatal effects? If the answer to this question is no, then comes, How do they know? Have they exposed other people to this exact mixture of chemicals for extended periods of time and had no ill effects? as in McSpirit et al. (2012, 77-78).

BDD-A31280 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)

Everything is uncertain; the authorities are treating this issue with nonchalance and thinking: “let us see what is going to happen.” They are the puppeteers and the puppets are the locals, and they are basically controlling everything according to their wishes. So, we need to ask ourselves the most basic question: How is this democracy? Because I sure do not see it.

Another activist from Bell’s novel, Debbie, hopelessly affirmed that: “We don’t get nothing down on this end of the county. We always get the short end of the stick in this county” (Bell 2013, 117). It feels like a world in which rules do not apply, a world in which the ones who own the power are doing what they want without thinking about consequences and about what they are doing to these people, who unfortunately are the collateral damage. The external costs of ‘cheap coal’ are not factored into that ‘cheap’ equation.

So, after all these, it is natural that the only thing that is left is activism. And for the majority of the people from all the affected counties, this is the last hope and it gives them the feeling that they are not powerless and that they can fight this injustice and make a change, be influential. There are various accomplishments that you gain from being part of grassroots organizations and NGOs. You feel that you belong to a group, you meet people that are fighting for the same thing and have similar problems like yours, you make friends, you encourage one another that everything will be alright, and that matters. Even if in the end maybe it will not be, but that helps you a lot, knowing that you are not alone.

Beside the NGOs and the grassroots organizations, there are also a lot of universities involved in this crucial matter. Professors, scholars, researchers and students are very determined to change peoples’ lives for the better, in spite of the fact that even they are receiving lowdown threats from the coal companies. By reading *Confronting Ecological Crisis in Appalachia and the South* (edited by Stephanie McSpirit, Lynne Faltraco, and Conner Bailey), a collection of essays that are written from a professional and legal point of view by researchers and people who work in grassroots organizations, I realized how many opportunities there are for students to engage in community-based research.

The universities engage in various forms of community outreach and are available to support student and public research. A lot of students coordinated by their professors pack their bags for a few days during school breaks and plant hundreds of trees on the lands of the abandoned coal mines to restore, patch by patch, the vast Appalachian hardwood forests that once populated these mountains.

BDD-A31280 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)

Involving the students in as many activities as possible would only be to their benefit because they have so much to learn from these experiences, they become more connected to the communities and realize they can make a difference. And more than that, they represent the future of those areas and they can bring a lot of good changes for the Appalachian people.

5. Conclusion

At the end of the day, playing safe and not fighting for your goal, can prevent you from experiencing all of what life has to offer. If you never take risks, you do not really get the chance to live at all. And what is the purpose of that? In life, you want to feel safe and you should feel safe. But as an activist, you are supposed to run towards the danger, instead of away from it. And you are also supposed to write about what you know, to tell your story to as many people as you can and to realize that there is no one way to effect change. Different groups and organizations work in different ways and use different methods to achieve justice and only one model does not exist.

Instead of throwing up our hands and say: “well, nothing really can be done,” we could start by changing our perspective and to realize that doing nothing, when it would be easy to help others, is a form of harm.

References

Albrecht, Glenn. 2007. “Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change.” *Australasian Psychiatry: Bulletin of Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists* 15(1): 41-55.

Bell, Shannon Elizabeth. 2013. *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed.* University of Illinois Press.

Earthjustice. 2019. “What is Mountaintop Removal Mining?” Accessed Oct. 4, 2019. https://earthjustice.org/features/campaigns/what-is-mountaintop-removal-mining.

BDD-A31280 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)

iLoveMountains.org. n.d. “What is Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining?” Accessed Oct. 4, 2019. http://ilovemountains.org/resources/.

McSpirit, Stephanie, Sharon Hardesty, Patrick Carter-North, MarkGrayson, and Nina McCoy. 2012. “The Martin County Project: Students, Faculty, and Citizens Research the Effects of a Technological Disaster.” In *Confronting Ecological Crisis in Appalachia and the South,* ed. by Stephanie McSpirit, Lynne Faltraco, and Conner Bailey, 75-91. University Press of Kentucky.

Pancake, Ann. 2007. *Strange as this Weather Has Been.* Shoemaker & Hoard.

BDD-A31280 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)