Peeking into Appalachia: Through the Eyes of an “Outsider Activist”

When I first traveled to western Virginia for a spring break activist conference, I knew relatively little about mountaintop removal, a controversial form of coal mining that has leveled mountains and raised resistance in Appalachia since the 1960s. At the time of the trip, I was a college freshman, a newly minted environmental activist, and an outsider to Appalachia and the resistance movement seated there. Wait - upon further consideration, I was, and still am, an outsider everywhere.

As a college student, I am in between where I come from and where I will eventually go. I hold a perpetual outsider status that has made me question my activism on a regular basis. For me, much of this questioning has been brought on by economic concerns. While the economy and the environment cannot be separated, taking a stance for the environment on a local level is, in many cases, standing against a form of income for that community. Was it right for me to take a stance on the coal plant that had been proposed in a neighboring county that might provide even a few jobs to their struggling economy? I even felt strange signing petitions against hydraulic fracturing; it impacted my hometown in upstate New York, but I was seven hours away, unaffected by the empty storefronts and the struggling economy that made gas leases so tempting.

During my trip to Appalachia, I learned that many of the activists I met there had been drawn to the mountains from other places. What differences in perspective and experience existed between people who had lived in Appalachia their whole lives, and those who came from elsewhere to work in the mountains? Did tensions arise as a result of these differences? What bearing did this have on environmental justice movements in general, and on my own activist involvements? I set out to learn more about the mountaintop removal resistance movement by talking to some of its members.

For some members of the mountaintop removal resistance movement, the fight is very close to home. Junior Walk, a native of the Coal River Valley in southern West Virginia, had taps running with red water when he was young. After high school he began to work for a coal company, but on his first day as a guard on a mountaintop removal site, he said, “I looked out on what was going on and I knew I was a part of it, knew I was a part of what was poisoning the water of the people who lived below that site.” Walk began to
volunteer with Coal River Mountain Watch (CRMW), a grassroots organization based in the Coal River Valley that works to end mountaintop removal.

Debbie Jarrell, another CRMW staff member, got involved with the fight on behalf of her granddaughter, a student at the Marsh Fork Elementary School which was located directly downhill from a sludge impoundment site, where 2.8 billion gallons of carcinogenic material left over after washing coal is held back by an earthen dam. She began educating herself about the issues surrounding mountaintop removal, and got involved with CRMW, who, she says, were the only ones who would listen.

CRMW has a relatively even mix of local folks and “outsider activists;” out of seven staff members, Walk says, four are local. This typifies the anti-mountaintop removal movement in Appalachia. While many young people move away from the region for lack of opportunities, the area has a steady stream of volunteers who are drawn to the mountains.

Susanna Ronalds-Hannon is one of these relative newcomers. She interned for Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards (SAMS), a “grassroots group of impacted and local people fighting the mines in their backyard” which pushes for legislation to abolish the practice. SAMS has a strong local presence, but usually has two to three interns, which Ronalds-Hannon says have all been non-local people. Overall, she said, she was surprised at how many people were very supportive of their presence. When she first arrived in the mountains, she spent a lot of time debating the fact that mountaintop removal, while a threat to homes and livelihoods, is also, for many people, what allows them to have these things. “I do feel conflict fighting something that is going to bring jobs,” she says.

In addition to individual perspectives, activist tactics vary from organization to organization. Marley Green, who has worked with SAMS, CRMW and Mountain Justice, commented on some of the differences between the organizations. Mountain Justice, he says, is an organization with a higher proportion of outsiders and a stronger emphasis on direct action and civil disobedience. These activities, he says, are often carried out by young folks who don’t live in the coalfields and, therefore, “have the privilege of not having to deal with the blowbacks.”

As Walk says, local people “have more of a connection and more of a personal stake in what’s going on.” After working as a covert reporter for CRMW, Walk faced serious
consequences for openly joining the organization as their Outreach Coordinator. He was kicked out of his home, he says, not because his family disagreed with what he was doing, but because associating with him would endanger his father’s job at a coal company.

Despite the variety of perspectives and backgrounds of those in the movement, Walk attests that, “all the people I’ve met have the same sense of drive and the same sense of urgency as the local folks. We all know that this all ties back to the way that industrial capitalism has destroyed our country and destroyed our democracy. We’re all coming from the same place.” Jarrell agrees; they have many young volunteers, and says, “we embrace the young people because it is my belief that it is the young people of today that are going to end the corruption that is going on here and elsewhere in our nation.”

The more I spoke to those involved with the movement, the less important the outsider-insider differences seemed to be. I can glance up to my dorm room wall for a reminder of why I, and other college students, should still be involved in environmental justice movements.

The poster is titled “The True Cost of Coal.” It was designed and created by the Beehive Collective, a Maine-based organization comprised of artists and activists who approach social and environmental issues from a storytelling perspective. The stories for the poster were gathered by the Collective over a period of three months, and were then worked into metaphoric images that show the history of mining resistance and the economic cycle of coal. Molly Shea, one of the Collective’s “bees,” presented the poster at the Mountain Justice Spring Break I had attended, and I remember it as one of the most poignant sessions of the trip.

The poster’s left-hand side depicts a pristine Appalachian landscape, and traces history through colonization, westward expansion and civil war, through the origins of the mining resistance movement, and onwards to the future where, hopefully, community autonomy and a healthy environment will be regained by the people who have lived there for hundreds of years. Further in the background loom large factories and monuments and city buildings, a labyrinth of industry and government that forms a backdrop to the activist struggles in the background.
Regardless of what my role might be in the activist movements I am aligned with, I understand why I need to be there – because I already am. I am a consumer of energy, a participant in the economy that encouraged the exploitation of an area’s resources and citizens. I am a constituent of my nation’s government; my vote will encourage a decisive stance on this and other environmental issues. I am a consumer of the air that spirals in towards the center of the poster in a violent hurricane, and of the stream that flows along its bottom.

The fight against mountaintop removal is just one example of a universal problem. Walk said, at the conclusion of our interview, “What’s going on here and what’s been going on here for 150 years is no longer stopping at the borders of the poorer communities…This sort of stuff, this sort of environmental injustice is going to be at everyone’s doorstep before long if we don’t stand up and do something now.” He referenced other locations, other issues - the Alberta Tar Sands, the Keystone pipeline, and hydraulic fracturing in the Marcellus Shale.

The last issue, as I have said, hits close to home for me. I shared with Walk (with a strange sense of guilt for having received a positive decision from my local officials) that my hometown in Upstate New York had voted in favor of a moratorium on gas drilling in the Marcellus Shale the night before our interview. We were two different people, from different backgrounds and facing different issues, but in that moment I began to wonder – are any of us truly outsiders? Though the mountaintop removal resistance is closely tied to a distinct place, watersheds run into one another and the atmosphere is not any one community’s to save. We are all enmeshed in the same government and the same economy. We are fighting fights upon fights, and each of us has a part to play.