



APPALACHIAN APOCALYPSE

BY ERIK REECE

PHOTOGRAPH BY J. HENRY FAIR

DOWN IN INEZ, Kentucky, right on the West Virginia border, a high school English teacher named Mick McCoy recently put up a large wooden sign beside his cucumber patch. On it, a light blue fog hovers above steep, verdant mountains. The message reads: GOD WAS WRONG. SUPPORT MOUNTAINTOP REMOVAL.

Mountaintop removal—the name says it all—is the most ruthless method yet found to extract coal as quickly and as cheaply as possible. That it happens at all is an outrage. That it happens in one of North America’s most biologically diverse ecosystems is heartbreaking. The mixed mesophytic forests of central Appalachia are home to more than 60 species of tree, which are in turn home to more than 250 different songbirds. Unfortunately, two-thirds of those warblers are in decline, largely because their habitat is being cleared by bulldozers and buried with explosives.

Imagine central Appalachia as a bombing range. McCoy and his family sit at the bull’s-eye. All around them, Massey Energy of Richmond, Virginia, and its many subsidiaries are mixing ammonium nitrate and fuel oil (think Timothy McVeigh) and setting off thousands of blasts each day. The shock waves ruin family wells and crack the foundations and walls of houses.

The coal in the Appalachian Mountains is hard to extract because it is buried under layers of shale and sandstone hundreds of feet thick. A few decades ago, strip miners would cut along the edge of a ridge side, then auger into a coal seam. But today, with bigger machines and little moral or regulatory constraint, coal operators simply blast away the entire mountaintop—its forests, capstones, and topsoil—so they can scrape out thin seams of low-sulfur coal. Nearly everything else is dumped into the valleys below, often burying pristine headwater streams. The resulting “valley fills” create the largest man-made earthen structures in the country—huge treeless funnels that let mud and rainwater wash unimpeded through low-lying communities all across central Appalachia. The town of McRoberts, Kentucky, recently endured three “100-year floods” in 10 days. The water filled homes and carried away carports. When TECO Energy of Tampa, Florida, had leveled every peak around the community, it took the coal, took the profits, and left the people of McRoberts with crumbling homes, terrible roads, and a constant fear of being washed away in one’s sleep.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, in addition to the more than 700 miles of streams buried by valley fills, thousands more miles have been contaminated with sediment, heavy metals, and acid mine drainage, a toxic orange syrup that kills everything in its path. And these are headwaters, so their contamination affects all life downstream. In Letcher County, Kentucky, children suffer extremely high rates of diarrhea, vomiting, nausea, and shortness of breath, all of which can be tied to dissolved minerals in nearby streams. Presumably the Clean Water Act was established to prevent such degradation. But early in the Bush administration, coal lobbyist Steven Griles was named a deputy secretary at the Department of Interior. Officials changed one word of the act—replacing “waste” with “fill”—so that toxic mining debris could be dumped into rivers as benign fill material.

There will soon be enough flattened mountaintops in Appalachia—1.4 million acres—to set down the state of Delaware on former summits. Try driving across the 10,000-acre wasteland that surrounds Larry Gibson’s home on Kayford Mountain, West Virginia. Hundreds of people, like the photographer J. Henry Fair, make that trip every year to see, in Gibson’s words, “what hell looks like.” Kayford Mountain, more than any place I know, illustrates the power and the willingness of some human beings to convert the natural world into money and “cheap energy” as quickly as possible. If that means the total destruction of an entire region, its people, and its culture, so be it.

And yet the majority of Americans have never heard of mountaintop removal. Many insidious cultural biases account for this. Almost all mainstream media treat rural people as dim and backward—folks not smart enough to make it to the city. And mountain people—“hillbillies”—get the worst treatment of all. Why not turn their homes into a sacrifice area that will provide cheap energy for our cities? But there is also a problem of perspective. It is difficult for most people to see what happens on top of a mountain. Fair has gone a long way toward solving that problem, showing how industrial aggressors cut the heart out of a mountain and turn one of the most biologically diverse landscapes in North America into a lifeless void. 🌿

**MOUNTAINTOP
REMOVAL: A
RUTHLESS METHOD
TO EXTRACT COAL
AS QUICKLY
AND CHEAPLY AS
POSSIBLE**

A last clump of trees on Kayford Mountain falls to the bulldozer.

*Erik Reece is the author of *Lost Mountain: A Year in the Vanishing Wilderness* (Riverhead).*