

## **BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE?**

***By John McFerrin***

For as long as there has been a West Virginia Highlands Conservancy we have been concerned about coal mining. At the first meeting, “strip mining” was listed as an area of concern. Our bylaws describe our general purpose as “to promote, encourage, and work for the conservation—including both preservation and wise use—and appreciation of the natural resources of West Virginia and the Nation, and especially of the Highlands Region of West Virginia...” In West Virginia, those “natural resources” must include coal.

Our more recent activities have continued that tradition. We now have a national reputation as one of the groups that has been most active in opposing mountaintop removal. People who had never heard of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy now know us as the group that filed suit to stop that practice.

Our focus on coal has shifted and broadened over the years. When we began, strip mining was largely unregulated. A state law controlling the practice had become effective three months before. The more stringent federal law would not come along for another ten years. There was no Clean Water Act. The damage from coal mining was more localized. Nobody talked about global warming.

Now the mines are bigger; the localized destruction is on a much larger scale. The evidence of global climate change is overwhelming. The London magazine, *The Economist* recently labeled the coal “Environmental Enemy No. 1.” While our focus on coal is still almost entirely concerned with local destruction, we now do it against the background of coal’s role in international environmental problems.

Intertwined with the battles over coal were battles over energy policy. The coal industry would routinely say that the nation need coal to produce electricity, occasionally pointing out the “irony” of our using typewriters, computers, light bulbs, etc. to fight the very industry that made electricity possible. Our response was always that electricity could come from some place other than coal. There was wind power, solar power, etc. We could conserve our way out of dependence upon coal produced electricity.

Now wind power is here. Why aren’t we beside ourselves with delight?

Our enthusiasm is tempered by the location of the wind power. Although the proposed wind power projects are not yet under construction, they are all proposed for the “Highlands Region of West Virginia” that our corporate purpose says we are supposed to preserve.

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The September issue of the Voice had articles on some specific projects. Our new Wind Power Committee has been active. There are proceedings before the Public Service Commission concerning approval of these projects. The Committee has been seeking information and is considering recommending that the Conservancy intervene in those proceedings.

Without debating the merits of any specific project, this issue carries forward the discussion in a more general way. For the second month in a row, President Frank Young devotes his column to the topic. We have a letter from a member recommending that we support wind power. We have an essay on the atrocities of mountaintop removal mining from a visitor's perspective. We have a book review which quotes Julian Martin extensively on the destruction that a strip mine can bring to a community. We have a history of the effort to preserve Canaan Valley, one of the Conservancy's most longstanding interests. Finally, we have a reprint of a news story about the founding of the Conservancy. To the extent that present actions should be guided by past discussions, that story is helpful as a reflection of some of those discussions.

While this issue of the Voice does not present a debate on the merits of wind power in the Highlands of West Virginia, it does provide some information about our history. That history may be helpful as we try to figure out how we balance the renewable energy supply that we have always wanted with our historic interest in preserving the Highlands of West Virginia.