TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE INTERIOR AND INSULAR AFFAIRS COMMITTEE ON THE FEASIBILITY OF ELECTRICAL GENERATING PLANTS BEING CONSTRUCTED IN THE SOUTHWEST

by

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I am Eliot Porter. I live in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I am a writer and photographer of nature and have published several books on environmental conservation.

My testimony is being delivered by proxy by Terry Moore of The Black Mesa Defense Fund.

The Southwest, from mid-nineteenth century, when the great western migration via the Snata Fe Trail began, until World War I, was a place of high adventure and romance. Roads were non-existant and communication was difficult. The whole area that now comprises much of the four-corner states was known as the Great American Desert. It is high country, arid, and formidable still, although much of it has become accessable by road to visitors who seek the lonely places and inspiration from nature, or temporary escape from the exigencies of civilization. The attractiveness of the Southwest, geologically a young land - newly formed, lies in its revelation of the on-going processes of change which one can almost see taking place before one's eyes; lies in its austere beauty, cleanliness and clarity, and, if it is permissable to speak of nature in these terms, its unaffected honesty.

The people who came to the Southwest settled here for these reasons as I did in 1946 as a result of a pre-war visit in 1939. The stimulation by thin air; the intense blueness of the sky; the towering thunderheads of summer that rumble and flash and produce sheets of rain with a sudden rush of water that soon passes leaving only a wet arroyo to dry within an hour; the quick changes of climate from burning dry heat that allows no sweat to wet one's clothes to a shivering cold during the rain fall; these are the attributes of this country that get into one's blood and bones.

So beautiful is the Southwest, so remarkable for its geological features, unexcelled - unmatched even - anywhere in the world that its fame is world-wide. In recognition also by our own government of these unique attributes, nineteen national parks and monuments have been set aside in this region to be kept unaltered and unexploited for the enjoyment of all people now and in the future. The parks belong to all of us whether we live in the southwest or elsewhere. They are the heritage of all.

The Southwest is big, wide land, and by eastern standards sparsely inhabited, but people are streaming in because word has gotten around that the conditions of life are more agreeable here than in the densely populated, polluted districts east of the Mississippi.

Developers say this country is so big that nothing can be done by man to spoil it - that it can absorb unnoticed any degree of exploitation. But those who make this claim stand to gain by the developments and exploitations they promote. Many of them are here temporarily only to reap a profit from their activities, whether successful or not, and will leave when this purpose is accomplished. They are known by their dealings across the country, by the trail of unfulfilled promises, deceit, and bankruptcy they have left from Florida to California. The most predatory of this clan claim the right to pre-empt our birthright - yours and mine - for private gain. In the Southwest, the last big area of the United States where degradation of the environment has only just begun, transcending this birthright to vistas of blue and distant mountains, is the inviolable, biological and physiological right of every person to breathe air unpoisoned by industry.

The biggest pollutors are the power producers - the utility consortium - and their ancillary coal strip mining associates. They plan a large proliferation in the four-state area of huge coal fired plants to supply electricity mostly for California where this new supply of power is advertised as smog free. Smog free for Californians but not for Southwesterners. These same plants would be outlawed in Los Angeles, but the operators, nevertheless, protest the application of effective emission control on the grounds of cost and feasibility, and for the more cynical reason that pollution of the underpopulated Southwest injures too few people to justify controls.

The Peabody Coal Company is strip mining the Navajo and Hopi lands at a give-away price foisted upon the Indians by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and it is paying only $7.50 an acre-foot for unrenewable water reserves for a slurry line. In 35 years the coal will be used up, underground water will be gone, the land will be destroyed, and the Indians will be poorer than before. The assertion of the Peabody Coal Company that it will reconstitute the land by grading and planting is not a credible reassurance in the light of the failure of strip miners, despite laws and promises, to do restoration anywhere else at any time.

I offer this testimony in support of a moratorium on the proliferation of coal-fired power plants in the Southwest, or as an alternative the adoption of effective emission standards for the control of ash and gasses from power plants with severe penalties for non-compliance. And in addition I support the outlawing of strip mining in order to prevent the generation of a western Appalachia.