

ECO-ALERT

May 1971

STRIP MINING - COAST TO COAST

By Harry M. Caudill

Some developments in recent weeks inspire a faint hope that at last - at the eleventh hour - this mineral-rich country may save itself from virtual ruin at the hands of strip miners. America is so abundantly endowed with ores and fuels, world demand for them is so great, and earth-moving technology is so efficient that strip-mining - until recently associated primarily with coal and Appalachia - has become a reality or an imminent prospect for every state and nearly all counties. An ecological nightmare of unimaginable dimensions suddenly looms everywhere.

Since 1950, according to Census Bureau figures, the nation's population has swollen by more than one-third. During that time the land area has not grown by a single inch. On the contrary, the amount of land available for crips, forests, recreation, and other uses has been effectively and permanently diminished. Highways, housing, developments, shopping centers and man-made lakes are insatiable consumers of land, but they have the virtue of being continuously useful to large numbers of people. However, strip mining is a land use that threatens to devour the continent in a single-benefit operation. Before most urbanized Americans are aware of what is happening, the land on which they depend may have been ruined past technology's capacity to restore it.

From coast to coast the United States is marvelously blessed - or cursed - with valuable stones, clays, ores and solid fuels. Beneath the ancient and varied forests of Appalachia are gigantic coal beds, vast ledges of limestone and silica sand, iron ore, clays, marble, granite and such seldom mentioned substances as gneiss, grahamite and gibbsite. In Florida there are huge beds of phosphate. Georgia has kaolin and Texas and Wisconsin have iron fields. Coal is abundant across the Great Plains in West Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Iowa and Kansas. It striates the hills of Colorado, alongside immense deposits of oil shale. Low grade coal and lignite are found under hundreds of thousands of acres in Arizona, Utah and the Dakotas. California and Nevada boast of gold and silver; Arizona has copper. And nearly everywhere, sand and gravel can be scooped up for an endless variety of construction projects.

In short, something mineable can be found practically anywhere, and the pressure on natural resources is so graet in our highly industrialized society that all of them are practically certain to be mined. These facts are of the gravest consequence to the nation.

.../2

Peter Borrelli, Eastern Representative, SIERRA CLUB, 250 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019 (212) 265-2815

The cheapest way to obtain solid-state minerals from the land is by strip-mining. This revolution in the technology of earth moving has swept the world in the last two decades. A combination of nitrate fertilizer and diesel oil makes a cheap and potent substitute for dynamite. Some bulldozers now plow into the soil with blades 7 feet high, and near Cumberland, Ohio, a supercolossus looms over a devastated county like an all-consuming titan. It is "Big Muskie", the planet's largest earth-moving machine, with a boom 310 feet long and a bucket that lifts 325 tons at a gulp. Not far away in the same state slightly smaller machines, "The Gem of Egypt" and "The Silver Spade", work their way through wooded hills as easily as a hungry man devours a steak and potatoes.

In stripping, the overlying strata of soil and rock - and their flora and fauna - are blasted and shoved aside to expose the mineral. It is then loosened by explosions, lifted into trucks and hauled away. The effect on the ecology has been widely documented, but remains indescribable.

For example, in mountainous eastern Kentucky much stripping has been done for coal. A 1955-59 study by state and federal agencies compared two adjacent watersheds. The valley that remained in timber yielded 27.9 tons of silt per square mile annually. The other, which had been "disturbed" by stripping, flooded its silt basins with 30,000 tons of acid-reddened mud from each square mile!

In 1967 the Interior Department sent to Congress its little noted study, "Surface Mining and Our Environment". It reflected conditions as of January 1, 1965, when 3.2 million acres had already been surface mined. Hawaii claimed only 10 acres of stripped soil; at the other end of the scale, Pennsylvania reported a massive 370,202 acres. Coal and lignite accounted for 40 percent of the total. An area equal to that of Connecticut had been devastated.

Congress disregarded the report and the last five years have seen an unprecedented mining boom. Today the equivalent of two Connecticuts lies as maimed as Flanders in 1917.

Half the states have no compulsory laws for reclaiming the land after the strippers have finished with it, and no state enactment approaches the strict, no-nonsense requirements of Germany and Great Britain. In such ravaged states as Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia and Ohio, enforcement is a farce in which the industries generally select the reclamation officers.

Surface mining kills every living plant and drives out, initially at least, all wild life. It pollutes water and permanently degrades it. Most important, perhaps, it produces unnerving ugliness.

Any serious national commitment to save our deteriorating environment would treat surface mining as an exceedingly grave problem. It would outlaw stripping where prompt and complete restoration of the land to its original and natural purpose cannot be achieved. It would require an industry to restore completely lands it is permitted to tear up, and would impose a severance tax on future mining to finance reclamation of America's ghastly backlog of plundered acreage.

.../3

The word that best fits the climate of West Virginia is "benign". Its mixed mesophytic forests have embraced and sheltered nearly all plant forms that the ancient ice shields pushed down from the north. Its 2,000 varieties of flowering plants make it a botanical wonderland without parallel anywhere outside the tropics. But all this profuse, interwoven and indescribably old web of life has been for twenty years under a brutal assault by corporations digging fuel for domestic and foreign electric power plants and steel mills, and for hundreds of chemical byproducts. The very life of the state is threatened by industrial processes that leave its splendid land as dead and piteous as the bloody carcass of a flayed lion.

West Virginia is fortunate, though, in that it has been adopted by two remarkable men whom voters have had the good sense to elect to public office. John D. Rockefeller IV - "Jay" to West Virginians - came to the state as a VISTA worker when Lyndon Johnson was building the Great Society. He stayed to serve a term in the state legislature and is now Secretary of State in the dingy capitol at Charleston. Unless his latest undertaking brings him to grief, this scion of New York's wealthiest family is likely to be elected governor as a Democrat in next year's election.

What he is attempting requires a breath-taking boldness. He has endorsed Sen. Si Galperin's bill to outlaw strip mining in the state "completely and forever", and has set off a political earthquake in the process. The bill challenges the state's vast absentee mining interests head-on in an "us-or-them" battle. Most West Virginians undoubtedly support the Rockefeller faction, but they are divided and generally inexperienced, whereas their opponents are tightly organized, unbelievably well heeled, ruthless and resourceful.

The first tactic of the mining cabal was to flood Charleston with lobbyists toting heavy satchels, and with hundreds of people who claim to make their living by strip mining. The strippers said that their activities employ 6,700 persons who support an additional 16,300 women and children. As the "abolitionists" promptly pointed out, these figures show the tiny stake West Virginians have in the industry that is wrecking their state. Even if the statistics are correct, only 1 percent of the people derive economic benefits from stripping. Actually, if Galperin's bill becomes law, new deep mines will promptly provide employment for many times as many men - men now on welfare and food-stamp rolls. For another generation or so, Appalachian coal is an economic imperative which will have to be mined by other means if strip mining is banned as ecologically unacceptable.

The state's other good angel is its Congressman from the Fourth District, Ken Hechler, another New Yorker and a one-time college professor turned politician. Hechler brings a formidable background of achievement to the service of his constituency. In 1969 he fought through a reluctant Congress a stringent - but as yet unenforced - new federal mine safety bill. On February 18 he dropped into the legislative hopper a bill bearing the names of twenty-nine co-sponsors and designed to outlaw strip mining for coal totally and everywhere in the United States.

These bills will probably be crushed between the wheels of public apathy and industry alarm. In fact these two able and dedicated men may find themselves driven from public life by sustained, lavishly financed campaigns. In any event, their efforts provide some measure of the despair that grips intelligent people when they comprehend the immensity of the destruction being visited on their native soil.

.../4

The Nixon Administration has made some gestures toward control over this runaway industry, but they are so gutless as to inspire no fear among strippers and little support from conservationists. Amid an almost limitless outpouring of rhetoric concerning our deteriorating environment, the most serious of all such problems has been largely ignored. Now the true scope of our national peril is recognized by growing numbers of people in and out of office who are willing to lay everything on the line in a struggle for survival. They see, clearly and with horror, that our present methods of obtaining minerals is incompatible with timber growing, wildlife, farming, potable water, natural beauty and continued human occupancy of mined areas. That a third of our coal, to name but one mineral, is extracted by this ruinous practice outlines the magnitude of our reliance upon it. But does a high standard of living built by such means represent progress in any real sense?

Ken Hechler's colleague, freshman Ohio Rep. John Seiberling answered the question this way: "The Romans created a desert and called it peace. We create a desert and call it progress." The desert Mr. Seiberling referred to is the only land Americans will ever have.

(Mr. Caudill, author of Night Comes to the Cumberlands, is one of the nation's foremost authorities on the history, problems and potential of his native Appalachian mountains.)

RESOLUTION OF THE SIERRA CLUB NATIONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS
adopted May 1, 1971

In view of the irreversible environmental damage caused by surface mining and the ineffectiveness of regulation to mitigate the environmental impact of surface mining, the Sierra Club advocates a total and immediate ban on all surface mining of coal, in conjunction with appropriate steps to prevent any compensating increase in other environmentally disastrous methods of obtaining or transporting fuel.

There are now 82 members of the House of Representatives from 24 states co-sponsoring legislation to abolish strip mining. Rep. Hechler's bill, H.R. 4556, and its companion bills, H.R. 4557 and H.R. 6484, have also received the support of Senators Gaylord Nelson (D-Wis.) and George McGovern (D-S.D.), co-sponsors of S. 1498.

And each day there is growing public support to ban the strip mining of coal. Two counties in Kentucky have outlawed strip mining. In West Virginia, the state legislature has enacted a two-year ban on strip mines in 22 counties so far untouched by them. Ohio conservationists are supporting a tough bill that virtually advocates abolition. And in the Four Corners region of the Southwest a coalition of conservationists and leaders of the Navajo and Hopi nations are struggling to halt the ripping apart of Black Mesa, Arizona.

.../5

The Natural Resources Defense Council, Environmental Defense Fund and Sierra Club have also initiated a legal challenge to the Tennessee Valley Authority's massive purchases of strip-mined coal.

At the same time well-financed lobbying and advertising campaigns have been launched by the National Coal Association and its allies to stave off this legislation long enough to enable strippers to make some quick killings. Although coal can and must be obtained from the billions of tons available through deep mining, industry remains wedded to the high profit margin of strip mining while millions of Americans pay the cost of this outrageous practice.

If you would like to help stop strip mining and work toward a sensible national energy policy, please contact your Congressman and Senators and urge them to co-sponsor Rep. Ken Hechler's bill. Write also to the chairman of the House and Senate Interior Committees and urge that this bill be moved as soon as possible. You may write to:

Hon. Wayne Aspinall
Chairman, House Interior Committee
House Office Building
Washington, D. C. 20515

Hon. Henry Jackson
Chairman, Senate Interior Committee
Senate Office Building
Washington, D. C. 20510

Your correspondence will help to convince many legislators who have already expressed interest in acting on the problem that there is broad public support for such action.

You may also help by informing your local newspapers and periodicals about this most critical national problem.

* * * * * * *

Co-sponsors of legislation to abolish strip mining (by state):

ARKANSAS - Rep. David Pryor (D)

CALIFORNIA - Rep. Glenn M. Anderson (D), Rep. Phillip Burton (D), Rep. James Corman (D), Rep. George Danielson (D), Rep. Ronald Dellums (D), Rep. Don Edwards (D), Rep. Augustus Hawkins (D), Rep. Robert Leggett (D), Rep. Paul N. McCloskey, (Jr. (R), Rep. John Moss (D), Rep. Thomas Rees (D), Rep. Lionel Van Deerlin (D)

CONNECTICUT - Rep. William R. Cotter (D), Rep. Ella T. Grasso (D)

FLORIDA - Rep. Claude Pepper (D)

GEORGIA - Rep. John Davis (D)

HAWAII - Rep. Pasty Mink (D)

ILLINOIS - Rep. Ralph Metcalfe (D), Rep. Abner Mikva (D), Rep. Sidney R. Yates (D)

INDIANA - Rep. John Brademas (D), Rep. Ray Madden (D), Rep. J. Edward Roush (D)

.../6

IOWA - Rep. Fred Schwengel (R)

LOUISIANA - Rep. Edwin Edwards (D)

MAINE - Rep. William D. Hathaway (D), Rep. Peter Kyros (D)

MARYLAND - Rep. Clarence Long (D), Rep. Parren Mitchell (D), Rep. Paul Sarbanes (D)

MASSACHUSETTS - Rep. James Burke (D), Rep. Silvio Conte (R), Rep. Robert F. Drinan (D), Rep. Harold D. Donohue (D), Rep. Michael Harrington (D), Sen. Edward Kennedy (D), Rep. F. Bradford Morse (R), Rep. Thomas O'Neill (D)

MICHIGAN - Rep. John Dingell (D), Rep. William Ford (D), Rep. Lucien Nedzi (D), Rep. Guy Vander Jagt (R)

MINNESOTA - Rep. Joseph Karth (D)

NEW JERSEY - Sen. Clifford Case (R), Rep. Cornelius Gallagher (D), Rep. Henry Helstoski (D), Rep. Peter Rodino (D), Rep. Robert Roe (D), Rep. Cha es W. Sandman, Jr. (R)

NEW YORK - Rep. Bella Abzug (D), Rep. Herman Badillo (D), Rep. Mario Biaggi (D), Rep. Jonathan Bingham (D), Rep. Hugh Carey (D), Rep. John Dow (D), Rep. Seymour Halpern (R), Rep. Edward Koch (D), Rep. Peter A. Peyser (R), Rep. Otis Pike (D), Rep. Bertram Podell (D), Rep. Ogden Reid (R), Rep. Benjamin Rosenthal (D), Rep. William Fitts Ryan (D), Rep. Lester Wolff (D)

NORTH CAROLINA - Rep. Nick Galifianakis (D), Rep. Richardson Preyer (D)

OHIO - Rep. John Seiberling (D), Rep. James V. Stanton (D), Rep. Louis Stokes (D), Rep. Charles A. Vanik (D), Rep. Charles W. Whalen, Jr. (R)

PENNSYLVANIA - Rep. William A. Barrett (D), Rep. Edward G. Biester (R), Rep. William Moorhead (D), Rep. Joseph Vigorito (D), Rep. Lawrence Williams (R)

SOUTH DAKOTA - Sen. George McGovern (D)

TEXAS - Rep. Robert Eckhardt (D), Rep. Henry Gonzalez (D)

WASHINGTON - Rep. Tom Foley (D), Rep. Thomas Pelly (R)

WEST VIRGINIA - Rep. Ken Hechler

WISCONSIN - Rep. Robert Kastenmeier (D), Sen. Gaylord Nelson (D), Rep. David Obey (D)