

STEWARDS OF APPALACHIA

APPALACHIAN VOICES: FROM THE COAL FIELDS TO CAPITOL HILL

By Jesse Wood

Photo by William Britten

“It’s not the staff of Appalachian Voices that makes the real difference; it’s the people — the volunteers all across the country that take ownership, who think it’s terrible what is happening in the coal regions of Appalachia and want to do something about it.”

– Matt Wasson, Director of Programs at Appalachian Voices

Appalachian Voices’ 2011 Staff | Photo courtesy of Appalachian Voices



This summer, Appalachian Voices celebrates its 15th anniversary, and since its inception in the High Country more than a decade ago, the organization has grown from a local publication staffed with a handful of volunteers into a regional organization that, among other things, has made mountaintop removal coal mining a national issue.

Appalachian Voices spawned from the Southern Appalachian Highland Eco-region Task Force of the Sierra Club, which started the environmental newspaper, *The Appalachian Voice*. In 1998 — after one year together — the task force split into separate independent organizations with Appalachian Voices taking over the newspaper.

Compared to the days when just a few volunteers were in downtown Boone, the nonprofit organization now staffs nearly two dozen and operates offices in Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. — while its main office still resides in the High Country. “I really didn’t [imagine that Appalachian Voices would grow into what it is today],” said Harvard Ayers, the original chair for Appalachian Voices and founding committee member. “I just knew

we could do good work.”

Today, Appalachian Voices has active campaigns in multiple states; is a member of The Alliance for Appalachia and Wise Energy for Virginia; and works with numerous other environmental organizations across the region. “It’s striking at just how much we are able to accomplish,” said Matt Wasson, director of programs for Appalachian Voices and a staff member for more than 10 years. When asked what spurred Appalachian Voices’ growth, Wasson spoke of two “defining moments” — the launching of iLoveMountains.org and the first annual Week in Washington. Both the website, where more than 103,000 people have pledged to help end mountaintop removal, and the week-long gathering on Capitol Hill, where people from all over the country lobby their legislators to end mountaintop removal, are dedicated to stopping the destructive mining process.

Fighting An ‘Egregious’ Way to Mine Coal

While mountaintop removal has remained a core issue addressed by Appalachian Voices for years, Wasson said the organ-



Appalachian Voices

Protecting the Central & Southern Appalachian Mountain Region

Highlights of Appalachian Voice's Work Through the Years

1998: Began community organizing work in southern West Virginia, which led to the spin-off of independent organization Coal River Mountain Watch.

2000-02: Brought together twelve groups from across North Carolina for a campaign that ultimately succeeded in passing the Clean Smokestacks Act, one of the strongest air pollution laws in the country at the time.

2003: Launched first Appalachian Treasures Tour, marking the beginning of our national campaign to end mountaintop removal.

2004: Helped form Christians for the Mountains, a non-denominational religious campaign founded on the idea of caring for creation

2006: Joined with 12 other organizations to form The Alliance for Appalachia; held the inaugural citizen End Mountaintop Removal Week in Washington and congressional briefing on mountaintop removal; and launched iLoveMountains.org.

An aerial shot of a mountaintop removal site near Rawl, West Virginia

Flight courtesy of SouthWings; Photo by Kent Kessinger



ization focuses 50 percent of its time and resources on other — mostly coal-related — issues, such as groundwater pollution that occurs from coal ash ponds at coal-fired power plants and mercury pollution from those same plants. Willa Mays, executive director of Appalachian Voices, noted that all organizations must decide where to apply their resources to make the most impact, and currently, this group's focus is coal because, as she said, "We see coal as the most devastating threat to our region." (Though the High Country is a part of Appalachia, we are fortunate that coal doesn't exist underneath our feet. If it did, our way of life would be much differ-

ent and the High Country likely wouldn't be a tourist destination and a Mecca for outdoor recreation. The majority of mining occurs in Eastern Kentucky, West Virginia and Southwest Virginia. "By sheer luck, we don't have coal here," said Jamie Goodman, communications coordinator for Appalachian Voices and editor of *The Appalachian Voice*.)

Since mountaintop removal is, as Harvard Ayers said, such an "egregious" process, it warrants excess attention and awareness. More than 1.2 million acres of previously forested land has been destroyed; more than 2,000 miles of streams have been buried and polluted; and more

A mountaintop removal site in Wise County, Virginia that looks like a moonscape. Photo by Matt Wasson



A 2009 rally in Raleigh to protest Duke Energy's Cliffside Power Plant's use of mountaintop removal coal.

Photo courtesy of iLoveMountains.org



than 500 mountains have been leveled because of mountaintop removal coal mining, a radical form of surface mining. The devastating process can involve decapitating more than 500 feet of a summit to retrieve buried seams of coal with millions of pounds of explosives. Mining waste is then dumped into valleys, burying many miles of streams. Then after a mine is exhausted, the nearby communities must live with polluted water and the threats of flooding for many, many generations.

When mountaintop removal occurs, not only is the land ravaged but whole communities deteriorate because of a trickle-down effect that pollutes the area, ruins the overall quality of life and takes down the local economy. "It virtually makes it impossible for any other industry to want to come to town," said Goodman. Studies have shown that areas with high mining also have high poverty and/or high unemployment rates. According to Gallup's 2010 Well-Being Index of 435 congressional districts, residents of the two districts where most mountaintop removal coal mining occurs — (WV-03) and (KY-05) — ranked last in physical and emotional well-being.

Amplifying Voices – From the Holler to D.C.

A main role of the Boone-based nonprofit is to amplify the voices of those affected, so politicians on the local, state and federal levels hear what impacted constituents have to say about these destructive practices happening in their communities. Appalachian Voices also focuses on state and federal legislation; currently its primary focus in that regard is the passage of the Clean Water Protection Act in the House and the Appalachia Restoration Act in the Senate, both of which would sharply reduce surface mining. Asked if the nonprofit is a lobbying group, Goodman said, "We are not lobbying

in as much as we're taking citizens from coal bearing regions to D.C. and talking to representatives. It's about citizens' voices."

Though Appalachian Voices has offices in four locales, it does not have offices in Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia, states where coal companies mine with reckless abandon. It does, though, partner with grassroots organizations that operate in those states like Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, Coal River Mountain Watch, and the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition. Those three groups are among the 13 organizations in The Alliance

for Appalachia, a regional partnership that aims to end mountaintop removal, put a halt to destructive coal technologies and create a sustainable and just Appalachia.

Along with amplifying citizens' voices, the organization also empowers local groups to fight their own battles instead of dictating what battles to be fought and meddling with local affairs. "It's always a struggle in organizing to navigate insider/outsider dynamics, but Appalachian Voices has a history of working with impacted communities and knows how to navigate all of those dynamics with respect," Katey Lauer, coordinator for the Alliance, said. She added that Appalachian Voices works by engaging established leaders in organized communities on the federal level. All of which are why Appalachian Voices doesn't consider itself as an outsider group interfering with local issues. "We are not trying to organize in the communities in Central Appalachia; we are working with people who are [already] organized in their communities, [and we help them] take their fight to



Matt Wasson, program director at Appalachian Voices, speaks before the North Carolina General Assembly in Raleigh. | Photo courtesy of Appalachian Voices

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Washington, D.C., and across the country," Wasson said. "We are really trying to amplify their voices rather than necessarily speak for them."

Protecting the Air and Water

The ending of mountaintop removal is an ongoing struggle, but it isn't the only battle being waged. Among the several other campaigns that Appalachian Voices is currently undertaking is Appalachian



Water Watch, a program that Lauer singled out when asked about exciting ongoing and/or upcoming projects. "One of the things we are really looking forward to is the beginning of regional citizens' water-monitoring effort," Lauer said. "I think as that project takes hold, [Appalachian Voices is] going to be one of the organizations that helps many local groups bring together local data, trends and efforts ... I think some of these resources [now] available [because of Appalachian Water Watch will] help us create some clearing-

house information that will be invaluable to national and local strategies."

The citizen water-monitoring program grew from an investigation of water violations by coal companies in Kentucky. There, Appalachian Voices and other environmental groups found coal companies falsifying reports in order to appease the Clean Water Act. The initial investigation unveiled 24,000 violations — with the potential of over \$800 million in fines — by the two largest mountaintop removal companies in Kentucky that went unnoticed by state regulators. To date, Appalachian Water Watch has identified over 40,000 Clean Water Act violations and has trained and equipped dozens of citizen volunteers in Kentucky and Virginia to protect their own water by monitoring their local

streams and aquifers.

Red, White & Water, another Appalachian Voices campaign, aims to enforce the Clean Water Act, which was enacted with bipartisan support several decades ago after the Cuyahoga River in Ohio caught on fire 13 separate times in a 100-year period from unregulated waste dumping. Yet, decades after the flaming river, water quality is declining because regulations are either being repealed or ignored. Red, White and Water has partnered with groups in North Carolina to

The Stewart family (above) poses for the advocacy of clean water during the ongoing Red, White and Water campaign. Wise County residents deliver a "Mile-Long Petition" to a Richmond-based utility to oppose new coal-fired power plant. | Photos courtesy of Appalachian Voices



start the N.C. Can't Wait For Clean Water initiative to educate citizens about coal ash pollution and put pressure on government officials to regulate the state's 14 coal ash ponds, which are owned by Duke and Progress Energies. These toxic coal ash ponds leak arsenic, boron, selenium and thallium into our groundwater.

A third effort to curb the degradation of our land, air and water is the Wise Energy for Virginia Coalition, a collaboration between Appalachian Voices and four other environmental organizations that began when a new coal-fired power plant was planned for Wise County in Virginia in 2007. Although the plant was eventually approved, public pressure from the grassroots coalition, which amassed 42,000 supporters, led to dramatic reductions in permitted pollutant limits from the power plant. Along with creating energy efficient legislation and promoting the use of renewable energy, the coalition is currently fighting a battle in Surry County, Va. Old Dominion Electric Cooperative has proposed building a \$6-billion power plant, the largest coal-fired power plant in the state. The plant is upwind to nearly 2 million citizens and is 30 miles from the Chesapeake Bay, one of the world's most biologically diverse estuaries. If built, the power plant would have major health implications for those citizens who are downwind citizens and the surrounding ecosystems.

'A Big Shot in the Arm for Our Work'

That's how Wasson described what President Obama's election did for Appalachian Voices and environmental organizations across Appalachia and beyond. During the former President Bush's eight-year tenure, the energy industry acted as if the environment was a piñata full of goodies, i.e. coal and oil.

With Dick Cheney, who was the former CEO of Halliburton, one of the largest energy companies in the world, acting as vice president during the Bush Administration, more than 300 environmental laws were repealed or diminished, weakening the protection of our air, water, public lands and wildlife, according to Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s Crimes Against Nature. One such legislative rollback was a change in the decades-old Clean Water Act, which provided a loophole allowing coal companies to dump mining waste into our waterways. That loophole led to moun-



A reporter speaks to **Ed Wiley**, who marched 40 days from Charleston, West Virginia to Washington, D.C., to oppose a mountaintop removal site next to Marsh Folk Elementary School, where his grandchildren were attending. | Photo by Matt Wasson



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2007: Established an office in Washington, D.C., and helped found the Wise Energy for Virginia Coalition. Also launched the “Appalachian Mountaintop Removal” layer in Google Earth and the online tool “My Connection” tool, covered in the Wall Street Journal exclusive report.

2008: Launched our “Obama’s First 100 Days” campaign and generated tens of thousands of letters to Obama’s transition team asking that he make stopping mountaintop removal a top priority. Helped to launch an energy efficiency campaign in Virginia and campaigned with Wise Energy for Virginia partners to achieve dramatic reductions in permitted emissions for a proposed coal plant in Wise County.

2009: Worked with Senators Lamar Alexander and Ben Cardin to introduce the Appalachia Restoration Act in the U.S. Senate and held the first-ever Senate hearings on mountaintop removal coal mining; launched a campaign with the Wise Energy for Virginia Coalition to oppose the largest proposed coal-fired power plant in Virginia; and launched the Appalachian Water Watch program in Kentucky to train Appalachian citizens how to test and monitor water quality in streams adjacent to mountaintop removal mines.

2010: Documented more than 30,000 Clean Water Act violations from two coal companies in the state of Kentucky, finding evidence that both companies had fabricated water quality results and initiated legal actions against the companies that have led to unprecedented fines. Gained 173 co-sponsors for the Clean Water Protection Act in the House and 12 co-sponsors in the Senate by the end of the 111th Congress.

2011: Reached 100,000 people who have taken action on mountaintop removal in response to our grassroots organizing. Expanded Appalachian Water Watch to Virginia. Launched the Red, White and Water campaign to educate the public about negative health effects of coal-fired power plants in the Southeast.



Executive Director Willa Mays and **Amanda Starbuck** during the March on Blair Mountain. The red handkerchiefs are in reference to the 1921 Battle of Blair Mountain between miners and coal executives. Miners wore them around their necks to distinguish themselves in the fight. Also, it is where the term “redneck” originated. | Photo courtesy of Appalachian Voices

taintop removal flourishing while polluting more than 2,000 miles of streams.

Though the vast majority of the loopholes and repeals are still in place under President Obama, who is on much friendlier terms with environmental groups, it was the belief in Obama’s slogans of “change,” “hope,” and “progress” that altered the bleak perception of the environment’s future. “We live and die on people empowerment, on people believing they can make a difference. There is never really a lack of bad things happening, and the important thing for us is convincing people they have a power to do something about it,” Wasson said. “That was really difficult during the last administration. Over the last few years, people have, I guess, had a little more belief, [a little more] hope that they can change, that things can change for the better, and that has been a big shot in the arm for our work.”

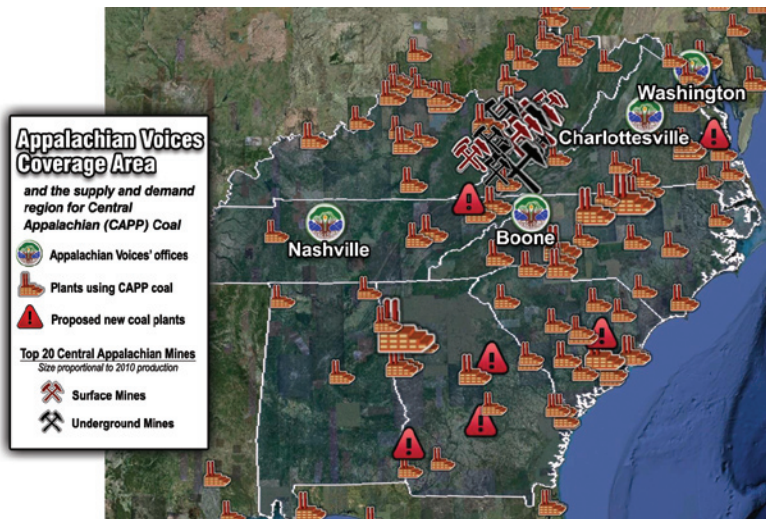
Envisioning When the ‘Earth is Safe’

Appalachian Voices’ official vision statement is: “We envision a day when the integrity of the land, air and water of central and southern Appalachia is protected for future generations, and the region is upheld as a national model of a vibrant, just and sustainable economy.” In short, Mays said the organization doesn’t allow special and very narrow interests to negatively impact what she considers the legacy of Appalachia – the mountains, streams and biodiversity. “[That] is not something that should be allowed to be destroyed,” Mays said.

Some – as pessimistic as it sounds – don’t ever envision that day, when one doesn’t need to worry about basic rights such as clean air and water, when another doesn’t have to worry about the plunder of the earth. One of those people is Lenny Kohm, campaign director for App Voices,



Executive Director Willa Mays speaks at EPA public hearing on coal ash in Charlotte, N.C. EPA panel is in the background. | Photo by Jamie Goodman



the air and keeping the water clean is just an ongoing battle. I'm sure we will be working on those things in different forms, and I know we will continue to be very vigilant."

With the passage of a bill in the House that eviscerates the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) authority to enforce the Clean Water Act; and with recent multiple presidential candidates calling for the dismantling of the EPA; and with a bill introduced into the Senate that would actually abolish the EPA entirely, environmental organizations like Appalachian Voices may be needed more than ever. If some of our elected officials have their way, Appalachian Voices and others like it will become our only eco-watchdogs, the only ones who are willing to stand up to the powers that be and amplify the voices of those that coal and other industries deem inconsequential. ♦

who at the time of the interview for this article was out West advocating for the Clean Water Protection Act. Kohm is renowned in the environmental world and has worked exhaustively in Appalachia and Alaska. When asked about his vision for the future of conservation organizations like App Voices, Kohm's response was longwinded, yet poignant:

"I don't imagine I would ever come to work one day, and a sign on the front of the office will say, 'The earth is safe. We don't need you anymore.' I've always said...even if the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (in the area we are concerned with) is finally designated as wilderness, and even if we stop mountaintop removal coal mining in Appalachia, the bad guys will try to figure out a way around that," he said. "As long as coal and oil exist and we use it, folks will be after it. It's hard to say what's going to come up exactly, but keeping



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