

Small Destructions Add Up

by Wendell Berry

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Newspaper editorials deplore such human-caused degradations of the oceans as the Gulf of Mexico's "dead zone," and reporters describe practices like "mountain removal" mining in eastern Kentucky. Some day we may finally understand the connections.

The health of the oceans depends on the health of rivers; the health of rivers depends on the health of small streams; the health of small streams depends on the health of their watersheds. The health of the water is exactly the same as the health of the land; the health of small places is exactly the same as the health of large places. As we know, disease is hard to confine. Because natural law is in force everywhere, infections move.

We cannot immunize the continents and the oceans against our contempt for small places and small streams. Small destructions add up, and finally they are understood as parts of large destructions. Excessive nutrient runoff from farms and animal factories in the Mississippi watershed has caused, in the Gulf of Mexico, a hypoxic dead zone of 5,000 to 6,000 square miles. In 40-odd years, strip mining in the Appalachian coal fields, culminating in mountain removal, has gone far toward the destruction of a whole region, with untold damage to the region's people, to watersheds, and to the waters downstream.

There is not a more exemplary history of our contempt for small places than that of Eastern Kentucky coal mining, which has enriched many absentee corporate shareholders and left the region impoverished and defaced. Coal industry representatives are now defending mountain removal -- and its attendant damage to forests, streams, wells, dwellings, roads and community life -- by saying that in "10, 15, 20 years" the land will be restored, and that such mining has "created" the level land needed for further industrial development.

But when you remove a mountain you also remove the topsoil and the forest, and you do immeasurable violence to the ecosystem and the watershed. These things are not to be restored in 10 or 20 years, or in 10 or 20 hundred years. As for the manufacture of level places for industrial development, the supply has already far exceeded any foreseeable demand. And the devastation continues.

The contradictions in the state's effort "to balance the competing interests" were stated as follows by Ewell Balltrip, director of the Kentucky Appalachian Commission: "If you don't have mining, you don't have an economy, and if you don't have an economy you don't have a way for the people to live. But if you don't have environmental quality, you won't create the kind of place where people want to live."

Yes. And if the clearly foreseeable result is a region of flat industrial sites where nobody wants to live, we need a better economy.

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