

MOUNTAIN VOICES: WHO'S LISTENING?

*Carol Judy**

Looking back, I see my approach to life was fragmented. Today, my life continues to be guided by what I have learned as I pulled those fragments—together with my individual strengths—into wholeness. Listening projects have been part of that pulling together. A listening project can be as simple as an elder passing on a story of a place as they knew it to a child who knows the same place as a different landscape, or it can be the foundation for working together, with respect, across a diversity of cultures, classes, and experiences.

I have lived in this world for sixty-one years, mostly in rural communities, and I am cash poor. I am a lay forester, a root digger, and place-based developer in my community, Tennessee's Clearfork Valley. I am also a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

Students from diverse colleges and universities came to the Clearfork Valley in 2001 to discover for themselves the truth about mountaintop removal from those who live in Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky. We are called Central Appalachia. As students listened to people discuss their feelings about what was happening to the mountains around them, they heard the stories of the past three to four generations. Those listening and recording heard something deeper in the stories. These stories were not just

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about individuals who refused to accept mountaintop removal as “progress” or people who wanted to be “environmentalists”—everyone mourned the loss of the mountains.

While the students documented our stories, photos documented the water’s vivid orange colors and the mountains being moved layer by layer, scooped into huge trucks and dumped into hollows; scientists tested the waters; and animals evicted by this process showed up in gardens, fields, and around people’s homes, even as other plants and animals were being added to the endangered species list—a testament to the destruction that was happening all around them.

Over the years, students camping in my yard have taken our voices and the knowledge found in our stories and begun to make change based on science and through the preservation of rural knowledge. Some students returned to contribute daily, while others took action elsewhere. These students knew where and how to connect what they learned to their place in the world we share. In this way, generational sustainability was formed for many years to come.

By taking actions based on what we learned, together we have made change happen by living greener locally and participating in national environmental movements. In my community, people have come out of their homes to get involved with public actions, tested the waters for hazardous material, and documented and posted their observations to websites as they watched the mountains being eaten away from their kitchen windows. They have also learned how to garden differently as a way to live positively with the environment around them and have guided future generations towards more environmentally-friendly ways to live. In fact, I am helping to found a cooperative business, with a shoestring budget and major time investment, which has had positive environmental impacts for rural and urban people. Our non-timber forest products are environmentally sound and will be viable for generations to come.

The academic world is taking the same knowledge to heart and making campuses more environmentally green. All of this has happened because students came to learn for themselves about mountaintop removal and shared that information with folks at the schools that they came from.

Listening projects validate the individual’s knowledge, connect

it to others, and create or add to a movement. The Clearfolk Valley listening project enabled individuals both inside and outside our community to find a collective voice for systemic change, across diverse cultures, classes, and ethnicities.