



OVERBURDEN

TWO WOMEN AND THE MOUNTAIN BETWEEN THEM

DISCUSSION GUIDE



PARE LORENTZ
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Lorelei Scarbro, left, leads a protest on the front steps of the EPA in Washington, D.C.

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LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

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Having grown up in Kentucky, I thought I knew Appalachia. I thought I knew what it meant to be a coal miner. I thought I understood the ways in which the land had shaped the people. I thought I knew what it looked like to raise a family there, to provide, to do what's right. But after beginning this project nearly 10 years ago, I learned that it's a place of coal and contradictions.

This film is largely about those contradictions. For those on the outside, like myself, the answers seem easy. Coal is bad. Water is life. Don't blow up the mountains. What's hard to see from the outside is the reason folks are so dedicated to the very industry that ultimately, and statistically, ends their lives 10 years earlier than other Americans. This is because the region has been engineered to support only one economy, a coal economy, leaving families with only one option: a job in the coal mine. Even though that very coal company may blow up your land, it's also the company that signs your paychecks, that gives you health insurance, and that feeds your children. And people fight fiercely to defend their families.

In the process called mountaintop removal coal mining, "overburden" is a term used to define the rock, soil, trees and ecosystem that lie above a seam of coal. This overburden is blasted and bulldozed away to access the coal below. It is shoved into valleys, discarded, much like the people who live and work in those valleys are cast aside. The goal of this film is to humanize those people, to explore the complicated issues and to spark conversation that can move beyond the expected and polarizing debates and allow viewers to access an empathetic view of a people and a place that few Americans truly understand.



Director Chad A. Stevens

"A remarkable document, powerful testimony to the absurd destruction that coal has brought to the mountains of Appalachia, and testimony also to the remarkable women and men who have done their best to deal with an almost impossible trauma."

– Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature*



OVERBURDEN protagonist Rory McIlmoil stands atop an excavating machine on a surface mine site during the first protest held on Coal River Mountain in 2009.

MEET THE CHARACTERS



Lorelei Scarbro
Community Organizer

Scarbro, the daughter and granddaughter of coal miners, works in her community to bring people together in support of the Coal River Wind Campaign.



Betty Harrah
Pro-coal Advocate

Harrah, also the daughter and granddaughter of West Virginia coal miners, is a staunch supporter of the coal industry and advocate for mine safety.



Rory McIlmoil
Project Coordinator

After dreaming up the idea to build a wind farm in coal country, McIlmoil moves to West Virginia to lead the Coal River Wind Campaign.



Bill Price
Sierra Club, West Virginia

After the mining company forced his family off their land, Price became an outspoken critic of the coal industry in West Virginia.

ABOUT THE FILM

OVERBURDEN is a disarming and powerful new film that shows the human stories from coal country – including stunning events that will either divide or unify a community, its coal workers and their families. The story, unfolding over eight years, follows a fiery, pro-coal right-winger and a tenacious, environmentalist grandmother as they join forces to take on the most dangerous coal company in America. According to The Guardian, the coal industry is in a “terminal decline,” leaving these communities facing an uncertain and dire future. OVERBURDEN is the first film of its kind to document the end of the age of coal and celebrate the heroes who are standing up to rebuild their fractured communities.

Learn more about the film:
www.overburdendocumentary.com



The Wood Thrush, one of thousands of species threatened by mountaintop removal coal mining.

DISCUSSION GUIDE OVERVIEW

This discussion guide is a resource for those who want to use the film to engage with their communities around environmental and economic justice issues. The hope of this guide is to help you facilitate a constructive dialogue and to offer guidance on hosting screenings, facilitating conversations, posing dynamic prompts, and engaging audiences in your own community. Although the specific environmental and political issues addressed in OVERBURDEN are unique to that community, the themes are quite universal and can apply to any community – especially those poised to defend their communities against environmental injustices.

This guide invites you to:

- **Understand the scope** of destruction caused by energy extraction industries.
- **Challenge stereotypes** and misconceptions of the Appalachia region.
- **Recognize environmental injustice** in your own community.
- **Discuss ways to organize** in your community as you explore solutions together.

HOW TO HOST A SCREENING

There is a power in the communal experience of viewing a film with a group of concerned citizens. We hope you can use this film and discussion guide to engage and embolden your peers to organize and tackle local, regional and/or national issues. Through film, people can connect with others living an experience, and can then discuss the film and collectively explore actions to take.

KEY ISSUES

OVERBURDEN is an effective tool to inspire grassroots organization in communities impacted by coal, oil and gas industries and will be of interest to people looking to explore topics like:

- **Economic Justice**
- **Environmental Stewardship**
- **Environmental Racism**
- **Power and Privilege**
- **Grassroots Activism**
- **Natural Resource Extraction**
- **Coal Industry**
- **Coal Mine Safety**
- **Corporate Responsibility**
- **Alternative Energy Development**
- **Women as Leaders**
- **Cultural Commons**
- **Appalachia Culture**



On Earth Day 2013, Lorelei's grandchild, Levi, was born. "This is a symbolic day," Lorelei said. "My grandchildren are the reason I do what I do."

"My son-in-law is not a proud coal miner. He's doing that job because there are no choices. There are no other good-paying jobs so they can support their families."

– Lorelei Scarbro



Lightning strikes the peak of a mountain at the edge of a mountaintop removal site outside of Pikeville, Ky.

SETTING UP A SCREENING

Whether you are hosting a screening in your home, for your university student group or at a local environmental organization meeting, here are some important questions to ask:

- **What are your goals?** Think through your aims in hosting a screening. Is it to build awareness about a specific issue? Is your goal to bring attention to a local issue and to then organize your community to address that problem? Once you have a focus, it will be easier and more effective to plan your screening.
- **Who is the audience?** Given your goals, be intentional with your invitation list. Think about the grassroots organization potential but also the “grass tops.” Who are the community members that are in positions of power who can help you achieve your goals? Who are the influencers in your community?
- **What are the logistics?** Think through the venue, visuals and sound systems needed. Most venues will most likely have a visual and sound system in place, but be sure to confirm with them beforehand. If possible, consider testing the film on their system beforehand.

FIND POTENTIAL PARTNERS

To get the most impact find local partners to collaborate with in planning and facilitating a screening. Consider potential partners like:

- Local chapters of environmental groups
- Your local PBS station
- Faith-based organizations active in the community
- University student groups focused on issues addressed in the film
- Academic departments at universities and high schools
- Institutes and research centers connected to local universities
- High school student organizations



Coal River Mountain, the setting for the film, is located in southwestern West Virginia, also known as “coal country.”

HOW TO WATCH OVERBURDEN

If your organization would like to screen OVERBURDEN, you can secure Public Performance Rights through our education distributor, Collective Eye Films. [Learn more](#)

If you are an individual wanting to screen OVERBURDEN in your community, please contact the director, [here](#).

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SCREENING

Preparation. Be sure to watch the film and review this discussion guide before you host a screening. The goal of this guide is to help you facilitate important conversations after your screening. It's totally okay if you don't have all the answers. Ultimately we are trying to address challenging questions, many that might not have easy answers.

Openness. Realize that not everyone will have the same reaction to the film. The key is to remain open to an array of perspectives, and encourage other viewers to do as well. It can be effective to respond to challenging and/or uncomfortable comments by reflecting it back to the audience with a question, for example: "How do others feel about this?"

Words matter. As a facilitator it is important to consider the language you use in leading discussions. Remember to "call people in" even when there is disagreement.

After the screening. It can be effective to give people a moment to gather their thoughts before launching into group discussion. One idea is to give people paper and pen and let them write down their initial impressions and questions. You can also utilize a verbal exercise called Popcorn. Ask everyone to shout out one word that describes how they are feeling in those moments right after the screening. You can dive into conversation from there as well.



After the Upper Big Branch mining disaster that killed 29 coal miners, Lorelei and Betty petitioned the state of Delaware to revoke Massey Energy's corporate charter.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

- Plan a Panel Discussion.
- Invite area activists or experts to participate in the discussion.
- Include group exercises to allow participants to learn from each other.
- Use inclusive language by framing your questions in a way that everyone can respond.
- Always verbally recognize contributions from audience members.
- Take time to allow participants to plan ways to engage their community after this event.

ABOUT THE ISSUES

MOUNTAINTOP REMOVAL, ECONOMICS, AND THE END OF COAL

A great battle is raging in America over the future of energy, and in no place is the battle line clearer, and more illuminating, than in the coal fields of Appalachia. In the ancient mountain hollows, the highly destructive process of mountaintop removal coal mining has pitted large, multinational corporations against citizens and environmentalists fighting to save their land, their communities and their way of life.

Mountaintop removal, a process which is more economical for mining companies, involves blasting up to 800 feet off the top of a mountain allowing the coal seams to be scraped out with heavy machinery. The soil and rock covering the coal seam, referred to by the industry as “overburden,” is then dumped into adjacent valleys and streams, often causing severe environmental and health issues for surrounding communities. The non-profit group Appalachian Voices estimates that 1.2 million acres of forest have been destroyed by surface mining. These tracts of forest support some of the greatest biodiversity on the continent, including several endangered species. Two thousand miles of streams have been filled with debris from mountaintop removal, resulting in increased flash flooding and air and water pollution.

Despite evidence of the negative health and environmental effects of mountaintop removal, support for the coal industry remains strong in the region, and the industry remains entwined with policy makers. While these mountaintop removal proponents maintain that the process improves the Appalachian economy, these claims are unsubstantiated. In fact, recent studies suggest the opposite.

West Virginia is the second poorest state in the nation, and the coal-producing counties are consistently the poorest in the state. A West Virginia University study reported that the coal industry “costs the Appalachian region five times more in early deaths than it provides in economic benefits.” Beyond that, due to cheaper natural gas prices and cheaper coal available in other areas, demand for coal is expected to decline 50 percent by 2024, causing further economic burden on residents of coal-dependent counties.

The relationship between the coal industry and the people of Appalachia remains a complicated one. Despite the negative health, environmental and cultural impacts of mining, many residents rely on it for their livelihoods. Politicians continue to be a barrier to attempts to diversify the economy. More than a quarter of West Virginia candidates for the state senate received more money from the coal industry than any other special interest group. In 2015, President Obama introduced a pro-



Betty Harrah visits the grave of her brother, Steve, who was killed in the 2005 Upper Big Branch mining disaster.

gram, the POWER+ Plan, to provide \$55 million in funding for economic diversification, job training and other efforts to revitalize communities impacted by the decline of coal. This program is being dismantled by the Trump administration.

It is abundantly clear that coal is no longer king. Coal production in central Appalachia has plummeted in the last ten years. In fact, nationally, there are now more people employed in solar energy sector than employed in the coal industry. And then the explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine on April 5, 2010 caught the world's attention, bringing heightened attention to the plight of coal miners, mine safety issues and the conceit of Massey Energy CEO Don Blankenship.

Five years after the Upper Big Branch mine tragedy, federal prosecutors made an unprecedented move by indicting Don Blankenship on conspiracy charges for his involvement in the mining disaster that killed 29 coal miners. Blankenship is the first coal executive ever to be indicted on charges linked directly to the deaths of workers under his watch. After spending one year in federal prison, Blankenship is now running for the U.S. Senate in West Virginia.

And now with coal in a terminal decline what's in store for Appalachia? Will others, like Lorelei and Betty, find power in coming together to fight for better alternatives and to rebuild their fractured communities? And can citizens in other communities find common ground in their local struggles for environmental and economic justice?

BEGIN THE CONVERSATION

WARM UP EXERCISES

I LIKE... I WISH... WHAT IF...

Ask participants to complete the following prompts based on any thoughts or ideas that arose for them while watching the film:

- 1) "I like..."
- 2) "I wish..."
- 3) and "What if..."

I USED TO THINK, BUT NOW I THINK...

To generate participation and give context to what group members learned from the film ask folks to quickly respond to this prompt:

"I used to think, but now I think..."

This prompt acknowledges what participants learned from the film and that an individual's principles can continually evolve.

Facilitator note: *The following questions have been arranged and ordered in a way in which they build on each other and lead to in-depth discussions. With that said, feel free to pick and choose questions that you find compelling and/or relevant to your community.*



"If we didn't have mining in West Virginia this state would be nothing," Betty Harrah said. "They can't make a living at McDonalds. Seven and a quarter an hour is not going to raise your family."



The daughter of an anti-mountaintop removal activist waits as her mother inspects a reclaimed mountaintop removal site in near Kayford Mountain in West Virginia.

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What did you learn in this film that surprised you?

Was there a specific moment in the film that moved you or that you found troubling in some way? What was it about that scene that you found particularly compelling?

What were your original ideas of Appalachia and what are they now after viewing the film?

Who are the people in the film you identify with the most? What is it about them that led you to relate to them or their experience?

If you could ask one of the people in the film a question whom would you ask and what would your question be?

How are the issues presented in Overburden relevant to people living outside of Appalachia?

Think of three facts you learned and explain why those facts are relevant to you or anyone outside of Appalachia.

Do you think the filmmaker is from Appalachia? Did you feel you were able to see what it's like being an "insider" versus an "outsider" in this culture?

Think of a natural space that is important to you. Describe the connection you have to that place. How you would feel if that place was destroyed?

ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

How does the decline of coal affect people living in Appalachia and how does that connect to, and affect, you and your community??

If mountaintop removal accounts for only 7% of the coal used in America, can we justify a process that destroys millions of acres of forest and pollutes streams and groundwater?

If mountaintop removal was outlawed tomorrow, what do you think the consequences be?

If the people of Appalachia care so much about the land, why do they work jobs that destroy that land?

In the film Bill Price says: "If the coal companies are so good for us, why are we so poor?" What do you think the answer is to that question?

How do you think Betty, who lost her brother in the mining disaster, would respond to Bill's question?

Why are there no other employment options in Appalachia? How did this happen and how is responsible?

As both Betty and Lorelei explain in the film, access to jobs is a major issue. As Lorelei says, "We live in a mono-economy." How might that idea affect how folks in Appalachia think politically?

Is there a "bad guy," and if so, who?

"Coal is life here. Coal is family. Coal is college education. Coal is a way of keeping people off the welfare line. Coal is king here."

– Betty Harrah

How has the Citizens United decision impacted the plight of communities, like Lorelei's, who are struggling against corporate entities, like Massey Energy?

Are there environmental or economic injustices playing out in our community? What are they and what can we do about it?



Community members gather at Marsh Fork High School in Glen Daniel, W.Va., on Friday, April 9, 2010 for a candlelight vigil four days after the mine disaster at the Upper Big Branch Mine operated by Maseey Energy.

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

What do you think of when you hear the term: “the common good”? In what ways do the actions of the coal company reveal a conflict between the individual (which includes corporations) and the collective good?

As philosopher and cognitive linguist George Lakoff states in his theory about identity: “If [an idea] comes [to you] and it doesn't fit your ‘higher truth’ and you happen to know it's a lie, it doesn't matter because the higher truth that defines your very identity is more important.” Do you know people in your life, in your family, in your community that fit this description? If so, how do you communicate with them?

When we know people as individuals, as human beings, then we can disconnect them from the stereotypes of a region, of a place, of a race, of a socio-economic status. They become real, they become like us. How can we take this idea and apply it our lives, to our communities, and maybe more importantly to communities of people we don't know?

Can you think of current situations (national, regional, or local) where communities are faced with environmental disasters? How many are in white, or affluent communities? Why is this?

Why are low-income and minority populations at particularly high risk for environmental injustice? What is happening?

Is there a difference between malicious intent, or systemic neglect? Does that matter?

How do we fight back?

Companies know these communities are historically dispossessed and therefore vulnerable. How can allies with power and privilege support these communities? Who gets to decide what that support looks like?

As they say: "If you don't have a seat at the table, you're probably on the menu." How do we get people previously left out of the decision-making a seat at the table?



During a Memorial Day ceremony at a family cemetery on Kayford Mountain, Hillary Hosta, an anti-mountaintop removal activist from Ottawa, ON, carries a young bird found on the path to the 300-year-old cemetery that can only be accessed with permission of the coal company.

Graffiti by community members in the coal-supporting town of Eccles, W. Va., marks an anti-mountaintop removal advertising campaign.



TAKING ACTION

How am I personally connected to environmental and economic injustice in Appalachia? How do I, as a consumer, contribute to a system that props up the coal or fossil fuel industries?

What actions can I take to help tip the scales back in the people's favor?

What does my own energy and electricity use mean for Appalachia?

Where does my electricity come from? Who, or what communities, are "paying" for my energy use?

What behaviors of my own can I change, that will help lessen the burden on impacted communities?

How can I not only decrease negative impacts, but also create positive impacts:

What actions can I take to help empower at-risk populations?

How can I hold "the powers that be" accountable, or contribute to efforts to help create a more just system?

Instead of re-inventing the wheel, what efforts are ALREADY ongoing in environmental justice communities? Who or what organizations can I reach out to? How can I join or contribute to THEIR efforts?

(For "outside" allies with power and privilege) who in the community can I ask to hold me accountable, for how I 'help'?