

Christian stewardship group seeks to blow top off mountaintop removal

Megan Fincher | Feb. 4, 2014 Eco Catholic

"God's original plan was to hang out in a garden with some naked vegetarians," declares a bumper sticker created by the nonprofit Restoring Eden -- Christians for Environmental Stewardship. Their recent target audience, however, isn't ironic hipsters, but rather everyday folks in Appalachia.

According to [the group's website](#) [1], Restoring Eden student volunteers have "knocked on 14,000 doors and gathered over 2,000 health surveys" in the past three years during alternative spring break trips to Appalachia's mountaintop removal coal mining communities.

Restoring Eden's mission statement is quite simple: Christians should "love, serve and protect God's creation." Its founder, Peter Illyn, is an evangelical pastor whose 1989 trek through the Cascade Mountains changed his life.

As detailed in a [2012 edition](#) [2] of *Spirituality & Health* magazine, on that four-month journey, with only two llamas for company, Illyn "witnessed hillsides shorn of their trees and logging towns fighting for permission to remove the last stands of old-growth forest -- even if it meant the extermination of the spotted owl." What he saw left him appalled.

In response, Illyn founded Restoring Eden in 2001, and has preached Christian environmentalism ever since. For the past three years, Restoring Eden has helped mobilize and train Christian college students, in collaboration with West Virginia University, to study how mountaintop removal coal mining affects health.

Mountaintop removal is a coal-mining technique that removes the vegetation from the tops of mountains before explosives are used to expose coal seams.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the explosives can also generate "large volumes of waste that bury adjacent streams." From the agency's [2010 report](#) [3] on the technique:

"The resulting waste that then fills valleys and streams can significantly compromise water quality, often causing permanent damage to ecosystems and rendering streams unfit for drinking, fishing, and swimming. It is estimated that almost 2,000 miles of Appalachian headwater streams have been buried by mountaintop coal mining."

Through their on-the-ground research, Restoring Eden discovered locals "find themselves living under clouds of silica dust and next to leaking slurry ponds filled with arsenic-laced sludge" and that poverty is rampant in the communities, which have some of the country's highest cancer and disease rates.

The results of health surveys in the region -- published in two peer-reviewed journals, the [Journal of Community Health](#)

[4] and the [Journal of Rural Health](#) [5] -- are troubling.

Jonathan Merritt, a columnist at Religion News Service, [said the data](#) [6] reveals a much higher rate of illness -- particularly heart disease, cancers, and birth defects -- and mortality among individuals living in [mountaintop removal] regions.?

In particular, the Journal of Community Health survey found higher rates of cancer in central Appalachian mountaintop mining areas than the national averages, which they estimated translates to an additional 87,600 people with cancer? in the region compared to national rates.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration [reported](#) [7] that in 2012 coal was the highest generator of electricity, with 37 percent of all consumption attributed to coal. In contrast, renewable energy sources like solar and wind, among others, only contributed 5 percent.

Renewing Eden urges people to understand where their energy comes from and to make sure it isn't produced by mountaintop removal coal mining (they recommend using [this website](#) [8] to do so).

As another one of Renewing Eden's bumper stickers reminds us: "Treat the earth as if your life depends upon it (Gen. 2:15).?"

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Links:

[1] http://restoringeden.org/newsandevents/past_events/alternative-spring-break-trips-1

[2] <http://spiritualityhealth.com/articles/can-religion-save-planet>

[3]

<http://yosemite.epa.gov/opa/admpress.nsf/3881d73f4d4aaa0b85257359003f5348/4145c96189a17239852576f8005867bc>

[4] http://crmw.net/files/Hendryx_et_al_self_reported_cancer_rates_2011.pdf

[5] <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jrh.12016/pdf>

[6] <http://jonathanmerritt.religionnews.com/2014/02/04/power-bill-connected-loving-neighbor/>

[7] <http://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.cfm?id=427&t=3>

[8] <http://ilovemountains.org/my-connection>