

**THE BLOG**

Dear Diane Sawyer: The Other Children of the Mountains

By Jeff Biggers

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While Diane Sawyer should be applauded for her interest in spotlighting the impoverished conditions of Appalachian children today—and even taking time to plug her program on Bill O'Reilly's program, who simply declared “their parents are drunks”—it's a crying shame that she didn't look at the deeper causes of poverty and dispossession, and the Appalachian heroes fighting back, in the region.

In the same eastern Kentucky counties that Sawyer visited, coal mining employment—which has maintained a stranglehold on the region and kept out any other attempts at a sustainable and diversified economy—has plummeted by nearly 70 percent in some areas, thanks largely to the highly mechanized and devastating use of mountaintop removal strip mining.

Sawyer left a lot of key issues hidden in, “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains.”

Start with the theme song of her program, “You'll Never Leave Harlan Alive,” which is a brilliant look at the unfair role of coal companies in exploiting land and mineral rights laws, dispossessing backwoods farmers from their land, and trapping them into the singular coal mining economy. The song ends: “And you spend your life digging coal from the bottom of your grave.”

Darrel Scot's version is here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Su06XIGI-w8&feature=related>

Patty Loveless' version is here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3lrnNAweM0&feature=related>

As the Kentuckians for the Commonwealth have shown, mountaintop removal and strip mining, in general, have led to massive unemployment in the coal mining region, depopulated many of the rural communities, and polluted the watersheds.

Here is a chart outlining the quality of life indicators vs. coal production statistics in the last 20 years in these coal counties: <http://www.kftc.org/our-work/canary-project/campaigns/mtr/county-profiles>

Instead of wringing their hands in sadness and powerlessness, the Kentuckians for the Commonwealth are some of



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time to check out their work:

<http://www.kftc.org/our-work/canary-project/campaigns/mtr/MTR-generalinfo>

In fact, eastern Kentuckians and citizens from around the region will be converging on Frankfort today, as part of “I Love Mountains Day in Kentucky,” calling for an end to mountaintop removal and a shift toward a sustainable future for Appalachia.

<http://www.kftc.org/calendar/events/i-love-mountains-day-2009>

Perhaps Sawyer can do another program on the need for green jobs in Appalachia.

While poverty certainly exists in a scandalous way in Appalachia, it’s too bad Sawyer didn’t talk to some of the writers and artists and activists who have shattered the hillbilly stereotype, fought against the injustices of the coal companies, and shaped the way the America lives today.

Some of these great heroes include author Silas House, whose novels and plays are some of the most compelling and fearless literary work today.

Silas House should be a household name in America. <http://www.ket.org/muse/novelapproach/silas.htm>

Diane Sawyer wants to understand the children of the mountains, she needs to interview Silas House.

And finally, any discussion about drug addiction in Appalachia must examine the role of the OxyContin makers and their admitted deception in marketing the highly addictive painkiller. In court last year, the Purdue Frederick Company recognized that they had made billions of dollars in sales, while admitting to false marketing.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/05/10/AR2007051000892_pf.html

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