

Published February 2023

July Floods Revealed the Past and Future Of Eastern Kentucky

I awoke to a harsh knock on the door. An anxious voice called out: “Move your car; everything is flooding; the building may no longer be safe.” I was in Knott County at Hindman Settlement School for the 45th annual Appalachian Writer’s Workshop during the historic flood of July 29th, 2022. Dawn revealed floating cars, obliterated homes, and destroyed businesses. Who could dare rebuild from this devastation? Even if the financial capital was available, the next flood could wash it all away again.

Here was the latest chapter in eastern Kentucky’s long history of abuse. Troublesome Creek runs past four strip mines. The direct effects of strip mining significantly contributed to the flood. Because the compacted soil cannot readily absorb precipitation, drainage quickly floods waterways. According to one study, a staggering 1400 square miles of land are affected by strip mines in eastern Kentucky and West Virginia. This storm produced 243 million gallons of water runoff per square mile of strip mine, assuming zero absorption. Fourteen people died in Knott County alone.

While coal did create jobs for a time, it ultimately stranded the people, creating a “feast or famine” economy that eventually left the people with nothing. The real capital gain exited the region, leaving communities stripped.

In 1950 Coal boasted approximately 48,940 jobs in Eastern Kentucky. The industry soon plummeted for two reasons. First, advancing technology: larger machines meant the whole

operation was run by few workers. Second, proportionally decreased demand: other sources of energy became more profitable.

Only 2,994 coal jobs now remain.

The real gut punch is this—it took the flood of 2022 for the nation to acknowledge the collapse of Appalachia, driven by our hunger for once cheap energy.

The stats are harrowing. From 2010-2020, 12.8% of Knott County's population left. On the list of the top twenty-five worst counties to live in the U.S., ten are in eastern Kentucky. Six counties rank in the top-ten highest cancer rates in the country. And despite decreased output, coal emissions cause 52,000 premature deaths yearly, according to the *Annual Review of Health*.

Many believe the flood may be the final nail in the coffin for the region.

Yet there is hope. Eastern Kentucky is full of resources far more valuable than coal. Natural beauty, adventure, music, and arts, to name a few. Can we sustainably tap into these resources in time to recover? Gatlinburg-type development is the wrong idea because it sucks capital out of the region like coal.

Instead, we need small business in the hands of locals. According to the Small Business Administration, 48 cents per dollar stays in a community when spent at a small business versus 11 cents at big retailers.

A new initiative known as “dispersed tourism” does just that, spreading visitors across an entire region providing countless jobs right where they're needed most. If the death of the region was

in extractive industry, then its resurrection is in restoring capital back into small communities. Dispersed tourism is the needed answer.

This initiative is globally relevant. Countries are turning to this tool for economic support. According to the United Nations, “Tourism is one of the fastest growing and most resilient socio-economic sectors of our times.” The Kentucky Bourbon Trail and the Red River Gorge, currently thriving with small businesses, are local examples of these exciting possibilities. .

The urgency of the situation requires public and political teamwork: infrastructure development, small business loans, and educational curriculums. As one example, high school students might work in and even launch small businesses before graduation.

Dispersed tourism means hope for an entire region desperately in need, building generational wealth and well-being. In this initiative lies a bright future for eastern Kentucky.

The rains will keep pounding, and the creeks rising. Now is the time to grab hold of this last lifeline—lest our future wash away with the remains of our past.