

FROM WHERE I STAND HUGH BOUCHELLE

The Health Of The Eye

It was a hot mid-summer morning as I watched the sun in my rear view mirror rise over the ridges of the Blue Ridge Mountains surrounding my home. I was heading west, pulling a one-room travel trailer (and my wife) along on a road trip across America to go kayaking with my son in Hood River, Ore. I had traveled this route before and was anxious "to renew my old love affair with the wild majesty of the Rocky Mountains and Western America.

Everything was fine until I neared southeastern Wyoming.

Instead of wide-open spaces, tumbleweeds and rolling hills, huge, white, wind generators marred the skyline for as far as the eye could see. At times, we would drive for hours with the horizon in



every direction covered by these obnoxious reminders of human technology.

I had seen pictures of these before. In the brochures, they were beautiful sleek towers, majestically standing alone in the distance, with a perfect blue sky and green hills in the background. Those images held no relationship to these ugly monstrosities that now rose upon all sides - destroying the wild beauty of this once timeless skyline. This was bad.

Photographers know perspective is everything. Up close, with people and vehicles nearby to provide perspective, I discovered these very real towers were 200-300 feet tall, and topped by generator housings (small buildings) big enough for the entire Parry McCluer softball team to stand together for a championship bow - with their coaches, the mayor and City Council.

The rotor blades were 150 feet long, a third longer than the wing of a 747 Jumbo jet and were painted sterile white to be easily seen by low flying aircraft. They looked exactly like what they were - gigantic, high-tech monuments to the gods of energy.

Because they needed to be as high as possible to catch the wind, they sat atop every ridge, dominating the landscape for 20 or 30 miles in all directions.

Each generator required a 4,000 foot reinforced concrete pad to hold its massive weight and because it takes 15-20 generators to be financially viable, these "farms" needed massive areas of land so each tower could have at least a quarter mile of cleared space around it to function most efficiently.

Imagine just one of these farms covering Elephant Mountain, Bluff Mountain and Round Top.

Now imagine these farms all up and down the Appalachians.

I am convinced that the natural damage would not be worth the cost.

Reasoned arguments for and against the economics of a proposed local wind farm have already been made in these pages, I will not repeat them here.

However, there is no doubt that these windfarms will rob Virginia, in some measure, of one of its most valuable resources - the natural majesty of the western mountains.

My solution is simple - find a better way.

Consider solar power. It too is sustainable, far more efficient, and requires less maintenance. It is nowhere near as damaging to the environment. Nuclear is another reasonable option. One research paper I read said increased efficiency alone could easily offset the need for such drastic (and ugly) sources of power.

There is no doubt that even as we demand more energy to support our high-tech society, living in that society will require more opportunities to enjoy nature.

Research shows that experiencing nature improves our memory and helps us think. Other studies show that the elderly live longer if their homes are near a park or green space. Children with ADHD have fewer symptoms after outdoor activities in lush environments. Violence and aggression are highest in urban settings devoid of trees and grass.

Yes, we can adapt to a loss of the natural, but adapting is not flourishing.

Dr. Peter Kahn, a renowned psychologist, compares this to a child raised never hav-

ing heard music. They may never know what they missed but that does not diminish the loss. Kahn's studies show that heavily managed landscapes do not provide enough natural envelopment for children to thrive as they might.

I wonder what studies might show about being raised in a landscape of sterile white towers.

I do not want my grandchildren to live in a world where a visit to the city park is the closest to nature they can get.

A recent PBS special declared that conserving our natural heritage is as unique to our country as was the Declaration of Independence. It was a truly democratic idea that access to "the magnificent natural wonders of the land should be available not to a privileged few, but to everyone."

If there is any place where American conservatism and liberalism can meet - it is here.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough."