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# Civic Agency for Environmental Action: Earth Week and Every Week

*by American Democracy Project on April 24, 2012*

By Carlin Stinson, MTSU American Democracy Project

To commemorate Earth Day, the student organization of American Democracy Project at Middle Tennessee State University wants to share with you an issue that weighs on our hearts and is part of the political life of university students in all of the Appalachian states. If you attend an east-of-the-Mississippi college or university, you already know about mountaintop removal (MTR). If you are in a coastal, midwestern, or western state, you probably have other issues that feel pressing to you in your region. We are sharing our ecological concern.



*Carlin Stinson, along with fellow ADP MTSU student Jimmy Deane, showing off Raiders Recycle t-shirts designed by ADP students to increase campus recycling awareness*

ADP has worked on many civic issues and projects over the years. We are a civic engagement organization, not at all an expressly environmental organization. Nevertheless, one of the public matters in which our students cannot not help but become involved is increasing awareness of and civic responsibility for our personal environmental behaviors. Some of the enviro-projects we have worked on since we became ADP members have included research toward the creation of a tobacco-free campus at MTSU (which, hooray, became campus policy January 1, 2012) to spreading the word about our university's campus

recycling program (this spring, for the first time ever, thanks to ADP students' efforts, the MTSU student orientation booklet for thousands of incoming freshman teaches Raiders Recycling to our new students)!

Of all the environmental initiatives we have taken on, however, perhaps ADP students' collaboration with MTSU Students for Environmental Action and Tennessee Conservation Voters may ultimately have the farthest reaching effects. We are part of the movement that defines our generation in our region, and ADP students can do no less than add our energy and voices to those of Mountain Justice, United Mountain Defense, Appalachian Voices, and iLoveMountains, among other groups, that advocate for the protection of America's oldest and most ecologically diverse mountains, the Appalachians.

What in earlier generations was known simply as "strip mining" is now more precisely referred to by what the process actually entails, "mountaintop removal." To provide cheap electricity to all of us in urban areas who use electricity as if it were a fundamental birthright, coal mining has for years and years been systematically and permanently blasting the tops off entire ranges of the Appalachian mountains. To watch the destruction on film is enlightening, to see it in person is life changing. View video [here](#).

This past fall, we in Tennessee and in ADP got involved in promoting the Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act, which if passed by the Tennessee General Assembly would have put a ban on mountaintop removal coal mining on ridgelines above 2,000 feet in our state and would have made Tennessee the first state in the nation to ban mountaintop removal. Although Tennessee has not been the most impacted state to date—only three mountains in Tennessee have been mountaintop mined to date, which is minor compared to the systematic destruction over the years in, for example, West Virginia—preemptively, we want to stop the devastation before it escalates further within our own state.

By word of mouth, meeting with other groups, and by way of the Internet, information about the Scenic Vistas Protection Act, which was to be put before the Tennessee Legislature in early 2012, spread throughout the fall of 2011 and into the first weeks of 2012, with thousands of online and hand-written signatures acquired in support of the legislation. The bill before our General Assembly had strong statewide backing even after only a few months in the public eye.

The bill had actually been stalled in the Tennessee Legislature for a number of years. In all of that time it had not received adequate support from lawmakers nor sufficient public demands to move it beyond committee. Having heard Shelby White, of Tennessee Conservation Voters (TCV), speak at a Mountain Justice mountaintop removal informational presentation about the bill's possibilities, Carlin, of ADP MTSU, took it upon herself to make a follow-up contact to Shelby to ask how people could become involved in promoting the legislation.

After personal discussions with TCV, Carlin posted information, links, and the online petition for the Scenic Vistas Protection Act on various Internet platforms. Both of us shared formation about the bill with our teachers and fellow students, in classrooms and via university e-mail. Our working with MTSU's Students for Environmental Action was a step in the right direction, developing a stronger link between ADP and SEA and expanding the networks of each group further than before. One project in which ADP members collaborated with SEA was sending holiday cards this past winter break to each of the legislative committee members who would be voting on the bill at the first of the year, urging them to vote affirmatively for Scenic Vistas.

During the winter Carlin spread the word to groups of concerned citizens beyond our campus. Tennesseans of every age and walk of life are passionate about protecting our mountains. Carlin was invited by Fount Bertram, President of the Friends of Tennessee State Parks Coalition and member of the Tennessee Trails Association (TTA) to speak about the Scenic Vistas Act at a chapter meeting of TTA, a member organization of the Tennessee Conservation Voters. Carlin took a support team of presenters and advocates to inform the Tennessee Trails audience about the devastating effects of mountaintop removal and how TTA could get involved in getting the law passed. Influencing people to become advocates of Scenic Vistas and to sign the petition for the Tennessee General Assembly was the easy part.

Unfortunately, the need to rally for the preservation of our beloved mountains has only just begun here in Tennessee. The push this winter for the Scenic Vistas Protection Act culminated with the bill's being officially introduced first on the floor of the Tennessee Senate, a preemptive move when the bill had not even made it out of House committee. State senators debated the bill but decided to table it for review at a later date. In other words, they put it on the backburner once again. Having been shot down in the Tennessee Senate, the bill was also tabled in House committee. Although no one in principle wants to harm Tennessee mountains, the Legislature, even more, wants not to restrain the coal mining industry.

However disappointing it may have been to see the General Assembly push the bill further away from passage, our conviction will not be swayed. The support gained for the bill in such a short amount of time in 2011 and 2012 was a huge start. We will be even better prepared to let the Legislature know what the people of Tennessee want for the mountains of Tennessee. We the People will be even more equipped for the next go-round with the Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act. The only way for us to make the change we would like to see in environmental policies concerning MTR will be consistency, persistence, and patient understanding as we continually work to make our fellow Tennesseans aware of the harmful practice of mountaintop removal coal mining and to enlighten them as to the alternatives.

It is our duty to stand up for the environment and to demand a clean energy future for the generations to come. If We the People don't make this demand, then who will? A clean energy future is entirely possible. But the Green Shift will not begin until the demand from our citizens is strong. At the very least, many more sustainable principles and practices must be incorporated into our lifestyles to make the difference. We can all start by turning off a light switch or unplugging our laptops or reading a book about sustainability.

There is no better time than Earth Day to be thinking green. Earth Week festivities are in progress right now at MTSU, as they surely are on your campus. We are having an eco-fashion show, clothing swaps, workshops, upcycled art, and lectures on sustainability and preserving the environment. Our ADP "Raiders Recycle" t-shirts and book bags will be showcased on campus. But environmental stewardship must be an integral part of our everyday routines, not limited to one week or day out of the year. Earth Day is every day! We urge everyone to take that extra step toward a clean energy future and to consider the green alternatives. We in ADP know full well how civic agency works: each of us must be the agent and be the change.

If you can find a way to add your voice to stopping mountaintop removal or toward supporting us in Tennessee in the passage of the Scenic Vistas Act, we surely would appreciate your assistance and ideas as we move forward.

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Carlin Stinson is an Agriculture student at MTSU. Originally from Nashville, she now lives in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, with her cat. She is involved in ADP as well as Students for Environmental Action of MTSU in the fight against MTR coal mining. She hopes to finish school in a timely manner and begin her career as a botanist and modern homesteader. She feels that any student can make a difference in his or her community with just a bit of time and effort.