

Badlands--Old and New

Residents of Southwestern North Dakota have long taken pride in the scenic beauty of the Little Missouri River Valley Badlands. Nature has artistically carved the sandstones, mudstones and other sedimentary rocks of appealing colors and diverse structural features into rugged landforms of unusual scenic value. These Badlands represent a unique natural resource, one that we proudly display to visitors from other states.

Now, our ever increasing national population and our ever increasing desire for electrical gadgets have increased the demand for lignite, that low-grade coal which is so abundant just below the ground surface in western North and South Dakota and eastern Montana. Presently serving mainly to fuel large thermo-electric power plants situated adjacent to the fields, lignite production has been of modest proportions. However, the development of a gasification process for lignite may increase utilization several hundred-fold.

Today, lignite is almost exclusively mined by strip-mining methods. Thousands of acres of useful agricultural land are being turned into a new kind of badlands—spoils banks so immense that they actually dominate the landscape. Unlike the natural badlands, however, these artificial ones are virtually devoid of scenic interest and agricultural value. They are scars on the face of the earth and a bleak reminder of the failures of industrial and governmental responsibility to the human community.

This is not to argue that there should be no strip-mining, although in certain places that may be desirable. What is needed is a recognition on the part of industry leaders that the land should be restored to a topographic condition consistent with the surrounding, unspoiled landscape and that efforts should be made to reestablish vegetation that will protect the ground, regenerate soil, provide wildlife habitat, and enhance future agricultural utilization of the land. Where this is not possible, the land should not be strip-mined.

Our present state regulations, strongly influenced by the corporations that are affected, are weak in environmental and scenic protection. Regulations at local governmental levels are almost non-existent. Because local governmental units are more subject to economic and political pressures, and because the problem transcends local governmental boundaries, efforts at regulating strip-mining activities must be carried out at the state level.

Our land use planning must take into consideration environmental protection as well as economic development. Environmentalists can help to correct and prevent land abuse by making their views known to the coal industry, the industries using the coal, local and state regulatory agencies, and county and state legislative leaders. We must act now to establish regulations that will permit reasonable development and environmental protection before the pressure of increased production is applied.

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