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## Faith can save the mountains

What makes the state's leading adoption lawyer draft a bill, become a registered lobbyist and spend her winter in Nashville trying to persuade legislators to pass the Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act – for free?

Knoxvillian Dawn Coppock wrote the book on adoption. Her treatise, *Coppock on Tennessee Adoption*, is on the desks of attorneys and judges all across the state. She has a busy practice and a busy life raising her two young children, but she has just finished her first full week on Capitol Hill lobbying to ban mountaintop coal removal (or cross ridge, as it is known in Tennessee). This is the strip mining practice that blows the tops off mountains and reduces them to slag piles oozing tainted water and creating flood hazards and visual blight.

She says her motivations are twofold: faith and heritage.

“This is a faith issue – that’s a no-brainer. As a Christian, it’s very clear to me that Jesus would identify with the people whose homes are getting flooded out and whose wells are getting polluted – not with the people who are at the country clubs spending the profits. If our neighbors in Eastern Kentucky don’t have water to drink and their family burial places are getting blasted off the hillsides, that’s not very loving. The poorest communities in the country are the ones that had the most coal. They sold off their beautiful scenery and killed the goose that laid the golden egg. Now, they’ve got nothing.”

She says a sign she saw in West Virginia sums up her feelings on the subject:

“It said, ‘God got it wrong. Support Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining.’”

Her other motivation is the legacy of being a lifelong Tennessean.

“It’s a heritage thing. My family has been in Tennessee since before it was a state. I grew up hiking and camping. My grandfather had 60 years in scouting, so mountains are not abstract to me – they feel very much like family. Another thing is, I have children and I want to pass that heritage on to them, so being cavalier about our

mountains is astonishing to me, to be that shortsighted.

“And any time I’m uniquely positioned to work on an issue, I always feel compelled to do that – and I am, on this issue, because I know a lot of key people who needed to be connected, so that’s what made me the junction point for a lot of varied constituencies and I couldn’t not do it, even though I really don’t have the time.”

The House and Senate sponsors of the Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act illustrate those varied constituencies. The Senate sponsor is the ultra-conservative Raymond Finney (R-Maryville). The House sponsor is environmentalist Mike McDonald (D-Portland). Helping Coppock with lobbying chores is Bob Tuke, a Nashville lawyer and former state Democratic Party chair.

They have all come together in support of a proposed new law that will mandate:

- (1) No new water permits to be issued by the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) for surface mining until a Comprehensive Environmental Impact Statement is completed by the federal Office of Surface Mining.
- (2) No permits for any surface coal operations within 100 feet of any surface water in the state of Tennessee.
- (3) That no permit certification for any surface coal mining that alters or disturbs any ridgeline above 2,000 feet in elevation.

Coppock says her sense of urgency over this issue grew more acute last summer when she saw changes to the landscape as she drove through southeastern Kentucky to a writer’s conference she attends annually. The mountains were literally disappearing.

“It was 30 or 40 miles from Hazzard, down the Daniel Boone Parkway. The coal companies mine along the roads last, but now, they’ve worked their way down there and they’re cutting down the mountains next to the highway,” she says. “Every time you go, there are fewer mountains.”

She’d also been hearing about mountaintop removal at her church, the Church of the Savior, United Churches of Christ on Weisgarber Road. Her pastor, John Gill, and the youth director, the late Kathy Linquist, were very active in social justice causes. Lindquist, who died of cancer in 2005, wrote a column in the church newsletter about protecting the environment, and coined the term “creation care” to describe this extension of her Christian faith. Her last column was about mountain top removal. After her death, the congregation pledged to continue her work, and Coppock and her

friend Pat Hudson founded the Lindquist Environmental Appalachian Fellowship (LEAF), the primary mission of which is "... to draw attention to the scriptural call for Creation Care in East Tennessee's Christian churches."

LEAF offers free materials to interested churches through its Web site, [www.tnleaf.org](http://www.tnleaf.org), and emphasizes the consequences of mountain top removal coal mining.

Coppock is encouraged by the reception she got during her first week of lobbying the Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act, but there's strength in numbers. Anyone interested in supporting her efforts should ask their legislators to support House bill HB3348 and Senate Bill SB3822.