Coal Mining Case Study
Katelyn Ciaccio
Michigan State University
Introduction

Black Nugget Gold (BNG), a coal mining company, has made a proposal to create approximately 200 short-term jobs that will last two and a half years at the very most. The process of mining coal by blowing up a mountain is called mountain top removal (MTR). The residents of Yonder Mountain County (YMC), West Virginia are in need of jobs and the majority of residents in this community support BNG’s proposal because of the jobs that will become available. “Coal mining families” have been working for coal companies like BNG for generations. The coal mining industry has provided a way for these people to feed their families and the thought of turning away coal mining jobs seems crazy.

About 600 YMC citizens are opposed to the coal mining project because of the dangers associated with MTR, however these residents are interested in jobs too. A local non-profit organization has offered to implement a nature reserve and future recreational center that will create about 100 long-term jobs. In addition, an increase in tourism-related revenue is an expected result of the project. Another viable option to generate jobs is the construction of wind farms. A few hundred construction jobs could be generated by a wind farm project, several dozen long term maintenance jobs could become available, and land would need to be leased from local residents (Clemmer, 2003). These are low risk, sustainable jobs that provide greater job security than coal mining jobs.

The Problem

There is disagreement within the community regarding values. The majority of the community shares a utilitarian perspective and values jobs. This group is in support of the BNG proposal. The other members of the community share a more altruistic perspective and believe in fighting
for social and environmental justice. This group is against the BNG proposal and is in support of the idea to implement a nature reserve, recreational center, and wind farms. All members of the community value jobs, but because the two groups have taken conflicting positions, this fact gets lost in the disagreement over where jobs should come from.

Objectives
The first objective is to reduce conflict regarding job sources within the community. Another objective is to change the lay perception of alternative job sources so that YMC citizens will feel more comfortable turning down coal mining jobs and considering different types of jobs that are more sustainable. The goal is to inform the public during community meetings about the scientific evidence that illustrates how harmful MTR coal mining is for the earth, and ultimately the health of the people.

Summary of the Case
Coal mining companies like BNG provide local jobs, which has allowed many generations of people to feed their families. However, these are dangerous, high risk, and short-term jobs that damage the environment and threaten the health of the people. Other jobs sources are available and should be considered. It is important for the YMC residents to realize that although they may appear to be on opposite sides of this issue, they actually share the same interests—jobs and a healthy family.

The lay opinion of coal mining needs to be addressed during community meetings so that YMC residents trust the scientific evidence which proves how dangerous MTR coal mining is to their health and the environment. Wind turbines do not degrade the value of the land and wind power
does not lead to contamination of surrounding water, air, or soil. Wind farms can be a source of income to Yonder Mountain County citizens indefinitely. Through community meetings and public participation, YMC residents will have an opportunity to gain insight and understanding that should ease some of the conflict throughout the community regarding where jobs should come from. According to equity theory, people tend to view something as just if they believe it is equitable (Tyler & Smith, 1995). Coal mining is not equitable, but wind farm and nature center jobs are the equitable, realistic, and safe solutions to generating energy and jobs (Senge, 1994).

Recommendations

From a utilitarian and an environmentalist standpoint, Don Slumington should not allow BNG to purchase the land for mountaintop removal. For the health and sustainability of the environment, the people, and the economy, the non-profit should execute their plans of turning the land into a nature reserve and future recreational center, along with the implementation of wind farms to further satisfy job and energy needs.

To reduce conflict within the community regarding coal mining versus sustainability, community meetings should be held once a week to provide an opportunity for community dialogue that will hopefully result in a peaceful resolution and better understanding on each side. At these meetings, information will be presented by a neutral speaker as an attempt to reshape the way MTR coal mining is viewed (Senge, 1994). The potential for wind farms in West Virginia will also be discussed in order to show the public that there are safer, healthier, more sustainable ways to create jobs and energy than MTR coal mining. Discussions about environmental injustice and risk perception will further help the public see that the coal companies are doing more harm than good to their communities (Cox, 2006).
References


