

'THE HILLS SHALL BURST INTO SONG' WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

PROPER 10, YEAR A

Lectionary Texts: : Genesis 25:19-34 Psalm 119:105-112 Psalm 65:1-13 Isaiah 55:10-13
Romans 8:1-11 Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Focus Text: Isaiah 55:10-13

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. ¹² For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. ¹³ Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

NRSV

ADDITIONAL TEXTS

For Economic Justice in Western North Carolina:

If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard. Proverbs 21:13

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And [the LORD] will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; [the LORD] will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of [the] people [the LORD] will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for [the LORD], so that [the LORD] might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in [the LORD's] salvation. Isaiah 25:6-9

[Jesus] looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven..." Luke 6:20-23a

For the Land of Western North Carolina:

Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O LORD. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

Psalm 36:5-9

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of [a] hand, or with the breadth of [a] hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? . . . Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? [God] who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name.

Isaiah 40:12, 26

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Romans 8:19-24a

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY

BY CHRIS LIU BEERS, PROGRAM ASSOCIATE,
NC COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Isaiah 55 paints a poetic picture of abundance. It describes a world in which there is, at the end of the day, *enough*. There is enough water, there is enough seed to plant and enough bread to eat. Cypress and myrtle blossom. Joy and peace become real, no longer the mere abstractions of dreamers. The word of the Lord accomplishes its

purpose. And the mountains and hills burst into song, singing the praises of the God of Israel.

In its literary and historical context, today's passage is primarily about offering hope and comfort to those in exile. When the people of Judah (the Southern part of Israel) were captured and deported by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, they were forced to deal with the harsh reality of life in a strange land. Not only that, but many had believed that God – *their* God, the God of Israel – would never let them be conquered or allow the Jerusalem temple to be overrun. Thus, in the exile, new theological questions arise and the prophets respond with a new message no longer centered on judgment, but on hope. The shift in tone is dramatic in Isaiah, when in chapter 40 verse 1, the prophet says, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." Throughout Isaiah 40-55, the prophet highlights God's continuing sovereignty, power, and holiness, even as the people seem to be suffering and longing for home. But the prophet's announcements are not empty wishes or Hallmark-style platitudes; rather, they are profound statements of faith and hope, rooted in the very holiness (i.e. "otherness") of God.

It is precisely this context – exile, longing, hope – that gives today's passage its rhetorical power. God will do, the prophet holds, what God has said that God will do, for God's word is not void. Just as we humans cannot control the rain, and yet are dependent on it for our daily bread, so too are we dependent on the un-tame-able word of God. Here, the image of the mountains bursting into song is particularly poignant. "Connoting both stability and awe, mountain imagery has a home in the profile of divine protection. As a conduit between the earthly and the heavenly realms, mountains afforded the ancients an acute awareness of God's formidable presence and unsurpassed majesty" (Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 201).

Much like the highlands surrounding Jerusalem, the landscape of western North Carolina is dominated by towering mountain peaks and fertile valleys. For all of our technological innovation, we too remain dependent both on the rain for our daily bread and on the word of God, which sustains us beyond bread alone. For those of us who live and work in Western North Carolina, these images from Isaiah capture our imagination and continue to give us hope. We continue to long for that day in which the word of the Lord succeeds in the thing for which God sent it – hope for the hopeless, justice for the oppressed, living wages for the workers, food for the hungry, sustainability instead of pollution, cypress instead of thorn, myrtle instead of brier, new life heralded by the song of the mountains.

PASTORAL REFLECTION

"THIS LAND IS HOME TO ME"

BY THE CATHOLIC COMMITTEE ON APPALACHIA

EDITOR'S NOTE: On February 1, 1975, the Catholic Committee on Appalachia (CCA) published a pastoral statement of solidarity with the poor and powerless in Appalachia, entitled "This Land is Home to Me." This statement came to fruition under the guidance of the first Catholic bishop of the Diocese of Charlotte, the late Michael J. Begley, who served as the president of the CCA. In 1985, Begley received the NC Council of Churches' Distinguished Service

Award for his many years of working for Christian unity and for peace and justice. Now over 30 years old, "This Land is Home to Me" continues to give eloquent voice to the enduring witness of the church among the poor and marginalized. Particularly for those in Western North Carolina, its prescient analysis and prophetic style continue to resonate to this day.

The statement begins with these words: "*Many of our Catholic people especially church workers have asked us to respond to the cries of powerlessness from the region called Appalachia. We have listened to these cries and now we lend our own voice. The cries come now from Appalachia, but they are echoed across the land, across the earth, in the suffering of too many people. Together these many sufferings form a single cry.*"

The full text of the statement is available online (www.osjspm.org/majordoc_this_is_home_to_me.aspx).

Excerpts are below:

Without judging anyone, it has become clear to us that the present economic order does not care for its people. In fact, profit and people frequently are contradictory. Profit over people is an idol. And it is not a new idol, for Jesus long ago warned us, No one can be the slave of two slave-drivers; the first will be hated and the second loved, or the first treated with respect, and the second with scorn. You cannot be the slave both of God and money (Matthew 6:24). This is not a problem only for mountain folk; it is everybody's problem.

In a country whose productive force is greater than anything the world has ever known, the destructive idol shows its ugly face in places like Appalachia. The suffering of Appalachia's poor is a symbol of so much other suffering - in our land, in our world. It is also a symbol of the suffering which awaits the majority of plain people in our society - if they are laid off, if major illness occurs, if a wage earner dies, or if anything else goes wrong. In this land of ours, jobs are often scarce.

Too many people are forced to accept unjust conditions or else lose their jobs. Human services for the poor, and for the almost poor, are inadequate. Safety standards are often too weak or ignored. Workers are injured unnecessarily. Legal and medical recourse for claims against occupational injury or occupational disease are often too difficult or unavailable. Sometimes those who should be helping people in their claims seem to stand in the way....

It's strange, for instance, that despite earlier reforms, a country which took such richness from Appalachia left so little for the people. Great fortunes were built on the exploitation of Appalachian workers and Appalachian resources; yet the land was left without revenues to care for its social needs, like education, welfare, old age, and illness....

Once we all knew how to dance and sing, sat in mystery before the poet's spell, felt our hearts rise to nature's cathedral. Now an alien culture battles to shape us into plastic forms empty of Spirit, into beasts of burden without mystery. If the struggle's dream can be defended, and we believe it can, then perhaps the great instruments of attack, cable TV, satellite communications, ribbons of highway, can become like so many arms, which instead of crushing life, reach out to make it fuller, to bring to others beyond the mountains, the promise of their vision....

God has challenged us to take up as holy whatever is good and beautiful in the modern world as in all of creation. But God has also challenged us to resist what is evil, especially injustice. Since the industrial age, we have been active, speaking and acting on behalf of the casualties of the new economic spirit....

Thus, there must be no doubt, that we, who must speak the message of God who summoned Moses, and whose mouth was opened in Jesus of Nazareth, and who keeps the Spirit alive on behalf of justice for so many centuries, can only become advocates of the poor. This is not to be simplistic, to see all in black and white, to be ignorant of economics and the contributions of other human sciences, but in a profound sense the choices are simple and stark: death or life; injustice or justice; idolatry or the Living God. We must choose life. We must choose justice. We must choose the Living God....

We must continually take time and invest creativity into listening to our people, especially the poor. For it is they who, out of their frustrations, dreams, and struggles, must lead the way for all of us. Next we must listen to the vast majority of plain people who would not be called poor, but who are not rich, and who increasingly share in the powerlessness of the poor. Finally, strange as it may seem, we must also challenge the rich. For although Jesus himself has told us that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for the rich to enter heaven (Matthew 19:24), and although one rich young man went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth (Luke 19:22), there is also the story of Zacchaeus who accepted the demands of justice, who returned his property to the poor and paid back four fold whatever was stolen. That day salvation came to his house; the Messiah has come to seek out and save what was lost (Luke 19:10). Throughout this whole process of listening to the people, the goal which underlies our concern is fundamental in the justice struggle, namely, citizen control, or community control. The people themselves must shape their own destiny. Despite the theme of powerlessness, we know that Appalachia is already rich here in the cooperative power of its own people....

Dear sisters and brothers, we urge all of you not to stop living, to be a part of the rebirth of utopias, to recover and defend the struggling dream of Appalachia itself. For it is the weak things of this world which seem like folly, that the Spirit takes up and makes its own. The dream of the mountains' struggle, the dream of simplicity and of justice, like so many other repressed visions is, we believe, the voice of Yahweh among us.

WORSHIP AID - 'THE HILLS SHALL BURST INTO SONG'

RESPONSIVE READING

Generous and loving God, Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth and all that is,
here in Western North Carolina we praise You.

When our earth was a formless void covered in darkness,
You called forth light --
the sun to guide us by day, the moon and stars to lighten our darkness.
You retained darkness to draw us to rest.
You created light and darkness and they are good.

By Your holy word,
You called forth the heavens, the earth, mighty waters and slow-moving streams.
You gathered together the expanse of the skies.
You set the dry land apart from the waters.
You measured the waters as in a cup and set their bounds.
You created the heavens, the earth, and the waters, and they are good.

(continued on next page)

Smiling upon the earth,

You called forth vegetation, diverse plants of every color, shape and kind,
giving delight to the eye, shade from the sun and nourishment for our bodies.

You created flora and forests and food to eat, and they are good.

Rejoicing with Your creation,

You called forth living creatures --

birds to give company to your skies; animals, wild and friend; fish, great and small;
humankind after your own image, to be free and loving.

You fashioned community, sustained by Your hand.

You created living creatures and they are good.

Revealing Your power, wedded to Your grace,

You called forth mountain, plain and valley,
storms, welcome rains and drought.

Each celebrate Your faithfulness and steadfast love.

You created mystery that we might know You are God.

**Generous and loving God, Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth and all that is,
here in our Western North Carolina home, we praise You
for You are Light, Word, Love, Life – Mystery Revealed,
Everything You have made is very good!**

(by B. J. Morton)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Lord God, the world is full of Your glory, but now Your glory is veiled by our negligence. Forgive us, Lord, for we have consistently valued profit more than the world that You created and sustain for all Your creatures. We have damaged Your creation by our thoughtless deeds and our greed. We have stopped our ears to the groans of the living world that is sore afflicted by our selfishness. Forgive us for our lack of concern and stir us now to protect Your suffering world, both human and natural. Help us to do all in our power to repair the damage we have done so that our world might be saved for this and future generations. For the sake of Your dear Son, who died to redeem all of creation. **Amen.**

(adapted from "A Prayer Guide for the Care of Creation," January 2007, <http://christian-ecology.org.uk/p0701.htm>)

SUGGESTED HYMNS

✠ <i>O Thou, in Whose Presence</i>	AM 83/AZ 377/CM 476/UMH 518
✠ <i>Come Ye Disconsolate</i>	AM 227/AZ 321/BH 67/CH 502/ UMH 510
✠ <i>Come Unto Me, Ye Weary</i>	LW 345/NCH 484
✠ <i>For the Beauty of the Earth</i>	AM 578 /AZ 14/BH 44/CH 56/ CM 20/GC 572/MW 538/NCH 28/ PH 473/TH 416/UMH 92
✠ <i>Many and Great</i>	BH 49/CH 58/GC 498/NCH 3/ PH 271/TH 385/UMH 148
✠ <i>The Harvest of Justice</i>	GC 711

◆ Hymnal Legend ◆

✠ AM – African Methodist Episcopal
✠ AZ – African Methodist Episcopal Zion
✠ BH – Baptist Hymnal
✠ CH – Chalice Hymnal (Disciples of Christ)
✠ CM – Christian Methodist Episcopal
✠ GC – Gather Comprehensive (Rom Cath)
✠ LW – Lutheran Worship
✠ MW – Moravian Book of Worship
✠ NCH – New Century Hymnal (UCC)
✠ PH – Presbyterian Hymnal
✠ TH – The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)
✠ UMH – United Methodist Hymnal

A Prayer for the Fulfillment of the Promise of God

God of grace and power, the cries of our sisters and our brothers call to us, and we know that we are called to listen. Give us ears to ear, that we might lend our own voice to the struggle for justice. The cries of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized echo through the mountains and valleys, the forests and lumber mills, the fields and hollows of Western North Carolina. Across this land, too many of us are suffering. Too many backs break from hard labor, and too many have little to eat. We long for your saving grace. Living God, who hears our cries, tell us what long ago, on a different mountain, you told Your servant Moses, that "I have heard the cry of my people. I will deliver them out of the hands of oppression. I will give them a rich and broad land." Bless us, O God, with Your saving grace, and may each of us share in Your promise. **Amen.**

(by B. J. Morton, with material adapted from "This Land Is Home To Me," by the Appalachian Catholic Bishops, www.osjspm.org/majordoc_this_is_home_to_me.aspx)

God of Heaven and Earth

God of heaven and earth, we thank You for the incredible diversity of the world You have created. Open our eyes that we may see and appreciate Your handiwork all around us. Teach us to value our world and all that is in it as precious in Your sight. We pray for all in authority, for heads of governments, and for leaders in industry and institutions everywhere, that they may use their power to help assure good stewardship of our God-given resources. Be with all those working to protect the forests, oceans, waterways and the air we breathe so that all our natural resources might be kept safe for our children. And give each of us the vision and heart ourselves to be good stewards of all that You have entrusted to our care. Help us to share with gladness all that You have given us so that none may suffer undue want or need. This we pray in the name of Your Son, Jesus, who died to redeem Your creation. **Amen.**

(adapted from "A Prayer Guide for the Care of Creation," January 2007, <http://christian-ecology.org.uk/p0701.htm>)

Prayer of the Farmworkers' Struggle

Show me the suffering of the most miserable; so I will know my people's plight.
Free me to pray for others; for you are present in every person.
Help me take responsibility for my own life; so that I can be free at last.
Grant me courage to serve others; for in service there is true life.
Give me honesty and patience; so that the Spirit will be alive among us.
Let the Spirit flourish and grow; so that we will never tire of the struggle.
Let us remember those who have died for justice; for they have given us life.
Help us love even those who hate us; so we can change the world
Amen

(from "Prayer of the Farmworkers' Struggle," www.colapublib.org/chavez/prayer.htm)

ADDITIONAL HELPS

▣ QUOTES ▣

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.
Margaret Mead

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

Mahatma Gandhi

We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.

Aldo Leopold

We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.

Native American Proverb

▪ PERSONAL VIGNETTE ▪

Hickory and Western N.C. are Struggling to Create Jobs

By PATRICK JEAN and RICHARD CRAVER
Media General News Service
Monday, March 27, 2006

HICKORY - Hickory and western North Carolina are trailing the rest of the state in job creation, according to a report by an Appalachian State University economist. The report found the Hickory metropolitan area lost 6.9 percent, or about 12,500, of its jobs during the 2001 recession - which lasted from January to November of that year - compared with 1.2 percent for the state. The report used seasonally adjusted data.

"Hickory's job losses during the recession were six times greater than state and national levels, and the Hickory metropolitan area has yet to experience any real recovery with employment numbers being about the same as they were at the end of the recession," Todd Cherry, author of the report, said Wednesday. The bulk of those jobs were in traditional manufacturing industries such as furniture and textiles. Since the end of the recession, employment in the Hickory area has risen by about 0.5 percent, or 800 jobs, through December 2005. But employment remains down nearly 4 percent, or 7,500 jobs, from its pre-recession level.

It was the same story for western North Carolina. The 25-county region lost 3.4 percent of its jobs during the 2001 recession, the report found. "The brunt of the losses was disproportionately felt by the Foothills and far-western counties," Cherry said. The report found western N.C. employment rose by 3.1 percent, or 17,654 jobs, through December 2005. But the region's employment remains down nearly 2,000 jobs from pre-recession levels. Meanwhile, statewide employment climbed by more than 235,000 workers since December 2001 and more than 187,000 from its pre-recession totals.

"The region is declining as part of the state's overall labor market," Cherry said. So is the Hickory area, he said. "With the sustained weakness in the metro area's labor market, it appears Hickory has experienced an out-migration of workers - most likely the area's more skilled workers," Cherry said.

The report wasn't all bad news. It found Asheville's employment recovery "is the exception, with the metro area's performance propping up the region." The work force also ... fared well in Henderson, Jackson, Macon, Madison, Polk and Swain counties, the report found. But Alleghany, Avery, Cherokee, Graham, Mitchell, Watauga and Wilkes counties have struggled, the report found. And counties "still dependent upon manufacturing likely won't see any significant economic improvement anytime soon," Cherry warned.

▪ CONTACTS AND OTHER RESOURCES ▪

- ✦ www.nccouncilofchurches.org – The North Carolina Council of Churches has two committees/programs that work on Western North Carolina issues. The Rural Life Committee brings together a variety of groups concerned with issues affecting rural North Carolina, including agricultural policy, health care, disaster recovery, contract farming, housing, urbanization, and the survival of family farms. NC Interfaith Power and Light works with faith communities to address the causes and consequences of global climate change through education and public policy advocacy.
- ✦ www.ncjustice.org – North Carolina Justice Center, North Carolina's leading private, nonprofit anti-poverty organization. Its mission is to reduce and eliminate poverty in North Carolina by helping to ensure that every North Carolina household gains access to the resources, services, and fair treatment that it needs in order to enjoy economic security.
- ✦ www.cpcwnc.org – The Center for Participatory Change (CPC) seeks to expand democracy in Western North Carolina by supporting the community involvement of people in low-wealth areas, especially groups of people who are outside of the usual decision-making systems. Through four programs -- grassroots organizing, capacity building, networking, and grant making -- CPC helps rural people make improvements in their communities through projects that they plan, implement, and evaluate. CPC has worked with 102 grassroots groups and networks over 24 rural counties. Of these groups, 36 were Latino, 30 rural Appalachian, 16 multiracial, 12 African American, and 7 Cherokee.

- ✦ www.hintoncenter.org – The mission of *Hinton Rural Life Center* is to be an advocate for the small membership church within the United Methodist connection, to assist small membership churches in becoming healthy and effective, to provide opportunities for missional involvement, and to be a place of hospitality, spiritual growth, and renewal.
- ✦ www.cpcwnc.org/Grassroots/Neighbors.html – *Neighbors in Ministry*, a division of The Center for Participatory Change, (NIM) is a multiracial group of dedicated community leaders in Brevard, NC who have a long history of fighting for racial justice by organizing church partnerships, antiracism trainings, and programs for children and parents.
- ✦ www.dogwoodalliance.org – *Dogwood Alliance* seeks to hold corporations in the South accountable for the impact of their industrial forestry practices on our forests and our communities, to protect and restore the South’s endangered forests, to end unsustainable forestry practices, and to increase the industry’s use of post-consumer recycled and other environmentally preferable sources of fiber in the production of paper.
- ✦ www.wnca.org – The *Western North Carolina Alliance* (WNCA) works to protect our national forests and parks from abusive commercial logging, and promote ecologically sound forestry on private lands, encourage citizen participation in water-quality monitoring and river stewardship, promote sustainable communities (ecologically sound business practices and development patterns, more livable communities, alternative transportation, recycling, and conservation of family farms, forest lands, and watersheds).
- ✦ www.ncruralcenter.org – The mission of the *North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center* is to develop, promote, and implement sound economic strategies to improve the quality of life of rural North Carolinians. The center serves the state's 85 rural counties, with a special focus on individuals with low to moderate incomes and communities with limited resources.
- ✦ www.rafiusa.org – *RAFI-USA* is dedicated to community, equity, and diversity in agriculture. While focusing on North Carolina and the southeastern United States, they also work nationally and internationally. *RAFI-USA* is playing a leadership role in responding to major agricultural trends and creating a movement among farm, environmental, and consumer groups to: 1) promote sustainable agriculture; 2) strengthen family farms and rural communities; 3) protect the diversity of plants, animals, and people; 4) ensure responsible use of new technologies.
- ✦ www.cssnc.org/justicepeace.html – The *Office of Justice and Peace* seeks to assist Catholics and other people of good will to put their faith into action on behalf of justice. Its organizational place within Catholic Social Services of the Diocese of Charlotte enables the Office of Justice and Peace to remain connected to the immediate needs of individuals and communities, while implementing programs to systematically address many of these needs. With so many threats to human dignity present in society, the Office of Justice and Peace offers educational resources that empower people to overcome such threats and actively address unjust social conditions.

KEY FACTS

For Economic Justice in Western North Carolina:

- ❑ According to the Western North Carolina Economic Index compiled at Appalachian State University, in early 2007, Western North Carolina’s economy showed signs of continued weakness. The national economy also has slowed, but this change has been more pronounced in Western North Carolina.¹
- ❑ North Carolina has one of the highest poverty rates in the nation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2004 data, 13.8% of North Carolinians were poor as compared to the 12.7% of the population that falls below the poverty line in the United States as a whole.²
- ❑ The far western counties of North Carolina and the mountainous counties bordering Tennessee are some of the poorest in the state. Twenty out of twenty-four Western North Carolina counties exceed the national average in poverty: Alleghany -- 16.5%, Ashe -- 14.1%, Avery -- 15.5%, Buncombe -- 13.8%, Burke -- 14.0%, Caldwell -- 13.6%, Cherokee -- 15.1%, Graham -- 16.7%, Haywood -- 13.8%, Jackson -- 15.8%, McDowell -- 13.1%, Macon -- 13.3%, Madison -- 15.4%, Mitchell -- 14.6%, Rutherford -- 16.1%, Surry -- 14.6%, Swain -- 15.4%, Watauga -- 14.7%, Wilkes -- 13.9%, and Yancey -- 16.4%.³ Only four have rates lower than the national average: Clay -- 12.7%, Henderson -- 11.2%, Polk -- 11.2%, and Transylvania -- 12.6%.³

- ❑ Tourism is a key contributor to the Western North Carolina economy. The Blue Ridge Parkway is the most visited unit of America's National Park System, consistently attracting about twenty million visitors each year. The Parkway meanders 469 miles between Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains National Parks, with 252 of these scenic miles in North Carolina.⁴
- ❑ Since the 1950s, native Cherokee in Western North Carolina have depended heavily on tourism for their income. About 75% of the tribe's revenue is derived from the tourism industry, including Harrah's Cherokee Casino. Yet, according to indicators from the U.S. Census Bureau, Cherokee County is still plagued with deep poverty.⁵
- ❑ Many people do not associate North Carolina's farmworkers—who are often treated unfairly with respect to wages and living conditions—with the Western region of the state. Many farmworkers, however, work in the state's vast Christmas tree farms; North Carolina has 2,500 growers producing an estimated 50 million Fraser fir Christmas trees on over 25,000 acres. Fraser fir trees represent over 90 percent of all species grown in the state. The North Carolina Christmas tree industry is ranked second in the nation in number of trees harvested and first in the nation in terms of dollars made per tree.⁶

For the Land of Western North Carolina:

- ❑ Coal-fired power plants, such as those operated by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), are the largest stationary sources of the harmful, haze-producing pollutants affecting the southern Appalachian region.⁷
- ❑ Studies consistently demonstrate that air pollution is related to myriad health problems in Asheville, including respiratory and heart diseases, lung cancer, and possibly strokes. Asheville suffers from the highest incidence in the state of lung disease deaths from emphysema and pneumonia. North Carolina passed legislation that will eventually reduce soot and smoke pollution from power plants in North Carolina by about 75 percent. However, without getting similar reductions from power plants in neighboring states, the city of Asheville will continue to suffer from bad air quality.⁸
- ❑ Researchers in the Smoky Mountains National Park have documented air-pollution damage to 30 different plant species and impacts on another 60 species. Symptoms of air pollution in our forests include large-scale tree death and visibility so limited that the mountains sometimes disappear. Vistas from the high peaks that once stretched for 93 miles now average only 15 miles in the summer tourist season.⁹
- ❑ Large producers of paper and wood are engaged in unsustainable forestry practices such as large-scale clearcutting, the conversion of natural forests to sterile tree plantations and the heavy use of chemical fertilizers and herbicides. These practices not only destroy the region's rich biological heritage but also degrade the socioeconomic well-being of rural communities.¹⁰
- ❑ Water quality is a key environmental issue related to agriculture and forestry. Many streams and lakes continue to have declining water quality in spite of highly successful point-source pollution control programs. Attention has turned to non-point-source pollution, such as contaminants from farm fields and stormwater runoff. When rain flows into the storm drain system, it picks up pollutants like pesticides, paint, household chemicals, sediment, yard waste, detergents, oil and grease, trash, and pet waste. The stormwater runoff empties directly into creeks, rivers, and other bodies of water.¹¹
- ❑ Developed land has increased 77 percent in Western North Carolina in the last two decades. The region's population continues to soar, and the mountains are predicted to lose another 490,400 acres of forests, farms, stream banks, and wildlife habitats by 2022 — a size almost as large as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.¹²

¹ *University News, Appalachian State University, "Region's Economy Weakens,"* www.news.appstate.edu/2007/05/09/economy-19.

² *US Census Bureau, "Percent of People Below Poverty Level in the Past 12 Months,"* www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/Ranking/2003/R01T040.htm; and *US Census Bureau, "North Carolina Quickfacts,"* <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/37000.html>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *National Park Service, "Blue Ridge Parkway,"* www.nps.gov/blri.

⁵ *Frommers, "Introduction to Cherokee, NC,"* www.frommers.com/destinations/cherokeenc/1795010001.html; *North Carolina History Project, "Cherokee County,"* www.northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/88/entry.

⁶ *North Carolina Christmas Trees,* www.carolinacountry.com/storypages/howtos/xmastrees/ChristmasTrees11.03.pdf.

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