

Destroying precious land for gas

Meanwhile

SEAN LENNON

On the northern tip of Delaware County, New York, where the Catskill Mountains curl up into little kitten hills, and Ouleout Creek slithers north into the Susquehanna River, there is a farm my parents bought before I was born.

My earliest memories there are of skipping stones with my father and drinking unpasteurized milk. There are bald eagles and majestic pines, honeybees and raspberries. My mother even planted a ring of white birch trees around the property for protection.

A few months ago I was asked by a neighbor near our farm to attend a town meeting at the local high school. Some gas companies at the meeting were trying very hard to sell us on a plan to tear through our wilderness and make room for a new pipeline: infrastructure for hydraulic fracturing.

Most of the residents at the meeting, many of them organic farmers, were openly defiant. The gas companies didn't seem to care. They gave us the feeling that whether we liked it or not, they were going to fracture our little town.

In the late '70s, when Manhattanites like Andy Warhol and Bianca Jagger were turning Montauk and East Hampton into an epicurean Shangri-La for the Studio 54 crowd, my parents, John Lennon and Yoko Ono, were looking to become amateur dairy farmers. My first introduction to a cow was being taught how to milk it by hand. I'll never forget the realization that fresh milk could be so much sweeter than what we bought in grocery stores.

Although I was rarely able to persuade my schoolmates to leave Long Island for what seemed to them an unreasonably rural escapade, I was lucky enough to experience trout fishing instead of tennis lessons, swimming holes instead of swimming pools and campfires instead of cable television.

Though my father died when I was 5, I have always felt lucky to live on land he loved dearly; land in an area that is now on the verge of being destroyed. When the gas companies showed up in

our backyard, I felt I needed to do some research. I looked into Pennsylvania, where hundreds of families have been left with ruined drinking water, toxic fumes in the air, industrialized landscapes, thousands of trucks and new roads crosshatching the wilderness, and a devastating and irreversible decline in property value.

Natural gas has been sold as clean energy. But when the gas comes from fracturing bedrock with about five million gallons of toxic water per well, the word "clean" takes on a disturbingly Orwellian tone.

Don't be fooled. Fracking for shale gas is in truth dirty energy. It inevitably leaks toxic chemicals into the air and

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water. Industry studies show that 5 percent of wells can leak immediately, and 60 percent over 30 years. There is no such thing as pipes and concrete that won't eventually break down. It releases a cocktail of chemicals from a menu of more than 600 toxic substances, climate-changing methane, radium and, of course, uranium.

New York is lucky enough to have some of the best drinking water in the world. The well water on my family's farm comes from the same watersheds that supply all the reservoirs in New York State. That means if our tap water gets dirty, so does New York City's.

Gas produced this way is not climate-friendly. Within the first 20 years, methane escaping from within and around the wells, pipelines and compressor stations is 105 times more powerful a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. With more than a tiny amount of methane leakage, this gas is as bad as coal is for the climate; and since over half the wells leak eventually, it is not a small amount.

Even more important, shale gas contains one of the earth's largest carbon reserves, many times more than our atmosphere can absorb. Burning more than a small fraction of it will render the climate unlivable, raise the price of food and make coastlines unstable for generations.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, when speaking for "the voices in the sensible center," seems to think the New York

State Association of County Health Officials, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the New York State Nurses Association and the Medical Society of the State of New York, not to mention Dr. Anthony R. Ingraffea's studies at Cornell University, are "loud voices at the extremes." The mayor's plan to "make sure that the gas is extracted carefully and in the right places" is akin to a smoker telling you, "Smoking lighter cigarettes in the right place at the right time makes it safe to smoke."

Few people are aware that America's Natural Gas Alliance has spent \$80 million in a publicity campaign that includes the services of Hill and Knowlton — the public relations firm that through most of the '50s and '60s told America that tobacco had no verifiable links to cancer. Natural gas is clean, and cigarettes are healthy — talk about disinformation. To try to counteract this, my mother and I have started a group called Artists Against Fracking.

My father could have chosen to live anywhere. I suspect he chose to live here because being a New Yorker is not about class, race or even nationality; it's about loving New York. Even the United States Geological Survey has said New York's draft plan fails to protect drinking water supplies, and has also acknowledged the likely link between hydraulic fracturing and recent earthquakes in the Midwest.

Surely the voice of the "sensible center" would ask to stop all hydraulic fracturing so that our water, our lives and our planet could be protected and preserved for generations to come.

SEAN LENNON is a musician.

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