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Chilling Images of Drilling's Perils, Met by Numbed Eyes

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The occasion was the screening of “Gasland,” a polemical and quite frightening documentary on the impact of the new generation of gas drilling coming to upstate New York. But, given the news, there was also plenty of talk about that huge well explosion everyone had heard about.

No, not that one far away in the Gulf of Mexico. Closer to home was the [natural gas](#) blowout last week in the Marcellus Shale in Pennsylvania that shot gas and water polluted with drilling fluids as high as 75 feet into the air until it was finally shut down 16 hours later.

As our numbed eyes witness every night on the news, stuff happens, particularly when it comes to extracting hydrocarbons. So here in the far reaches of the Catskills the issues in the film weren't abstract, and the gulf wasn't so far away. They were the stuff of daily politics, pitting neighbor against neighbor, revolving around two questions: Is the risk worth the reward? What's the alternative?

For this crowd, overwhelmingly antidrilling, the first answer was easy. The second, well, we're all waiting.

New York announced in April that it would impose stricter regulations on gas drilling in the watershed that supplies drinking water to 8.2 million people in New York City and about 1 million people in Westchester, Putnam and other nearby counties. Similar standards would be placed on the watershed serving about 200,000 people in Syracuse and elsewhere. That accounts for less than 10 percent of the New York portion of the Marcellus Shale, a giant gas deposit that extends through several states, chiefly New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

“Gasland” is the product of Josh Fox, a 37-year-old theater director who lives over the border in Milanville, Pa. In 2008, he received a leasing offer from a gas company. He set out to find the effects of gas drilling and captured harrowing footage from places like Dimock, Pa.; Pavillion, Wyo.; and Weld County, Colo., documenting polluted air, tap water that catches fire, tainted well water and families claiming to be sickened by drilling on their property. The film won the special jury prize for documentaries at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and will air on HBO on June 21.

It's one-sided, flawed and personal in the Michael Moore mode, and it jibes completely with the stories told by people from out west who offered cautionary tales at an information session at the same theater two years earlier, when the leasing frenzy upstate was just beginning.

Many people have signed leases hoping to get rich. Not many of them were at the screening. Most of those on hand were more concerned with the environmental risks. Gas is not oil. The Catskills region is not the gulf. But that endless underwater gusher, the oil-soaked pelicans in full cry, seemed just outside the door.

“What they have in common is that they're working on the hairy edge of the possible,” said Laurie Spaeth of the Chenango Delaware Otsego Gas Drilling Opposition Group, whose Web site, un-naturalgas.org, tracks drilling issues. “As impressive as the technology is, there are going to be accidents. What they're doing here is not quite as extreme as what they were doing in the gulf, but it clearly has the same potential for devastation.”

Apparently others agree. The advocacy group American Rivers put the Upper Delaware River at the top of its annual list of the nation's 10 most endangered rivers, citing gas exploration and the millions of gallons of water used in the hydraulic fracturing of each well. Thousands of wells are projected to be drilled in New York, and a drilling boom is well under way in Pennsylvania.

At this point the voice of reason is supposed to add, Yes. But. We need the energy from somewhere. What's the least bad alternative: Offshore or Middle Eastern oil? Gas? Nuclear? Coal? A conventional answer is gas. Only you look at those sickening images from the gulf and the shimmering green canvas of hills, lakes and dairy farms upstate and you add another “Yes. But.” If there could ever be an event that would set our hair on fire, send us running a million miles an hour toward full-bore efforts at conservation and alternative energy, what else could it be if not this one?

Or maybe there's no such thing. We look at the images from the gulf, feel ill, click to another channel. Leno and Letterman tell oil-spill jokes. Half comatose, half engaged, we gravitate toward whatever silos make us happy. Maybe New York has gotten ahead of the curve on regulation. Maybe the optimists hope it all works out — some get rich, some get run over, life goes on.

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