

holiday gift guide

High Country News

For people who care about the West



Follow the Fish

Fish-stocking has drawn otters to a new corner
of the Northern Rockies

By Wudan Yan



Patrick Cross, an ecologist at the Yellowstone Ecological Research Center, examines otter scat found at Beartooth Lake, Wyoming, finding it full of fish bones. WUDAN YAN

On the cover

River otters traverse the icy Yellowstone River between Hayden Valley and Canyon, Wyoming, where they swim in unfrozen holes and race from one to the next.

MICHAEL L. HARING VIA ISTOCK



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Editor's note

Facing ecological realities

We have reached a point in the human experiment where it is impossible to see ourselves apart from what we once called nature. This has been true for a while, but it is becoming more and more obvious. The realization that humans are an inseparable part of the natural world (a powerful, often destructive part) has major implications for how we think about ourselves as members of an ecological community. Some folks call this era the Anthropocene, but this issue calls it the "Plastocene," in one of two features exploring the human impact on the West.



As writer Krista Langlois explains, the Plastocene is a very specific era, one in which humans have put so much plastic into the world that the plastic is now melding with sediment to create a new kind of rock. In some distant future, when humans are long gone, our time on Earth will be represented by this kaleidoscopic layer. Much of it will consist of big chunks of plastic, but some of it will be made of microplastics — those bits of plastic that become tinier and tinier but never go away entirely. Not a lot is known about how these could impact the world, but researchers are studying the problem. We do know that microplastics seem to be everywhere, including in what we like to think of pristine natural environments, such as the alpine forests of Montana. They are in the water we drink, in the plants and animals we eat, and even aloft on the air. We are altering our own bodies through the plastics we produce, here at the height of petrochemical culture.

What are we to do with this knowledge? How should we see ourselves in this world we're creating? I think one answer is found in this issue's cover story, partly set in Montana, where another kind of human impact holds much better lessons on being ecological. From the Beartooth Plateau, writer Wudan Yan reports on ongoing attempts to find otters — otters that, like microplastics, are not supposed to be there. They are finding their way onto the plateau because a specific kind of human, known as a fisherman, has stocked the lakes and streams with fish. The otters have followed the food, and this might just encourage them to leave lower elevations, where climate change threatens their food sources, for higher, safer altitudes.

Whether we're furthering the spread of microplastics, or the spread of otters, our actions carry consequences. Just as a beaver dam is a part of the beaver's being, and just as a hole in the ice is the sign of an otter's passing, we humans are composed of the world we inhabit. There is no separating us from the place we live. How we deal with this reality is another matter, and entirely within our control. The world, in other words, is yet what we make it.

—Brian Calvert, editor-in-chief

How the ADA could affect Native American voters

Like many Indigenous communities, Navajo Nation citizens face a gantlet of voting obstacles, from long trips to polling places to a lack of language assistance and restrictive identification requirements. Now, to participate in the democratic system, Navajo voters may face an additional roadblock: compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Though the ADA is a federal law and doesn't apply to tribal nations, it does apply to polling places operated by the county. After five polling places near Flagstaff, Arizona, were moved just months before highly contested midterms, some observers raised questions as to whether or not the Department of Justice's efforts to enforce ADA compliance could be used as part of a larger voter suppression strategy. In Arizona, the race for Republican Sen. Jeff Flake's replacement seat was so close it wasn't called for a week — ultimately going to Democratic candidate Kyrsten Sinema, with just a 1.7 percent margin as of Nov. 13. **ANNA V. SMITH**
Read more online: hcne.ws/native-votes

Is Arizona keeping minority voters from the polls?

Voter turnout was key to securing a victory for Democrat Kyrsten Sinema in the midterm elections. But that victory didn't come without its hurdles. Arizona has a long history of voter suppression. In 1965, when Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, the state was one of 16 singled out for its attempts to disenfranchise rural and minority residents. In 2013, a portion of the act that required greater federal oversight of these states' elections was overturned. Ever since, access to the ballot has become increasingly difficult for voters. Arizona is now the only state in the country that requires proof of citizenship to register to vote, and recently legislators made it a felony to turn in someone else's ballot, even as a favor. **JESSICA KUTZ**
Read more online: hcne.ws/arizona-voters



Orcas in the endangered Salish Sea pod play off Vancouver Island, British Columbia, in August. **RICHARD ELLIS/ZUMA PRESS**

“Extinction. They’re not going to make it.”

—Researcher Ken Balcomb, talking with newspapers about Salish Sea orcas over the summer, after two incidents involving the killer whales — first the death of the well-known orca named Scarlet, then the death of a newborn orca that lived for just an hour, but whose mother carried it for 17 days before finally leaving it. **SAMANTHA LARSON**

Read more online: hcne.ws/orcas

Anti-public lands and anti-Native groups converge in Montana

The New Code of the West Conference, held in Whitefish, Montana, this October, brought together two movements seeking to rewrite the story of the American West in their own vision. Attended by activists who oppose the rights of Native American people to exercise self-government and anti-federal public lands activists like Ammon Bundy, the conference united fringes that take aim at the structures of tribal and federal government.

Elaine Willman, a board member of the Citizens Equal Rights Alliance, which calls for an

end to Native American sovereignty, said most federal Indian law is unconstitutional. (*Read more about Willman's group on page 8.*) At the conference, Ammon Bundy compared himself, and ranchers like him, to Native Americans because he feels persecuted by the federal government.

As conference attendees challenged Native sovereignty and federal control over public lands, 400 counter-protesters from conservation and human rights groups protested in Whitefish. **TAY WILES**

Read more online: hcne.ws/whitefish



Bruce Inglangasak and Herman Oyagak look for a way to pass through the sea ice. **BRIAN ADAMS**

Photos

One Inuit family's life, straddling national borders

While much attention is drawn to the United States' southern border, in the Arctic, national boundaries blur as Inuit families move across the frozen landscape. Changing game patterns took the Inglangasak family from Alaska to the northern shores of Canada's Northwest Territories. With a “never say die” motto, the families brave harsh conditions to keep their heritage intact. Photographer Brian Adams traces their family connections across borders in his photo essay from the top of the world, where lines on a map mean less than the bonds of family and culture.

See more of Brian Adams' photos online: hcne.ws/inuit-borders

Guest farmworkers find their voices in Washington state

The H-2A visa program is one of the main sources of agricultural labor on many farms across the West. The program, which provides seasonal visas to foreign farmworkers, has long been the subject of complaints about low wages, poor living conditions and overworking of farm workers. Last summer, when Honesto Silva Ibarra died working in the field, guest workers in the program filed suit against the Sumas, Washington, farm they worked on. Their still-unresolved case will test whether farmworkers in the program have a voice in the American judicial system.

LEVI PULKKINEN Read more online: hcne.ws/wa-workers

Trending

Migrants' endless walk north

Despite ramped-up rhetoric ahead of the midterm elections, fueled by President Donald Trump and the cable news cycle, immigrant caravans are neither new nor something to fear. This year's group is fleeing the violence and economic hardship of Central America in an organic movement of people seeking safety and better opportunities for themselves and their families. The threat of family separations at the border and the unwillingness of the Trump administration to process asylum claims is still outweighed by these migrants' hope for a better life and a piece of the ever-fleeting American dream.

RUXANDRA GUIDI

You say

JACK BURKE: “These countries fail to take better care of their citizens after the U.S. and other world-leading countries give billions of dollars to them. This does not mean we should welcome them with open arms.”

MARY SIMMONS: “Let's all start calling it a Pilgrimage — to Freedom.”

MARIA K. FOTOPOULOS: “Continuing to be baffled why *HCN* would support the importation of mass numbers of people. Any real advocate of the environment and conservation understands sustainability, and the United States today is not sustainable.”

Read more online: hcne.ws/walk-north and Facebook.com/highcountrynews

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RISING SEAS WILL TOUCH US ALL

I find it interesting that Peg Ferm of Monroe, Washington, writes in a letter to the editor that she thinks *HCN's* article on Imperial Beach has no relevance for her (*HCN*, 10/15/18). Monroe, in Snohomish County, is located in a floodplain. There have been record (disaster-level) floods 18 times in the past 56 years in that county, the last one in November 2015. While it is true that Imperial Beach is not “the mountain West,” neither is Monroe, Washington, and it appears that climate change is affecting both communities. That is relevant to all of us. Thank you for the article.

Linda McCone
Paonia, Colorado

IMPERIAL BEACH IS NOT PLANNING
'MANAGED RETREAT'

A recently published article (“Nature Retreat,” *HCN*, 10/15/18) asserts that Imperial Beach is addressing sea-level rise by planning massive moves away from the coastline, technically known as “managed retreat.”

Contrary to the author's assertion that little has been done to address this “slow-moving catastrophe,” many California coastal communities either recently have or will soon complete plans that address sea-level rise. Imperial Beach is about midway through the process of updating its plan, and managed retreat is not its core adaptation strategy.

The article asserts that Imperial Beach's coastal developments would need to relocate three blocks inland at a stated cost of \$150 million, saying “(Mayor) Dendina's decision is straight-up revolutionary” because it goes against the American principle of preservation of private property rights. This “decision” is really an opinion, not an approved city strategy.

Imperial Beach is a leader in championing a phased or “trigger-based” approach to sea-level rise in California. This means we will use various adaptation strategies in the short run, such as sea walls and sand replenishment, until the frequency of flooding and other “triggers” indicate we need to do more. Then we might plan for dunes and/or groins (jetties), and finally, perhaps closer to the end of the century, managed retreat.

Premature calls for planned retreat on a large scale have caused major divisions and unnecessary damage to property values in other communities. We don't need this in Imperial Beach. Instead, we need to stay calm, plan for



PETER OMMUNDSEN

staged adaptations through the trigger-based approach we are currently refining (which is supported by the Coastal Commission) and avoid alarmist rhetoric that leads nowhere.

Ed Spriggs, councilmember
Imperial Beach, California

THE OTHER DANGERS OF DRILLING

Oil and gas drilling poses significant future safety and environmental threats (“When Your Neighborhood Goes Boom!” *HCN*, 10/28/18). Wells are drilled and cased with steel and a layer of cement to prevent reservoir fluids from contaminating fresh water zones above the hydrocarbon reservoir and escaping to the atmosphere. Unfortunately, over time, the cement degrades, allowing corrosive underground fluids to attack and corrode the steel pipe. This allows those fluids and hydrocarbons to exit into fresh ground water and the atmosphere. Oil and gas development will eventually lead to legacy pollution similar to the hardrock mines of the West. Who will be harmed, and who will pay for remediation? Not the oil and gas industry.

Ronald Collings
Parker, Colorado

THANK YOU FOR ASKING HARD QUESTIONS

A recent letter to the editor laments the author's belief that *HCN* “seems to have become just another ‘woke’ partisan magazine” (*HCN*, 10/15/18). I disagree and applaud *HCN's* efforts to diversify your coverage and engage the less-than-savory realities of the American West — racism, extraction and destruction. Basic historical literacy reveals that genocide is the

foundation of white settlement. As a white person, I believe it is our responsibility to ask hard questions of ourselves if we are ever to heal the wounds we have inflicted.

On land stolen from Indigenous Americans — land prioritized for fossil fuel development — public lands and environmental issues are tribal sovereignty issues. In rural counties, where farm labor is performed mostly by black and brown bodies while local governments cut tax deals to private prison companies, rural economic issues are racial justice and prison reform issues.

The author's critique of identity politics belies his assumption that the “normal” identity is his own. This in itself is identity politics. To insist

that we ignore politics and identity while benefiting from their structure is the hallmark of privilege. To turn away from this reality is, obviously, a choice that any of us are free to make. But to make such a choice is to consciously and intentionally retreat from the hard work to be done. I am thankful that *HCN* is interested in doing this work.

Charlie Macquarie
Berkeley, California

BIGHORNS, BIG LIVESTOCK HERDS

I wanted to commend Paige Blankenbuehler's “The Big Threat to Bighorns” (*HCN*, 9/3/18). My friends and I do a big backpacking trip each year in Western wilderness areas. This year, we did a roughly 40-mile loop through the Flat-tops Wilderness in northwest Colorado. There were few people, but lots of cows. For roughly seven miles, cattle often blocked the hiking trail. When we hiked up and onto the higher alpine tundra areas, we encountered domestic sheep.

This is not unique to Colorado. I have encountered cattle and sheep while backpacking in some of the West's most remote wilderness areas. As much as I sympathize with the sheep rancher in the article, the reality is that the vast majority of Colorado's citizens want these wild lands to be just that: wild lands. The fact that disease from domestic sheep could wipe out Colorado's entire bighorn sheep population makes it unbelievable that we keep our public lands open to grazing. Once again, science is ignored in favor of industry.

Joel Strohecker
Denver, Colorado

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TOM QUINN/UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON



CATHERINE AUSTIN/UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Salmon-tossing for science

A decades-long experiment demonstrates how the iconic fish help trees grow

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

Every year, thousands of sockeye salmon meet their end in Hansen Creek, a pebble-strewn tributary of Lake Aleknagik in southwestern Alaska, dying from old age or at the paws and jaws of a brown bear. Either way, they're likely to rot away on the stream's north-facing bank.

That's because professors, researchers and students have been systematically flinging salmon carcasses in that direction for the last 20 years. The scientists count and measure the carcasses and then toss them out of the streambed and up into the forest using gaffs — wooden poles with metal hooks on the end — in order to avoid double-counting the surveyed fish. Altogether, they have tossed about 295 tons of salmon onto Hansen Creek's north-facing bank. In the process, they created a unique opportunity to study exactly how salmon fertilize the forest.

Over the past 20 years, researchers across the Northwest have shown that

salmon play an essential role in forests. The nutrients they bring from the ocean make their way into the needles and wood of trees growing next to salmon-bearing streams. And those trees appear to thrive more than their fish-deprived counterparts. A recent experiment, described in a paper published in the journal *Ecology*, proves that this observation is true: More salmon mean faster-growing trees.

Tom Quinn, a professor at the University of Washington's School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences who has been teaching and researching in southwestern Alaska since the late 1980s, initially studied the relationship between bear predation and salmon populations. Over the years, his work and the work of his collaborators and students has branched out to address other questions, like how climate change and hatchery fish affect the environment. "What's special here is this is a long-term experiment," Quinn said. "It's part of a more holistic study of interactions throughout the ecosystem."

In the summer of 2016, two decades

after the fish-tossing began, Quinn, along with co-authors James Helfield, Catherine Austin, Rachel Hovel and Andrew Bunn, took tree-core samples from the spindly white spruce on either side of Hansen Creek. "In the back of my mind, I've been thinking about the fertilization impact," Quinn said. It seemed like the right time to finally look into it: "I'm not going to be doing this forever. Twenty years seemed like a good time to analyze the data." The core samples revealed that the trees that were fertilized with salmon guts grew faster than they had during the 20 years prior to the experiment. They were even catching up with their taller counterparts on the opposite bank.

With control over the conditions, the researchers were able to address some of the criticisms of previous studies. Most of those studies measured the difference in growth rates of trees above and below waterfalls or between different streams, Quinn said, meaning they weren't able to rule out other potential factors: Water availability, elevation and other factors impacting soil fertility. Quinn's experiment effectively removed many of those variables.

The research reinforced salmon's importance in the ecosystem, even as their stocks dwindle in many streams up and down the West Coast. This study, Quinn said, "provides perspective on what is lost in other ecosystems." □

Andrea Odell, above left, an undergraduate student in the University of Washington's School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences, tosses dead sockeye salmon onto the bank of Hansen Creek in southwest Alaska while other researchers record data and look for salmon in the stream.

Both live sockeye salmon and fish carcasses, top, are seen in Hansen Creek in 2014.

Researchers take tree core samples along the creek, above, to help measure the impact of salmon carcasses as fertilizer.

THE LATEST

Backstory

In 2014, two solar energy companies withdrew plans to build a massive solar thermal project near Joshua Tree National Park. Conservation groups and local tribes opposed the Palen project, citing impacts on migratory birds, historic trails and views. One wildlife scientist estimated that a similar project, Ivanpah, was killing up to 28,000 birds a year. The fight over utility-scale solar development in the California desert has intensified, with green groups advocating distributed rooftop solar and use of already disturbed lands instead ("Clean energy's dirty secret," *HCN*, 10/26/15).

Followup

In early November, the Bureau of Land Management approved a redesigned Palen solar project on roughly 3,100 acres in a BLM Solar Energy Zone. It will power about 130,000 California homes. Now a traditional photovoltaic plant, it should have less impact on birds, although opponents are concerned about harm to other resources. Palen is the second utility-scale solar project approved by the Trump administration, which is considering loosening the long-standing Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan that protects millions of acres of publicly owned California desert.

JODI PETERSON



Future site of the Palen solar project.
BLM

Carlsbad builds for a drilling boom

The nation's busiest BLM office looks for more work

BY TAY WILES

If there is one place that holds the most promise for Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's vision for U.S. energy dominance, it might be southeast New Mexico. The 6-million-acre region includes part of the Permian Basin, which stretches into west Texas and is expected to produce more oil and gas than any nation in the world except Saudi Arabia by 2023. In August, the Bureau of Land Management released a 1,500-page draft of a new management plan for the New Mexico side of the basin, which will determine how its resources will be used for the next 20 years and beyond.

The BLM's Carlsbad field office, which oversees this three-county region, is the nation's busiest when it comes to oil and gas drilling. It's also a landscape of deserts, grasslands, small mountain ranges and spectacular underground caves. Its new management plan — one of the first major resource management plans in the country to be released under the Trump administration — paves the way for yet more drilling.

The plan, eight years in the making, was originally supposed to be released under the Obama administration but was then delayed after President Donald Trump's election. According to documents obtained by *High Country News*, the Carlsbad field office originally intended to protect certain areas with known wildlife, scenic or cultural values. Those areas, however, are not included in the new version. For instance, maps drafted in 2016 show that the BLM's preferred alternative offered greater protection for grasslands west of the 12,000-person town of Artesia. According to multiple sources close to the planning process, who spoke to *HCN* on condition of anonymity, the BLM pivoted, changing the "no-surface occupancy" restrictions on drilling — which prohibit companies from disturbing the surface of a sensitive area — to make them less restrictive in several locations that were part of the draft plan before Trump was elected.

In response to the new administration's priorities, "the BLM performed a review of Executive Orders, Secretarial Orders, and Secretarial Memos," James Stovall,

the BLM manager of Pecos Field District, which includes the Carlsbad field office, wrote *HCN* in an email. "The team then reviewed, and revised as necessary."

Jim Goodbar, a cave and karst specialist employed by the BLM in New Mexico for 38 years before retiring in January, worked on the resource plan under the Trump administration. During that time, he noticed priorities shift in line with the new president's energy-first vision. "There was definitely a sense that everybody was thinking, we wished we'd gotten it approved prior to the change of the guard," Goodbar said. The former employee also told *HCN* he's concerned because the draft RMP uses 2014 data about water and mineral resources. "Since then, there have been major (oil) discoveries, and the numbers of wells and sizes of the pads have changed quite dramatically," Goodbar said. "So that could be a lot more environmental impact than they would actually be reporting."

Southeast New Mexico has been drilled for 90 years already, and activity has ramped up drastically in the past several years. Seventy-one percent of the BLM's acreage here is leased for drilling, meaning it's either slated for development or already in use. "I think there's a real danger that Carlsbad is going to become a single-use field office," said Judy Calman, an environmental attorney with New Mexico Wild, a statewide conservation nonprofit. "More than other field offices, Carlsbad faces more pressure to do more for conservation because it's so on the verge of becoming just an oil and gas field office."

The BLM's last Carlsbad plan, written in 1988, left all but 11,600 subsurface acres — out of 2.6 million — open for leasing. A lot has changed since then, including new innovations in fracking methods and technology that allow oil-and-gas development to happen faster than ever before. Climate change has also increased the importance of riparian areas for threatened or endangered species, such as the Texas hornshell mussel and the Pecos gambusia.

The BLM's preferred alternative would close 88,500 acres — or about 3 percent — of the management area to new drilling, and add an estimated 11,000 or more



SOURCE: BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT NEW MEXICO STATE OFFICE, SURFACE OWNERSHIP, 2012.

oil-and-gas jobs over the next 20 years. As with all federal land plans, the draft presents four "alternatives" with varying priorities. The more conservation-oriented option would close 40 percent of the land to new leases and could create more than 9,000 industry jobs.

Environmentalists pushed for greater protection for 550,900 acres of desert riparian zones, great blue heron habitat, unique salt playas, and grasslands with one of the nation's highest diversity of bird species. The BLM's preferred alternative within the new draft doesn't include those four nominations for Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, though the agency did write its own proposals for new ACEC designations.

Tension between conservationists and industry in the Carlsbad region also extends deep underground. Carlsbad



THE LATEST

Backstory

In 1998, Dakota Mining Corp. abandoned the Stibnite Mine in Idaho's Payette National Forest. **After a century of mining, nearly 4 million cubic yards of tailings and cyanide-tainted water threatened the source of the Salmon River's South Fork**, with reclamation estimated at more than \$1 million ("Paying for a gold mine," *HCN*, 3/15/99). In 2016, Midas Gold Corp. proposed building one of the nation's largest open-pit gold mines at the site and also producing antimony for batteries and munitions. Midas has promised to remediate earlier mining damage, calling its planning document a "plan of restoration and operations" rather than just a "plan of operations."

Followup

Tribes and conservation groups have expressed growing skepticism, since nearly 60 percent of development would take place on previously un-mined land. **In early October, the Nez Perce Tribe announced its formal opposition, citing potential harm to treaty rights and fish.** A draft environmental impact statement is expected in 2019, with a final decision from the Forest Service in 2020.

JODI PETERSON



The Stibnite Mine site as it looks today.
COURTESY OF MIDAS GOLD

▲ A drill rig between Carlsbad and Artesia, New Mexico, just after a thunderstorm, October 2017.

ROBERT D. FLAHERTY/
ENERGYLANDSCAPES.NET

◀ Carlsbad Caverns National Park, and its expansive network of caves in southeast New Mexico, could be affected by increased drilling in the area.

ARIC BROWN/FICKR CC



Caverns National Park, first designated in 1923 as a monument, protects over 100 miles of caves that formed millions of years ago and have yet to be fully explored. "The cave and karst resources ripple out far beyond the boundary of the park," said Jerry Otero of the National Parks Conservation Association. The cave networks are connected to aquifers, which could be contaminated by oil and gas drilling, Otero said. "It's very likely groundwater would be impacted, and there is a possibility that caves and underground structures connected to the cave systems within the park could be penetrated and contaminated," if certain areas near the park are leased, added Ernie Atencio, NPCA's New Mexico senior program manager.

Advocates of the park also want the new BLM plan to reflect the fact that the

area is an international tourist attraction. "If you're standing at the park, at the visitors center, and you look out and see an industrial landscape, your experience is not the same," Otero said.

Many of the locals want fewer restrictions on the oil and gas industry. Dan Girand, former director of legislative and regulatory affairs at Mack Energy Corporation, an oil and gas producer based in Artesia, is concerned that the plan will close certain lands to drilling and put restrictions on others. "Once they lease it to us, they're going to have conditions to it, which could cost us a whole bunch of money," said Girand, who is also chairman of the Chaves County Lands Council. Oil and gas is an important economic driver for communities in the area, and county commissioners would like to see even more focus on drilling and greater local input in

the process. Fifteen percent of local jobs are in mining or the oil-and-gas industry. The per capita income of this three-county region was \$39,500 in 2016, according to Headwaters Economics data.

"My preference in this whole deal would be for this draft to be thrown in the trashcan, and the BLM to actually come coordinate with the counties putting this resource management plan together," Chaves County Commissioner Will Cavin said of the draft, invoking the legal requirement federal agencies have to work alongside locals. Using the provision known as "coordination" has become a favored strategy in recent years for Western conservatives who want more influence on the federal planning process. Groups like the nonprofit American Stewards of Liberty, based in Texas, have held local trainings in southeast New Mexico and elsewhere, to teach counties to leverage federal law to gain more influence.

While Cavin called for more coordination between regional federal employees and locals, he also said he and other county commissioners had already met with BLM brass on multiple occasions earlier this year to talk about the new resource management plan. Those officials included BLM Deputy Director Brian Steed and Deputy Director of the Office of External Affairs Tim Williams.

The BLM held eight public meetings about the resource plan in September, in the New Mexico communities of Carlsbad, Artesia, Roswell, Hope, Albuquerque, Jal and Hobbs, and in Midland, Texas. □



Elaine Willman speaks with a journalist at the New Code of the West conference. Willman, a board member and former chair of the Citizens Equal Rights Alliance, claims to be Cherokee, though Cherokee Nation officials told HCN she is not an enrolled member. LAUREN GRABELLE FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

Why don't anti-Indian groups count as hate groups?

The current understanding of 'hate groups' excludes those that undermine tribal rights and sovereignty

BY ANNA V. SMITH

"CERA uses false stereotypes to create turmoil, divide communities, and undermine tribal governments."

— Montana state Rep. Shane Morigeau, a Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes member

In early October, anti-government activists converged on Whitefish, Montana, for the "New Code of the West" conference — a symposium catering to Western conspiracy theorists and extremists. Alongside speakers like Ammon Bundy, leader of the 2016 Malheur National Wildlife Refuge occupation in Oregon, and Washington Rep. Matt Shea was Elaine Willman, a board member and former chair of the Citizens for Equal Rights Alliance (CERA), whose mission is "to change federal Indian policies that threaten or restrict the individual rights of all citizens living on or near Indian reservations."

The national group, with board members in Montana, New Mexico, Arizona, California and Washington, has declared that treaties regarding land and water rights are no longer valid, advocated for state rights at the expense of tribal sovereignty, and repeatedly sown distrust between non-Natives and tribal governments on issues like taxation, voter fraud and land use. CERA, which calls tribal sovereignty a "myth," works to undermine forms of self-determination — foundational issues for tribal nations that have borne the brunt of violent U.S. expansion for centuries.

Anna V. Smith is an assistant editor for *High Country News*. [@annavtoriasmith](#)

Tribal leaders and organizations like the National Congress of American Indians have denounced CERA for supporting policies that undermine tribal rights and would further assimilate Indigenous people. "CERA uses false stereotypes to create turmoil, divide communities, and undermine tribal governments," Montana state Rep. Shane Morigeau, a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, told the Montana Human Rights Network. "Now, CERA is aligning with anti-public land radicals to try and spread their hateful message." Willman disputes the characterization that CERA is anti-American Indian, but rather "anti-federal Indian policy." On its website, CERA states: "We do not tolerate racial prejudice of any kind. We do not knowingly associate with anyone who discriminates based on race."

However, a July report by the Montana Human Rights Network argues that CERA and other anti-American Indian groups, such as Upstate Citizens for Equality and Proper Economic Resource Management, should be labeled hate groups for their multifaceted attempts to reduce Indigenous political power while promoting racist stereotypes. Willman calls the network's labeling of CERA as a hate group "absolute trash," but says that the network does always quote her accurately. "There's no one at that event who

holds hate in their heart," Willman says of the Whitefish conference. "The only ones who hold hate in their heart is probably the Montana Human Rights Network, and I think that's sad. What a horrible way to think and live."

Anti-American Indian groups have received little-to-no public scrutiny, compared to their anti-black and anti-Latino counterparts. Yet the number of hate crimes against Native Americans in 2016 stood at 4 percent nationwide, even though Indigenous people represent around 2 percent of the population. The Southern Poverty Law Center, a leading civil rights organization that monitors hate groups, has not been including anti-American Indian groups in its annual accounting of hate groups, currently at 954 nationwide. A Southern Poverty Law Center representative told *High Country News* that it will examine whether groups like CERA "fall in line with our hate group criteria as we work on finalizing our 2018 count."

Advocates believe that Americans' understanding of both civil and Indigenous rights affects their perception of anti-American Indian groups. Because groups like CERA say they advocate for "equal rights for all," their deeper message often slips by unnoticed. Calling them hate groups, the Montana Human Rights Network argues, could help communities

identify and resist their ideology. So, why aren't they already considered hate groups? The answer lies in a combination of coded language, mainstream ignorance of Indigenous issues and long-embedded racism against Native Americans.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines a hate group as one whose primary purpose is to promote animosity, hostility and malice against people belonging to, among other things, a race or ethnicity different from the organization's members. (Willman claims to be Cherokee, though she is not an enrolled member. CERA claims to have some Native members.) The Southern Poverty Law Center defines hate groups similarly, including "practices that attack or malign an entire class of people" for their "immutable characteristics." For anti-American Indian groups, those characteristics can include Indigenous culture, religion, language and history. The Montana Human Rights Network has applied those definitions to such groups, saying in a 1992 report that groups like CERA constitute "a systematic effort to deny legally-established rights."

Indeed, CERA has its own legal arm, the Citizens for Equal Rights Foundation, which files lawsuits and "friends of the court" briefs for court cases opposing tribal interests. In the past two years, those have ranged from land-to-trust cases in Massachusetts, to attacks on the Indian Child Welfare Act, to a case where tribes asked Washington state to fulfill its treaty obligations and remove salmon-blocking culverts. "No matter the issue," says Travis McAdam, research director for the Montana Human Rights Network, "if American Indians are asserting their rights, these groups will be in opposition." That, McAdam says, makes the difference between an anti-American Indian hate group and one that expresses prejudiced, anti-American Indian sentiments.

Anti-American Indian groups also seek to influence the legislative branch. In 2015, at a CERA-sponsored conference, Willman told attendees that the bipartisan Flathead Water Compact in Montana was "a template for federalizing all state waters and implementing communalism and socialism" that was "aligned to spread tribalism as a governing system while eliminating State authority and duty to protect its citizenry." Willman dismissed the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' treaty rights and publicly challenged their sovereignty. Despite a lawsuit filed by two former and current Montana legislators, the settlement eventually gave the tribes control of Kerr Dam, making them the first tribe to control a hydroelectric dam.

These high-level conversations in government and litigation impact Native communities by altering public discourse. Researchers say a connection exists between inflammatory local conversations involving tribes and the disproportionate rates of hate crimes against Native

Americans. Chuck Tanner, advisory board member at the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights, has tracked anti-American Indian groups in Washington and elsewhere since the mid-'90s. "When these organized groups put forward these frameworks that distort and deny tribal rights and cast them as essentially taking from white people, that fuels these expressions of bigotry and violence," he says.

That affects individual Native Americans, especially in places with a high number of non-Natives, like the Flathead Indian Reservation. Carolyn Pease-Lopez, a member of the Crow Tribe and a Montana state legislator from 2009 to 2017, remembers how CERA, and Willman, affected the discussion around the Flathead Water Compact. "They were going to oppose it, so they needed to hang their hat on something," Pease-Lopez says. "And she gave them something to hang their hats on." During the negotiations, Pease-Lopez was struck by the animosity from non-Natives, who felt that the compact was "going to give the tribe something that wasn't rightfully theirs" — even though off-reservation water rights were not ceded in the original 1855 treaty. Throughout the process, Pease-Lopez heard many non-Natives complain that "they're being left behind, and here are all these people skating through life getting things for free."

A major point of the Montana Human Rights Network's report is that these are more than talking points; they are an agenda at work. The "hate group" label relies on civil rights and an organization's disregard for them. But there are flaws in that framework when it comes to categorizing anti-American Indian groups, because they exploit the language of civil rights in their names and rhetoric to bolster their motives and credibility. "They all try to pack equality into their titles and framing as much as possible, but it doesn't change the fact that they're a full-scale assault on tribal sovereignty," says Tanner. As American citizens, Native Americans are afforded full civil rights. But there is an additional layer of tribal rights involved in tribal membership that the civil rights framework does not encompass. That can result in the erasure of those rights from conversation.

Tanner thinks that the "hate" designation may not be effective, because it reduces the conversation to psychology and emotion. That obscures the fact that these groups want to restructure political power to favor non-Natives over American Indians in Indian Country. Still, Tanner says, if we're going to use the "hate" designation, anti-American Indian groups should be included. "They're not as overtly racist as the Klan, but their endgame is the subjugation of tribes and the dismissal of tribal human rights."

Because concepts like treaty rights and

tribal sovereignty aren't commonly understood by non-Natives, organizations like CERA can easily make inroads. A study released in June by Reclaiming Native Truth surveyed non-Natives and found that "limited personal experience and pervasive negative narratives" can "cement stereotypes" of Native Americans. The survey also found that "people who live near or work in Indian Country, especially areas of great poverty, hold bias." McAdam says that's how anti-American Indian groups are able to resonate: by melding concepts like private property rights and anti-federal sentiments with their own anti-Indigenous ideology. "There's these frameworks out there, and organizations out there looking for opportunities," McAdam says. "When there is an absence of knowledge to understand what's going on, it's people like Elaine Willman that show up and fill in that gap of knowledge."

Pease-Lopez agrees, noting that nearly half of Montana's 56 counties either border or contain a reservation, making education even more important. "It's very subtle how they're working their way in among our citizens. People could be supporting them or agreeing with them because of



some points that are of concern to them, but they don't realize their full agenda."

Because "hate" is hard to define, anti-American Indian groups have gone mostly unnoticed in a culture built around subtle, consistent aggressions against Indigenous peoples. McAdam and others say this helps normalize their message in political discourse and opens easy lines of attack that are coded in legalese and rely on stereotypes. But ultimately, it damages the human rights of Indigenous peoples: their lands, histories and bodies. "It's something we face every day," Pease-Lopez says. "You almost have to have an outsider come in to say, 'This isn't normal.' " □

Vernon Finley, chairman of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, speaks to a crowd brought together to protest the New Code of the West Conference in Whitefish.

LAUREN GRABELLE FOR
HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

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*Matriarch. Cannon Ball, North Dakota, USA.
November, 2016.* JOSUÉ RIVAS

STANDING STRONG

By Josué Rivas
140 pages, hardcover: \$55
FotoEvidence, 2018

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe refuses to surrender; earlier this month, the tribe challenged the Army Corps of Engineers' conclusions that the Dakota Access Pipeline poses no threat to the tribe. The tribe has fought the pipeline for over four years, culminating in headline-making 2016 demonstrations on the reservation in North Dakota. In *Standing Strong*, Josué Rivas (Mexico/Otomi) looks back at the water protectors and their camps. Rivas mixes moods in black-and-white diptychs, placing a photo of a man holding his eyelids open to be washed after he was sprayed with mace, next to an image of a landscape at dusk. *Standing Strong* is not merely an account of the protests; rather, it creates an environment of images that linger beyond the book. In the afterword, Ojibwe environmentalist Winona LaDuke writes that the demonstrations opened a "profound moment, when we awaken, look all around and find our people, people of many tribes, colors and histories. We find our power." BY ELENA SAAVEDRA BUCKLEY

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Celebrate the holidays with us!

A stylish coven of witches took over our *High Country News* headquarters in Paonia, Colorado, this Halloween (see *photo below*), but that wasn't the scariest thing to happen in the past few weeks — Nov. 6, after all, was Election Day.

In the weeks before the midterms, our coverage focused on the role public lands and energy development played in races around the West. We also investigated the voter suppression tactics that were being employed to disenfranchise Native voters in North Dakota and minority voters in Arizona.

On the eve of the elections, some staffers watched the results pour in at a party in Paonia. Farther afield, at Seattle's Arctic Club, Associate Editors **Kate Schimmel** and **Tristan Ahtone** joined Assistant Editor **Anna Smith** to watch the results, with special interest in a ballot initiative that would have created the first carbon fee in the country. (It failed.) Smith and Ahtone provided live commentary as part of the first-ever Native broadcast of national elections — a collaboration between the media outlets First Nations Experience TV, Native Voice One radio and *Indian Country Today*. Really proud of you guys!

Elections aside, our editorial staff has been busy integrating into the larger community here at Western Colorado University in Gunnison, Colorado, where an editorial satellite office is located. At the beginning of November, Assistant Editor **Paige Blankenbuehler** led a storytelling lecture for a group

of graduate students from the university's environmental management program. Thirty students showed up to hear how *HCN* reporters turn broad themes and topics into narrative stories for our readers. Paige and Brian later joined editorial intern **Elena Saavedra Buckley** and fellow **Jessica Kutz** for a night of poetic analysis, reading Robinson Jeffers' "The Roan Stallion" with Western's **David Rothman**, who heads the university's creative writing program.

Moving to Gunnison has been just one part of this larger period of experimentation for *HCN*. To learn more about all the exciting changes the organization is undergoing, read our annual report, released in October, online here: www.hcn.org/about/2018annualreport/view. Here's the short version: Our print and digital subscriptions are both growing, with the help of generous reader support. So a huge thanks to all of you, for continuing to believe in us and for spreading the word!

Our apologies to **Stephen E. Strom**, whose name we misspelled in our review of his new book, *Bears Ears: Views from a Sacred Land* (*HCN*, 11/12/18).

If you feel like celebrating *HCN*'s success — or perhaps blessing our enterprising reporters with the gift of investigative news tips — come on down to the annual *High Country News* Holiday Open House on Dec. 6. The festivities run from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. at our headquarters, 119 Grand Ave, in Paonia, Colorado. See you there!

—*Jessica Kutz, for the staff*



They do such good work, it must be magic!

LUNA ANNA ARCHIE/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

FEATURE BY WUDAN YAN

Follow the Fish

Fish-stocking has drawn otters to a new corner of the Northern Rockies



On a moody September afternoon, Patrick Cross stood on top of a rock and inspected the banks of a creek that flowed steadily out of Beauty Lake, an alpine lake in the Beartooth Plateau, a vast stretch of high plateau on the border of Wyoming and Montana.

Cross, an ecologist at the Yellowstone Ecological Research Center in Bozeman, Montana, was looking for river otters. Nearly six years ago, he found some otter scat near here, a sign that the animals use to mark their territory. Otter scat is black and streaky, and it should be easy to see against the pale gray granite rocks. And otters typically prefer large flat surfaces onto which they can haul their entire bodies when they do their business.

"If I were an otter, I'd be pooping all

over that thing," Cross told me, pointing to a big flat rock a few steps away. He stepped confidently on the stony nubbins of granite that ringed the lake, never tripping, to reach the rock of his interest. His dog, Pika, an 11-year-old Montana cowdog, followed loyally. Cross knelt to get a closer look; sometimes, scat disaggregates and turns into a pile of translucent fish scales. But much to his disappointment, the rock was bare.

Otters were once unheard of in the Beartooths. In fact, there's no evidence they're native to this high alpine environment at all; their arrival appears to be part of the sweeping changes humans have brought to the plateau. In the 1960s, zoologists Donald Pattie and Nicolaas Verbeek spent years surveying the various mammals found in the Beartooths. They found creatures as small as dwarf

shrews and as large as grizzly bears and mountain goats, but no otters. Continued but sporadic surveys done by field technicians and researchers at the Yellowstone Ecological Research Center in the 1990s yielded no sign of river otters, either. But for the last decade or so, there have been a few anecdotal reports from Cross, his colleagues, and some of the locals who frequent the plateau.

No one seems to know when the otters started showing up or what led them to migrate to this rugged landscape in the first place. So Cross is on the case, not just trying to find some otters but hoping to figure out how they got here, and what exactly they might be doing today.

GROWING UP IN BILLINGS, Cross spent most of his days outside, with the Beartooths as his backyard. Both of his

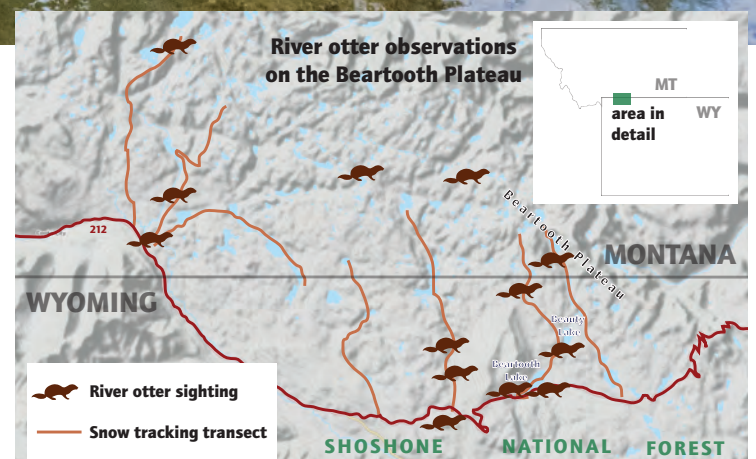


parents skied, and when he was 5, Cross' mother started taking him out of kindergarten early so that he could learn to ski, too. Soon after, he joined the Boy Scouts, and his troop frequently made outings to the Beartooths. His group once built a raft entirely out of logs and took it down the Stillwater River, which flows out of the Beartooths. In high school, Cross and his close friends would backpack or ski into the mountains in search of new peaks to climb, lakes to fish and lines to tie. His parents gave Cross the freedom to explore, even if at times they were wary of some of his excursions.

After Cross graduated from college, he worked on a fishing boat in Alaska for a few months, and then as a biological science technician in Yellowstone National Park. In 2012, after a few field seasons tracking bears and wolves, he

began a master's in systems ecology at the University of Montana and the Yellowstone Ecological Research Center, tracking foxes in the Beartooths. He spent two winters living out of an RV on Beartooth Lake, tucked at the foot of Beartooth Butte, an orange and clay-colored monolith made of limestone and shale. In the winter, the lakes iced over and were covered in a thick blanket of snow, and he spent his days on skis, following fox prints to see where the animals were going.

On a dreary day in January 2013, Cross and his colleague were scouting for fox tracks when they found a pair of tracks that they couldn't place. Each print had five toes and measured about 3 inches wide. At first, Cross wondered if these tracks belonged to a fisher, a small, weasel-sized animal that's rare in the



SOURCE: YELLOWSTONE ECOLOGICAL RESEARCH CENTER; MAP: LUNA ANNA ARCHEY/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

◀ Patrick Cross, an ecologist at the Yellowstone Ecological Research Center, wants to understand why river otters are moving into the Beartooth Plateau.

▲ Cross inspects a rock at a stream coming out of Beauty Lake in the Beartooth Plateau for otter scat. WUDAN YAN PHOTOS

► Nick Hackman, a volunteer with the Alpine Otters Project, investigates a set of adult river otter tracks crossing an ice floe on Kersey Lake in the Beartooth Mountains, Montana, during a citizen science field day last May 20.

▼ A river otter in Soda Butte Creek, Yellowstone National Park, February 2009.

PATRICK CROSS/
YELLOWSTONE ECOLOGICAL
RESEARCH CENTER



Beartooths. But when he followed them, they descended into a hole in the ice. That set off an alarm: Fishers don't swim. "That's when I had an inkling that maybe these could be otters," Cross said.

On subsequent trips, Cross started looking for otters. About four months later, he was tracking red foxes around Beartooth Lake in the brutal cold, when an otter suddenly shot out from under him. It bounded ahead and then slid on its belly, over and over, until it found a hole in the ice. "He took one look at me and then slid into the water," Cross said.

HISTORICALLY, NOT ONLY DID THE PLATEAU LACK OTTERS,

it was devoid of the fish they prey on. In fact, before the West was colonized, the majority of mountain lakes in the area lacked fish. Physical barriers, like waterfalls, prevented fish from moving upstream into high alpine lakes, and the lakes were typically covered with ice 10 months a year, making them unsuitable for most fish. When Europeans — cattlemen, miners and sportsmen — colonized the American West in the 1800s, they started introducing trout into the high lakes wherever they could.

Fish stocking continued into the 1900s, when state fish and wildlife organizations took over, building hatcheries to spawn fish to populate the West's lakes. Fish stocking, according to former aquatic biologist Edwin "Phil" Pister, had "the singular goal of creating and enhancing sport fishing and without any consideration of its ecological ramifications." Even today, stocking is funded by the Dingell-Johnson Act of 1950, which taxes angling permits and equipment.

Any new addition to an ecosystem is going to have consequences. In Northern California, stocking of trout in alpine lakes threatened the frogs and salamanders native to the lakes. Researchers started documenting the loss of invertebrates and bugs — essential prey for bats, birds and snakes — following fish stocking as early as the 1950s, and ecologists continue to publish similar findings.

Raising fish in hatcheries and then

stocking them in mountain lakes is a remarkably unnatural process. In a hatchery, the fish are raised until they're about 3 to 4 months old and about 2 inches long. At that time, these so-called "fingerlings" get transported via helicopters to wilderness regions. The helicopters then hover over the lakes and drop the fish into their new home, creating a piscine waterfall.

In the 1970s, the management of fish stocking changed in the Beartooths. State fish and wildlife technicians treated the lakes with rotenone, a chemical that could kill all fish in a given body of water. Once those fish perished, wildlife managers restocked the lakes with Yellowstone cutthroat trout, which are indigenous to the greater Yellowstone ecosystem. They reasoned that the lakes in the Beartooths, which are part of that ecosystem, could be stocked with the same fish.

Moreover, Yellowstone cutthroat trout — a dietary staple for grizzlies, ospreys, eagles and river otters — are in decline, due to competition and predation by non-native fish. The Beartooths' lakes provide a genetic refugia for the species. "If a volcano took out the Yellowstone River and got rid of the Yellowstone cutthroat trout, we'd still have a lot of Yellowstone cutthroat trout in the mountains," said Chris Phillips of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Today, the only stocked lakes in the Beartooths were grandfathered in before the Absaroka-Beartooth Range was designated as wilderness in 1978. New batches

of fish are dropped off every two to eight years, depending on how many anglers visit a particular lake, how large the lake is, and how well the fish do once they're stocked. But most of the high alpine lakes of the Beartooths have few nutrients and as such, offer poor habitats for these newly stocked fish. After eight years or less, the cutthroat are usually on their last tail.

Fishing is a huge draw for backpackers in the region. Many small towns on the way to the Beartooths have a storefront or two designed for outfitters or anglers, and it's rare to find a backpacker or dayhiker in the plateau without a fishing rod. Even Cross keeps one in the back of his car.

Now, those stocked fish in the Beartooths may have drawn a new predator to the plateau: the otters Cross spotted. The playful and elusive mammals had their own trouble with stocking in nearby ecosystems. North American river otters are not currently at risk of extinction. But in Yellowstone National Park, illegally stocked lake trout in Yellowstone Lake precipitated a huge decline in the native cutthroat trout population, as well as in the otters that feed on those fish. The Beartooths lie just northeast of Yellowstone Lake.

Merav Ben-David, a wildlife biologist at the University of Wyoming who studied the effects of lake trout stocking on river otters in Yellowstone Lake, says it's possible that the open space and the amply stocked lakes of the Beartooths provided enough food and room to satisfy the river otters pushed out of Yellowstone Lake. But no one will know for sure where these otters came from, unless their genes can be compared to those of river otters in adjacent ecosystems — a question that Cross hopes to explore in the future.

Meanwhile, the impact the otters might have on the ecosystem of the Beartooths is unclear. Without large predators that prey on otters, there are no animals to keep the population in check. "Because there's so much fish, the opportunities for the otters are pretty much unlimited at this point," Cross said.

But it might not be a bad sign if otters are in the Beartooths. Like their prey, they are bound to be negatively affected by climate change and environmental pressures. "If we can create new habitats for them at higher elevations, all the better," says Ben-David.

STUDYING OTTERS IN THE WILD, as Cross aims to do, isn't easy. They tend to be nocturnal, territorial and dispersed. They're also difficult to trap live. "It would be an ongoing, very labor-intensive, and sometimes not very productive effort," says Thomas Serfass, a wildlife biologist and otter specialist at Frostburg State University in Maryland. The best way to learn about the presence — or absence — of otters, he says, is by identifying their latrines and then watching how

the animals move from those particular areas.

For Cross, latrine sites are an important indication of possible changes in otter behavior in the Beartooths. But he found he needed more help, beyond the sparse anecdotal reports of his friends and his own rare sightings. He thought that a project dealing with a "charismatic carnivore" like the otter would provide an opportunity to get ordinary citizens involved. "If we can use a charismatic animal like the otter to engage people — to get people to value conserving that species and its habitat — it will benefit the other species that use that habitat, too," Cross said.

In November 2017, Cross launched a project on Experiment.com, a site where scientists and researchers can crowdfund various projects. In less than two months, he raised more than \$3,000 to help pay his "citizen scientists" to join him on a cross-country ski expedition to track otters.

Cross identified six transects and corridors where otters had been spotted and might be seen again. Last Memorial Day weekend, 17 people showed up to look for tracks along those transects to see how far into the plateau the otters had traveled to, to collect scat to analyze their diet, and to see whether there were families of the animals around.

It was still wintry on the day of the expedition, fortunately: Looking for otters in the winter is much easier, since tracks and scat are more obvious against the snow. In the summer, animal tracks may be everywhere, but they're much more difficult to discern.

Rusty Willis, a local climber, was one of Cross' helpers. Willis had grown up in the Beartooths, though he'd never seen otters up here. But once he learned about Cross' project through a friend, he started noticing otter tracks everywhere. "It's not like you could mistake it for something else," he said.

Towards the end of the day, as Willis skied near a stream, he saw an otter poke its head out of the water. There were no tracks leading to its location, and Willis fumbled to get his phone out. But he was too slow. The otter swam downriver and re-emerged in front of Willis' ski partner, ran across the snowy bank and dived back into the river. Willis and his partner measured the tracks in the snow. Cross and the other volunteers, skiing along separate transects, saw tracks, but no other live otters. Some volunteers collected scat samples for analysis, but they were all infested with tapeworms and therefore useless.

ON THE HIKE OUT FROM BEAUTY LAKE, Cross moved quickly, almost speed-walking. The weather — as unpredictable as it can be in the alpine — quickly turned from sunshine to a light drizzle, and storm clouds started to roll in. Shortly after, along the trail, we ran into two backpackers — Don Sharp, his

brother-in-law, Robert Kietler, and his dog, Pepe.

"See any otters?" Cross asked, as he asked almost everybody we met on the trail. Most people have said no, surprised it was a possibility.

"Actually, yes!" exclaimed Sharp. At that moment, Mother Nature joined the conversation, throwing sleet and hail at us, and we took cover under a whitebark pine. Sharp dug into his backpack for his camera and showed us a photo of three otters up at Crystal Lake, a little over 6 miles northwest of Beauty Lake. Sharp said he'd spotted them swimming and bobbing their heads out of the water. One of the otters looked much younger than the others, a sign that they could have been a family.

This was a repeat trip for Sharp and Kietler, they said. On a trip to Crystal Lake a few years ago, they caught plenty of fish. This time, they came up empty. "We thought the lake was barren, and then we saw the otters," said Sharp. "Now we know why." (It's possible for otters to completely consume all the fish stocked in an entire lake, said Ben-David.)

When the hail subsided, we wished Sharp and Kietler luck on the rest of their backpacking trip, got back in the car, and headed towards Beartooth Lake in search of more otter signs.

We parked Cross' Ford Ranger at the trailhead and walked toward the inlet of the lake. I made my way clumsily around the rocks, trying not to dunk my feet in the water. Cross sprinted ahead and called me over to a small grass patch. While the other grasses in that area reached my waist, this section was flattened. Two black, greasy streaks sat at the center: otter scat. Cross picked up some twigs and used them to pick apart the scat.

"It's like Christmas or something," he said. "You just start unwrapping the present and you never know what you're going to find or uncover." In some fox and marten droppings, for instance, he'd found balls of hair, or minuscule portions of another animal's claws.

As Cross picked apart the flaky scat, prickly fish bones emerged, along with tiny fish scales, a fish eye, and the larvae of a caddisfly. It fit the idea that the otters were mostly drawn to the fish in their new homes, and suggested that they weren't eating much beyond the fish humans have put here. The scat was fresh and greasy, indicating that the otter had been there recently, perhaps within the last day or so.

To the left of the scat, Cross pointed out the slide that the otter made to get back in the water after it left its droppings. We walked slowly along the banks and watched the water closely, looking for anything breaking the surface. The mud squelched beneath our shoes. Fish ripples dotted the surface, but no otters came up for air. After a few minutes, we headed out, leaving the lake and its inhabitants in peace. □

"We thought the lake was barren, and then we saw the otters. Now we know why."

—Don Sharp, who had caught plenty of fish at Crystal Lake a few years back, but came up empty this year



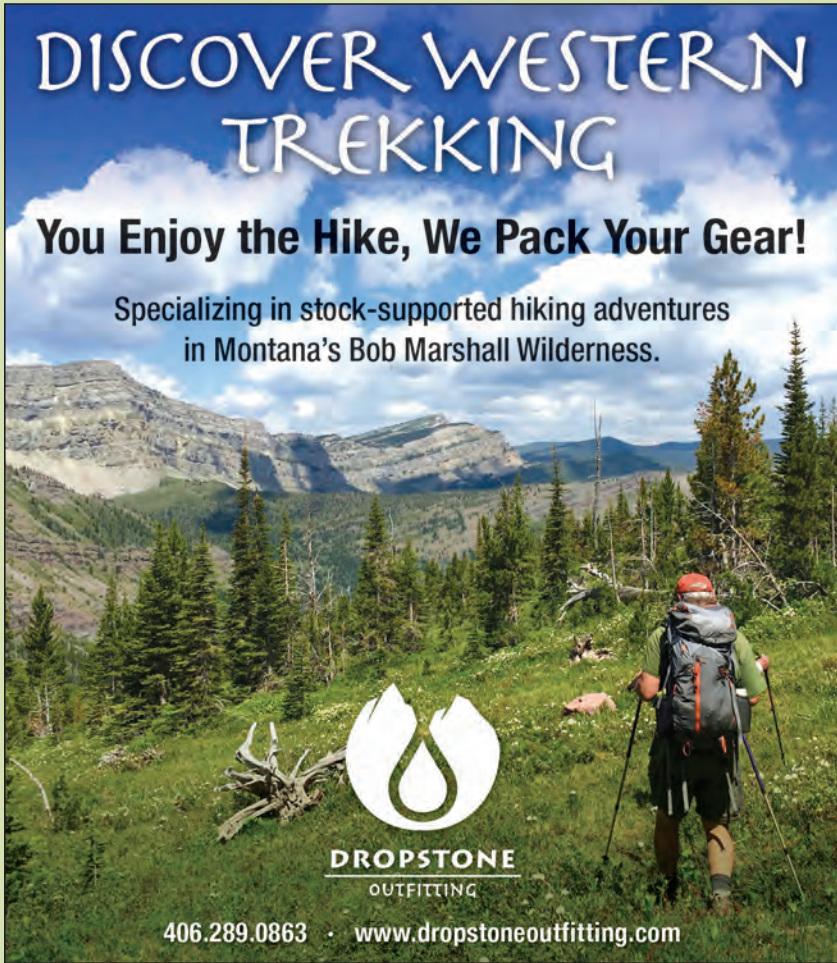
Wudan Yan is an independent journalist who writes about science, health, the environment, human rights and international issues. Although frequently itinerant, she is based in Seattle.

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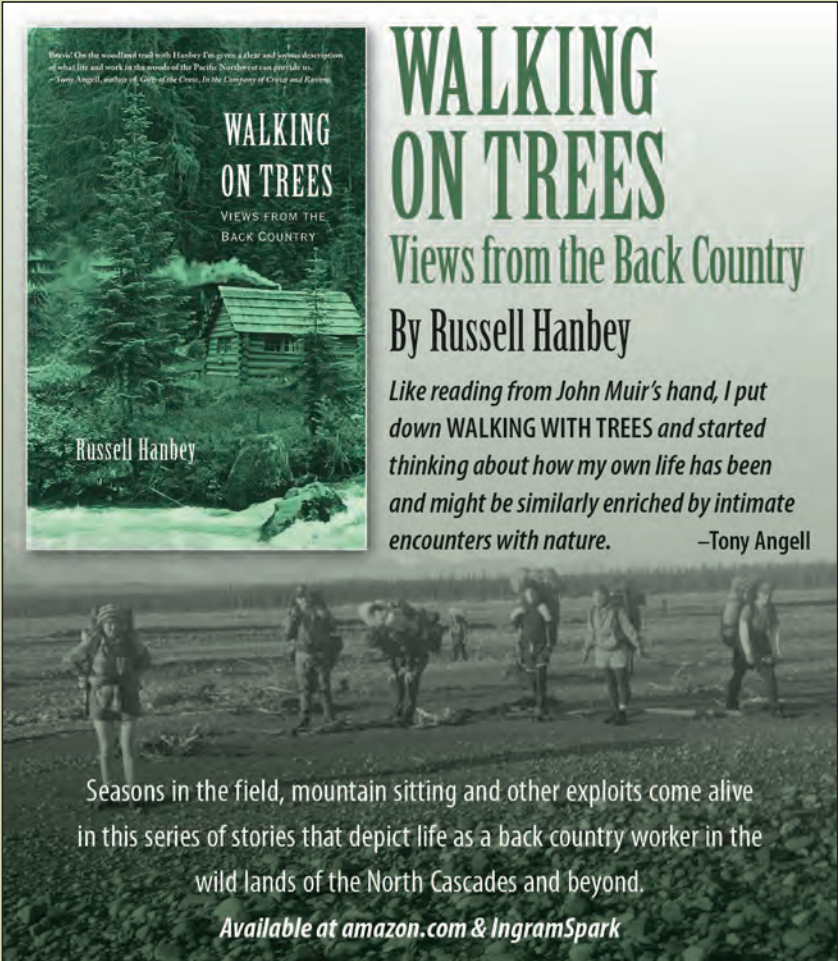
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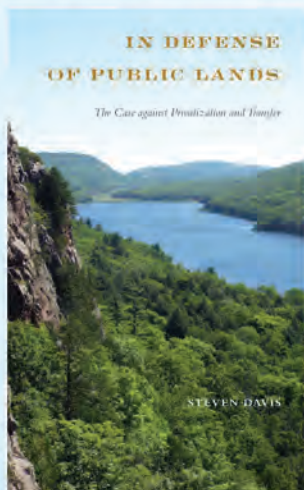
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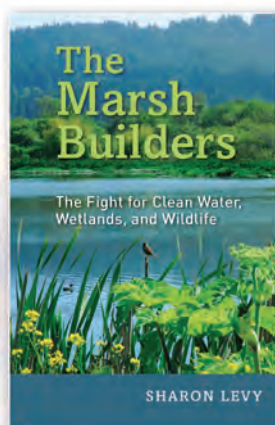
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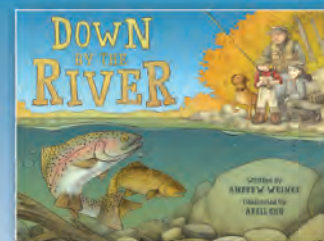
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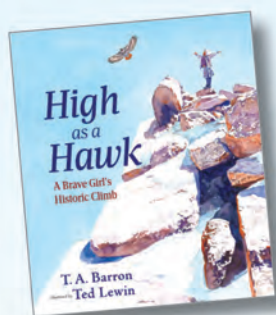
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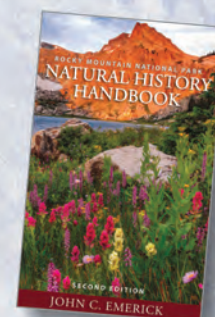
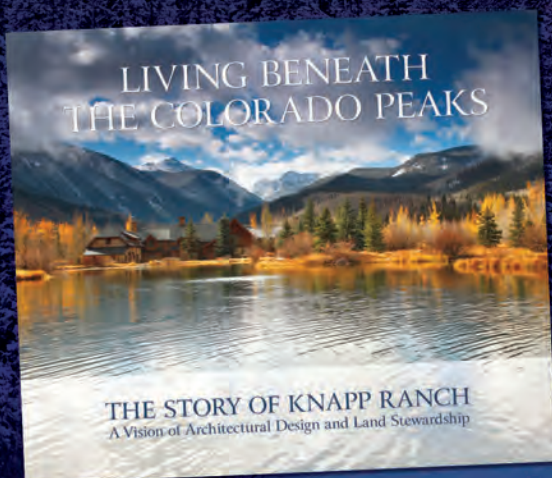


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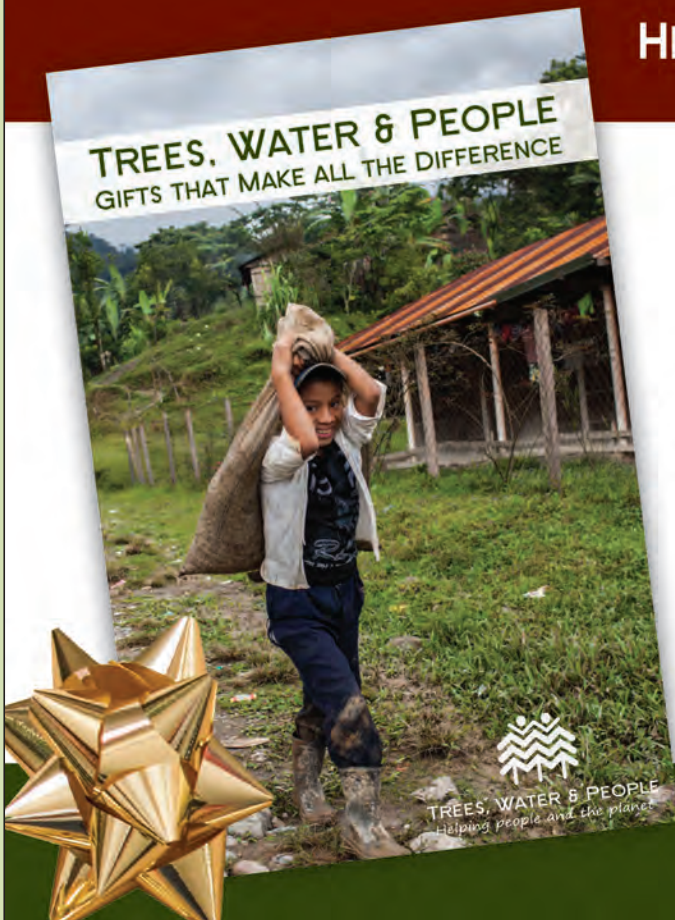
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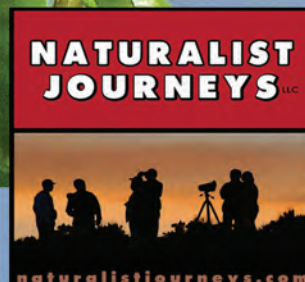
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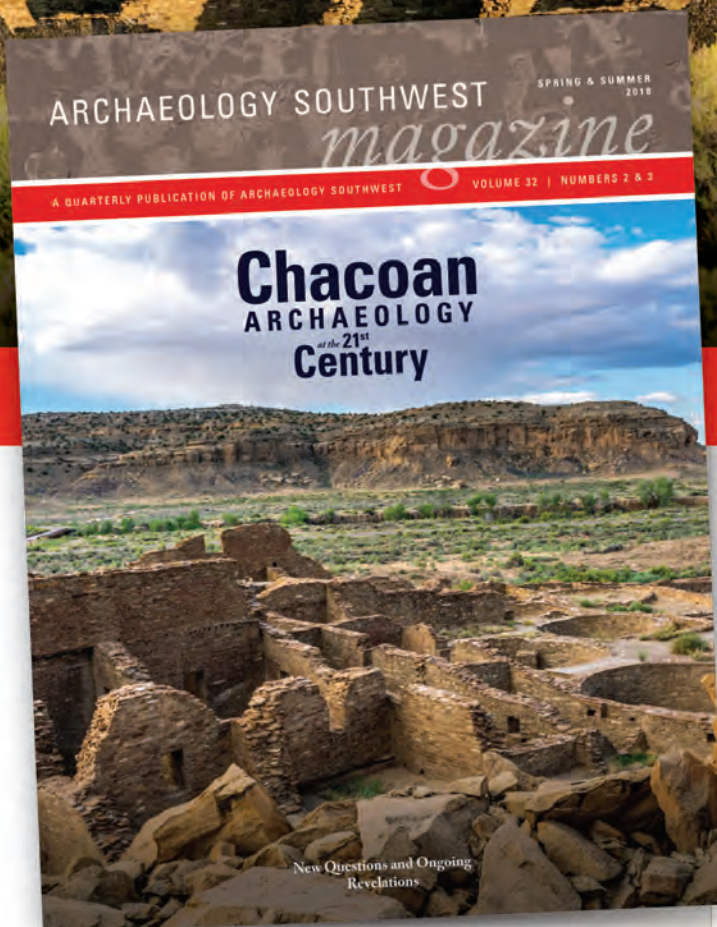
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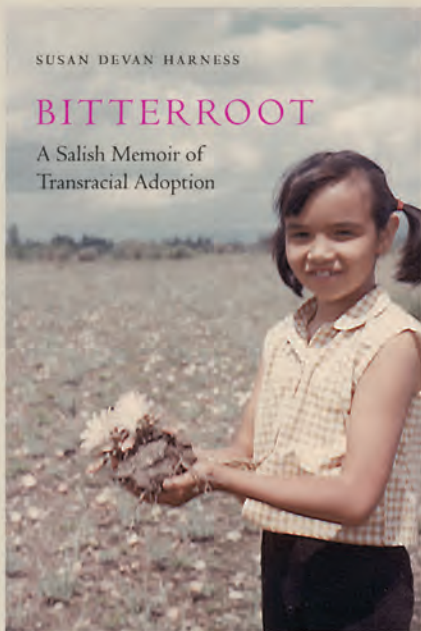
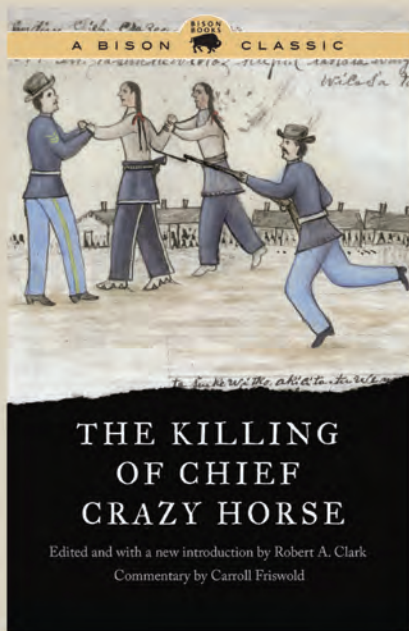
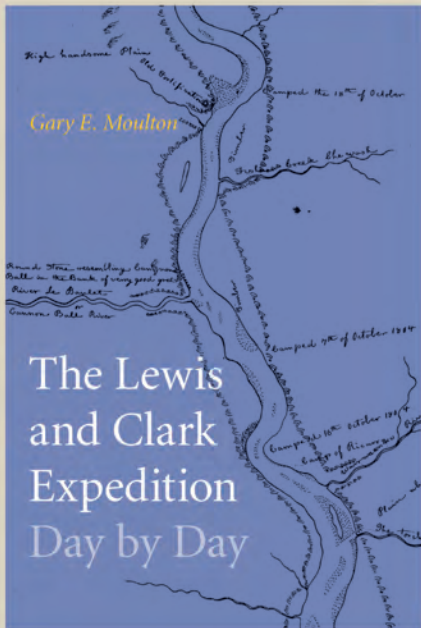
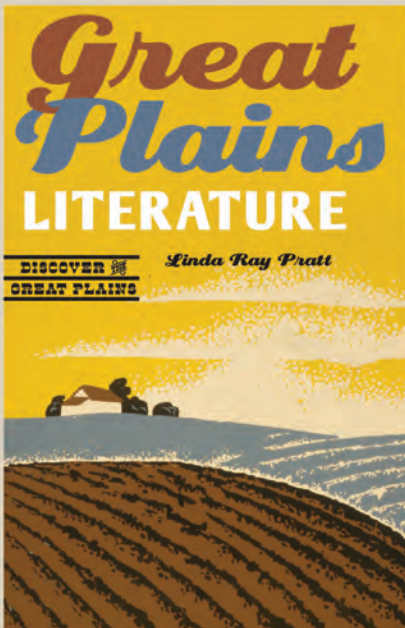
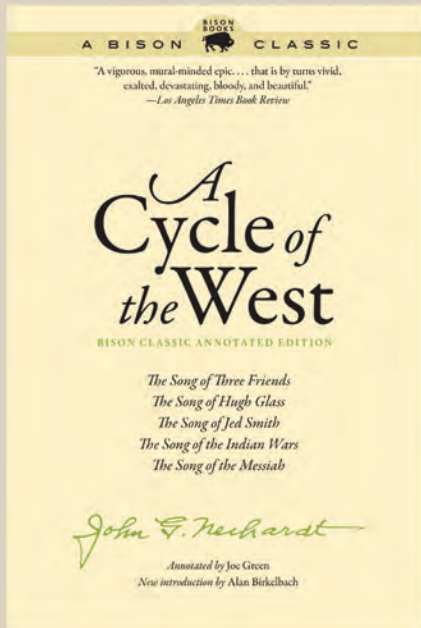
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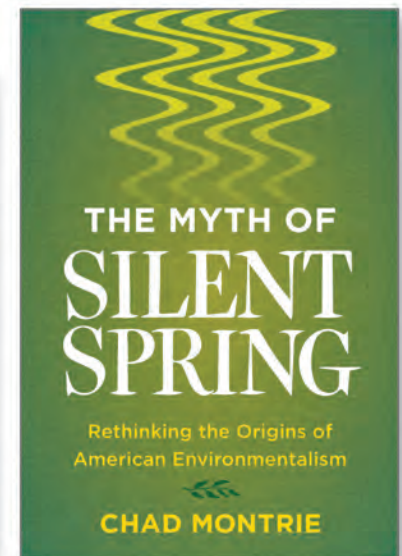
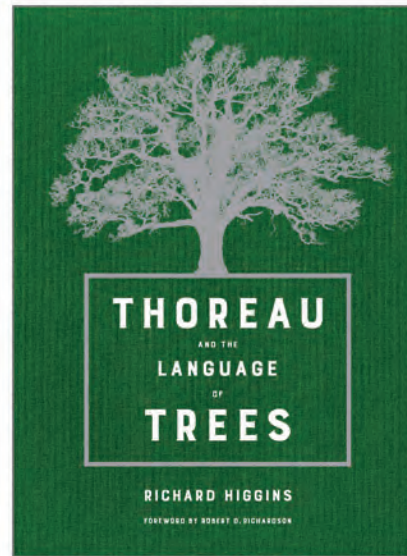
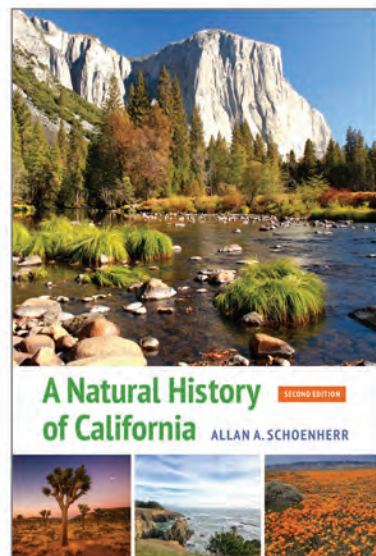
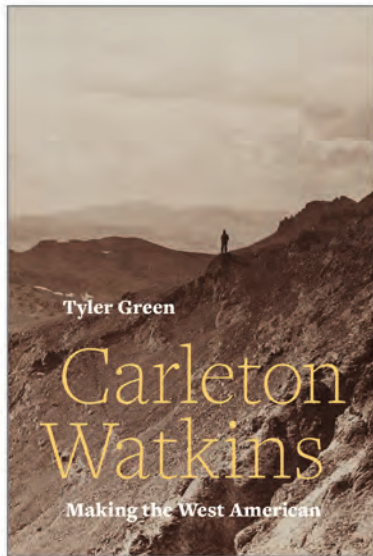
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Welcome to the Plastocene

The West is awash in microscopic pollutants

MAKIA MINICH

FEATURE BY
KRISTA LANGLOIS

On a still dark December morning in 2015, a red Ford Ranger plastered with stickers and jammed with kayaking gear left the lights of Bozeman, Montana, and headed south on Route 191, paralleling the Gallatin River. It drove through subdivisions and farmland, past a ski resort, and finally toward the border of Yellowstone National Park, where the river's headwaters rise. There, in one of the most intact, well-protected ecosystems in the United States, Gerrit Egnew, a Montana State University bioengineering student, pulled the truck onto a side road and parked.

The sun had just risen, its rays slanting through frosty spruce trees. The temperature was 10 degrees Fahrenheit.

Egnew and his friend Kirra Paulus went through a routine they'd practiced dozens of times: Dress in warm layers of wool and synthetic clothing, yank Gore-Tex dry suits over their heads, and shimmy into the neoprene spray skirts that connect them to their plastic boats. Snow crunched underfoot. Although the pair had been here just a few months earlier, the river was nearly unrecognizable in the grip of winter, banks of undercut ice narrowing its channel to less than eight feet across. Not far downstream, the blue-black water disappeared entirely beneath snow and ice.

These aren't the kinds of conditions whitewater kayakers normally get out of bed for, but Egnew and Paulus hadn't come for adrenaline. "I'm a middle-class white guy who gets to spend a lot of time outside, and sometimes I feel like the activities I love are selfish," Egnew told me later. Wanting to put his kayaking skills to more altruistic purposes,

he signed up to collect water samples for a Bozeman-based nonprofit called Adventure Scientists. The organization uses kayakers, skiers, climbers and other outdoor enthusiasts to gather environmental data from places too scattered, far-flung or difficult for scientists to regularly reach. One of its biggest projects revolves around a material that Egnew knows well from his years of rafting and kayaking: plastic.

More specifically, Adventure Scientists is interested in microplastics, pieces smaller than 5 millimeters in diameter. Some have broken down from larger items like disintegrating tires, toys or plastic bags. Others are shed from synthetic clothing, or come from personal hygiene products with exfoliating "microbeads." Some can be seen with the naked eye; others are so small that they're nearly invisible, and so light they can float on currents of air. And they are everywhere, from Arctic sea ice to

city drinking water. By the time Egnew began volunteering on the Gallatin in 2015, Adventure Scientists had already collected water samples from thousands of locations around the world. Ultimately, they found microplastics in 73 percent of them.

But while the ubiquity was startling, the nature of the project meant there was little follow-through at individual sites. And while the threat that microplastics pose to the world's oceans is well-established, there's been comparatively little research on their impact to freshwater and inland environments. So Abby Barrows, principal investigator of Adventure Scientists microplastics initiatives and a marine researcher with College of the Atlantic, decided to investigate plastic pollution in a single unlikely place: Montana's Gallatin River, which flows into the Missouri River and then the Mississippi. If she could identify how microplastics entered the headwaters of one of the country's biggest watersheds, it could help shed light on how the pollutants spread from streams to rivers to the fish we eat, the water we drink, and the fields where we grow our food.

Which is why Egnew and Paulus were slowly making their way down the last ice-free section of the Gallatin in December, dunking their hands into the frigid water to fill labeled metal water bottles. As Barrows had instructed, they sampled from the left, right and center of the river, always upstream from their kayaks. They took photographs of their gear and clothing so Barrows could later make sure that no plastic bits came from the volunteers themselves. Everything was going well. Then, just before the river disappeared beneath the frozen landscape, a bottle slipped from Egnew's hand. He pulled his sprayskirt and dove down to rescue it. At the river's edge, his polyethylene-molded boat scraped ashore.

IF FUTURE SCIENTISTS digging through layers of rock and sediment come upon the geologic strata being set down today, they'll find a colorful stripe of earth atop the plain rock and dirt of the pre-industrial era. Since plastics first became widespread in the mid-20th century, more than 9 billion tons have been manufactured, most of which has been thrown away.

Once they're buried, scientists have no reason to believe that these Crayola-colored bits and bobs will ever fully biodegrade. Instead of calling our current geologic epoch the Anthropocene, or Age of Humans, scientists who study plastics sometimes refer to it as the Plastocene. Geologists even recognize a type of rock — "plastiglomerate" — that's made from plastic and sediment that have naturally fused together.

So perhaps it should come as no surprise that when Egnew and Paulus turned in their water bottles, together

with more than 700 additional samples collected from 72 sites along the Gallatin over a two-year period, the samples were flush with tiny pieces of plastic. In peer-reviewed research soon to be published, Barrows found that 57 percent of the samples contained microplastics, with an average of 1.2 pieces per liter of water. If that doesn't sound like much, consider that the Gallatin flows at a rate of 6,000 cubic feet of water per second at its peak, and this seemingly clear mountain river begins to look like a conveyor belt for tiny pieces of trash.

Microplastics have been found in numerous other Western water bodies, from alpine tarns to the giant reservoir of Lake Mead. But the upper Gallatin is one of the most pristine watersheds in the Lower 48 — a playground for fly fishermen, whitewater boaters, mountain bikers and hikers. Much of the river flows through protected public lands. So

where's the plastic coming from?

One source could be the outdoor recreation industry. Mixed in with the organic material floating in the river water, Barrows finds shreds of synthetic rubber like that used in mountain bike tires, the neoprene used in wetsuits, and the PVA used in fishing line. It's intriguing, she says, "to have the materials from your study directly point to the land uses in a particular area."

Still, outdoor recreation isn't wholly to blame. As the Gallatin flows downstream — past Bozeman, into the Missouri River, and through cities, wildlife refuges and Native American reservations — plastics enter the watershed from a panoply of sources, including our own homes.

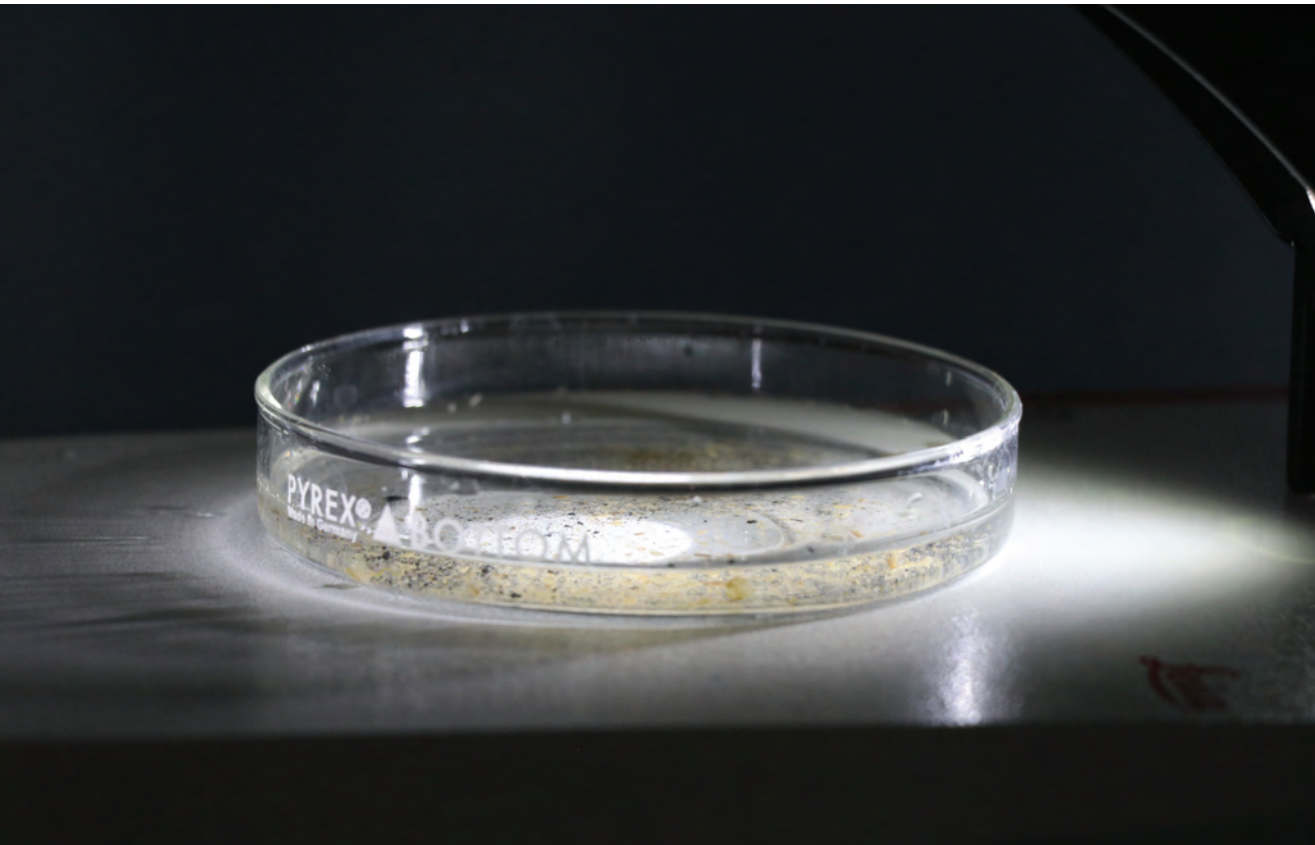
TO THE EXTENT THAT most of us think about microplastics, we're probably familiar with microbeads, the tiny plastic scrubbers that became common in face

Volunteers Kirra Paulus and Gerrit Egnew kayak to their sample site on the Gallatin River in December 2015. Their efforts as citizen scientists will contribute data to an initiative by Adventure Scientists that studies the impact of microplastics in the Gallatin Watershed.

LOUISE JOHNS



Microplastics were found in 81 percent of tap water and 93 percent of bottled water from around the globe, including the United States.



Sherri Mason, a chemistry professor at SUNY Fredonia, prepares to analyze the microplastic content of lake sediment samples. Top, a petri dish filled with microplastic and other small particles found in Great Lakes sediment. ERICA CIRINO

washes and toothpastes in the late 1990s. Following a surge in public awareness about the dangers microbeads pose when eaten by fish and other wildlife, Congress voted to ban them in personal care products beginning in 2017. But Danielle Garneau, an associate professor of environmental science at SUNY Plattsburgh who studies microplastics, says that microbeads never made up a large percentage of the microplastics she and her colleagues found in freshwater. A bigger problem, she says, are plastic fibers. Head to any coffee shop in Bozeman on a wintry Saturday morning, and the culprit is in plain sight. Fleece pullovers. Polypropylene leggings. Polyester hats. Globally, production of synthetic fibers — long, thin strands of plastics spun into threads much as wool is spun into yarn — more than doubled from 2000 to 2017. Today, roughly 58 percent of clothing is woven with them, including many technical outdoor fabrics. While these fabrics excel at keeping us warm and dry in the elements, they shed every time they're washed: up to 250,000 plastic fibers per jacket, per wash cycle.

That means every time one of Bozeman's 45,000 residents throws their synthetic base layers or fleece jacket in the wash after a sweaty day of skiing or kayaking, they're releasing microfbers into the city's sewer system. From there, the plastic-laced water travels to Bozeman's state-of-the-art wastewater treatment plant, where it passes through a variety of filters and tanks before being discharged into the East Gallatin River. Although Bozeman's plant meets some of the highest environmental standards in the United States, Garneau says wastewater treatment plants (like freshwater treatment plants) simply aren't designed to pick up particulates as tiny as microplastics. A 2016 study she co-authored found that municipal wastewater plants release up to 23 billion plastic particles into U.S. waterways every day — a major point source of freshwater plastic pollution.

Even plastics that are captured by treatment plants often end up back in the environment. They settle into the semi-solid residue, or sludge, produced by plants, which is then repurposed as fertilizer and sold or given to farmers. Scientists from the Norwegian Institute for Water Research and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences estimate that because of such fertilizers, more plastics wind up in Europe and North America's agricultural soils each year than currently exist in all the world's oceans. Inevitably, untreated irrigation runoff sends some of them back into our rivers.

Without additional research on the Gallatin-Missouri watershed, no one can say for sure how microplastic concentrations fluctuate as the rivers flow downstream, or to what extent they've contaminated wild and human communities. Still, studies from elsewhere in the

country paint the basic picture. Some microplastics are flushed out to sea, where they contribute to marine plastic pollution. Scientists estimate that some 80 percent of the plastic in the world's oceans originates from inland sources.

Other particles sink to the river bottom, where they may be eaten by benthic invertebrates like freshwater mussels. Still others bob along in the water column and are gobbled up by fish or birds. In the Northeast's Lake Champlain, Garneau has found an average of 22.93 microplastic particles in the guts of each bird she surveyed, 6.49 in fish, and .61 in invertebrates. Off the coast of California, University of Toronto ecotoxicologist Chelsea Rochman found microplastics in 25 percent of fish and 33 percent of shellfish caught locally and sold for human consumption. In both studies, the majority of particles were fibers.

Some of these microplastics are excreted, while others stay embedded in animals' guts and other organs that Americans rarely eat, except in the case of shellfish. But the chemicals that plastics are made with, including carcinogens like brominated flame retardants, can leach off plastics and be absorbed into muscles and tissues — parts of the fish bound for our dinner plates.

DINING ON CONTAMINATED FISH and shellfish is just one way humans ingest plastics. Researchers have also found microplastics in craft beer, honey, salt and — in research headed by SUNY Fredonia chemist Sherri Mason — in 81 percent of tap water and 93 percent of bottled water from around the globe, including the United States.

Because the study of microplastics is so nascent, there's been relatively little research on how eating them impacts human health, and many scientists are wary of being alarmist. "We're still asking basic questions," says Timothy Hoellein, an associate professor of biology at Loyola University Chicago who worked on the Gallatin River research. "A big part of microplastics research is still trying to understand where it is, where it's coming from and where it's going."

Laboratory studies, however, are beginning to reveal how eating plastics could affect animal behavior and physiology. The results have been mixed. Some studies show no changes, while others demonstrate repercussions ranging from liver toxicity to tissue scarring to a reduced appetite, which could affect wild creatures' survival rates. The differing results might be due to the fact that vastly different types of chemical compounds are lumped together as "plastics."

"Microplastics is a name we use for a lot of different types of contaminants," Rochman explains. "There are different shapes, different sizes, different suites of chemicals. When we're talking about pesticides, we never just say, 'What's the impact of pesticides?' We say, 'What's the impact of chlorinated pesticides?' or

'What's the impact of DDT?'" But with microplastics, that conversation just isn't being had yet."

Students in Rochman's lab are trying to tease out how, say, eating polyurethane foam impacts wildlife differently from eating polyester fibers. She hopes the results may eventually help regulate the production of hazardous plastics, the way similar research helped regulate pesticides. "We're not going to get rid of plastic," Rochman says. "It's a really important material. But we can think about using safer types." That could mean banning certain chemical compounds from plastic manufacturing, or perhaps engineering more environmentally friendly plant-derived plastics.

Like other plastic scientists I spoke with, Rochman is surprisingly optimistic. Instead of feeling discouraged by the pervasiveness of plastics, they believe the visibility of the problem makes it more likely to be tackled: Unlike climate change, plastic pollution is hard to deny. Environmental campaigns aimed at reducing plastic waste are encouraging some consumers to use steel straws, cloth shopping bags, and washing machine filters that capture microfibers, while the bipartisan cooperation on banning microbeads offers hope that other types of harmful plastics can also one day be regulated. California banned single-use plastic bags in 2016, and Seattle recently banned single-use drinking straws and plastic cutlery from being distributed within city limits.

Other Western states, however, are moving away from regulation. Idaho and

Arizona both recently passed legislation banning plastic bag bans, which means cities like Bisbee, Arizona, that independently voted to stop using plastic bags may have to drop their bans or risk losing state funding.

Yet landlocked Western states are hardly immune from the effects of plastic pollution, especially in rural areas where people are more likely to catch and eat wild fish. Keeping plastics out of rivers like the Gallatin could help keep microplastics out of humans' and animals' food supplies, both in the intermountain West and farther downstream.

The outdoor recreation industry may be responsible for only a fraction of the plastics entering Western watersheds, but as the number of mountain bikers, hikers and anglers toting plastic into wild places grows, enthusiasts like Gerrit Egnew are starting to reckon with the footprint they leave behind. Like nearly everyone else in this country, Egnew depends on plastics. After he dove beneath the icy water of the Gallatin to retrieve his water sample on that December morning, the plastic-derived gaskets and fabrics in his dry suit protected him from hypothermia. That's why he's happy to have contributed to research identifying the outdoor recreation's role in plastic pollution.

"Outdoor industries are often touted as solutions to more extractive types of industry," Egnew says. "I think that's probably true. But without knowing the impact of the outdoor industry ecologically, we can't really compare them." Quantifying that impact, he adds, is the first step toward mitigating it. □

A volunteer for Adventure Scientists collects water samples from a stream in the Gallatin Watershed.

LOUISE JOHNS



Krista Langlois is a correspondent with *High Country News*. She writes from Durango, Colorado. @cestmoiLanglois

This story was funded with reader donations to the High Country News Research Fund.

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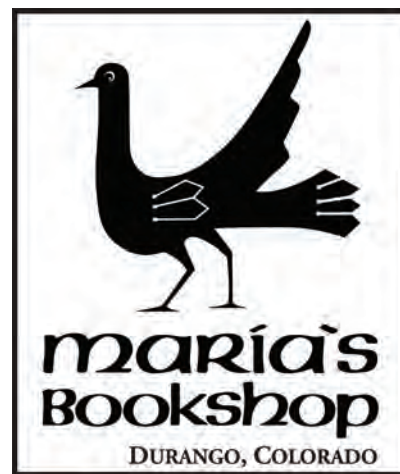
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A photograph of a man in a black t-shirt and blue jeans holding a young child in a striped shirt and green pants over a pond. The child is being held horizontally, as if being swung or about to be thrown into the water. The background shows a line of trees and a clear sky.


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A photograph of a smiling woman with dark hair, wearing a blue top and a colorful, patterned cardigan. She is standing in front of a large blue and white boat, possibly a ferry or a tour boat, on a body of water.

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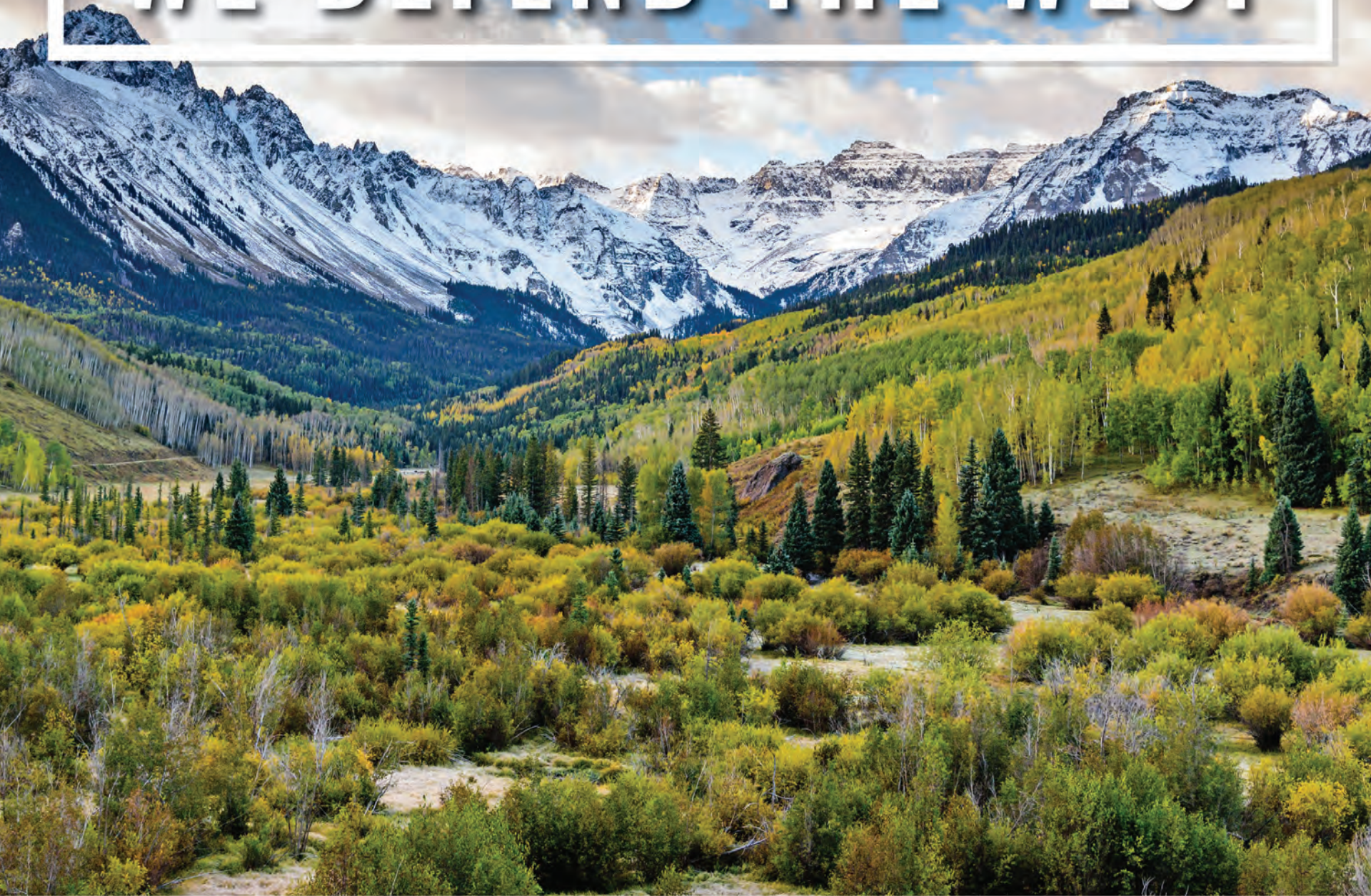
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Where the wild things are

Sgaawaay K'uuna offers viewers a compelling story and a blueprint for future Indigenous filmmakers

Near the end of *Sgaawaay K'uuna* (*Edge of the Knife*), the film's anti-hero, Gaagiixid, enters a dimly lit camp after surviving a winter alone in the rainforest — a punishment self-imposed after he caused the death of his best friend's son. Gaagiixid offers himself as a sacrifice to Kwa, his former best friend and the movie's protagonist, and Kwa is given the chance for deadly revenge. The audience would readily forgive him for taking it, but Kwa acquiesces to Haida tradition. Gaagiixid, "the Wildman," is bound and restrained instead, and in a flurry of cedar capes and low murmurs, the administration of medicines begin.

It's a glimpse into the way things were handled in 19th century Haida Gwaii, an archipelago off the West Coast of Canada, where Indigenous values prevailed: You didn't just lock someone in jail and throw away the key. You can rationalize the decision; perhaps the community needed every member alive, so it was worth rehabilitating wrongdoers whenever possible. Then again, perhaps it was more than that — an entirely different way of looking at the world. Regardless, it's an instructive and fascinating scene to watch, unburdened by a white protagonist providing voiceover, or worse, an anthropologist taking notes off to

the side. Throughout *Sgaawaay K'uuna*, audiences watch Haida tradition and life unfold without settler intrusion, making it easier to absorb the themes of this film: redemption and healing.

Directed by Hluugitgaa Gwaai Edenshaw and Jaada Yahlangnaay Helen Haig-Brown, *Sgaawaay K'uuna* is the story of friends who might as well be brothers. But their friendship reaches a horrible impasse, and each man must make his own journey toward reconciliation. Kwa is the responsible one, with a son, a wife and good standing in the community. Adiits'ii is reckless, driven to madness upon making a horrible mistake. This results in his slow transition into Gaagiixid, a wild supernatural creature.

Sgaawaay K'uuna is advertised as the first Haida-language feature film. That alone makes it remarkable, but it is more than that. The film is a window into the inner workings of a Haida community, its members' ideas of justice, humor, and matters as simple as food and daily entertainment. These details are often handled in a cursory fashion by non-Native filmmakers, usually given a brief exposition and then brushed aside in favor of the Anglo protagonist's worldview. Not in this film, not this time.

Featuring Haida actors coached

and trained by fluent Haida speakers, *Sgaawaay K'uuna* is a successful endeavor, quietly good and confident in the way it handles its material. From the opening credits, audiences may recognize the name of Zacharias Kunuk, one of the film's producers and the director of the 2001 hit *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*. Kunuk, who is Inuk (Inuit), shot *Atanarjuat* with an Inuit cast in the Canadian Arctic, and it was the first feature-length film to be written and directed in the Inuktitut language. *Sgaawaay K'uuna* shares DNA with *Atanarjuat*, but it lives in its own universe, in its own wonderful way.

There are no fish-out-of-water narratives or rite-of-passage elements in either *Atanarjuat* or *Sgaawaay K'uuna*, and neither film features white men (or women) finding their way, strangers in a strange land, learning important truths about life that the Indigenous people they encounter have always known. Audiences are accustomed to these recurring, tired old plot points, which serve non-Natives well but leave Indigenous people as the supporting cast. That's true even in films that brim with Indigenous content. Take, for instance, *Woman Walks Ahead*, released earlier this year, which stars Jessica Chastain as a painter and Michael Greyeyes as Lakota Chief Sitting Bull. Chastain is a fine actor, and her character, Catherine Weldon, is an interesting subject. But Sitting Bull's story likely offers more to viewers than the story of the non-Native who painted him. This trope is not only insulting, it can also clutter a film with so much exposition that the actual story becomes lost to cliché.

Sgaawaay K'uuna spares audiences such expositional labyrinths, instead plunging them directly into Adiits'ii's world, where community members depend on each other and the person you hunt with is as important as the one you eat with. It is a world built on trust.

The film marks a huge step in Indigenous film agency. How many times have you wanted to see a movie set in a pre-contact era about a tribal community without the Anglo conduit? I want to see Geronimo's story without having to listen to the U.S. Cavalry lieutenant who pursued him. I'd love to hear Quanah Parker's own story, without a drawling Texas Ranger spinning us a yarn. How did Tecumseh help create a confederacy of warriors to take on the United States in 1811? I want to hear these stories and more. *Sgaawaay K'uuna* takes us to this place, offering not only a compelling story but another blueprint for future Indigenous filmmakers. BY JASON ASENAP

Jason Asenap is a Comanche and Muscogee Creek writer and director (and occasional actor) based in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

After he kills the son of a friend, Gaagiixid must undergo a powerful ritual to return him to his former self.

FILM STILL



Life lessons learned on a dogsled

Hold tight and don't let go



We're making 10 mph across the frozen Chukchi Sea when Geoff spots a suitable ridge. "Whoa!" he calls to the team of dogs pulling our sled. I jump off and hold the brake for him as he fishes a hammer from his bag and pounds a snarg — a boltlike anchor — into three feet of solid ocean. Our ride secured, he stoops down to it and lifts a slight form in a shroud of blue tarp. Our three companions pull up on snowmobiles and dismount. Geoff places the still bundle on the crest of ice rubble. The huskies lined up in front of the sled seem to sense what's happening. They let out a chorus of wails: Diamond was born to lead, and today was her last run.

Seventeen years is a long life for a dog, on or off the Arctic Slope. In his eulogy, Geoff, a retired biologist, attributes her longevity to a diet of fish and blubber — and, he adds, "She didn't smoke." He relates how her infallible compass propelled her from fourth position to swing, and eventually to lead. She liked pulling sleds full of kids during the spring festival, he tells us, especially when she got to wear flowers in her harness.

But today, it's just the five of us: Geoff; a bowhead whale expert; a technician at the nearby NOAA station; a marketing manager at the tribal college; and me. We're part of a loose, rotating squad of volunteers who assemble most Sundays at Geoff's kennel to run the last dogsled team in Utqiagvik, Alaska, America's northernmost city.

It's a quiet ride back to town. The 20-knot wind that scoured our faces on the way out is our silent ally on the way

home as we circle around near Point Barrow. It's hard to feel blue in February, when sunlight finally roars back to northern Alaska, but the rocking-chair creak of the sled as glides over the unmoving sea promotes reflection.

In San Diego, two years earlier, I dabbled in surfing, played tennis, slugged craft beers. My wife, citing Homer, called it the "Isle of the Lotus-Eaters." Life was a series of pleasant inessentials in a sunny place nearly unmolested by the passage of time.

Not long before we laid Diamond to rest, on a trip back to San Diego, my father told me he had stage 4 colorectal cancer as we stood in a theater parking lot, waiting to see Star Wars. The five-year odds weren't good, he said, but he didn't want that to trouble me. For a moment, the sun's warmth faded, and time reasserted itself.

The American Kennel Club's age conversion chart tops out at 16 dog years, but it seems safe to say that Diamond attained the corresponding 120 human years. My father spent his 64th birthday in Alaska in April. We knew it'd likely be his last. Near Anchorage, we marveled at moose and melting glaciers from our rental car; he pronounced the collected sights "the trip of a lifetime." But when he stepped into my glittering otherworld, laying hands on the same wooden sled that has carried my friends and me over countless miles of ice and tundra, I hope he was able to see something else.

Life in a place like the Arctic Slope forces curiosity upon you. You come to carefully observe the natural world

because its vagaries bear on all that you do, from a run to the store to a flight to the next village. The cycles of seasons, weather and climate all play into a sense of steady chronology, but also one of wild wonder and possibility. "What may not be expected in a country of eternal light?" Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote of the fevered weirdness of the midnight sun.

For all the attention I've paid it, though, time does speed by, faster here than anywhere else, it seems. In October, my father died. The best I can do is find reassurance in nature's signs and schedule, as I do when the sun returns after two months of polar night, or migrating birds make their spring debuts and startle me with their song. This is balance.

But sometimes, as when permafrost thaws or coastlines erode or you get grim news from loved ones, balance collides with chaos. This is where I find the first principle of driving a dogsled useful: Hold on tight, and don't let go.

The Sunday after my father's visit, I again ran dogs with Geoff and crew, 18 miles out to the extremity of the continent and back. There's nothing mystical about the experience; it's the same weekly routine of snow, fur and slobber, but something about it lifts my spirits and sorts my sorrows. As usual, we set out into the wind, pressing our bundled faces against time, for time moves like the wind out here, and the wind is never still. □

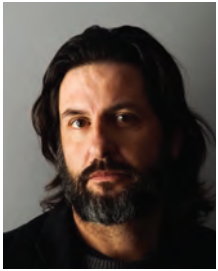
Griffin Hagle is the executive director of a regional housing authority and writes from Utqiagvik, Alaska.

A dog-sledding expedition in a storm on the frozen Arctic Ocean.

GORDON WILTSIE/
GETTY IMAGES

Sagebrush Rebel appointed to Interior Department

Property rights lawyer Karen Budd-Falen will give legal counsel on wilderness, wildlife and many of the policies she's spent her career attacking



PERSPECTIVE
BY JONATHAN
THOMPSON

The conservation community let out a collective sigh of relief earlier this year when Karen Budd-Falen, a Wyoming property rights lawyer, withdrew from consideration as the new head of the Bureau of Land Management. The reprieve was short-lived, however. In October, the Interior Department announced that Budd-Falen had instead been appointed deputy Interior solicitor for wildlife and parks — a more obscure, but still important position, and one that aligns with the Trump administration's apparent desire to push the American public out of the public lands.

Budd-Falen's four-decade-long career, which includes a stint under James Watt, Ronald Reagan's notorious Interior secretary, has been built on the defense of private property, part of a movement that is often opposed to federal oversight and environmental regulation. In 2011, she told a gathering of county sheriffs in Northern California that "the foundation for every single right in this country, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote, our freedom to petition, is all based on the right of ownership of private property."

This sounds like a noble cause, standing up for ordinary landowners when the government or corporations mess with their homes. And sometimes it is: Budd-Falen represented the legendary Republican-turned-anti-oil-and-gas activist Tweeti Blancett in her attempt to get the Bureau of Land Management to clean up the mess it made on and around her New Mexico ranch, and her firm often works with landowners to get the best deal from energy companies developing their property. But more often than not, Budd-Falen's vision of private property rights extends beyond a landowner's property lines and onto the public lands and resources — at the expense of the land itself, the wildlife that live there, and the people who rely upon it for other uses.

In a telling article in the *Idaho Law Review* in 1993, Budd-Falen and her husband, Frank Falen, argued that grazing livestock on public lands was actually a "private property right" protected by the Constitution — a notion that would certainly make it hard for federal land managers to regulate grazing. In 2012, Budd-Falen defended Andrew VanDenBerg, who bulldozed a road through a wilderness study area in Colorado's San Juan Mountains to access a mining claim, arguing that a 150-year-old statute meant to provide rights of way to miners and pack animals should apply to motorized travel and bulldozers. In 1995, she represented Wyoming landowners who felt that they had the right to kill more big game — a public resource — because limiting the number of hunting tags issued to them "effects a constitutional taking" of their property.

Budd-Falen's property-rights crusade has put

her in questionable company. In the early 1990s, she represented a number of southern Nevada ranchers — including Cliven Bundy — in their beef with the feds over grazing in endangered desert tortoise habitat. And while she condemned the Bundys' later anti-federal conflicts in Nevada, her work and words — often hostile toward environmentalists and federal land agencies — have helped provide an intellectual underpinning for the Bundy worldview.

Budd-Falen is a lifelong Sagebrush Rebel, a veteran of the 1980s-era conflicts over public-land management in the West. She is an alumna of the Mountain West Legal Foundation, which spawned the so-called "Wise Use" movement and helped launch the careers of both Watt, who tried to dismantle the Interior Department from within, and Gale Norton, George W. Bush's drill-happy Interior secretary. In 2007, she told *HCN's* Ray Ring that her most important case was *Wilkie v. Robbins*, in which she used RICO, an anti-racketeering law, to intimidate BLM agents who had cited her client for violating grazing regulations.

Outside the courtroom, her rhetoric has helped provide justification for those inclined to take up arms against federal agents, as when she described land-management agencies as part of "a dictatorship" intent on taking away "private property and private property rights." In the 1990s, Budd-Falen encouraged counties to create land-use plans that turned the National Environmental Protection Act against the federal government. Catron County, New Mexico, adopted a template with her help, in a plan that said, "Federal and state agents threaten the life, liberty, and happiness of the people of Catron County ... and present danger to the land and livelihood of every man, woman, and child."

Now, Budd-Falen is a fed. Her job will be to provide legal counsel to the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife and U.S. Geological Survey, on wild and scenic rivers, wilderness areas, environmental protections and endangered species protection. Few if any of those matters will benefit from a person whose worldview is so opposed to public resources, especially at a time when so many environmental laws and regulations are under attack. She'll be working under the acting solicitor, Daniel Jorjani, who was responsible last year for declaring that oil companies, wind farms and open-pit mining firms are not liable for the deaths of migratory birds. Nothing in Budd-Falen's record suggests she'll work hard to protect anything other than the dubious private property rights of people and corporations. If she seems these days to be less on the far-right end of the spectrum, that's because the spectrum has shifted. Budd-Falen, not so much. □

Jonathan Thompson is a contributing editor at *High Country News*. He is the author of *River of Lost Souls: The Science, Politics and Greed Behind the Gold King Mine Disaster*.

WEB EXTRA

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COLORADO

A self-proclaimed “redneck” spelled out exactly what kind of roommate he wanted in a classified ad in the *Durango Herald*: “No meth heads, no man buns, no BS. Horses OK. No cats. No couples. NO chicken-chasing dogs. Serious background check, no eviction notices, you will be bodily thrown out the door.” And what’s the rent for sharing his 40-year-old-trailer on its own 40 acres, should you qualify? “\$600/month plus one-half utilities.” Housing is tight in this southern Colorado college town.

THE WEST

No state has more airports — 282 — than Alaska, and the northernmost one is the Wiley Post-Will Rogers Memorial Airport in Utqiagvik. Once the snow falls, wildlife can’t help wandering onto the runway, and over the years workers have had to shoo away oxen, caribou, a wide variety of birds and the occasional polar bear, reports The Associated Press. But another critter made its first-ever appearance on the runway recently: a bearded seal, which humped its way inland for a mile from the Chukchi Sea. The animal was so docile it didn’t need to be tranquilized, but it was so plump — at 450 pounds — that it took a snow machine and sled to haul it off.

In Montana, meanwhile, the vandals allegedly targeting a Stevensville golf course turned out to be a grizzly bear lusting after earthworms. The bear snapped flag sticks and dug a huge hole on the green over several days. Yet it remained elusive: Golfers played through its visit but never reported glimpsing it. A culvert trap placed by state Fish and Game staffers corralled the 2-and-a-half-year-old male, which weighed close to 250 pounds and sported what one observer called “a massive head.” The bear was released close to the Rattlesnake Wilderness, reports the *Missoulian*.

NEVADA

Perhaps only in Nevada could Dennis Hof, a Republican candidate for the state Assembly, win election despite being dead for two months. Hof, 72, a proud self-proclaimed pimp, owned every legal house of prostitution in his county, and gained even more notoriety by appearing in the



THE WEST Be wary of those post-holiday discounts. CAROL FEY

HBO reality series, *Cathouse*. Hof wielded political heft; when a ballot initiative would have banned his brothels, his opposition to it proved decisive — only 4,000 voted in favor, while 16,000 voted against. *Rolling Stone*, which said Hof called himself the “Trump of Pahrump,” concluded that “Though pundits have long believed death to be one of the quickest ways to sink a campaign for office, conventional wisdom doesn’t have much of a foothold in southern Nevada.”

Nevada is definitely paradoxical, agrees the Center for Land Use Interpretation, a California think tank. On the one hand, researchers say, Nevada is the most urban state. Close to 95 percent of its 3 million residents live in either the metro areas of Reno or Las Vegas, two cities that take up only 2 percent of the land in the state. That means Nevada has the most people living on the least amount of land, “making it the most urban state and most rural state at the same time.” Nevada is also the most “open” state, given its 85 percent of publicly owned lands. Yet it contains the U.S. military’s largest

and most secretive restricted areas: “Go through that gate, pardner, and your freedom is likely to diminish considerably.” Nevada’s relative emptiness is drawing the interest of Southern California businesses, thanks to its “inexpensive land and permissive development atmosphere.”

WASHINGTON

Katharina Groene is alive today only because she met a day hiker on the Pacific Crest Trail, the 2,650-mile trek made famous by Cheryl Strayed’s book *Wild*. The 34-year-old had been hiking alone since May, and was determined to reach Canada, less than 200 miles away, when she met Nancy Abell, an experienced backpacker from nearby Sultan, Washington. The two women hiked together for two hours, and Abell began to worry. She told the *Washington Post* that she urged Groene, who lacked snowshoes, to turn back before heavy snow hit the difficult upcoming part of the trail. Groene could not be dissuaded. That week, three feet of snow fell, and Abell, more

worried than ever, finally called 911. “I just kept thinking of her being up there alone,” she said. Groene was in deep trouble: Her clothes and tent were wet, her only food was a Pop-Tart, and without snowshoes she floundered in the snow. She recorded farewell messages on her phone to friends and family, “apologizing for dying on the trail,” but rescuers — guided by Abell’s predictions regarding her whereabouts — set out to save her. After 10 abortive tries, a helicopter was able to land and rescue the hypothermic hiker from Munich, Germany. Groene said at a press conference that she had wanted to hike the trail because she “felt like she was losing faith in humanity. My faith in humanity is definitely restored ... box checked.”

WEB EXTRA For more from Heard around the West, see hcn.org.

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