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High Country News

For people who care about the West

WHAT KILLED WASHINGTON'S CARBON TAX?

And what does it say
about the future?

By Kate Schimel



Washington Gov. Jay Inslee speaks with people last June as he helps to gather signatures for a carbon tax initiative. Voters in Washington state went on to reject the measure. PHUONG LE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

On the cover

The sun rises behind the Space Needle in downtown Seattle, as seen last August through smoky skies created by wildfires in the Cascade Mountains and British Columbia.

SIGMA SREEDHARAN



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And what does it say about the future? By Kate Schimel

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Editor's note

The greatest of apes

We are at a strange moment in history. On the one hand, a sizable percentage of Americans do not believe in human-caused climate change, as though facts can be rejected at will. On the other hand, people who do understand the implications of a warming planet seem incapable of doing much about it. Our politics will not allow it: Conservatives continually block climate change legislation, while liberals have done little to prioritize it. And yet, the future lurks ahead of us, promising a warmer world, where crops shift, seas rise and species die out. We humans, being such intelligent apes, will probably survive, and I suppose there's some comfort in that.



But it's worth asking, at this moment, what is stopping climate action? During the 2018 midterms, the state of Washington was asked to vote on a fee that would have curbed emissions of carbon dioxide, the tricky little molecule that puffs from smokestacks and car exhaust and traps the sun's energy in the atmosphere, creating the "greenhouse effect." As Associate Editor Kate Schimel reports in this issue's cover story, the fee — seen by many as a tax — failed. The question is: Why? Like a detective in a noir mystery, Schimel goes in search of Initiative 1631's killer, examining the usual suspects — the oil and gas lobby, for example — and seeking clues among researchers, policymakers and activists. What emerges is a terrible plot twist: The culprit (spoiler alert) is us.

Homo sapiens are the greatest of apes, and we have mastered the art of survival. Our eyes evolved to scan the savanna for predators, our hands to make stone tools and field-butcher carrion. Our language helped us learn from our mistakes, to tell complicated stories by firelight. We developed our minds and leaped from an agricultural revolution to an industrial one. We've made amazing discoveries and invented complex systems, such as capitalism, to organize millions of people under tribal ideologies. But somewhere along the way, we became the agents of our own undoing.

The death of Washington's carbon tax teaches us a tough lesson: We have not yet learned to survive ourselves. For all our smarts, we are still dumb animals, unable to properly imagine the threats of the future, unable to act. The last great lesson we must learn, then, is how to outsmart ourselves. We must begin an ecological revolution, to find a way of being in the world that does not utterly consume it. Our politics, our policies, our habits, rituals, beliefs — all the stories that we tell ourselves — these must be realigned if the world as we know it is to survive us. It won't be easy, and there will be casualties, like Initiative 1631. But that does not mean we should give up. The time to act is now. It always will be.

—Brian Calvert, editor-in-chief

Trump's EPA is reluctant to punish law-breaking polluters

Under the Trump administration, the Environmental Protection Agency is more likely to give polluters a pass when they violate laws intended to keep the air healthy and water clean, according to recent reporting by the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative, a watchdog group. Nationally, EDGI found a 38 percent drop in the number of orders requiring polluters to comply with the law, and a 50 percent drop in the number of fines between 2017 and 2018. The EPA acknowledges a shift in focus from "enforcement" to "compliance." That means it's likely to work less as a cop than as an adviser to the companies it regulates, an approach critics say could incentivize companies to cut corners. "It's another iteration of EPA's industry-friendly approach," said EDGI member Marianne Sullivan, a public health expert at William Paterson University. "It says we're prioritizing industry's needs and desires over the health of our environment and the health of our communities." **CALLY CARSWELL**

Read more online: hcne.ws/reluctant-epa



A coal-fired power plant in Hunter, Utah. "ARBYREED," CC VIA FLICKR

Irrigating in California, which is entitled to more Colorado River water than any other of the seven Colorado River Basin states.

"LOCO STEVE," CC VIA FLICKR



How to share the Colorado River

To stave off catastrophic Colorado River shortages that could leave some Western communities high and dry, the seven Upper and Lower Basin states are close to finalizing a deal to prepare for a much drier future. As negotiations over the so-called drought contingency plans enter their final stages, here are the biggest takeaways from each state:

Wyoming, which has more water than it needs, now will keep more water than previously in the Flaming Gorge Reservoir to help regulate the level of Lake Powell.

Colorado farmers are weary of sacrificing water to prop up Lake Powell. Agricultural interests on the Western Slope say they will oppose a deal that forces them to use less water because they believe such contributions should be voluntary.

Utah has plans to grow, and it wants more water to do so. The state wants to build a massive pipeline from Lake Powell to southern Utah. State officials say the project is necessary, but they

haven't figured out how to fund it.

New Mexico has signed onto the drought contingency agreement, but state water managers are silent about what exactly the state has agreed to do to reduce its water use.

Arizona is holding up the basin-wide plan because it can't agree on how and where to cut its water use. Large agricultural economies in central Arizona, in particular, stand to lose.

Nevada has offered to forgo about 10 percent of its Colorado River allocation if there is a shortage declaration that reduces water deliveries to Nevada, Arizona and California.

In **California**, a battle is brewing between Imperial Valley agriculture and the coastal cities. Growers are concerned that restrictions could violate their historical water rights and limit their future use.

PAIGE BLANKENBUEHLER

Read more online: hcne.ws/river

Trending

It's a mistake to keep parks open during the shutdown

In 2016, the National Park Service hosted 320 million visitors, more than all Disney parks, major league baseball, football, basketball and soccer games and NASCAR races combined. Under the current government shutdown, leaving the parks open without essential staff is equivalent to leaving the Smithsonian open without any staff to protect its priceless artifacts. Yet as a result of the shutdown, which furloughed most park staff, this is what has happened. It is a violation of the stewardship mandate, motivated only by politics. While the majority of the public will be respectful, there will always be a few who take advantage of the opportunity to do lasting damage. **JONATHAN B. JARVIS, WRITING IN THE GUARDIAN**

You say

KATHY ROSENTHAL: "The parks should have been closed to the public. There is no personal responsibility anymore. Leaving the parks open is yet another political move by those that have no appreciation for our national treasures."

NANCY GRINDSTAFF: "It's a mistake to have a shutdown."

HUNTER GRAHAM: "Gotta make exceptions though, right? Yellowstone must stay open from the north entrance at Gardiner to Cooke City at the northeast entrance or else locals who don't have snow machines would not be able to leave Cooke in the winter. Just sayin'."

Read more online: hcne.ws/parks-shutdown and Facebook.com/highcountrynews

Photos



The band Morbithory performs in Many Farms, Arizona, left. Mutilated Tyrant's bass player, Laurence Tsosie, in the back of bandmate Rory James' truck. CLARKE TOLTON

“Metal is disenchantment with everything: establishment, society, the frustrations you have in your life, socio-economic problems, family problems, not being provided the resources or the opportunities that most people are given everyday, just because you're on the rez.”

—Jerold Cecil, manager for the Navajo heavy metal band I Don't Konform, discussing why the 1980s musical genre resonates on the Navajo Nation. See more of Clarke Tolton's photos at hcne.ws/metalheads

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BRAINWASHED, ALT-RIGHT

I had to read “Welcome to the Alt-American West” (*HCN*, 12/24/18) a couple of times for it to really sink in. A better title would have been the “Alt-Right West,” because that is mostly where the altered reality lies. What Editor-in-Chief Brian Calvert describes jibes with what I saw in a video years ago by a professor at the University of Northern Colorado. He was researching why, in the face of scientific data and consensus, people deny climate change. In one scene, he was interviewing a man on the street, a very stereotypical old, fat jowly white guy. As the interviewer recited his facts and figures, in sudden exasperation, the big guy blurted out, “Look, I know it’s true. I just don’t believe it.” When I read Newt Gingrich’s explanation of essentially the same thing, the conclusion I draw is that there isn’t much difference between a person’s deliberately altered beliefs despite facts, and being brainwashed.

Mark De Gregorio
Masonville, Colorado

NUCLEAR PROPAGANDA

I was very disappointed by “Generation Atomic” (*HCN*, 12/10/18), which read like pro-nuke propaganda. Uranium mining, milling, processing and transport all take up a huge amount of natural resources and produce carbon emissions. Furthermore, nuclear waste, which remains toxic for hundreds of thousands of years, is currently stored in thin-walled stainless steel canisters in the United States, unlike the more robust casks that are the standard for the rest of the world. At California’s San Onofre nuclear power plant, corroded, cracking canisters, full of highly radioactive waste, are sitting dangerously close to the ocean. In the process of moving them farther from the shore and into storage holes, a canister once nearly fell 18 feet.

Once there is an accident, there is no way to completely decontaminate the environment, as we have seen in Chernobyl, Ukraine, and Fukushima, Japan. Even decades later, radiation levels remain frighteningly high in rural and “wild” areas. In the Western U.S., this will turn into a double threat, due to the frequency and scale of wildfires.

Recently, a wide area of Southern California was exposed to radiation when the Woolsey Fire broke out at the Santa Susana Field Lab, site of a partial meltdown in 1959. Since the accident, horrifying cancer clusters have been documented within a 2-mile radius. Residents are once again rallying and pro-



testing the incomplete cleanup. Perhaps the Mothers for Nuclear should meet with the mothers of Santa Susana.

Carole Hisasue
San Luis Obispo Mothers for Peace
Los Osos, California

PERVERSIVE PLASTICS VS. TECH CLOTHES

Regarding microplastics in “Welcome to the Plastocene,” (*HCN*, 11/26/18) and the letter “Patagonia’s plastics” (*HCN*, 12/24/18), it feels like we’re continuing to jump on the last thing we heard, like it’s our biggest issue, while forgetting about the bigger underlying reasons for the problem. Plastics in outdoor clothing is certainly a concern, but it’s dwarfed compared to the general once-through plastic that pervades every aspect of our existence in this modern world of convenience.

I have been working for years to eliminate plastics from my life: refusing to buy bottled water or use plastic grocery bags, asking the meat counter for meat packaged in paper, keeping my own stainless steel cup handy to avoid to-go cups with plastic lids, and so on. I even make my own personal care products, deodorant, tooth powder and liquid soap, which my partner and I sell locally. I haven’t thrown a toothpaste tube away in probably 10 years, preferring to refill and reuse my same plastic bottle repeatedly.

Once habits that avoid plastic are established, they take hold and are hard to break. We all make purchasing decisions every day of our lives that either help to reduce the problem of plastic or contribute to it. Until we can get control of all the other simple ways we can say no to the once-through plastic that is 99 percent of the problem, I’m not going to

get too excited about a few fibers from my tech clothes.

Julie Smith
Golden, Colorado

FIGHT FOR MULE DEER

In my 70 years in Wyoming, I have witnessed a steady decline in mule deer numbers (“The record-breaking journey of Deer 255,” *HCN*, 8/20/18). Fields that once hosted hundreds of deer now have dozens. The proliferation of “town deer” is not a healthy sign, either. These deer have lost their ability to migrate, so they don’t benefit from migration’s diverse nutrition. You don’t have to be a veterinarian to see that their health is not optimal. Mule deer stick to their migration paths more than other big game and are very sensitive to disruptions in their home ranges. This makes them especially vulnerable to energy development in crucial habitat. Pinedale, Wyoming, has documented a 40 percent decline in its local herd, even as hunting brings \$300 million a year to the state.

Without habitat protections, mule deer will diminish, along with hunting opportunities and revenue. Meanwhile, the Bureau of Land Management has no enforceable measures in place to prevent oil and gas interests from fragmenting and disrupting narrow migration corridors and winter range. Wyoming should not allow itself to be treated like a second-class energy colony. We are, in fact, one of the last places on the planet that has an intact ecosystem, and it is up to all of us to let the BLM know that we will not let this be taken away without a fight.

Nic Patrick
Cody, Wyoming

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After natural disasters, workers face exploitation

Immigrant laborers are especially vulnerable to health risks and wage theft

BY JESSICA KUTZ

When the Camp Fire swept through the town of Paradise in Northern California, it destroyed more than 18,000 structures in its path. The wildfire reduced schools, churches, residences and businesses to piles of rubble and toxic ash, and a years-long project of cleanup and rebuilding is now underway. If history serves as any indicator, immigrants will play an outsized role in completing this hazardous work, a common pattern after natural disasters. But economics and immigration status can leave them vulnerable to exploitation in dangerous cleanup situations.

While some of the recovery after a natural disaster is done by people trained to handle hazardous materials, many subcontractors utilize an informal labor force made up of construction crews, domestic workers and day laborers, who lack that training. But dangers hide among the damage: A job as innocuous as removing furniture from a damaged house or ripping out drywall, for example, might expose a worker to asbestos and mold, toxins that can have long-term health effects.

The \$3 billion cleanup of this year's California fires, for its part, will entail everything from removing felled trees and large pieces of debris to containing hazardous chemicals like pesticides and paint solvents. California has standards in place to protect workers, including laws that require employers to provide proper training and protective gear. But the state's enforcement mechanism for these rules — the Division of Occupational Safety and Health, or Cal/OSHA — is severely under-resourced, said Jessica Martinez, the co-executive director of the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health, a federation of worker-advocacy groups. The department is authorized to employ just 275 inspectors, which amounts to one inspector for roughly every 60,000 workers in the state. A complaint "could take years" to be investigated, she said. That leaves employers with little scrutiny into their workplace safety practices.

"Legally (employers) are supposed to provide a healthy and safe working environment," said Nicole Marquez, a senior staff attorney with Worksafe, a California-based workers-rights organization. "But a lot of times that just doesn't happen." Paying for trainings and protective gear like N95 masks, which protect against things like mold, takes money from a business' bottom line. Because the work is

often performed through temporary contracts — or in many cases by day laborers — the thinking is that safety-related expenses just aren't worth the cost. Last year, San Francisco-based public media outlet KQED detailed several allegations of worker safety violations by Ashbritt Inc., a company that held one of the largest cleanup contracts after 2017's wildfires. In response, Ashbritt CEO Brittany Perkins maintained that the company addressed protective gear concerns. In the company's core values, she said, "Number one is safety first."

Undocumented workers are a large part of disaster cleanup crews and their immigration status makes them even more vulnerable, especially if they've been impacted by a disaster personally. Undocumented residents don't qualify for certain Federal Emergency Management Agency benefits, a government program that assists natural disaster victims. And if they or someone from their family lacks legal status, "they might be less likely to have evacuated to shelters or sought out help, because of fear in the current political climate," said Elizabeth Fussell, a researcher who studied the arrival of the Latino labor force in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

The fear of deportation can prevent laborers from reporting unsafe work conditions. "Many of these communities are very fearful of anything that has to do with the government," said Martinez. This fear is well-founded. In 2005, immigration officials impersonated OSHA officers in North Carolina to lure laborers to a meeting, where they made dozens of arrests.

Undocumented status can also make workers easy targets for wage theft in the rebuilding period following natural disasters, according to the nonprofit American Public Health Association. Examples include not being paid final wages when a job is done, or getting bad checks. Indeed, researchers at the University of Illinois found that over a quarter of immigrant day laborers interviewed, many of whom were undocumented, were victims of wage theft after Hurricane Harvey. At a public meeting in Houston, workers spoke about their experiences with exploitation after the hurricane, *The Guardian* reported. "It's sad, because we all count on our weekly pay to survive," explained Claudia (last name withheld) who is originally from Colombia. Her employer disappeared before she was paid for her work after the hurricane, she told *The Guardian*. "Many of my co-workers are fearful that another contractor will come and do the same thing to them."

Workers also experienced wage theft after the 2017 wildfires in California, Marquez said, citing instances where companies paid day laborers with debit cards that ended up being scams.

To help prevent these types of abuses at disaster cleanups, groups like the University of California, Berkeley's Labor Occupational Health Program dispatch trainers to work centers to educate laborers about the hazards of wildfire cleanup, how to advocate for their rights, and how to use basic protective gear. At a time when employers are shirking their responsibilities, Martinez said, knowledge is power. "Our concern is that these workers have access to basic training." □



Work crews clean up Santa Rosa, California, after the Tubbs Fire in 2017. JEFF CHIU/AP IMAGES FILE



JEFF VANUGA

THE LATEST

Backstory

More than 700 SNOTEL telemetry stations run by the federal government sit in high-mountain watersheds in 13 Western states, delivering vital data about water supply ("Taking water's measure," *HCN*, 6/13/16).

Climate models using SNOTEL data predict a decline in Western snowpack, with earlier melting in spring — thereby increasing the risk of floods, droughts and severe wildfires.

Followup

In December, University of Arizona researchers presented new on-the-ground findings supporting these predictions. Using SNOTEL data and other tools, the scientists laid out a grid of squares, 2.5 mile on a side, across the U.S. — a much finer resolution than previous 40-mile squares — and studied snow records between 1982 and 2016. **In parts of the West, annual snow mass has declined by 41 percent, and the snow season is 34 days shorter.** Scripps Institute of Oceanography climatologist Amato Evan told the *San Diego Union-Tribune* that "climate change in the Western U.S. is not something we will see in the next 50 years. We can see it right now."

JODI PETERSON

Jessica Kutz is an editorial fellow at *High Country News*. [@jktutzie](#)

Water savings may hurt burrowing owls

Can the tiny raptors adapt to irrigation changes in California's warming fields?

BY LIZA GROSS

On a scorching September morning, three curious young owls peer out from a burrow carved out of a sunbaked irrigation ditch. They train their bright yellow eyes on me, barely moving a feather. "There's one hunkered down, pretending to be a rock," says Stevie Sharp, pointing to a slightly larger owl, perhaps the trio's parent, standing sentry above the burrow. "Sometimes you see them, sometimes you don't."

Today, Sharp and I see plenty of owls, a bird nearly every 20 feet or so, along the hay fields or perched atop stakes scattered along one of the hundreds of canals that deliver Colorado River water to half a million acres of farmland in Southern California's Imperial Valley. Sharp, an environmental specialist with

the Imperial Irrigation District, pounds a stake with a bright pink ribbon stamped "owl burrow" into the parched ground next to the ditch. She flags burrows anytime a district project could disturb nesting owls, to help maintenance and construction workers avoid them.

For decades, the Imperial Valley, where the hardpan Sonoran desert meets the verdant agricultural fields that stretch from Mexico to the Salton Sea, has provided an improbable refuge for these owls. They were once relatively scarce here, but now the valley harbors 70 percent of the state's population, thanks to a 3,100-mile irrigation system that transformed this stretch of desert into a multibillion-dollar agricultural industry. The sprawling patchwork of irrigated farmland offered owls the ecological equivalent of big-city living: Round-tailed ground squirrels easily tunnel through the earthen canals, providing abundant nesting sites, and agricultural fields support a well-stocked buffet of insects and rodents.

Burrowing owls flourished here as a

happy accident of industrial agriculture, when they were mostly left to their own devices. But that began to change when the Imperial Irrigation District was forced to find ways to conserve water in a farm-to-city transfer agreement negotiated in 2003. Now, after years of water-tightening measures — and increasing loss of farmland to renewable energy production — biologists worry that owls may not be able to adapt to this rapidly changing landscape.

"Numerous efforts to conserve water, which is a good thing, have taken a toll on the burrowing owls," says Courtney Conway, director of the U.S. Geological Survey's Idaho Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit and professor at the University of Idaho.

"It's a conundrum," says Conway, a leading authority on burrowing owls. The population grew as owls took advantage of an artificial system and a laissez-faire approach to water delivery, he says. "Now they're declining in the Imperial Valley because we as a society are trying to get better at water conservation there."

Imperial Valley agriculture has depended on imported water since entrepreneurs dug the first canal to divert water from the Colorado in 1900. The All-American Canal now provides that lifeline, turning a region with about 3 inches of rain a year into one of the nation's most productive farming areas. The Imperial Valley, aided by year-round irrigation, produces 100 different crops, from alfalfa hay to wheat, and supplies about two-thirds of the nation's winter vegetables.

Western burrowing owls love to congregate along the lateral canals fed by one of the three main arteries that carry Colorado water to the irrigation district. They mostly tolerate the low roar of hay balers and passing trucks but invariably scatter as I approach, diving through the air like dolphins before alighting about 40 feet away. From a safe distance, they start hissing and bobbing, hoping I'll go away. Nesting season has ended, but remnants of scat, clothing and other scavenged tidbits still adorn their burrow entrances, likely signaling other owls to find another nest.

This robin-sized raptor, barely heavier than a baseball, once bred throughout North America's grasslands and deserts. But populations have tumbled nearly 40 percent over the past several decades, victims of our penchant for developing open

An owl perches on a stake marking its burrow near a dirt road and field.

LIZA GROSS FOR
HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

Liza Gross is an independent journalist based in the San Francisco Bay Area who writes about the intersection of science and society. She is the author of *The Science Writers' Investigative Reporting Handbook*. [@lizabio](#)





Though irrigators and farmers have been careful to not harm burrowing owls, the birds now face the threat of more efficient irrigation decreasing their food supply. LIZA GROSS

spaces, spraying pesticides and persecuting the burrowing animals that build their subterranean hideaways.

California listed Western burrowing owls as a “species of special concern” in 1978. Conservation groups petitioned the state to list the birds as threatened or endangered in 2003 — the same year water managers ramped up conservation measures — but officials refused, pointing to the healthy Imperial Valley population. Now, that population appears to be declining as well. Conway thinks lining 23 miles of the All-American Canal with concrete to prevent water from seeping into the dirt banks may have contributed to the decline by inadvertently destroying suitable nesting sites.

Breeding pairs in district lands dropped from about 6,500 in the early 1990s to 4,000 in 2012, according to Audubon California’s latest estimates. Irrigation district surveys in 2017 identified about 3,330 burrows, but did not estimate owl numbers.

Figuring out how many owls live in the irrigation district is far less important than improving methods to avoid them, says Dan Rosenberg, an ecologist at the Oregon Wildlife Institute and Oregon State University who has advised the Imperial Irrigation District. Rosenberg reported in 2006 that maintenance of canals and roads inadvertently buried three owls in their burrows near the Salton Sea. Yet maintenance can also benefit owls by clearing vegetation from canals, giving them a clear line of sight to hunt and avoid predators. Thanks to water district training programs, no owls have been killed over the past decade, aside from one incident, when a worker knocked a piece of concrete loose and

crushed an owl, according to reports filed with the state. Yet even the best avoidance methods can’t be 100 percent accurate, Rosenberg says. “There are just too many owls and too much landscape.”

The tiny raptors must also contend with vehicle collisions, pets and illegal shootings, along with loss of habitat to development and a burgeoning renewable energy industry. Agriculture is still the main economic driver in the valley. But farmland is increasingly being converted to solar, wind and geothermal projects to meet California’s Renewables Portfolio Standard, which requires utilities to get a third of their electricity from renewable sources by 2020.

Ironically enough, the owls are in trouble because we’re getting better at conserving resources: Loss of farmland to green energy development, much like lining dirt canals with concrete, means loss of habitat for burrowing owls.

Owls are often relocated to accommodate solar farms and other renewable energy projects in programs the state calls “mitigation,” Rosenberg says. “You might call it humane removal, in the sense that you’re moving it out of harm’s way,” he says. “But you’re not protecting that owl population. If you’re going to develop an area and you’re not increasing their habitat somewhere else, it will cause a decline. It’s not mitigation.”

The loamy soil that supports the cornucopia of crops here retains the grayish, red-brown palette of the surrounding desert. That palette suits the burrowing owls’ spotted coats, which make them nearly impossible to spot against the sun-dappled earth — until a vulture flies overhead and the “earth” looks up. In the fields

beyond the burrows, white-faced ibises, gulls and cattle egrets join owls to feast on the insects that feed on the crops.

They had far more food when alfalfa farmers routinely flooded their fields. “Crickets and other bugs start popping up from the ground, and the birds quickly tune into that and feed along the advancing line of water,” says Christian Schoneman, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist and manager of the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge. “You’ll get thousands of birds feeding in a single field taking advantage of this.”

As growers have turned to sprinkler irrigation, which uses about half of the water that flood irrigation uses, Schoneman says, owls and other birds have lost that food source.

Less water in the fields also means that less water is diverted to California’s largest and most endangered lake, the Salton Sea, which supports millions of overwintering birds.

Biologists think burrowing owls from other regions may overwinter here, too. And though most Imperial Valley owls stay here year-round, Conway says, it’s possible that some disperse to a handful of dwindling populations along the coast. “We can’t say for sure that Imperial Valley owls are providing that source,” he says, “but it’s likely that they’re at least contributing.”

The state promised to come up with a comprehensive conservation plan to protect California’s declining populations in 2008, but never did. “We ran out of money,” says Esther Burkett, statewide coordinator for burrowing owls for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. State officials drafted conservation guidelines in 2012, but they have no regulatory teeth. The state still needs to get a better handle on population trends and how owls are affected by being relocated, Burkett says.

Lack of information is not the problem, Rosenberg believes. “Nobody wants to make these decisions because of the impact on development,” he says. “Instead, they’ve been moving (owls) around — calling it mitigation, as if that solves the problem.”

The good news, says Conway, is that burrowing owls are highly adaptable. “There are so many other species, like sage grouse, where it just takes a little development and they’re gone,” he says. “Burrowing owls are definitely not that way.”

Yet, as the decline of the owls throughout their range attests, even this highly adaptable species has its limits. For decades, these plucky little raptors thrived on the incidental benefits of an artificial landscape managed for farming, not wildlife. But if the conditions that allowed burrowing owls to bloom in this desert disappear, they’ll need more than benign neglect to survive. □



NATHANIEL WILDER

THE LATEST

Backstory

Some Republicans and **energy companies have long sought access to the estimated 10 billion barrels of recoverable crude oil in the coastal plain of Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.**

The 1.5-million-acre area provides essential habitat for caribou calving, polar bears and migratory birds. Although environmentalists, Alaska Native groups and moderate Republicans tried to protect it, Congress passed a bill in 2017 requiring the Bureau of Land Management to begin leasing the area to energy companies (“In Alaska, wildlands lose out to roads and drill rigs,” HCN, 2/28/18).

Followup

In late December, the **BLM released an environmental impact statement for ANWR’s coastal plain whose three options would open between 66 and 100 percent of it to leasing.** The agency acknowledges that development could impact subsistence hunters and wildlife, cause water and air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, loss of permafrost and vegetation, and reduced recreational opportunities, but energy companies have already applied to begin seismic exploration. Public comment on the BLM study is open until Feb. 11.

JODI PETERSON

Indigenous podcasts elevate true crime

First Nations reporters reinvent a common formula

BY ELENA SAAVEDRA BUCKLEY

"That's the power of storytelling, and that's the power of being able to create space, to have empathy, and to connect with people who have been misrepresented in the media."

—Connie Walker, host of *Missing and Murdered: Finding Cleo*

In May 2017, Connie Walker, a longtime reporter for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, walked through Park View Cemetery in Medford, New Jersey. It was a sunny morning, with birds squawking, and Walker held a microphone to pick up the crunchy footsteps that she and her producer, Marnie Luke, made among the graves.

Walker knew what she was looking for; she'd seen a photograph of the squat headstone for 13-year-old "Beloved Daughter, Cleo L. Madonia," born 1965, died 1978. "It's quiet here, which is good," Walker narrated, "because I imagine we're a strange sight."

The cemetery search begins the fourth episode of *Missing and Murdered: Finding Cleo*, the second season of Walker's popular podcast. *Finding Cleo* investigates what happened to Cleopatra Semaganis Nicotine, a Cree girl from the Little Pine Reserve in Saskatchewan, Canada, who was forcibly taken by social workers, adopted in the United States, and given a new name. Over the course of the show, Walker, also a Cree woman from Saskatchewan, and Cleo's biological siblings learn how Cleo ended up in Medford and what happened in the final moments of her short life.

Finding Cleo is generally considered a true-crime podcast, giving it the advantages of the increasingly popular genre; at the time of this writing, six out of 10 podcasts in Apple's top U.S. charts involved murders, swindlers or nightmarish doctors. *Finding Cleo* has been downloaded over 17 million times and frequently appears at the top of Canadian podcast charts, along with *Thunder Bay*, a podcast by Anishinaabe host Ryan McMahon that investigates crimes against Indigenous residents in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

But *Finding Cleo* doesn't focus on a death for its own sake. The story's true mystery lies in systems that dwarf a single event: the Canadian government, child welfare practices, Indian residential schools and the colonial legacies that shadow Indigenous lives. The Indigenous reporters behind *Finding Cleo*

and *Thunder Bay* weave true crime and Indigenous history together — deploying a trusted formula to reveal a world frequently invisible to non-Indigenous listeners, but reaching beyond the violence that draws much of the public's attention.

In the cemetery, Walker gasps. "There it is," she says, spotting the headstone. Walker and Luke stand quietly in front of it. The discovery is a turning point that will lead Walker to documents about Cleo's adoption and to people who knew her during her short lifetime. Walker works like a detective in reverse — she finds the grave to confirm Cleo's death, but it's a better clue to the mystery of her complicated life.

In the four years since *Serial*, the true-crime show so trailblazing it was simply named after its format, podcasts have become a formidable medium. If audiences keep growing, within two years, more than half of all Americans will have listened to podcasts. Major publications have reporters who cover them as a beat, and juicy ones like *Dirty John* have been adapted for television. Gimlet Media, a for-profit podcast network started in 2014, produces 24 shows and routinely brings in millions of dollars.

Investigative and true-crime podcasts have reached the point of parody. *Saturday Night Live* has spoofed them more than once. A sketch about an award show called "The Poddys" includes categories like "Best Nervous White Girl In A Place She Doesn't Belong." In her acceptance speech, the award winner thanks "the thousands of women who chose to listen to gruesome confessions of neo-Nazis while walking on their treadmills."

Good parody only comes from familiarity, something reporters like Walker use to their advantage. The true-crime elements of *Missing and Murdered: Finding Cleo* — scattered clues, cliffhangers — work to push listeners toward the structures behind events. Much of the show centers on the Sixties Scoop, when Canadian social workers moved tens of thousands of Indigenous children into foster and adoptive homes. In Saskatchewan, the Adopt Indian Métis program ran ads about available children in newspapers, on television and on the radio. Walker also interrogates



Indian residential schools, some of which survived into the 1990s. Cleo's mother, Lillian, was sent to one. "I know that to understand Cleo, I have to understand what her mother went through," Walker narrates.

Walker prefers being this kind of historical detective. "Some of the feedback we got that was the most meaningful was people who said, 'I thought I knew about residential schools and about their legacy, but now I understand it in a different way,'" she said. "That's the power of storytelling, and that's the power of being able to create space, to have empathy, and to connect with people who have been misrepresented in the media."

Walker isn't a big fan of true crime podcasts herself, but she appreciates their ability to guide listeners to bigger ideas. A longtime television reporter for the CBC, she had never produced a podcast before the first season of *Missing and Murdered*, which focused on the killing of a Gitxsan woman named Alberta Williams. The form, she realized, could provide the time and context for stories that two-minute news spots couldn't.

In *Finding Cleo*, time is reserved for talking about the reporting itself. For Walker, transparently discussing the difficulties of reporting traumatic events is one of the podcast's most enduring elements. She wrestles with whether to interview one of Cleo's siblings, April, who lives with bipolar depression. "I know that *Finding Cleo* is so important to her family, and this family's story deserves to be told," she says in the episode. "But I don't want to make life more difficult for any of them."

These practices are somewhat rare in

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the field. Maya Goldberg-Safir is the artistic director of the Third Coast International Audio Festival, known as “the Oscars of radio,” which this year awarded *Finding Cleo* “Best Serialized Story.” “I sort of ate it up,” she said about the show. She thought the true-crime genre gained a new edge in Walker’s hands. “She’s not only telling us the story, but she’s demonstrating how to tell the story,” Goldberg-Safir said. “We heard Sarah Koenig tell the process of *Serial*, but I think Connie’s process is particularly important to her.”

Walker clearly feels at home in parts of *Finding Cleo*, particularly when she’s visiting the Little Pine First Nation or hearing people speak Cree. This instinctual sensitivity is helpful during interviews, and it allows Walker, and her listeners, to access an internal bank of experience. Walker’s emotions are not a separate layer of the podcast; they’re organic outgrowths from the collective weight of many stories like *Cleo*’s.

Ryan McMahon knows few things as well as a microphone. He’s worked as a standup comedian for years, and podcasting isn’t new to him: He hosts two and runs an Indigenous podcast network. But making *Thunder Bay*, distributed by *Canadaland*, felt different.

McMahon grew up in the Couchiching First Nation, a small community in Ontario on the Minnesota border. He always knew about the problems of nearby Thunder Bay, population 100,000, that affect its Indigenous communities: a high murder rate, dangerous encounters for Indigenous residents and government corruption. McMahon wanted to investigate the forces

that propped up its patterns of violence.

“There are podcasts that try to solve murders,” McMahon says in the first episode. “This isn’t one of those podcasts. The question I’m trying to answer is not who killed all those kids. It’s what killed all those kids.”

Thunder Bay profiles webs of crime and the colonial patterns that created them. It’s a collage rather than a case file, often highlighting the reporting of local journalists. One episode details the mayor’s involvement in protecting a lawyer accused of sex abuse; another explores the city’s community of sex workers; and another, one of the most affecting, traces the pattern of uninvestigated disappearances of Indigenous teenagers. As in *Finding Cleo*, structural racism connects the dots.

Like Walker, McMahon isn’t on Team True Crime. He considers the genre “sort of bottom of the barrel,” with podcasts that often value morbidity over thoughtfulness. “But I will say that a lot of the top true-crime stuff is subverting the genre.” *Finding Cleo*, *In the Dark* and *My Favorite Murder* are among his favorites.

Listeners appreciate *Thunder Bay*’s approach; the podcast has made it to the top of Canada’s Apple charts, and it broke into the U.S.’s top 100, which McMahon called a rare feat for a Canadian podcast. (*Finding Cleo* made it all the way to number two in the U.S.) But neither show up on Apple’s U.S. list of the best podcasts of 2018, nor do they appear on many publications’ year-end roundups, losing out to the usual goliaths: *The New York Times*’ *The Daily* and *Caliphate*, or the third season of *Serial*.

It could be that American listeners simply choose *This American Life* over Canadian stories. McMahon, however, thinks otherwise: “The U.S. has no interest in remembering that Indigenous voices are still there,” he said.

“What we’re talking about is an industry that has yet to make space for us on purpose,” he said. “We have the chance to make sure that the space is equitable, diverse and empowered by ensuring that there are certain voices at the table. But we have to do that on purpose.”

When *Finding Cleo* won “Best Serialized Story” at Third Coast, it competed with “the most well-resourced and funded institutions in American podcasting,” Goldberg-Safir said. Standing with her team at the Chicago award ceremony, Connie Walker accepted the trophy — a custom-made wooden radio — noting how the issues they investigated haven’t ended.

“(Indigenous children) are still being separated from their parents and their families and communities, and ending up in the child welfare system. Indigenous women and girls are still disproportionately victims of violence in Canada and in the United States,” she said.

As a part of the award, *Finding Cleo* was distributed to public radio stations around the country, allowing Americans to stumble across the podcast and skirt the “subscribe” button.

The special aired during Thanksgiving weekend, a fraught time for many Indigenous people in the U.S. As Isabel Vázquez, Third Coast’s producer, noted: That felt right. □

Left, Connie Walker tells the stories of Indigenous women and children in her podcast, *Missing and Murdered*.

CBC MEDIA CENTRE

Above, Thunder Bay, Ontario’s high murder rate and government corruption are explored in Ryan McMahon’s podcast.

MÉLANIE/FICKR CC

Anna Ortega
on the hunt
for rising
trout outside
of Laramie,
Wyoming.
BEN KRAUSHAAR



Sportsmen flex their political muscles

In the midterms, public land access issues helped several candidates nab governorships

BY CASSIDY RANDALL

On Dec. 2, 2017, onstage in a cavernous auditorium at Boise State University, two of the three Republican hopefuls for Idaho governor, Lt. Gov. Brad Little and businessman Tommy Ahlquist, discussed their views on public lands in front of a crowd of hunters and anglers. The forum, sponsored by the Idaho Wildlife Federation, Trout Unlimited, and 16 other sportsmen's groups, was a pivotal one in a state where public lands are a defining issue. The third candidate was conspicuously absent: Rep. Raúl Labrador, whose voting record in the House had already proved him a staunch public-lands critic.

In a political climate marked by public-land threats, Labrador's absence spoke volumes, and he lost the primary to Little by 5 points. "In not coming to a sportsmen's forum, you allow everyone to fill in the blanks," said Michael Gibson, Idaho field coordinator for Trout Unlimited. "Gov.-elect Little was willing to come in front of hunters and anglers and say he supports public lands." In a state where only 12 percent of voters are registered Democrats, that primary victory all but handed Little the governorship.

Republicans were once instrumental in passing laws like the 1964 Wilderness Act and the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. In recent decades, however, the party has developed a reputation as the enemy of public lands, a stance further solidified by the Trump administration's rapid rollback of protections. But in Idaho and Wyoming, two of the West's most conservative states, hunters and anglers threw down the gauntlet, demanding state policies that

protect access and voting down gubernatorial candidates who threaten public lands. As state legislatures shift in 2019, sportsmen's groups are positioning themselves to fight the administration's erosion of public-land protections.

In the early 20th century, conservation became a political issue in America, fueled largely by Theodore Roosevelt's desire to protect rich hunting and fishing grounds. Republicans carried on that legacy until the early 1990s, when the GOP began opposing environmental initiatives. Once President Donald Trump took office in 2016, his administration slashed national monuments and put increasing amounts of public land up for resource extraction. In Congress, Republicans refused to renew the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a popular program that safeguards natural areas.

In the West, the Utah, Montana and Nevada state legislatures have introduced resolutions urging the transfer of federal lands to state ownership. Sportsmen's groups generally oppose such transfers, as they would likely limit public access. In Wyoming, for example, state parks ban camping, preventing multi-day backcountry hunting and fishing trips. In addition, state land is managed to fund schools, which means potentially cutting off public access in favor of gravel pits, increased logging and land sales.

More than half of Idaho is federal public land, including the Frank Church-River of No Return, the biggest contiguous wilderness in the Lower 48, and 891 miles of wild and scenic rivers, including the Salmon, Owyhee and Snake. But the state has no national parks. That's partly because Idaho is a sportsmen's state,

and hunting is not allowed in national parks. In 1972, for example, state leaders from both parties ended a decades-long fight over making the Sawtooths a national park by designating the region a national recreation area, thereby protecting its status as popular hunting grounds. In 2016, tensions boiled over when Texas billionaire brothers Dan and Farris Wilks purchased vast chunks of old timber company land that recreationists had long used to access adjacent public lands. Gates appeared on roads, cutting off hunters, anglers and off-road vehicles. As the Wilkses bought increasing tracts, people's frustrations grew, marked by enraged comments on news articles and letters to the editor. A confrontation at a property line between an armed security guard and a recreationist helped push Idaho lawmakers to update trespassing law, which sowed further unrest. "Critics sought the entire session to pin the bill on Dan and Farris Wilks, the Texas billionaires who have angered hunters, ATV riders, campers and local officials in central Idaho after they closed off 172,000 acres of forest they bought in 2016," the *Idaho Statesman* reported.

Voters like Jerry and Terry Myers, who manage a ranch and run guided fishing trips on the Salmon River, made public lands protections a central issue in the Republican gubernatorial primary. "We live here because we love this lifestyle, and we're always continually working to keep that lifestyle as part of Idaho," said Terry Myers, who is also president of the local chapter of Trout Unlimited. "Even if leadership isn't coming from the top down, it's coming from the bottom up, with the idea that those things built locally will build into the political arena."

Cassidy Randall writes about adventure, public lands and conservation from Revelstoke, B.C., and Missoula, Montana. [@cassidyjrandall](#)

Labrador's lackluster reputation on public lands galvanized the Myerses and other sportsmen. Opinion pieces in local media like *Idaho County Free Press*, *Idaho State Journal*, and *Idaho Press* denounced the congressman as a public-lands-transfer activist, while groups like Idaho Wildlife Federation and League of Conservation Voters highlighted his voting record on public lands. His subsequent refusal to attend the candidate forum at Boise State confirmed voters' suspicions. Little — the establishment candidate, who was seen as likely to continue outgoing Gov. Butch Otter's opposition to the land-transfer movement — prevailed.

In Wyoming, public lands proved one of the defining issues in the race for governor. As in Idaho, sportsmen are a powerful force: Thirty percent of the state's 600,000 residents applied for a hunting permit in the last five years, and 18 percent bought fishing licenses. "If you look at the voting public, which is 50 percent, I'm going to bet every one of those guys who hunt, vote," said Dwayne Meadows, executive director of the Wyoming Wildlife Federation. "And if you look at the fact that roughly two-thirds of the state are registered Republicans, that's a lot of voting Republicans who are hunters."

In August 2018, at a candidate forum hosted by the Wyoming Wildlife Federation in the crowded Republican primary, three candidates, Harriet Hageman, Taylor Haynes and Rex Rammell, expressed support for public-lands transfer, with Hageman going so far as to suggest a one-million-acre pilot program of land transfer to the state.

Hunting groups picked up on the issue immediately. *Right to Roam*, the most listened-to hunting podcast in the state, made it the focus of an episode on the candidates. The Wyoming Hunters and Anglers Alliance endorsed Mark Gordon — a multiple-use public-lands advocate who frequently hunts on Wyoming's public lands — because of the forum, citing his stance on issues related to hunting, and his opponents' stances on land transfer (Full disclosure: Both Gordon and Little formerly served on the board of *High Country News*.) Gordon won the primary with 33 percent of the vote, while Foster Friess, who received Trump's endorsement but "provided a mix of positive, negative, and neutral stances on sportsmen's issues," according to the alliance, got 26 percent. Hageman, who had been polling well before the forum, came in with only 21 percent.

"I think all the public-lands transfer conversation has done is galvanize the sportsmen," said Meadows. "You can see it in the growth of organizations like mine over the last few years, and it's powerful."

Public-land issues also had an impact in other Western states. In the New Mexico race for governor, Republican Rep.

Steve Pearce went on the record as supporting the Land and Water Conservation Fund despite previously voting against it in Congress. Pearce lost the race to Democratic Rep. Michelle Lujan Grisham, who supported public-land protections and is also an avid fly-fisher. "Our community is a staunch supporter of public lands," said Kerrie Romero, executive director of the New Mexico Guides and Outfitters Association.

"Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona are all moving more toward the Democrats, and that's in part because of the GOP being tone-deaf as to why people of all political stripes value public lands," said David Jenkins, executive director of Conservatives for Responsible Stewardship. "I've always said that if you're trying to change the political right on environment, you have to show how that aligns with their values — and in the West, people's affinity for public lands is part of who they are."

In 2019, sportsmen's groups plan to continue the advocacy that helped Little and Gordon win their governorships. In rural states like Idaho and Wyoming, it can be hard to track what the legislature is voting on day to day. Even if citizens have a subscription to a Cheyenne or Casper newspaper, those papers won't always list individual legislators'

decisions. That is one reason the Wyoming Wildlife Federation is launching bill tracking with real-time alerts to follow specific legislators, so that citizens can let their elected representatives know how to vote. The group is also stepping up recruitment of local ambassadors in rural communities, to help explain how public-lands transfer and the administration's removal of protections could limit public access. Groups like Trout Unlimited and Artemis, a new sportswomen's advocacy organization, plan to ramp up trainings that teach people how to testify in hearings, call their elected officials and generally engage in local politics, all tactics intended to remind state politicians of the groundswell of local support that helped put public-land proponents in office.

Sportsmen's groups are already taking action in the federal arena as well: On the first day of the 116th Congress, House lawmakers reversed a 2017 measure that made it easier to sell off or transfer public lands — a measure that had been widely criticized by hunters and anglers.

"The overarching thing that every sportsman can agree on is public-lands defense," said Gibson. "Over beers or at meetings, we might argue about regulations or season length. But whether the season is a week or a month, or you keep two fish or four fish, you have to have access to them." □

"If you're trying to change the political right on environment, you have to show how that aligns with their values — and in the West, people's affinity for public lands is part of who they are."

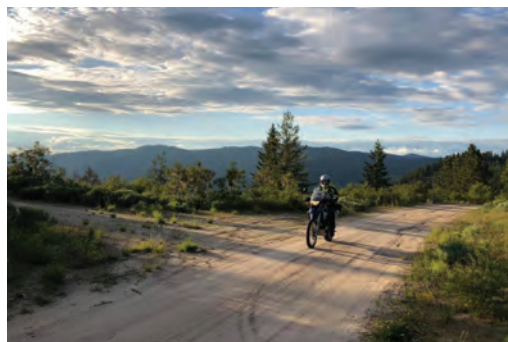
—David Jenkins, executive director of Conservatives for Responsible Stewardship



Becca Aceto, an Artemis ambassador, poses for a post on the Idaho Wildlife Federation Facebook page encouraging Idaho voters to register. MAGGIE ACETO

► Boise Ridge Road, Idaho, a U.S. Forest Service road, was closed to recreationists after being purchased by the Wilks brothers in 2016. DAYTON YOUNG

► ► Dwayne Meadows, executive director of the Wyoming Wildlife Federation. COURTESY DWAYNE MEADOWS



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Paperboy, Toquerville, Utah, 1953.
DOROTHEA LANGE

IN A RUGGED LAND: ANSEL ADAMS, DOROTHEA LANGE, AND THE THREE MORMON TOWNS COLLABORATION, 1953-1954, By James R. Swensen
432 pages, softcover: \$34.95
University of Utah Press, 2018

In the 1950s, two legendary photographers created a body of work that has since been nearly forgotten. Dorothea Lange, whose images distilled the Great Depression, and landscape photographer Ansel Adams visited Utah — “The Place,” as Brigham Young called it — to document the lives of Mormon communities. Their “Three Mormon Towns” collaboration appeared in *Life* magazine, capitalizing on the public fascination with the growing religion, but the photographs all but faded from memory. In *a Rugged Land* re-assembles the images, capturing snippets of moving life as families rise from church pews, children balance atop horses and a mother cans pounds of green beans. In the text, James R. Swensen describes the project’s thorny history, showing how the images provide windows into the communities they depict as well as into the lives of their aging photographers, who hoped to “re-enter the discourse of photography.”
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Su Check & C.R. Abele | Littleton, CO
Mary Coulter | Bellingham, WA
James & Sally Crompton | Colorado Springs, CO
Myron Davis | New Plymouth, ID
Gary Falxa | Eureka, CA
Gertrud Firmage | Salt Lake City, UT
Cass Fannesbeck | Pocatello, ID
Bill Gordon | Thermopolis, WY
Dan Grenard | Cañon City, CO
Linda Grey & Terry Root | Golden, CO
LaDonna V. Harris | Albuquerque, NM
Doug Hesse | Denver, CO
Tina Kingery | Centennial, CO
Gerald Kolbe | Hermann, MO
Steve Lewis | Eagan, MN
Manfred Luehne | Centennial, CO
Johnny & Pam MacArthur | Ranchos de Taos, NM
David McCord | Denver, CO
Pat & Barry McElDowney | Fort Collins, CO
James McGrath | Santa Fe, NM
William A. Molini | Reno, NV

Darlene Neid | Denver, CO
Michael Olsen | Grass Valley, CA
Gordon Patrick | Denver, CO
Karrin Peterson | Redmond, WA
H.R. Pitt | Sonoita, AZ
Stephen Powell | Central, SC
Myron & Lavona Price | Dove Creek, CO
David Primrose | Broomfield, CO
Joan Pryor | Lake Stevens, WA
Fred W. Rabe | Moscow, ID
Vicki Reich & Jon Hagadone | Sagle, ID
Peter Reser | Albuquerque, NM
Randy Rhodes | Denver, CO
Mary Richards | Evergreen, CO
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Phyllis Schwartz | Superior, CO
Tony Valim | Chico, CA
Charles Woods | Tucson, AZ
Kendra Zamzow | Chickaloon, AK

A new year, a new intern and a new investigative story

After a holiday break that gave much of our staff a well-earned reprieve from the daily news along with some cozy time with loved ones, we are happy to be back and starting a new year. Some of our team spent the holidays in far-flung places like Berlin and the U.S. Virgin islands, while others used the extra time to venture into the West’s winter wonderland.

Editor-in-Chief **Brian Calvert** (almost) figured out how to fit both his dogs into a skijoring rig so they can drag him through the Colorado mountains. Associate Editor **Maya L. Kapoor** took a backpacking trip to Point Reyes, California, where, thanks to the government shutdown, visitors were forced to bushwhack to nearby creeks to filter water, as water stations had been shut off. And Associate Photo Editor **Luna Anna Archey** went hiking in the sandstone canyons of Utah’s Capitol Reef National Park, after finding both Arches and Canyonlands closed. At Capitol Reef, Luna saw a “saintly park ranger still working and taking out trash.” Thank you, ranger, for your service.

Back in Gunnison, our editorial staff welcomed **Nick Bowlin**, our newest intern. Nick formerly worked as a politics reporter for *Energy and Environment News (E&E News)*. He took three days to drive in from the East Coast, which gave him just enough time to listen to *The Odyssey* before he starts his own at the magazine. Nick started his journalism career at St. Olaf College in Northfield,

Minnesota, where he majored in political science and edited the school newspaper. After a short stint at a daily newspaper in the Philadelphia area, he then moved to Washington, D.C., where he polished his reporting skills and delved into the money politics that govern national energy and environmental policy. He’s “very excited to write about energy development and public lands in the West” for *HCN*, he said, and we are very excited to make use of his expertise!

Meanwhile, readers **Bruce Baird Struminger** and **Isabel Constable** stopped by our headquarters in Paonia, Colorado, and left us some juicy story tips from their home state of New Mexico. Thank you both!

Speaking of tips: Assistant Editor **Paige Blankenbuehler** is opening an investigative reporting project examining home insurance and wildfires. If you or someone you know has experience dealing with post-fire insurance claims and would like to share, please send an email to paigeb@hcn.org. Discretion assured.

Finally, a correction and a clarification from our “Good News, Bad News” special issue (*HCN* 12/24/18). In “Blooms in the Desert,” we described *The Colorado Sun* as a nonprofit; in fact, the venture is an LLC. In “Patty Calhoun has hope,” we failed to disclose a prior working relationship between Calhoun’s *Westword* and the writer of the story. We regret the errors.

—Jessica Kutz, for the staff



HCN’s new intern, Nick Bowlin, is looking forward to skiing in the mountains surrounding Gunnison, Colorado. JESSICA KUTZ/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS





WHAT KILLED WASHINGTON'S CARBON TAX?

*And what
does it
say about
the future?*

FEATURE BY KATE SCHIMEL

Early on election night, as a drizzly dusk settled over Seattle, I made my way to the Arctic Club, a hotel decorated with explorers' maps and a fake polar bear — a fitting place to await the results on Washington's carbon tax initiative. Upstairs, in a dimly lit ballroom, community organizers and other supporters of the ballot measure had already gathered. Recent polls suggested a close call on the measure, officially called Initiative 1631, a local, political effort to address the global challenge of climate change.

This was the state's second attempt to tax carbon emissions, and in the months leading up to the vote, an unusually wide swath of Washington society had turned out in support. A coalition of environmental groups, labor unions, racial and economic justice advocates, health workers and leaders from nearly two dozen tribal nations had designed the tax proposal, and their supporters, in a mix of work-wear, fleece and the occasional suit, filled the airless room. If people were nervous, it didn't show. A few campaigners sat hunched over computers in the back corner, but mostly, it seemed, people were there to socialize. The line for the bar stretched the length of the room, and a bank of television screens on the far wall drew barely a glance as the evening progressed.

At 8:15 p.m., the buzz of conversation spiked, becoming a roar. "We did it," a young woman standing next to me said. I checked the televisions: A few counties were leaning toward approving the measure. The room began to perk up. Daisy-chains of young supporters,

Craig Cundiff's mural *My Child, Our Air*, in Seattle's Georgetown neighborhood, was inspired by a day in 2017 when his 4-year-old son wanted to go to the beach, even as smoke from wildfires mixed with the usual smog that lingers in Seattle's air from all the traffic there. CRAIG CUNDIFF



Northwest tribes and supporters rally for Initiative 1631 last October at the Western States Petroleum Association building in Lacey, Washington.

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linked arm-in-arm, wound through the crowd, their shirts proclaiming “Yes on 1631.” “This energy!” a man standing nearby exclaimed, surveying the clusters of people shouting enthusiastically about the results. “People who weren’t sure if they were going to win — that’s the best.”

The celebrations lasted a few minutes. Then a strange hush swept the room, rippling outward from the televisions. People pulled out their phones to refresh elections pages. A second wave of results had come in, and the tide had turned. By 9 p.m., Initiative 1631 was dead.

A few speakers got up to laud the hard work of campaign staff, and the room, which hadn’t quite lost its party feel, echoed with the murmur of people dissecting a loss that hadn’t sunk in. Then the speeches ended, and people began to leave, making their way to the city’s gloomier bars or pedaling home in the dark. As the room emptied, I stood there refreshing my own phone, wondering what had just happened, and what it might mean.

THE FAILURE OF WASHINGTON’S CARBON TAX proved a dim coda to the state’s long fight to control rising temperatures and reverse their effects on its most vulnerable communities. Its demise raised big questions about humanity’s ability to address climate change. Yet its failure had seemed improbable. After all, in the months leading up to the vote, climate change made its mark on much of Washington life. Over the summer, a ragged line of wildfires scorched the Northwest, curling from British Columbia through eastern Washington and down to Oregon. Wheat fields and forests burned and towns throughout the region were choked with wildfire smoke. In Seattle, people halted their daily runs and commuters wore masks to work, as an orange murk hid the hills of the suburbs and clung to the Space Needle. In August, a mother orca lost her calf, then carried its body on her nose for 17 days, a painful reminder of species loss and habitat degradation. In the fall, many of the state’s largest salmon and steelhead fisheries closed,

from the Yakima to the Columbia River, thanks to warming rivers and oceans. Just a few weeks after the election, the National Climate Assessment confirmed that all that was likely just an ominous portent of things to come: Climate change threatens the region’s infrastructure with landslides, rising seas and aberrant weather, while its most vulnerable communities face deteriorating air and water quality.

Given these reminders, now would have seemed a prime time for Initiative 1631. For years, economists have said that a carbon tax — which essentially builds an economic incentive to curtail emissions of carbon dioxide — is one of the most efficient ways to combat climate change. Initiative 1631 proposed to do this by putting a fee (\$15 per metric ton) on carbon emissions from the largest polluters, then slowly increasing that fee, with the revenue going toward programs that reduce greenhouse gases and pollution and their effects. Washington voters, in other words, were given a specific ac-

tion to undertake while they lived out the specific consequences of climate change.

It made sense here, in a green-leaning state where calls to climate action ring louder than in, say, coal-dependent Wyoming. Throughout the Intermountain West, the oil and gas industry provides a lot of jobs and wields a lot of influence, and a significant number of voters support mining and fossil fuel extraction. But in the Northwest, that's not the case. In Washington, hydroelectric dams, not fossil fuels, have long provided the state's energy. In 2017, the state received just over 20 percent of its energy from coal or natural gas, and its only coal power plant is on track to close. That reality has helped green Washington's politics and identity, especially in the western part of the state. Seattle made a commitment in 2002 to eliminate the city's carbon emissions from electricity, one of the first American cities to do so, and voters passed renewable energy standards in 2006. The state put a limit on emissions in 2008. But Initiative 1631 failed, and Washington must now confront a darker version of itself, in the kind of identity crisis that comes only in defeat.

IN THE PAST DECADE, the Northwest has seen a slew of wins in fights against carbon-emitting infrastructure — and a slew of losses on climate policy. KC Golden is a longtime climate campaigner and, until recently, a senior policy advisor at Climate Solutions, which helped craft Initiative 1631. Now almost 60, Golden claimed his first climate victory in the 1980s, when his group Northwest Energy Coalition was part of regional energy efficiency efforts. In those days, Golden was fighting the “greenhouse effect,” an early name for the warming effects of carbon dioxide, and he won support by pointing to both reduced energy costs and environmental benefits. By 2008, Golden had helped craft local and state commitments to clean energy, and climate activists stepped back, thinking their local fight was mostly over and the federal government would pick up the slack. President Barack Obama's White House seemed committed, along with much of the world, to reducing emissions of greenhouse gases through regulations and other incentives, with states like Washington, Oregon and California poised to help lead the way.

By 2010, the decline of the U.S. coal market had become obvious, and the fossil fuel industry began to eye the West Coast for access to Asian markets. “They were holed up in the mountains with their coal, and they were trying to figure out where to go,” Golden said. The West Coast offered the quickest way from coal country to China, and so began a wave of proposals for trains to haul the coal and for coastal terminals from Oakland, California, to Bellingham, Washington, to export it. The natural gas industry also began to swell, proposing a dozen separate refineries and terminals with their

attendant pipelines and trains in Oregon and Washington.

Had every project been built, “it would certainly make us one of the top fossil fuel transport hubs anywhere in the world,” said Eric de Place, a programs director at the Sightline Institute, a nonprofit think tank focused on regional sustainability. In addition to concerns about air pollution and the safety of coal trains and gas pipelines, the proposals threatened the region's sense that it was a leader on climate change. “So much of the region had already invested in its identity as being on the forefront of clean energy,” Golden said. Climate activists drew what they called a “thin, green line” at the coastal Northwestern states, adopting a term coined by de Place to describe their role as a barricade against a fossil fuel boom.

The fight to block fossil fuel infrastructure drew widespread support in Washington and Oregon. The Keep It In The Ground movement, which opposes any new fossil fuel production, firmly established itself with direct action in “Blockadia,” as activists strapped themselves to a drill rig headed to the Arctic, blocked trains and demonstrated in the streets of Seattle and Portland. The rural communities of Hoquiam and Aberdeen unanimously banned new crude oil storage facilities in their towns. The Lummi Nation successfully killed a proposal for an export terminal for Montana coal outside Bellingham. In 2018, voters in Kalama, Washington, elected Mayor Mike Reuter, who promised to block construction of a plant for methanol, a fossil fuel with a heavy pollution fingerprint. In Oregon, voters elected a blue bloc of representatives, including Golden's brother Jeff in southern Oregon, who promised to block permits for an LNG export terminal at Jordan Cove.

Why were these so successful, compared to the carbon tax? Since 2013, legislative proposals for either cap-and-trade or carbon taxes have failed three times. A carbon tax failed on the ballot in 2016. In part, the problems with more abstract carbon-pricing proposals, including 1631, were societal and structural. “(Fossil fuel companies) have spent centuries creating a system of dependency,” Aiko Schaefer, one of the architects of 1631 and the director of Front and Centered, a climate advocacy coalition for people of color, said. Reimagining it will require a radical overhaul of societal structures, a process she thinks will take longer than an election cycle or two. “We're trying to break free and make a fundamental shift in our society.”

And the difficulties with that shift run deep in the human psyche. Terminals, refineries and railways exist in the material realm, de Place said. “If you take a mile-long coal train going through Seattle, it just doesn't look good,” said de Place. “We're animals, and we live in a physical world. That physicality did connect up the dots for people.”

PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS, yes, and political animals at that, forming loyal packs and scrapping over neighborhood HOAs, city councils, Congress and the courts. In the months since the vote, national climate politics have remained mired in feuding over partisan responsibility and inaction. But what killed the carbon tax was not a blind, party-line vote: the measure failed in red and blue strongholds alike. Of the 59 percent of Washingtonians who voted to re-elect Sen. Maria Cantwell, a Democrat who supports aggressive climate action, about a quarter rejected the carbon tax. In the end, the measure passed in just three places: Seattle's King County, Port Townsend's Jefferson County and the county that encompasses the San Juan Islands.

The simplest explanation is that people just don't like taxes, and oil and gas outspent green groups to exploit that dislike. In Washington, fossil fuel companies and lobbyists spent more than \$30 million to defeat Initiative 1631, versus \$17 million from supporters. The solution, then, would seem to be to convince people they'll be just as well off before a carbon tax as after — and to match fossil fuel interests' spending dollar for dollar. But some observers say the challenges with raising taxes to pay for climate action run deeper.

Nives Dolšak and her husband, Aseem Prakash, are both professors, focused on climate change and its human dimensions, at the University of Washington, in Seattle, who spend their days studying climate policy and pushing environmentalists to reflect on their approach. I thought they could tell me what killed the carbon tax, and I spent many rambling hours on the phone with them, discussing the tax's details, and its flaws. Whichever one I'd call, I'd find them together: They have been married for 19 years and often greeted me in unison in a well-worn routine. Still, they argued about the relative importance of this or that point and right up to election night, they were divided on one key point.

“We disagreed on whether 1631 would pass,” said Dolšak, a serious-seeming woman in her early 50s from Slovenia, speaking with a wry note in her voice. Dolšak thought it was doomed, while Prakash acknowledged ruefully, “I thought it would pass.”

Not that Dolšak enjoyed being right; 1631's defeat left them both deflated, she said. “It had all the structural factors in its favor,” said Dolšak, from the menacing weather that preceded the vote to the overall support for climate action in the state. “It had no business not passing.”

In the weeks after, as they ate dinner or got ready for work, they'd dissect the results: Is Washington turning conservative? Is any carbon tax doomed to fail? For Dolšak, the less optimistic of the two, the tax's failure reinforced her sense that sweeping climate action is far from imminent. “When we're thinking of solutions, I'm thinking in two to four

Initiative 1631 failed, and Washington must now confront a darker version of itself, in the kind of identity crisis that comes only in defeat.



Along the beach in Edmonds, Washington, a coal train passes behind Nives Dolšak and Aseem Prakash, professors at the Center for Environmental Politics at the University of Washington.

KAREN DUCEY FOR
HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

years,” she said. She came to believe it was a failure of Washington’s green self-mythology: “In Washington, we’re excited to support environmental action, as long as we don’t have to pay for it,” she said. “If a carbon tax cannot pass in good economic times, in a pro-environment state like Washington, then action on climate is far more difficult than it used to seem.” Prakash’s longer view gave him a more hopeful perspective, she said, forecasting what might happen thousands of years from now.

“That’s the Hindu in me!” Prakash quipped, meaning the tendency to think not just of this reincarnation, but the next and the one after that. Although he believes people will embrace climate action eventually, in the short term, he conceded, “I think things are going to get worse before they get better.”

Prakash blamed environmentalists and their approach. “The mainstream environmental groups are less willing to hear from the periphery,” he said. They focus on consolidating a liberal

base, he said, to their detriment. Many groups, including the Sierra Club and The Nature Conservancy, did not back an earlier carbon tax that was designed to appeal to more conservative voters. That, Prakash said, “was myopic.” (Mo McBroom, director of government relations for The Nature Conservancy’s Washington chapter, noted that 1631 differed from 732, as it “would have provided investments to make our state more resilient to climate change, including reducing risk of forest fire and addressing drought” and drew support from businesses, prominent philanthropists like Bill Gates, and health professionals.)

In the wake of the election, the couple published half a dozen pieces analyzing the failure that drew on their own discussions. “Nives and I have not given up on conversation,” Prakash said. “It comes out as a family compromise.” What they arrived at was simple: The failure of 1631 was about more than a deep-pocketed oil and gas campaign machine; it spoke

to climate action’s broader challenges. “We have anecdotal evidence that money doesn’t lead to electoral success,” Prakash said. And the messaging of the “No” on 1631 campaign fed on the rich vein of discontent around accountability for the funds the tax would raise, as well as the worry that voters, rather than large-scale polluters, would end up paying for the cost of climate change.

STILL, IT WASN’T ADVERTISING campaigns or partisanship alone that killed the tax: it got mired in the same murk that has slowed climate action for decades. The climate is too big for us to easily wrap our minds around, and so it proves to be a difficult issue to legislate. This election cycle, Jordan Stevenson was a fellow at the advocacy group Our Climate, which supported Washington’s carbon tax. A 20-year-old woman with square glasses and a knack for getting people to talk, she spent weeks knocking on doors in the Spokane area, on the far eastern side of the state, along with her husband.

She also talked to her father, back home in Vancouver. “He said, ‘I’m glad you’re working on this,’” she told me. “‘I’ll take a look.’” But in the end, she’s not sure he even voted. When she spoke to voters in Spokane, not many people there knew what the tax was, let alone what it had to do with the wildfire smoke outside their windows. “It still didn’t seem concrete or tangible to people,” Stevenson said. Voters told her: “The money I pay in taxes, the increase at the gas pump, it will never benefit me.”

Initiative 1631’s demise might have had something to do with moments like this, where the connection between taxing carbon and more immediate fears about one’s health or one’s job becomes obscured. The initiative promised to pool funds for projects, including new bus lines, land conservation grants, and training to transition fossil fuel workers into other jobs. But when people need to choose between their day-to-day concerns and a future pot of money for projects they can’t imagine, the day-to-day wins. Our minds are better suited to immediate threats — like snarling hyenas or flammable trains — and we struggle with the abstract dangers of a changing climate.

“People don’t get worried about problems that aren’t happening today or tomorrow,” Dolšák said. Those climate hawks who believe that extreme weather events, like wildfires and hurricanes, will inspire climate inactivists are overly optimistic, Prakash said. “An extreme weather event doesn’t affect political leanings.” Ongoing, intensifying hurricanes in Florida, for example, have not necessarily driven people to vote for liberal candidates who back climate action, and extreme weather has a relatively small impact on public opinion.

“A lot of environmentalists are approaching conservation and pollution reduction from a normative perspective: We have to reduce pollution and protect the environment,” Dolšák told me. Instead, the question is over the cost required to take action: “How much is society willing to pay to reduce this problem versus another, equally important problem?”

Despite the work of scientists and researchers, whose models are getting better at explaining the chaotic relationships between climate and weather, the truth is that the destructiveness of a particular storm is hard to link straight to a changing climate — what experts call “the attribution problem.” Smoky summer days in Idaho can seem far removed from a tax, or fee, that will somehow reduce carbon emissions, somehow slow climate change, and somehow decrease wildfires. In this way, climate change can boggle the imagination. Unsurprisingly, the carbon tax found wide support among the state’s tribal nations, some of whom face the obvious possibility of displacement due to rising seas, and in Seattle’s communities of color, where air pollution already causes higher-than-average rates of asthma.

In short, the difficulty of addressing climate stems from its very power: Its effects are inextricable from the way we have configured our society. If we have to name 1631’s killer, it might be what geographer Mike Hulme called the “climate of climate change.” Hulme, an expert in climate change theory at the University of Cambridge, argues that our concept of climate is only partly rooted in objective truths about the material world. At least as powerful is the fact that climate fundamentally formed human cultures, contributing to our idea of it as static. It is impossible to separate ourselves from the climate far enough to get a clear look at it, something equally true of many injustices and economic structures. All of these things are wrapped together, but the climate is changing, and so must our analysis of it.

“All aspects of human life are now analyzed or represented in relation to climate: gender, violence, literature, security, architecture, the imagination, football, tourism, spirituality, ethics, and so on,” Hulme wrote. “All human practices and disputes can now be expressed through the language of climate change, which has become a new medium through which human life is lived.”

Given this, the fight over what to do about rising temperatures epitomizes all our other disagreements over what justice — let alone climate justice — might, and should, look like. For example, Stevenson, the canvasser, was first drawn to climate activism through her interest in reproductive health and justice: “There are areas where people’s children are not growing up healthy because they’re breathing in fumes or drinking fossil fuels in their water,” she said. She used that argument to talk to her dad about climate change, invoking his sense of familial values and his worry for his kids and grandkids. The fight for the carbon tax, then, becomes a fight for what the future of our society ought to look like — and on that, we remain deeply conflicted.

SOME SAY THE DEATH OF THE CARBON TAX

was easily foreseen. “The word ‘tax’ is probably the most reviled word,” said Hal Harvey, CEO of the firm Energy Innovation, which helps design renewable energy policies around the globe. “The first lesson is: Don’t lead with your chin.” Harvey, an energy wonk with a cheery, blunt manner, said the state’s climate coalition should have pushed for more immediately achievable ends first, such as fuel efficiency standards modeled on California’s, or tighter building regulations. “If you had to choose between performance standards and a carbon tax, you’d be insane to pick a carbon tax,” said Harvey.

Dolšák tends to agree: She hypothesized that even cap-and-trade, which often amounts to the same thing as a carbon tax, might have passed in the state, given that it sidesteps the word tax and directly limits emissions. A quirk of state law classified 1631 as a fee, evoking a

parking ticket for emitting, rather than a cost to everyday consumers, but most voters identified it as a tax.

Economists generally support a carbon tax over regulations or building standards, because it costs all emitters fairly, in proportion to their emissions. A building standard, for example, might require different windows, different insulation, a different design ... and by the time you’re done, it’s hard to disentangle what you did from what you might have done otherwise, and even harder to say how much more money per ton of carbon was effective. In practice, however, many key emitters are relatively unaffected by a carbon tax. Those who build new



buildings are rarely the ones paying the energy bills, so a tax on emissions is more likely to hit the building’s occupants.

On the other hand, voters — most of whom aren’t economists — tend to prefer energy standards because they put the costs on those most directly responsible for carbon-emitting systems, the real estate developers and car designers. And although the cost of new standards varies between industries, within them, the costs are the same. An engineer at Volvo isn’t likely to compare her efficiency costs to those of double-paned windows in a new high-rise. Rather, she’ll look to her competitor at Peugeot, who is under the same constraints.

Washington may already be learning its lesson. Less than a month after the carbon tax failed, Gov. Jay Inslee, a Democrat who backed it and has suggested that he might run for president on a climate change platform, held a press conference to announce a new green legislative deal. “This is the greatest endeavor of our time,” he told a crowd of reporters

Hal Harvey, CEO of Energy Innovation, who says proponents of Washington’s Initiative 1631 needed a better strategy. COURTESY OF ENERGY INNOVATION



KC Golden on the Seattle waterfront, overlooking the Alaska Way Viaduct. As a senior policy advisor at Climate Solutions, he helped craft Initiative 1631. KAREN DUCEY



Kate Schimel is an associate editor for *High Country News* based in Seattle. [@kateschimel](#)

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at a workspace for energy efficiency innovators in Seattle. “It is a moment of great peril but it is also a moment of great promise.” He unveiled a plan he hopes to put before the state Legislature this year, one that encompasses clean fuel standards, tighter building codes and a shift to 100 percent clean energy.

The time for a carbon tax will come, Harvey said. The warming climate will produce — in fact, it is already producing — challenges that altered consumption habits and more efficient buildings can’t pay for. The costs of relocating communities farther inland from the coasts, for example, won’t be recouped from sales of Teslas. But for now climate activists are stuck with the art of the possible. “The essence of strategy is making choices,” Harvey said. “‘Everything’ is not a choice.”

IN THE WEEKS AFTER THE DEATH of 1631, climate activists took little time to grieve,

refusing to declare defeat. This wasn’t the end, they swore; it was just the beginning. “2019 is a year we can make a lot of progress on this,” Nick Abraham, a spokesman for the Yes on 1631 campaign, told me. “We’ve moved the conversation away from, ‘Should we take action?’ to, ‘What should action look like?’”

“I want to make sure people don’t take the vote count and say, ‘Pffft,’ and move on,” Schaefer, the head of Front and Centered and one of 1631’s designers, said. “When my kid plays soccer, when he loses a game, I don’t say, ‘Don’t play soccer anymore.’”

But if climate hawks want to make progress, they’ll need to grapple with the cause of death for Initiative 1631. Not long ago, I met Golden in a noisy coffee shop a little over a mile away from the site of the election night failure, for a final postmortem. He was in a reflective mood: Climate Solutions was in the midst

of moving offices, and they’d unearthed years of news clippings on the long fight for climate action in the state, records of campaigns and failures going back more than a decade. Golden’s mind was on what would come next, including setting aside the fight for a carbon tax, for now. “Carbon pricing is not our quest,” he said, his voice both uptempo and steady. Carbon taxes are just a tool. “Our quest is to deal with climate change.”

Without a course correction, climate activists may well find themselves right back where they started, raising the body count on failed climate initiatives while blithely marching forward. In Canada, for example, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau faced blowback for his carbon tax proposal. And not long after the U.S. midterms, France underwent a major political crisis, brought in part by a fuel tax meant to curb emissions. In the U.S., advocates are crafting an economic stimulus package — a Green New Deal. And there, at least, they seem to have taken the hint: That package sidesteps a carbon tax entirely.

Over a cup of tea, Golden dissected, and then dissected again, the faults of the tax and the future of climate action. “The fundamentals are there,” he concluded. But the moral urgency, the sense that life after oil is a real possibility, the feeling that anything useful can be done — those aren’t. In Washington, even as winter faltered and delivered a meager snowpack, concerns over climate change had been quickly replaced by more immediate worries: a federal shutdown and a volatile stock exchange. So even if a majority of Americans believe in climate change, that statistic amounts to very little. It’s just another thing to worry about, on a heaping plate of worry.

What, then, should we take away from the death of 1631? The big lesson is that we need to seek the root cause of our worries, clarify our fears and to face them head on. Golden thinks the first step is to regain a sense that our collective actions can actually affect the course of climate change. On our dependence on fossil fuels, “we’re fighting something that’s dying,” Golden told me. “We’re just not on the same timeline as physics.” Climate change is not just an environmental problem or an economic problem, and it can’t be framed that way. It’s a challenge to our moral imagination — and a big one. Putting a policy to that will be as daunting as it is urgent.

We finished our drinks and parted ways. Outside, the winter weather was particularly nasty, with rain that flew sideways and high winds shoving people around the sidewalks. I made my way through the streets, my thoughts scattered, and before I could really think through all I’d just learned, a gust of wind caught me by surprise and nearly slammed me into a building. I stumbled down a flight of stairs looking for somewhere to retreat to, but there was nothing around but bad weather. □

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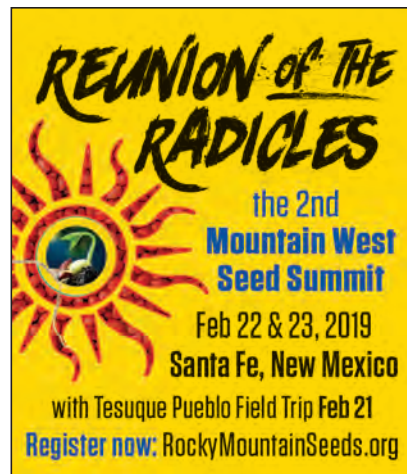
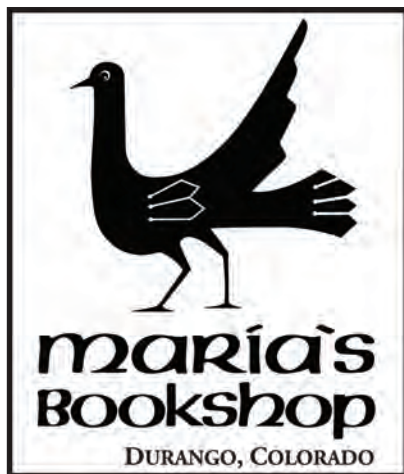
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A muskox mother with her newborn near the DeLong Mountains, Alaska. COURTESY JOEL BERGER

Plight of the ‘snow oxen’



Extreme Conservation: Life at the Edges of the World
Joel Berger
368 pages,
hardcover: \$30.
University of Chicago
Press, 2018.

Life in the planet’s latitudinal and altitudinal margins has long weathered extremes: Tibetan wild yaks, Arctic muskoxen, Bhutanese takin (“gnu goats”), or the Gobi’s saiga gazelles became inured to dryness, thin air and cold. Now rampant climate change together with hunters, poachers, herders and predators (which increasingly include feral dogs) is driving these “elusive, dazzling treasures” to the brink. In refreshingly footnote-free dispatches, the conservation biologist Joel Berger discusses the Pleistocene ancestry of these ungulates — physical and behavioral traits that may yet allow social slow-breeders to adapt. In spite of a “disquieting desperation” pervading the no-longer-so-icy barrens, Berger finds grace notes of humor and lyricism, even a stubborn solution: “Maintain what we have and restore what we’ve lost.”

For Berger these animals are not just fascinating puzzles but powerful symbols as well, “relics of the past and fugitives in a modern world.” The Los Angeles-raised wilderness buff tries to understand their relationship with other species, their perceptual worlds, and the interplay of food base, climate, reproduction rates, predation and human incursion that either dooms them or makes them thrive. Yankee whalers with

breechloaders, in a textbook example, exterminated muskoxen in 19th century Arctic Alaska. In 1930, the animals were replenished with Greenlandic stock shipped thousands of miles. Inupiaq Eskimos no longer familiar with the long-skirted bruisers see them as competition to caribou, an important subsistence game. (Similarly, yak pastoralists on the Tibetan Plateau think wild yaks take food from the mouths of domestic herds.) Some grizzlies learned to breach the bulwarks adult muskoxen form when they feel threatened, slaughtering numerous animals — more than they can eat — and eliminating entire herds. Mortality from bear kills has increased twenty-fold lately. Sealing off plants on which muskoxen feed, frequent winter thaw-and-refreeze episodes have been causing the animals hardship, stunting the calves’ growth. In 2011, a February storm whipping a western Alaska lagoon drowned 52 out of a herd of 55 that Berger was studying. Was this ice surge nature’s business as usual, a statistical fluke, or a harbinger of things to come? Urgency drives Berger’s scientific agenda. He wonders how long it takes extremophile mammals to adapt, and what it takes for them to do so.

Decrying new trends, this conservationist cannot help being a culture critic too. “Our focus on individual achieve-

ment and modern technology erodes our curiosity about the natural world,” he writes. As a result of runaway industrialization, Central Asia’s “Roof of the World,” which boasts the greatest amount of ice outside the poles, is heating up like the Arctic, two to three times faster than other regions. Sprawling development by itself is lethal. It is in “remote geographies,” Berger avers, that “wild animals may have a better chance to survive the world’s crowded lowlands.”

Drawing on 33 expeditions, the book shows biological fieldwork, warts and all. Berger digs “chip-like” or “slimy nugget” stool samples from muskox anuses with frost-stiffened fingers when he’s not defending projects to belligerent locals.

Conservation can be a bloody business, as in sawing horned heads off for postmortems. And before muskox calves could be captured for Depression-era reintroductions to Alaska, all the adults in their fiercely steadfast parental groups had to be killed.

An old-school biologist of Jane Goodall or George Schaller’s cut appears in these pages, one sharply in tune with modern ethics. The poetry-quoting Berger feels for the animals, which he regards as sentient individuals, not anonymous research subjects. He worries they’ll burn calories or break bones stampeding. “We would never know the emotional toll of becoming a muskoxen orphan in the Beringian wilds, or that of females we (accidentally) detached from their herds,” he writes. Berger acknowledges PTSD in these creatures and its effects on their physical and emotional wellbeing; he therefore favors non-invasive approaches. “Another day, another datum,” he quips, speaking of a tranquilized animal. He constantly weighs the trade-off between science and conservation.

His methods range from the high-tech — radio-collaring; heli-darting; photographic profiles to determine growth rates; hormone analyses to assess stress-levels or pregnancy — to the experimental, as when he plays wolf-howl recordings to caribou or stalks muskoxen in a bear costume, only to be charged. Many mysteries remain. How do thousands of caribou cows give birth within the same 10-day window, overwhelming bear and wolf predators with sheer numbers. And do muskoxen remember their dead?

The book’s blunt title holds dual meaning: It references the conditions under which Berger and his assistants labor (whether climatic, physical, logistical or political) and also the measures we need to take to avoid the worst of the sixth mass extinction. **BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD**

The howl of an iconic wolf

Two shadows

slipped across the frozen landscape and away from a freshly killed elk. Their movements quick and light as they navigated a maze of sagebrush, the two wolves made their way toward me. The darker one led the other, a younger wolf in the pack, just as she had done during the hunt.

As I watched, they moved closer, their warm breath momentarily visible in the cold air. Soon, I could hear their rhythmic footfalls on crunching snow.

It was my third trip to Yellowstone National Park, my second as a natural sounds recordist, and my first in search of wolves. I'd come to document the sounds of these animals in January 2016, in order to preserve their voices for the park archives and for use in displays and stories for the public.

If the pair I watched knew I was present, they gave no sign of it. Instead, they greeted a third individual off to my right with brief sniffing and posturing. Then, as the light faded and darkness slowly overtook the day, these three members of the Lamar Canyon wolf pack spent the next 20 minutes in what can best be described as play. Just as I have seen my own domestic dogs do countless times before, these three very wild dogs ran, jumped and wrestled with each other, tails wagging as they brought the day to a close.

Though millennia of evolution separate our domestic dogs from these wild ones, I saw the evolutionary links between them in their evening play.

Had it ended there, it still would have been the memory of a lifetime. But as evening fully set in, the three broke off their play. They stood still in the darkness and, along with the rest of the pack hidden in the hills, sang out in a prolonged chorus which hung impossibly long in the cold night air. Luckily, I'd hit "record."

I work as a natural sounds recordist for moments like these. My mission is to create an aural history of the sounds of our wild lands, in sad anticipation of the future loss of species and the changes to ecological communities caused by human impact on the planet. At best, these recordings help inspire support for the conservation of species and ecosystems. At worst, I create acoustic fossils of animals and landscapes that are gone too soon. I believe in the importance of my work, but sometimes I wish it wasn't so damn necessary.

That January sighting was my very first glimpse of a wolf pack, and a remarkable one at that. The dark leader was the famous alpha female known to park biologists as 926F — affectionately nicknamed "Spitfire" by wolf watchers. In the two years since, this memory had faded, the details blurring, leaving me with just the unforgettable outlines.

In November, 926F was legally killed

by a hunter just outside park boundaries in Montana. When I first saw the story, it was just another headline noting the loss of another famous animal at the hands of a trophy hunter. Her even more famous mother had met the same fate six years prior. But then, a note of recognition rang, and my stomach slowly sank.

I scrambled around, searching through old pictures and leafing through my field notes. It was her: my first wolf, and a prominent figure in my first field recording of a truly wild and iconic predator. She was gone and her voice silenced. I sat alone in disbelief in my basement office, everything still except the humming of the ventilation system. I'd listened to her howl hundreds of times from this same spot, fondly reliving our encounter.

In my recordings, 926F's voice is forever preserved. I wanted to be upset at the hunter and angry at the hunting laws that allowed her death, but I couldn't move past grief. For comfort, I put her recording on repeat. As howls filled the room, I drifted back to that January day in the park where our paths first crossed, and I remembered the sounds of a group of wild creatures at play. □

Jacob Job is a natural sounds recordist working for the Sound and Light Ecology Team at Colorado State University.

To hear Job's audio recording of 926's voice, visit hcn.org.



926F stands at the edge of the Lamar River during the winter of 2016. MELISSA DININO

Cutting carbon requires both innovation and regulation

Where coal-state Sen. John Barrasso got it wrong in a recent New York Times op-ed



NEWS
COMMENTARY
BY JONATHAN
THOMPSON

In December, after world leaders adjourned a major climate conference in Poland, Sen. John Barrasso, a Wyoming Republican, penned an opinion piece in *The New York Times* headlined “Cut carbon through innovation, not regulation.”

Those first two words were enough to get me to continue reading. After all, when was the last time you heard a conservative Republican, particularly one who represents a state that produces more than 300 million tons of coal per year, advocate for cutting carbon?

“The climate is changing,” he wrote, “and we, collectively, have a responsibility to do something about it.” What?! In one sentence he not only acknowledged the reality of climate change, but also admitted, obliquely, that humans are causing it — and have a responsibility to act. I had to re-read the byline. Had someone hacked the senator from Wyoming?

Unfortunately, no, as became clear in the rest of the op-ed. The “responsibility” thing was just the first of three “truths” that Barrasso gleaned from the climate conference. He continued: “Second, the United States and the world will continue to rely on affordable and abundant fossil fuels, including coal, to power our economies for decades to come. And third, innovation, not new taxes or punishing global agreements, is the ultimate solution.” Ah, yes, there’s the sophistry we have come to expect from the petrocracy.

Translation: We’ve got to stem climate change, but we have to do it by plowing forward with the very same activities that are causing it. And we have to take responsibility by, well, shirking that same responsibility and hefting it off on “innovation” instead.

Fine. Meanwhile, I’ll be over here getting rid of my growing love handles while I continue to eat three pints of Chunky Monkey per day.

Aside from the abstract answer of innovation, Barrasso offers two specific solutions to take the place of regulations or carbon taxes. The first is nuclear power. Aside from the waste and the uranium mining and milling problems, nuclear power can be a great way to cut emissions — as long as it displaces coal or natural gas, which doesn’t seem to be what Barrasso has in mind.

His primary solution, however, is carbon capture and sequestration. It sounds great. Just catch that carbon and other pollutants emitted during coal or natural gas combustion and pump it right back underground to where it came from. Problem solved, without building any fancy new wind or solar plants. But there are currently only 18 commercial-scale carbon-capture operations worldwide, and they’re not being used on coal power plants, where they’re most needed, because of technical challenges and high costs.

Once the carbon is captured from a facility, it must be sequestered, or stored away somewhere, perhaps in a leak-free geologic cavern. Most current carbon-capture projects, however, pump the carbon

into active oil and gas wells, a technique known as enhanced oil recovery. This widespread method of boosting an old well’s production usually uses carbon dioxide that has been mined from a natural reservoir, the most productive of which is the McElmo Dome, located in southwestern Colorado under Canyons of the Ancients National Monument.

Using captured carbon instead makes sense. It obviates the need to drill for carbon dioxide under sensitive landscapes, and it can help pay for carbon capture projects. But none of that changes the underlying logical flaw in the whole endeavor, which amounts to removing carbon emitted from a coal plant only to pump it underground in order to produce and burn more oil and therefore emit more carbon.

Barrasso writes: “The United States is currently on track to reduce emissions to 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2025 ... not because of punishing regulations, restrictive laws or carbon taxes but because of innovation and advanced technology. ...” And he’s right. Carbon emissions from the electricity sector have dropped by some 700 million tons per year over the last decade. But it wasn’t because of carbon capture, or more nuclear power. It was because U.S. utilities burned far less coal, period.

Sure, innovation played a role. New drilling techniques brought down the price of natural gas, and advances in solar- and wind-power did the same with those technologies, making them all more cost competitive, displacing some coal. But Barrasso seems not to understand whence that innovation comes. It doesn’t happen in a vacuum. More often than not, innovation is driven by money, regulations or a combination of both. Fracking was a way to increase profits in old oil and gas fields. Renewable technologies moved forward in response to state energy requirements. Carbon taxes would encourage renewables, nuclear and, yes, carbon capture, by making them more competitive with fossil fuels.

“People across the world,” Barrasso wrote, “are rejecting the idea that carbon taxes and raising the cost of energy is the answer to lowering emissions.” He mentions France, and the *Gilet Jaune*, or Yellow Vest, movement, the members of which have passionately protested against higher taxes on fuel, among other things. But the Yellow Vests aren’t opposed to carbon-cutting or environmental regulations. They were demonstrating against inequality, and against the fact that the fuel tax was structured in a regressive way, hurting the poor far more than the rich. The lesson is not that regulations are bad, but that they must be applied equitably and justly. That, in turn, will drive innovation, and, we hope, more thoughtful future op-eds. □

There are currently only 18 commercial-scale carbon capture operations worldwide, and they’re not being used on coal power plants, where they’re most needed, because of technical challenges and high costs.

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*.

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MONTANA

"I don't target practice — but if I see something that looks like Bigfoot, I just shoot at it." That's what an unidentified man in a national forest outside Helena, Montana, told a 27-year-old hunter, explaining why he shot twice at him, reports the *Idaho Statesman*. The hunter in question told Lewis and Clark County Sheriff Leo Dutton that he had been setting up targets for a practice when suddenly a bullet hit three feet to his left and another one whizzed by him on the right. But when he confronted the shooter, who was in a black Ford F-150 truck, instead of an apology he received an ultimatum: Wear orange or get "confused for Bigfoot." The shooter apparently has been seeing, and shooting at, Bigfoots — or is it Bigfeet? We are unsure of the correct plural here — all over Montana. Initially, "there was some question about the veracity of the incident," but after the story got around, "another woman came forward," saying that she, too, had been shot at by a man in a black F-150. "We're working to find this person," Dutton said. "It is of great concern that this individual might think it's OK to shoot at anything he thinks is Bigfoot."

Curious citizens wanting to know how to tell the difference between a Bigfoot and a regular-footed biped might be interested in the International Bigfoot Conference, usually held in Kennewick, Washington. Unfortunately, however, this year's gathering has been postponed, according to the event's Facebook page, "due to a scheduling conflict with a film production." That means we'll all just have to wait for the movie.

UTAH

Aspen are truly one of the West's more bizarre trees. When you look at a thick grove of these white-barked trees with their trembling leaves, you need to remind yourself that you are really looking at a forest of only one: Every tree has sprung from a single root system. It's not well

advertised, but near Richfield, Utah, there's a 106-acre treasure of some 47,000 aspen clones. All are genetically male, and according to *Atlas Obscura*, the 13 million-pound clone is "almost certainly the most massive organism on earth." But there's sad news about its likely future. Called "Pando," which is Latin for "I spread," the Utah forest has begun to shrink in size. The keystone species, which has hundreds of dependents, has come under assault from human encroachment, including the development of campgrounds and cabins, as well as hungry cows and mule deer fleeing from hunters. Paul Rogers, a Utah State University ecologist who has analyzed 72 years' worth of aerial photographs along with recent ground surveys, said that though the aspen forest had thrived for thousands of years, "it's coming apart on our watch."

WYOMING

Under the "we love dogs, too, but come on, people" department, we were shocked to learn of the way two German shepherds outranked two children during a road trip from Arizona to Wyoming, as reported by the Associated Press. Michael



IDAHO Better take the road more traveled. MARK BRUNSON

J. Fee, 63, and Amber L. Freudenstein, 31, made two children aged 6 and 10 ride in the trunk while the two dogs lolled in the back seats. In court, Fee offered this rationalization: "There was not enough room for everyone, so the children were relegated to the trunk." The couple pled guilty to two misdemeanor counts of child endangerment but received what seems like an astonishingly mild sentence of 30 days in jail. We can't help wondering if maybe 30 days in a car trunk would be more educational.

THE CANADIAN BORDER

Three species of bear — the black bear, polar bear and grizzly bear — have been observed for the first time hanging out at the same time in the same habitat in Canada's Wapusk National Park.

EcoWatch reports that the 366 visits from polar bears and 25 from black bears were not that unusual, since both species live in the region, but the number of grizzly visits — 20 — came as a big surprise.

"How they interact is a really big question," Doug Clark of the University of Saskatchewan Clark told the *Canadian Press*. "There's all kinds of things that could go on." Yes, indeed. Our biggest question: What to call the progeny, if any? *EcoWatch* notes that "so-called 'pizzly' or 'grolar' bears — or grizzly-polar hybrids — are the result of grizzly bears in Alaska and Canada expanding north due to the warming environment," but adding a third species makes the nomenclature even more complicated. Say hello to "chocolate grizlars," or maybe "black plizbears"?

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

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