

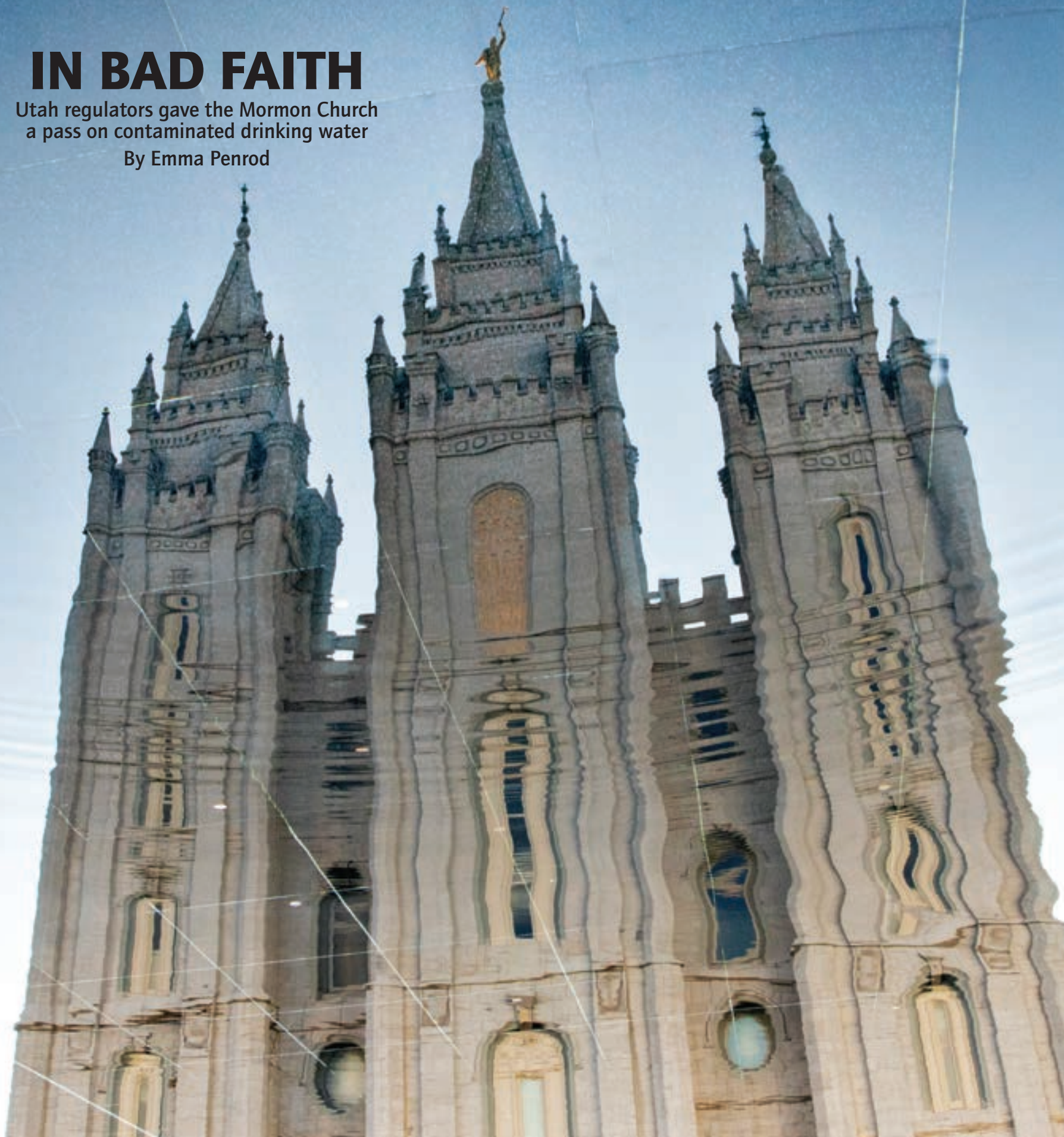
High Country News

For people who care about the West

IN BAD FAITH

Utah regulators gave the Mormon Church
a pass on contaminated drinking water

By Emma Penrod





Aspencrest Camp in Wasatch County, Utah, where thousands of children from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints spend a week each summer, drinking water the state says is contaminated. KIM RAFF FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

On the cover
The Salt Lake Temple as seen in a reflecting pool in Temple Square, headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. KIM RAFF FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS



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Editor's note

On power and accountability

In the 1840s, followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints fled persecution in Illinois and made their way west to the Great Salt Lake, intent on building a communal utopia in the desert. The church financed the building of its Zion, and, in what many believers saw as a sign of divine favor, their work prospered. As a result, the church has retained power over a large swath of the Mormon West, ranging from modern-day Utah through its neighboring states.



This issue's cover story explores the consequences that can follow when religious power and state politics become too closely entwined. Emma Penrod, a writer based in rural Utah, describes faulty water systems that have exposed thousands to tainted drinking water, problems exacerbated by the influence of the LDS Church over state regulators. Penrod, a former investigative journalist for *The Salt Lake Tribune*, reported this story for the better part of a year. She found that not only did the church's leadership know about the contaminated water, but so did Utah's chief water regulators — who gave the church a pass on repeated infractions for years.

She also learned that a popular LDS summer camp she visited in her youth as a member of the church, was among those whose water was most likely contaminated. This inside perspective allows for a critical look at the potential human costs of power structures that allow pollution and other environmental harm. It also gives us a better understanding of how the legacy of power works in Utah, through both members and non-members of the church.

Throughout the issue, we explore issues of legacy and accountability. Assistant Editor Anna Smith describes the efforts of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians to manage land in Oregon recently returned to them but then burned in a human-caused forest fire. Writer Wudan Yan describes the air-lift removal of non-native mountain goats from Washington's Olympic National Park, revealing the lengths to which national and state agencies must go to restore complex ecosystems. And, in a moving essay, Contributing Editor Ruxandra Guidi describes her correspondence with an immigrant detainee named Miguel, who writes to her from the Otay Mesa Detention Center in San Diego, California.

All these stories portray a complicated West, in which power and legacy have unexpected impacts on human and non-human systems. And, in the end, they ask us to consider accountability. Who should keep us safe from tainted water? Who should manage what land, and how? And how far should our compassion go? The West has always forced us to ask such questions, and these days, the need for answers is more pressing than ever.

—Paige Blankenbuehler, associate editor

THE LATEST

Backstory

For decades, white **Mormons have dominated the San Juan County government in southeastern Utah, despite the fact that the area is majority Navajo.** Many Navajo citizens describe a systematic disenfranchisement of Native voters, which has resulted in a lack of public services, including ambulance access, road infrastructure and education funding. In 2016, a U.S. district court ruled that San Juan County violated both the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the U.S. Constitution by drawing the boundaries of its voting districts to disenfranchise Native voters ("How a Utah county silenced Native American voters — and how Navajos are fighting back," *HCN*, 6/13/16).

Followup

The county was forced to redraw its county commission voting boundaries, and the first-ever majority Native-American commission took office in January 2019. **In June, the commission, now with two Navajo members, voted not to challenge an appeals court decision, which upheld the previous ruling that the county had violated the Voting Rights Act,** according to *The Salt Lake Tribune*. NICK BOWLIN



San Juan County Commissioner Willie Greyeyes, who was elected after the voting districts were redrawn, following a civil rights lawsuit.
JOLENE YAZZIE

Climate researchers set fire to escaping methane gas trapped beneath a frozen pond near the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus as part of their study of global warming.

TODD PARIS/UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS



Budget cuts threaten climate change research at University of Alaska

This July, Republican Gov. Mike Dunleavy of Alaska slashed the University of Alaska's funding by \$130 million, alarming students, scientists and climate specialists. Researchers throughout the country depend heavily on the University of Alaska system to conduct climate change studies in the Arctic. Throughout the years, scientists have been collecting quality data on climate issues, such as permafrost depth and the thickness of coastal sea ice. In addition to damaging local

ecosystems in the Arctic, these environmental changes are rewriting global weather patterns and contributing to extreme weather events in the Lower 48. Moving forward, this research may be threatened. Luckily, Gov. Dunleavy recently signed a bill that restored \$110 million in state funding for the university system, allowing the school to cancel its earlier declaration of "financial exigency." **HELEN SANTORO**

Read more online: hcne.ws/research-cut

99.9

Percent of comments the Environmental Protection Agency received opposing the reauthorization of "cyanide bombs." Despite that, the Trump administration said M-44s can again be deployed by Wildlife Services, which uses them to kill vast numbers of wild animals each year. Now, after a public backlash, the Trump administration said it's reconsidering. **JIMMY TOBIAS, THE GUARDIAN** Read more online: hcne.ws/poison-bomb



Photos

A safe space for polygamists

Every summer, amid the red-rock cliffs south of Moab, Utah, hundreds of polygamists gather for a five-day festival, which includes hiking, rafting and country music. It's a safe haven for Mormon fundamentalists who practice polygamy, which is banned in the U.S. Known as the Rock Rally, the event is significant for polygamous families, who often lead secluded lives and are scattered across the West. Heidi Foster, a plural wife from outside of Salt Lake City, told her five kids they were among friends. "If someone asks, 'How many moms do you have?' you can tell them," Foster said. **NATE CARLISLE**

Read more online: hcne.ws/polygamist-party



Clockwise from upper left: Heidi Foster, a plural wife and advocate of more lenient polygamy laws; participants gather for a picnic served on an overturned raft; Enoch Foster embraces his third wife, Lydia, left, and his second wife, Lillian, right, as she holds her son Elijah, during a closing hymn and prayer at the testimony meeting.

SHANNON MULLANE FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

2.8 million

Number of acres of Colorado state trust lands.

500,000

Number of those acres accessible to the public. (This figure will double over the next three years.)

\$1,500

Fine one man paid for mistakenly trespassing onto state trust lands, where his son shot a mule deer.

While mule deer hunting in 2015, Tavis Rogers and his son, Nathan, entered a stretch of woods marked as Colorado state land, where they took a deer. On the way out, they were stopped by a game warden and fined \$1,500, even though they had a legal state hunting license. The pair had unintentionally wandered onto a tract of Colorado state trust land. Trust lands are used to fund public institutions, and over the past decade, they have raised \$1.4 billion for Colorado's public schools. Unlike many other Western states, Colorado state trust land is generally treated as private, unless explicitly leased by the state parks department. There has been a recent push to expand the amount of trust land accessible to the public. This culminated in July, when the state parks department approved a 500,000-acre expansion over the next three years of trust land open to hunting and fishing, effectively doubling the amount of accessible trust land. **NICK BOWLIN**

Read more online: hcne.ws/trust-lands

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INMATES AND FIRE

I fought fire alongside Arizona inmates for 15 years with the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service ("From Prison to Fireline," *HCN*, 8/5/19). I am glad *HCN* took the time to highlight Arizona's inmate fire program. The personal discussions with the inmates and their opinions of the program carry value for your readers. The lasting social, physical and outdoor skills are invaluable over and above any work they do behind walls. However, the article focuses on an anthropologist's critical opinion of a program she had never even seen firsthand. Once she puked her guts out on her first hike, she saw the light. I am glad that gave her more respect for the program and helped her change some of her bias against it. People can call it forced labor, but every prisoner I ever worked with was damn happy to be out there, regardless of what they were making. Getting a spot on the fire crew was something they earned, and it's one day off their sentence while they get paid to be outside. Yes, they usually get the crappier jobs on the fire, but only a shade worse than the regular crews' work. To highlight the fact that the job is hard, dangerous and underpaid is pretty laughable. I am glad she only needed a doctorate and one day on a fire to figure that out.

Dan Feola
Fayetteville, North Carolina

UNTRAMMELED COAL COUNTRY

I shed no tears for the looming demise of Wyoming's coal industry ("With coal in free fall, Wyoming faces an uncertain future," *HCN*, 8/5/19). Despite the Trump administration's regulatory rollbacks and vocal cheerleading, coal is a dying industry — good news to environmentalists everywhere. Mining is a dirty, dangerous business for the miners themselves, and losing those jobs should have a silver lining for ex-workers who won't be saddled with the chronic diseases that afflict miners around the world. Many other industries have been disrupted by competition and new technologies. For rural Wyoming, it's hard to picture large-scale retraining of mining workers, absent a huge surge in non-extractive industries like solar, wind or geothermal. Which may mean that the Powder River Basin and other remote areas, despite mining scars, may return to a more natural state, untrammelled by earthmovers and coal trucks. That would be a good thing.

Jeffrey Marshall
Scottsdale, Arizona



DREAMING OF GOOD TENANTS

"Dreaming of Thoreau, but dealing with landlords" (*HCN*, 8/5/19) was irritating. The author conflated landscaping for a better environment with the issue of dealing with a landlord. The reluctance to have a broad mind when it comes to landscaping is a general one and likely has nothing to do with whether the homeowner lives on the property or rents it. The author even noted, "The yard did not look like the conventional grassy lawns of my neighbors." Why not explore how people can be educated to appreciate a variety of locally appropriate outdoor plants? Having been a homeowner and a landlord for 45 years, I can tell you that many renters do not make landscaping or home maintenance decisions because they do not want to be bothered. In my Albuquerque neighborhood, most homes have converted to landscapes that do not include the typical grassy lawn of years past. It's obvious that some people take a lot of pleasure and pride in the local outdoors — but not everyone. Still, since the 1990s, the city has reduced per capita water consumption to half of what it was, and the transition to better landscaping is just as likely to be found among rented houses as owner-occupied homes.

Spencer Nelson
Albuquerque, New Mexico

'CHRISTIAN NORMS'

I fully support the author of "The queer Mormon policy reversal is not enough" (*HCN*, 5/27/19), especially in her remarks about some seeking death as

an escape from the "sin" of being "queer." Everyone needs a center; for me, it is my Episcopal Church community, which — at least in its West Coast manifestation — is willing to adapt to a Bible interpretation that is modern and consonant with our times. As our local parish has become inclusive and welcoming, we become more closely connected with our gay community, having potlucks and monthly get-togethers with people who play an integral part in church activities, governance and outreach. In such a context, the term "queer" ceases to have any literal meaning, as does the term "Christian norms." In our men's Bible study (a carryover from different times), we interpret the scriptures in their historical setting. We are relatively free from ecclesiastical control, except to celebrate the Eucharist as our coming together in fellowship with the personhood of the resurrected Jesus. I do not consider the author as "queer," but rather precious, unique and a sister in Christ.

Malcolm Hepworth
Port Townsend, Washington

GEOTAGGING

Thank you so much for the thoughtful piece, "Five reasons to keep geotagging" (*HCN*, 6/10/19). I'm subscribing thanks to pieces like this. Our public lands are for everyone, and everyone should feel welcomed just as they are, and as different from each other as they are.

Anita Sarah Jackson
San Ramon, California

High
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A biocrust skin graft

Without its cover of living microorganisms, the desert is eroding

BY KRISTA LANGLOIS

When Patrick Cruz's ancestors carved honeycombed dwellings into the canyons of what's now New Mexico's Bandelier National Monument, the land looked very different than it does today. Biocrusts — communities of mosses, lichens and cyanobacteria — formed a living skin over the earth, anchoring it in place, storing water and carbon, and laying the foundation for ponderosa and piñon pine forests.

After drought drove the Ancestral Puebloans away from Bandelier and into nearby pueblos in the 16th century, European colonizers moved in. Their logging and livestock grazing devastated Bandelier's biocrusts. Drought and bark beetles in the mid-20th and early-21st centuries then killed up to 90% of pines, leaving unshaded patches of dirt between juniper shrubs where little could grow. Together, these impacts now cause an astonishing 8,900 pounds of soil per acre to erode each year.

Similar erosion is on the rise across the Southwest as oil and gas drilling, recreation and new development tear up biocrusts. For Cruz, an archaeologist and tribal member of Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, 30 miles northeast of Bandelier, one major concern is that this unnatural erosion threatens to undercut the buildings and other sites where the ancestors of modern Indigenous people lived, prayed and are buried. Such places still hold deep significance — they “help the culture function spiritually,” Cruz says.

Eroding soil has other consequences, too. It drifts into rivers, choking aquatic life, and onto snow, causing it to absorb more sunlight and melt prematurely, thereby shrinking water supplies. Clouds of dust cause respiratory issues for thousands of people. And without nutrient-rich

topsoil, plants can't take hold, which means animals also struggle to survive. “When you start losing soil from an ecosystem, you can start to erode the whole system,” says Kristina Young, a Ph.D. student at the University of Texas at El Paso who studies biocrusts.

Now, Young and other scientists are trying to stem the loss of Southwestern soils by reintroducing biocrusts to degraded ecosystems. “We've gotten awesome at growing biocrusts in greenhouses and in the lab,” says Sasha Reed, a research ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Moab, Utah. With a moderate temperature and extra water and light, biocrusts that take decades to grow in the wild can sprout in as little as four months indoors.

But transplanting lab-grown biocrusts into the wild is another story. In 2015, Young, Reed and several other scientists inoculated soils in Bandelier with lab-grown biocrusts. When the crusts were in a naturally occurring dormant state, they ground them up and sprinkled them on an eroding mesa, hoping some of the pieces would sprout into the kind of living skin that had once likely blanketed the area. To increase their chances, the scientists inoculated the mesa before the summer monsoon, thinking the extra moisture might help the biocrust take hold.

Waiting for these fragile environments to heal themselves isn't necessarily an option, Young explains. When Gen. George Patton drove tanks through the Mojave Desert in a World War II training exercise, he left behind tracks that researchers later compared to undisturbed soil nearby. Based on how slowly the ground had recovered after five decades, scientists estimated it could take biocrusts almost 2,000 years to fully rebound.

Ten months after Young's team inoculated the mesa in Bandelier, she had to concede: The inoculated areas looked no different than the control sites. Similar experiments in China and the Mojave Desert have

been more successful, but just as many others have failed. Steven Warren, a U.S. Forest Service ecologist and early proponent of restoration, now thinks the time and money spent trying to artificially boost biocrusts isn't worth the cost. In a 2018 paper, he suggested that conservationists should focus on minimizing destruction rather than reintroducing biocrusts to degraded environments. Besides, he argued, in certain Southwestern environmental niches, biocrusts have been shown to regrow on their own in less than 20 years.

Despite Warren's views, however, a growing number of scientists — from Iceland to Australia — hope that re-establishing wild biocrusts will soon begin to reverse decades of abuse to arid lands and “break the cycle of soil erosion,” as Young wrote in a recent paper about the Bandelier experiment.

For these researchers, even unsuccessful experiments offer insight into how seasonal timing, soil type and other factors affect biocrust establishment. Reed now hypothesizes that cultivated biocrusts may not be hardy enough to survive in the wild. She's growing biocrusts in an outdoor nursery near Moab in hopes they'll stand a better chance than greenhouse- or lab-grown ones. She's also subjecting different species of lichens, mosses and cyanobacteria to extreme heat and dryness to see which respond best to the conditions expected to hit deserts in our changing climate.

Cruz supports these efforts, but remains skeptical that they'll be more than a Band-Aid over the large-scale degradation of desert ecosystems. Still, if restoration works, he says, “it would be good for not just the archaeological sites, but for the animals, the birds and the plants and everything else.” □

Since Ancestral Puebloans made their homes in the cliffs of what is now Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico, erosion has drastically increased, threatening the integrity of these historic structures.

SARAH STIERCH/CC VIA FLICKR



Kristina Young examines a lab-grown biocrust reintroduction plot. Biocrust can take decades to grow in the wild. KATIE MAST

The cyanobacterial filaments that make up biocrust latch onto soil particles, holding the surface together and preventing erosion.

COURTESY OF KRISTINA YOUNG



Can Western states afford to break the boom-and-bust cycle?

Climate action on public lands would force a reckoning for fossil fuel-dependent communities

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

In 2018, record-setting federal oil and gas lease sales in the booming Permian Basin helped pump more than \$600 million into New Mexico's state coffers. With that cash burning a hole in its pockets, New Mexico upped education spending by nearly half a billion dollars the following year.

Even as New Mexico's oil and gas economy booms, Wyoming's once-vital mineral economy is convulsing, as demand for coal wanes and operators consolidate and go bankrupt — leaving counties owed tens of millions of dollars and hundreds out of work. So it goes for Western states riding the boom-and-bust cycles of mineral dependence.

But this fossil-fueled rollercoaster ride could come to a shuddering halt under recent climate action proposals. Several Democratic presidential hopefuls propose to end new federal fossil fuel leasing and phase out drilling on public lands. While any such moves would be met with legal challenges from the fossil fuel industry and energy-dependent states, recent federal court decisions show a way for federal agencies to deny development based on the public's long-term interest.

Leasing moratoriums and drilling restrictions would send shockwaves around the West and require a massive restructuring of local, state and national programs. But with states and utility companies setting ambitious emission-reduction goals, and climate scientists issuing dire warnings about the rapidly closing window to avert even grimmer scenarios, states that aren't preparing for the changing energy economy could be left behind in the shift from fossil fuels to renewables.

More than half of Wyoming's annual revenue comes from fossil fuel extraction. This robust cash flow has enabled the state to forgo income taxes and keep sales and property taxes low. When times are good, this tax structure has allowed Wyoming to keep living costs low and attract businesses while pouring money into services like education — it has long paid teachers far better than its

neighbors — and infrastructure.

With its angled metal roofs, floor-to-ceiling windows, water slide, lazy river and rock-climbing wall, the Pinedale Aquatic Center in Pinedale, Wyoming, would be at home in any upscale Western suburb. But this is no swanky suburb; Pinedale, a town of about 2,000, was at the epicenter of a natural gas boom in the early 2000s. With tens of millions of dollars flowing into Sublette County, the county put \$17 million into the facility in Pinedale, its county seat, while also making local teachers the highest-paid in the state.

Now, it's getting harder and harder to keep the recreation center up and running. Over the last five years, shrinking oil and gas revenues have siphoned more than a million dollars from the facility's annual budget, resulting in staff cuts and an end to free passes for senior citizens.

And the current pangs aren't confined to recreation centers and budgets for government programs, which face ongoing cuts and calls for privatization. Wyoming lags behind other Western states in terms of personal income growth, higher education attainment, and employment in high-value sectors like manufacturing.

To a large extent, those lagging economic indicators can be traced to fossil fuel reliance. A recent Headwaters Economics report states the problem: "Wyoming's decision to be dependent on energy commodity taxes has caused an economic and political 'mineral tax trap' wherein a political culture and commitment has developed around protecting the self-interest of low taxes and the status quo." That commitment to coal was in full force this

More than half of Wyoming's annual revenue comes from fossil fuel extraction. This robust cash flow has enabled the state to forgo income taxes and keep sales and property taxes low.



Carl Segerstrom is an assistant editor at *High Country News*, covering Alaska, the Pacific Northwest and the Northern Rockies from Spokane, Washington. [@carlschirps](#)

March, when Wyoming passed a law making it harder for utilities to decommission unprofitable coal-fired power plants.

Over the last few years, Wyoming has studied ways to diversify its economy. Some of those ideas could capitalize on climate action: The Economically Needed Diversity Options for Wyoming (ENDOW) initiative, started by then-Gov. Matt Mead in 2016, cited a tenfold increase in wind generation as one way to improve the state's economy in the next 20 years. Increased wind development could utilize public land in the state and pair well with any federal climate action plans. A Bureau of Land Management report found that more than 14.5 million acres of federal lands in the state are suitable for wind development.

Still, public-lands wind development won't generate the same kind of royalties as fossil fuel extraction anytime soon. And Wyoming lags behind other states in taxing wind power; while it collects over \$500 million in severance taxes per year from minerals, it gets less than \$4 million from wind generation. Economist and former state legislator Michael Madden pins this policy gap on "the perceived conflict between wind and the state's primary breadwinner — the mineral industry."

Wyoming's woes go far beyond shrinking budgets at the state level. Entire towns and counties have economies and government budgets that rely on fossil fuel extraction, and are in danger of



SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR; INFOGRAPHIC BY LUNA ANNA ARCHHEY

collapsing as the industries fade without plans to transition plans in place. For inspiration on how to create a just transition, Wyoming could look to recently passed legislation in New Mexico that funnels money from utility ratepayers to communities hit by coal-plant shutdowns. That bill, which also includes a mandate for 100% carbon emission-free electricity by 2045, sets aside tens of millions of dollars for site cleanups and job retraining in affected communities.

But the Cowboy State's situation makes it harder to fund such a transition. In New Mexico, the utility that's shutting down coal plants and charging ratepayers to finance a just transition will survive, even as it ditches coal and moves to less-carbon polluting energy sources. In Wyoming, the mining and drilling operations that pumped money into the economy can pack up their rigs and dozers and go, leaving the state to sort out the messes they leave behind.

But with the downfall of coal already underway, and the cost of renewables plunging to compete with natural gas, Wyoming's dependence on minerals and the federal lands they come from will eventually be broken. Asking citizens and businesses to pony up for government services like roads and education won't be easy in a state where low-tax and small-government ideologies reign supreme.

Ramping down federal fossil fuel leasing and extraction would require a monumental policy shift from the drill-America-first priorities of the Trump administration. And any discussion about that shift should be informed by a full accounting of the federal subsidies that prop up the industry in the United States

and by proxy the states that rake in its revenue. According to a recent study by economists at the International Monetary Fund, the United States spent \$649 billion in 2015 subsidizing the fossil fuel industry. That accounting measures the actual cost of consumption against an "efficient" pricing of fossil fuels, which considers the public health and environmental costs of burning fossil fuels.

While that eye-popping number includes factors that could be debated, such as how to account for the costs of climate change and air pollution, the federal government spent on average more than \$14 billion in direct subsidies to oil and gas in 2015 and 2016, according to an analysis by the climate advocacy group Oil Change International. That \$14 billion — which comes from sources like tax loopholes, distorted royalty rates, and below-market lease and rental rates on public lands — amounts to billions less than fossil fuel companies return in production revenue from public lands and waters and is considerably more than the federal government spent subsidizing renewable energy during the same time period.

Climate action in the form of federal oil and gas reform will have a disproportionate impact on Wyoming, as it continues to rely on fossil fuels and lags behind other states in transition planning. But swapping federal subsidies from fossil fuels to renewable energy could be a major boon for job growth across the West, creating jobs and opportunities for innovation through renewable installations, grid improvements and new storage technology. In states like New Mexico, plans to capture this growing economy — and rejuvenate coal communities in the process — are already underway. With the cost of renewable plus storage projects dipping below the cost of natural gas generation, the sun will shine brightly on states prepared to capture the winds of change blowing across the energy landscape. □



The climbing wall at Pinedale Aquatic Center in Wyoming, which was built using oil and gas revenue. With decreases in payouts, the \$17 million facility is struggling to stay open.

ARNIE BROKLING/PINEDALE AQUATIC CENTER

A large billy goat and a nanny goat are suspended in slings, being lowered by a helicopter. The billy goat is in a grey sling and the nanny goat is in an orange sling. Both goats are wearing blue blindfolds and orange harnesses. They are being lowered towards a waiting truck, their feet bound and their vision obscured by blue blindfolds.

A high-flying act in Olympic National Park

In an effort to protect visitors and rare plants, the park is relocating its beloved invaders

BY WUDAN YAN

PHOTOS BY GRANT HINDSLEY

A large billy and a nanny mountain goat arrive at Hurricane Ridge.

In early July, the loud whirring of a helicopter punctured the quiet of Washington's Olympic National Park as wildlife specialists scoured meadows, forests, ridgelines and mountaintops for flashes of white fuzz: mountain goats. The cherry-red aircraft kicked up dirt and debris as it lowered two goats, dangling in slings, toward a waiting truck, their feet bound and their vision

obscured by blue blindfolds. During a brief landing, one of the specialists — commonly known as “muggers” — stepped out, with a kid no more than 6 weeks old calmly cradled in his arms.

It sounds like a dramatic scene from a wilderness reality show, but it's not: It was just another day in an extensive effort to eliminate mountain goats from the Olympics — where they are not native, damage endemic plants and have even killed a person — and hand some over to Washington state to boost populations in

the North Cascades Range, where mountain goats have declined after decades of overhunting. The project — which cost more than half a million dollars just this year — illustrates the lengths to which national and state agencies are willing to go to restore a single strand in the complex web of these human-altered ecosystems.

Outdoor recreationists are generally excited to see mountain goats in the Olympics. They're more majestic than marmots and pikas and other alpine creatures, and less terrifying than bears. A few

Wudan Yan is an independent journalist based in Seattle. [@wudanyan](#)

The project — which cost more than half a million dollars just this year — illustrates the lengths to which national and state agencies are willing to go to restore a single strand in the complex web of these human-altered ecosystems.

days before the start of this year's relocation effort, a man posted on a Facebook group for hikers, saying he wanted to see the mountain goats before they got moved. When I asked why, he replied, "The goats represent the wild in Mother Nature."

But mountain goats are not native to Olympic National Park: Hunters from Alaska introduced about a dozen of them in the 1920s. At one point, the population ballooned to over 1,000, causing "ecological mayhem," as they grazed on rare alpine plants and eroded the landscape, said Patti Happe, the wildlife branch chief for the park. Before the translocations began, there were about 725 goats on the Olympic Peninsula.

Not only have they destroyed native plants, but mountain goats have also become aggressive after growing too accustomed to humans: In 2010, a male goat mauled and killed a 63-year-old man hiking near Hurricane Ridge. The goats have become habituated to people and are drawn to them partly because humans provide something the animals need — salt. Olympic National Park lacks the natural salt deposits that would otherwise sustain the goats, leaving them dependent on the makeshift saltlicks that hikers produce when they pee on the trails.

To keep humans safe and restore balance in mountain goat populations, wildlife biologists decided to physically relocate the Olympic Peninsula goats, starting with 115 translocations last year. The animals were all radio-collared and ear-tagged so they can be identified and tracked in their new environs. Approximately 70% of adults and half the children survived the first year — which is within the natural range of survival, said Jace Taylor, a wildlife biologist not involved in the Olympic project who has overseen mountain goat translocations in Utah.

It's still too early to say whether the project is achieving wildlife managers' larger goals, in part because scientists don't yet know if the relocated goats are breeding in their new home. Happe said the project will be a success if those moved to the North Cascades help boost populations there, and if goats in the Olympics are completely eradicated. Unfortunately, many mountain goats evade capture; one woman involved in the project described them as "escape artists." That means the majority of the Olympic goats will be killed after the translocations are over. In

addition, some animals have died during capture or in transit.

And some of the relocated goats may already be accustomed to humans, which could endanger hikers in the North Cascades. I recently saw a sign there warning people of the dangers of salt-craving mountain goats. It's not easy to reverse habituated behaviors, says Richard Harris, a wildlife manager at Washington's Department of Fish and Wildlife overseeing the translocations. Perhaps over time, if human visitors leave them alone and urinate in locations the goats can't reach, their degree of habituation might decay, ultimately benefiting both species. Still, "all wild animals are potentially dangerous to people," Harris said. "People need to use their heads."

But despite the expense — and the trauma for the goats — "rectifying the balance is something we should be doing when we have an opportunity to improve upon mistakes made by our predecessors," says Harris. "To the degree that we can capture an animal and move it to a place where it's native, give it a home, and allow it to return to its natural state within the North Cascades — I think that is worth spending money on." □



A large billy wears a blindfold on the veterinary table. The goat's vital signs are checked and vets work through a checklist to make sure he is free of disease and other health problems before he is dropped off in the Cascades.



Derrick Halsey clutches a mountain goat kid as they land at the staging area for goat relocation. Halsey is a "mugger," a team member who is dropped off as close as possible to animals that are netted or sedated from the air, and prepares them for flight.



When federal lands become tribal lands again

A story of fire, dispossession, and how hard it is to get the U.S. to follow its own laws

BY ANNA V. SMITH

▲ Timberlands belonging to the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians.

DMITRI VON KLEIN
FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

The smell of scorched soil and burnt wood filled the air. Michael Rondeau, CEO of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, looked over the damage, clad in forest-green pants and a lemon-yellow jacket with “Douglas Forest Patrol” on the back. The Milepost 97 Fire, which started just days earlier with an illegal campfire, had consumed almost 13,000 acres in southwest Oregon. Almost a quarter of that was on the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians Reservation — land so recently acquired by the tribe from the Bureau of Land Management that no conservation work or logging had yet occurred.

The tribe lost a good stand of timber, and officials estimate that replanting and recovery could take millions of dollars. Less than two months earlier, I had visited this tract of land, touring it with Rondeau and Tim Vredenburg, Cow Creek director of forest management. Then, it had been lush with evergreens and wildflowers — lupine, beargrass and paintbrush. Now, that was all gone.

“We’ve been so focused on managing

to prevent fire,” Vredenburg told me over the phone, a few days after the fire. “That’s where all of our mental energy was being invested in: How do we manage this forest to prevent fire? And doggone it, now we’re looking at: How do we manage it after fire?”

The answer may lie in something Vredenburg and Rondeau said to me before the fire: that the Cow Creek lands would be managed differently now than they were by U.S. agencies prior to their return. Thinning and reintroducing fire through prescribed burns, they told me, would be a top priority for the more than 17,000 forested acres the tribe received through the Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act in 2018. Rondeau explained that the management of Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians reservation lands would reflect Indigenous values — an example separate from either industry or conservation groups. “We don’t believe in locking up the forests and allowing them to ‘remain natural,’ because it never was,” Rondeau said. “For thousands of years, our ancestors used fire as a tool of keeping underbrush down, so that the vegetation remains healthy and productive.”

Looking down from Canyon Mountain at a valley full of blackened madrones and

pinus, Rondeau and Vredenburg — along with some 1,800 Cow Creek tribal citizens — are thinking of the future, 165 years after their lands were taken and only one year after they were partially returned. The Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act’s passage illustrates just how long it can take — and the kind of political will it can require — to hold the United States and its citizens accountable for illegal treaty violations.

The journey to regain control of Cow Creek lands has been a long one. In 1853, six years before the state of Oregon existed, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians signed a treaty with the U.S. government. In exchange for a reservation, housing and health care, the Cow Creek ceded 800 square miles of land. But instead of complying with the terms of its own treaty, the federal government sold Cow Creek lands to settlers through the Donation Lands Claim act, making the tribe landless. In 1932, Congress passed a bill to restore the tribe’s land base, only to see it vetoed by President Herbert Hoover. Litigation followed. “That really did set back our tribal members for quite a few decades,” Rondeau says. “There was a continuation of their lifeways, but the longer it went from the time of the treaty, they would lose more and more of their culture or just simply be blended in to the new lifeways and assimilate.”

But last year, the Cow Creek made a breakthrough with the Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act. The act — which passed the U.S. House seven times, only to die each time in the Senate — finally was signed into law by President Donald Trump. It restored more than 17,000

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acres of public land to the Cow Creek Band, along with nearly 15,000 acres to the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians.

"This is pretty rare. It shouldn't be, but it is," says Cris Stainbrook, president of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation, of the restoration act. "Those are the homelands of the tribe — these are lands that were reserved by the tribe in the treaty process."

The Milepost 97 Fire, then, was particularly devastating as a pointed reminder of the tribe's long pursuit of land. During the Termination Era, which started in 1954 and affected tribal nations across the U.S., the federal government terminated 61 western Oregon tribes, abdicating its legal responsibility to Indigenous communities. (To date, five tribes in western Oregon have regained their federal status.) In the 1950s, former Oregon Gov. Douglas McKay, who headed the Interior Department, "enthusiastically" supported termination, after pushing state-level policies to "integrate the Indians into the rest of our population."

Michael Rondeau represents one of the last generations of Cow Creek to remember what termination was like: no access to higher education or health care, and no land base — despite legal promises. His father, Tom Rondeau, the descendant of French traders and Umpqua people, grew up with a ramble of cousins on his grandparents' Tiller, Oregon, homestead in the 1940s, hearing a mix of English, French and Chinuk Wawa, also known as Chinook Jargon. Tom, a big guy with a flattop, raised Michael and his brother in Glide, Oregon — 17 miles from where Michael now lives and works. The Rondeaus were a timber family, and Michael spent his childhood summers on the meandering North Umpqua River, a self-proclaimed river rat. By age 17, his dad had him setting chokers on Douglas fir trees to make sure he understood the hard labor he'd be doing if he chose to work in the timber industry.

Decades after termination, persistent efforts by tribal nations and advocates resulted in the federal government once again recognizing tribes and treaty obligations. In the 1970s and '80s, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians and the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde gained federal recognition again, along with some lands. The Coquille Indian Tribe, Cow Creek and Coos were re-recognized, too, but without lands. Efforts by tribes in what is currently western Oregon to reacquire their land came shortly after recognition.

In 1996, the Coquille Indian Tribe, based on Oregon's southern coast, regained 5,400 acres of BLM land. But local voters opposed the transfer by nearly 5 to 1 in an advisory vote, and the final legislation required that the tribe allow public access for hunting, recreation and fishing.

An attempt by the Confederated Tribes

of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians to acquire federal lands the next year in 1997 hit a roadblock when voters and environmental groups vocally opposed the transfer, arguing that the land would no longer be subject to federal environmental law, despite promises from the tribal chairman that the tribe would adhere to federal standards. "Although the Coos tribe still hasn't formulated details such as the amount of acreage or specific parcels of land," a 1997 Associated Press article wrote, "environmentalists already say they would oppose any plan that would remove federal land from public control." The Coos Tribe would not receive their lands for another 21 years, until the Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act.

In 2013, when the Cow Creek drew up plans for the BLM land transfer, Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden's office nixed the deal.

The lands were ground zero for the timber wars of the 1990s, when the Endangered Species Act and industry clashed over the spotted owl, making their transfer almost 20 years later a non-starter for conservation groups. "It was such a touchy conversation with the environmental community — it would have been a complication that would have been hard to overcome," Rondeau said. Instead, the tribe received BLM lands of relatively lower timber quality — checker-boarded lands, instead of the contiguous land base of many reservations.

The tribe also tried a less conventional approach. In 2017, the Cow Creek Tribe made a bid to buy Elliott State Forest, after the state of Oregon put it up for sale. The Elliott, which was legally required to make money for Oregon schools, hadn't been producing enough. "Our tribal leadership was

Please see Cow Creek, page 22



◀ Cow Creek Director of Forest Management Tim Vredenburg, left, and CEO Michael Rondeau envision a plan to manage the new lands with Indigenous values.

DMITRI VON KLEIN

▼ From a vantage point on Cow Creek lands, the checkerboard of land use is evident.

DMITRI VON KLEIN



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California: the West magnified



BY PAUL LARMER

From 30,000 feet, Nevada resembled an endless canvas of dull flat browns, relieved only by low-slung mountain ranges and dry lakebeds rimmed with white salt like margarita glasses. Then I looked ahead, and my heart skipped a beat: the sharp eastern spine of the Sierra Nevada, patches of snow still shining on granite peaks.

We were almost to California, the state where I was born, and where my parents were born, and where, in the 1850s, one of my great-great-grandfathers claimed 160 foothill acres, supposedly searching for gold but becoming an apple-grower instead. Our plane swiftly descended over Yosemite Valley and the Sierra's forested western slope; the square fields and spreading towns of the Central Valley, the car-choked freeways winding through oak-speckled hills in the eastern suburbs, and, finally, the fog-shrouded San Francisco Bay.

Until I moved to Colorado 27 years ago, California was my primary connection to the West. Yet, when I moved from the Bay Area to work as an assistant editor with *High Country News* in 1992, the staff and board were still wrestling with whether California should even be part of our beat.

On the one hand, it seemed like a stretch. *HCN's* small team of editors and writers had a tough-enough time just keeping up with the Rocky Mountain West. California, with its teeming cities and liberal politics, seemed a world away. How could we even pretend to cover it?

And yet, we found ourselves increasingly dipping our editorial toes into the Golden State's waters. In the late 1990s, we wrote about the Quincy Library Group — one of the West's first forestry collaboration efforts, which brought together the local timber industry, environmentalists and federal land managers on the Plumas National Forest. We ventured to Lake Tahoe to report on the unique regional planning agency charged with regulating development there and keeping the lake clear and blue.

By the early 2000s, we were producing stories of both regional and national significance: the first major deal transferring water from Imperial Valley farmland to urban Southern California; rampant illegal marijuana grows on public lands in Mendocino County; conflicts between tribes, farmers and fisherman in the Klamath River Basin; controversial large-scale solar plants in the Mojave Desert; and the impact of a steady exodus of largely white, conservative Southern Californians to places like Idaho and Colorado.

Each story confirmed that California is more than just another part of the West. The state has always been larger than the sum of its parts.

"California is the future of the West and the country," Jay Dean, *HCN's* current board president, told me over coffee in Martinez, California, where he works for the John Muir Land Trust. Its racially and ethnically diverse population reflects how America will look a few decades from now, he says. "It's the reason you have that phone in your pocket and why



automobile companies have agreed to California's tough fuel standards, even when the Trump administration wants to weaken them nationally."

It's not all innovation and progressive policies, of course. California also embodies all the contradictions that *HCN* has covered for the past 50 years. In Martinez, I drove past the massive, reeking stacks and tanks of the Shell oil refinery before pulling into the John Muir National Historic Site, managed by the National Park Service. Muir, the Sierra Club's founder and a father of the modern environmental movement, penned his inspiring words in the wood-paneled den of a 10,000-square-foot mansion — once the center of a 2,600-acre ranch, now hemmed in by the refinery and the freeway. Muir married well: The ranch was purchased by his in-laws, the Strentzels, a family that got rich selling supplies to the gold miners who ripped up the Sierras and steamrolled Native peoples in search of instant riches.

The next night, long after what I thought was rush hour, I headed toward one of California's first gold towns, Sonora, to visit readers Kate and Charles Segerstrom, the parents of *HCN's* assistant editor, Carl Segerstrom. At 9 p.m., I-580 was bumper-to-bumper traffic, as I inched by the giant wind turbines of Altamont Pass and headed toward the boomtown of Tracy. Charles, a recently retired energy efficiency manager for PG&E, explained that this was just standard commuter traffic: Sky-high housing prices have driven workers to the Central Valley, he said. It's not uncommon for people to drive an hour to Pleasanton to catch an hour-long train ride into the Bay Area.

The entire "Gold Country" belt of the Sierras has exploded, stretching the social fabric, said Kate, a Tuolumne County judge who handles an increasingly heavy load of domestic dispute and drug-related cases out of Sonora. Growth is also pushing more people into the fire-prone and ecologically fragile mountains. Before heading to the airport, I dodged RVs and logging trucks to reach Pinecrest Lake, elevation 5,700 feet. For centuries, Pinecrest was a trading center for the Tuolumne Band of Me-Wuk Indians, who run a nearby casino. Now, it's a magnet for locals and tourists escaping the valley. The sun was hot but the air cool as I walked to the lakeshore, underneath enormous ponderosa and sugar pines. Slipping into the cold blue waters amid a raucous menagerie of splashing, inflatable-armed kids, I breathed in the mountain air and thought: Now, *this* is California dreamin'. □

Top, smokestacks at the Shell oil refinery in Martinez, California.

JAMES DAISA/CC VIA FLICKR

Bottom, the serenity of Pinecrest Lake in Stanislaus National Forest, California, stands in contrast.

PAUL LARMER



"On the Road to 50" is a series of community gatherings in cities across the region, collecting feedback about *HCN's* future direction as we approach our 50th anniversary in 2020. See more: hcn.org/otr-50

Paul Larmer is executive director/publisher of *High Country News*.

In Bad Faith

Utah regulators gave the Mormon Church a pass on contaminated drinking water

Documents from the Utah Department of Environmental Quality show correspondence with Aspencrest Camp about its drinking water well.

DOCUMENTS COURTESY OF STEVE ONYSCO

On an early June morning in the early 2000s, I piled into a van with a group of neighborhood girls and headed up to Aspencrest summer camp, operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My pillow, stuffed with provisions for the week ahead — pajamas, an extra jacket, scripture — was propped against the window.

We drove up a steep, sparsely wooded mountainside dotted with small farms. The van, supervised by church volunteers from my neighborhood congregation, pulled up to a dusty pavilion in the Wasatch Mountains above Salt Lake City. Aspencrest Camp was barren, except for a sparse grove of its lacey namesake trees. The other girls and I sleepily unpacked our tents.

This was not the wooded wonder-

land that I — a resolute 12-year-old tomboy — envisioned when older girls described their mystical experiences at our church's annual all-girls camp. But I was determined to make the best of it. For most members of the LDS Church, camping was a religious rite — a mark of emerging adulthood. I intended to return home a woman of faith, ready to tackle the temptations of junior high.

The camp's amenities included self-service mess halls, flush toilets and showers, even one of those challenge courses, where we participated in exercises such as the "trust" fall, where our religious leaders taught us that God would always look after us.

We prepared traditional meals on the camp grills or provisional gas stoves and bonded by cooking "friendship stew," a surprisingly palatable dish made with random canned goods supplied by the campers. We giggled, ate candy and haggled over extra shower time while we waited in line to fill our water bottles at the tap beside the camp pavilion.

None of us ever dreamed that the water might be unsafe.

But according to state records obtained by *High Country News* from a former engineer with the Utah Division of Drinking Water, Aspencrest's water has long been contaminated with bacteria — and it remains tainted to this day.

While Aspencrest is the setting for some of my fondest childhood memories, I wasn't surprised when this investigation revealed that regulators overlooked potential health risks at church-owned facilities, not once but twice in recent years. The LDS Church, which is omnipresent in Utah, has been widely suspected of dictating public policy and granting leniency to prominent church members who

break the law. Why would the regulatory agencies responsible for our health and safety be any different?

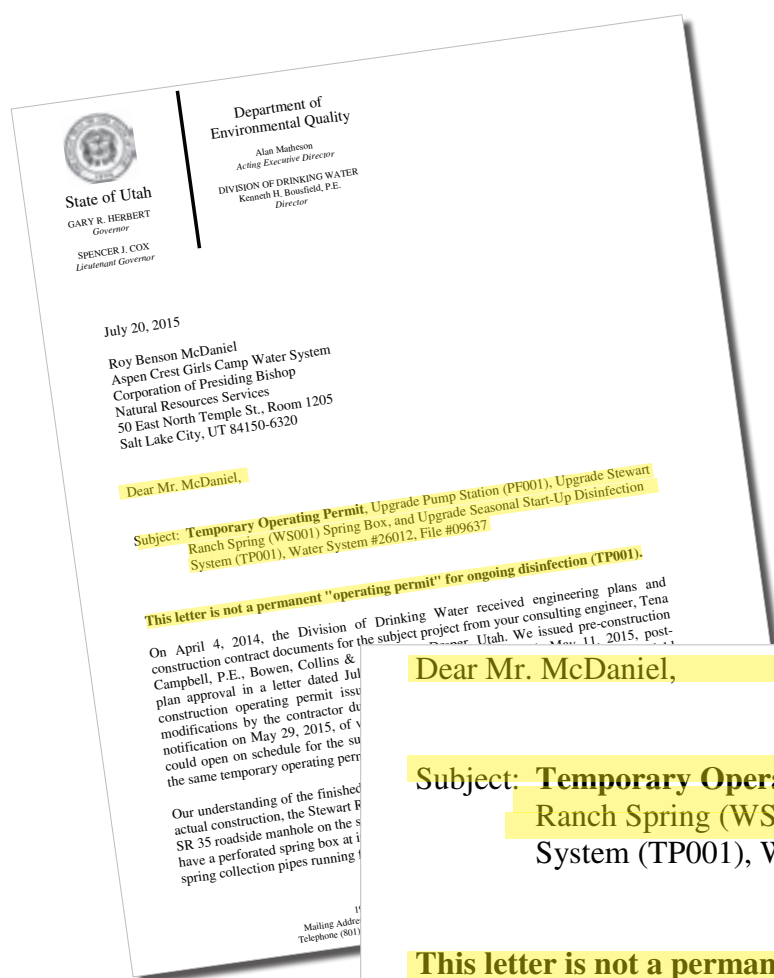
For years, state regulators turned a blind eye to potential health risks at multiple church-owned facilities, trusting that their fellow believers would eventually make good on promises to correct the problem.

Preparations for the annual Aspencrest trip began months in advance. There were handmade journals to craft and camp songs to memorize. The first day was usually filled with mishaps as we learned to pitch our tents on the steep, sunny hillside. The bishop of our congregation would arrive later, driving a taco cart from which he sold cinnamon tortillas.

We swam in the ice-cold creek, trying not to lose the flimsy water shoes required by our adult chaperones, who feared leeches. We sang and danced, and occasionally one of our more permissive leaders helped us sneak away to Kamas, the nearest town, to buy illicit milkshakes. I looked forward to the pivotal spiritual fireside — a candlelight meeting at which we revealed our deepest secrets and pledged loyalty to our church.

To countless girls like me, the camp was a safe place to test the waters of adulthood, while savoring the last days of our childhood. We worried about small things — what our friends would think of our makeup-free pimples, or whether poison ivy grows in Utah. But we never doubted the safety of Aspencrest.

Though Aspencrest is not the largest recreational facility owned by the LDS Church, state records suggest as many as 600 campers are there during any given week. At least 90 Salt Lake-area congre-



Dear Mr. McDaniel,

Subject: **Temporary Operating Permit, Upgrade Pump Station (PF001), Upgrade Stewart Ranch Spring (WS001) Spring Box, and Upgrade Seasonal Start-Up Disinfection System (TP001), Water System #26012, File #09637**

This letter is not a permanent "operating permit" for ongoing disinfection (TP001).

The well from which Aspencrest Camp, owned and operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, pumps water for up to 600 campers a week. Documents show it hasn't complied with state regulations for drinking water quality.

KIM RAFF FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

gations — each representing about 300 members — are assigned to the camp. Most girls between 12 and 16 will spend a week there each year; many young women return in subsequent years as volunteer camp leaders.

The spring from which Aspencrest draws its drinking water has a history of bacterial contamination. According to an August 2018 memo, the camp's primary water source has tested positive for coliform bacteria since 1995. Tests reveal that the bacteria were still present as of June 2019.

Coliform bacteria are found in animal and human digestive tracts and feces, as well as in soil and plant material. Most coliforms are harmless, but federal rules do not permit them in drinking water because their presence indicates that the water may have been contaminated by fecal material. And potentially serious diseases can be caused by fecal contamination, including illnesses triggered by some kinds of *E. coli*, which can cause stomach cramps, nausea and diarrhea.

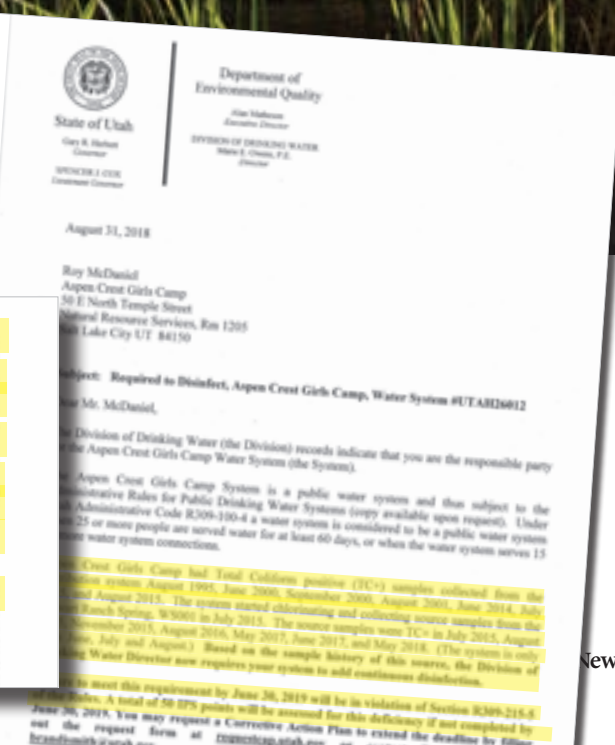
The camp was told to fix the problem by June 30, 2019 — but the state water department let it slide. Under normal circumstances, the state would note such noncompliance on Aspencrest's public drinking water report card. If the camp accumulated sufficient points, either due to multiple infractions or because violations had been ignored for lengthy periods of time, its approval to provide public drinking water could be revoked.

By early July, the division had yet to add any infraction to the camp's report card, even though the spring had again tested positive for bacterial contamination the previous month. Instead, the Utah Division of Drinking Water offered to let Aspencrest maintain its clean re-



Aspen Crest Girls Camp had Total Coliform positive (TC+) samples collected from the distribution system August 1995, June 2000, September 2000, August 2001, June 2014, July 2015, and August 2015. The system started chlorinating and collecting source samples from the Stewart Ranch Spring, WS001 in July 2015. The source samples were TC+ in July 2015, August 2015, November 2015, August 2016, May 2017, June 2017, and May 2018. (The system is only open June, July and August.) Based on the sample history of this source, the Division of Drinking Water Director now requires your system to add continuous disinfection.

Failure to meet this requirement by June 30, 2019 will be in violation of Section R309-215-5 of the Rules. A total of 50 IPS points will be assessed for this deficiency if not completed by June 30, 2019. You may request a Corrective Action Plan to extend the deadline by filling out the request form at drinkingwater.utah.gov or contact Drinking Water Director at brandi.smith@drinkingwater.utah.gov.



cord in exchange for the church's promise that Aspencrest would chlorinate its drinking water permanently, in spite of previous communications in which the division asserted that chlorination was not an acceptable long-term remedy. A July 2015 letter from the Utah Division of Drinking Water shows that while state regulators gave Aspencrest permission to install a disinfection system to temporarily address the contamination, they warned that camp managers would have to prove that "ongoing disinfection/chlorination is for precautionary purposes at a safe water supply rather than remedial purposes at an unsafe water supply."

This is not the first time the Division of Drinking Water turned a blind eye to the camp's water problems, according to Steve Onysko, a Utah state water engineer who spent nearly 20 years at the Utah Division of Drinking Water. Onysko, a middle-aged man with graying hair, contacted me during the summer of 2018, when I was working as a reporter at Utah's flagship daily, *The Salt Lake Tribune*.

Onysko had spent years documenting situations where division staffers had, in his opinion, failed to fulfill their duty to uphold the state's drinking water standards. In late 2017, Onysko was fired from the department after an investigation into a work-place abuse complaint. Onysko, who believes he was dismissed for whistleblowing, has filed suit against his former employer. In court filings, the Utah Division of Drinking Water has acknowledged that Onysko's professional competence was never in question.

Onysko claims that as long as the church agreed to fix any problems, the agency would waive normal public penalties and the church's water problems

would remain unrecorded, although the division denies this. Onysko alleges that the department wanted to avoid worrying parishioners or parents who send their children to camps like Aspencrest.

Despite repeated warnings from state drinking water regulators, the water at Aspencrest continues to fall short of state drinking water standards. The disinfection system is a flimsy safeguard against sickness, Onysko says. Should Aspencrest's disinfection system fail for any reason — during a power outage, for example — the untreated water could allow live bacteria into the system, potentially sickening hundreds of unsuspecting campers.

In fact, the state says the disinfection system "is not an acceptable remedy," and rules require water-system operators to prevent bacteria from entering the drinking water system in the first place. "Disinfection shall not be used to mask ongoing contamination and shall not be used as a substitute for correcting deficiencies," according to the state rule.

In a written statement to *High Country News*, Utah Division of Drinking Water Director Marie Owens said her department worked with the LDS Church to ensure the water source provided to Aspencrest camp complies with state standards. "The system responded to the division in September 2018 that they were complying with the requirement to continuously disinfect." Owens did not respond to a request to clarify why the division in a 2015 memo said long-term disinfection was unacceptable.

Meanwhile, Aspencrest is not the first, or only, LDS-operated water system to experience problems to which the Division of Drinking Water turned a blind eye.

Three mountain ranges to the west of Aspencrest, a standard-issue LDS chapel rises out of one of the West's most barren deserts. The Dugway chapel, with its tan brick facade and white spires, serves an isolated congregation of Latter-day Saints, most of whom work for the U.S. Army on a base that, according to its official website, tests biological and chemical weapons.

Like many remote communities, Dugway, Utah, is served by multiple small, privately held water systems. One of these systems — consisting of a single well, pump and filtration unit — is owned and operated by the LDS Church to provide water during services for a congregation of about 200.

But sources knowledgeable about the system's design are skeptical of the experimental water filtration system that the church has installed — but declined to test — in Dugway.

Onysko, the former Utah Division of Drinking Water engineer, surveyed the Dugway water system before his termination. The filter, he says, may be unable to reduce naturally occurring but potentially harmful minerals and metals to safe drinking levels.

The valley is sparsely populated, with fewer than 1,000 year-round residents, many of whom are members of the LDS Church. This stark white landscape, encompassing the base and a part of the Goshute Indian Reservation, is nicknamed Skull Valley after the number of animals that have died there after drinking from local ponds. Potable water is scarce.

The water in the Dugway chapel's well contains iron and manganese in amounts considerably above EPA recommendations, according to the church's own tests. High levels of these minerals are not considered as dangerous to humans as, say, lead, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. But they do pose a risk to developmental health.

State records show that in 2014, the LDS Church sought approval for a water treatment plant designed to remove minerals in general, and manganese in particular, from the well. Rather than buying an approved filtration unit, the church opted to design a mechanism of its own. After an initial round of testing showed a reduction in manganese, state officials signed off on the design. "The Division believes in giving water systems as much flexibility as possible to address their own issues as long as public health will not be compromised," said Division Director Marie Owens in a written statement. "As with any treatment process, we require sample results to ensure that the installation is effective before issuing a final operating permit."

But Paul Check, the production manager at Wisconsin-based Clack Corporation, which supplied the parts for the church's custom filter, is skeptical of the church's design. Normally, he says, the managers of small water systems

Steve Onysko, who worked for the Utah Division of Drinking Water for nearly 20 years, stands at Nobletts Creek, which runs adjacent to the well where Aspencrest Camp gets its drinking water. KIM RAFF



simply buy off-the-shelf components. But the particular components the church selected, Check recalls, have never been tested to ensure they work together. “I’ve been in the business now for 30 years, and wouldn’t know if this exactly would work,” he says. “It would take someone with a lot of experience to make it work, if it’s going to work at all.”

The church’s components, Check says, have been used to remove manganese and iron from drinking water for nearly 100 years. But they only work when air is present to help oxidize and absorb dissolved metals. If the filter isn’t properly aerated, he says, it won’t work.

The trouble with aerating a water system, Check says, is that if it’s not done carefully, bacteria can enter the system. Once there, they may collect and grow inside the filter. Over time, if the filter becomes coated with bacteria, it will stop removing manganese and may actually release additional metals into the drinking water.

What the church should have done, Check says, is run an extended pilot study to ensure the long-term success of its design. Instead, after an initial round of tests in 2014, the church declined to provide the Division of Drinking Water with additional samples.

Onysko discovered the lack of testing data three years later, while he was working for the Utah Division of Drinking Water. During a routine survey of the water system, he noticed that several related measures — including the amount of total dissolved solids in the water — had significantly worsened since the most recent tests he had on record. Unable to get satisfactory answers from the local maintenance crew, Onysko reached out to the manufacturer — Check — who suggested that the filter may have become clogged.

Onysko told Owens, the division director, that he needed to contact LDS Church headquarters to find out if anyone had done any long-term testing on the Dugway filter. Owens, he alleges, told him that all direct correspondence with the church had to go through a single staffer named Dave Hansen, a Utah Division of Drinking Water environmental scientist. Hansen relayed information from Roy McDaniel, the church’s water manager, who did not provide test data, merely saying the church had not conducted additional testing because manganese does not pose a health risk.

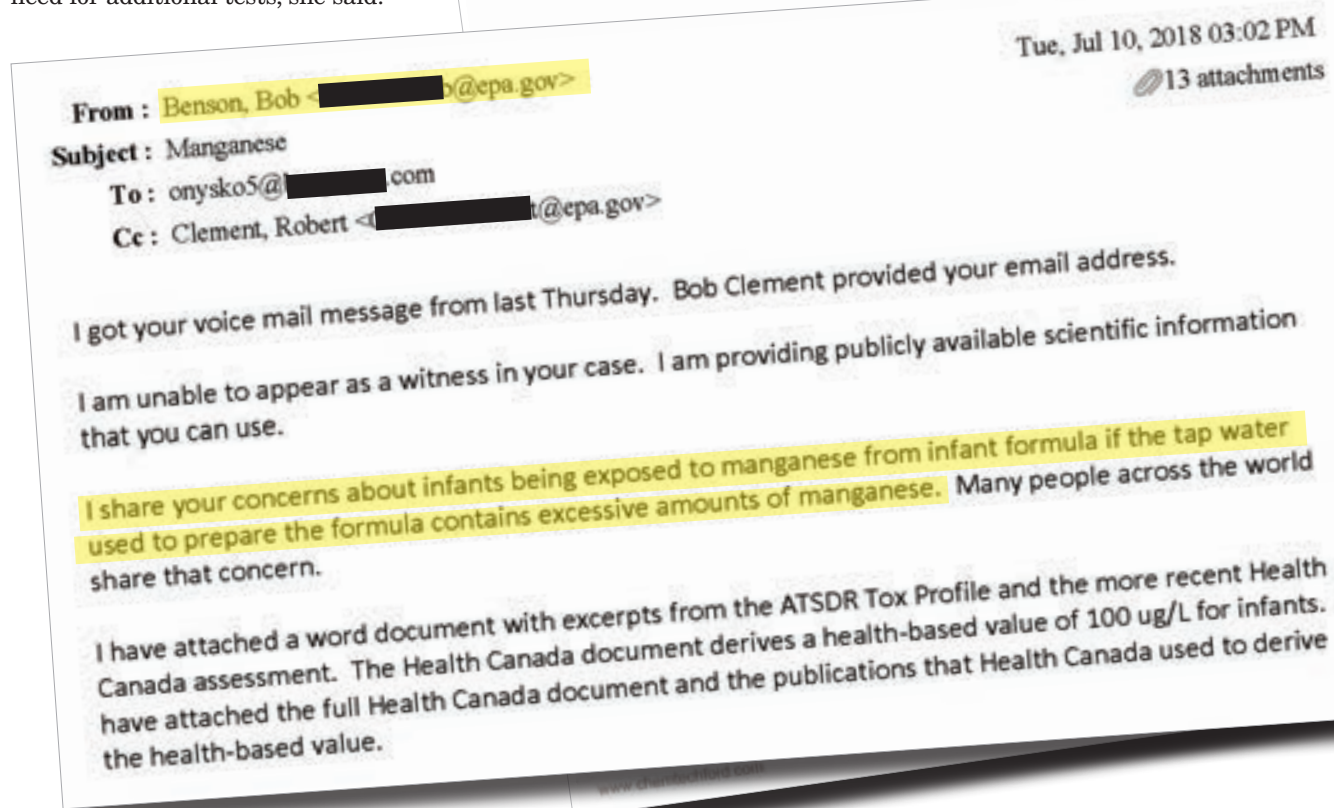
This is partly true, and partly false. The EPA has two tiers of drinking water standards. Water systems are required to screen for “primary” contaminants, which are considered harmful to human health. The EPA’s “secondary” standards are for “nuisance” contaminants, including iron and manganese.

However, there is evidence to suggest that the presence of manganese in drinking water may cause developmental delays in infants and fetuses, according to Bob Benson, a drinking water toxicologist

with the EPA. In a 2018 email to Onysko, Benson expressed concern that infants could be exposed if the church’s parishioners unknowingly prepared formula using contaminated drinking water. Still, he declined to intervene on Onysko’s behalf beyond providing more than a dozen studies regarding manganese’s potential health impacts.

Onysko alleges that when he attempted to present his findings to division leadership, his supervisor, Owens, became visibly angry and told him that he was attacking McDaniel’s judgment, adding that she knew McDaniel personally (Owens denies this) through the church. Onysko claims that Owens assured him that the church’s staff knew what they were doing and would never fail to ensure the safety of church drinking water.

Owens denies that the division was overly permissive. Because there is no enforceable federal standard for manganese, there was no need for additional tests, she said.



“(The) EPA is looking into setting (a health standard) for manganese and we are watching this process closely, but as of now, there are only aesthetic standards for both these parameters,” according to a written statement by Owens. Representatives of the LDS Church, including McDaniel, did not respond to requests for comment.

The girls in my congregation had mixed feelings about summer camp. For some,

Aspencrest was the highlight of summer vacation. Others saw it as an arduous pilgrimage, to be endured only because their parents insisted that they go.

For me, the oldest of my class in church and at school, camp represented a delightful opportunity to escape from the humdrum of suburban life and prove myself a leader within my church. As I grew older and considered the limited leadership roles available to women in

A lab test, top, of drinking water at the LDS church in Dugway, Utah, shows high levels of manganese and other contaminants. Above, an email from the EPA says elevated levels of manganese there are a concern.

The LDS church in Dugway, Utah, has a water system with high levels of manganese and other contaminants that could threaten the health of parishioners, especially babies.

KIM RAFF



the church, I imagined myself returning to the camp as a volunteer leader like those who once guided me.

Investigating Onysko's claims and reading state memos became a sort of "trust fall" exercise. Except this time, my leaders weren't there to catch me, and I fell. Aspencrest's water was almost certainly contaminated when I was there. It was almost certainly contaminated when my friends were there. It's almost certainly contaminated now that we're grown — perhaps even this summer, when my friends' children were staying at the camp.

Rules and safety standards for drinking water, like other environmental regulations, are generally established at the federal level. The Environmental Protection Agency determines the maximum amount of bacteria, lead or other contaminants that may be present in drinking water.

In most cases, the state-level environmental agency is responsible for ensuring that the EPA standards are met. In Utah, it's the Division of Water. State agencies regulate how water systems are built to ensure compliance with federal rules, conduct inspections and issue penalties to enforce the rules at all public water systems. Water systems are considered "public" if they serve more than 15 households, or at least 25 individuals daily, regardless of whether government or private entities own them.

This is why Onysko, who is not a member of the LDS Church, was flummoxed by what he perceived as instructions to let the Dugway church — a public facility that fell under his jurisdiction — off the hook. Though only a few of the 22-some violations and oversights he believes he documented over the years involved church-owned facilities, their religious association, Onysko says, seemed to put them in a special class when his colleagues made inspections.

Looking back, he says, he believes the situation was more complicated than outright cronyism.

"Some of it was, 'You are my religion, so you can do whatever you want to do,'" he says. "Other times it was, they were such religious zealots that (they believed you could) do whatever you want, because God wouldn't let something bad happen. And a third was, you can do whatever you want, because you're so much smarter than us." Junior staffers, he says, frequently seemed "intimidated" or star-struck by church leaders.

Onysko was similarly disturbed by his colleagues' inaction with regard to Aspencrest.

Even if we had known the water was unsafe, my friends and I could have done little more than drag our feet when camp leaders told us to brush our teeth and refill water bottles from the tap at the end of the day. The specter of tainted drinking water didn't top the list of our youthful concerns. We were more afraid that a mischievous friend might hide a certain notorious rubber snake in our beds.

But the lack of oversight no longer surprises me. In Utah, the power of the church is always felt, even among non-members.

It's there in the fact that the church owns a portion of Salt Lake City's downtown Main Street — the actual street itself — and forbids public demonstrations there. It's shown in the presence of church attorneys at government meetings that appear to have little to do with church interests.

A 2016 survey by *The Salt Lake Tribune* determined that LDS Church members outnumbered even Republicans in Utah's traditionally conservative state Legislature; nine in 10 representatives are members. According to a report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, approximately 50% of Utahns identify as LDS.

There is no LDS conspiracy to take over Utah's government, but like Onysko, I've observed that state leaders often offer the church unasked-for favors, inspired simply by trust or admiration.

Questioning or criticizing church

leadership is grounds for excommunication, and high-profile contrarians are frequently ejected from membership. In my experience, however, it is less fear than a desire to believe the church possesses an unassailable goodness that creates a culture for granting leniency to it.

As a faithful churchgoer, I was taught that LDS leaders were direct spokesmen for God. Their leadership positions are "callings" in church vernacular, assignments issued by a fatherly deity himself, and God, it is taught, would not allow his chosen leaders to lead the faithful astray. Many church members want — just as I did — to believe there is some fount of wisdom you can turn for moral clarity. And on a certain level, it makes sense. Former LDS Church President Wilford Woodruff is quoted in church instructional materials as saying God "would remove me out of my place" if he attempted to teach something contrary to God's desires. The manual goes on to say that the statements of church leaders may even supersede biblical teachings and other forms of scripture, and that the top three church leaders have authority in all matters, regardless of their professional backgrounds.

According to the church's instructional manual, God will excuse and even "bless" his followers for acting on the instructions of church leadership, even should the church be proven wrong.

So when Onysko showed me his documentation, I felt betrayed by my church. I had assumed, as did my family and church leaders, that Aspencrest was a place unspotted by the world — a safe place, where God, if not the church, would protect me from all harm. I should note that there have been no official reports of illness caused at the camp. I wouldn't expect there to be. I doubt that anyone, including me, would have ever blamed the camp if we'd gotten sick. We would have simply dismissed any illness as the product of something else. Maybe it was something in the "friendship stew." □

Web extra

See the documents behind this investigation at hcne.ws/unholy-water



Emma Penrod is a journalist based in rural Utah who covers science, technology, business and environmental health, with an emphasis on water.

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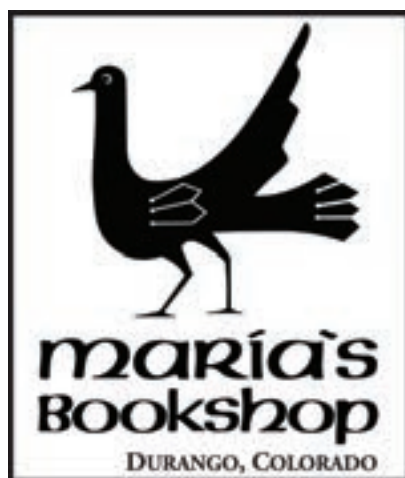
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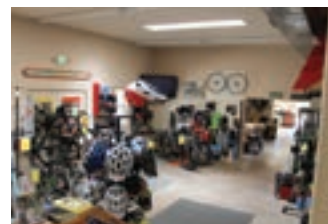
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Cow Creek *continued from page 11*

concerned that some out-of-state, out-of-the-area or foreign-owned company could come in and buy this forest,” Vredenburg said. With its \$220 million price tag, the Elliott was out of reach, so the Cow Creek turned to Lone Rock Resources, a local Oregon-based timber company.

Conservation groups, critical of Lone Creek’s forestry practices, staunchly opposed its involvement and accused the partnership of wanting to privatize the forest. Conservationists in turn were called out for their failure to work with tribal nations: “Your organization has mobilized opposition to the sale, with little to no engagement with the Tribes who would have, once again,

become the stewards of this land,” a consortium of racial justice groups, including NAACP Portland, wrote in an open letter to the Sierra Club, Cascadia Wildlands and four other conservation organizations. “We also note the many ways in which environmental groups in Oregon remain predominantly white, and work from a place of white privilege; this situation is a very clear example of the lack of racial justice analysis applied to what is a complicated situation.”

Then-Sierra Club Oregon Chapter Director Erica Stock responded, “As an environmental conservation community, we must do more to proactively reach out to Tribal Nations and rebuild trust.”

Ultimately, the sale was dropped by the state after intense public outcry, but tensions between conservation groups and tribes remain.

“The conservation movement began as a way for settlers to justify the seizure of Indigenous lands under the pretext that Native peoples didn’t know how to manage them,” says Shawn Fleek, Northern Arapaho, who is director of narrative strategy for OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon. “If modern conservation groups don’t begin their analysis in this history and struggle to address these harms, it becomes more likely they will repeat them.”

Rhett Lawrence, conservation director for the Sierra Club’s Oregon chapter, says that his group opposed the timber company and privatization, not the concept of tribes regaining their lands. Still, Lawrence acknowledges, “We need to do better about having those conversations. We certainly have not resolved things from where they were two years ago.” Since then, two groups named in the open letter, Trout Unlimited and Wild Salmon Center,

have now partnered with the Cow Creek Tribe on restoration projects.

Once a decade, a national study of tribal forests is conducted to monitor land health, production and management. The latest study, in 2013, found that the federal government was not fulfilling its trust responsibility to fund tribal forestry programs, yet noted that tribal stewardship could nonetheless serve as a model for resource management and practices on federal lands. “Those studies have shown that Indian forest management is superior than BLM and BIA because of the direct tie the Indian people have to the land,” says George Smith, chief forester for the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1978 to 1983 and the former executive director for the Coquille Tribe. “That’s their homeland, so they have a lot more vested interest in how those lands are managed.”

Tribes are often better at managing timberland holistically, says Smith, adding: “The tribal capacity with most of the tribes now, particularly the self-governance tribes, is at least equal to or better than the federal government.”

On a chilly December night in 2018, Michael Rondeau learned that the Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act had passed. He had been driving through Medford, Oregon, when the call came from Sen. Wyden’s office. After hearing the news, he sat in his car in a parking lot, feeling drained. The Cow Creek would have at least some land back, roughly 3% of what was originally ceded, the result of decades of letter-writing, lobbying and compromising. “I was of course proud of my team, and the effort that we had accomplished. I was excited for the future and knowing what it would mean to our people,” Rondeau says now. But the sense of victory was inextricably linked with the feeling of injustice that the act sought to correct. “Probably most emotional for me was the sadness that my grandparents and great aunts and uncles and beyond that didn’t have a day of recognition.”

He thought of his great-aunt, Francis Rondeau Corder, whom his family had cared for, ferrying her from her mobile home to doctors’ visits that they had to pay for out of pocket, since the promised federal medical care never materialized. She passed before the tribe was recognized. He’d seen the legislation go through the House seven times since 2012, only to die in the Senate, victim to horse-trading and the hazards of Congress.

While the Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act received less public pushback than the land conveyances of the 1990s and the Elliott debacle, some hard-line environmentalists continue to oppose the return of public lands to tribes. Al Runte, a Seattle-based environmental historian, wrote in *National Parks Traveler* in January that “had we protested the Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act, they would have called us racists.” Meanwhile, Andy Kerr, who worked for two decades

at Oregon Natural Resource Council (now Oregon Wild), still objects to public lands becoming tribal lands. “The Democrats who supported this legislation came down on the side of Native Americans and, in this case, against nature,” Kerr wrote in a December 2018 post on his website.

While “Native Americans” should get some form of compensation, Kerr argued that “such compensation should not come at the cost of losing federal public lands of benefit to all Americans.” Both Runte and Kerr see money as an adequate substitute despite treaty law, since “in the society that won out in that struggle for a continent, the most common way to right wrongs is by money being transferred to the aggrieved parties from the parties that unjustly benefited.” Kerr continues: “The currency of compensation by the United States to Native American tribes ought to be the currency of dollars, not that of the irreplaceable and precious public lands that belong to all of us.”

But it’s not a matter of money, says Cris Stainbrook, Oglala Lakota, of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation. “It’s ironic they don’t recognize they’ve had the public benefit of lands for on the order of 165 years of using someone’s land that was guaranteed to them, and used those lands to their own benefit. It’s about time, after 165 years, that they live up to the treaty.”

Stainbrook says he and others at the foundation often hear arguments like these against tribes working to regain land. Often, opponents say that too much time has passed — that broken treaties, while unfortunate, are a relic of the past. “The same could be said of the U.S. Constitution — why bother with any of that, that was done in the 1770s,” Stainbrook says. “I could quit paying my house mortgage tomorrow, since I signed that nearly 20 years ago. Time isn’t the issue here.”

The Milepost 97 Fire started a mile south of Canyonville, Oregon, on July 24, then spread to an old burn scar from the 1980s that was, at the time, BLM land, and is now Cow Creek again. Nine firefighters were injured over five days as snags 100 feet in front of the fire ignited from the embers, “lighting up like Roman candles,” recalled Vredenburg.

Recovery from fire means different things depending on the time scale, but with the fires just recently out, it’s difficult to think too far ahead. “The irony of finally, after 165 years, getting the reservation that was promised in the treaty, only to have almost a quarter of it burned, it’s gut-wrenching,” Rondeau told me from his office in early August. Still, he talks about the importance of beginning the hard work now, to be carried on for generations of Cow Creek: “I was taught that land was forever.”

The cream-colored beargrass, purple lupine and red paintbrush wildflowers will return within the next few years, and in a few decades, mature pines. But the legacy of fire and its scars will always be there, under the heights of evergreens. □



The Milepost 97 Fire burned on thousands of acres of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians Reservation. COURTESY OF MICHAEL RONDEAU

A myth of mountain masculinity



JEREMY WEBER/CC VIA FLICKR

Rowdy Burns doesn't look like much, the first time he meets ranch hand Wendell Newman. He's a silent slip of a boy, 7 years old, hollow-cheeked and hollowed-out by trauma — a mother struggling with drugs, days spent alone in an empty apartment. He's "the tiniest little thing for miles," Wendell thinks. And yet Rowdy becomes the gravitational force that draws together two families long torn apart by rural class and political divisions that ultimately erupted in murder.

Joe Wilkins' gripping debut novel, *Fall Back Down When I Die*, opens soon after Rowdy's arrival in Wendell's care, in a trailer in a hardscrabble corner of eastern Montana, during the first year of the Obama administration. Wendell is just 24 himself, a bookish former high school basketball star who now works for the wealthy rancher leasing his family's land, struggling to pay down back taxes and his dead mother's medical bills. Rowdy is the child of Wendell's cousin; he drums his fingers on his cheeks, is prone to fits. But the two, sundered from their closest relatives, begin to fuse into a new little family. Wendell teaches Rowdy how to set and run a trapline, lets him ride along in the grain truck, enlists his help with calves. Wendell begins to find in himself the father figure absent from his own life; Rowdy, though he struggles in school, calms down and starts to open in the embrace of Wendell's easy faith in his competence and potential. Sometimes, he even finds his voice.

Wendell and Rowdy's unfolding relationship is the central thread of three interwoven storylines set against

the backdrop of the Bull Mountains, the landscape where Wilkins grew up and the subject of his equally gorgeous memoir, *The Mountain and the Fathers*. The second follows Gillian Houlton and her teenage daughter, Maddy. An idealistic school administrator, Gillian goes out of her way to keep local kids from getting derailed by desperate circumstances. She winds up finding her way back to teaching, her true calling, when she takes Rowdy on as a special-ed student. After meeting Wendell in a local dive bar, Maddy embraces Rowdy's cause, bringing him books and a winter coat, and growing closer to Wendell. She has no idea that the two of them share a dark past. The third storyline reveals that darkness, piece by piece, through a series of notebook entries written years before by Wendell's father, Verl.

Wrestling with the loss of his public-land grazing leases and the subsequent loss of his cattle, Verl shot a wolf and buried it in a ravine. He blamed the federal government for the predator's return; to him, it exemplified the forces that had stolen everything from him, the land and wealth earned by his birthright and the work of his hands. So when the game warden confronted him, Verl shot him, too, then abandoned his family and vanished into the wilderness, into "his" Bull Mountains, forever, chronicling his flight as he went.

The game warden was Verl's friend, was Maddy's father, was Gillian's husband. In a heartbeat, Wendell, Maddy and Gillian had lost the most important men in their lives to a myth of masculine

self-sufficiency and settler entitlement that, in Wilkins' telling, runs through the veins of their homeland like a drug.

As their lives twine together around Rowdy, that violent mythos threatens to tear them apart yet again: The first legal wolf hunt in Montana is coming up, and a right-wing militia movement that sees Verl as a hero plans to use the event to launch the opening salvo of their revolution. When they turn to Wendell as Verl's emissary, Wendell must decide what kind of man he wants to be, and what kind of world he wants for Rowdy.

The land itself — almost a living character in the book, rendered both beautiful and ominous in Wilkins' poetic prose — leads him to his final answer, and to the book's spellbinding conclusion. This is big, dry country that defies irrigation, turns farmhouses into peeling, yawning shacks, pushes families like Wendell's own out of business and into poverty. "It wasn't the EPA or the BLM making it all of a sudden hard," Wendell realizes. "It had always been hard. That's why the wolves were coming back. They were built for it. They didn't worry about what was owed to them. They lived how the land demanded."

Even Verl arrived at this realization before he melted into mystery and dust among the dry needles of the mountains' dry forest. In one of the notebook's last entries, he acknowledged as much, writing and then crossing out, as if he couldn't live with the conclusion: "If I were to pick up a rock or stone out here and call it mine it would only fall back down when I die." **BY SARAH GILMAN**



Fall Back Down When I Die

Joe Wilkins
256 pages,
hardcover: \$27
Little, Brown and
Company, 2019.

Mom loves the desert. Daughter loves the Dollar Store.



RACHEL TURIEL

Last spring, we camped in the Sonoran Desert for our kids' spring break, bathing in the sunshine after record winter snowfall in our Colorado hometown and savoring the "superbloom," a fireworks display of wildly abundant spring flowers. Waterfalls of silky orange poppies cascaded down hillsides. Purple lupine lined the roads. By dusk, the intense heat slipped away along with the daylight. Bats swooped over our campsite as the sky became a starry darkness. It was my kind of vacation.

My children felt differently. One afternoon, we drove on the outskirts of Tucson through a promenade of big-box stores. My 12-year-old daughter, Rosie, funneled all her energy into spotting the Dollar Tree amid the squared hulking buildings with their distinctive logos, more recognizable to most Americans than their regional flora and fauna. This was my daughter's kind of vacation.

As we blurred past storefronts, a familiar despair washed over me. I long for my children to find value and intrigue in the natural world rather than in unrestrained consumerism. It's hard for me to separate their lust for the next landfill-bound fad from my failure to imprint my conservation values on their developing minds. When this mixes with my worry about the demise of the planet, it can make for troubling parent-child relations. "Do you think everything at the Dollar Tree actually costs a dollar?" Rosie asked, concern tightening her voice. "Because

if not, maybe we should look for Dollar General or Family Dollar." Like my own captivation with desert plants — spiny and waxy and extravagantly orange — Rosie was taking note of the subtle variations on a theme "Hey — what about the 98 cent store?" she asked, a new species calling to her.

I swallowed my sermon on how clever, well-funded marketers have sold her a lie that the next new shiny thing will bring her happiness and how the longing for pleasure delivered through single-serving stuff is actually killing our planet. These are not popular messages among the backseat contingent.

We had spent the morning hiking in Romero Canyon, northwest of Tucson, gossiping about saguaros: which had the most arms, the tallest trunk, the most classic storybook look. We delighted in bright cardinals and their cartoonishly chunky red beaks. The sun cranked up the heat. Lizards darted. My 14-year-old son challenged us with logic riddles.

I announced how much fun we were all having, like a salesperson trying to sell the kids on something — the wonders of quick-moving birds and slow-moving cacti. They could smell my fear: If this

blooming desert won't stand up to their world, beckoning them with unlimited entertainment and the lure of perky YouTubers peddling merch, we were, as a species, in very big trouble.

A friend recently said to me, speaking about adolescents: "They're questioning everything. That's their job." I get it: If it is my voice railing against retail therapy, that will become the easy target against which they will necessarily rebel. As when Rosie says, "Hey, World Market looks interesting!" and her father replies, "How about the actual world; that could be interesting, too." Now the mental space available for outrage is directed toward her father, rather than the corporations that convince us we are hopelessly deficient without their products.

I would like nature to be a salve, a refuge, a teacher for my kids, as it was for me as a young adult investigating my own cultural conditioning. At the same time, I don't want to shame my children for wanting what they want. I believe that if they get to taste all the flavors of consumerism — the joy and heartache — they will find their own wisdom.

We located the Dollar Tree, and Rosie exploded from the car, clutching \$16. I found her in line behind a man gathering 100 toiletries. "For the homeless," he explained. He returned multiple times, arms loaded with toothbrushes, shampoo and other items that help confer human dignity. The part of me that wanted to point fingers at some villain had to lower my hand and reconsider. Rosie and I were stilled by his kindness but also by his cheery resolve. I detected no inner tension, not about the copious plastic bags, nor the dubious "scents" in the scented deodorant. Life was more complex than I'd made it out to be.

Rosie paid for her 16 items; I covered the tax. "Just one bag, please," she requested.

Back at camp, we set off in the waning light for Romero Creek. A rabbit paused in the shadows. The saguaros were, inexplicably, just as we left them; I had crossed through 10 emotions and back again.

At the creek, Dan and the kids conducted a stick race downstream. A Gila woodpecker called from the top story of a saguaro. The kids were barefoot and laughing, cheering on their stick-boats as the sun cashed out on another day. "This is so fun!" Rosie shrieked. I felt the utter relief of not having to sell them on anything, of simply letting the experience of unstructured joy in nature imprint its hopeful message on them. If the kids are in the business of questioning everything, I hope they found one small answer in this moment. □

Rachel Turiel writes and grows food and a family in Durango, Colorado. She's been published widely, including in The New York Times. See more work on her website 6512andgrowing.com.

Mauna Kea and colonialism on public lands



NEWS
COMMENTARY
BY ROSALYN
LAPIER

If you spend much time in the American West, you're likely to see someone wearing a T-shirt that says "Public Land Owner." It's an assertion that public lands are owned by everyone and that their management is of critical importance to us all. In Hawaii, a battle over public land and Indigenous rights has complicated that sentiment for many, as Native Hawaiians find themselves forced to defend their homeland.

For weeks, thousands of Native Hawaiians have been blocking the only access road to Mauna Kea, the largest mountain in Hawaii, to oppose the construction of the \$1.4 billion Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) at its summit. After 10 years of fighting its construction, Native leaders began demonstrating after Hawaii's Department of Land and Natural Resources issued a "notice to proceed," allowing the University of Hawaii, the permit holder for the TMT, to begin building.

The conflict on Mauna Kea — between Indigenous people and the state of Hawaii — illustrates not only the issue of how public lands are managed but also an emerging debate over how Indigenous rights to those lands are addressed. What we see in these conflicts are two ways of viewing and using public lands in the American West: as places for development and as culturally important landscapes.

As an Indigenous person, I can identify with Native Hawaiians who want to save what is left of their sacred mountain and their right to access it, before it is overdeveloped. As a scholar, however, with an undergraduate degree in physics, no less, I understand and even sympathize with scientists who want to build one of the world's largest telescopes in order to better understand the mysteries of our universe. A telescope on top of a mountain is ideal — but perhaps not on this mountain.

As governments push to further develop public lands, places Indigenous people see as their last refuge, conflicts between Native people and federal or state governments will only increase and intensify in the coming years.

Colonization of Hawaii began in the late 18th century. American businessmen continued the process of dispossessing land and resources when they overthrew the Native Hawaiian monarchy in 1893, later ceding their "public lands" to the U.S. government via annexation in 1898. Native Hawaiians have always contended that their land was illegally taken, a view that President Clinton codified in his 1993 apology. When Hawaii became a state in 1959, the U.S. transferred what was left of these public lands to the new state. Today, Mauna Kea is no longer owned by the Native Hawaiian community. It is now on state public lands.

Mauna Kea's story, unfortunately, is not unique.

Twenty years ago, the Apache in Arizona tried to stop the construction of the Mount Graham International Telescope on their sacred mountain in Coronado National Forest. More recently, we have witnessed similar struggles at Bears Ears in Utah and the Badger-Two Medicine in Montana, where, despite Indigenous protests, protections for important



Native lands have been removed or put into question.

Public lands are often the only places where Native American sacred landscapes still exist since so much land was lost to conquest and colonization, and they are among the few places where Native people can practice their religions, hunt, fish or gather their sacred medicines. Hawaiian leaders have consistently stated that the demonstration at Mauna Kea is not about "science vs. religion." It is about development on public lands and the Native people's right to steward those lands.

"This mountain represents more than just their building they want to build," Hawaiian activist and elder Walter Ritte told the *Hawaii Tribune Herald*. "This mountain represents the last thing they want to take that we will not give them."

Mauna Kea is named for the god Wakea or "sky father," one of the nine gods or goddesses connected to the mountain. Mo'olelo, the narratives passed down through generations of Native Hawaiians, tell the histories of these sacred landscapes.

But what is their future on public lands?

This past week, William Pendley was appointed the acting director of the Bureau of Land Management. Pendley, formerly president of the Mountain States Legal Foundation, has a long history of advocating for development on public lands — including Native American sacred landscapes. Most recently, he defended an oil and gas company's lease in Montana's Badger-Two Medicine region — on my ancestral homelands and the sacred lands of the Blackfeet. Earthjustice and a coalition of Native American groups have asked the Department of Interior for Pendley to recuse himself as the attorney of record for all matters concerning that lease. To date, he has not done so.

I went to Mauna Kea when the demonstrations began to stand with Native Hawaiians because we face a similar foe, which 30-year old Native Hawaiian leader Kahookahi Kanuha, passionately spoke about, "Our *aina* (land) is in danger. Our *lahui* (nation) is in danger. ... If we want to stop this, if we want to beat this settler-state system that is forcing itself upon us, we need to rise up and stand together."

It is time for "public-land owners" in the American West to stand with Indigenous people to protect public lands from development, because these conflicts — like the fight over Mauna Kea — will only continue to grow. □

Demonstrators gather on July 15 to block the road at the base of Hawaii's tallest mountain. Since then, thousands of Native Hawaiians have come together to maintain the blockade.

CALEB JONES/AP IMAGES

As governments push to further develop public lands, places Indigenous people see as their last refuge, conflicts between Native people and federal or state governments will only increase and intensify in the coming years.

Rosalyn LaPier is an award-winning Indigenous writer and ethnobotanist with a BA in physics and a Ph.D. in environmental history. She is an associate professor of environmental studies at the University of Montana and an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Tribe and Métis.

WEB EXTRA

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Letters from Miguel: 'I felt I had no option but to leave'

How my correspondence with an immigrant detainee has given me hope



NEWS
COMMENTARY
BY RUXANDRA
GUIDI

I've covered immigration as a journalist for almost 20 years, documenting the lives of families in different corners of the Western Hemisphere as they make the difficult decision to move to the U.S. to seek a better life. In the process, I've tried to help readers understand immigration policy, even as I personally relate to the challenge of making a new home in America, of learning a new language and cultural norms, of missing friends and family.

Yet over just the past two years, I've watched America — which welcomed me almost three decades ago — methodically close its doors to people from other cultures while dangerously scapegoating both new and longtime immigrants.

I know I'm not alone when I say how helpless it makes me feel, following the back-to-back news stories about migrant caravans, family separations and the inhumane conditions at immigrant camps and detention facilities. I sometimes feel ashamed to enjoy the freedoms I do, knowing that my government is refusing those same rights to others.

And yet many of us do our best to suppress those feelings, averting our gaze from people held in confinement; we are afraid to think about how debilitating it must feel to be cut off from your family, in a foreign place, without the prospect of freedom or a regular, productive life. Being held in detention must be particularly unsettling for recent asylum seekers or border-crossing migrants who came to this country seeking refuge and instead found themselves behind walls.

I've recently found one way to deal with my feelings of shame and helplessness — by exchanging letters with a man named Miguel. I found him through Detainee Allies, an organization started in June 2018 by a group of friends and neighbors from San Diego, California, who were disturbed by the disastrous Trump administration "zero tolerance" family separation policy, which is still in existence today despite a court order halting it and the growing public outcry against reports of mistreatment inside detention facilities.

By getting hundreds of people around the world to write letters to immigrant detainees in the U.S., Detainee Allies hopes to create a lifeline for people inside the detention centers, as well as for those, like me, on the outside who feel like helpless witnesses to the White House's inhumane actions.

Miguel is being held at the Otay Mesa Detention Center in San Diego for at least a month, though he doesn't know exactly how long it will be. So far, I've sent him two short letters and gotten one reply. I wrote to him because I feel so impotent and frustrated, and I know that someone like him must feel great despair and loneliness, too. I don't know whether our correspondence can change anything, other than assuaging my feelings while giving me the chance to connect with a stranger who might need to hear a friendly voice.

Miguel has shared a few details about his life: He's from Guatemala; his parents came to California

to work when he was a baby and left him at home with an aunt. He finished technical school in Guatemala and wants to become an auto mechanic. But that's not easy to do in his home country today. "I faced violence, extortions and death threats back in Guatemala," he writes, and ultimately, "that is why I felt I had no option but to leave and ask the U.S. for protection."

Needless to say, the quest for protection has landed more migrants than ever in detention — and worse. At least 24 migrants have died in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody since President Donald Trump took office. Children and teenagers in detention facilities have made allegations of deliberate mistreatment, including sexual assault, by border enforcement officials, and many have been held for weeks and even months in crowded cells with no access to soap or showers, sleeping on concrete floors in unwashed clothing. A recent report by the Office of the Inspector General describes 155 immigrant detainees occupying a room that was meant for only 35. ICE's detention population is at an all-time high, with 54,000 people held in detention on any single day — up from 2016 averages by more than 50%.

Miguel has not told me about conditions at the Otay Mesa Detention Center. But last December, other detainees writing to people on the outside described medical neglect, racism and discrimination. In at least one instance, a detainee was forced to work extra shifts at the facility for \$1 a day.

Even if he's not facing those problems at the Otay Mesa Detention Center, Miguel must know he's now part of an ever-growing population of poor migrants from throughout the world who are now stuck inside this country's immigration detention dragnet without access to due process.

I don't know how old Miguel is, but the fact that he's so eager to be reunited with his parents and start a career makes me think he's in his early to mid-20s. His handwriting is filled with youthful, bubble-shaped letters. I hope we can meet in person someday. Even after he finally gets out, Detainee Allies told me, Miguel could still use my guidance or support.

"Thank you for understanding," read his first short letter to me. "May God bless you."

When I replied, I asked him how he was doing. I questioned him about what he hopes to do once he's out of detention and able to look for his parents. My heart was full, and I struggled to find the right words. In the end, all I could say was: "I wish you good health and strength." □

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A close-up photograph of a pair of brown canvas work pants. The fabric has a coarse, textured weave. A dark, rectangular brand label with the word "patagonia" in white script is visible on the right side. The lighting is warm and directional, creating deep shadows and highlighting the texture of the material.

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THE WEST

"A patrol car was struck by a falling bear in Northern California ... causing the vehicle to crash and explode." News stories rarely begin this way, but it certainly is an opening guaranteed to catch the reader's attention. The Associated Press explained that the bear apparently either "jumped" or fell onto the car from a steep embankment. No doubt this was a bear of considerable girth, because it smashed the hood and windshield, causing the patrol car to crash into the embankment, roll onto its side and "burst into flames." Somehow the Humboldt County deputy escaped without serious injury, but the car was gutted and about half an acre of hillside caught fire and burned. As for the bear? "Don't worry," a spokesperson for the California Transportation Department; it "fled the scene."



NEW MEXICO The latest in pack rat home security systems. CARL GABLE

THE WEST

Pop quiz: What part of a bison can you safely touch in Yellowstone National Park, or in any other park, for that matter? "No part, and don't even think it!" has been the Park Service's answer for decades, yet tourists can't seem to resist a fortuitous fondle. Thanks to a widely circulated video of a bison flinging a young girl into the air after a group of kids got too close, we know that the animals have little patience with rude humans. Yet a man who left the boardwalk at Yellowstone this August to pet a bison on the head managed to escape without being gored. So how does the Park Service get its safety message across? The agency recently distributed a schematic drawing of a bison, carefully but humorously delineating the consequences should you venture too close. What happens if you touch a bison's nether regions, for example? The Park Service simply replies: "Do you have insurance?" Poking the chest of a bison leads to a blunt "Vacation over." Yet given human nature, we fear one warning might prove counterproductive. Asking people "How fast are you?" before they touch a bison's head might just tempt competitive types, dying to find out.

WASHINGTON

If you read the *Seattle Times*, you've probably noticed that real estate dominates the news, as young people are priced out of a drum-tight market, and ho-hum houses sell for a million or more. Meanwhile, Seattle struggles with what the paper calls the "surreptitious and unregulated universe" of rundown recreational vehicles lining some city streets. The RVs, which rent cheaply but are in sorry shape, will soon be towed away, said Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan, who called their owners "the worst of slumlords." Yet the tent colonies set up by the homeless in front of buildings are no solution either. Some "authorized encampment areas" have been turned into tiny-house villages, but until Seattle has enough services and housing, Durkan said, "I can't guarantee that we'll ever have a place where there are no tents."

THE BORDER

It lasted for half an hour, but it was a lovely sight: Three pink seesaws were inserted between the steel slats of the border wall that divides Mexico from the United States, and as U.S. Border Patrol agents and Mexican soldiers watched, children on both sides bobbed up and down, united in fun. On the U.S. side, the happy event was held in Sunland Park, New Mexico, population 14,500. The "Teeter-Totter Wall" was created

by Ronald Rael, an architecture professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and Virginia San Fratello, an associate professor of architecture at San Jose State University. Their earlier works include a "Burrito Wall" that allows a food cart to be inserted between the slats, as well as a "Wildlife Wall" with gaps permitting wildlife to pass freely between the two countries. Only a few months ago, though, Sunland Park's wall made darker news. In April, members of a right-wing militia took it upon themselves to forcibly detain migrants there. Then, in May, a group collecting private donations for a border wall erected its first section of fencing on private land in the city, reported *The New York Times*. Sunland Park Mayor Javier Perea praised the shared playground, saying that it showed that "people live along the border and get along pretty well with each other despite the wall."

WYOMING

Paul Beaupre, a doctor and CEO of St. John's Medical Center in Jackson, Wyoming, wasn't climbing a mountain or even out golfing when lightning struck him this July: He was walking toward his car across a parking lot at the Jackson Hole Airport. Waking up after being "face-planted on the asphalt," Beaupre said later that he simply went on home, figuring that the lightning hadn't killed him, "and I would see how it went." The answer was "not well." At the hospital where he works, Beaupre later learned he had a broken nose and jaw and three broken ribs. But at least he hadn't suffered a heart attack, reports the *Jackson Hole News&Guide*, "which is a common occurrence after being struck by lightning." The National Weather Service recommends taking shelter if a storm is within 3 miles, adding ominously that even on a clear day, lightning "can travel up to 15 miles from a storm."

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

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org or tag photos #heardaroundthewest on Instagram.



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