

MONTANA'S WHEAT WOES | A GRAY WHALE DIE-OFF | CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND RACIST VIOLENCE

High Country News

For people who care about the West

**"We can either wait on Mother Nature
— or we can give it a shot ourselves."**

To save their aquifer, Colorado farmers wrestle with
the promise and perils of self-governance

By Nick Bowlin



Center, Colorado, is surrounded by center-pivot-irrigated farms that draw water from shrinking aquifers below the San Luis Valley. GOOGLE EARTH

On the cover

Water from an aquifer that lies below Colorado's San Luis Valley flows through a center-pivot irrigation system, one of some 14,000 that draw water from below.

LUNA ANNA ARCHIE



Complete access to subscriber-only content

HCN's website
hcn.org

Digital edition
hcne.ws/digi-5116

Follow us



FEATURE

12 “We can either wait on Mother Nature — or we can give it a shot ourselves.”

To save their aquifer, Colorado farmers wrestle with the promise and perils of self-governance By Nick Bowlin

CURRENTS

- 3 **The Latest: Logging in Tongass National Forest**
- 5 **Trump's trade war is draining profits for Montana farmers**
Growers now confront environmental threats and geopolitical conflict
- 6 **Why are so many gray whales dying?**
A major Pacific Coast die-off has researchers worried about an even bigger trend
- 7 **The ineffectual bombing of sea lions**
Fishermen get frustrated as sea lion numbers swell
- 8 **Extremists appropriate Indigenous struggles for violent ends**
From Nazi Germany to El Paso, white nationalists use Indigenous imagery to justify racist violence

DEPARTMENTS

- 3 FROM OUR WEBSITE: HCN.ORG
- 4 LETTERS
- 10 THE HCN COMMUNITY Research Fund, Dear Friends
- 21 MARKETPLACE
- 25 FILM *Merata: How Mum Decolonised the Screen* by Hepi Mita.
Reviewed by Jason Asenap
- 26 BOOKS
The End of the Myth by Greg Grandin. Reviewed by Alex Trimble Young
- 28 HEARD AROUND THE WEST By Betsy Marston

Editor's note

Where our happiness is at stake

Sometimes I'm asked whether I hold out any hope concerning the fate of humanity and climate change. I have a hard time answering. I have no doubt that things are going to get hotter before they get better; Denver, for example, just broke its heat record for September, hitting 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Do I doubt that humans will somehow figure out a way to survive? Not really, at least for a few hundred years — maybe a few thousand, even. What ought to worry us about climate change is not the fate of humanity, or even of the Earth; after all, this planet has another 800 million to 1.2 billion years for life on it to re-evolve, wherever it leads. Rather, a climate in flux is a major challenge to our happiness right now. We have barely started to grapple with the despair of the modern age, and an unstable climate brings the prospect of increasingly conflict-driven lives.



Take the cover story for this issue, in which editorial fellow Nick Bowlin reports from Colorado's San Luis Valley, a high-altitude community of ranchers and farmers that is finding it hard to conserve water. The state has warned the locals that if their current experiment in self-governance fails, it will step in to manage their water for them. That means they will lose some of their freedom. Yet it's not always easy to do the right thing. Last year, severe drought squeezed the community pretty hard. When this year brought heavy snow and plenty of runoff, farmers felt driven to make up for their losses — pumping water to grow hay and crops instead of recharging the groundwater. In a less volatile climate, people would have a better chance of succeeding and sharing water. But faced with extremes, humans falter. Conservation yields to self-preservation.

The ticking clock of climate change, in other words, makes it harder to do the right thing. Our health and happiness are threatened across the globe. The leading thinkers who gathered in Stockholm last month for World Water Week warned of increased global conflict over water, citing erratic rainfall and food shortages in South Sudan and Syria as examples.

From the San Luis Valley to South Sudan, climate change is challenging our values, forcing us to advance our ethics faster than the temperatures rise. And because the American West is more sensitive to this kind of change than much of the country, we who live here face the pointy end of this ethical challenge. But that's where my hope lies. My hope is that people who care about the West, who read this magazine, will help guide the world through the challenges ahead. That means starting now and working steadily — thinking big, showing up and doing good.

—Brian Calvert, editor-in-chief

THE LATEST

Backstory

Alaska's Tongass National Forest, a 16.7 million-acre stretch of old-growth spruce, hemlock and cedar, is the world's largest intact temperate rainforest. **After decades of battles over logging, the Forest Service phased out the clear-cutting of old-growth trees in 2016.** However, conservationists argued for stricter laws to protect the ancient trees and rare animals that inhabit this unique ecosystem ("An end to old-growth logging in Alaska's Tongass?" *HCN*, 10/31/16).

Followup

In August, *The Washington Post* reported that the Trump administration wants to exempt the Tongass from logging restrictions. The area is currently protected by a Clinton administration policy known as the "roadless rule," which protects about 58 million acres of the nation's remaining undeveloped national forest from logging, road building and mineral development. Alaska's political leaders have been pressing the administration for an exemption. **If Trump's plan succeeds, it could affect 9.5 million acres of preserved Tongass forest.**

HELEN SANTORO



Tongass National Forest. GILLFOTO/CC VIA FLICKR



◀ Kerianne Gardner in the bedroom of her teenage daughter, Aurra, who committed suicide there in 2017.

▼ Kerianne Gardner embraces her daughter, Samaria, at Bear Canyon Arroyo, where her daughter, Aurra, would go when she skipped class.

DON J. USNER/
SEARCHLIGHT
NEW MEXICO AND
THETRACE.ORG

New Mexico's teen suicide crisis

New Mexico currently has the fifth-highest youth suicide rate in the country, with approximately 16 per 100,000 residents taking their lives — double the national average. Sixteen-year-old Aurra Gardner, who died in 2017, was one of them. Gardner was a shy, motivated and creative young woman whose death exemplifies a tragically pressing issue that families and experts struggle to understand. Health professional and government agencies are working to address the crisis, but their efforts have been insufficient. "We've lost a student to suicide every year for the past four years," said Tanya Kuhnee, who teaches English at Gardner's school. **NICK PACHELLI/SEARCHLIGHT NEW MEXICO AND THETRACE.ORG**

Read more online: hcne.ws/teen-suicide



“If you want to maintain a positive branding reputation with the future generations, do you want to be siding with the person that most of us think is the biggest climate denier in the world, President Trump?”

—Jeff Alson, one of the architects of the Obama administration's mileage standards, speaking about the recent deal between California and four automakers in which they pledged to reach an average fuel economy for new cars and trucks of 54.5 miles per gallon by 2026.

EMILY HOLDEN/THE GUARDIAN VIA CLIMATE DESK
Read more online: hcne.ws/automakers-climate

Border-wall construction in Organ Pipe is a travesty

This August, border-wall construction began in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona. The process involves tearing out saguaro cactus and creosote bush, devastating the desert ecosystem and violating numerous environmental laws, Erica Prather of Defenders of Wildlife wrote in a recent opinion piece. Members of the Tohono O'odham Nation also harvest saguaro fruit and perform

their sacred salt ceremony in the monument. "We sit weeping over the irreversible harm that is unleashed as the plans are laid, the engines rev, the news cycle drones on," Prather wrote. "It's in this moment, with the air hot on our necks, that we in the Borderlands beg you to bear witness with us." **OPINION BY ERICA PRATHER, DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE**
Read more online: hcne.ws/wall-organ-pipe

1,000
Number of elk that used to frequent the forests around Vail, Colorado.

53
Number found there at last count.

170,000
Number of hikers that use some trails near Vail during a year — twice as many as in 2009.

The number of outdoor recreationists — including hikers, mountain bikers and backcountry skiers — is growing. While this is good for tourist towns such as Vail, Colorado, it is not good for Colorado's elk. These days, recreation in Vail is a year-round affair. To escape the crowds, people are traveling deeper into the woods, increasing their chances of coming into contact with wildlife. According to scientists, the area's elk population has plummeted since the early 2010s. Former wildlife professor Bill Alldredge blames increased contact with humans, which has been shown to increase stress for elk mothers and their calves.

CHRISTINE PETERSON/THE GUARDIAN
Read more online: hcne.ws/colorado-elk

Trending

Trump administration rolls back methane pollution regulations

In late August, the Trump administration announced plans to roll back requirements for oil and gas drillers to reduce methane leaks from drilling operations, pipelines and storage facilities. Methane is a potent gas that traps heat and contributes to climate change. Janet McCabe, an environmental official under the Obama administration, said that it has about 25 times the warming potential of carbon dioxide. "If the EPA manages to finalize and implement this illegal proposal, it will have devastating impacts on our climate for years to come," said Darin Schroeder, an attorney for the Clean Air Task Force. The administration calls the rule redundant and claims the move will save the oil and gas industry \$17 million to \$19 million a year. **EMILY HOLDEN/THE GUARDIAN VIA CLIMATE DESK**

You say

STUART KOSTER: "Self-regulation by companies is the reason we have the big problem of climate change."

KENT CHRISTENSEN: "Chance for companies to self-regulate. (Government) is incompetent."

BEVERLY KOLKMAN: "They need to rename the EPA. It certainly isn't protecting our planet; it's helping destroy it."

Read more online: hcne.ws/trump-methane and [Facebook.com/highcountrynews](https://www.facebook.com/highcountrynews)

High Country News

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR/PUBLISHER
Paul Larmer
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Brian Calvert
ART DIRECTOR
Cindy Wehling
DIGITAL EDITOR
Gretchen King
ASSOCIATE EDITORS
Tristan Ahtone
Emily Benson
Paige Blankenbuehler
Maya L. Kapoor
ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR
Luna Anna Archey
ASSISTANT EDITORS
Carl Segerstrom
Anna V. Smith
EDITOR AT LARGE
Betsy Marston
COPY EDITOR Diane Sylvain
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Graham Brewer
Ruxandra Guidi
Michelle Nijhuis
Jonathan Thompson
CORRESPONDENTS
Krista Langlois,
Sarah Tory, Joshua Zaffos
EDITORIAL FELLOWS
Nick Bowlin
Kalen Goodluck
EDITORIAL INTERNS
Helen Santoro
Jolene Yazzie
DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR
Laurie Milford
MAJOR GIFT ADVISER
Alyssa Pinkerton
DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATE
Hannah Stevens
DIGITAL MARKETER
Chris King
EVENTS & BUSINESS PARTNER
COORDINATOR Laura Dixon
WEB APPLICATION DEVELOPER
Eric Strebel
IT MANAGER Alan Wells
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS
Erica Howard
ACCOUNTS ASSISTANT
Mary Zachman
CUSTOMER SERVICE MANAGER
Kathy Martinez
CUSTOMER SERVICE
Karen Howe, Josh
McIntire (IT support),
Doris Teel, Tammy York
GRANTWRITER Janet Reasoner
editor@hcn.org
circulation@hcn.org
development@hcn.org
advertising@hcn.org
syndication@hcn.org
FOUNDER Tom Bell
BOARD OF DIRECTORS
Brian Beitner, Colo.
John Belkin, Colo.
Seth Cothrun, Calif.
Jay Dean, Calif.
Bob Fulkerson, Nev.
Anastasia Greene, Calif.
Wayne Hare, Colo.
Laura Helmuth, Md.
Samaria Jaffe, Calif.
Nicole Lampe, Ore.
Marla Painter, N.M.
Bryan Pollard, Ark.
Raynelle Rino, Calif.
Estee Rivera Murdock, Colo.
Rick Tallman, Colo.
Andy Wiessner, Colo.
Florence Williams, D.C.
Luis Torres, N.M.,
Director Emeritus

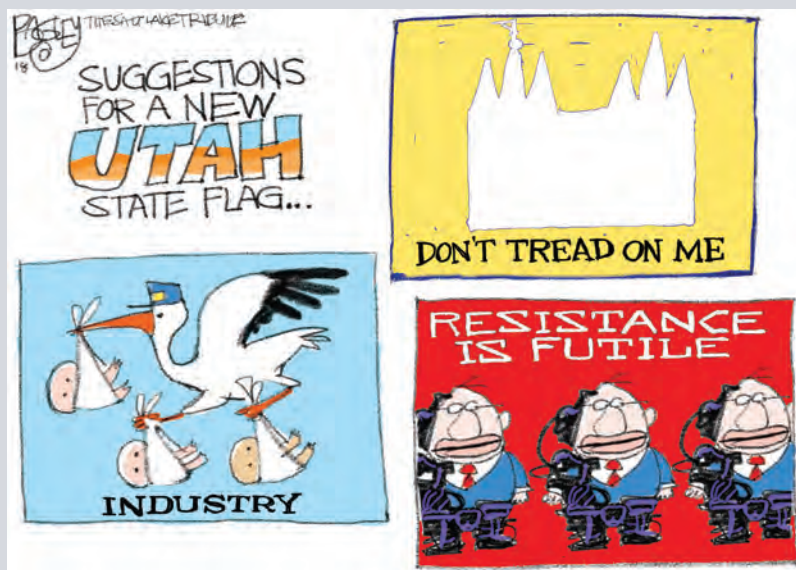
RECIPE FOR A GREAT ISSUE

Start with Kim Raff's excellent cover shot (*HCN*, 9/2/19). Add Paige Blankenbuehler's note on accountability, San Juan County, Utah's Indigenous reversal of power, and a positive story on our polygamous neighbors, plus the opening up of Colorado's state trust lands to public access. Mix in biocrust skin grafts, Wyoming's self-dug coal-pit woes, and flying goats in the Cascades. Season with the tragedy of tribal land being returned only to be heavily burned, Paul Larmer's pleas to include our home state in *HCN*'s West, Sarah Gilman's ace book review, Rachel Turiel's charming epistemology story, Ruxandra Guidi's personalizing the immigration issue, and finally some significant mainland coverage of the ongoing struggle of Native Hawaiians on Mauna Kea. (Thank you, Rosalyn Lapier.) All good ingredients. But what made the cake was Emma Penrod's outstanding investigative piece. Living in Colorado for the past 40 years, I've come to appreciate Mormon culture and its championing of family values. This unfortunate incidence of state/religion collusion that put children at risk is disturbing. And quite rightly exposed.

Art Goodtimes
Norwood, Colorado

A BURIED HISTORY OF CONFLICT

Anna Smith's article on the challenges the Cow Creek Band has faced in regaining and now managing forest lands in Oregon is the kind of piece that both informs and challenges readers. The challenge thrown down by some tribal members is quite provocative: Shawn Fleek's quote — "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" — is something I hope *HCN* follows up on. Such settlers generally seemed to presume they were simply better and more modern and were rarely conservationists. There are numerous times and places where conservation groups and Native Americans have come into conflict, but I can't recall seeing those groups in their early days complaining about Native management of lands.



PAT BAGLEY/THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE VIA CAGLECARTOONS.COM

Maybe this history is buried, or maybe it is a misapprehension of how such groups came to oppose tribal land management. Many early conservationists seemed to think that Native Americans had little or no impact, acting to leave a pristine natural environment for the public to enjoy. That fantasy of "wilderness" wrote Native Americans entirely out of the landscapes they had managed. Even now, as some land-management agencies return to the low-intensity fires used for centuries, they pretend this replicates "natural" fires. The conflict and misunderstandings between conservation organizations and Native American tribes are well worth exploring, even as both regard the government as their opponent.

Craig Jones
Boulder, Colorado

IRRESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM

Is *HCN* a news journal or a creative writing magazine or simply fake news? As a professional educator and writer, I was deeply disturbed by the Aug. 19 issue. I use *HCN* as a classroom resource, as I hope others do as well. I teach critical thinking and journalistic skepticism along with the regular course content. I laud *HCN* to my students and colleagues for its excellent reporting and how it reveals what is going on "behind the curtain." These are mostly young people who have never not known the internet. But it took even me a few moments to realize that this was fiction, not truth, when I started (as usual) with "Heard around the West." Put bluntly: This is irresponsible journalism. If I was fooled, even for a few moments, why would they not be? How can I preach journalistic skepticism when one of my

most trusted sources for Western issues cranks out fiction in what is supposed to be a news outlet? I first read *HCN* in 1992, when I was an archaeologist living out of my truck. It was a discarded copy, still on newsprint, stained with ketchup and coffee from the previous readers. As a new transplant to the region, that single issue brought to light the complexity of Western issues. Please go back to your roots: the insightful and objective stories that spark informed conversations

in cafes, classrooms and brewpubs.

Chris Wayne
Chiloquin, Oregon

KUDOS FOR CREATIVE THINKING

Thank you for the issue on Speculative Journalism (8/19/19). The smart and creative writing, illustrations, layout and editing express the reality of climate disruption in a more powerful, embodied way than any literal account possibly could. You have demonstrated the power of art. The various imaginings of the year 2068 bring home the real human experiences that are coming. To hit people in the gut, as these pieces do, is essential to any hope of change in the face of human denial and dissociation on the one hand, and unmitigated greed on the other. The presence of Indigenous people and culture in the stories is essential; we must find and cultivate — all of us — a sense of being, as the dictionary defines "indigenous": "from the land." We need to shift from what anthropologist David Stuart has called a culture of power (Chaco and contemporary America are his examples) to one of efficiency. Stuart notes that while Chaco's culture, with a moderate change in the climate, fell in 40 years, the efficient culture of Bandelier persists to this day in contemporary Pueblo culture. Thank you for the terms "climate causer" and "climate criminal," which need to be a part of our lexicon. Sociopaths (aka "slimeballs") do not respond to understanding or rationality, only punishment. Where do I sign up to be a member of the "Old Bears?"

Jon Maaske
Albuquerque, New Mexico

High
Country
News



High Country News is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) independent media organization that covers the issues that define the American West. Its mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the region's diverse natural and human communities. (ISSN/0191/5657) is published bi-weekly, 22 times a year, by High Country News, 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO

81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to *HCN* are \$37 a year, \$47 for institutions: 800-905-1155 | hcn.org

printreleaf
CERTIFIED
Printed on recycled paper.

Trump's trade war is draining profits for Montana wheat farmers

Growers now confront environmental threats and geopolitical conflict

BY HELEN SANTORO

On a hot August day in southern Montana, Michelle Erickson-Jones climbed onto her green combine, a massive machine that reaps and separates ripe grain. August is harvest season, so Erickson-Jones was focused on gathering the mature wheat on her farm and preparing it for sale. “We cut somewhere around 250 to 300 acres a day,” she told me over the phone, even as she maneuvered the combine through a field. All told, she and her family spent 21 days collecting wheat this year — a good harvest.

Despite that bounty, problems arise once the wheat is sold. Ongoing international trade disputes are causing Montana wheat farmers’ earnings to stagnate. With around half a million dollars in operational costs and less than \$25,000 in subsidy payments from the federal government, Erickson-Jones, a fourth-generation farmer, will not make a profit this year. “It’s been three years since I’ve drawn anything but a break-even budget, and that’s hanging on good (wheat) production,” she said.

This struggle to make ends meet is shared by many Montana producers. Along with environmental threats like heat waves and flooding, today’s farmers must contend with the chaos of modern political conflicts. With the U.S.-China trade war in its second year and international agricultural relationships uncertain, “it’s really hard to make any kind of profit,” said Lyle Benjamin, a farmer and president of the Montana Grain Growers Association. As a result, farmers “are taking a real hard look at whether they really want to stay farming or not.”

American farmers depend on international trade. The U.S. is one of the world’s largest agricultural exporters, shipping over 20% of its farm-grown products overseas each year. In Montana, wheat is the state’s biggest agricultural commodity, with farmers exporting \$565 million worth in 2017.

Much of Montana’s wheat goes to Japan. But the future of that long-standing relationship was thrown into doubt in 2017, when the U.S. withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a now-defunct trade agreement among 12 countries, signed in 2016. The deal that replaced it would tax U.S. wheat at a higher rate than Canadian and Australian wheat, starting in April 2020, putting this vital market at risk, said Steve Mercer, vice

president of communications at the U.S. Wheat Associates. The Montana Wheat and Barley Committee, a lobbying group, estimates that the withdrawal is costing Montana wheat farmers around \$150 million annually. However, a new trade deal the U.S. and Japan are negotiating now may retain the country’s equal footing with Canada and Australia, preserving Montana’s top wheat market.

The ongoing U.S.-China trade war is putting additional strain on Montana farmers. Since early 2018, President Trump has imposed tariffs on more than \$250 billion worth of Chinese goods, from steel to textiles. China retaliated with tariffs on \$110 billion of U.S. products, including soybeans, corn and wheat. And both countries have announced additional taxes, which began this month. The back-and-forth hikes have caused the price of a bushel of Montana wheat — which typically hovers around \$5.50 — to drop by 41 cents, said Benjamin.

Nationwide, farmers’ economic losses have totaled billions of dollars. In response, the federal government last year started doling out subsidies through the Market Facilitation Program. Farmers and ranchers across the country have received about \$8.59 billion since then, 84% of which has gone to Midwestern soybean farmers as of April, according to the *Great Falls Tribune*. Montana farmers, on the other

hand, received less than 1%. This year, U.S. farmers and ranchers who were impacted by the tariffs are receiving at least \$15 per acre. These payments will make up for soybean growers’ short-term losses, “but that will not be true of all producers everywhere,” said Patrick Westhoff, director of the Food and Agriculture Policy Research Institute at the University of Missouri.

No thorough analysis has been done on how the subsidies impact wheat farmers specifically, but “you’d be hard-pressed to find a farmer who would say that this program fully offsets what they lost in sales from the tariffs,” said Josh Tonsager, vice president of policy and communications at the National Association of Wheat Growers.

Along with the immediate concern of revenue losses, this trade conflict may also provoke more lasting problems. The subsidies are “not a sustainable approach for having a healthy U.S. farm economy,” said Amanda Countryman, an associate professor in agriculture and resource economics at Colorado State University. China is the largest export market for U.S. agricultural products, and payments to farmers can’t compensate for the erosion of that relationship, or the trust that was its foundation, Countryman said; the payments are merely a “Band-Aid on a much deeper wound.”

And the trade war between the U.S. and China shows no signs of stopping. With Trump hinting at his regrets about the continuing trade conflict at the end of August, just 48 hours after he pledged to raise tariffs on China, farmers are uncertain about the next round of U.S.-China trade negotiations, scheduled for later this month. It may still be a while before producers like Erickson-Jones turn a profit. “I would like to keep operating,” she said, but the trade war “definitely puts a little bit of a dimmer on the future of agriculture.” □

“You’d be hard-pressed to find a farmer who would say that this program fully offsets what they lost in sales from the tariffs.”

—Josh Tonsager, vice president of policy and communications at the National Association of Wheat Growers



Michelle Erickson-Jones on her farm in Montana. Government subsidies are dwarfed by her large operational budget, which leaves her without a profit in 2019.

MATTHEW BROWN/AP IMAGES

Helen Santoro is an editorial intern at *High Country News*. [@helenwsantoro](https://twitter.com/helenwsantoro)



Why are so many gray whales dying?

A major Pacific Coast die-off has researchers worried about an even bigger trend

BY HELEN SANTORO

A gray whale carcass on the shore south of Point Lay, Alaska, in the northeastern Chukchi Sea. It is one of at least 193 that have washed up recently.

LISA BARRY/NOAA/NMFS
PERMIT NO. 20465

On July 2, around a thousand feet above the Chukchi Sea, Megan Ferguson sat with two scientists in the back of a small propeller plane. Bounded on the east by Point Barrow, Alaska, and on the west by Wrangel Island, north of Russia, the Chukchi serves as the summer feeding ground for hundreds of gray whales. This year, a disconcerting number of them are not completing their journey north. Along the West Coast of Mexico, the United States and Canada, at least 193 dead animals have washed ashore — the most in two decades.

The plane cut through clouds and fog, curving around Alaska's northwestern coast as the research team searched for the 90,000-pound creatures. Through the overcast, a scientist at a side window spotted a gray whale. She opened the window, aimed her camera and photographed it, while Ferguson, a co-leader of an Alaska Fisheries Science Center research team, jotted down its location and behavior. By tracking the whales' numbers, physical condition and eating patterns over a four-month period, the team can compare them

to other gray whales in different areas. Ideally, that will help them figure out what is happening to this species.

So far, the cause of the die-offs remains a mystery, though theories include starvation from lack of food, or a disease that mimics chronic wasting disease. Teams of scientists are investigating what the casualties mean for the gray whale population as a whole. But some also fear that the deaths could be part of a larger trend, as animals struggle to adapt to climate change. Said Ferguson: The "gray whales are just one piece" of the environmental puzzle.

This isn't the first time marine biologists have seen large numbers of gray whales wash up on shore. In 1999 and 2000, around 630 whale carcasses were reported in Mexico and the United States. The deaths happened during their annual migration, when the whales travel 10,000 miles round-trip from their breeding areas in the warm waters of Baja California, Mexico, to their feeding grounds in the cold Arctic seas. At the time, scientists speculated that the deaths were caused by starvation, disease, ship strikes or some

combination of the three, but no firm conclusion was reached.

Today, many of the whales washing up along the coast in California, Oregon and Washington look malnourished, with blubber that lacks a healthy, oily shine. That was true of a dead whale on the rocky coast of Port Hadlock, Washington, whose stomach was filled with eelgrass. The presence of eelgrass, which grows on the muddy ocean bottoms where whales typically suck up amphipods — microscopic ocean critters that may be struggling due to changing ocean conditions — suggests that the whales may have been trying desperately to eat but not finding the foods they typically rely on.

But in Alaska, Ferguson isn't seeing signs of starvation. Instead, her aerial photos show normal-looking gray whales. There is the possibility that emaciated whales are dying before they reach Alaska, but that's a working hypothesis and there's still a lot of data to be collected, she said.

Sue Moore, an affiliate professor in biology at the University of Washington who studied the mass die-offs two decades ago, thinks more than malnutrition is involved. Moore noticed that, just like last time, not all of the dead whales look the same, indicating that the cause of death may be more complicated. Their symptoms mimic chronic wasting disease (CWD), a deadly neurological condition that mainly affects hoofed mammals like deer, elk and moose. Once the disease reaches the brain, animals display abnormal behavior and start to starve, which eventually leads to death.

According to Trent Bollinger, a CWD expert at the Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Center, the chances of the whales having CWD are slim — but they may have a neurological disease with similar symptoms. Moore would like to collect fresh tissue from the whales and test for an array of diseases and viruses.

The gray whale deaths also reflect a larger issue — the impact of climate change on the ocean. Arctic animals in particular are struggling to adapt to warming waters. For example, Alaska salmon have been suffering from heart attacks caused by rising water temperatures, with some areas reaching all-time highs. Additionally, amphipods, one of the gray whales' main food sources, may be at risk from a loss of oxygen in warmer Arctic waters. Since the mid-1900s, ocean oxygen levels have decreased on average by two to five percent. "This is a broader story," Moore said. "I think something big is going on."

For Ferguson, who is now flying out of remote Deadhorse, Alaska, the photos collected are key in helping investigative scientists reach a conclusion. Every year, something happens in the ocean that we couldn't predict, said Ferguson. "We are definitely entering new and uncertain territory." □

The ineffectual bombing of sea lions

Fishermen get frustrated as sea lion numbers swell

BY KATIE BROWN AND HELEN SANTORO

With the lights of Moss Landing, California, twinkling in the distance, Capt. Porter McHenry stood on the top deck of the *Merva W*, a large commercial fishing boat. Ocean water sprayed his face and dampened his thick brown beard. A third-generation fisherman, McHenry employs a crew of three. In the dead of night, his yellow rain jacket was briefly illuminated as he ignited the long wick of an orange firecracker and chucked it over the side of the boat into the waves.

Seconds later, a bright flash and boom broke the sea of darkness. The three-inch explosives, known in the fishing world as “seal bombs,” create a blast comparable to that of a small stick of dynamite. West Coast fishermen from California to Alaska use them to scare away seals and sea lions trying to steal the squid, anchovies and salmon the fishermen catch. Once thrown overboard, the bombs detonate below the water’s surface, producing a noise that can travel for over 40 miles underwater.

Katie Brown is an environmental journalist based out of Washington, D.C. [@earthexaminer](#)

“Sometimes you can throw a bunch of ’em, and sea lions will stay away for a couple minutes,” said McHenry, “and you’re able to catch.”

McHenry’s bomb forced a school of anchovies to crowd together. The fishermen cast a net, which unfurled across the water like a blanket.

But a nearby pack of 30 hungry, burly sea lions was only momentarily deterred.

The animals thronged the bulging net, some plunging in and out to sneak extra mouthfuls of fish. The fishermen start to haul in the more than 10 tons of anchovies in the net. One sea lion swam back in and thrashed around wildly before diving back into the waves.

This unabashed thievery has left fishermen feeling frustrated, forced to use a deterrent that doesn’t seem to work. Interviews with fishermen and marine biologists and a review of studies reveal that seal bombs are unsuccessful at scaring sea lions away from fishing nets. And the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the federal agency in charge of handling nuisance sea lions,

knows that seal bombs are ineffective. Yet the agency continues to enforce its policy against lethal deterrents, leaving fishermen with few options other than to illegally kill sea lions or watch the animals gobble up their valuable catch.

“This is our livelihood. This is what we do to pay our bills and help our families,” said commercial fishermen Clark Walker, who works on McHenry’s boat. “If they leave us with no resources, we’re screwed.”

Before the seal bombs became the go-to method for dealing with sea lions, West Coast fishermen used shotguns. Until the late 1950s, fishermen freely shot at sea lions encroaching on their boats. Oregon even paid people to track down and kill the animals for \$10 per carcass. But when the species’ population plummeted to the verge of collapse in the 1960s, conservationists stepped in.

The Switzerland-based International Union for Conservation of Nature, a global authority on species conservation, listed California sea lions as very rare. This

Please see Seal bombs, page 20

Researchers hypothesize that seal bombs may even act as a dinner bell by luring sea lions toward a fresh meal. Between the seal bombs and blaring lights that fishermen use, hungry sea lions are easily tipped off to where they can find free food.



After the shooting of sea lions was outlawed, their numbers nearly tripled between 1975 and 2008. Fishermen are left with few options to deter them. DAVID MERRETT/CC VIA FLICKR

Extremists appropriate Indigenous struggles for violent ends

From Nazi Germany to El Paso, white nationalists use Indigenous imagery to justify racist violence

BY KALEN GOODLUCK

"The story of the Indians is one of the strongest possible arguments for tight borders. Immigration, or more accurately, the arrival of European pioneers was a disaster for the Indians. We took their land, destroyed their way of life and put them on reservations."

*—white supremacist
Jared Taylor*

Just minutes before a massacre at an El Paso, Texas, Walmart earlier this month left 22 people dead, a hate-filled anti-immigrant manifesto appeared online. In it, the author, whom authorities believe to be the alleged shooter, claims to be defending his country from white American "replacement" and an "invasion" at the U.S. border, as well as from environmental destruction and corporate power.

"Some people will think this statement is hypocritical because of the nearly complete ethnic and cultural destruction brought to the Native Americans by our European ancestors, but this just reinforces my point," reads the manifesto. "The natives didn't take the invasion of Europeans seriously, and now what's left is just a shadow of what was."

For decades now, warped ideas about Indigenous struggles have buoyed conservative rhetoric and white nationalist fantasies and been used to justify racist violence. And while the far and extreme right share a hollow, disingenuous affinity with Indigenous people, their appropriation of Indigenous victimhood and rights language is providing long-burning fuel for everything from right-wing propaganda on Fox News to extremist manifestos and movements worldwide.

In 2011, for instance, a far-right terrorist in Norway killed eight people in a bombing and another 69 at a youth camp. In his 1,500-page manifesto, the killer argued that the rhetoric of white nationalism was ultimately doomed to fail due to its connections to Hitler. Instead of using language and ideas associated with Nazis, the author chose to exploit an "untapped goldmine" of Indigenous rights language. "We are no more terrorists than Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse or Chief Gall who fought for their people against the imperialist General Armstrong Custer," reads the manifesto. "Our struggle will be a lot easier if European nationalist use smart and defusing arguments instead of using supremacist arguments which can be efficiently squashed through psychological warfare propaganda or by anti-Nazi policies." To the author, embracing the language of Indigenous rights and victimhood was a softer, even sympathetic, strategy that would embolden efforts to reclaim European land and culture from immigrants.

A few months after the Norway attack,

a German far-right anti-immigration propaganda video uploaded to YouTube featured a Green Party politician and a stereotypical "Cherokee" Indian maiden, a foreign exchange student who hopes to become a naturalized German citizen. The politician quickly obliges — a dig at the party's "multicultural ideals" — and the maiden tells a story about the massacre of her people by European immigrants who were allowed to settle the land by traitors in her tribe. The righteous xenophobia revealed here has plenty of company: In 2014, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), another far-right German nationalist party, echoed the same sentiment in a meme of Hunkpapa Lakota Chief Sitting Bull, with a caption that warned: "Indians could not stop immigration. Now they live on reservations."

"Nowadays, you see internet memes and videos on YouTube of people who tell the story of the conquest of North America and who skew historical references," said Frank Usbeck, curator for the Americas at the State Art Collections in Dresden and former professor of American studies at the University of Leipzig in Germany. "Look at the Native Americans who invited the foreigners as refugees."

Usbeck, who has studied the links between Indigenous people and white nationalists for years, began by examining the relationship between German perceptions of Native Americans and the Völkisch Movement's "blood and soil" ideology, which has roots in the 19th century. "Constructing a national identity among Germans seems to have had strong roots in identifying with Native Americans and also setting oneself aside from many other Europeans," said Usbeck, adding that this need to belong to the land and to connect with an "Indigenous" identity can be traced to early German nationalist studies of pre-Roman Germanic tribes.

Before and during World War II, Nazi propaganda declared American cultural imperialism a threat to German culture, noting that it had destroyed the Native American way of life and comparing U.S. bombing campaigns in German cities to American frontier massacres. Usbeck calls this "co-victimization" — an invented affinity with the Native American experience of genocide and cultural loss, rhetorically linked to ideas of German victimhood. The Nazis thereby used Indigenous people to create a myth of survival, of a people fighting heroically for their homeland.

And Indigenous people remain potent symbols of outsider oppression for far-right extremism globally. In 2013, in Greeley, Colorado, anonymous citizens bought two billboards that espoused pro-gun propaganda with the image of three armed Native Americans. The text reads: "Turn in your arms. The government will take care of you." Ammon Bundy's 2016 anti-government militia takeover of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge even tried to appeal to Native Americans: "We're reaching out to the Paiute people, in the sincerest manner that I can," said Robert "LaVoy" Finicum, a spokesman for Citizens for Constitutional Freedom, in a video posted to YouTube. (Finicum was later killed by law enforcement at a traffic stop during the occupation.) He continued, "Any claims that they (Paiutes) may have upon the lands, let's begin that dialogue." But the Burns Paiute Tribe quickly denounced the Malheur militia members for mishandling tribal artifacts and damaging traditional land.

Earlier this year, a video featuring white supremacist Jared Taylor trod the same ground. "The story of the Indians is one of the strongest possible arguments for tight borders. Immigration, or more accurately, the arrival of European pioneers was a disaster for the Indians," said Taylor. "We took their land, destroyed their way of life and put them on reservations." The video ends with a final thought: Indians fought for their land, so why can't whites do the same?

In the early days of U.S. colonization, white settlers waged numerous wars to displace Indigenous people. "This idea of making (colonial) invasion look like self-defense goes all the way back to the Declaration of Independence, where the British colonists, who were declaring independence from the crown, were simply making the argument that they were defending themselves against merciless Indian savages," said Nick Estes, author and assistant professor in the American Studies Department at the University of New Mexico. "The El Paso shooter was referencing Native people as a heroic defense against invasion, when he himself was waging a kind of a terror campaign against actual Indigenous people who are crossing the border."

The suspected shooter also allegedly wrote that the destruction of the environment led by corporate interests would limit available resources for whites, echoing the manifesto of the shooter who killed

Kalen Goodluck is an editorial fellow at *High Country News*.

51 at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019, who considered himself an “eco-fascist.” Historian and author Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz says this anti-capitalist environmentalist rhetoric is designed to reach readers beyond already-sympathetic audiences. “He hits on certain tropes that make him somewhat sympathetic to Native Americans, and he talks negatively about corporations controlling everything,” said Dunbar-Ortiz. “It is a very manipulative manifesto by a very rational guy.”

The manipulation of Indigenous struggle and victimhood has been a part of white supremacists’ modus operandi in Europe for decades. Now, white male gunmen in the U.S. are picking up the mantle.

“Hate groups have co-opted historical U.S. symbols in a weak attempt at tearing down any progress we’ve made toward including people of all races, creeds and backgrounds as true Americans,” said

Keegan Hanks, senior analyst at the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit that tracks hate groups and far-right extremism in the U.S.

The El Paso shooter’s manifesto is the most recent anti-immigrant, hate-filled document to actually culminate in enormous violence. But since the shooting, the *Guardian* reports that police have thwarted seven similar plots by far-right extremists with racist ideologies.

“The idea of a parallel people aggressively taking land, taking whole swaths of territories — Mexicans coming in don’t have any power to do any of that,” said Dunbar-Ortiz. “It’s really obscene that he really is framing things that are completely different.” It’s unlikely that the El Paso shooting will be the last white supremacist attack in the name of an imaginary immigrant invasion, nor the final use of Indigenous victimhood in a hate-filled manifesto. □



Even after billboards in Greeley, Colorado, were taken down, the pro-gun propaganda has persisted. Patches can be purchased online featuring this image of armed Native Americans. ROGUE PATRIOT GEAR



For decades, white nationalists have been appropriating the language and imagery of Indigenous victimhood. COURTESY OF JACOB KREICI

RESEARCH FUND

Thank you, Research Fund donors, for helping us reach new heights

Since 1971, reader contributions have made it possible for *HCN* to report on the American West. Your tax-deductible gift directly funds nonprofit, independent journalism.

Thank you for supporting our hardworking journalists.

STEWARD

In honor of our friends Kimberly & Hank | Boulder, CO

In memory of Emily Stonington Hibbard | Helena, MT

Jake Sigg | San Francisco, CA

GUARANTOR

Lynn & Jim Gibbons | Portola Valley, CA

John Osberg | Woodway, WA

BENEFACTOR

In honor of John C. Matter | Cedar Crest, NM

In memory of Lawrence J. O'Neill | Elizabeth, CO

Richard F. Buscher | Tigard, OR

Ron & Elizabeth Cogswell | Arlington, VA

David George | Louisville, CO

Alan Gourley & Sarah Brown | Steamboat Springs, CO

Bob & Jackie Heyda | Monument, CO

Michael Kenney & Anna Moscicki | Dubois, WY

Mike McWhirter | Fair Oaks, CA

Catherine Putnam-Netto | Salt Lake City, UT

Herb Simmons | Visalia, CA

Michael D. Scott | Bozeman, MT

SPONSOR

Anonymous (2)

In honor of Richard Michael Truly | Crested Butte, CO

Neal Anderson & Hope Robertson | Jacksonville, OR

David & Sharon Damkaer | Monroe, WA

Geralyn Dreyfous | Salt Lake City, UT

Philip Ertel | Ivins, UT

Paul Hohenlohe | Moscow, ID

Liz Ickes | Asheville, NC

Dennis Johnson | Idaho Springs, CO

Jerry Lidz | Eugene, OR

Michael Logsdon | Portland, OR

Michael Massa | Nederland, CO

Dan Slack | Centennial, CO

Grace L. Williams | Mimbres, NM

PATRON

Anonymous (3)

In memory of Charles Bowden | Scottsdale, AZ

In memory of Eldredge Moores | Davis, CA

In memory of Susan Epstein | Fort Collins, CO

In memory of David & Rhea Temkin | Chicago, IL

In memory of Jo & Lee Wiegand | Boise, ID

Stephen Blecher | Lakewood, CO

Kristen Boyd | Chestnut, IL

Joseph Brown | Aspen, CO

Alex Carter | Grand Junction, CO

Dorothy Evans | Twisp, WA

William Foisy | Red Lodge, MT

Carol Goodman | Sandy, UT

Linda Hamilton | Fort Collins, CO

Gretchen & Harry Leland | Boulder, CO

Bill Lindsay | Vail, CO

James & Dianne Mahaffey | Anchorage, AK

Mary Munger | Fort Collins, CO

Linda Peer | Torrey, UT

Jennifer Pitt & Michael Cohen | Boulder, CO

Norm Rasulis & Rita Kissen | Fort Collins, CO

Don & Nina Robertson | San Mateo, CA

David Rohdy | Santa Fe, NM

David M. Rose | Silver City, NM

Gordon & Tina Sanders | Coeur d'Alene, ID

Daniel & Philippa Solomon | Edison, NJ

Tory Starr | Sacramento, CA

Sarah Teofanov & Tory Larsen | Farmington, NM

Janis Wagner | Fort Collins, CO

John Wentworth | Mammoth Lakes, CA



FRIEND

Anonymous (12)

In memory of Harry Klepinger | Corrales, NM

In memory of Jenna Clare Martin | Leadville, CO

In memory of Teacher | Woodland Park, CO

Daniel Ault | Longmont, CO

Steven Basch | Denver, CO

Lara Beaulieu | Carbondale, CO

William Bishop | La Grange, TX

Robert & Anne Bohac | Redmond, OR

Miles Bradley | Sebastopol, CA

Jerald Brown | Annapolis, MD

Rebecca Clark | Portland, OR

Amy Concilio | Austin, TX

Richard E. Cooper | Caledonia, OH

Rebecca Craven | Bellingham, WA

Melanie Cypher | Westcliffe, CO

Bill & Sarah Dakin | Bigfork, MT

Sandy Dodge | Bozeman, MT

Fintan Dooley | Bismarck, ND

John Echeverria | South Royalton, VT

Wayne & Deb Elliott | Pleasant Hill, OR

Tyler & Joan Gilmore | Pasco, WA

Romey Haberle | Tacoma, WA

Marcia Hannig | Colorado Springs, CO

David & Mary Hanscom | Park City, UT

Karen Harkin | Grand Junction, CO

David Hendricks | Arvada, CO

Jim & Jackie Hertel | Yakima, WA

Karl Hess | Wilmington, NC

Myron Hess & Gail Rothe | Austin, TX

Robert M. Hill | Divide, CO

Gretchen E. Hofmann | Santa Barbara, CA

Margaret Kelly | Albany, OR

Susan Kingrey | Seattle, WA

Sandy & Betsy Kunzer | Sierra Vista, AZ

Bob & Cathy LeFevre | New Auburn, WI

Dan Lincoln | Evergreen, CO

Gary H. Lundberg | Aurora, CO

Bill McCabe | Santa Fe, NM

Tom & Jane Meacham | Anchorage, AK

Ken & Pat Mesec | Littleton, CO

Sue P. Minahan | DuPont, WA

Daniel Mortensen | Mead, WA

Kimberly Moses | Piedmont, CA

Grace Peng | Redondo Beach, CA

John Pilsworth | Missoula, MT

Betty & Dale Porter | Longmont, CO

Stella Portillo | Sandy, UT

☒ YES! I care about the West!

☐ \$35 Friend

☐ \$75 Patron

☐ \$150 Sponsor

☐ \$250 Benefactor

☐ \$500 Guarantor

☐ \$1,000 Steward

☐ \$2,500 Philanthropist

☐ \$5,000 Publisher's Circle

☐ \$10,000 & up Independent Media Guardian

Amount of gift \$ _____ ☐ Make this amount recurring

☐ Here's my check (or voided check/1st month's gift for recurring gifts)

☐ Charge my credit card \$15/month minimum

Card # _____ Exp. date _____

Name on card _____

Billing Address _____

City/State/ZIP _____

High Country News | P.O. Box 1090 | Paonia, CO 81428 | 800-905-1155 | hcn.org

D016A010

Left, *Red Rock, Nevada* — *Fear and Loathing* (5.12a) Eve-Lyn Rochon works through overhanging jugs before the crux section of the climb. Below, *Jailhouse, California* — *Iron Junkie* (5.12c) Joshua Enoch Williams executes a heel hook. FRANÇOIS LEBEAU

Climbing Rock: Vertical Explorations across North America

By François Lebeau and Jesse Lynch

272 pages, hardcover: \$50.

Rizzoli New York, 2019

If you're looking to relax with a different kind of nature book, sit down with *Climbing Rock: Vertical Explorations across North America*. This monograph's impressive environmental photographs, many taken from rock faces at great heights, span the seasons and nations of North America. It's all seen from a climber's perspective — climbers traversing arches in Utah, California's Joshua Tree National Park at twilight and, of course, the glorious "El Cap" in Yosemite. A passion for the outdoors and deep appreciation of its grandeur are evident throughout, with mountaineers in helmets and bright apparel sharing their thoughts and their often spiritual feelings about the sport. "It is a deeply beautiful survey of climbing," writes Jesse Lynch. And if the colorful climbing jargon leaves you hanging at times — words like "choss" or "kneebar" or "wag bag" — there's a helpful glossary included. (Hint: "Wag bag" is a term taken from dog walkers.) KALEN GOODLUCK



Jane Poss | El Paso, TX
 Ericka Prechtel | Salt Lake City, UT
 Theresa Price | Bellingham, WA
 Deborah Proctor | Gillette, WY
 Chad Reich | Athens, OH
 Monika Ritter | Oak Park, CA
 Andy Robinson | Plainfield, VT
 Ronald Rogers | Bend, OR
 David Rolloff | Sacramento, CA
 Martin & Joan Rosen | Carmel, CA
 Charlie Ross | Groton, CT
 Cheryl Scannell | Silver City, NM
 Reed & Nola Shafer | Cheyenne, WY
 Robert M. Simpson | Pony, MT
 W. T. Soeldner | Valleyford, WA
 Gerald & Nancy Stephanz | Port Angeles, WA
 Richard & Barbara Stockton | Tucson, AZ
 Roberta Stokes | Redstone, CO
 David Suehsdorf | Eden, UT
 Michael Tanksley | Woodinville, WA
 Kathryn Turnipseed & Tamara Saimons | Albuquerque, NM
 Susan Urmston | Oro Valley, AZ
 Kent Winterholler | Park City, UT
 Larry & Jane Yazzie | Craig, CO

Bryan & Barbara Bates | Flagstaff, AZ
 Janet S. Bixby & Martha Mealy | Portland, OR
 Dondi Black | Boise, ID
 Sloan Cunningham | Santa Fe, NM
 Gene Dinkel | Omaha, NE
 Kathryn L. Hiestand & Neal Miller | East Glacier Park, MT
 Danette & Michael Meyer | Livermore, CO
 Phyllis Pearl-Erk | Casper, WY
 Forrest G. Poole | Golden, CO
 Kathleen A. Roediger | Phoenix, AZ
 Don Tidwell | North Hollywood, CA
 Norman Williams | Rye, CO
 Jeff Woodard | Idaho Falls, ID

JOIN THE SUSTAINERS' CLUB!

For \$15 a month, we'll automatically renew your subscription for the life of your membership. We'll also send you an eye-catching matted print of a magazine cover to enjoy and take you behind the scenes with our *Friends of High Country Newsletter* with publisher Paul Larmer. Your reliable contributions help save on postage, paper and administration costs, and support independent journalism. For a monthly gift of \$20 or more, we'll send a complimentary gift subscription to a friend on your behalf. hcn.org/support/monthly-giving

Professors, pedalers and presidential candidates

Cooler nights and changing colors hint that fall is just around the corner — a welcome break from the heat for many of our staff.

Associate Editor **Paige Blankenbuehler** has begun her first semester as a journalism instructor at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, her alma mater. Her attempts to make her *HCN* colleagues call her "Professor Paige" have so far failed, but she hasn't given up.

Assistant Editor **Anna V. Smith** spent 10 days at the Bristol Bay Institute in Alaska, sponsored by the Institute for Journalism & Natural Resources. Along with nine other journalists from across the country, Anna learned about a myriad of topics, including Indigenous sovereignty, resource management, salmon ecosystems, climate change's impact on the Bristol Bay region, and the controversial Pebble Mine — a massive copper and gold project proposed for the headwaters of Alaska's best salmon fishery.

HCN would like to wish a fond farewell to our longtime colleague, **Jodi Peterson**, who has taken on the role of director of news and public affairs for KVNF, the community public radio station in Paonia, Colorado. During her nearly 15 years at *HCN*, Jodi worked with at least 80 interns and fellows, saw more than 300 issues off to press, edited at least 400 stories and another 400 book reviews, and wrote around 300 stories. We already miss her, and we wish her the very best.

The Paonia office had the pleasure of a visit from longtime reader **Mike Ryan**, a former U.S.

Forest Service researcher and now part-time researcher and teacher at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado. Mike came over McClure Pass from Carbondale — about 60 miles — by bicycle, sporting a "Ride the Rockies" jersey. Mike has stuck with us since the 1990s, he says, because *HCN* "writes positive stories at least some of the time." That's not always easy these days, but we do our best. The Paonia office also welcomed another longtime reader named Michael — Democratic presidential candidate and Colorado Sen. **Michael Bennet**, who was later spotted walking down the sidewalk, attempting to balance a large and melting ice cream cone from an *HCN* favorite, Ollie's Ice Cream.

Longtime readers **Andrew Melnykovych** — an *HCN* contributor in the late 1980s and early 1990s — and his wife, **Debbie**, stopped by the Gunnison satellite office in late June. They'd come to Colorado from Louisville, Kentucky, for a wedding in Fort Collins and took the opportunity to enjoy some birding in the mountains. They didn't manage to see any Gunnison sage grouse, but were delighted to glimpse some black swifts in Ouray.

And finally, the Aug. 20 story "When Arizona catches fire, prisoners step up" has been corrected to reflect that in 1990, five incarcerated wildfire fighters and a correctional officer died in a blaze near Payson, Arizona, not in Arizona's White Mountains. We regret the error.

With that, we go into an issue break. We will see you again on Oct. 14.

—Kalen Goodluck, for the staff



Jodi Peterson edits a radio piece for KVNF. We will greatly miss her talents at *HCN*, but are glad that the KVNF studio is right down the street from the Paonia office.

LUNA ANNA ARCHERY

“We can either wait on Mother Nature — or we can give it a shot ourselves.”

To save their aquifer, Colorado farmers wrestle with the promise and perils of self-governance

One day in mid-July, Colorado state engineer Kevin Rein stood before a packed room of farmers and ranchers and admitted that he might be forced to ruin their lives. Rein, a middle-aged man with wavy gray hair, spoke in the measured tones of a technocrat, but

his message was dire: If the val-

ley's residents cannot figure out how to sustainably manage their water use, the state would do it for them. And though he stressed, time and again, his office's dedication to working with them, and though he praised their efforts, his goodwill fell flat in the hot, poorly ventilated room, where more than 120 people were crammed, worried about their future.

For most of the 20th century, water use in this southern Colorado basin outstripped water supply. The people of the valley came up with an uncommon solution to this not-uncommon problem: an experiment in communal water management. And what they've found is that self-governance is hard. Rein not only has the authority, but a legal mandate, to end this experiment if its failure becomes assured. If or when it becomes clear that the San Luis Valley's water system can-

FEATURE BY
NICK BOWLIN

PHOTOS BY
LUNA ANNA
ARCHEY



not reach a sustainable level by the year 2031, then, yes, he said, his office would shut off irrigation for a substantial part of the area. That would mean no water for many fields, which could mean foreclosures, bankruptcies and family farms sold.

The stifling room went silent for a full 10 seconds. When the questions resumed, they came without outrage. Rein was not the villain. Most people present must have known that, in the end, they themselves represented both the cause of the problem and its only possible solution.

THE SAN LUIS VALLEY is a high-mountain desert ringed by the Southern Rockies and blessed with unusual water resources. From its headwaters in the San Juan Mountains, the Rio Grande traces south-

east down to the valley floor, beneath which lie two enormous stores of water, one just belowground, the other deeper and enclosed by clay. The river and these aquifers sustain more than 1,500 farms and ranches — and the towns that rely on them — in harsh conditions generally inhospitable to agriculture. Center, a small town with a predictable location relative to the rest of the valley, registers some of Colorado's coldest temperatures and lowest rainfall. Farming at almost 8,000 feet means long winters and a three-month growing season, accompanied by regular dry spells and occasional July killing frosts. But the sandy soil and near-constant sun are great for potatoes, making the valley the nation's second-largest producer of “fresh” spuds — as in produce found in a store, not French fries.



Board and community members gather at a Rio Grande Water Conservation District's Subdistrict 1 budget meeting in August. The subdistrict voted to raise pumping fees from \$90 per acre-foot to \$150 per acre-foot. They also discussed the fallow field program and ways to make it more accessible for farmers, such as allowing half fields to be fallowed.





Kyler Brown rides along the Rio Grande River, where headgates divert water into irrigation canals. Coming up with a plan to reduce water use is the easy part, he says. Changing peoples' behavior is trickier.

Other crops include barley, which often goes to the Coors Brewing Company, and alfalfa.

When morning comes to the valley, the Sangre de Cristo ("Blood of Christ") Mountains earn their name, burning blood-red as the sun summits the sawtooth peaks. On high, snowpack endures for most of the year, watched daily by the farmers below, whose yearly water supply depends on the runoff. A drought that began in 2002 and continues today — recent rainfall notwithstanding — made

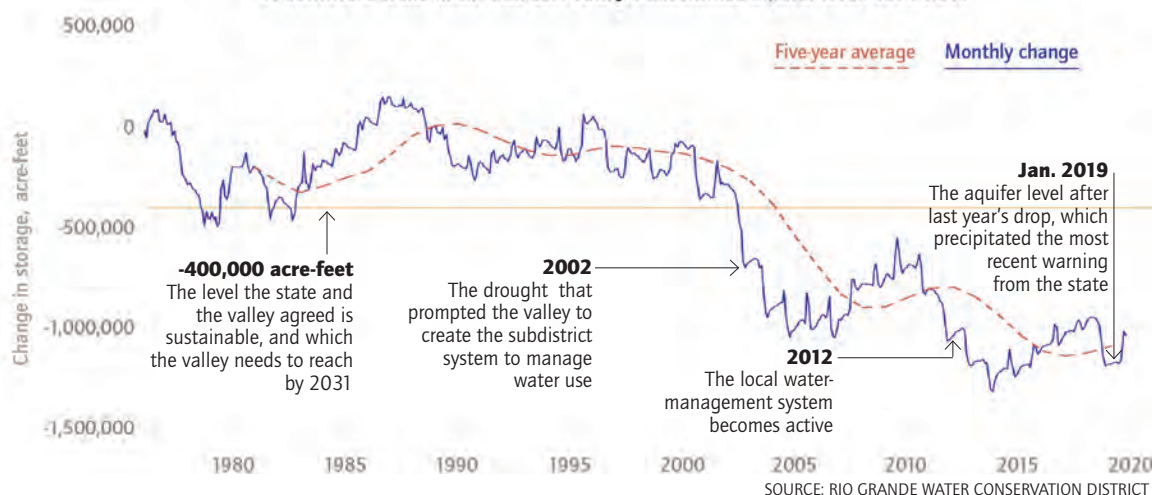
the valley's water deficit even more acute. In response to this new aridity, the people of the valley sought authority to regulate their own water use, which the state granted in 2004. In 2012, local governing bodies made up of water users across the valley began to tax commercial irrigation, replace water removed from rivers and streams, and pay farmers to fallow their land.

Western water wonks mostly view this attempt at self-management with hope, as a possible model for other com-

munities facing water crises. But on the ground in the valley, the situation is grim. Last year, the snowpack was low and little rain fell; the Rio Grande's flow in 2018 was one of the lowest ever recorded. The U.S. Department of Agriculture designated the valley a drought disaster area. With little surface water, farmers had to rely on water pumped from belowground, wiping out years of steady accretion to the shallower, or unconfined, aquifer. Last year's dry spell put the valley back where it started: about 800,000 acre-feet below the aquifer's legally mandated recovery level. Seven years gone and no net gains. In December, Rein sent the valley a warning letter. If, he wrote, it is "undeniable that the sustainability goals" will not be met by the 2031 deadline, irrigation shut-downs would follow. Rein would repeat this message in July. This threat now haunts thousands of water users, an ever-present doom on the horizon.

DROUGHTS BELONG TO THE CHAOTIC forces of climate, and markets to invisible hands. But the San Luis Valley's experiment in self-governance means that its agricultural producers control their own fate. Among them is Kyler Brown, who farms barley and potatoes a few miles north of Monte Vista. On a windy, warm day, Brown drove me through his family

A downward trend in the San Luis Valley's unconfined aquifer level, 1976-2019



fields. The farm belongs to his father-in-law; Brown married into the valley. He is 36, tall and sturdy, and sports a black beard and a wide-brimmed hat. Brown laughs often in loud bursts and treats the valley's struggles to moderate water use with a black humor. To him, the valley is suffering from old habits that die hard.

"It hasn't led to violence yet," he said with a grin, as the truck bounced down a two-wheel dirt track. The San Luis Valley is occasionally called "the Kumbaya basin" for its collaborative spirit, but Brown dislikes this description. For decades, the locals lived beyond nature's limits. Now, water is scarce.

It was late March, and the snow still sat heavy on the surrounding peaks. The irrigation ditch adjoining the fields was overgrown with weeds. Soon, the scrub would be burned clean, the gates connecting Brown's fields to the Rio Grande Canal open, and his water allotment flowing. Brown steered with one square tanned hand and gestured with the other. If the valley's farms and ranches, its towns and economies, are to survive, he said, their relationship to water must change, and yet Brown does not think the local governance system, as it stands now, is up to the challenge. "People thought the (water management system) was the miracle, that was the amazing thing," he said. But implementing the system, forming committees and boards, that's the easy part, Brown went on. Changing how people act, that's the real work.

This is especially true when water suddenly appears plentiful, as it did this spring. As if in response to Rein's letter, southwestern Colorado had one of its snowiest winters in decades. In the mountains above the valley, the season-to-date snowpack average stayed above 300% for most of the spring. The Rio Grande, snow-fed, ran fast and full across the heart of the valley. Grazing meadows flooded in places. Ditches and canals, the vascular system that carries the lifeblood of the valley, filled.

This, then, was the challenge the valley faced, after the disastrous drought and Rein's letter: 2019's abundant water, set against 2018's drought, offered yet another test of the farmers' habits. Could they use the welcome, unexpected snowpack to refill the aquifers? This is a hard ask: Last year's drought strained farmers financially. This year, the resource is plentiful.

Brown wants to take on this clash between individual and communal interest. Over the winter, he proposed a "consensus-building" plan to the local water management authority — something that would bring farmers, ranchers and community members together to build agreement on a few key conservation points. As Brown sees it, the people of the valley need to accept that the problem is not principally, or only, water scarcity. People's water habits, the crops they grow, the decisions they make on the farm: All of these need to be held up and examined

under the new arid realities.

"Everyone needs to think every time they turn on a pump," he said.

Brown took me to a small meadow near the Rio Grande, where he runs a few dozen cattle on the cottonwood flats. The river was full to its banks, running dark and cold. Seeing so much water makes scarcity hard to imagine. It's easy to think that way when the river is full.

Perhaps that's been the problem all along. The valley's system of water rights dates back to the 1850s, following the Mexican-American War. The Rio Grande supported the area's early farms and ranches. *Acequias*, community water channels, shared the resource at the valley's southern end. Founded in 1852, the San Luis People's Ditch in Culebra Creek is the oldest continuously used water right in the state. These waterways created thousands of acres of marshy terrain in the low country, grown over with stands of cottonwood and willow that shaded native wildflowers. By 1900, the entire flow of the Rio Grande was allocated via surface water rights.

After World War II, electrification enabled farmers to pump water from wells tapped deep into the aquifers. By the second half of the 20th century, surface-water users had to curb irrigation, thanks to river compacts formed with downstream states. Well users faced no such restrictions. They pumped away, which impacted stream flows, since ground- and surface water interact. For a time, this was not a problem; there was enough water to go around for both surface and groundwater users. (In fact, the water table was so high that valley houses built in the early 20th century don't have basements.)

The development of center-pivot sprinklers in the 1970s brought big changes, expanding agricultural capacity by allowing more efficient irrigation, no matter what the river was doing. Water use and farm size increased. Before this pumping technology, fields were flooded from the irrigation ditches, and the runoff helped replenish groundwater. But now, the combination of pumps and sprinklers drained the groundwater without replenishing it. Few questioned what this technology allowed. The water table dropped, and the rivers and creeks thinned. The pheasants that once thrived in the thickets and woodlands disappeared.

TODAY, MORE THAN 14,000 permitted wells puncture the valley floor. On a map, they appear as a tightly packed confederation of crop circles, laid out like thousands of green sundials set against the dusty waste of the desert. Many of these wells pump within the valley's first water management "subdistrict," which began the experiment in self-governance eight years ago. Two more subdistricts became active this year, on May 1. If all goes according to plan, there will be seven of these, distinguished by differences in geography and hydrology.

The actual work of shared governance takes place through the taxpayer-funded Rio Grande Water Conservation District, which includes the subdistricts. In practice, this involves committee meetings, lots of them. Each subdistrict's board is made up of water users — farmers and ranchers. (Board members are mostly, but not uniformly, older, white and male. The valley is not — about half the population is Hispanic or Latino.) The meetings take place in a drab, reddish stucco building outside Alamosa. Committee members show up in stiff jeans, flannel shirts and seed caps that are removed for the Pledge of Allegiance, which begins each meeting, revealing pale foreheads above weather-beaten faces. The audience resembles the boards. Most people seem to know each other. Before an April session, I heard a farmer in a hat that proclaimed "compost done right" confide to the man next to him that "we're going to be doing more quinoa this year, for sure."

The meetings themselves tend to be dry affairs. In April, Subdistrict 2 board members went page-by-page through the annual water plan, discussed a few water leases, and solemnly approved a \$78.22 refund to a ranch for a water fee overcharge. Someone cracked a joke about "counting every penny." But these sessions, however mundane, are where the water management work gets done, amid a patchwork of interests, values and preoccupations.

Cattle ranchers sit next to barley and alfalfa producers. Big operators who own thousands of acres farmed with the newest in GPS-driven tractor technology rub shoulders with smallholders who supplement their agricultural income with a second job in one of the scattered towns. Some have water wells and some have river rights, and many have both. There are disagreements and digressions, punishingly long budget sessions, personal gripes, and episodic displays of resourcefulness and democratic good sense. In the middle of all this is Cleave Simpson, the water district manager, a fourth-generation farmer who tends about 800 acres of hay. Tall, thick-shouldered with sun-narrowed eyes, Simpson has a remarkable ability to explain water policy minutiae in clear, everyday language. People remark on his steady presence and decent conduct in an uncertain time. Even people who disagree with him tell me this.

Simpson believes that the valley can fix its water imbalance, but he admits the difficulty. Cutting water use is unpleasant, he told me, "but we can either wait on Mother Nature — or we can give it a shot ourselves."

For eight years, the first subdistrict has given it a shot, and the results are uneven. Farmers within its borders must comply with the subdistrict's water plan or get their own through state water court. Some early resistance aside, most chose the first option. Subdistrict 1 has several tools at hand to curb pumping. The primary one is a fee on pumped wa-

"Everyone needs to think every time they turn on a pump."

—Kyler Brown, San Luis Valley farmer

**"It's
important
that farmers
cut back for
the good of
the valley."**

*—Erin Nissen, who is
using technology and
diverse crops to lower
the water use on her
San Luis Valley
family farm*

ter; the current rate is \$90 per acre-foot. Those with excess water can sell it to those who want more, via a credit system. There is also a program that pays farmers to take land out of production. About 10,000 acres of farmland have been retired this way, only about a quarter of the expected figure by this point.

Though the system is complicated, the aquifer is not. The aquifer responds to two things: recharge from the surface and reduced pumping. The effects are so obvious that locals sometimes refer to the aquifer as "the bathtub." The amount of surface recharge each year is limited, so replenishing the aquifer effectively means less groundwater pumping for irrigation. That's the hard part.

Subdistrict 1 sits atop the unconfined aquifer, so in many ways it is the most important. Many of the largest and most lucrative farms are here, in the heart of the valley. The subdistrict stops just before the Rio Grande to the south and stretches into the valley's northern reaches, where smaller farms and ranches sit amid the sage and chico brush. Most of the farmers here grow barley, alfalfa or potatoes. Almost all of them rely on wells that pump from the aquifer. When Rein threatened a pumping shut-off, he was referring to Subdistrict 1's more than 3,000 wells.

Rein's letter woke people up, said Erin Nissen, who plants potatoes and barley with her father, Lyle, outside the small town of Mosca. At a special meeting after the letter ran in the local paper, several dozen people were expected to show. Hundreds came, filling the room and spilling out the door. "The letter was good," she told me over the phone. "Scary, but good. There was talk from the beginning: 'Oh, it's fine, they won't come and shut off the wells.'"

People are realizing now that the state might, indeed, shut off the wells. Part of the problem, according to Nissen, is an inability to require water-use cut-backs. When the subdistrict system was formed after the 2002 drought — the mention of which still makes valley farmers shiver — the architects thought market mechanisms would be enough, given commodity prices, and the hydraulic and climatic data available.

While sound at the time, this model could not account for the realities of a changing climate, and the subdistrict has proven unable to discourage enough farmers from pumping. "There's a really sad mindset of, 'I can pay for it, so it's my neighbor's problem,'" Nissen said.

IN PRACTICE, THE SUBDISTRICT'S POLICIES

struggle to account for the valley's unequal water distribution. Farmers with good surface water rights take what they need from the river and sell the extra as credits, while wealthier farmers and operations owned by corporations and other outside entities pay the pumping fee and buy up credits. In both cases, there is no behavior change. Hiking the pumping fee will eventually hurt large water users,

but it would also devastate small, poorer farms and ranches. It doesn't take much to break them. For some, the cost is already too high.

That was the case for Dale Bartee's neighbors, in the northern part of Subdistrict 1 near Center. In the past few years, he said, three locally owned farms nearby sold, in part due to the ever-rising pumping fee, with most of the land going to out-of-state investment firms.

"We used to see all our neighbors on the road, and we'd stop and visit with them," he said. "Not anymore; now, it's just haul by and never see them."

"It's really hurt this area," he added, sitting at his kitchen table in mid-August. He and his 8-year-old son, Kolby, had been out in the fields, and Bartee made sure Kolby washed his hands and arms before sitting down to talk. A laconic man with a horseshoe mustache, Bartee is the fourth generation of his family to work the farm and hopes to make it five. He runs a cow-calf herd, puts up hay and grows small grains. Kolby and his brother run a herd of 57 sheep. Bartee's operation has middling surface rights, so he does all he can to limit pumping costs.

All summer, farmers discussed a pumping fee increase as if it were a certainty. They were right. At a budget meeting in late August, Subdistrict 1's board confirmed a \$150-acre-foot rate for next year's irrigation season. In the public comment period, many argued that the fee would drive farmers from the land. Others said an increase was the only choice, given the aquifer's level. Several board members spoke about the rate hike as a grim necessity. To Bartee, the new fee means that "the big guys and the ones with the surface credits are just going to get bigger."

The other subdistricts seem to have learned a few things. LeRoy Salazar, the president of Subdistrict 3 near the Conejos River, which flows wide and shallow down from the San Juan Mountains and east across the valley's southern end, said that his board can mandate water use restrictions during a dry spell. Simpson agrees, but obtaining this capacity for Subdistrict 1 would require an arduous return to water court. A small farmer himself, Simpson said that a \$150-acre-foot fee could make his operation untenable.

Without enforcement authority, Subdistrict 1 has minimal tools besides higher taxes to restrain pumping or manage competition between members. As Brown sees it, this sustains incentive structures that are geared toward use, not conservation and replenishment. "I have a decreed right to that water on paper, and I'm going to pump as much as I can, for as long as I can."

The instinct is understandable. Most farmers operate on tight financial margins and will pump all they can to bring their crops to market. But when it comes



to creating a sustainable system for the valley as a whole, these private instincts run afoul of public considerations.

By April, as snowmelt accelerated on the peaks and farmers prepared to plant potatoes, Brown was already souring on the prospects for his consensus-building plan, proposed to address the public-private push-and-pull. The response, he said at the time, had been pretty quiet. At an April presentation of the proposal by one of Brown's friends, the skepticism was tangible. Brown said he understands public hesitation. The community has already tightened its belt, but it has not been enough. He likened the water challenge to a family budget.

"Every family has a hard time living within its means," he said. "Not because there aren't externalities, like going to the emergency room or no Christmas bonus. But it's about behavior."

IF THE VALLEY IS TO MEET ITS WATER

DEMANDS, inherited habits from wetter times will need to change. Right now, for example, many farmers currently pump to their legal limit, whether or not the crops need water. In a year like 2018, when the rivers and ditches ran low, heavy well pumping is the only option for many. And in a wet year, the economics of farming and the demands of thirsty crops like alfalfa and wheat prevail. If the water is there, alfalfa will keep drinking. Of the crops that grow in the valley, alfalfa uses the most water per acre. It is also extremely lucrative: The valley exports bales by the truckload to dairies



Erin Nissen, far left, a San Luis Valley farmer, in a quinoa field she planted to help decrease water use on her family's farm. Kolby Bartee, age 8, drives as his brother, Tyler, 12, feeds hay to sheep on their farm. The boys run their own sheep herd as part of their family's fourth-generation farm.

and stockyards all over the West, and in a good year like this one, a farmer can get three cuttings.

In Subdistrict 1, it falls to the ranchers and farmers themselves to break these inherited habits. On the ground, this looks something like what Erin Nissen is up to. Nissen, who is in her late 20s, grew up on her family's farm. She has a calm demeanor, a direct gaze and innovative ideas on how to manage water use.

Her family operation consists of 11 fields, with each 120-acre section divided into 40-acre plots. Each plot is farmed independently, with crops that rotate each year. They currently grow 240 acres of potatoes and 60 acres of barley. Other fields are planted with cover crops, which are chopped up and turned back into the soil. Also in the rotation are fields of sorghum-sudangrass that are grazed by cattle, fertilizing the fields and thereby reducing the need for chemical inputs. All of this is done with an eye towards building up organic material and promoting healthier, more resilient soil, which acts as a sponge and better retains water. Once rare in the valley, crop rotation has become more common, its benefits for the soil now widely recognized.

For irrigation, Nissen uses evaporation models to predict the precise amount of water her crops will need. If the afternoon turns cloudy, for instance, she'll reduce irrigation by a few percent. Even the sprinklers have been modified — anything to shave water use down to the minimum. Newly installed nozzles spray

water in droplets, like rain. Older models distribute a mist that is more likely to blow away. Nissen has also reduced the total number of acres she cultivates and voluntarily limits her pumping.

Many farmers use some of these techniques, but few use them all. It can be hard to introduce crop rotations, let alone a full switch to less thirsty crops like quinoa and hemp. Habits are durable things, especially successful ones. Barley and potatoes, planted on the same fields every year — and irrigated in the same ways — have made and sustained many livelihoods in the valley.

I asked Nissen why she has introduced so many changes, and her first answer was: necessity. The family has lower-priority surface water rights, so they depend on taxed water that is pumped from belowground. Cutbacks save money, and healthier soil means higher crop yields. But Nissen also called it an ethical move. Like so many young people who grow up on farms, she went away for college, graduating from Texas Tech University with a degree in agricultural and applied economics. After graduating, she returned, the fourth generation of her family on the farm. It's not just any future she wants for the valley, but this one, where family farms of moderate size endure, where children work the same land their parents and grandparents tilled. Attaining that future, though, Nissen said, demands that she change her farm's water habits. "It's important that farmers cut back for the good of the valley," she said.

THIS COMMUNAL VIEW was what Brown wanted to encourage with the consensus-building plan, breaking away from the system that brought on the current water crisis. In early June, the Subdistrict 1 board gave the proposal a muted response. For now, the idea has little life.

Like Nissen, Brown's ultimate hope is for people to face up to the conditions at hand and then consider what sort of future they want for the valley, before it's too late. For both of them, the point of the subdistrict system, this experiment in self-governance, is not simply to guarantee the valley's economic future, but, crucially, to sustain a certain sort of life on the land and the communities this life supports. "If we want as many people, as many families, working the land as possible, that's a value we need to be working towards," Brown said.

Even while family farms and smaller operations endure in the San Luis Valley, many people describe a trend towards consolidation — larger farms growing at the expense of smaller operations, while outside dollars buy up land as investments or tax write-offs. Department of Agriculture census records show an increase in the number of large, rich farms in recent decades.

Some of the valley's larger operations, such as North Star Farm, which is owned by a California-based trust, and Natural Prairie from Texas, are backed by outside money, as are many of the new hemp operations. Without the strong community ties and commitment to family farms that have inspired Nissen to overhaul her

Alamosa, Colorado, in the San Luis Valley, is heavily dependent on the farm economy.



farming practices and conserve water, these deep-pocketed operations have little reason to limit their water use beyond the legal mandate.

The San Luis Valley depends on agriculture. Along any of the valley's highways, most of the storefronts and signs advertise this dependence, from engine shops and welders to potato warehouses and irrigation engineers, to the shiny new combines that crouch in waiting along the bar ditch. People, too, rely on agriculture. Farm dollars fund a public school system and several hospitals. Monte Vista has more than a dozen churches. Alamosa boasts a small university, Adams State, which offers an agriculture degree tailored to local students.

There is a divide between the valley's majority-Hispanic towns and the farms that surround them, according Flora Archuleta, director of the San Luis Valley Immigrant Resource Center. "The people in control are white, the farmers," she said. "They own the land." Even so, she went on, Alamosa, Monte Vista and Center would likely not exist without agriculture. The resource center sits on a storefront strip down a gravel side street in Alamosa. Across the street, passenger train cars sit humped and rusting in an old railyard. The office is constantly busy — something different every day. In May, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) invaded a nearby Mexican restaurant, taking five people. Decades ago, more than 10,000 migrant workers staffed the farms each year. Some farmworkers, mainly Mexican and Guatemalan, still come up through New Mexico and Arizona for planting season, but fewer now, Archuleta said, due to the ever-increasing mechanization of industrial agriculture and tightening immigration policies over the past decade. "The valley is a farming community," she said, "and that's what people rely on."

As Heather Dutton, a fifth-generation valley resident and manager of the San Luis Valley Water Conservancy District,

put it, even Alamosa's mountain-bike stores — in a town of fewer than 10,000 people — exist because there are enough people with enough money to ride on weekends. "There's this huge chain of people who are all able to live here because of farming in one way or another," she said, sitting in a craft beer and coffee shop in Alamosa. When we got up to leave, Dutton stopped to say hello to several diners she knew. Like her, all of them rely in some way on the success of those farms for a livelihood.

A major downturn in agriculture — whether it happens over time, due to climate change and consolidating market forces, or immediately, should the state order well closures — would hurt Alamosa and the other towns. And the valley is already struggling, despite the presence of so many large, wealthy farms. Commodity prices have not been healthy in more than a decade, and the six counties that constitute the valley are among Colorado's poorest. Shuttered storefronts dot Alamosa's main street. A recent casualty is a J.C. Penney, which anchored the block for more than a century. Locals took this closure particularly hard, even petitioning the company to keep the store open. Explaining the closure in a statement, the company said it is shutting locations that do not meet financial targets.

Archuleta's family has lived in the area since before it was part of the U.S. If farming collapses, she predicts, "the valley would become a ghost town."

IN FEBRUARY, MANY PEOPLE SPECULATED

that, with a large river and some luck with snowmelt, the valley could regain what was lost last year and maybe substantially more. The first part came to pass: The Rio Grande is projected to have its highest annual flow in more than two decades. The second part did not. As of August, the aquifer had gained about 150,000 acre-feet, just under what had been lost in 2018 and not even the largest

yearly recharge since 2002. The water level by summer's end tends to be the replenishment for the year. It is enough to stay the threat of well shutdowns for now, but next year is as likely to return to drought as it is to resemble 2019. Rein's warning endures. Did the valley take advantage of this year's snowpack? As with most things, the result is mixed — not exactly a failure, but not all it could have been.

Simpson, the water district director, remains stoic about it. He points out that the valley's hydrology is complex and beyond human control. Some water simply went to re-wetting the bone-dry riverbed after last year's drought. Snowpack matters, sure, but so does the timing of the melt, how the river comes together. Some water from the aquifer is delivered into the river every year, as part of a federal project to help the Rio Grande. And the more water there is in the river, the more Colorado must let flow to downstream users as part of an interstate compact. But, as Simpson often says, the aquifer responds, in the main, to less pumping — to human choices.

The valley's people know that the sub-district system may well fail, yet many continue to act on behalf of a project that asks them to place their trust in each other. Simpson was born here, left for the Colorado School of Mines, and spent more than a decade working as an engineer before coming back and buying a farm with his wife, Cathy, who is also a local. This tracks a pattern in Simpson's family history; his great-grandfather was the first in the family to arrive in the valley. His grandfather left for a time, then came back, as did his father. His son, Jared, left for college. Now 27, he works the farm with his father. Simpson told me he does the often-thankless task of running the valley's water governance system for his son. "I love agriculture," he said. "My son loves agriculture. He has a college degree, he doesn't have to do this. I do wonder why we keep beating our heads against the wall. But this is home."

And if it fails, this experiment in self-governance, why should people outside the valley, beyond these homes, care? I put this question to Brown in March. We were driving out along the dirt track through the low country that cradles the river. Snow was visible high above, and spring was coming on. He thought about this for a moment. The valley's inhabitants produce food, and their livelihood depends upon a thriving agricultural economy, he said. Most of the country does not live this way. And failure to address the water crisis would threaten this way of life, another instance of the decades-long economic abandonment of rural America. But then, after a pause, he added something more. Here in the Colorado mountains, there exists a community, one with a past full of mistakes and a future dark with uncertainty — yet a community all the same. "People who live here aren't any more special than people anywhere else," he said, "but they also aren't any less special than anyone else." ■



Nick Bowlin is an editorial fellow at *High Country News*.
 @npbowlin

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

A water ‘win-win’ in Colorado?

Not so fast

IF WATER FLOWS TO MONEY, in Colorado, it flows to the Front Range. There, a booming population has strained municipal governments, which are actively looking elsewhere for new water sources. This is nothing new: In recent decades, locals have fended off several schemes to export the San Luis Valley’s water east over the mountains. The latest of these is Renewable Water Resources, a venture backed by Denver metro money and former Republican Gov. Bill Owens. Worsening drought, poor commodity prices, economic trends towards consolidation and the ever-present threat of state intervention in local water management have some people worried — and others sensing an opportunity.

Sean Tonner, a businessman and longtime state Republican operative who worked for Owens, is behind the current water export scheme. Tonner exudes salesmanship, the sort of person who calls you by your first name the second he meets you. His plan reworks one that was pushed by the late Gary Boyce, a notorious water export advocate. Tonner, who now owns Boyce’s 11,500-acre property at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, proposes a 22,000-acre-foot pipeline to carry water from the northern end of the valley over Poncha Pass to Douglas County in the southern Denver metro area. His company would buy and remove from irrigation about 30,000 acre-feet of San Luis Valley water, paying local farmers for the water rights that would offset the export.

Tonner uses the phrase “win-win” to describe the project. The front page of the project’s website reads: “Best for the San Luis Valley. Best for the environment. Best for Colorado.” Few in the valley see it that way. The Rio Grande Water Conservation District rejected the proposal in January 2019, and the board has told Tonner it would fight any attempt to export water from the valley. Several town governments oppose the plan, as well. If it goes to court, the exporters would have to prove that the plan would not injure Rio Grande water rights, the aquifer or the protected areas that rely on the aquifer, including Great Sand Dunes National Park.

At a February water conference at Adams State University, former U.S. Sen. and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar — the most public member of the well-known Salazar family, which has farmed in the southern part of the valley since the 1850s — declared that “water will flow out of this valley to the North only over my dead body,” drawing a raucous cheer from the audience of farmers and ranchers.

Even so, it is easy to imagine the valley’s economic plight making it possible for Tonner’s proposal to catch on. His plan offers incentives that previous plans lacked, including a \$50 million fund for local governments to use in the community. If the valley’s financial woes worsen — or if the state were to shut off thousands of wells in Subdistrict 1 — that cash could sway some desperate local officials.

Tonner claims he has local support. At a community meeting in Saguache on May 23, he told the large crowd that he had enough water users interested in selling to obtain 22,000 acre-feet of water. Few farmers and ranchers want to admit this, but the valley’s grim circumstances are pushing some to sell.

I put the question to rancher Dale Bartee in August: What would happen if the drought returns next year, the valley’s pumping fee is higher, and the export company shows up with ready money?

“If the price is right, it would be very hard to say no,” he said with a sigh, sitting at his kitchen table. It’s an admission he does not like making out loud. Like many here, Bartee sees the

export advocates as turncoats, exploiting the imbalance of economic and political power concentrated on the other side of the mountains to extract rural resources. Repeated attempts to export the valley’s water make the people feel dispensable.

“For me, I will probably be one of the last ones to say yes to it, because of my boys,” Bartee said, whose two sons work the farm with him.

“They both say they want to come back, they want to farm,” their father said. “And if I sell out, what do they have left?”

If the valley’s water use were corrected, Cleave Simpson believes, the export schemes would evaporate. “Buy and dry” proposals, as they are known, seem less appealing when water supply and demand are in better balance, he said. The subdistrict model is an attempt to allow current farms to carry on at slightly diminished capacity, rather than face the “draconian” decision of either selling to exporters to get what money they can or risk having pumping rights suspended by the state engineer.

“I don’t think producers should have to make that choice,” Simpson said.

NICK BOWLIN

“(My boys) both say they want to come back, they want to farm. If I sell out, what do they have left?”

—Dale Bartee, talking about the prospect of selling his water rights to a Front Range developer



San Luis Valley farmer Dale Bartee, left, with his parents and his oldest son, Tyler, the fourth generation on the farm.

Seal bombs *continued from page 5*

listing helped motivate President Richard Nixon to sign the Marine Mammal Protection Act into law in 1972, making it illegal to hurt, harass or injure any marine mammals. As a result, the sea lion population tripled from just under 90,000 in 1975 to over 270,000 in 2008, and the animals did not have to be listed under the Endangered Species Act. This was a conservation success, but the sea lion resurgence has since become a huge nuisance for West Coast and Alaska fishermen, who lose money with every mouthful the animals take from their catch.

And the monetary impacts extend beyond the lost fish. "Not only do they eat the catch out of the net, but they do significant harm to the net, which is pretty expensive," said Kathy Hansen, a commercial fisherwoman and director of the Southeast Alaska Fishermen's Alliance, a nonprofit commercial fishing organization. Hungry sea lions are also known to chase boats, and fishermen spend more money on fuel fleeing from them.

Watching this is "like beating your head into a wall," said Rudy Zeiss, a fourth-generation commercial fishermen from Santa Cruz.

Since the 1970s, fishermen have employed non-lethal deterrents. Seal bombs, which are regulated by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, became the popular choice. They are portable, easy to ignite and have the added benefit of creating a pressure wave that forces fish together while briefly spooking sea lions. Fishermen set off as many as 37,500 seal bombs per month in Southern California from 2005 to 2016,

according to a study done by the Scripps Acoustic Ecology Laboratory. In 2009, researchers recorded over 3,000 explosions in a single night at one fishing site.

But there is growing concern over whether the bombs pose a significant risk to other marine life, both directly, by hitting animals, and indirectly, by blasting loud noises, researchers say. The noise ripples out into a marine ecosystem filled with animals that rely on underwater sounds to find their next meal.

What's more, research across the West Coast indicates that these explosions are only somewhat effective in fending off sea lions.

Two studies in 1987 revealed that sea lions were only deterred for an average of roughly four minutes. These findings were replicated in a report by NOAA and the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, which examined the use of seal bombs in rivers and bays in Oregon, Washington and California from 1997 to 2008. They found that the explosives were ineffective in stopping sea lions from preying on fishery catches.

"These are animals that are about eating food, reproducing and resting," said Robert Anderson, the marine mammal program manager at NOAA. "Those things are extremely hard-wired and hard to break."

Researchers hypothesize that seal bombs may even act as a dinner bell by luring sea lions towards a fresh meal. Between the seal bombs and blaring lights that fishermen use, hungry sea lions are easily tipped off to where they can find free food.

Despite this, many fishermen still think the bombs are better than nothing. Former Alaska Trollers Association Director Dale Kelley said that seal bombs

"provide the singular most effective and legal nonlethal means to deter sea lions from vessels and catch." And, according to Rudy Zeiss, the explosives give commercial fishermen like him "some type of chance to make a living here. Honestly, they may not do much, but even the peace of mind, thinking that it's doing something, helps. It helps everything, it helps morale."

Finally, in 2018, NOAA decided to permit the use of lethal force in Oregon. Specifically, officials allowed the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to start euthanizing sea lions in the Willamette River, where sea lions are harming the local salmon population. Instead of staying in their natural ocean habitat, California sea lions have traveled upriver to Willamette Falls, where salmon pass through every year on their journey to spawn. According to more than a decade of data, the number of sea lions at the waterfall has increased from 27 per day in 2014 to at least 40 per day in 2017. "None of us got into the type of work that we're in to do something like a lethal removal program, but you kinda end up there," said Anderson, who is managing the program.

But for commercial fishermen out in the open ocean, NOAA has no solution. According to John Ewald, director of public affairs, NOAA is developing "specific measures for deterring Endangered Species Act-listed marine mammals." However, "through this effort, we are not evaluating effectiveness of deterrents, nor are we developing deterrent methods or technologies."

NOAA's own 11-year report on the use of seal bombs in Oregon, Washington and California shows that nonlethal deterrents aren't working, yet allowing a lethal removal program in the open ocean would require passing new laws in favor of culling a once seriously threatened species in its natural environment. This conflicts with the agency's mission to be stewards "of the nation's ocean resources and their habitat."

So, rather than develop new tools, NOAA is doubling down, focusing its efforts on teaching fishermen how to use seal bombs and other nonlethal deterrents properly. But with no new and more effective deterrent in sight, fishermen are left with a growing sense of frustration and few other options. A *National Geographic* report last year found that West Coast fishermen are now illegally using shotguns; between 1998 and 2018, around 700 sea lions were found with gunshot or stab wounds.

There is "no way other than shooting them," says fisherman Clay Eldredge, who is based out of Half Moon Bay in California. "But you go to prison." The penalty for killing a sea lion can be a year in prison and a fine of up to \$28,520. However, without eyewitness accounts, video evidence or confessions, tracking down perpetrators is close to impossible. Since 2003, just five fishermen in California have been convicted.

"It's the last option for the fishermen," says Eldredge. "It's all we've got." □

Capt. Porter McHenry lights a seal bomb on the top deck of his commercial fishing boat, the *Merva W.*
KATIE BROWN



Notice to our advertisers: You can place classified ads with our online classified system. Visit hcn.org/classifieds. Sept. 27 is the deadline to place your print ad in the Oct. 14 issue. Call 800-311-5852, or email laurad@hcn.org for help or information.

Advertising Policy: We accept advertising because it helps pay the costs of publishing a high-quality, full-color magazine, where topics are well-researched and reported in an in-depth manner. The percentage of the magazine's income that is derived from advertising is modest, and the number of advertising pages will not exceed one-third of our printed pages annually.

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

Conservationist? Irrigable land? Stellar seed-saving NGO is available to serious partner. Package must include financial support. Details: <http://seeds.ojaidigital.net>.

Advertising is a great way to support High Country News and get your word out — Consider a classified ad in HCN when you have a conservation or green technology job to fill, a conference or event coming up, a house to sell, unique home and garden products, professional services to promote, travel opportunities or any other information you would like to get out like-minded people. Visit <http://classifieds.hcn.org> or call 800-311-5852.

EMPLOYMENT

Seeking Executive Director — Montana Watershed Coordination Council in Helena, Mont. More at mtwatersheds.org.

Looking for experienced farmer for 25-year-old certified organic vegetable farm. Business arrangements flexible. Seven acres raised beds. Excellent infrastructure. Northwest Montana. Contact: allysian@gmail.com.

Organizing and Training Coordinator

Live in a spectacular part of the West and work with great people to build power and win! The Western Organization of Resource Councils is seeking an experienced community organizer and trainer to join our team. At least three years of community organizing and issue campaign experience including work with diverse communities a must. billings@worc.org <https://www.worc.org/>.

Board Member — Join the Society of Wilderness Stewardship (SWS) board and help us broaden, diversify, and engage the wilderness community. <http://www.wildernessstewardship.org/node/347>.

Director, Texas Water Programs (Austin, Texas) — The National Wildlife Federation seeks a Director to lead our water-related policy and program work in Texas, with a primary focus on NWF's signature Texas program, the Texas Living Waters Project. Learn more by visiting our careers page at www.nwf.org.

MERCHANDISE

Lunatec Hydration Spray Bottle — Clean off, cool off and drink. Multiple spray patterns. Better than you imagine. Try it. www.lunatecgear.com.

Western Native Seed — Specializing in native seeds and seed mixes for Western states. 719-942-3935.

2017 John Deere Lawn Mower Z930R 15 hours on it, three-year warranty, 22.5 HP, \$1,600 sale price. Contact: helengu747@gmail.com.

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Expert land steward — Available now for site conservator, property manager. View résumé at: <http://skills.ojaidigital.net>.

PUBLICATIONS AND BOOKS

The Book of Barley — Collector's item! The story of barley, the field crop; 50 years of nonfiction research. www.barleybook.com.

REAL ESTATE FOR RENT

Historic adobe vacation home in Albuquerque — Centrally located. One bed, one bath, lovely outdoor patio, well-stocked kitchen. 505-242-7627. casacalderones@icloud.com.

Coming to Tucson? Popular vacation house, furnished, two-bed/one-bath, yard, dog-friendly. Lee at cloler@cox.net or 520-791-9246.

New Mexico birder's paradise — Fully furnished two bed/two-bath home near Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, great for nature lovers. bosquecitollc@gmail.com.

REAL ESTATE FOR SALE

Taos bike shop for sale — Gearing Up, well-established, profitable, full-service bicycle shop. MLS #103930. Contact: 435-881-3741.



Ojo Caliente commercial venture Outstanding location near the world-famous Ojo Caliente Mineral Spring Resort. Classic adobe mercantile complete with living quarters, separate six-unit B&B, metal building and spacious grounds. 505-470-2892, wimettre@newmexico.com, wimettrealty.com.

Gila Wilderness — Two Properties Organic farm, hot springs, San Francisco River runs through both. flow@sanfranciscoriver.com.

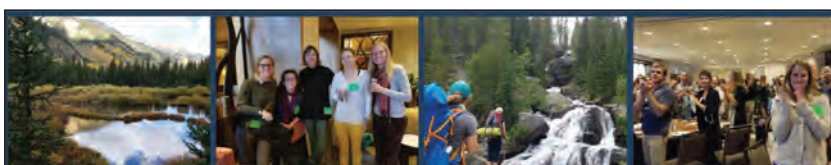


Honoring the spirit of our founder, Tom Bell, we want to hear from aspiring essayists, ages 18 to 25, who will help tell the ongoing story of the modern American West.

Essays should be no longer than 800 words. Consider the topics you're familiar with and tell us why they're important to you: environmental or social justice, climate change, water, energy & industry, wildlife, public lands, sustainability — you decide.

The winning essay will be awarded the Bell Prize and receive \$350 in merchandise from our sponsor Mountainsmith. Runner up will receive \$250 in merchandise and be featured online.

Visit hcn.org/bellprize for details and rules.



2019 Sustaining Colorado Watersheds Conference "The Human Element"

Advance your career. Reach out and make connections!

October 8-10, 2019 | Westin Riverfront Resort | Avon, CO
www.coloradowater.org/scw-conference-2019



Pre-Conference Workshops
Meals and Happy Hours
Presentations and Panels
Poster Social
Post-Conference Workshop

Sponsorship Opportunities Available
through early September



Bluebird Grain Farms

Organic
ANCIENT GRAINS.
freshly milled flour
& dry product blends.
Farm direct



Visit our online store at
BLUEBIRDBGRAINFARMS.COM

Spectacular scenic mountain view home-building site Located on top of Sugarloaf Mountain. Five miles west of downtown Colorado Springs, Colo. \$80,000. neal@carbon-xl.com.




maria's
Bookshop
DURANGO, COLORADO

Everland Mountain Retreat — 300 acres with mountaintop lodge. Nonprofit relocating. www.everlandmountainretreat.com.

Joseph, Ore. — Spectacular country home on 48 acres with Wallowa River running through it! 541-398-1148. www.RubyPeakRealty.com.

New Mexico — 43 acres in the Gila National Forest. Horse facility, custom home. Year-round outdoor living. REDUCED to \$999,000, 575-536-3109.

Electric Mountain, Paonia, Colo. — Only two lots left in Electric Mountain Recreational Subdivision. Spectacular vistas. Visit and dine at the reopened Electric Mountain Lodge, Thursday-Sunday. Contact: ira@yatesconservation.com.

For sale: South Austin, Texas, ranch next to Wildflower Center — Seeking LMP/family to share one of two complexes, ranching, hunting and recreation as allowed on a city of Austin-held 385-acre water-quality conservation easement. Tranquil, yet in town. You'll get it when you experience it. Qualified buyers only. \$3.5 million. It's about the land and location. Contact: Ira@Yatesconservation.com.

Custom Mountain Valley Home — Home/horse property on 22.8 acres, pasture and ponderosa pines, near Mora, N.M. Views of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Near fishing, skiing, back-country

hiking. Taos MLS 100971. 435-881-3741. johnj.taosnm@gmail.com.

Gila National Forest, N.M. — Beautiful off-the-grid passive solar near the CDT. 9.4 acres, north of Silver City. Sam, 575-388-1921.

Southwestern New Mexico — Classic, territorial abode home. Horse facilities, Gila Wilderness, Mimbres River and much more. Contact 575-534-7955 or tim@lapalomare.com.

Beautiful and undeveloped 40 acres near Dolores in southwest Colorado. \$60,000 plus costs. Contact: haydukestilllives@yahoo.com.

TOURS AND TRAVEL

Copper Canyon, Mexico — Camping, hiking, backpacking, R2R2R, Tarahumara Easter, Mushroom Festival. www.coppercanyontrails.org.

UNIVERSITIES AND SCHOOLS

Instructors: Get High Country News for FREE in your classroom! Help your students unravel the complex issues facing the American West with this tremendous resource. The HCNU Classroom Program gives FREE magazines and/or digital access to instructors and students. Sign up at hcn.org/edu.

In-depth and reliable

High Country News has been
telling it straight since 1970.

Support news you can trust.
Please donate today.

High Country News

For people who care about the West.

Donate online at hcn.org/1909ad · Call 1-800-905-1155

Or mail to P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428



Michael George, a water resources technician for the Coeur d'Alene Tribe's Lake Management Department, retrieves a sediment-covered anchor from the bottom of Coeur d'Alene Lake during a data collection trip in October. The amount of organic materials and nutrients in the sediment are indicators of excessive nutrient loading from the lake's watershed.

Photo by Jerome Pollos for High Country News

A Project of the Resource Renewal Institute, www.rri.org Mill Valley, CA



High Country News
**BOOKS
& AUTHORS**
ISSUE

"I received your special Books and Authors issue today and have already purchased eleven books that were advertised or reviewed in it. I'm letting you know in case you ever have publishers wonder about the value of High Country News."

–Doug Hesse, author, professor, ED of Writing Program - University of Denver

RESERVE YOUR ADVERTISING SPACE NOW!

Publication Date: November 11, 2019

For more info, visit hcn.org/ba or call 1-800-311-5852

WE DEFEND THE WEST



**Western
Environmental
Law Center**

We are a nonprofit that uses the power of the law to safeguard the public lands, wildlife, and communities of the American West in the face of a changing climate.

Join us:  /westernlaw

www.westernlaw.org

The Greater Chaco region is the ancestral home of some of New Mexico's earliest Native peoples. Archaeological wonders abound in this UNESCO World Heritage site—as do modern-day Native communities.

But the federal government is driving a frantic oil and gas rush in Greater Chaco even though 91% of this sacred region's public land is already leased for drilling and fracking.

Together with our partners and supporters, we're using every legal tool to protect Greater Chaco's communities, and the land's natural and cultural heritage, from fracking. This summer, we achieved a major federal court victory, taking a key step forward to provide this sacred landscape with permanent protections. With momentum building, the time for action—and justice for Greater Chaco—is now.

A Maori filmmaker and the fight for proper Indigenous narratives

“Foot soldiers don’t have a very high status, but they have to be very brave and very determined to keep fighting a war.”

These words are spoken by the late Maori filmmaker Merata Mita in *Merata: How Mum Decolonised the Screen*. They embody her filmmaking philosophy and also drive the central theme of this new documentary by Hepi Mita, Merata’s son: that Indigenous filmmaking is a battle against the establishment. Mita’s film documents his mother’s lifelong fight for the proper portrayal of Indigenous narratives on the screen. If not for this film, it is doubtful that the rest of the world, outside Indigenous film circles, would ever come to know about Merata’s story.

The documentary is Mita’s first film. We see the director, a film archivist by trade, looking at footage of his mother throughout the film; it is his way of connecting with her after her passing. But we also see him make new discoveries. “I viewed the archives as a window to the past, and myself as a conduit to explore them in the present,” says Mita.

His siblings pop up in Merata’s film footage and we see how integral family was to her filmmaking process, her four children (later five, with Hepi as the youngest) acting essentially as support system and crew. Talking-head interviews with Mita’s older siblings reveal the immense struggles they faced as a poor young family, first when Merata Mita leaves an abusive husband and becomes a single mother, and later, on her path to becoming a filmmaker. Sleazy landlords offer to trade sex for a place to live; her children are shunned at school because she is seen as a radical filmmaker; the New Zealand government targets her for her politically charged films; and the police even attack her 16-year-old son. Hepi Mita may have had been fortunate to be born later in his mother’s career, thereby avoiding the same hardships, but he is also in the unenviable position of having to dredge up and explore traumatic family memories.

In the documentary, there are the standard interviews with the important people in the subject’s life: her children, Indigenous filmmakers she mentored, Hepi himself in many instances. But one of the most fascinating interviews is with Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin. Obomsawin has made 50 films and counting, according to the National Film Board of Canada. The now 86-year-old describes meeting Merata for the first time at a film festival in Guelph, Canada. They were the only two Indigenous filmmakers with work screening there, and Obomsawin felt “as if we knew each other already. ...” There was a natural sisterhood between them, according to Obomsawin, a bond born from fighting

all their lives for Indigenous voices in cinema.

In the early 1980s, Merata made two very political documentaries, which are examined closely in her son’s film. *Bastion Point Day 507* (1980) documents the police-led confiscation of Maori land in Auckland, and *Patu!* (1983) covers the anti-apartheid protests that occur after the New Zealand government invites the South African rugby team to tour the country. But the documentary also recounts how Merata was the first Maori woman to write and direct a feature-length film, *Mauri* (1988), a story about a love triangle that explores cultural tensions in New Zealand. She also directed a nine-part documentary series on one of New Zealand’s most important Maori artists, Ralph Hotere.

Hepi Mita gives us a fascinating glimpse into his mother’s life’s work. Merata’s story is huge — her triumphs, her various losses, but perhaps the most important idea throughout is she was simply there. Merata didn’t focus on developing innovative techniques, like the jump-cut edits created by the French New Wave or the groundbreaking special effects of George Méliès; instead, she tackled a very different kind of challenge. She fought in the cinematic trenches, advocating for accurate representation and documenting the other artists who were fighting for the same goals.

Merata’s cinematic lineage is one that

crosses international boundaries, and her vision encompassed Maori connections with Indigenous people worldwide. She saw how the Indigenous peoples of Scandinavia, New Zealand and North America shared similar histories. She inspired the Sundance Institute to think bigger than just the United States; it eventually created a fellowship in her honor. White-hot Maori filmmaker Taika Waititi, a former Sundance Indigenous film program mentor, credits Merata for giving him the courage to explore his own unique, irreverent aesthetic when he was engaged in making his film, *Boy*. Waititi went on to direct the incredibly successful *Thor: Ragnarok*, and is slated to direct the next installment in that series. From *Bastion Point Day 507* nearly 30 years ago to the planet of Asgard in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Merata’s influence can be felt.

In her son’s documentary, Merata Mita can be seen as a true foot soldier in the fight to portray Indigenous narratives on the screen. She didn’t make films for fame or fortune, and she refused to simply wait around for someone else to take up the cause. In the end, her son, Hepi, says it best: “I wanted to offer her story as an example that despite how hopeless some of these situations may feel, her triumphs are proof that those sacrifices are worth it.”

Merata: How Mum Decolonised the Screen can currently be streamed on Netflix. BY JASON ASENAP

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

Filmmaker Merata Mita advocated for accurate cinematic representation of Indigenous narratives. She also made a point of documenting other artists that were doing the same.

COURTESY OF HEPI MITA



FROM FRONTIER STOCKADE TO BORDER WALL



Life in the American West is life in a region that has been conscripted into the service of the nation's frontier myth. Nowhere are the absurdities and tragedies of this myth more apparent than in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands. From the hackneyed re-enactments of Tombstone's Gunfight at the OK Corral to the real-life vigilantes and outlaws who haunt the deserts along the borderline, the violence of the frontier is alive in the Borderlands in a way that feels simultaneously anachronistic and immediate.

New York University historian Greg Grandin explores this strange affinity between the frontier stockade and the border wall in *The End of The Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. The scope of Grandin's frontier history extends far beyond the Borderlands or even the American West, ranging from the genocidal Indian wars of the 13 colonies to recent interventions into the affairs of the Central American nations that former President Ronald Reagan was fond of referring to as our "southern frontier."

Such violent expansion of territory and influence has long provided an outlet, Grandin argues, for fundamental tensions within the American body politic. Whether the class antagonism that Andrew Jackson sought to appease by brutally opening new territory for settlement, or the sectional divisions that were sutured in the unifying white nationalism of the Spanish-American War, *The End of the Myth* suggests that expansionism served as a "safety valve," releasing pressures produced by our most profound social contradictions.

Grandin borrows this concept of the frontier from the best-known frontier historian of all: Frederick Jackson Turner. In his controversial 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" — notorious today

for celebrating settler colonialism and downplaying its violence — Turner imagined the frontier as a mobile site where the class tensions of the Old World were supplanted by an epic struggle between civilization and savagery. For Turner, the story of this struggle was the narrative of U.S. history, the source of the democratic and egalitarian nature of the "American character." His essay ends on a note of marked anxiety as he ponders the exhaustion of "free land" in the West: "At the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."

Grandin comes to a different conclusion: In the final chapter of his 21st century frontier thesis, provocatively titled "The Significance of the Wall in U.S. History," he argues that it was not the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny, but rather the election of Donald Trump, that marked the end of an era. After decades of foreign policy failures, from the jungles of Vietnam to the deserts of Iraq, "the frontier is closed, the safety valve shut," Grandin warns. "After centuries of fleeing forward across the blood meridian, all the things that expansion was supposed to preserve have been destroyed, and all the things it was meant to destroy have been preserved."

Turner's myth of an egalitarian frontier democracy always obscured the bloody reality of history. Grandin, however, argues that Turner's story has met its definitive and inevitable end in the white supremacist ideology made manifest in Trump's obsession, the border wall. The U.S.-Mexico border has become "the negation of the frontier," a "repository of the racism and brutality" that Turner's notion of history and its representation of the "savage" on the other side of the frontier had sought to project beyond the nation.

By echoing Turner's anxieties about

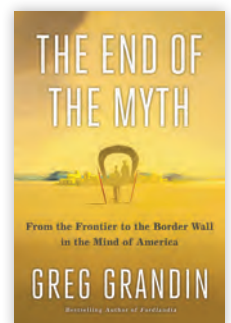
what, in his later years, he called "a nation thrown back upon itself," Grandin offers a stirring condemnation of Trump. Through his ambivalent embrace of Turner, however, Grandin also risks inadvertently revisiting some of Turner's blind spots. Grandin takes "the mind of America" as his subject, but the voices that dominate his book are those of white Americans, the intended beneficiaries of frontier expansion. In an especially remarkable omission, the voices of Indigenous scholars — people who have a lot to say about frontier conquest and its consequences — are almost entirely absent.

Many Indigenous intellectuals are skeptical of claims that Trump and the ideology he represents are exceptional or new. As Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear put it in the week following Trump's election, "This week I do not grieve anew. ... As a Dakota, we have struggled post-apocalyptically for a century and a half." Grandin, on the other hand, argues that the emergency engendered by the election of Trump marks an epochal shift that will finally force Americans to face the choice that frontier expansion once allowed us to evade: "barbarism or socialism."

Grandin may be "a rash prophet" (to borrow a phrase from Turner) for arguing that our contemporary crisis signals "the end of the myth" that has for so long sanctioned the United States' expansive violence. Nonetheless, Grandin paints a vivid picture of the troubling continuities between frontier expansion, border vigilantism and military action abroad. By illuminating the litany of emergencies that is the history of U.S. empire, Grandin's history does vital work in the ongoing struggle to reject the myth of the democratic frontier.

U.S. Border Patrol agents on the Rio Grande River.

CHARLES OMMANNEY/
GETTY IMAGES



The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America
Greg Grandin
354 pages,
hardcover: \$30.
Metropolitan Books,
2019.

BY ALEX TRIMBLE YOUNG

patagonia®

Work, pants.

Carrying capacity.

From deep, double-layer back pockets to sturdy cargos and reinforced five-pocket designs, we build our Iron Forge Hemp® canvas work pants with a range of pocket setups to suit your specific needs on the job.

© 2019 Patagonia, Inc.

ALASKA

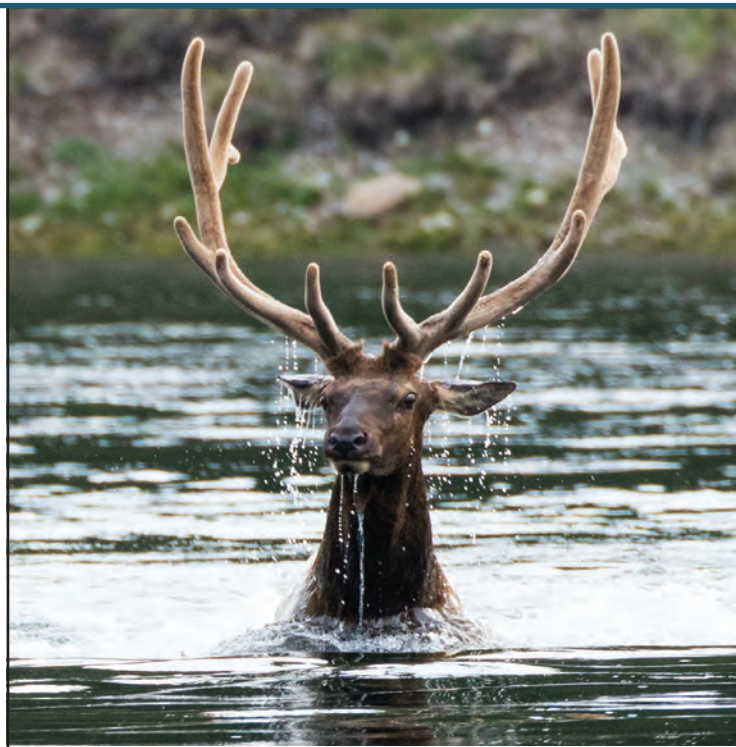
In 2016, the administrators of the Kenai Peninsula Borough, 75 miles south of Anchorage, did something radical: They decided that only people who belong to “official organizations” could give the invocation at the start of meetings, reports *The New York Times*. That meant atheists were not allowed to open meetings, nor was — inexplicably — a woman who was Jewish. After the ACLU challenged the discriminatory policy, the Alaska Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional. This has made life quite unpleasant for administrators, who, unable to block the appearance of a “Satanic Temple” member, were horrified to hear her invocation begin with a hearty “Hail, Satan!” A dozen officials and attendees fled the meeting in response. Once outside, some joined protesters who carried signs saying “Reject Satan and his works” and “Know Jesus and his love.”

UTAH

You'd never call Torrey House Press in Salt Lake City a big publishing firm, and one of the books it brought out this year was certainly small, at just 84 pages, but Ellen Meloy's *Seasons: Desert Sketches* is a gem. (See our review, “Last words from a desert scribe,” *HCN*, 7/22/19.) The sketches were written in the 1990s as brief on-air essays for KUER, and they sat on a shelf until this collection brought them back to life. Meloy, who died suddenly in 2004, can make you laugh out loud as she mocks a person who opposes wolf reintroduction because wolves “jump on some deer and eat that animal alive.” “He's right,” Meloy says, “nature is rude and wolves should change their ways.” Meloy then slyly suggests that wolves dump their “disgusting pack technique” and switch to takeout. We're so distant from the wild, she says, that we forget that we are mammals who stalk our own prey at Safeway. “The wolf on your nature poster is a killer, a predator of supreme skill and endurance,” Meloy says. “The human in your mirror is an animal. Both revelations should humble and ennoble us.”

THE WEST

When Kenneth Nesslage's 95-year-old mother died recently in Utah, the mortuary there neglected to inform the Social Security Administration. That meant Nesslage, who lives in western



WYOMING Antlers: Hand wash, drip dry. MACNEIL LYONS/YELLOWSTONE INSIGHT

Colorado, had to notify the federal agency. But when officials asked him for his own Social Security number, Nesslage inadvertently “sent himself into the digital jaws of death,” reports the *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel*. According to agency computer records, Nesslage himself was dead, and worse, after a few days he realized “it was much easier to die than to come back to life.” His credit card was declined at a restaurant, a machine he leased to aid his breathing was recalled by the company, and the bank holding his mortgage sent condolences but then got down to nitty-gritty financial questions. His bank also insisted that he “physically walk into the nearest branch” to prove that he existed. Altogether, he says, it made him feel like a “dead man walking.” Though it took him four trips to his Social Security office to get formally resurrected, Nesslage says he's now able to laugh about it all. The experience has also helped him decide what he wants on his headstone: “Here lies Ken Nesslage. The second time he died, it worked.”

UTAH

It probably helped that Andrew Gillreath-Brown, an archaeology doctoral candidate at Washington State University, was a tattoo enthusiast. He was

doing a routine inventory check of a museum box at the university when he noticed a needle fashioned from skunk-bush wood attached to two cactus spines. Then he picked it up and “saw the black staining on the tips” of the spines, reports the *Salt Lake Tribune*. Voilà! He'd discovered a tattoo-delivery instrument bound together with yucca. Other artifacts found in the same place in the Grand Gulch area of Bears Ears in southeastern Utah date back almost 2,000 years, which makes the tattoo needle the oldest ever found in Western North America. Gillreath-Brown says the tattoo needles were created by the Ancestral Pueblo civilization, which flourished in what is now southeastern Utah between 500 B.C. and 500 A.D., long before the arrival of white settlers. Gillreath-Brown, who did some experimental tattooing with the device on pigskin, called the prickly pear spines “very efficient,” although, as he told *Newsweek*, “I think it would have hurt some.”

OREGON

Three years ago, Lainey Morse started Original Goat Yoga. It's not quite what we first pictured — goats in yoga pants cavorting around on people's lower backs — but it sounds fun: “The animals nuzzle participants and occasionally cuddle with them as they stretch.” The business took off like a rocket, expanding to 12 locations across the country. But now there's a problem: Oregon zoning laws prevent Morse from running the business in her home state. According to writers from the High School Journalism Institute, state law says goats are farm animals. “The irony is, if we slaughtered our goats, we could do goat yoga,” says Sean Scorvo, Morse's business partner. Scorvo and Morse want lawmakers to pass an exception to state law so the goats on their farm can just be goats while hanging out with people on yoga mats. Meanwhile, goat yoga classes and events are taking place in California, Colorado and seven other states.

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.



High
Country
News

For people who care about the West.

High Country News covers the important issues and stories that are unique to the American West with a magazine and a website, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write *High Country News*, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898.

U.S. \$5 | Canada \$6

