

High Country News



LIVES ON LOCKDOWN

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'Safer at Home'
in Los Angeles

Bracing for
the Worst

Outdoors,
Ethically

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Local resident Soraya Zain, 25, skateboards past shuttered businesses along the famous boardwalk in Venice Beach, California. Though stores, restaurants and the beach itself are closed, some residents are still venturing out for fresh air by the sea. **Roger Kisby / HCN**

Know the West.

High Country News is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) independent media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people – through in-depth journalism – to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. Beginning April 1, 2020, High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 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. 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.



EDITOR'S NOTE



Love and strength

IN FEBRUARY 1944, Robert Desnos, a French poet, journalist and member of the French Resistance, was arrested by the Gestapo, to be tortured, interrogated and incarcerated. That July, from a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia and under pitiable conditions, he wrote a letter to his lover, Youki Foujita, imagining their reunion in Paris. “For my part, I’m taking a deep swig of youth, and I will return filled with love and strength,” he wrote. “Will this letter reach you in time for your birthday? I would have liked to give you a hundred thousand American cigarettes, a dozen couture dresses, an apartment on the rue de Seine, an automobile, a little house in the Compiègne forest, the one on Belle Isle and a little four-penny bouquet. In my absence, you can go ahead and buy the flowers. I will repay you for them. The rest I promise you for later.”

Desnos remained imprisoned until June of 1945, dying of typhus shortly after liberation. He was unable to keep his promise, but he left us all a gift, a body of work that bore witness to that terrible time. I have returned to Desnos’ words often in the last few weeks, feeling the weight of this surreal moment, the fear and isolation this virus has thrown upon us. I have taken heart in the optimism of that letter, its ability to imagine beauty beyond horror.

I have taken similar inspiration from the courageous staff of this magazine, who have worked for weeks to bring you this issue. In it, we bear witness for the West, presenting a picture of the region as it currently stands: cities in lockdown, rural doctors girding for the worst, an economy in turmoil. But we are also working at keeping our spirits up, and so we offer you pro tips from the natural world on how to physically distance, along with advice on getting outdoors ethically. Beyond the pandemic, the world is moving faster than you’d think, so we have balanced our COVID-19 coverage with other stories from the region, as we plan to do in issues to come.

These are uncertain times, and we do not know what the future holds. It seems clear, however, as I shelter in place in western Colorado, worried for loved ones, waiting for a flatter curve, that the world has been forever changed. One thing that won’t change, though, is our promise to work hard, to report what we learn, to write it all down, to make sense of the West as best we can — and to be here for you, with love and strength, when the terror of this time has lifted.

Brian Calvert, editor-in-chief

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FEATURES

No Trick of Light

The beauty of Los Angeles
is still here for all to see

BY LYNELL GEORGE

ON THE COVER

Sunset Boulevard is eerily quiet since shelter-in-place orders were enacted in Los Angeles. One of the city's most iconic thoroughfares, on any given day it's normally teeming with cars and pedestrians. Now, businesses are closed, parking spots are empty, and the ubiquitous billboards and movie posters seem to be advertising to no one. **Roger Kisby / HCN**

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Near Broadway in Los Angeles' Chinatown (*above*).
Roberto (Bear) Guerra

Some of the handmade masks community members have donated to the Jackson Hole Community Mask Project at Keegan Pfeil's home in Jackson, Wyoming. Pfeil has collected and donated thousands of masks to protect patients and health-care workers at St. John's Health. The group is also donating masks to high-risk workers at grocery stores, post offices and other essential businesses (*right*).

Sofia Jaramillo / HCN



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Jackson, Wyoming, confronts the coronavirus.

PHOTOS BY SOFIA JARAMILLO | TEXT BY HELEN SANTORO



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LETTERS

High Country News is dedicated to independent journalism, informed debate and discourse in the public interest. We welcome letters through digital media and the post. Send us a letter, find us on social, or email us at editor@hcn.org.

ENDOWMENTS

“Land-Grab Universities” (April 2020) called for reconciliation efforts at schools that have endowments derived in part from the taking of Native American lands in the 19th century. South Dakota State University has dedicated around \$636,000 in annual endowment income from these lands to programs and support for Native students. If all 52 universities in your investigation were to do the same, approximately \$22 million would be available annually for these kinds of programs, based on a 4.4% average payout on a combined total of \$495 million, the estimated inflation-adjusted present value of their endowments.

Cornell University, with the largest endowment, would invest \$4 million a year in Native programs. The next largest, Montana State University, would pony up \$1.6 million. And the University of California system, where I work, would contribute \$597,051. Oregon State University, near the

median, would spend \$184,019.

I do not know whether other universities are spending anywhere near what these endowments earn, like South Dakota State is doing. But users can easily add a column to the database that *High Country News* has made public to calculate a 4.4% payout (which the Congressional Research Service recently found to be the average university endowment payout) based on the estimated present value of these endowments. That number could indeed be an interesting tool for further research, and — hopefully — potentially productive discussions with these universities.

Jon Christensen, via email

TRUE PARTNERSHIPS NEEDED

This is a much-needed deep dive into the issue of land “grant” universities. Let’s hope this sparks real dialogue and action today as we move forward with true partnerships with Indigenous people, education of Indigenous students,

hiring of Indigenous faculty and staff, and ethical research to support (and in collaboration with) Indigenous communities.

Michael Dockry, via Facebook

NECESSARY HISTORY

We’re actually covering settler colonialism and some of its ramifications now in my class, specifically related to water resources and ecology, as it problematizes ideas of ecological restoration, stakeholders, historical water rights and other things we treat as givens in the dominant culture. And I totally agree with this last statement: “‘You can’t go back and change the beginning,’ Dunn said. ‘But you can start today and change the ending.’ ” Here’s hoping. (I may make this supplemental reading!)

Jamie Browne, via Facebook

ANTI-RATIONAL RACISTS

In his essay “The road to ecofascism” (April 2020), Brian Calvert is right about the Nazis’ perversion of environmentalism; their mystical feelings for the land did indeed add to a “romantic populism” that led in the “dark direction” of racism. But we need not worry about American environmentalists going in that direction; they care about the whole world, not just the USA.

Al Gore’s association of environmentalism with our national character is a rational and healthy appreciation, even if it’s overly optimistic. The danger in pre-World War II Germany was an irrational, ethnocentric assumption, so easily felt, that fed into

that nation’s version of national exceptionalism. Gore’s vision sets a high standard without denigrating other countries.

“Cactus Ed” Abbey, as Calvert implies, took pride in his political incorrectness, which unfortunately allowed his racism, misogyny and elitism to mar his otherwise stellar environmental stance. His libertarian side would never have let him become fascist, eco- or otherwise. Nor do I see any signs that Abbey’s fans are racist (though they may be somewhat elitist).

I simply don’t see modern American environmentalists heading toward ecofascism. On the contrary, the current populist movement is irrationally anti-environmental and racist. Donald Trump is proud to be a developer, his administration is chipping away at environmental safeguards, and his supporters have remarkably narrow vision. They are the danger. Environmentalists these days are rational, humanistic and worldly, and are trying to lead in the direction of the light.

John Watson-Jones, via email

FASCISM IS ALREADY HERE

I think we’d best beware of the “fascism” that we already have! Trump is using the COVID-19 pandemic to relax environmental standards for industries as it is. If anything, we’re going in a totally opposite direction than what this suggests. Our once-relevant Environmental Protection Agency has been mostly hijacked early on by the Trump admin-

“Let’s hope this sparks real dialogue and action today as we move forward with true partnerships with Indigenous people, education of Indigenous students, hiring of Indigenous faculty and staff, and ethical research to support (and in collaboration with) Indigenous communities.”

istration. Andrew Wheeler, the present EPA head, worked previously as a coal industry lobbyist, and Trump's first appointed head was a climate change denier. So it's unlikely that we are headed for "ecofascism" any time soon. You know, there are at least two extremes, and there's such a thing as doing things right and for the right reason. And it's not impossible to do so.

Danny Comer, via Facebook

NEW NORMS

The way forward requires a new norm. As David Sloan Wilson writes in *The Neighborhood Project*, "If you're undermining the commons, you're degrading your soul."

Wesley Rolley, via Facebook

WHAT BROADBAND OFFERS

The author of "Wiring the Wild" (Outdoor Rec & Travel 2020) asserts that the Park Service's mission is to "conserve and entertain," but what about the essential mission of interpretation: enabling visitors to experience and learn about natural and cultural features, and in the process protecting the parks through greater public understanding and appreciation? The article failed to note that broadband offers the potential for the Park Service to offer more virtual interpretive resources and programs: on-demand graphics and ranger-narrated videos that are not subject to vandalism or wear and tear and which can be updated more readily.

Steven Semken, via email

WHAT ACTION CAN WE TAKE?

I read the article about the National Park Service allowing new cell towers in the Teton Range. It sounds immediately like a horrendous idea, and yet it is happening. You'd think the Park Service would know better, but alas. I went to the Park Service site but could not find any comment opportunities on the plan. It would be of great help if you could provide links

"If you really love nature, then you would mourn the devastation of even a marginal population loss of this animal."

that offer more info on the subject, and — even better — specific actions that readers could take.

Hong Son, via email

INTRUSIVE TECHNOLOGY

While I share the concern as to the intrusion of technology and impact of placement of towers, I am also reminded of the multiple deaths and rescues that have occurred due to ill-advised flatlanders who attempted to climb Longs Peak or similar destinations in Rocky Mountain National Park in poor weather conditions. You're not going to be able to stop people from doing so, and had they had a cell signal, that would have increased their chances of being rescued alive, rather than their bodies found only once the snow melted. We need solutions that will balance both safety concerns and the desire to maintain a wilderness experience.

John W. Thomas, via email

SPOOKABLE SHEEP

This is sad news indeed, but after working with the Forest Service on bighorn sheep range studies for three summers in the backcountry, it comes as no surprise ("Competitor of conscience," Outdoor Rec & Travel 2020). Bighorns are a sensitive and easily spooked genus. Researchers need to make sure their data is rock-solid, do additional studies if needed, consult outside biologists and ecologists, make rational decisions, and set closures which are then policed and enforced. I'm a British Columbia skier, but if the sheep need our support, then we need to make sure they've got it. Our playground and backcountry is their home. I'll deal with the change, but they may not be able

to. If you really love nature, then you would mourn the devastation of even a marginal population loss of this animal.

Jim Hardcastle, via Facebook

MORE THAN 'SNOW-BLIND'

In response to Nick Bowlin's article about Backcountry Film Festival ("Snow-blind," Outdoor Rec & Travel 2020), we at the Backcountry Film Festival and Winter Wildlands Alliance would like to address what Bowlin's critique missed.

BCFF's films come from a variety of backgrounds, speak to relevant issues regarding a variety of backcountry and environmental issues, and are considered for their ability to inspire, create conversation and represent each attendee's backcountry experience. We were disappointed in the article's structure as a standalone film review from the viewpoint of the broader ski industry and classic ski movie genre.

Every season, we call for films that represent WWA's mission to promote and preserve winter wildlands, showcase human-powered winter adventures, empower the backcountry community and/or include a call to action. These are not your standard "ski-porn" films.

A call for filmmakers to create this content, as the article somewhat does, is the first step, one we've been taking for the past 15 years. However, Bowlin missteps in discrediting the storytellers who currently create this content and the reason those stories come together. The article ignores BCFF's purpose as a vital community event and fundraiser supporting local policy and advocacy work, avalanche centers, snow

education, backcountry retailers and outdoor nonprofits (to name a few). Since we started our national tour, BCFF has raised \$1,300,000 for these communities.

BCFF brings us together to share in the importance of wild winters, conservation and responsible recreation. We will continue screening diverse films that speak to our audiences and the backcountry issues they care about. To all HCN readers, please consider submitting your film for the 2020-'21 season. We'd love to see it.

Melinda Quick, via email

ETHICS PER SE

Most Western states have regulated seasons for shed hunting and designated open and closed areas ("The ethics of shed-hunting," Outdoor Rec & Travel 2020). Nothing unethical about following these regulations to shed hunt. Those who flout the regulations are not only unethical but committing crimes. Shed hunting per se is not unethical.

Richard B. Jones, via email

ANTLERS AS CALCIUM

In regard to "The ethics of shed-hunting": Rodents and other animals consume shed antlers and bone as a valuable source of calcium and other nutrients, especially in arid and semi-arid environments. Once collecting becomes an industry, it is certainly bound to have a negative impact, much like wild ginkgo collecting in the Eastern U.S.

Craig Keyzer, via email

Adapting for access

Amid the outbreak, health clinic outreach for immigrants has shifted to Facebook and smartphones.

BY JESSICA KUTZ

FOR MOST OF HER CAREER, Sheila Soto, a public health worker based in Tucson, Arizona, has worked to bring health services directly to low-income and immigrant communities. She grew up in Idaho, where her parents were farmworkers, and spent much of her early career doing community outreach to immigrants and Latino agricultural workers.

“I honestly hated working in the fields when I was young,” she told me. “So I promised myself I would do whatever I could to get to college and to help my people so we wouldn’t be suffering so much.”

After getting her master’s degree in public health at the University of Arizona, she joined the Primary Prevention Mobile Health Unit Program, a university initiative that provides preventive health services and screenings to immigrant communities across the country, from the nearby border town of Nogales in rural Cochise County to the city of Denver, Colorado. The program is based

on an already-successful national model, in which approximately 2,000 roving mobile health clinics provide outreach and resources to underserved populations.

The initiative has tried to address the enormous health barriers facing immigrant communities in the West — from bridging the language and culture gap in services to connecting undocumented immigrants to health clinics at a time when many are afraid to access federal services.

But in just a few weeks, the program has had to adapt to a new challenge: reaching residents during a global pandemic. Public health workers like Soto who have dedicated their lives to their communities, building trust through in-person visits, have had to change their methods entirely. But the information they are providing is more urgent than ever.

“We are literally going down a list of all the people (whom) we’ve encountered and luckily, they are answering their phones,” said Dr.

Cecilia Rosales, director of the Mobile Health Program. “They are very grateful that we are calling them.”

Rosales has spent most of her career bridging the health-care access gap for rural and immigrant residents in the Southwest through new programming and research. Now, she says, COVID-19 is adding an additional challenge.

“What this pandemic is doing, or at least the impact it is having on communities, is it is adding to their already existing anxiety and fear, not just in accessing medical services, but also social services,” Rosales said. “We have a lot of mixed-status families, (who) even though they have citizens in the mix, still hesitate to access services.”

Their reluctance is well-founded: In February, just a few weeks before the virus’ rapid spread became apparent, the Trump administration enacted a public charge rule barring immigrants who use government services like Medicaid or food

stamps from applying for a green card or visa. In light of COVID-19, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) released a statement specifying that undocumented residents could access testing and treatment without fear of losing the ability to gain citizenship. But that information isn’t necessarily reaching the undocumented community, largely because the nonprofits and community centers that serve them are temporarily closed.

Soto acknowledged there is a lot of distrust of the government — especially in this time of stricter immigration enforcement. “People are just scared,” she said. She’s had a hard time reassuring participants that they could still access care during this time. “It is kind of hard to make people believe that,” she said.

Meanwhile, misinformation about coronavirus cures is proliferating, and not enough outreach is available to explain how the virus can spread in communities





The University of Arizona's Primary Prevention Mobile Health Unit sits idle in one of the school's parking lots in Tucson, Arizona (far left).

Sheila Soto, the program manager, has shifted her focus to providing accurate COVID-19 information online to Spanish-speakers (near left). **Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN**

where multigenerational families are common. Noting the lack of reliable Spanish-language materials in the U.S., Rosales used her connections in Mexico to get essential information through the U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission. "We desperately needed good literature and information in Spanish," she told me.

Whereas Soto's days used to involve weekly trips for face-

to-face meetings around southern Arizona, now she spends time every day updating the mobile unit's Facebook page with Spanish-language advisories about different federal and state resources as well as links to free lunches and unemployment information. Financial help has become more urgent; according to the Pew Research Center, nearly half of U.S. Hispanics have

a family member who has lost a job or taken a pay cut due to the pandemic's effect on the economy.

But she could be back on the road before long: The Mobile Health Units will be delivering medications in partnership with Federally Qualified Health Centers, a safety net for uninsured and undocumented people. There's talk of using the units for food deliveries as well. And their trips may become

an opportunity to teach patients across the West about how to tap into telehealth options.

"It is the responsibility of everyone — but especially of organizations and government agencies that provide services — to continue to provide that credible information and keep our doors open," Rosales said. "If we don't treat everyone the same, then we are more likely to increase the number of cases." ✨

THE LATEST

Body brokers

Backstory

In October 2017, the FBI began investigating Sunset Mesa Funeral Directors, a funeral home in Montrose, Colorado, for illegally selling deceased bodies. "Body brokering," as it's called, is a shady industry that supplies cadavers to a range of industries, including university labs and the military. FBI agents and the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies discovered that Sunset Mesa owner Megan Hess and her mother, Shirley Koch, were disposing of bodies without the required permits. The funeral home was shut down ("None of this happened the way you think it did," 6/10/19).

Followup

In March, Hess and Koch were arrested for illegally selling body parts. The women met with bereaved families and charged them \$1,000 or more to cremate the body, according to a recently unsealed grand jury indictment. They often transferred bodies to third parties against the family's wishes and even shipped corpses that tested positive for infectious diseases, violating Department of Transportation regulations. Both were charged with six counts of mail fraud and three counts of illegal transportation of hazardous materials and face up to 135 years in federal prison. — Helen Santoro

REPORTAGE

An unhealthy outlet

Forty years after the eruption of Mount St. Helens, science and safety compete over Spirit Lake.

BY ERIC WAGNER

THE PUMICE PLAIN in southwest Washington's Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument is one of the most closely studied patches of land in the world. Named for the type of volcanic rock that dominates it, it formed during the mountain's 1980 eruption. Since then, ecologists have scrutinized it, surveying birds, mammals and plants, and in general cataloging the return of life to this unique and fragile landscape.

Now, the depth of that attention is threatened, but not due to the stirrings of the most active volcano in the Pacific Northwest. The problem is a large lake two miles north of the mountain: Spirit Lake. Or, more specifically, the Spirit Lake tunnel, an artificial outlet built out of necessity and completed in 1985.

After nearly four decades, the tunnel is in need of an upgrade. At issue is the road the Forest Service plans to build across the Pumice Plain despite the scientific plots dotting the plain's expanse. In this, Spirit Lake and its tunnel have become the de facto headwaters of a struggle over how best to manage research and risk on a mountain famous for its destructive capabilities.

THE ENTANGLEMENT of the land, the lake and the tunnel began 40 years ago, when Mount St. Helens erupted on May 18, 1980. At 8:32 a.m., a strong earthquake caused the mountain's summit and north flank to collapse in one of the largest landslides in recorded history. Some of the debris slammed into Spirit Lake, but most of it rumbled 14 miles down the North Fork Toutle River Valley. Huge mudflows rushed down the Toutle and Cowlitz rivers, destroying hundreds of bridges, homes and buildings.

The eruption killed 57 people and caused millions of dollars in damages. Mount St. Helens shed more than 1,300 feet of elevation, hundreds of square miles of forest were buried or flattened, and Spirit Lake was left a steaming black broth full of logs, dead animals, pumice and ash. Its surface area nearly doubled to about 2,200 acres, and its sole outlet, to the North Fork Toutle River, was buried under up to 600 feet of debris.

Having no outlet, and with rain and snowmelt still flowing in, Spirit Lake began to rise. The situation was dangerous: If the basin filled, the lake could overtop the debris field and radically



destabilize it, unleashing another devastating mudflow that would send millions of tons of sediment toward the towns of Toutle, Castle Rock and Longview, Washington.

To forestall this, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a 1.6-mile-long tunnel through a ridge, allowing water to flow out to the river. That held the lake's surface steady, but the ridge itself remained in constant — if slow — motion: Twelve faults and sheer zones have squeezed and buckled the tunnel, causing engineers to close it several times for repairs. During one closure in the winter of 2016, Spirit Lake rose more than 30 feet. "It was definitely a wake-up call," said Chris Streb, a project director with the U.S. Forest Service, the agency that oversees the monument. What if something — perhaps another earthquake — severely damaged the tunnel? Federal managers are facing a situation that Rebecca Hoffman, the monument's manager, characterizes as an urgent, although not immediate, crisis — a potential catastrophe. "This is the struggle we're in the middle of," she said. "I don't want to get to the point where we wait for an emergency."

The Forest Service decided to open a second outlet as a safeguard. To gauge a likely route's feasibility, the agency needs to drill into the debris blockage and study its composition. Its plan for doing so, however, has unsettled another group deeply interested in the region: scientists.

After the 1980 eruption, some of the first people to visit the blast area were researchers. For a group of ecologists from the Forest Service and universities across the Pacific Northwest, the eruption was a huge, unplanned experiment, a chance to test some of their discipline's oldest theories about how life responds to what can seem like total devastation.

The scientists set up hundreds of studies. It was in large part at their urging that the federal government created the monument in 1982, setting it aside as a place for "geologic forces and ecological succession to continue substantially unimpeded." Many plots from 1980 are still studied today, and the work has had a broad reach. One group's findings have helped shape regional forest management by uncovering the role "biological legacies" — organisms that survived the blast — played in the development of the post-eruption community. Another group described how plants returned to the denuded space of the Pumice Plain willy-nilly, rather than in the orderly fashion they previously presumed.

"Mount St. Helens has taught us so much about how plants and animals respond to large disturbances," said Charlie Crisafulli, a Forest Service ecologist who came to the blast area in the summer of 1980 and never left. "It has let us

ask questions that we can't ask anywhere else in the world. That's what makes this such a valuable landscape."

NOW, HOWEVER, ECOLOGISTS are worried. In 2018, the Forest Service proposed constructing a 3-mile road across the Pumice Plain to move drilling rigs to test sites. Scientists and conservationists objected so strongly that the agency withdrew the proposal. Then, a few months later, in December 2019, it released a new one. This time, in addition to tacking on some tunnel maintenance, the Forest Service suggested an additional alternative to the road: bringing in equipment and personnel via helicopter. But in early April, the agency decided to go ahead with the road, and Streb hopes that the work, which could take up to five years, will begin this summer.

Scientists prefer using helicopters, arguing that they would minimize the impact on research while still allowing for drilling and maintenance work. "No one is opposed to the project, but the Forest Service needs to find a better alternative than building a road," said Carri LeRoy, an ecologist at The Evergreen State College who studies five new watersheds that formed on the Pumice Plain post-eruption. She recently received a big grant from the National Science Foundation, and the proposed road would cross all five watersheds, ending her project before it can really begin.

But the helicopter alternative, with its tougher logistics and higher price, was a hard sell. A few scientists who attended planning meetings late last year left fearing a decision had already been made. "I just came away with

a sense that (the Forest Service) is bound and determined to build that road," LeRoy said.

In outreach meetings, too, Forest Service officials have talked up the destructive mudflow Spirit Lake could unleash, showing pictures of flooded towns from 1980 while de-emphasizing that such an outcome is only a distant possibility. The project is being sold to the public as essential for safety reasons, according to Arne Mortensen, a commissioner for Cowlitz County, where the downstream towns are located. "Absent a near-term and long-term cost analysis to show otherwise," he wrote in an email, "using the road approach looks better."

Scientists fear that they were subtly scapegoated, and the importance of their studies brushed aside, in an effort to cut costs. "I'm worried they're just paying lip service to researchers' concerns," LeRoy said. Hoffman, the monument manager, denies this: "We're working with specific researchers, and will continue to work with the research community to limit the amount of impact that occurs," she said.

But Susan Saul, a conservationist with the Washington Native Plant Society who was instrumental in getting the blast area designated a national monument, said project planners have been cavalier about the road's possible impacts on research. For example, a Forest Service staffer wrote that the physical environment "will have returned to baseline" within two years of the project's completion. To Saul, that phrasing betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between science and the landscape at Mount St. Helens. Ecologists want to study how life responds after an eruption. But a road will change everything, with effects that extend far beyond its physical footprint: Vehicles crush vegetation, ferry in introduced species and change animal behavior, among other things. Slap a road through the Pumice Plain, and the research there would effectively be reduced to how life responds after a road is built — a much less interesting project. "So it seems like the writer wasn't taking the research seriously," Saul said.

For ecologists, this seriousness, or its lack, could have profound consequences. What is the value of a monument devoted to the processes of disturbance and ecological succession if those processes are themselves irrevocably disturbed? That is a question as yet unstudied, but as Crisafulli, the Forest Service ecologist, points out, no one has invested more in the research at Mount St. Helens than the federal government. "The agency has spent millions of dollars on multiple studies for the past four decades," he said. "There's no getting around the fact that building a road through the heart of it would put that legacy at risk." 🌱

"It has let us ask questions that we can't ask anywhere else in the world."

Washington State University Vancouver biologist John Bishop leads students on a trail through wildflowers to his research plots on the Pumice Plain of Mount St. Helens. He has studied life on the plain since 1990, 10 years after the 1980 eruption left the landscape dry and barren (left). **Courtney Talak / The Daily News**



An activist from the Hia-Ced O'odham and the Tohono O'odham nations sits with a friend by Quitobaquito Springs in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona. **Kitra Cahana**

REPORTAGE

Tired of winning

Anger and despair rise with the president's border wall.

BY JESSICA KUTZ

IN THE DESERT GRASSLANDS along the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge, amid the muted greens of spindly ocotillos and creosote bush, construction workers are digging trenches, widening roads, pumping groundwater and pouring deep concrete bases. Their work is part of the construction of a 30-foot-high border wall on the U.S.-Mexico border.

This portion of the wall in southeastern Arizona is just one of the 18 sections announced in 2019. Trump's long-promised wall has finally evolved from campaign rhetoric to reality. And for the past year, environmental groups and border

communities have fought it, filing lawsuits that challenge its funding sources, organizing protests in cities and at national monuments, and testifying in emotional hearings before lawmakers in D.C. But so far, their efforts have failed to stop construction.

Meanwhile, border residents — members of the Tohono O'odham Nation as well as local ranchers and environmentalists — have grown increasingly angry and demoralized as it becomes clearer that the administration is determined to build as much of the wall as possible before Election Day.

On Feb. 13, another 31 new border

projects were announced, signifying the planned construction of 177 miles of wall in areas previously thought to be too rugged or isolated. Much of it will replace old pedestrian fencing and vehicle barriers, though other projects will break new ground.

Once completed, for the first time in U.S. history, the barrier will physically wall off the majority of New Mexico, Arizona and California, an area stretching from the Rio Grande to the Pacific Ocean. What once seemed like a pipe dream has become as concrete as the barrier itself. A triumph for the Trump administration, it's regarded as a tragedy for the border

communities that call the region home, as well as the more than 93 endangered and threatened species that live in this desert.

THE PELONCILLO MOUNTAINS, a range in southern Arizona, serve as a bridge between the Sierra Madre Occidental Range in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains. Wildlife species, including ocelots, pronghorn, black bear, Gould's turkey and the white-nosed coati, roam the area, according to the Sky Island Alliance, a regional conservation nonprofit. It was designated critical habitat for jaguars in 2014; one was famously photographed by a local rancher in 1996, and is believed to have traveled here from Sonora, Mexico.

When the first set of border projects was announced in 2019, this region was spared. But the new round of construction will cut across critical habitat, including a migratory corridor that jaguars use to move between the United States and a breeding population in Sonora, Mexico, according to the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit

conservation organization.

From his office in Las Cruces, New Mexico, Kevin Bixby of the Southwest Environmental Center told me, “It was heartbreaking to see those (new) projects announced.” In some places, including New Mexico’s Bootheel region in the southwestern corner of the state, pedestrian fences will replace vehicle barriers, which wildlife can easily cross over and under. This will destroy important habitat range for species like the Mexican gray wolf. As Bixby put it, “Individual animals can no longer move freely across the landscape to get to the food and the water and the mates that they need to survive.”

The new wall projects will also separate the threatened white-sided jackrabbit in the U.S. from a neighboring population in Mexico. “The one valley (the jackrabbit) can migrate through will have a double wall,” said Myles Traphagen, Borderlands coordinator for the nonprofit Wildlands Network. When populations are separated arbitrarily, individuals are likely to become more vulnerable to disease and natural disasters, while a lack of mates can result in harmful inbreeding.

As the wall rises in places like Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, and soon, in Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, experts fear that endangered species like the Sonoran pronghorn will face extinction. Though a successful recovery effort was led by both countries, fewer than 1,000 pronghorn are currently thought to live in the region. Carlos Castillo, a Wildlands Network conservation specialist based in Hermosillo, Mexico, said the barrier will make it difficult for the animals to access the large territory they need to survive and reproduce.

Today, this section of the Borderlands is protected in both nations through a sister-park partnership, which connects Organ Pipe and Cabeza Prieta in the U.S. with Mexico’s El Pinacate and Gran Desierto de Altar Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO world heritage site.

Castillo, who formerly directed El Pinacate, says the wall could jeopardize his life’s work. “It’s a great sadness because it is a special place for so many reasons,” he told me. “I started my professional career working to protect the Sonoran pronghorn, helping to protect the area through the sister-park initiative in Arizona.” Now he says, the wall “will practically close shut all of the Sonoran Desert.”

THE TOHONO O’ODHAM Nation, whose land reaches into both the U.S. and Mexico, is particularly concerned over how construction is disturbing many important archaeological and cultural sites. At a Feb. 26 hearing with the House Committee on Natural Resources, Tohono O’odham Nation Chairman Ned Norris Jr. testified that his tribe is worried about a burial ground at Monument Hill in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, which it fears was desecrated by construction-related blasting. Other sites are in danger, including ceremonial grounds for the Hia-Ced O’odham Tribe in neighboring Cabeza Prieta, Quitobaquito Springs, and a burial site in the proposed path of the border wall. The Tohono O’odham suggested alternatives to preserve those specific areas, but Norris said the tribe’s input was ignored.

In response, Scott Cameron, the Interior Department’s principal deputy assistant secretary for policy, management and budget, assured the committee members that an environmental monitor has been

on site to assess whether blasting or construction need to be halted, if and when cultural resources are at risk.

As part of the recently announced slate of projects, a new section of the wall is now set to go up directly east of the Tohono O’odham Reservation. This would leave the reservation sandwiched between barriers on either side of the Southwest border.

The Cocopah Indian Tribe, whose nation also extends across the border, has remained neutral on border policy issues. In an email statement, however, the tribe told *HCN* that it is concerned that a portion of the new wall could limit members’ access to a “culturally significant site.”

As construction is rammed through, border communities are left to cope with the long-term impacts the wall will have on cultural resources, wildlife and the ecology of the region. Construction has proceeded apace without legally mandated environmental reviews. Advocates are left scrambling to compile data and set up new wildlife cameras to track migrating animals while they can still cross the border.

“(We are) racing to get some baseline information,” Laiken Jordahl of the Center for Biological Diversity told me. “One of the first things we are demanding when Trump is out of office is a comprehensive study of how border walls have affected wildlife, affected water and the landscape. We want those studies to identify which areas we should rip the walls out first.” ☀

WHAT MAKES BORDER WALL CONSTRUCTION POSSIBLE?

National Emergency Declaration: President Donald Trump’s February 2019 national emergency declaration, which was renewed in 2020, gave him sweeping powers to tackle military construction projects, along with at least 123 statutory powers, according to the Brennan Center for Justice.

Waiver Authority: The Real ID ACT of 2005 lets the Department of Homeland Security waive laws that might hinder barrier construction. So far, Trump has used it to waive 62 laws, including the National Environmental Policy Act, which requires a multi-year assessment of a project’s environmental impacts.

Federal Land: The Roosevelt Reservation is a 60-foot-wide slice of federal land that runs through New Mexico, Arizona and California along the U.S.-Mexico border. Established in 1907 by President Theodore Roosevelt, it makes it easier to build a border wall by removing private property rights from the equation.

Funding: Approximately \$15 billion worth of funding has been earmarked for wall construction since 2017; \$3.6 billion of this is currently tied up in the courts. Some of the money came through House appropriations, but the bulk of it was taken from the Defense Department’s counter-narcotics funding and from military construction projects.



Map compiled by Myles Traphagen

“Living in this amazing community that has so many helpful and resourceful people, I thought we could all get together. My idea was to get a mask in everyone’s hands that needs one or would like one. We’ve delivered masks to the senior center, grocery stores, as well as the hospital staff.”

—Keegan Pfeil, an emergency room nurse at St. John’s Health, a search and rescue volunteer and founder of the Jackson Hole Community Mask Project, which has organized the creation and donation of thousands of masks for hospital employees and other community members working in high-risk environments.



The pandemic hits home

Jackson, Wyoming, confronts the coronavirus.

PHOTOS BY SOFIA JARAMILLO TEXT BY HELEN SANTORO



"That's the thing about a ranch. The cows were bred in June. They have a 285-day gestation period. They are going to calve with the pandemic or not. There's three of us that handle the whole ranch operation. We've got to get the cows through winter, no matter what happens. If we all get sick, we will have to work through it, because the cows won't stop calving."

—Chase Lockhart, a sixth-generation rancher who works with a small team to sell meat to local restaurants and hotels. That part of his business has been devastated.

During a typical spring, the small resort town of Jackson, Wyoming, would be gearing up for a lively summer tourist season. Thousands of visitors come here to climb the towering peaks of the Teton Range, raft the Snake River and mountain bike miles of trails — activity that contributes substantially to the town's economy.

But this year, in response to the coronavirus pandemic, popular destinations like Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks have closed, with no set date to reopen, and the Jackson Hole Tourism Bureau has asked visitors to reschedule their trips. As a result, many locals have been laid off, businesses are

struggling and the normally bustling town is eerily quiet.

For people like Eric and Zarina Sakai, who own and operate a local restaurant, the changes add up to a substantial loss in income. “Since the pandemic began, our sales are down by 65 to 70%,” said Eric Sakai. In response, community members are taking action. Keegan Pfeil, for example, who is an ER nurse, started the Jackson Hole Community Mask Project, where locals make face coverings for hospital employees and patients. “Hopefully, we’re slowing the spread of COVID,” said Pfeil, who has lived in Jackson for 18 years. “I’m very attached to the community; it’s a phenomenal community with a lot of wonderful people who want to help.”



“We started early, because we have a lot of colleagues who are in the cities hit hard. We knew what was coming. So we decided to stop dine-in service four days before the mandate came out. Once we shut our doors, Eric and I fully sanitized the entire restaurant, ceiling to floor. Since we’ve closed until now, nobody has come in here. It’s only us. You can never be perfect, but you have to take every precaution you can. We thought there was a bigger responsibility, not just to the community, but to humanity.”

—Eric and Zarina Sakai, among the first restaurant owners in the area to close their doors and take precautionary measures. They now offer contact-free curbside pickup, and they added essentials to their menu — like tissues, paper towels, bleach, sanitizer spray and dish soap — that they could still order through their vendors (above).



“My family, my kids, everyone, said to me, ‘Mom, please rest!’ But the truth is with this situation that we are living, I cannot be there, watching television or walking or relaxing. It’s that there are many people that need masks. It’s a way of saying, I am going to save lives.”

—Carmen Gloria Rodriguez Sanzana, who is originally from Chile, worked at Blue Spruce Cleaners as a seamstress. After she was let go because of lack of work, she found herself bored at home and decided to make face masks. In over two weeks, Carmen made over 1,000 masks for St. John’s Health (left).



“The coronavirus has affected us a lot because, well, truthfully, we live from work. We are accustomed to work every day; it is our routine. We are worried because we don’t know in reality when it will end, and, well, the bills have to get paid.”

—Rocio Enriquez and her husband, Miguel, who both recently lost their jobs. They have a family of four to take care of, including Rocio’s 82-year-old mother and their teenage daughter, and they are not sure when they will be able to return to work (above).



“With having two knee surgeries this winter and not being able to physically do the work I do, ski instructing, I was already forced to live paycheck to paycheck. After losing my job, if it wasn’t for relief grants and government help, I’d be homeless.”

—Paul Angiolillo, who worked at the Jackson Hole Mountain Resort ticketing office until the resort closed early on March 16 (above).

“I think, right now, unity and compassion are more important than ever. It’s never been a more perfect time for the expression ‘better safe than sorry.’ Because looking back on this time, after we get through this first part, asking that question of your future self: What did you do during this time, and can you be proud of that answer? Did you think past your own needs? Did you act with courage and compassion to other people?”

— Wren Fialka, who is the founder of Spread the Love Commission, which has assembled and distributed hundreds of health and hygiene packets to Teton County, the Salt Lake area and the Wind River Reservation (left).

Mounting costs and falling counts

The pandemic is battering oil-state economies.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

LONG BEFORE New Mexico or Wyoming identified any cases of COVID-19, even before residents began hoarding eggs and sacks of flour, state budgets were feeling the impact of the disease.

In mid-January, when the epidemic was still mostly confined to China, officials there put huge cities on lockdown in order to stem the spread. Hundreds of flights into and out of the nation were canceled, and urban streets stood empty of cars. China's burgeoning thirst for oil diminished, sending global crude prices into a downward spiral.

And when oil prices fall, it hurts states like New Mexico, which relies on oil and gas royalties and taxes for more than one-third of its general fund. "An unexpected drop in oil prices would send the state's energy revenues into a tailspin," New Mexico's Legislative Finance Committee warned last August. Even the committee's worst-case scenario, however, didn't look this bad.

Now, with COVID-19 spanning the globe, every sector of the economy is feeling the pain — with the exception, perhaps, of toilet paper manufacturers and bean farmers. But energy-dependent states and communities will be among the hardest hit.

At the end of December, the U.S. benchmark price for a barrel of oil was \$62. By mid-March, as folks worldwide stopped flying and driving, it had dipped to around \$20, where it's been stuck for weeks. The drilling rigs — and the abundant jobs that once came with them — are disappearing; major oil companies are announcing deep cuts in drilling and capital expenditures for the rest of the year, and smaller, debt-saddled companies will be driven into the ground.

COVID-19 and related shocks to the economy are reverberating through the energy world in other ways. Shelter-in-place orders and the rise in people working from home have changed the way Americans consume electricity: Demand

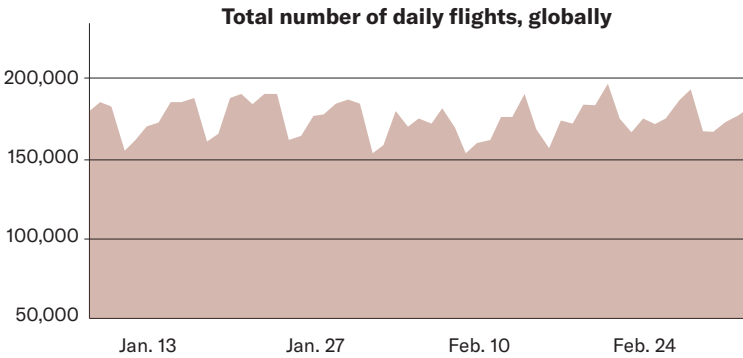
decreased nationwide by 10% in March. As airlines ground flights, demand for jet fuel wanes. And people just aren't driving that much, despite falling gasoline prices, now that they have orders to stay home and few places to go to, anyway.

The slowdown will bring a few temporary benefits: The reduction in drilling will give landscapes and wildlife a rest and result in lower methane emissions. In Los Angeles, the ebb in traffic has already brought significantly cleaner air. And the continued decline in burning coal for electricity has reduced emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants.

But the long-term environmental implications may not be so rosy. In the wake of recession, governments typically try to jumpstart the economy with stimulus packages to corporations, economic incentives for oil companies, and regulatory rollbacks to spur consumption and production. The low interest rates and other fiscal policies that followed the last global financial crisis helped drive the energy boom of the decade that followed. And the Trump administration has not held back in its giveaways to industry. The Environmental Protection Agency is already using the outbreak as an excuse to ease environmental regulations and enforcement, and even with all the nation's restrictions, the Interior Department continues to issue new oil and gas leases at rock-bottom prices.

The impacts on energy state coffers will unfold over the coming weeks and months. But the shock to working folk from every economic sector has come swiftly. During the third week of March, more than 3 million Americans filed for unemployment — more than 10 times the claims from a year prior.

This page shows more of the shocks hitting energy economies and systems in the Western U.S. ☀



2 million

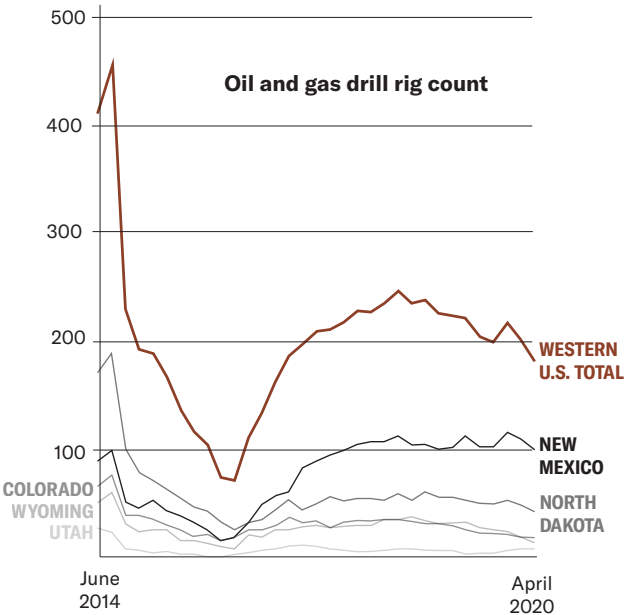
Number of flight cancellations due to COVID-19 as of April 1.

1,247 pounds

Amount of carbon dioxide emitted per economy-class passenger on a round-trip flight between Los Angeles and New York City.

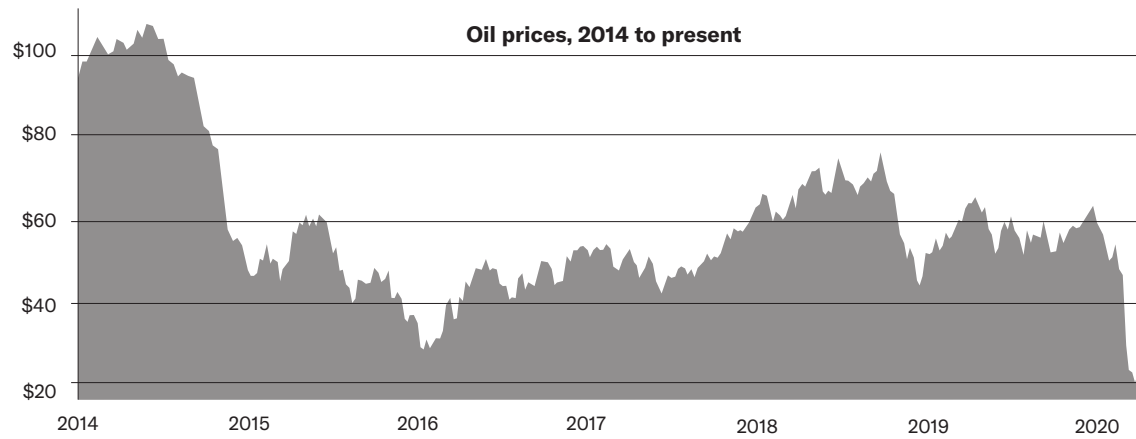
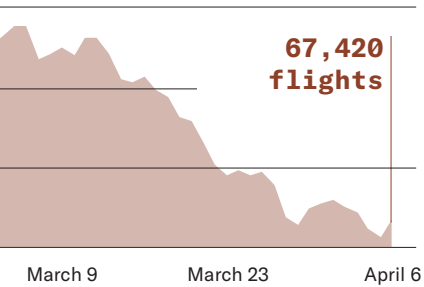
2,495 pounds

Amount of carbon dioxide emitted per premium-class passenger on the same flight.



36

Percentage of New Mexico's general fund revenues that came from oil and gas royalties and taxes in 2019.



\$135

Price of oil in June 2008.

\$50

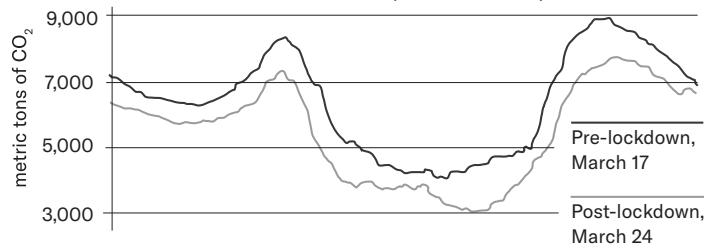
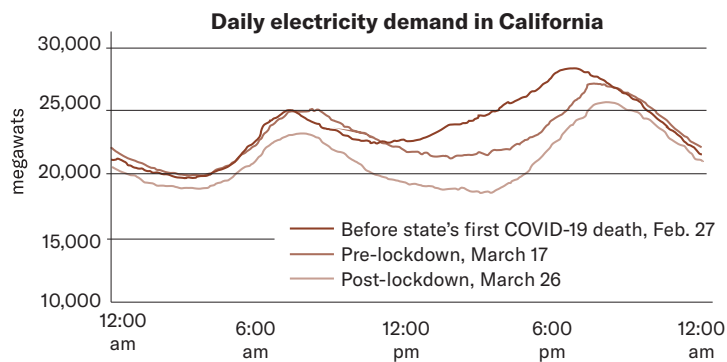
Assumed average U.S. benchmark price of oil for 2020, which Wyoming lawmakers used to frame their budget.

\$20

Price of oil on April 15.

2.5 million barrels per day

Reduction in global oil consumption in March due to COVID-19.



215,000

Number of unemployment insurance claims filed nationwide on March 23, 2019.

6,606,000

Number of unemployment insurance claims filed nationwide on April 4, 2020.

Infographic design by Luna Anna Archey. Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration, New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, California Independent System Operator, Baker-Hughes, Unacast, FlightRadar24, Wyoming Department of Revenue, Carbon Footprint, International Air Transport Association, OAG.

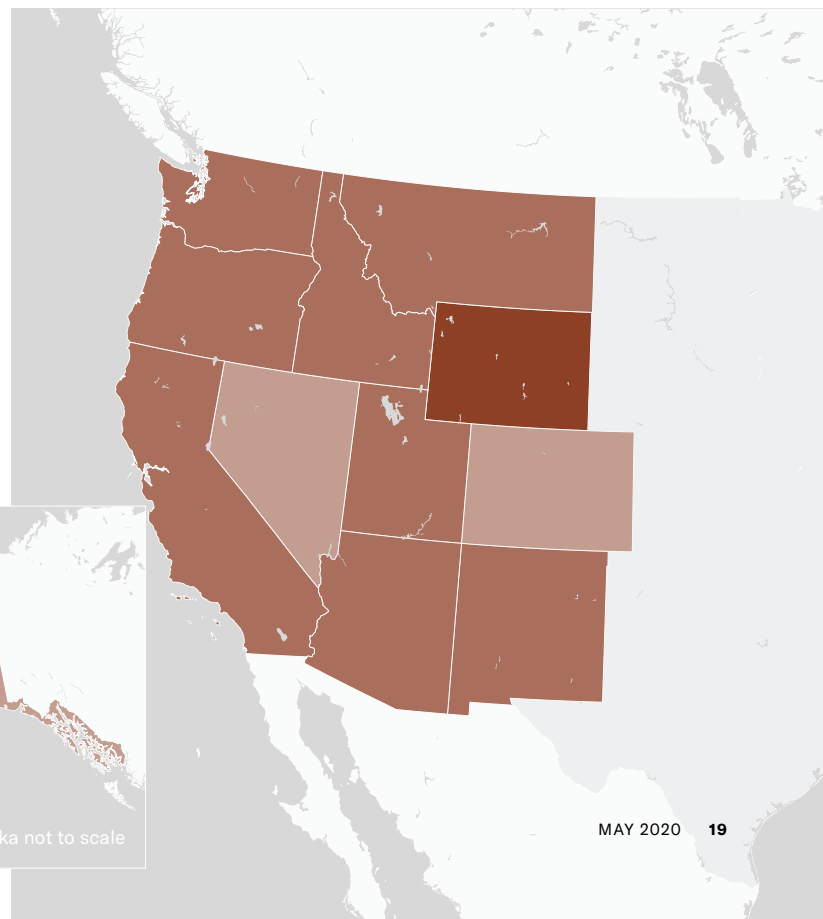
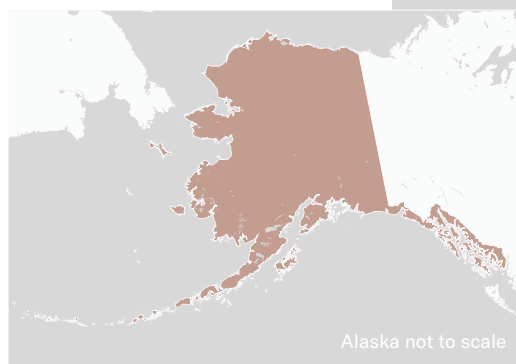
10.4 million

9.4 million

Average weekday megawatt-hours of electricity used in the United States during the weeks of Feb. 23 and March 23, respectively, representing a 9.8% decrease.

Changes in mobility across the Western U.S.

40-55% DECREASE
25-40% DECREASE
LESS THAN 25% DECREASE





Jason and Sara Hogan keep a careful distance from each other outside their home in Crested Butte South, Colorado. Sara, a physical therapist, is pregnant with the couple's first child. **Dean Krakel / HCN**

COVID-19

A rural doctor braces for the worst

'We run towards problems, not away from them.'

BY NICK BOWLIN

IN EARLY MARCH, Dr. Jason Hogan realized what was about to happen: The new coronavirus had infiltrated his community, and it was going to be bad. Hogan, one of seven emergency medicine physicians at the only hospital in Gunnison County, Colorado, and his colleagues were seeing dozens of patients with textbook COVID-19 symptoms. Some had been sick for more than two weeks. During that time, they ate dinner with their families, picked up groceries and talked to friends.

Hogan, who has cropped dark hair and the calm demeanor of one who habitually reassures the worried, understood the virus' potent transmission capacity. Given the sheer number of symptomatic patients, he had a hunch that the virus had already spread widely in the community. And this signaled trouble for his rural, resource-limited hospital, which serves a large valley in the mountains of Colorado's Western Slope.

"If you wait until people are coming in," he told me over the phone in mid-March, "you're already way behind."

And, indeed, they were. Since that weekend, Hogan has been on the front lines of one of the nation's COVID-19 epicenters. Like several other

ski-dependent areas in the Western U.S., Gunnison County— home to the ski town of Crested Butte — was hard-hit. It ranks among the nation's top 10 counties for rate of infection per capita. The county's response has been notably aggressive, with business closures, limits on gatherings and shelter-in-place policies that came much earlier than the state's orders. A public health order bans non-residents from remaining in the county, including those with second homes in the area.

FOR HOGAN AND MEDICAL WORKERS like him, the new coronavirus collapses the boundaries between the work of the day and life beyond it. At home, the virus distorts everything. His sleep schedule is erratic. At work, he fears for his wife, Sara, a physical therapist working in Crested Butte, who recently entered her third trimester of pregnancy with their first child. During the second week of March, as the number of patients rose, Hogan worked long shifts nearly every day. He came home exhausted and worried, prey to a constant background hum of anxiety and fear. "We're all talking about it (at the hospital), potentially coming home and hurting family," he said.

For Sara, who has blond hair and a love for cross-country skiing, mid-March was a painful, uncertain time. She had stopped seeing her own patients to avoid exposure. COVID-19's impact on pregnant women remains unclear, but pregnancy lowers immune response, and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists said that some COVID-19 symptoms in mothers, including high fevers, can impact infant health. At home, she found herself crying at random moments during the day. She worried about Jason's health. She worried about her own. She worried about the baby. One night that week, the two sat down to discuss physical separation. Sara even bought a tarp to silo Jason's side of the house. But for the time being, even though Jason has been exposed, they have decided against absolute isolation. "It was scary to think that if he got sick and didn't handle it well, it would be really hard for me to be far away from him," she said.

Instead, they have developed new routines. During the day, Sara takes walks and tries to restrict her consumption of news. Jason sleeps in a separate room and uses a different bathroom. They wear masks in the house and limit contact as much as possible. They share only an exercise bike, which they "sanitize aggressively" before and after each use. "We haven't kissed or hugged or had any of the normal day-to-day contact in a month," Jason said. Still, Sara feels reassured when he is at home, even if they don't interact. "If he's home, he can be asleep," she said. "He can be asleep the whole time, I don't care."

Both read the grim news coming out of hospitals in China, Italy and New York. What those doctors experienced, Jason would soon. A recent *Washington Post* article written by a physician dubbed this fear "pre-traumatic stress disorder," the awareness that bad times are coming and there's no preventing it. Sara worries about her husband's mental health, but, she said, "I've been proud and also reassured by how mentally focused he is."

Gunnison County's first COVID-19 related death came on March 23. Later that day, I sent Hogan an email, asking what this meant for him. "A trauma surgeon I trained with as a medical student used to say that as emergency/trauma providers, 'We run towards problems, not away from them,'" he wrote. "I like to remind myself of that in these situations."

"In regards to changing my personal or professional life, my perspective on death changed a long time ago," he went on. "Working in health care in any capacity reminds you that life is finite

and to try your best to take care of yourself, so you can help take care of others.”

AS MARCH PROGRESSED, Hogan and his colleagues worked 12- and 16-hour shifts, many days in a row. Whenever a patient’s lungs filled with fluid, Hogan ran a tube through the mouth and down the windpipe. Ventilators carrying oxygen hummed at all hours. Gunnison Valley Health has 24 beds, a small staff, just a handful of ventilators and no Intensive Care Unit. Without an ICU, the hospital cannot treat the sickest patients, those with viral pneumonia or extreme difficulty breathing. The staff must take these cases via ambulance to Grand Junction, more than two hours away over some dicey mountain roads. It’s assumed that at least 10% of the medical workers will be sick with COVID-19 at any one time; several have already tested positive. (The hospital received a team of nurse reinforcements from the state.) Whenever the staff had a spare moment, they trained frantically on each other’s emergency room roles. When one worker falls ill, another has to step in.

Yet despite the strain, by early April the hospital had not been overwhelmed. Hogan and other local health officials credit the integrated effort of the county government, the Health and Human Services Department and a strong network of volunteers to “buffer” the hospital against a wave of patients. This is done, in part, by strict rationing of tests and by exporting care, often multiple patients a day. What keeps Hogan up at night, he said, is the scenario in which their partner hospitals reach patient capacity, even as cases increase in Gunnison. And this may be coming: Available data suggests that Gunnison’s hospital can expect an April surge of patients. The staff is planning for the “worst-case scenario,” where the breathing-impaired cannot be transferred. The hospital hastily built an off-site emergency room at a local field house mainly used for livestock shows.

This anticipation can be hard, Hogan said, especially given the possibility that neither the virus’ spread nor the burden on the hospital will have eased by his wife’s early-June due date. “I just hope to be able to be in the delivery room and hold my son when he’s born,” he said, though he acknowledged that this may not be a good idea. Sara said her immediate priority is simple: Stay healthy. Each Thursday marks another week of the pregnancy — “a small thing to celebrate” in these uncertain times — and another day closer to giving birth to a baby boy.

“My mindset is to try and control what I can control,” Sara said. “The due date is all I can wrap my head around right now, and we’ll see what happens after that.” ☀

What is your county’s bed capacity?

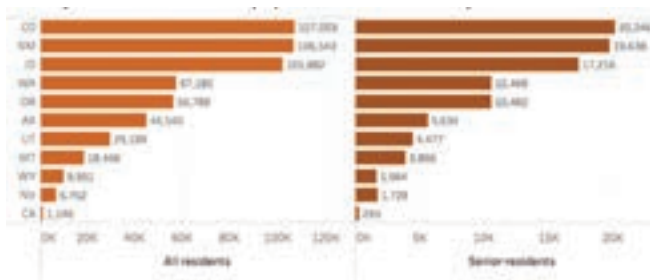
As some parts of the Western United States see a rise in COVID-19 cases and others start to flatten the infection curve, it’s important to get a sense of the region’s health-care capacity. Identifying underserved areas and connecting outbreaks to regional resources can help cities and counties prepare as the virus spreads. These maps and charts, compiled by Megan Lawson of Headwaters Economics, help give a snapshot of hospital bed capacity around the West. This information should be considered a jumping-off point for larger discussions about health-care infrastructure, not a resource for people in need of medical care. The data collected here from the Department of Homeland Security and Commerce Department shows glaring deficiencies in capacity for many regions and unexpected trends regarding where hospital beds are available. For example, on average, rural areas in the West actually have more hospital beds per person than urban areas.



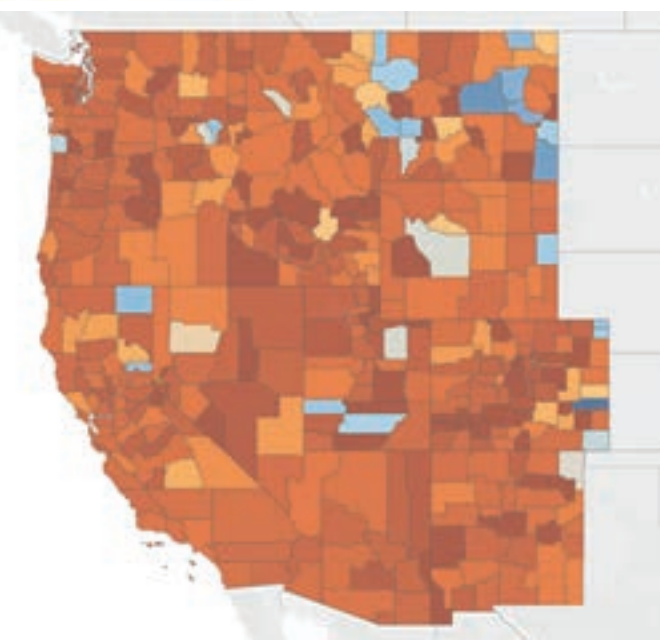
Rural areas have maintained their capacity partly through a 1997 federal program that provides special funding to keep hospitals running in remote areas. This program has helped some rural hospitals keep their doors open. And yet many parts of the Western U.S. still lack access to health care. Some rural areas could see major strains on resources, particularly if they lack hospitals and have large populations of people over 65. In Idaho, Colorado and New Mexico, more than 17,000 citizens over the age of 65 live in counties without hospital beds. —Carl Segerstrom



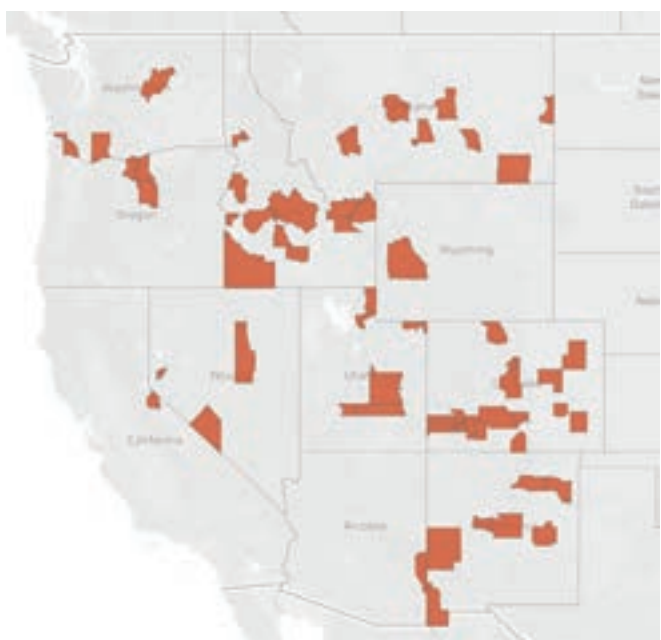
State-by-state breakdown of populations without hospitals



Hospital beds per county in the Western U.S.



Counties without hospitals



Get lit, howl and mind your paws

Pro tips from the natural world on physical distancing.

BY MAYA L. KAPOOR
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
DANIEL GONZALEZ

Humans are a social species, and physical interaction keeps us healthy. Or, as the late Bill Withers wrote, “The city really ain’t no bigger than the friendly people, friendly people that you meet.” But COVID-19 has made it difficult to meet those friendly people. The lucky among us, those who can physically isolate without worrying about our health, our jobs or our loved ones, still have to cope with loneliness.

Here are a few tips on being social from a distance, gleaned from some of the West’s most experienced social distancers. We hope you’ll find some welcome distraction here. At the very least, may this list remind you that if you’re seeking unique ways to stay in touch, you’re certainly not alone.



LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE, EVEN FROM AFAR WESTERN FIREFLIES

Many people never notice Western fireflies, perhaps because these beetles dwell in habitats favored by mosquitoes — think grassy fields, marshes and other humid places — and they tend to get the bioluminescent party started after 10 p.m.

The West’s fireflies are pros at keeping in touch: Their flashing lights are visible across the length of a baseball field on a summer evening. To potential predators, the flashes warn: *Stay away! I taste terrible.* (To potential mates, they say *Oh, hello*, though moving from messaging to meeting may be risky: Some female fireflies use flash patterns to lure in males from other species for a fresh meal.)

If you’re sheltering in place (as you should be, if you can), remember: You can still find ways to dazzle from a distance.

KEEP THE PACK POSTED GRASSHOPPER MICE

Hunting prey in family packs across the West, grasshopper mice are like tiny wolves — they even throw back their heads and howl to each other. They may be making territorial calls, or they may be letting their pack members know that they’ve caught dinner. These fierce nocturnal predators of deserts, prairies and grasslands hunt insects, other rodents and even scorpions.

During a pandemic, it’s important to keep in touch with family and friends. Just be like a grasshopper mouse and do it from a distance — if not by howl, then perhaps over video call.

Oh, and if you’re retrying to avoid the grocery? Take inspiration from these resourceful rodents: When they catch a Pinacate beetle, which defends itself by spraying a foul, toxic liquid from its rear end, grasshopper mice ram the beetle’s backside into the ground so it can’t spray, then chomp down on its head and abdomen, leaving its stinky behind, behind. You shouldn’t be afraid to eat creatively, either.





HEED PUBLIC WARNINGS, EVEN THE GOOEY ONES

CALIFORNIA AGLAJAS

A snail relative that doesn't live in a shell, this sightless, predatory sea slug lives on mudflats and rocky beaches and in tidepools on the Pacific Coast as far north as central California. A dark chocolate color with thin yellow-and-white stripes and dashes of turquoise, California aglajas follow fellow sea slugs' mucus trails to find a mate. (Although the species is hermaphroditic, the follower generally provides the sperm to fertilize its partner's eggs.) If a California aglaja is seriously disturbed as it goes about its business — say by a curious human — it exudes something different from the usual mucus: a bright yellow mixture containing an alarm pheromone. If another aglaja encounters the gooey yellow roadblock, it turns away and heads off in another direction. Perhaps the second sea slug is offended that the first one has given up on even trying to find toilet paper.

Or perhaps there's a bigger lesson here: If you do venture out for exercise, mental health or necessities, pay attention to public information to keep yourself and others safe.

LEAVE A MESSAGE

POLAR BEARS

Bears of all kinds, from pandas to grizzlies and black bears, communicate through odor. Trail cameras in Alaska have documented grizzlies scratching and rubbing up against trees, marking them with their scent. Multiple bears will scent the same trees for years. But on treeless, barren sea ice, what's a solitary ursid to do? The messaging gets complicated for polar bears, who range up to thousands of miles in a year across a frozen landscape in search of seals and other prey.

Instead of marking trees, polar bears leave smelly footprints in the snow for other bears to sniff out. (Their feet have the same kind of sweat glands that make nervous humans a little sweatier, and a little stinkier.) By taking a whiff, polar bears can learn important things about each other — size, sex, reproductive state — without ever coming in physical contact.

Even if COVID-19 means you're on a solitary journey right now, you can still find ways to leave signs and messages for others, who might be excited to discover that someone is thinking about them, too.



TRY TO BE HELPFUL, WHEREVER YOU ARE

MYCORRHIZAL FUNGI

Long before Instagram existed, or even AOL Instant Messenger, the nonhuman world had social networks. Beneath the West's forest ecosystems, mycorrhizal fungi, webs of filaments thinner than human hair connect trees. Sometimes, those trees are related; other times, they aren't even the same species. In Oregon, fungi connect Douglas firs to tanbark-oaks, for example.

Mycorrhizal fungi, which can't photosynthesize, get their sugars from trees. In exchange, the trees get nutrients such as nitrogen, an essential protein-building block they can't produce on their own. The fungal networks also carry sugars to other trees in need.

Though there's no evidence that the trees are deliberately trying to help each other, there's still a lesson here: There are plenty of ways to support your community, even if you're stuck in place. ☀

Hikers gaze out at Tucson, Arizona, from Mount Lemmon in the Coronado National Forest. On a March weekend, the trails were busier than usual, but still allowed for social distancing. **Roberto (Bear) Guerra**



COVID-19

Get outside, but do it ethically

Sheltering responsibly doesn't mean you have to stay inside.

BY CRAIG CHILDS

PEOPLE HAVE BEEN TRYING to get outdoors during this COVID-19 pandemic, and I don't blame them. Without fresh air to breathe, clear sunlight or mist on our eyelids, I don't think we can remain sane. And we need a sane population. Especially now.

All over the country, beaches and parks are closed, warning tape is wrapped around playgrounds. People are trying to get out, but not finding any place to go to. Central Park remains open, and New York City has been asked by its mayor to close certain streets to vehicles so people can get out and walk. In late March, in the San Francisco Bay area, where shelter-in-place orders were in effect, residents were being told that parks were open and to go enjoy them — with certain caveats: The restrooms weren't open, and neither were the trashcans, and don't hike in groups.

In the West, we've got plenty of space. But are we supposed to be using it? We're hearing different messages. There's been a pushback

against recreating on public lands, mostly from gateway communities receiving visitors they don't want, even as people are being encouraged to enjoy parks and open spaces where they can keep a safe distance from others. Some national parks remain open, and entry fees have been waived.

So which is it? Stay indoors, or go outside? If you go out for a walk, you might hear someone shouting at you from a window, "What don't you understand about just stay home?"

Moab was overwhelmed by tourists — a madhouse, I'm told, which is significant when you hear it from a Moab local. Last week, it became too much, and all tourist services were closed down. Mayor Emily Niehaus announced, "Moab is asking people to please stay in their home community." The Southeast Utah Health Department halted visitor recreation, restaurants were closed or limited to curbside, camping and hotels across multiple counties were closed to *(continued on page 40)*

ON THE ROAD TO 50

In difficult times, community matters

BY GREG HANSCOM



On Associate Editor Tristan Ahtone's last day of work, HCN staffers get together digitally to wish him a fond farewell. Ahtone is shown top row, second from left.

As the COVID-19 pandemic blazes through cities and sends red-hot embers drifting into the rural West, I think of the people working on the frontlines — people, and work, that I know well.

I spent nine years, from 1998 to 2007, moonlighting as an emergency medical technician in Paonia, Colorado, HCN's hometown. The North Fork Ambulance was the first line of defense for the roughly 10,000 residents of three small towns and the surrounding farmland and mesas. We hauled people out of car wrecks and collapsed mines, handled drug overdoses and emergency childbirths, and rushed people to the nearest hospital whenever their serious ailments or age necessitated specialized care.

As I write, there have been six confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Delta County — with one death — but if those sparks of virus ignite a conflagration, it will hit this community hard, and the North Fork Ambulance squad will be called into service.

For our part, the *High Country News* staff — in the North Fork Valley and across the Western U.S. — has dispersed to our homes, most of us under “stay at home” orders. Associate Editor Paige Blankenbuehler is heading a team that publishes regular stories on our website, where all of our COVID-19 coverage is available for free.

To allow staff to focus on this critical work at a difficult time, and to ensure that every issue contains the best journalism possible, we are shifting to a straight monthly publication schedule, canceling the three special issues we'd planned for later this year. Apologies in advance for any confusion this creates. If you subscribed (or renewed) hoping for those “bonus” issues, we will extend your subscription to include additional monthly issues of the magazine.

We have also delayed the public rollout of our 50th anniversary fundraising campaign and postponed our anniversary gala to June 4, 2021. We want to give this magazine and its readers the celebration we all deserve. Watch for more information in the coming months.

But we still need your support — now more than ever. Through your subscriptions and donations, *High Country News* readers provide three-quarters of the revenue that keeps this organization going.

We hope you'll consider contributing to our spring fund drive. There should be a donation envelope inside this issue; a letter with more information will arrive in your mailbox soon. If finances are tight — as no doubt they are for many of you — please consider giving in smaller, monthly installments, or making a legacy bequest. For more information, visit hcn.org/support or email development@hcn.org.

Thank you, as always, for your support. We will do our best in the months ahead to provide the clear, accurate and essential information you rely on. We need the community's help to do it. ✨

Through your subscriptions and donations, High Country News readers provide three-quarters of the revenue that keeps this organization going.

“Thank you for all you do and have done over the years to bring issues to our attention. We are especially appreciative of your reporting on tribal concerns.”

—Scott & Jill Eckberg, Clarkston, Washington

Thank you for supporting our hard-working journalists. Since 1971, reader contributions have made it possible for HCN to report on the Western U.S. Your donation directly funds nonprofit, independent journalism. Visit hcn.org/support to give.

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Dear Friends

All of us here at High Country News hope you and your loved ones are staying safe and healthy in these uncertain and difficult times. Here's what we've been up to since COVID-19 upended everyday life.

Across the region in our respective houses, *HCN's* writers and editors have been churning out truly excellent COVID-19 coverage, some of which you'll see in this issue. But then the workday ends, and we're still at home, unable to leave. And so, we need hobbies. Based on an unscientific poll, there seems to be a great deal of bread baking and garden planting going on in anticipation of warming weather. A lot of knitting is happening: Contributing Editor Elena Saavedra Buckley has learned to crochet and now has more coasters than glasses or mugs. Digital Editor Gretchen King rigged up a homemade Ping-Pong net. Correspondent Leah Sottile has taken to streaming live Twitter concerts using her record player and her intimidatingly cool vinyl collection. People are reading — and trying to read about things besides coronavirus. There are also many staff dogs absolutely thrilled to have their humans around all the time. They (the dogs) hope the current situation continues.

We also have some bittersweet news: We have to say goodbye to Associate Editor Tristan Ahtone, who is taking over as editor-in-chief of the *Texas Observer*. Tristan helped build *HCN's* Indigenous Affairs Desk from scratch, creating an award-winning, nationally recognized team that centers Indigenous voices for an Indigenous audience. He will be dearly missed, and we wish him all good things with his next endeavor. (To the powers that be in Texas: Watch out.)

Regarding our recent feature on “Land-Grab Universities” (April 2020): We need to clarify which tribal nations ceded land in Missoula, Montana, to fund Texas A&M University. That land was originally ceded by the Pend d'Oreille, Salish and Kootenai.

Be safe, wash your hands and check in on your neighbors. And if you'd like to tell us about the coronavirus situation in your community, there's an anonymous tip line on *HCN's* website. We'd love to hear from you.

—Nick Bowlin, for the staff

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Clockwise from above right:
105 and 110 Interchange,
South Los Angeles. **Noé Montes**

Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles.
Noé Montes

Daly Street, Lincoln Heights.
Roberto (Bear) Guerra

Ingraham Street, Koreatown.
Noé Montes

Central Avenue, Little Tokyo.
Roberto (Bear) Guerra





No Trick of Light

The beauty of Los Angeles
is still here for all to see

By Lynell George

"The color of the land is in the light ..." — Carey McWilliams

"A part of the backyard ... asserts the premise of indigenous, a place where the ground refuses to be manicured. There is a bird's nest, perhaps, and vines with mice, hedges of red-and yellow hibiscus thrashed with latania." —Kate Braverman



It's just out of reach, the source of this memory: An image from a film on a loop, flickering like the California Dream itself. A critical scene shift. An establishing shot locates us in a sleek, dim bedroom: Drapes, pulled apart, allow a streak of clear, sharp light; tropical plants with scalloped leaves stir in a suggested breeze; palm fronds throw spiked inky shadows on a white wall. The protagonist raises herself in bed, reaches for a peignoir. Sitting back, she accepts the breakfast tray from an unidentified attendant. It's arranged with toast and coffee, a grapefruit half. Next to the dishes, a folded newspaper confirms what we already suspect — know — that we are in Los Angeles. We intuit this from the delicate change in light from powdery to aqueous, which tells us always that the East has been shed for the West. It's the morning of a new chance, so different from the half-light of the last location.

As a native of Los Angeles, I take this blink-awake moment to occupy someone else's imagination, absorb its sensory cues, take in the physicality of the place with someone else's eyes. Bask in it. To wake in paradise, into a second chance, is a trope, but one of the sturdiest

conveyed in film and books and music and television. It thrums in the light of paintings and swims in the frames of photography. What might it be to see, feel, smell, hear, taste Los Angeles for the first time?

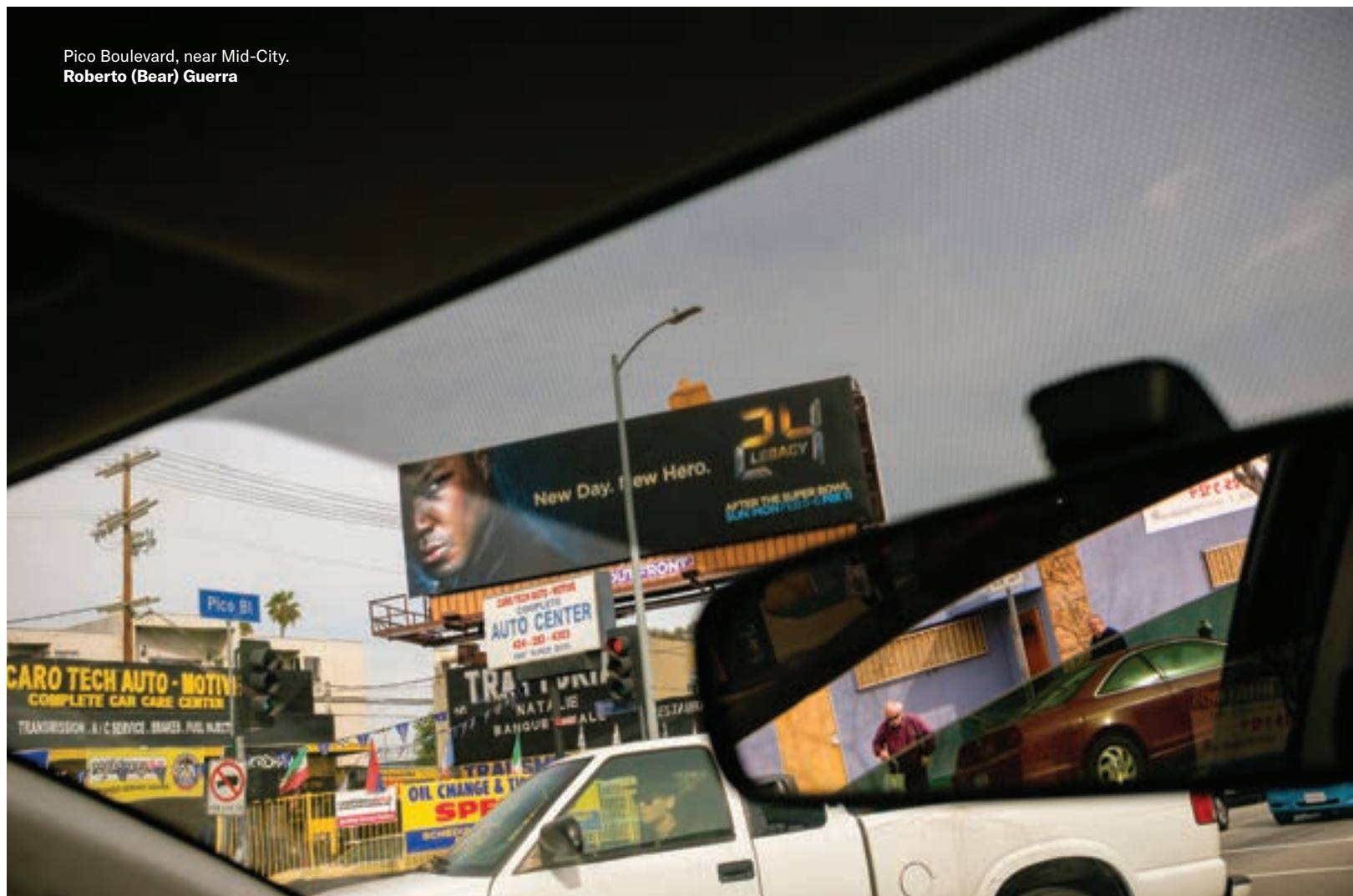
That's outside my own stream of memories, of course, as I have always been here. But growing up here, I understood very early that we daily traverse both a real and an imagined Los Angeles.

We live amid a tangle of clichés and misapprehensions. We may cut them back, but we will never kill them. Still, this is my city, my shelter, my place.

So much here shifts in a blink, as effortless, it sometimes seems, as a scene change. Depending on who you speak to, we are built on either impermanence or illusion. Earthquakes, fires, floods rewrite the narrative of the city as we know it, in the moment. Depending on how you frame the story, there's always some malevolent force crouching in paradise.

Los Angeles has long been a contested domain — both as territory (from the Indigenous Tongva onward) and as emblem. Boosters, speculators and swindlers have had their way not just with the land but with the very image

Pico Boulevard, near Mid-City.
Roberto (Bear) Guerra



of Los Angeles. The city grew, like an opportunistic vine. It couldn't just be. It had to be bigger than life, better than perfect. Even within my lifetime, popular culture has conjured a vision of Los Angeles that is sleight-of-hand, a trick of light, brutally at odds with the lived experience. Los Angeles, by its sprawling nature, absolutely resists oversimplification. This, despite its frustrations, irritants and absurdities, is precisely why I remain here.

Over the years, I've railed against what Los Angeles isn't (the nested insults about vacuousness), or shouldn't be limited to (the slick surfaces). On a recent evening, upon meeting a friend's visiting sibling, we eased into sunset small talk on a patio draped in bougainvillea. "I could see, if you grew up here, why you might stay,"

he offered. It was a non sequitur. We hadn't been talking about the place, we'd been talking about the flu, but yes, here we were sitting in the center of an L.A. cliché made real: the afternoon light softening to blush, a dwarf orange tree, showy with February fruit, fragrant beside us. He leaned back to share his own blink-awake memory of Los Angeles: a child, hurrying off a Midwest-originating flight, winding through the fluorescent terminal, pushing out of the automatic doors and peeling off layers of winter clothes with each step. December. Balmy. Unexpected. The sky, salmon, dusted with clouds that in the dying sun appear violet. Fifty years gone, he holds on to that moment, the sort of memory you fold into your wallet or press like a flower between pages.

In this sense, Los Angeles — physically — is an exhale. A recalibration. At times, I wish I could experience a "first-glimpse," a "blink-awake" — moment, but the region has always been my backdrop, my ride through, my nurturing soil. Therefore, my relationship to Los Angeles — and how it looks, sounds, feels, pulses — is specific to my lifelong commitment to exploring it, sinking myself deeply into it, articulating it — its vastness, its complexity, its paradoxes, its defiance.

The city has always been slippery, if not elusive. And it is expressly because of its transitory nature that I began writing. Not with the goal to become a writer, but with the intention to try to capture what I saw and felt before it all went away — a quick cut, a scene change.

I'm often asked, "What was it like to grow up in Los Angeles?" I think what the inquisitor really means is not "How do you live amid fires and earthquakes and floods or disaster?" but rather "How did you find a place in placelessness?" How did L.A. as a presence, a territory, first come to me? As a physical presence, beyond the sun on my skin or sleeveless Christmases? Or bobbing in the surf, my father's large, sure hand at the small of my back, steadying me? These are flashes of early sense memories: If you have nothing to compare it to, L.A. just is.

As a child, I saw and smelled it first through my parents' vivid descriptions. Both traveled here from radically disparate origins. My mother, who was born in New Orleans, always spoke of California's orange groves. You

My Los Angeles was not an idyll. It was cacophony, it was a bouquet of languages that sometimes merged ...

didn't have to drive anywhere to pick up the scent. It was the region's perfume. My father, who was born in Pittsburgh and raised in Philadelphia, was a proudly self-defined East Coast kid, who shrugged out of his wool vest and sweater and coat and, once he crossed the city limits, was happy to never again shovel snow or scrape ice off a windshield. He was taken by the adjacencies, the access to various textures and climates. He took to the smooth beaches and the sharp angles and temperature twists of the desert. I remember happening upon a photo album years back — a catalog of time, pre-me and my younger brother. It featured just vistas: ocean and cactus and redwoods, just lush, lush, with hardly a person for pages and pages. Not even the two of them for scale, or an "I was here" flag in the sand. Just landscapes within which to set a story. Both of them, and then us, were officially Angelenos, all part of the Great Migration of African Americans tipped north and west. Southern California's environment was the prize, the land the centerpiece. Look, we made it, the snapshots said. It is ours. All of it.

In Candacy Taylor's recent book, *The Overground Railroad: The Green Book and the Roots of Black Travel in America*, the historian and photographer explores this "dreams come true" allure, the physical beauty and freedom the West promised people of color generally, African Americans specifically. Los Angeles represented the apogee: "In the mythology that gave us the American Dream, the West has always represented freedom. And once you reached the westernmost edge of the continent, there was California — there you could relax in the land of swaying palm trees framed by a cerulean blue ocean, while ripe

fruit fell to the ground under a sunlit sky."

We know the rest. I was fed on it. Both the beauty and the rub: Things are not what they seem. Restrictive housing covenants. Broken promises. Double-edged illusions. So many families uprooted for work — train labor, industrial jobs in manufacturing, in aerospace, but high-paying industrial jobs often eluded many who'd come with high hopes and limited means. This forced a pivot, in plans and in dreams.

Like the television and movie figures we happen upon — ducking in for coffee, picking up dry cleaning, heading up a trailhead — people and place look very different close up. So much of what we Angelenos live around and what defines the region has been imported — trucked in, sailed in, nipped and tucked, fluffed up. As Carey McWilliams wrote in his seminal assessment of the region in 1946, *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, this place is a paradox, "a desert that faces the ocean." Modernity changed ecology, the palm trees, the eucalyptus, the acacia and pepper trees, the flowers, and of course the flow of water. None of this is ours, yet all of it is us.

On clear days, looking toward the San Gabriel Mountains to the northeast, you can make out a semblance of what was, what greeted our forebears. "The natural landscape," McWilliams writes, "was not particularly prepossessing. The native vegetation consisted of chaparral on moist mountain slopes and bunch grass on the lowlands." That's what I am drawn to — the glitches, the stubborn outgrowths that can't be tamed; the hardy seedling volunteers that root among the acquiescent native plants. As

underscore, McWilliams quotes the writer James M. Cain: "The naked earth shows through everything that grows on it. The earth is naked and exposed in California." The truth is always with us.

FINDING HOME

The spaces I moved through as a child and adolescent often didn't square with what I encountered in books or in movies. My Los Angeles was not an idyll. It was cacophony, it was a bouquet of languages that sometimes merged; it was a stop-and-go saunter through wildly varied experience, improvised architecture, middling air quality, flora and fauna, mix-and-match street culture. It didn't look at all like the fantasies of advertisements or the punchline of a joke. I'd see recognizable locales on some television shows, like, say, *The Rockford Files*, the 1970s detective drama that flirted with the workaday subcultures along the county's edges. The show's creators understood L.A. as a series of discrete and distinct neighborhoods that sprawled beneath the flight path or hugged the foothills; Jim Rockford lived in Malibu Cove with an uninterrupted ocean view, sure, but in a sun-and-sea-beaten 1959 Nashua house trailer.

Weekly, for decades now, before the sun makes itself fully visible over the L.A. Basin, I make a trek high up into the hills, sometimes alone, sometimes with a friend. It's not church, but it is more than a ritual, a way to situate myself. Most often we head to the trails that wind up into Griffith Park. This is L.A.'s municipal park, a gift of industrialist and philanthropist Griffith J. Griffith. Situated at the eastern end of the Santa Monica Mountains and covering 4,310 acres of land, it stretches

from Los Feliz on the western end to Burbank/Glendale to the east. It's a well-worn Angeleno joke: You must drive to take a walk. (It's not always true; some mornings I walk straight from my house into the San Gabriel Mountains and the Angeles National Forest, with its lush tree groves and calming streams.)

Always, I hold out hope that the park will be quiet and unpopulated enough to allow me to simply concentrate. Not on beauty, but on incongruity. On how the impossible was made possible. I marvel at the coastal sage scrub, sycamores and oak, the wandering coyote and deer, and that I can look past them to an ever-changing skyline that seems to have simply sprouted, like the wild mustard, from the same earth upon which I stand; to the crisscross of freeways — the I-5, braiding with the 134 and, farther out, the I-110; to the metropolis of millions, soon to blink awake.

firmness is a kinky illusion. no stomping ground/the marriage of fire and water tar pits deserts earthquakes emotional swamps of mood. lakes of molten love. a sky of cries.

—Wanda Coleman, from "Gonwandaland"

I'm not certain when I realized that Los Angeles, with its varied microclimates and unique seasons, its fluid ambivalence about its past, had somehow tattooed itself upon me. I do know that for as long as I can remember, I've been hungry for books that found their traction here; I sought writers who wrote from their Los Angeles. I slipped through seams in time ('50s, '20s, '40s, '60s) and jumped around genres (history, poetry, literary fiction, memoir,

noir). I wanted to see those backdrops flicker up. Not just the column of clear white light projected on a wall, but what it was to move through Los Angeles in those eras — to touch it, smell it, taste it. I was trying to find the familiar and to answer questions about how we got here, to this flawed overarching narrative, the land of “laid back,” mañana lifestyle, the capital of “everything loose will land” here.

I read Chandler, Cain, West, Fante, Bukowski, Schulberg, Fitzgerald, Himes. These were stories that told me what histories — whose turf — I stood on: shadowy barrooms, dusty flophouses, sunny Hollywood conference rooms, a deeply past-tense world lit through venetian blinds. But it wasn’t mine. My L.A. progressed beyond the doors of my local library, my sunny east-facing bedroom, through the Spanglish banter of corner stores, the scraping of skateboards in drought-drained pools, the drum circles in Leimert Park, whose beats followed the flow of girls in tap shoes hurrying to Saturday-morning class. The sounds of neighborhoods, of hustle and scrapping.

“L.A. is a wash of sounds. Of moods. Of textures,” says musician and composer Anthony Wilson. Over the past few years, Wilson, a native and son of the late, great L.A.-based jazz band leader Gerald Wilson, has been trying to chronicle a sense of place, not just in his own music, but also in photographs. He walks and bikes, and this slows the city down — slides it into focus, the ways communities segue into one another, some abruptly, some imperceptibly. The images of his that most resonate with me are instances and perspectives that an outsider would never pin as quintessential Los Angeles. It’s not the palm tree shadows or the dusty fronds themselves, or even the blink-awake aqueous light; it’s the riot of color — yellows, turquoise, hot orange — of buildings and close-up hand-painted



Dollar Store, South Los Angeles.
Noé Montes

signage. It’s a careful arrangement of executive office chairs on a vast asphalt parking lot, or the angle of late-afternoon amber light slicing through a storefront window.

Spinning through his images, if you concentrate enough, you might pick up what Wilson hears when he’s grabbing these visual notes. “When you get quiet enough in yourself to hear it — beyond the dry roar of automobile and air traffic, past the sounds of mariachi and ranchera music in East L.A. or the northeastern L.A. hills or the deep bass thump of hip-hop coming from cars on the streets throughout the city — in any part of Los

Angeles there is always the sound and song of birds: incessant chirps from inside bushes and treetops, insistent calls of crows and gulls, coos of doves and pigeons. It’s really there always, and there’s so much that seems more identified with this city, but for me, it’s the music of the millions of birds who share this space with us that is the true sound of Los Angeles and tells me that I’m here.”

I also hear that dance between urban and wild. Depending on where I’ve landed for the day, it’s mostly an urban hum: I too wake to birds, but as the morning cedes its tranquil hold and afternoon

takes hold, the backdrop fills: The sound of a bus’ air brakes; the snap, pop of live electric wires overhead, the mechanic’s lift, the fruit cart’s squawking bicycle horn, the screeching wheeling migrating wild parrots; the tumbling tribal drums that echo in the moist night air; It’s the freeway hiss that you pretend is an ocean advancing and retreating. Forever and always, it’s a city of contradictions and brokered coexistence, even its sonic ambiance.

LIFE AS IT COMES

Sometimes a clear-eyed, poetic depiction of the city catches me



unawares. A vision that combines Los Angeles' ragged urban rawness with the sobering spectacle of nature: its paradoxes, its flashes of wonderment. Like the city itself, the best rewards — that flock of screeching wild parrots in a tangle of old television aerials, a bear taking a stroll through San Gabriel front yards — are not searched for but happened upon.

I've begun to see the more recognizable contours of my city more and more. By chance, when I stopped by to check on a friend recovering at home from surgery, a screener of director Karen Kusa-ma's thriller, *Destroyer*, was just

starting up on her TV screen. The movie stars Nicole Kidman as a worn-out undercover detective for the LAPD. I could tell from the first frames it wasn't escapist fare. Grubby and vacant-eyed, the detective moves through the harsh desert light, chasing her past, and along the way I see my present — the concrete river, the wash of mishmash architecture and urban blight, a 21st century backdrop, a character itself. I took a seat. I watched, transfixed. What struck me most was an elaborate foot chase that begins at night in the gritty urban flats (here, south L.A. subbed in for Echo Park), then rises up narrow, dimly lit concrete pathways. The pursuit extends, the characters breathing heavily as they stumble up a steep grade and into the dirt footpaths of hills, then stop amid a lacy stand of trees. The city fans out below, not a beautiful glittering gem, but a wash of light, diffused by a bit of marine moisture. From their perch, the expanse reveals how high the climb and how tremendous the drop.

In this cinematic moment, I see L.A. at its most beguiling and real: You can cross on foot from one completely "wild" environment into the next, on foot.

To people watching elsewhere, unaware of L.A.'s terrain, it must look like invention, or even a mistake. How could they run from the center of a city into the woods in a matter of minutes? Angelenos know: You can. Why is this multifarious, wily Los Angeles still such a stranger to the world? Why is its richness still such a mystery?

"Why," I ask out loud, "did this send me so?"

I'm sitting across a two-top dining table, sharing small plates in a restaurant at L.A.'s Union Station with the novelist Nina Revoyr, reanimating this hilltop scene, the juxtaposition of territories. This is another day for us, in the place we know, the place we call home, but the backdrop is sure to shift, as it always does, sometimes in small tremors many

miles below the surface. Revoyr feels this and is familiar with the city's nuances, a longtime resident of Los Angeles who has lived all over the basin. Revoyr's work — more than two decades of stories about people and sense of place in obscure regions of Los Angeles — feels like a devotional, rendering a more complex version of the city, clearing the sight lines to allow a better view.

What I realized finally, I tell her, is that that moment was a visual echo that pulled me back to a similar instance from an earlier decade: Allison Anders' 1993 film, *Mi Vida Loca*. It's the same general locale — the Elysian Park trails above northeast Los Angeles' Echo Park, presenting the same view of the outstretched city — where two childhood friends, Mousie and Sad Girl, go to settle scores. They call this hidden-from-outsiders turf "The Logs," a place they, and their Mexicana/Chicana posse, can travel on foot. But most strikingly this: Despite the relentless turf warfare, the graffiti-sprayed streets, that breathtaking million-dollar view on a brisk, clear night is theirs and theirs alone. All their struggles — the violence that is evident or hinted at — transpire against a backdrop of exquisite natural lushness. That flickering California Dream. And the freeway-adjacent Arcadia.

Tonight, we sit with a view of the station's concourse, watching waves and waves of commuters rush toward the subway escalators or up toward train departure gates, and I can't help but reflect on the fact that this is the portal through which my mother first entered the city, and that we are also sitting on land that was once the largest of the villages of the Tongva people — Yaangna.

And this is what Revoyr sees, the layers, and, too, what the naked earth reveals. This is what we've come together to talk about, our visions of our city: Where they merge, where they depart. Not just ski to surf, but how just a jog across the basin puts you in the

path of mountain lions, coyotes and bobcats along the foothills, into the thick of the always-changing complexity of "home." L.A.'s land speaks, reveals the past and present; you just have to be conversant in its symbology. For a hiker, Revoyr explains, "it's striking, looking down. It's evident which areas are wealthier and which aren't, just by the amount of green they have. Hancock Park, for example, looks very green from above, because of all the trees and irrigation — much different from neighboring, congested Koreatown."

She identifies other markers: "Driving down major streets, like Central or San Pedro in South L.A., is very different than, say, driving down Pico in West L.A. There are so many little stores and storefront churches, rundown businesses that struggle to stay open. Graffiti and murals. Metal gates opened in daytime that are drawn closed at night. And yet there is so much more street life here, too, a different kind of vibrancy."

Proximity to the ocean, sprawling views, adjacency to big nature: These, generally speaking, are the backdrops that become more accessible to (and associated with) Angelenos with wealth, but, Revoyr says, the divide is even more fundamental than that. That fabled air and light? It's not available to all. It cuts both ways. "When you look at tools like CalEnvironScreen — an online mapping tool that identifies areas of high pollution throughout the state — you'll see that our most severely polluted areas map almost exactly with areas where low-income people of color live. It's folks of color whose neighborhoods are slashed through by freeways, who live near the ports and refineries and trash-burning facilities, whose homes are right next to active oil drilling." Not long ago, a Delta airline jet preparing to make an emergency dump of 15,000 gallons of fuel on an elementary school, injuring children and adults in the working-class

It's important for us to remember and tell out loud these stories that don't fit snugly in the quasi-official narrative ...

community of Cudahay. "It was just an extreme version of what's happening all the time."

And yet, while grappling on the page with these tensions and divides, Revoyr is still captivated by the stretch of experiences one can move through in a single day — or a single hour; the many Los Angeleses she can call her own. "When I lived in Glassell Park ... owls would serenade each other over the canyon," she says. "I would walk twice a day with our dogs and feel both that I was moving through a major metropolitan area — busy neighborhoods and freeways in every direction — and like I was moving within a large expanse of nature, in terrain people lived in, but could never control. Even as we've covered so much of this land in concrete, nature keeps wiggling through. ... It reminds us who is in charge."

It reminds us why we're here.

CASUAL DREAMERS

Like many Angelenos of late, I'm trying to read between the lines of a new narrative. The order comes on a Thursday: Not a full lockdown, but an aggressive response to the novel coronavirus pandemic, a stepped-down version of "shelter in place" — "Safer at Home." I listen to the press conference of L.A.'s mayor, Eric Garcetti, on my laptop, attempting to multitask through tabs until I can figure out the contours of this new story. Reporters phone in with questions, parsing language: How is this edict different from shelter in place? Other words from the mayor's address vibrate in my head: "There is no magic moat around us. ... Today is a day that will be seared into the story of the streets of this city."

We will have to stay apart to come together. In this sense, our sprawl will serve us differently. I

take the edict seriously: A before-and-after marker. I vow to stay close to home. I also take note that it is the first day of spring, the air itself vivid with birdsong and the scent of new blooms. Los Angeles at its most fetching. By Saturday morning, my curiosity gets the best of me. What has happened to my city? I drive into my old neighborhood, Echo Park, to do my sanctioned grocery shopping. Just as I've glimpsed in the TV coverage, Sunset Boulevard appears as if asleep. Surreal for a Saturday: the empty streets slick with morning drizzle, the bus benches clear of commuters, the sleek new cafes, usually noisy with morning business, shut tight behind accordion gates. Blocks away, along the placid lake, a few joggers make a loop, and pairs of mallard ducks parade near the shore. The paddle boats, docked in careful rows, as if waiting for this — this ill wind — to pass.

This is the part that is sometimes difficult to put into words: The L.A. that moves through us. The Los Angeles we carry with — and in — us, every day. It abides through all the changes. I see it in Wilson's photographs. I hear it in some of the cross-genre music that was the soundtrack of my southwest L.A. days — the salsa, funk and shredding guitars — that represent a collision of bordering ethnic neighborhoods. And I saw it in the wistful frames of Allsion Anders' film.

A few weeks back — moments, it now seems, before everything turned upside-down — through the pure gift of serendipity, I crossed paths with Anders at a benefit in an urban oasis in Pasadena. Arlington Garden, a three-acre public greenspace dedicated to the flora and fauna of Southern California — here we

stood amid the familiar — coastal sage scrub, succulents, old shaggy palm trees. Our big town is a small town. In minutes, sharing stories standing in a lush oak grove, alight with darting butterflies, listening to dreamy DJ sets that fold in salsa, samba and soul, we realized that we had both lived in Echo Park during the same era, and now once more share a hometown flush against the San Gabriels. Her work speaks my language because it has walked my same L.A. footpaths. I tell her about how much I was struck by the mood and sense of place of *Mi Vida Loca* — the play of light, the colors floating, the ebb and flow of street talk — so much so that I carried it around with me, tucked away, a memory of a vanishing place.

We live in a fast-changing city. That was always a given, but now gentrification is rapidly grinding away many more recognizable contours. And while *Mi Vida Loca* is a chronicle of a friendship, and the love that ebbs and flows within it, it now also reads as an ode to the lost Echo Park and the hardscrabble neighborhoods like it.

The life of the street pulses. The sidewalks buckle, tree roots push through concrete, gunfire tears through the most perfect moment on a most perfect day. But flowers grow out of asphalt. Trees regenerate after wildfires. The natural environment is emblematic of hope, and the promise of L.A. floats, even tarnished, in view, if not in reach.

To understand Mousie and Sad Girl and their cohort (Whisper and Sleepy, Giggles and Casual Dreamer), Anders explained, "I had to understand the place they inhabited. Where do they sleep? Where do they eat? Where do they shop? That's how I get to know who they are. What I'm always

interested in are communities of people in a space that they have not necessarily chosen to be in. That's, of course, working-class people. ... They are going to have to be resourceful, because they have to be. It's not going to be beautiful, but they are going to make it beautiful."

When Anders moved to Echo Park, it was the same neighborhood I inhabited as a young journalist, just starting out, seeking affordable digs. Echo Park then had the texture of a real neighborhood, a real place — heavy with history, noisy with chickens and roosters, spiky territory tags/graffiti tossed up on walls, a smear of music that rose up from the bars and blasted from cars into the streets. But if you stopped for a moment, from up high on a clear day, you could see not just the lake but the Pacific. This all created a deep sense of community connection, of pride, even back in the 1990s, when the L.A. River wasn't much more than a trickle, still strangled by concrete. When Sad Girl says, "You can get anything you need in my neighborhood," she means it.

"When I was interviewing DPs (directors of photography)," Anders said, "they'd read the script and say: 'Oh, I know. I'm going to make this really gritty and urban.' " It sent up an alarm. I'd go, 'Ehhhh. ...' But then Rodrigo Garcia showed up and said: 'I'm going to make this really beautiful, because that's how they see it.' I needed somebody to do that. Because it is."

Look up, look around. Nature reminds us: "There is something beyond all of this. If you can just get a moment to stand on a hill and look out, you can regain your perspective. You can get beyond all of this. You can get through it."



Griffith Park, Los Angeles.
Lynell George

Luis J. Rodriguez, the city's former poet laureate, writes in his "Love Letter to L.A.": "To truly love L.A. / You have to see it / With different eyes / Askew perhaps ..." This line sticks in my mind like a skipping record. In Los Angeles, sometimes you have to tilt the frame to see more, to regain perspective, but you also have to know to do so. Because of the region's tangled histories — its whispered restrictive housing covenants and redlining, its power shifts and social hierarchies, its discrimination, its de facto brand of segregation, its legacy of strictly

enforced "sundown towns," which restricted nonwhite citizens, not just from living there but even passing through — some stories of the city, those that are uncomfortable or inconvenient, remain muted. The people who have the privilege to tell the story of a place, do. And often, they retell the same one over and over.

Every day, we walk atop Native people's land. I've tried to memorize whose and where: like Yanngna, where Revoyr and I sat for our conversation at Union Station, or Karuuvanga, situated on the city's westside, minutes

from where I grew up, where a spring still flows. For generations, developers have built housing, parking lots, over not just city blocks but entire former neighborhoods. They've remade and renamed so many spaces. But the physical places in Los Angeles still live within the stories of the people who worked graveyard shifts in aerospace, or once made their homes in the jewel-toned bungalows now cleared for a freeway, or who kept neat vegetable gardens and fruit trees and shared their bounty. Some of them still stand. Everyday, we walk over the shards of old dreams. It's important for us to remember and tell out loud these stories that don't fit snugly in the quasi-official narrative; they are essential to understanding the spirit of this place.

L.A. isn't just an idyll. It is urban — with all of the tensions inherent in that. And in this extended moment, through our abundance of caution, I realize there will be no more sharing small plates, no tandem bike rides, no serendipitous meet-ups in oak groves, for an interval of time we cannot predict nor will into being.

Paradise can be a backdrop to tragedy, to disappointment, to disaster. When I circle back to Echo Park now, it's home to a sizable homeless encampment, with a view of Echo Park Lake, where Mousie and Sad Girl sat in the glorious light of afternoon, trading tragedies. The wild pops up out of nowhere sometimes, in the middle of the urban. It's part of the American story of second chances, of possibility, L.A. ever the epicenter.

Like Anders, Revoyr knows that when writing of home, it's important to sink into the particular. I reflect on her observation: "I tend to write about neighborhoods that are challenged and complex. I do want to show the difficulties, the struggles. But there is also loveliness too, and I want to capture that, the resilience of the people, the connections and family, the physical beauty of neighborhoods that people may

not notice, or may not know to look for. ... I want to show them in all their complexity."

Those stories of place, the Los Angeles of my childhood and adolescence and young adulthood — the '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s — couldn't be told until we began to tell them. Until we steadied and raised our voices. Until we made our way through gatekeepers, and most significantly until we were of age and of mind to turn our attention to a shifting definition of the West (or El Norte), one that included stories of migration and immigration, of protest, of underemployment, of struggle, and of love and resilience despite disappointment, and in the ways in which we tend to the physical environment, to conserve against drought or be mindful of energy use and emissions. We must tend to the region's various topographies in narrative. It's imperative. Or they will be lost. As a chronicler, my responsibility is to try and tell an honest story. True to its roots. Even now, even in this quiet moment in the city, we must remember its cacophony, its music.

We are trying to convey something of Los Angeles — the flicker of light that sparks a recollection, a borrowed memory that resonates — and ultimately leave some clearer understanding of the gradations, the mix and the complexity. I suppose, in the seeing and retelling, we are all trying to leave a little bit ourselves, too — like the laced graffiti, which, even in the press of change, still claims walls, marks territory, exclaims: "I was here." ☀

Lynell George is an award-winning Los Angeles-based journalist and essayist. Her new book: A Handful of Earth, A Handful of Sky: The World That Made Octavia E. Butler, will be published in fall 2020 by Angel City Press.

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Aspens illuminated in a talus field in Colorado. Paul Larmer for High Country News

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*Center for Western Priorities, 3/19/20.

Forget the parks; seek out the spaces in between, the backyards and alleys. It's a great time to explore an irrigation ditch or the woods at the edge of town — to see what's around you.



San Juan County, Colorado, enacted a ban on non-locals, placing copies of the order on the windshields of vehicles with out-of-county license plates.

Addiengorge / Twitter

(continued from page 24)

non-locals, and visitors centers have shut down. Everybody, go home. Is home restricted to the indoors, or does it include the spaces around you?

I believe in the right to be outside, but at this moment it shouldn't be exercised through visitor centers and bottlenecks. Forget the parks; seek out the spaces in between, the backyards and alleys. It's a great time to explore an irrigation ditch or the woods at the edge of town — to see what's around you. Be as local as you can. If you're heading to Red Mountain Pass to ski between Silverton and Ouray, Colorado, and you have out-of-county plates, the San Juan County Sheriff's Office will place a yellow slip on your windshield reading, "San Juan County Colorado is enacting a LOCALS ONLY order until further notice due to the COVID-19 Virus crisis." Further down the slip, it notes, "Failure to comply with this order will result in charges with the potential of 1 year in prison, and a \$1,000 fine."

In southwest Colorado, as in much of the West, we're fortunate to live in a nest of public lands with few trails or kiosks, mostly dirt roads with random pullouts — the spaces managed by the Bureau of Land Management. When I hear "shelter in place," I think of this place. How far does that legally, ethically extend?

A couple of days ago, my gal and I met up with two friends, another couple sheltering at home, and drove separately to a rock scarp near where we live. We kept 6 feet or more between us at all times, handing nothing back and forth without an antibacterial wipe. The air we breathed was cavernous, a sandstone canyon without a trail or a sign, a place where you'd rarely see footprints. For half a day, we scrambled over boulders and took pictures of rock and sky. I was more cautious than I usually am, trying to limit the risk, because you don't want to take any resources from rescue workers who already have tough jobs to do. On our hike, we recounted the weeks since we'd seen each other last, catching up on the stories under the vault of the sky. This, I believe, is sanity. As far as I've heard, what we did is neither illegal or unhealthy. Perhaps it's not unethical, either.

I realize not everybody can do this; the out-of-doors comes in degrees. Sometimes just standing on a sidewalk and staring into the sky makes a world of difference.

Currently, federal land agencies, including the National Park Service, defer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for social-distancing guidelines. But for those wondering about going out farther than their own backcountry, Colorado Parks and Wildlife put out simple guidelines reflecting outdoor recommendations from groups and agencies around the West.

In a nutshell:

- ▶ If you are sick, stay home.
- ▶ Keep a social distance from others.
- ▶ Avoid high-risk or remote activities.
- ▶ Announce your presence to others.
- ▶ Stay regional.
- ▶ Avoid times and places of high use.
- ▶ Practice good hand hygiene.
- ▶ Be kind. Say hi.

A key bullet point is "stay regional." How big is a region? Where do you usually travel for groceries? In some of these big Western counties, a hundred miles or more can be your region. In Denver, I figure this means your city and the land immediately around it; Front Range residents are advised to avoid traveling to the high country or to small mountain communities closed to visitors. In the Pacific Northwest, permits are still being given for the Pacific Crest Trail. Online battles are raging between those leaving the trail — who are being called "quitters" — and those staying on it, who are being accused of selfishly making coronavirus and its host of difficulties worse.

In other words, there's no official definition. One good answer came from a friend in Trinidad, Colorado: "If someone gets to a spot and there are a bunch of people there, you should immediately go somewhere else."

I was probably one of the last groups to leave the southeast Utah backcountry late last week. I came out with participants in a wilderness archaeology program. We traveled through the town of Bluff to see what was happening, and we found a pandemic in progress: People were telling us to go home, to stay put in Utah, to go back to the wilderness where we'd been living happily for the last five days. Airplanes were still flying, so civilization was still intact. But answers were hard to find. We all headed back home, which sent us in every direction but kept us out of the hair of the locals, which seems to be the major issue. Small gateway communities do not need the strain on their groceries, gas or medical services.

If you're looking for justification to take a trip to the backcountry, leaving your area to go through someone else's, this isn't it. Stay in your home terrain. If where you live has backcountry wrapped around it, or a trail that's open and uncrowded, or just some woods to walk through, I consider that an extension of home. It may not be true for everyone, but many of us live out here on the margins. And all of us, I hope, can reach the outdoors in some form, because sanity is also necessary for health. ☀

Pandemic as prologue

A failure of imagination has stymied our outbreak response, but that's just the beginning.

BY BRIAN CALVERT

THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS officially arrived in the United States on Jan. 19, when a sick person went to an urgent care facility in Snohomish County, Washington. But it wasn't until two months later — weeks after the World Health Organization declared a pandemic — that Congress passed a massive spending package, cities enacted major travel restrictions, and rural towns started begging visitors to stay home and not overwhelm their limited medical facilities. Many people died, yet it took months for the imminent threat of the virus to become apparent to national leaders.

Why? In part, I think, because U.S. leaders, cynically trapped in a false sense of security, were unable to imagine how a pandemic might play out here, even as they watched it unfold abroad. This lack of imagination, underpinned by privilege and a dangerous nationalism, does not bode well for the future. The world has changed in the past few months, but climate chaos still

looms, and this pandemic is but a prologue.

As the number of cases climbed and travel restrictions tightened, I found myself returning to Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, a critique of the modern imagination. Ghosh, an award-winning novelist and essayist, argues that sometime in the 19th and 20th centuries, people began to feel more at ease with a “new regularity of bourgeois life.” That sense of ease manifested itself in a collective failure of imagination, replaced by a reliance on probabilities and statistics. Our inability to imagine catastrophe, in other words, has brought it to fruition. As a society, we simply cannot imagine what is coming, because we have become too inured with the comforts that be.

Ghosh argues that we are living in an era of the “uncanny” — the strange, the disorienting, the unsettling — in German, *unheimlich*, un-home-like. “No other word

comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us (including) the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors.” Ghosh means climate forces, but he could just as easily be talking about viruses, which challenge our notions of inside and outside, our selves versus our environment. There is nothing more intimate than a virus that enters your body from the outside, infects you, then becomes part of you. A pandemic blows apart the idea that humans are separate from their environment, much as climate change blows apart the idea that we are masters of that misconstrued environment. This newest (not last) coronavirus suggests what climate change demands: A viable future depends on the ability to re-see the world.

Americans were blinded by our own comfort, while our leaders willfully lied to us. It was easy to believe them. But the truth was at the margins. As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, a discrepancy appeared across a racial divide, which in America must always be linked to

inequality. In early March, a Pew Research poll found that “older adults, black and Hispanic people, and those with no college experience are especially likely to view the coronavirus as a major threat to their own health.” These concerns were ignored, of course; the comfortable scoffed while the president dithered. Now, many, many thousands will die, and needlessly.

This pandemic gives us a chance to re-see the world. Sequestration, isolation, frustration — these offer a new chance for connection, for re-imagination, even if every morning brings a freshly broken heart, every headline a new horror. It is all strange, uncanny, anxiety-inducing. But the truth is this: Many people around the world, in many countries ignored by the United States or actively punished by it, are accustomed to this dread. Now, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought that dread and widespread suffering to the land of the privileged, a preview of what's to come. It is up to us now to see clearly this unraveling, to consider it, and to remember it. ☀

A pandemic blows apart the idea that humans are separate from their environment.

Hanna Barczyk / HCN





Lissa Yellow Bird searches for Kristopher “KC” Clarke in Mandaree, North Dakota. **Kalen Goodluck**

REVIEW

The searchers

In her debut book, Sierra Crane Murdoch follows Lissa Yellow Bird’s quest for missing people and hidden histories.

BY SOPHIE HAIGNEY

LISSA YELLOW BIRD KNOWS something about how to find a body in the badlands of North Dakota. To outsiders, the landscape might appear empty and unchanging, but to Yellow Bird, it looks dynamic — different in every season. She is attuned to how April’s snowmelt washes away sediment and carves rivulets into the land; to the way

the heavy rains in the fall can erase tracks; to how the winter’s snow can bring new shapes into relief. “The land would reveal what it wanted to us,” journalist Sierra Crane Murdoch recalls Yellow Bird explaining. “The point was not to force the land to give up the body but to be there when it did.”

For eight years, Yellow Bird has

helped grieving family members search for missing relatives. In her sprawling and richly detailed debut book, *Yellow Bird*, Murdoch, a former *High Country News* contributing editor, tells the story of Yellow Bird’s first search.

Kristopher “KC” Clarke disappeared while working on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation during the fracking boom of the early 2010s, and Yellow Bird helped his family look for him. As she describes Yellow Bird’s efforts, Murdoch also does her own excavating, trying to uncover the connections between the region’s settler colonial history and its ongoing human disappearances. The result is an illuminating book that draws a complex portrait of Yellow Bird as well as of life in Fort Berthold during the boom and the historical context of the region’s disappearances.

In the 2010s, the Fort Berthold Reservation — home to the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, also called the Three Affiliated Tribes — underwent extraordinary upheaval, as a fracking boom brought unprecedented money and an influx of outsiders to the reservation. Clarke, a 29-year-old white man from northwest Washington, vanished in 2012 from the reservation, where he moved after a breakup. At the time of his disappearance, Clarke was working for a friend’s trucking company, which hauled water to drilling sites. “The work had been so good, (his mother) learned, that her son hardly slept,” Murdoch writes. Clarke was completely burned out, and at his employer’s suggestion, he took a vacation. He never returned. Authorities began investigating about a month later, but the case stalled with few leads.

Yellow Bird, a federally enrolled citizen of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation who lived in Fargo, North Dakota, never knew Clarke. She stumbled upon his case when she saw a Facebook message posted by his mother asking for help. Yellow Bird began her search, driven by an impulse she struggles to explain to Murdoch.

“The first time I asked (Yellow Bird) the question, she paused as if I had caught her by surprise, and then she said, ‘I guess I never really thought about it before,’” Murdoch writes. Part of Murdoch’s goal in the book is to understand Yellow Bird’s growing obsession with the case.

Murdoch draws from a wealth of source materials — text messages, court records, interviews with Yellow Bird’s distant family members and old boyfriends, ride-alongs in cop cars, archival documents, even months spent living in Yellow Bird’s house in Fargo — to draw a deep and vivid portrait of Yellow Bird’s engrossment. Yellow Bird got too deeply involved, Murdoch suggests, creating fake Facebook accounts, befriending and manipulating someone she saw as a suspect, fighting with Clarke’s mother, pestering law enforcement officials she considered complacent and incompetent. Eventually, she started fighting with her children about the time she was spending on the case.

Seeking to understand this relentless quest, Murdoch connects it both to Yellow Bird’s personal history — her guilt about her absence from her own children’s lives during her several years of meth addiction and imprisonment — and to the region’s history of settler colonialism. In particular, Murdoch points to the flood engineered by the United States government in the early 1950s on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation, during construction of Garrison Dam. The government used strongman tactics to obtain the land, forcing the Three Affiliated Tribes to relocate to higher ground, abandoning roads, schools, bridges, farmland, houses and a hospi-

tal, along with ancestral remains. This history, Murdoch argues, is deeply connected to Yellow Bird’s attempts to bring back Clarke — she is reacting to a long history of things suddenly disappearing. This idea of erasure — historical, environmental and literal — holds together the disparate pieces of the book.

As the messy narrative of Yellow Bird’s search for Clarke unfolds, Murdoch paints a vivid, sometimes disturbing picture of the reservation during the boom. Clarke’s disappearance came at a time when violent crime and drug use — both by tribal members and non-Native itinerant workers — were rising; when money was flowing in from oil and gas companies at unprecedented but unpredictable and uneven rates; and when non-Native workers were flooding onto reservation land, where tribal law enforcement lacked legal jurisdiction over them.

“I had some understanding of the legal topography into which (Clarke) disappeared,” writes Murdoch, who began reporting on the reservation in 2011, “and I suspected his case might be a window into the darker realities of the boom.” Indeed, it quickly becomes clear that greed and oil money were factors in Clarke’s disappearance. The search for justice would be complicated by the jurisdictional tangle that makes it difficult to prosecute non-Indigenous offenders for crimes committed on reservation land. Murdoch notes that there is also very little free press on the reservation or in the state of North Dakota, making it difficult to get information about cases from government or tribal agencies.

In an afterword, Murdoch, who is white, asks, “What right did I have to tell Lissa’s story?” Yellow Bird does not appear to be bothered; after all, as she tells Murdoch, she has given her permission. But Murdoch worries about getting Native stories wrong. Her attempt to address this is twofold. First, she shared a manuscript draft with Yellow Bird and several of her relatives, going through an unusual process of discussions, corrections

and revisions with her sources. This makes the book both more sensitive and deeper, a conversation with her sources rather than an attempt to ascribe motivations from a bird’s-eye view. Secondly, Murdoch put herself in the book as a character. She says she hopes this will help her to “be clear who was telling the story — who heard it, interpreted it, chose which details to leave in or out — and convey to readers my limitations as a narrator.” Here, perhaps, she could have gone further. Murdoch remains largely in the background, and readers have little sense of her own history, or how it shapes her interactions with the people she encounters.

Murdoch did extensive reporting for eight years in her dogged attempts to capture Yellow Bird in all her complexity. There are times, though, when the breadth of her reporting becomes a weakness: There is simply too much there. There are layers of Yellow Bird’s family history that might feel essential to the characters themselves, but less so to readers; by the end of the book, it becomes a bit hard to keep track of minor characters even if one is taking notes. A whole chapter on a heated tribal election in 2014 might have been summarized in a few paragraphs. It feels easy, in a book of this length and scope, to drown in particulars. Murdoch might have aided her readers by using a more selective process and some editorial winnowing. Still, her prose is lucid and lyrical, alternately calling to mind nonfiction writers like Ian Frazier and novelists like Marilynne Robinson. One haunting passage describes the impact of the Garrison Dam flood, which drove tribal members off their land: “It would not take long for the prairie to claim the church, for wind to unhook the battens and shatter windows, and for rodents to make homes in the floors and walls. This became the nature of the reservation. A person could come home and find things taken or worn out. It was something you got used to, the inevitability of loss.”

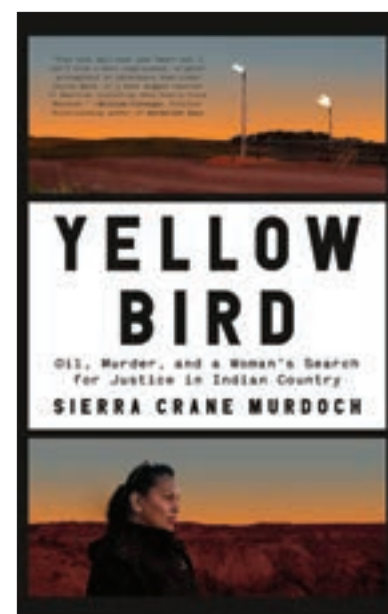
Yellow Bird, however, never

got used to it: She continued to search for Clarke long after law enforcement stopped, and even as a number of other bodies appeared. In this way, perhaps, *Yellow Bird* reveals how powerful and final disappearance can be in places with limited oversight or recourse to justice. In the badlands, there are many places to dispose of a body where it might never be found, and there are limited avenues for justice on the reservation. The United States is mostly looking elsewhere, especially when the boom starts to go bust.

Many questions remain by the book’s end. Without giving away too much, it’s fair to say that there is ultimately justice of a sort, and Murdoch argues that this is brought about at least in part by Yellow Bird’s determination. Yellow Bird’s quest to find Clarke, to un-vanish someone who is gone, begins to symbolize reclaiming the past. Murdoch turns her attention not only to what is gone, but to a woman who is still there, and in doing so, has produced a masterful book. ✨

Yellow Bird: Oil, Murder, and a Woman’s Search for Justice in Indian Country

By Sierra Crane Murdoch
376 pages, hardcover: \$28
Random House, 2020.





Q&A

AS COVID-19 SPREADS across the U.S., the West's institutions of higher education are racing to adapt, from moving classes online to closing dorms and reimbursing students for housing and dining.

But not all schools have the resources to respond. Minority-serving institutions, or MSIs, which enroll significant proportions of non-white students, can be crucial gateways to the middle class for students of color. According to research by the American Council on Education, MSI students have higher economic mobility rates than non-MSI students. This means that students from the lowest-income families are more likely to attain above-average incomes if they attend MSIs. But the pandemic is increasing the strain on already-overstretched institutional budgets.

‘Government support is going to be vital’

Long a path to the middle class, Hispanic-serving colleges and universities are struggling to adapt to COVID-19.

BY MAYA L. KAPOOR

Hispanic-serving institutions, or HSIs, whose student bodies range from 25% Latino to more than 90% Latino, were scrambling for equitable federal funding well before the pandemic. According to the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, or HACU, for every dollar in federal funding that non-HSI schools receive, HSIs get just 68 cents. Meanwhile, more Latinos are

attending college than ever, with a majority attending HSIs. Approximately 45% of the nation's HSIs are in the Western United States, with a third of all HSIs in California alone.

On March 27, Congress approved an emergency spending bill for COVID-19 aid that includes almost \$31 billion for the Department of Education. The funding takes into account

how many need-based Pell Grant recipients attend each school and gives the schools broad discretion in deciding how to spend the money, from improving remote learning systems to helping out students in need. HACU estimates that approximately 0.69% (some \$214 million) of the allocation is designated specifically for HSIs.

Antonio R. Flores has been president of HACU for more than 20 years. After attending college in Mexico (“I guess it was an HSI,” he joked), he attended graduate school in Michigan. Today, even as he adjusts to working remotely, Flores is urging Congress to provide more funding for HSIs in response to COVID-19.

High Country News recently spoke with Flores about the unique challenges that HSIs face during this pandemic. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

How are Hispanic-serving institutions being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Because these institutions are seriously underfunded by the federal government, they are not as prepared to cope with a crisis like this, in terms of having the best digital infrastructure, connectivity and so forth. They have to scramble to put together platforms for online teaching. Instructors might not be up to par in terms of teaching online, and some of the students might even be challenged taking courses online, in terms of having access to the best technology and bandwidth.

Just in terms of overall infrastructure and capacity to respond to a crisis like this, HSIs just don't have the reserves to use to pay for things that need to be used in lieu of regular campus life.

What are some of the financial challenges?

Obviously, (HSIs) have to pay their employees — even if the students might be all trying to do things online, the schools still have to pay the personnel they need, and for their infrastructure, and those things cost money. The schools are underfunded already, so it may be extremely hard for them to come up with what it takes to really meet the challenges of keeping going.

Why do you think it's important for HSIs to survive?

These institutions represent the best avenue for the Latino community to succeed in terms of getting a higher education.

They, by far, have the largest number of Latino students enrolled: Out of the 3.8 million Latino students in college nationwide, HSIs enroll more than two-thirds of them. We have about 550 colleges and universities across the country that we represent.

HSIs are really among the very best socioeconomic movers of lower-income people to higher socioeconomic status. Upon graduation, those grads move out of poverty and become part of middle class in significant numbers, and contribute

to society in multiple ways.

Students from all walks of life attend those universities, so they are very diverse institutions. The students they serve really are a microcosm of America's 21st century demography.

You wrote a letter to Congress requesting increased funding for HSIs in response to COVID-19, saying, "HSIs receive 68 cents for every dollar going to all other colleges and universities annually, per student, from all federal funding sources, to educate a disproportionately low-income student population." What does that mean?

We compile information on all the revenue sources that institutions have from the federal government — student aid, research money, all types of funding. We estimate that for every dollar going to non-HSIs, per student, HSIs only get about 68 cents. So we have a gap of about 32 cents on the dollar, and these institutions educate some of the neediest students in the country.

It used to be worse. When I first came to HACU years ago, it was 48 cents on the dollar. We are moving in the right direction — 20 cents in 20 years. We don't want to take another 20 years. I'm not going to be around in 22 years, and I don't want the HSIs to be moving at such a slow pace.

Are there particular challenges for HSIs in the Western U.S., and beyond?

The challenges primarily have to

do with two things. One is the very high rate of enrollment increases for HSIs, particularly of Latino students, because that is the population that is growing in higher ed — as it is broadly across the country.

If you look at trends from the last five to 10 years, you will see that the Latino student population has been going up significantly, whereas white student enrollment has gone down dramatically. So on the one hand, you have the greater demand for education from Latinos. On the other hand, you don't have adequate resources, so it's a one-two punch.

The good news is we have many more Latino students who are going to college and graduating, wanting to improve their lives and contributing to the American economic labor force.

Looking forward, what else are you keeping an eye on?

It's so crazy, the whole (COVID-19) thing. Right now, (HACU) is in a survival mode, trying to follow directives from public health officials — isolation, social distancing, all of that.

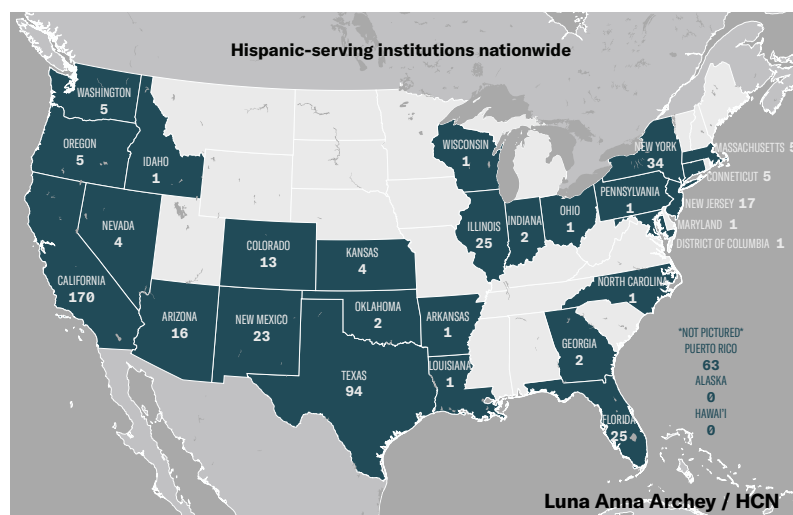
Is there anything you'd like to add?

I hope Congress, when it gets back to work, zeros in on higher education as a national priority and HSIs as an important part of that priority, and appropriates more funding for them to keep going. Government support is going to be vital for them going forward. ☀

If you look at trends from the last five to 10 years, you will see that the Latino student population has been going up significantly, whereas white student enrollment has gone down dramatically.

A closed and taped-off bus stop at Northern New Mexico College in Española, New Mexico. The college serves a student body that is 67% Hispanic (above left).
Minesh Bacrania / HCN

Antonio R. Flores, president of HACU (below). **Courtesy photo**



Heard Around the West

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

BY BETSY MARSTON

COLORADO

Jokes about life under semi-quarantine have bounced through our computers the last few weeks as we all sat alone, yet linked to others. It's hard to choose the best, but our vote goes to Colorado's *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel*, which thoughtfully provided some white space on a page, with the headline: "Consider this our 'square to spare.' If you're desperate or worried about running out, below is an ink-free piece of newsprint that you're welcome to clip out and add to your emergency stores." The paper humbly added, "Many claim this is the highest and best use of the *Sentinel* — or that we've been scraping bottom for years."

OREGON

Speaking of toilet paper, the police department in Newport, Oregon, urged people not to call 911 just because they ran out at home and the stores were empty. The *Oregonian* offered sage advice: "Be resourceful. Be patient. There is a TP shortage. This too shall pass." The police suggested alternatives drawn from possibly anecdotal historical reports, including wet rope (used on old sailing ships), seashells and other substitutes far too uncomfortable to contemplate. The most sensible suggestion? Newsprint. Meanwhile, sensing a marketing opportunity, a pizza joint in Portland announced a hard-to-resist special: Buy a \$15 pizza, and get a roll of toilet paper thrown in for free. Pizza Schmizza is offering this takeout bonanza.

IDAHO

Avid powder skier Ken Scott knows a thing or two about being confined,



and he's not talking about voluntary social isolation in the comfort of your home. On Jan. 7, he writes in *Mountain Journal*, he was caught in two avalanches, one right after the other, at the Silver Mountain Resort in Kellogg, Idaho. Three skiers were killed and four others were injured that day. Fortunately, another skier saw Scott just as the first cascade of snow came barreling down, and he was found after a frantic, almost hour-long search. No part of him was visible: The second avalanche left him encased in several feet of snow as hard as concrete. Trapped in total darkness and unable to move, Scott became delirious and was desperate for air by the time he felt something hit his body. He sensed shoveling, and then he suddenly felt air on his face and opened his eyes to the thrilling sight of people. But

when his rescuers suggested strapping him onto a backboard to take him off the mountain, Scott rebelled: "Don't strap me in! I don't want to be tied down, confined!" Scott, whose account of his ordeal was written with Timothy Tate, called his nick-of-time rescue nothing less than a miracle.

THE WEST

It's hard to believe, but some visitors are underwhelmed by the grandeur and beauty of our national parks. They just don't get what all the *oohing* and *ahhing* is about and sometimes even post one-star reviews on Yelp. That inspired artist Amber Share to begin a project she calls "Subpar Parks," in which she juxtaposes what *Atlas Obscura* calls her "lush, loving" park posters — illustrated in a style reminiscent

of classic 1930s travel posters — with disgruntled tourists' snarky comments. One visitor to Yosemite National Park complained, "Trees block views and there are too many gray rocks," while another critic summed up Sequoia National Park: "Sure, Sequoia is full of giant, ancient trees. But before you get too excited, keep in mind that there are bugs and they will bite you on your face." As for Yellowstone and its multicolored geysers, one tourist scoffed, "Save yourself some money — boil water at home." Share tried to imagine writing a "fake bad review" of a park like Grand Canyon, but the worst she could come up with was "It's too hard to look at ... there's too much to see." The series will eventually honor all 62 of our barely adequate, just so-so national parks.

ARIZONA

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is building President Donald Trump's border wall in Organ Pipe National Monument in Arizona, a UNESCO biosphere reserve and a place sacred to the Tohono O'odham Nation. *Newsweek* reports that the Corps claims to be "carefully transplanting" some of the monument's iconic saguaro cactus, but since when does that phrase mean "mowing cactus down with a bulldozer?" A staffer for the National Parks Conservation Association recently shared videos and pictures showing the Corps bulldozing majestic saguaros. Federal officials defended the destruction, saying some cactus just weren't healthy enough to salvage. We suspect they were even less healthy after they'd been flattened. ☀

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Rocky Schifani gathers tree-ring data after a record avalanche season left an unprecedented number of downed trees in its wake. Independence Pass, Colorado. FOREST WOODWARD © 2020 Patagonia, Inc.

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#IAM THE WEST

ANTONIO FLORES

**Nurse
Seattle, Washington**

My father was from Cuba. They sent him to one of the satellite countries of the Soviet Union, which was Czechoslovakia. He met my mother at a dance, and the rest is history. I was talking to my roommate and bandmate about coming to the West Coast for over a decade. I got into long-distance running, ultra-running. Not too many great trails in Florida or Miami, so I sought out something else. I ended up staying in Washington because I fell in love with the Northwest. Since the pandemic, I've built a crack-climbing system in my house. I've tried to get out of the house, but of course I don't want to set a bad example. I miss having the ability to go out during the week with my friends, hitting the outdoors, but we gotta sacrifice for the greater good.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
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