High Country News

Demonstrators for Black lives

Militarized police

Birders against racism

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‘I am here fighting for my life and future children’

–SKYE, LOS ANGELES

Anagi Crew hunts a 30-foot male bowhead whale on the Bering Sea in an umiaq, a small sealskin boat that is prized for its light weight, stealthy movement and respect for tradition. **Yves Brower**

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported 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.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The West protests

WE ARE CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING the full brunt of what the writer bell hooks calls the "dominator culture." Those who did not previously understand this must surely grapple with it now. "Throughout our nation," hooks writes in *belonging: a culture of place*, "the dehumanization of poor people, the destruction of nature for capitalist development, the disenfranchisement of people of color, especially African-Americans, the resurgence of white supremacy ... has become an accepted way of life."

This acceptance has created severe injustices, from the police killings of Black people and others, to the rising death toll from COVID-19, to the suffering that climate change has already wrought throughout much of the world. These issues are inseparable, because they are all the product of this culture of domination — a culture finding renewed strength in the current political environment.

How does *High Country News* fit into all this? hooks can help, as she offers a counter to dominator culture: the promotion of "a culture of belonging, a sense of the meaning and vitality of geographical place." One of *HCN*'s roles, I think, is to help readers understand the Western United States as a place. It is my hope that this will help readers bring meaning and vitality, equity and justice, to this place, to create for all who live here a culture of belonging. We can do this by examining the West as a whole.

In this issue, for example, we cover Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the West, while highlighting solutions to heavy-handed policing. And we offer a data-driven look at disproportionate police militarization and violence across the region. But we also explore the climate adaptations forced onto the Inupiat of the Arctic, as well as the coastal cities of California. We follow efforts to save a vanishing species of catfish along the U.S.-Mexico border. And we describe the rise of labor organizing among fruit packers and ski patrollers alike. The issue also features an interview with a founder of #BlackBirdersWeek; an argument for full-time wildland firefighters; and a former insider's warning of a compromised Bureau of Land Management.

To view any of these stories separately is to overlook the hidden connections between them. Read together, they expose the obvious: Dominator culture has pushed the West — the world — to the brink. It appears that people are now pushing back, and that much of the West has joined them. The question, then, is: What comes next?

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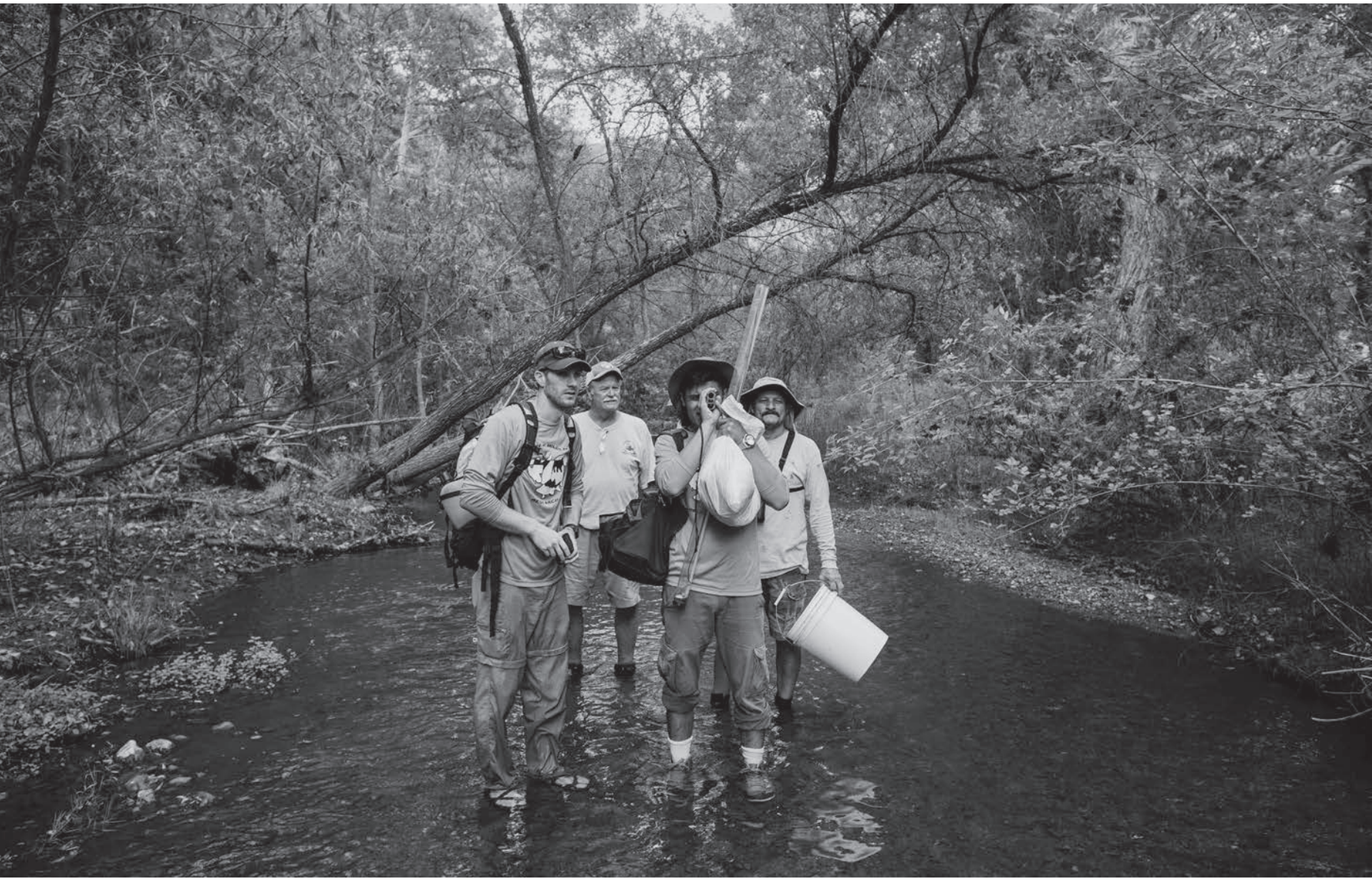

United States biologists Thomas Hafen and Chuck Minckley work with Mexican biologists Alex Gutiérrez-Barragán and Alejandro Varela-Romero (pictured from left) to measure the distance to an eDNA sampling site while conducting fieldwork in northern Sonora, Mexico, in September 2019 *(above)*. **Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN**

Vinnie Cervantes, director of Denver Alliance for Street Health Response, talks to people about new programs and lawsuits stemming from police response to protests in Denver *(right)*. **Carl Payne / HCN**

FEATURES

ON THE COVER
Skye Woods, photographed outside Los Angeles City Hall, where daily protests have been part of the international response to police brutality sparked by the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police in May. **Stephanie Mei-Ling / HCN**

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REPORTAGE

Experts in de-escalation 7

How Eugene, Oregon, avoids unnecessary policing.
WHAT WORKS BY ANNA V. SMITH

REFLECTION & REVIEW

DEPARTMENTS

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 media, or email us at editor@hcn.org.

WILDLIFE POACHERS

As a subscriber and contributor to *High Country News* for many years, I have to say I was shocked by the graphic descriptions of animal cruelty in the poaching article ("Digital Shadows," June 2020). I happened to be browsing the print edition over lunch. Bad timing. The article describes admirable teamwork by the people who brought these perverted killers to justice, but it doesn't do much to explain why the criminals acted as they did. I would've appreciated some warning about the graphic content, much as broadcasters do before airing stories containing descriptions or imagery that could be upsetting to some people.
Louis Jaffe, San Francisco

One of the smartest moves in this story is that the reporter included comment from a foreign terrorism and radicalization researcher. The story is about heavily armed men running a poaching ring in Washington and Oregon.
Ian Morse, via Twitter

A FLAG OF FANTASY

The Gadsden flag has become a symbol of ignorance and hate ("Who's Treading Now?" June 2020). Worse yet, the purveyors of this image represent the darker elements of human nature, including selfish, violent and anti-democratic sentiments, often under the guise of Christianity. They live in a fantasy bubble where there are no rules, no regulations and no control over destructive behavior. Government is an obstacle to their "freedoms."
Joe Bickel, via Facebook

FLYING FISH?

I cannot help but comment in protest of the practice illustrated in the story, "Running hot" (June 2020) of apparently tossing (live?!) salmon up and over a stationary setnet onto the rocky shoreline. I'm sure I don't understand the business of commercial fishing, but no animal deserves to be dispatched in such a degrading manner.
Alex Kouvel, Tucson, Arizona

AMERICA'S HISTORICAL VIOLENCE

Graham Lee Brewer's interview with Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz provides some historical framing for current socio-political happenings ("Armed and contagious," June 2020). When things don't make sense, dig into history to find out why.
Alan-Michael Foucault, via Twitter

The culling of human beings is what I am heartbroken about — our old, our houseless, our vulnerable.
Natalie Hirt, via Twitter

The interview provides a view on the armed reopen "protests," from an interesting point of view. It's a chilling analysis summing up three centuries and their original sins: guns, profits and a culture of privilege. Maybe a tad bit radical, but makes you think.
Jürgen Kraus, via Twitter

POISON FOR PROFIT

This is the Trump administration's environmental shock doctrine ("Reg wreckage," June 2020): Ramping up the killing of poor, Black, brown and Native peoples, and poisoning the world for profit.
Alyosha Goldstein, via Twitter

While the nation is distracted by a pandemic, the Trump administration is rolling back health and environmental protections at a breakneck pace.
Susan Stone, via Twitter

The architect of President Trump's environmental rollbacks, Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, has spent most of his career serving industry, anti-regulation ideologues.
J.K. Sloan, via Twitter

UNJUSTIFIED CAPTIVITY

Rena Priest does an effective job in her story, drawing parallels between captive orcas and missing and murdered Indigenous women ("A captive orca and a chance for our redemption," April 2020). Fifty years on, how do we justify the conditions Tokitae lives in, let alone the fact of her captivity itself?
Lance Martin, via Facebook

Such a tragic story. Poor sweet Tokitae, imprisoned for 50 years in a tank that's illegally too small. In 2005, southern resident orcas finally received protection under the Endangered Species Act and were never to be kept captive again. But the law excluded Tokitae. She is made to perform circus tricks and be USED as a surfboard.
Fred Page, via Twitter

The scientific name for the orca is *Orcinus orca*. To my tribe, the Lhaq' te'mish of the Salish Sea, they are people. In our stories, they have societies and a culture similar to our own.
Quad Finn, via Twitter

"The purveyors of this image represent the darker elements of human nature, including selfish, violent and anti-democratic sentiments, often under the guise of Christianity."

CAHOOTS crisis workers speak with the parents of a young man having a mental health crisis. Each worker completes 500 hours of training in areas including medical care, conflict resolution and crisis counseling. **Thomas Patterson**

WHAT WORKS

Experts in de-escalation

How Eugene, Oregon, avoids unnecessary policing.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

AS CITIZENS ACROSS the country fill the streets to protest police killings of Black people, the violent response from law enforcement has added urgency to a national conversation about police brutality. Pressure is mounting to reform or abolish police departments. City officials in Western urban centers like Los Angeles are reducing police budgets — L.A.'s currently totals $1.8 billion — and reinvesting in underfunded social initiatives. Minneapolis City Council members pledged in June to disband its police department entirely. As cities look for what's next, there is already a proven system of de-escalation for the high volume of mental health calls that police respond to, which often end in violence.

Mobile, community-based crisis programs employ first responders that are not police to address disturbances where crimes are not being committed. One of the nation's longest-running examples is CAHOOTS — Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets — in Eugene, Oregon. CAHOOTS has inspired similar programs in other cities in the region, including the Denver Alliance for Street Health Response, Mobile Assistance Community Responders of Oakland and Portland Street Response in Oregon.

Such programs take police out of the equation when someone is going through a mental health crisis, struggling with substance abuse or experiencing homelessness. When police show up, situations can escalate, and the use of force can be disproportionate, especially towards Black people; a 2016 study estimated that 20% to 50% of fatal encounters with law enforcement involved someone with a mental illness. Advocates say the CAHOOTS model shows those encounters aren't inevitable: Less than 1% of the calls that CAHOOTS responds to need police assistance. The CAHOOTS system relies on trauma-informed de-escalation and harm reduction, which reduces calls to police, averts harmful arrest-release-repeat cycles and prevents violent police encounters.

THE WHITE BIRD CLINIC in Eugene started CAHOOTS 31 years ago as an alternative for people who felt alienated or disenfranchised from systems that had failed them, CAHOOTS Operations Coordinator Tim Black said in an interview. "We're there to listen, we're there to empathize, and we're there to really reflect on what they're going through," and to discuss ways to access resources to help them. CAHOOTS — a free, 24/7 community service — is funded by Eugene and neighboring Springfield at a cost of around $2 million, equal to just over 2% of their police departments' annual budgets. The program is currently fundraising to expand and make up for COVID-19-related budget cuts.

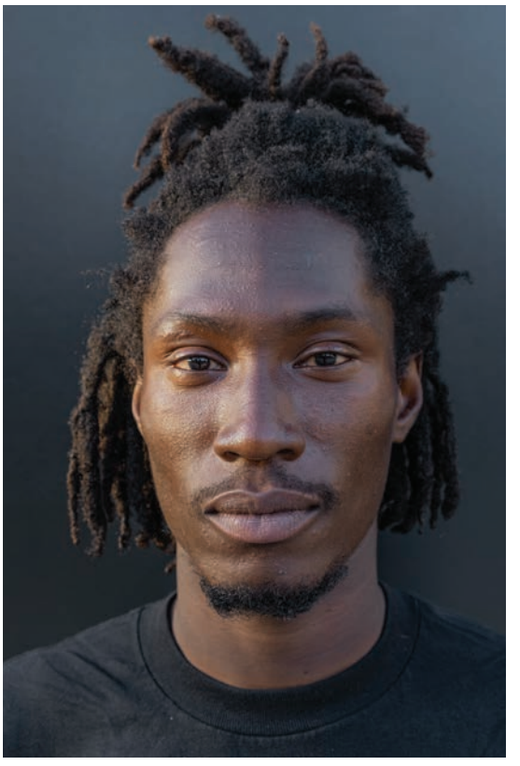
Under the model, instead of police, a medic and a mental health worker are dispatched for calls such as *(continued on page 36)*

"I came because it's a bigger purpose, especially for this generation now. I'm an older person. ... This has been going on for a long time, and it's about time to change. The only way that change can be brought forth is not through violence, but uniting and coming together to stand for a purpose."

—Edward, Lubbock, Texas

"It's really horrible how African American people are treated. And as a white woman, it's kind of awful that I can come to things like this and not be worried that something's going to happen to me, and I can be pulled over, and not worry that something's going to happen to me."

—Kim, Los Feliz



"As I was walking with the crowd, people were smiling, saying I was playing the right music. I felt good. I stayed there the whole night."

—Wilkens, Echo Park

"I'm supporting Black Lives Matter and here with union leaders and supporting the cause. I'm glad I did."

—Yancy, Downtown LA

"The goal isn't to live forever, but to create something that will."

—Soulaire, Hollywood

"I'm here for my siblings, my family, other Black men, our future generation and my children — if I ever have children — you know, people in general."

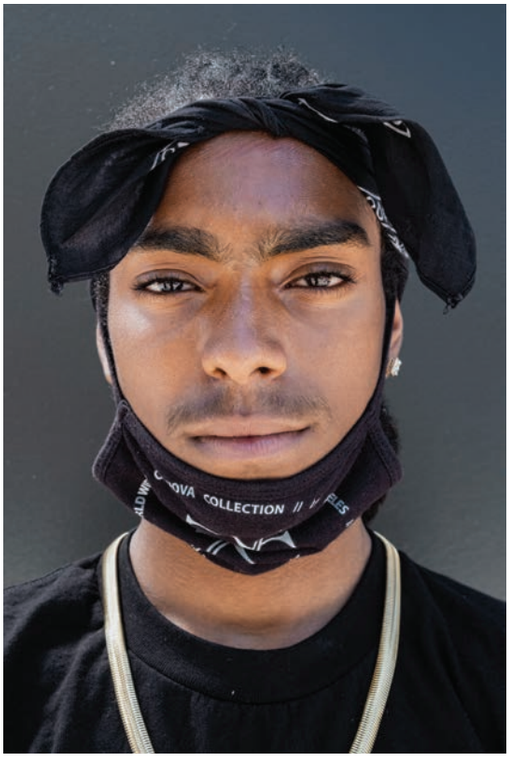
—Layah, Willowbrook

“I’ve been a revolutionary singer-songwriter for over 20 years now, and this is everything that I’ve been speaking about forever.”

—Jhavoice, Sherman Oaks

“Seeing all the police brutality … I see a lot of abuse of authority, you know. And I feel like everyone has a voice, and when we all come together, it makes a stronger community … a louder voice.”

—Mandi, Rosemead



“I’ve been a victim of it. I’ve been a victim of police harassment just because of my skin color. I feel him (George Floyd). I might not feel as much pain as he did, but I feel him on his level.”

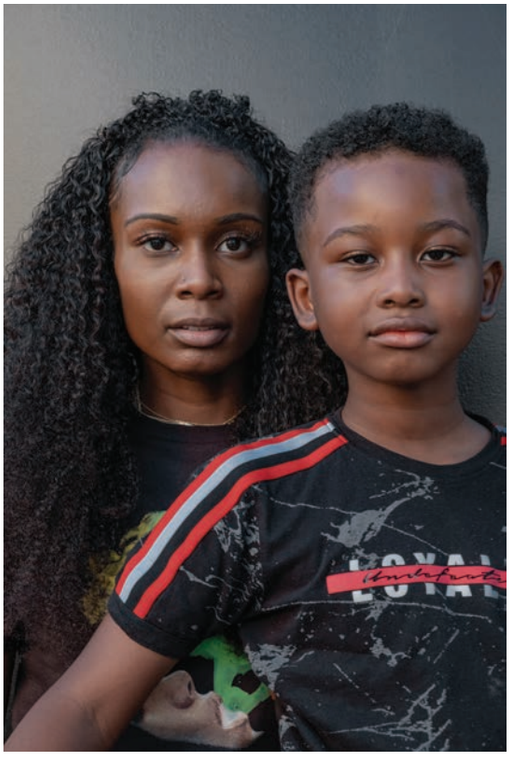
—Tim, Gardena

“I’m here to fight for justice. We’re better in numbers; we’re more powerful in numbers. And we ain’t got nothing but time, so we’re here to fight for justice for the many people that have been lost at the hands of police brutality and violence.”

—Kristen, Mid City

“I have a son, and African American men are targets.”

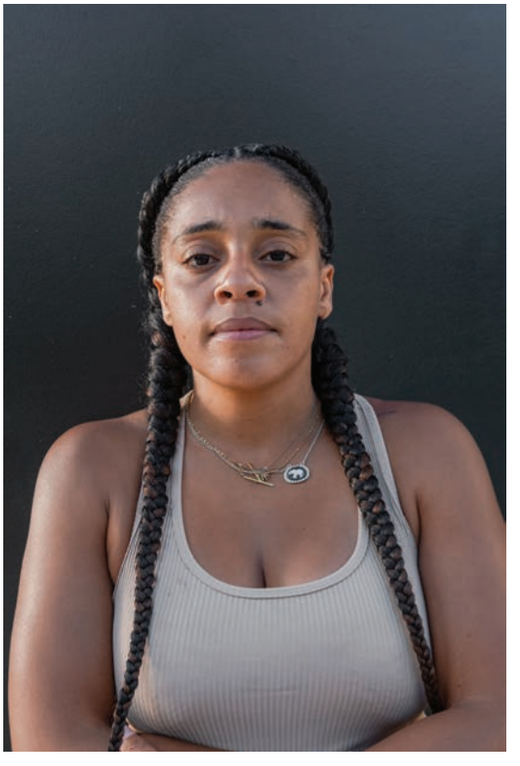
—Nandi and Christopher, Rancho Cucamonga



Voices from an uprising

Portraits from Los Angeles’ Black Lives Matters demonstrations.

PHOTOS AND INTERVIEWS BY STEPHANIE MEI-LING

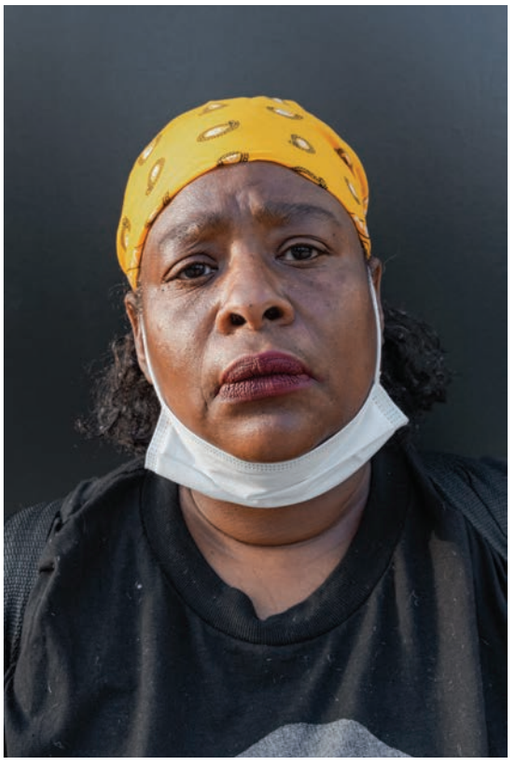


“When I seen that officer had his knee in his back and would not release him … I’m not going to lie, I cried. That was hurtful to see any human being with an officer with his knee on his neck! So that’s why I’m here … to protest. And because Black lives matter.”

—Joyce, South Central

“I’ve been choked to the point where I passed out. I started an organization called ‘I Can’t Breathe’ after I was choked by a security officer — for nothing.”

—Brother Wayne, Altadena



“Anguish. I didn’t really want to come out, and then I felt guilty as the days proceeded on, and I watched on television. And I felt like my voice needs to be heard, even though for many years my voice never counted, never meant anything. My tears never counted.”

—Sherry (Cocoa), Downtown LA

“I’ve been going to protests a lot to learn. I want to contribute to the community.”

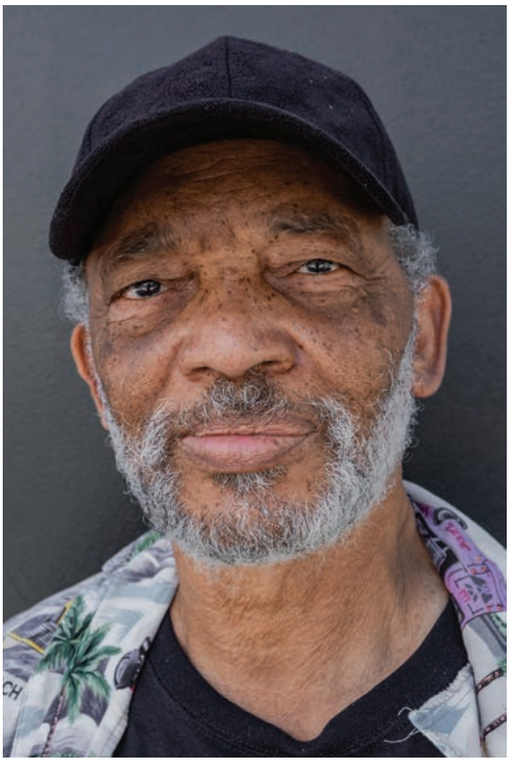
—Eddie, Downtown LA

“Women of my generation raised those millennials, and we raised them to do this. We’re so happy they’re finally out here.”

—Bonnie, Mid Wilshire

“Equality. I want equality.”

—Dom, North Hollywood

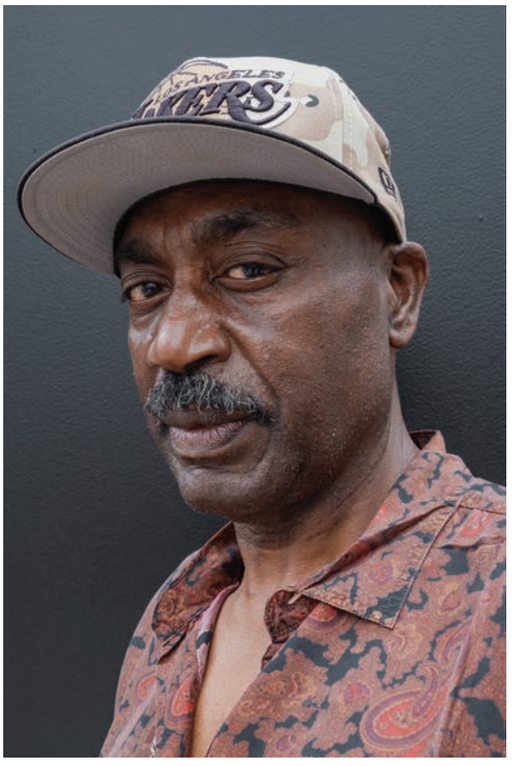


"I was one of the first people who went to an establishment in Memphis in 1968 to integrate. It was a Thursday. I came to protest because it was beating on my heart so strongly. Being involved in the 1960s, and now in 2020."

—Percy, South LA

"I am a Black woman, and we need to stand for justice and Black lives."

—Carlyn, Los Angeles



"I was there when Martin Luther King was killed in Memphis. Yeah, I was there. The times are changing, and this is a sign that people are sick of this racism. People are created equal, and this is about time for people who want to be superior, they have to come down to earth and realize the time for that is over."

—Charles, Downtown LA

"It's about time. It's about time."

—Bryan, Marina Del Rey

"I'm here for the protest, because being a descendant from the African American community, we have to fight for our Black civil and constitutional rights here in the city and the county of Los Angeles."

—Gerald, Century City

"I saw videos online on Instagram and wanted to see in real life what it was like."

—Armani, Lynwood

Where COVID-19 revived labor organizing

Washington fruit packers seek lasting gains from pandemic strikes.

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

ON A CRISP MAY MORNING in Washington's Yakima Valley, Blanca Olivares took her break from sorting apples at the Allan Brothers packing facility a little early. Soon, five other workers joined her in the outdoor patio area. Together, they waited, disappointment creeping in when more didn't follow. Little by little, however, employees trickled out. Within the hour, 40 to 50 people had congregated, and the first in a string of labor strikes that would include hundreds of workers at seven fruit packing facilities in the valley had begun. "I didn't know anything about strikes," Olivares said, through a translator. "I just knew that if we all put our voices out there, then maybe they would listen to us."

The labor actions — catalyzed by frustration over inadequate protections and compensation during the COVID-19 pandemic — swiftly grew into a protest against industry working conditions in general, according to Rodrigo Rentería Valencia, an anthropology professor at Central Washington University and member of the Washington State Commission on Hispanic Affairs, who chronicled the strikes and interviewed dozens of workers. The strikers held out for weeks, their fight demonstrating the nascent power of the region's agricultural workers and the challenges they face in having their concerns heard.

Yakima's first case of COVID-19 was reported on March 8. Rumors swirled, but little solid information emerged about the spread of the virus within workplaces. Employees at fruit-packing plants, who are predominantly Latino, feared the virus could spread rapidly in the close quarters of sorting and stamping lines. Their concerns were justified: According to the Yakima County public health department, as of early June, more than 800 agricultural industry workers had tested positive for the novel coronavirus, accounting for nearly one-fifth of the more than 4,000 cases in the county. Twenty-nine of them worked at Allan Bros.

Latinos and people of color are more likely to be exposed to COVID-19 because they disproportionately work in jobs deemed essential, and they are more likely to develop complications from the disease due to lack of access to healthy food and reliable health care. Latinos make up just 13% of Washington's residents, but they accounted for 43% of the state's confirmed COVID-19 cases. On May 30, David Cruz, a longtime worker at the Allan Bros. plant, died after being hospitalized with the virus.

Olivares, whose daughter is a nurse, was well aware of the seriousness of COVID-19 and the heightened risk she faced in her work environment. She likened her job to being the joker in a card deck — able to fill whatever role is needed. As she moved between different areas of the facility, workers expressed their unease about the sickness and their working conditions.

Olivares emailed management and requested a meeting to address the problems. But rather than engage her directly, the manager and human resources staff bypassed Olivares and went to others on the line first, gauging the mood before addressing the squeaky wheel. Workers grew frustrated when their chosen representative was left out of the process.

Poor lines of communication and hard-to-break hierarchies are common in agricultural work. "Perhaps most upsetting for workers is the industry doesn't allow workers a voice within the pyramidal structure," said Rentería Valencia, who biked a couple miles to the Allan Bros. strike when it first started. Instead of taking their grievances directly to the owners, workers must communicate through managers, who can abuse their power to silence them, he said. At the same time, the workers felt that state-level authorities were deaf to their concerns about COVID-19.

Olivares began reaching out to employees with whom she rarely interacts, including night-shift workers and those in separate areas of the facility. They soon realized that each cohort shared similar frustrations, Olivares said. Momentum for collective action grew.

Despite the lack of a union or experience with organized labor, the ad hoc coalition was

(continued on page 40)

Martha Aguilar, an employee of Hansen Fruit and Cold Storage, strikes for hazard pay, sick pay and safer working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic in front of the company's fruit-packing facility in Yakima, Washington, on May 16. **Terray Sylvester**

‘It’s not natural for them to cooperate’

San Francisco Bay towns agree they need to plan together for sea-level rise. The trick is getting them to do it.

BY ROBIN MEADOWS

A beach in Pacifica, California, undergoes restoration efforts. Sea-level rise in the area is so severe that nearby apartment buildings had to be removed because the eroding cliffside made them too dangerous.
Lucas Foglia

FOSTER CITY, A COMMUNITY of curving streets and cul-de-sacs, edges up to California’s San Francisco Bay. Built on wetlands that were drained and filled more than a century ago, the city was barely above sea level to begin with. Today, 34,000 people live in Foster City, and all that keeps water from pouring into their streets and neighborhoods is an earthen levee fortified by concrete and riprap. With climate change raising the sea level, this won’t be enough to protect the small city. So, in 2016, officials floated a plan to raise the levee.

That worried Hank Ackerman, the flood-control program manager for Alameda County, which lies just across the bay from Foster City. Ackerman wrote in a 2017 letter that he was “very concerned” that raising the levee could shift floodwaters to Alameda County, much of whose 36 miles of shoreline is densely populated. He cited research showing that raising seawalls in one area can simply transfer the rising waters elsewhere. “To address sea-level rise jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction will result in an acceleration in the adverse impacts to other entities around the Bay,” Ackerman concluded.

But Foster City moved forward anyway, and in 2018 passed a $90 million levee bond, putting it on track to be the first municipality around the bay with comprehensive shoreline protections against sea-level rise. Alameda County and other local jurisdictions have no recourse against such unilateral actions.

The San Francisco Bay Area has 101 municipalities across the nine counties that ring the bay, and each is like a little kingdom. “Cities are self-interested actors. It’s not natural for them to cooperate,” said Mark Lubell, director of the Center for Environmental Policy and Behavior at the University of California, Davis. “Local governments really hate being told what to do.” In their defense, local governments also bear full responsibility for protecting their constituents from sea-level rise.

The water keeps rising, shrinking the window for implementing solutions. Sea-level rise already threatens the bay shore, which, at about 500 miles, is half the length of the entire California coast. The worst is yet to come: The Bay Area needs to plan for a 2-foot rise by 2050 and up to 7 feet by 2100.

In a 2019 survey, Lubell found that Bay Area leaders overwhelmingly agreed that the biggest barrier to addressing sea-level rise is the lack of a regional plan. For years, no one had stepped up to lead such a plan — until now.

STRICTLY SPEAKING, San Francisco Bay is an estuary. This configuration can cause ripple effects at surprising scales: When seawalls are taller in one part of the bay, water can surge over lower walls in a completely different part. The lowest-lying stretches of shoreline already flood during intense storms and the highest of high tides.

Now, in the first bay-wide effort to protect shorelines from rising waters, Jessica Fain, who helped New York City recover from Hurricane Sandy, is convening stakeholders to find common ground. “It’s a tricky issue,” said Fain, a planner at the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, which regulates land use along the bay. “How do you get adjacent jurisdictions to talk to each other? At this point, it’s optional.”

Fain hopes that giving all stakeholders a voice will ensure buy-in. “Coordination is important, especially in a closed bay system,” she said, adding that while her agency has taken the lead on a regional plan, it has no authority to implement it — which means the plan still won’t be binding.

Another worry, Fain says, is that without coordination and accountability across Bay Area towns and cities, wealthy residents will get outsized protection. San Rafael, a city on San Francisco Bay in Marin County, is among the nation’s top 10 richest. But San Rafael’s Canal neighborhood is home to 12,000 people, most of them Latinx living in apartments on incomes below the poverty line. The neighborhood is also one of the first here that will be hit by sea-level rise, projected to be submerged as soon as 2030.

Marco Berger, the community resilience coordinator at the Multicultural Center of Marin, worries that Canal neighborhood residents will face both the brunt of sea-level rise and displacement by gentrification. While property improvements like flood protection protect residents from the impacts of climate change, they can also drive up housing costs. “We want to create equity for the Canal neighborhood,” Berger said. “They usually don’t have a voice at the table.”

Unifying all the voices around the bay on sea-level rise is an enormous task, yet Fain faces it with equanimity. “Sea-level rise can feel like a far-off problem — but it’s not when you look at the time it takes to plan large infrastructures,” Fain said. “We need to move on this.”

Will COVID-19 help save small slaughterhouses?

As laborers for the Big Four meatpackers fall ill, small slaughterhouses see unprecedented demand.

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

A RECENTLY CLOSED small slaughterhouse in Odessa, Washington, is in the process of reopening, thanks to soaring demand for locally raised and processed meat. As large meatpacking facilities across the country have become hotspots for COVID-19 outbreaks — at least 277 cases have been confirmed among the nearly 1,500 workers at the Tyson Foods plant 100 miles south in Wallula, Washington, and three people have died — business is booming for small meatpackers.

With grocery stores limiting customer purchases, some Wendy's restaurants running out of beef and the price of ground beef increasing nearly 5% from March to April, customers are flocking to ranchers like Ed Gross, who has a herd of 1,500 cattle in eastern Washington. "Even big chain stores are looking to buy from us now," said Gross, one of the founders of the Odessa plant.

Big meatpacking facilities have made meat cheap in the United States. But those low prices have come at a cost to workers and pushed smaller slaughterhouses out of business. Now, as people turn to small butchers for meat, the pandemic is exposing the vulnerability of this centralized system — and highlighting the importance of a diverse and resilient food economy.

The meatpacking industry has undergone major consolidation. From 1990 to 2016, the U.S. lost more than 1,800 livestock slaughterhouses, 40% of the industry. As small slaughterhouses closed, the so-called "Big Four" meatpacking companies — Tyson, Cargill, JBS and National Beef — came to dominate the industry. Today, these four companies process more than 80% of beef in the U.S.

In 2013, the Livestock Processor's Cooperative Association, a group of ranchers in eastern Washington, tried to break the grip of industry consolidation by opening a slaughterhouse in Odessa, Washington. The plant, which was backed by community development agencies, would allow ranchers to tap into consumer demand for local beef without transporting cattle long distances for slaughtering or using large meatpackers.

But the cooperative struggled with inconsistent sales and hiring and retaining employees in a small town, Gross said. Now, however, with the pandemic driving demand and closing the price gap between local and industrial beef, the Odessa facility is preparing to reopen in July.

Jeff Wilke, a butcher on the outskirts of Spokane, Washington, who works directly with animal owners, is also seeing unprecedented consumer interest — so much so, that he's booked up for the rest of the year. "My phone's been ringing off the hook," Wilke said.

Wilke's business, Quadra K-Meats, serves people who are raising their own animals and ranchers who sell directly to consumers. Wilke slaughters animals where they were raised, something he's done since he was a kid, helping out his dad in the 1970s. "Animals don't get poked and prodded and loaded onto semis," he said.

But that process isn't nearly as efficient as industrial operations: The assembly lines at large meatpacking facilities can process hundreds of cattle an hour, while Wilke slaughters and processes about eight animals a week. That means meat processed by small slaughterhouses typically costs more: A locally raised and slaughtered cut of top sirloin steak at the Main Market Co-Op in Spokane costs more than $14 a pound, while a top sirloin at Walmart in Spokane costs less than half that.

Slaughterhouses like Wilke's also confront a two-tiered system of slaughterhouse certification. Most large facilities — and some smaller ones, including the Odessa plant — are inspected by U.S. Department of Agriculture or state inspectors and permitted to sell individual cuts to stores and restaurants. Businesses like Wilke's, however, don't have inspectors on site and can only process animals that were purchased directly from individual ranchers.

That lack of access to venues like farmers markets makes it harder for small slaughterhouses to stay in business. In response, federal lawmakers have introduced a bipartisan bill several times in recent years. The PRIME Act would make it easier for butchers who aren't USDA-inspected to reach customers by allowing them to sell meat to restaurants and other retail outlets.

Without such reforms, the current bump in business for small processors may not last. Right now, it's time to "make hay while the sun shines," said Rebecca Thistlethwaite, an agricultural extension agent for Oregon State University and the director of the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network. But with the potential for a prolonged economic slump following the pandemic, she expects that most people will soon return to cheaper meat processed at large facilities, as happened during the 2008 recession.

That would further the long-term decline of small slaughterhouses and ranching operations, leaving the meat industry even more consolidated and vulnerable to future disasters. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the risk of relying on just a handful of companies and factories to keep grocery stores full. A diverse system composed of businesses from large to small is key to making the food supply resilient, Thistlethwaite said. "People are realizing that now," she said. "Hopefully, we can continue to support small producers going forward."

Jeff Wilke prepares to shoot a cow at a client's property in Spokane County, Washington. Wilke slaughters animals where they were raised, instead of putting them through a stressful journey to an industrial slaughterhouse (*left*).

Ken Wilke and his son, Jeff Wilke, skin a cow at a client's farm in 2011. The family's company, Quadra-K Meats, serves people who raise their own animals. With large meatpacking plants closing down, demand for small butchers has skyrocketed *(below)*.

Young Kwak

A unionized ski patrol

When Vail Resorts added Stevens Pass to its empire, ski patrollers feared becoming fungible cogs in a corporate machine. So they organized.

BY ANDREW SCHWARTZ

When the CWA union was approved and Brianna Hartzell was named unit president, she said that management treated her and other union figures unfairly. **Ryan Irvin / HCN**

IT TAKES FOUR YEARS to become a "competent patroller" at Stevens Pass Ski Resort, a couple of hours east of Seattle, Washington. Such a ski patroller, said Katrina Rostedt, a longtimer herself, will have absorbed the idiosyncrasies of twisted knees and broken wrists and know exactly where wet snow poses an avalanche risk unless explosives are properly deployed.

Yet the patrollers who know these things are precisely the sort who tend to leave. Evan Woods, who began patrolling in the 1980s, has seen "hundreds" grapple with the same question after three to five years: Embrace a lifestyle that leaves you earning barely more than minimum wage, or hang up the red coat and trade passion for practicality?

For those who regard patrolling as a labor of love, this tension is part of the job. Still, it grated in 2018, when Stevens Pass Resort became another asset in the fast-expanding empire of Vail Resorts, an industry titan worth more than $8 billion — underscoring the big money and power dynamics governing even this modest and traditionally easygoing workplace. Many patrollers wanted to be treated, and compensated, as professionals, not fungible parts in a corporate machine. The unionization effort they commenced — learning as they went — wasn't just about sustainable wages, but about demanding a voice to speak to management as co-equal stakeholders in their resort.

Following decades of seemingly inexorable decline, union activity is on the rise in some sectors. But unions in the ski industry, whose seasonality fits awkwardly into the rigid U.S. labor regime, are rare. Going into the 2018-2019 season, an independent union represented ski patrollers at Aspen's four resorts, while patrollers at another four — of the hundreds of resorts in North America — were represented by the Communication Workers of America (CWA).

In recent years, Vail and its nascent private equity-backed competitor, Alterra, have led a period of brisk ski industry consolidation; Vail now owns at least 34 resorts in North America — including major destinations like Whistler-Blackcomb in Canada, Breckenridge, Colorado, and Park City, Utah. While flat attendance numbers, climate change and now the coronavirus crisis threaten future prospects, there's still serious money in the ski business. In 2019, Vail reported more than $300 million in profits. It could give every ski patroller it employs a $5 hourly raise at a cost well under the $50 million it reported spending last year on stock buybacks to boost the price of its shares.

BEFORE THE PRESEASON training program for the 2018-2019 season, Katie Johnston gave little thought to Vail's acquisition of Stevens. But the "bull in a china shop" energy of new management preoccupied with standardizing operations in line with other resorts made many patrollers uneasy, said Johnston, then entering her fifth year on patrol. Capital investments, lift rescue training and safety policies were welcome. But even as Vail upgraded uniforms, the company tightened the dress code. Management instituted a drug policy that some felt made patrollers less likely to report incidents. Popular programs that brought in volunteer doctors and made physical therapists available to resort employees were eliminated.

For skeptical patrollers, frustration mounted, not so much at the changes per se, but the apparent lack of interest Vail management seemed to have in their perspective. "You had to fight for everything," said Johnston. "It was essentially like negotiating a union contract — but with no power." Vail

representatives declined multiple written and voicemail requests to comment for this story.

Historically, talk of forming a union often came tinged with sarcasm. But at the preseason training, patrollers spoke about it in earnest, said Johnston. As the season began, Johnston and other organizers solicited the thoughts of "every single patroller." They reached out to CWA union representatives, who guided interested patrollers through an arcane maze of U.S. labor law.

One rule is that, generally, you don't organize on company property. So, in early 2019, workers hosted after-work meetings at their homes in nearby Leavenworth, a Bavarian-themed tourist destination and outdoors hub on the eastern side of the Cascade Range. Johnston says most of the patrol attended at least one of the meetings — free-form discussions in which organizers took questions and listened to concerns, basically saying that "it seems big and scary, but you also have a legal right to organize. Here's rules you can't break, or you could get fired."

Some rules posed problems. Many patrollers regarded their supervisors, former rank-and-file patrollers, as friends. By law, however, they were excluded from the bargaining unit. Moreover, if they learned about the unionization effort, they might feel obliged to tell management, to protect their own jobs. Keeping mum "was all about protecting them," said Johnston. "It felt weird. I didn't like it. But it was kind of that necessary evil." In March 2019, union supporters signed and submitted cards to the National Labor Relations Board to petition for CWA representation, and an election date was set for the following month.

Vail could give every ski patroller it employs a $5 hourly raise at a cost well under the $50 million it reported spending last year on stock buybacks to boost the price of its shares.

IN 2015, WHEN BRIANNA HARTZELL patrolled at Utah's Park City Resort, Vail brought in the Labor Relations Institute to educate workers about unions as a representation vote approached. LRI is a high-priced "positive employee relations" consulting firm that advises against unionization. Its curriculum convinced Hartzell, then in her first year of patrolling, that a union would impede direct communication between patrollers and supervisors. She voted against unionization. (CWA narrowly won, anyway.)

Years later, when Vail brought LRI to Stevens prior to the union vote, Hartzell, now working at the Washington resort, saw things differently. She had come to believe that, even with amicable employee-manager relations, it's "an illusion that employees on the ground can actually go and give constructive criticism to resort management." By now, Hartzell, like other rank-and-file patrollers, had already been educated on the union's terms. But some supervisors, excluded from the organizing process, had a different view. As the patrol director, with an LRI consultant present, delivered a slideshow-based curriculum about unions during occasionally testy mandatory morning meetings, tensions simmered between anti-union and pro-union factions within the patrol. In April, 2019, the National Labor Relations Board held a secret ballot: The CWA union was approved by a 27 to 18 vote.

The year since then has not always been smooth. Before everyone scattered into the offseason in 2019, Hartzell was named unit president. At times, amid the early friction of the 2019-2020 season, Hartzell said management treated her and other union figures unfairly. There was a "target" on her back, she said, and she was among those named in unfair labor practice charges the union filed, but ultimately retracted. (*High Country News* reviewed the labor complaints, which alleged arbitrary discipline and discrimination.) The heat "dissipated," Hartzell said, as momentum built on the collective bargaining process, and as it became clear how much patrollers' and Vail's interests aligned.

Then the coronavirus hit. In a flash, in March, it stalled negotiations on a first contract and shuttered the industry. Millions of workers, thousands of ski patrollers among them, lost their jobs. While Hartzell believes that Vail, given the circumstances, generally did right by its employees, the crisis drove home how little power individual workers have. And it may well be a catalyst. Other ski industry union drives are "out there — we know about them," said Hartzell. "The tide's turning. Which is exciting as, like, this little worker bee, hearing about other worker bees getting organized."

THE LATEST

A new Bundy ranch?

Backstory

During his 2017 trial for charges stemming from an armed standoff with the Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service near Bunkerville, Nevada, rancher Ryan Bundy described a Western United States built by rugged individualists like himself despite heavy-handed federal interference. His speech to the jury lasted over an hour and evoked longstanding tensions dating back to the 1970s, when the Sagebrush Rebellion emerged as a vocal opponent of federal management of public lands ("How Ryan Bundy sees the West," 11/20/17). The case ended in a mistrial, though the Justice Department is seeking to retry the Bundy family over the standoff.

Followup

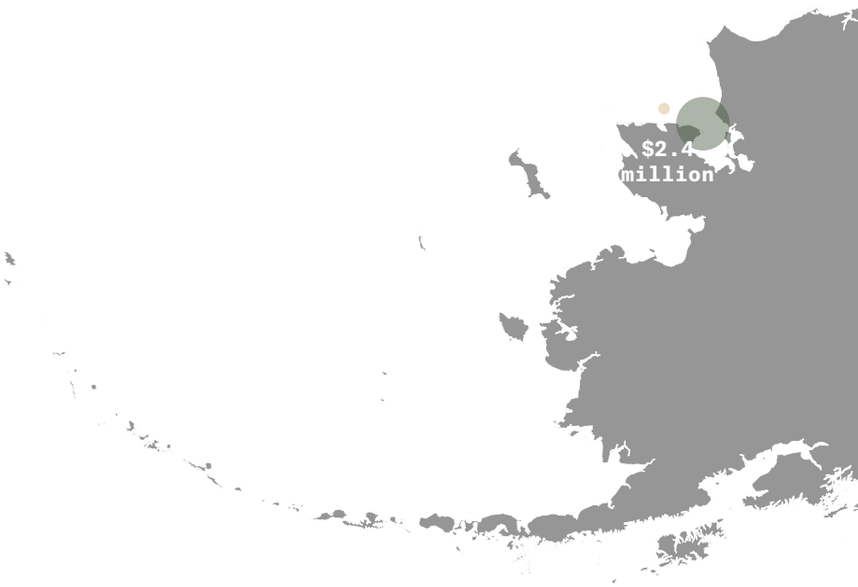
In mid-May, *E&E News* reported that the BLM is investigating Ryan Bundy's alleged illegal irrigation construction on the Gold Butte National Monument, the same land where he and his family have unlawfully grazed cattle for years. A group of hikers filed a complaint after seeing Bundy drive a truck carrying large reels of sprinkler line into the area.

—Kalen Goodluck

Lethal law enforcement

Police from Western states are some of the most militarized and violent in the country.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON



OVER THE PAST THREE DECADES, local and state law enforcement agencies have become increasingly militarized, both in approach and equipment, purportedly to fight the so-called wars on drugs and terror. More and more Western counties and towns have special weapons and tactics, or SWAT, teams, and they are more heavily armed than ever before, often with equipment obtained from the Department of Defense. The battlefield-ready equipment, and a mindset to match, have been on display nationwide this spring as law enforcement agencies responded to protests against the killing of Black people by police and against police brutality in general.

The current transformation of police officers into militarized troops has its roots in the National Defense Authorization Act of 1989, which allowed the U.S. military to support civilian law enforcement drug interdiction efforts, and in the subsequent Defense Authorization Act. This included the so-called 1033 Program, which further expanded the sale and donation of military equipment to all law enforcement agencies. After 9/11, the flow of weaponry to civilian agencies ramped up dramatically.

Since 9/11, police and sheriffs' departments, including those in rural Western counties, have acquired arms, ammunition, vehicles, grenade launchers, drones and even helicopters by way of the 1033 Program and grants from the Department of Homeland Security. The armored vehicles present at many of the protests this spring, for example, were likely MRAPs, or mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles, valued at about $700,000 each.

In 2015, President Barack Obama signed an executive order restricting the type of gear the 1033 Program could transfer, citing concerns that military equipment in the hands of police can alienate and intimidate local residents. In 2017, President Donald Trump rescinded that order, re-opening the free-flow of ammunition, guns and armored vehicles to police.

With the growing awareness of the killing of Black citizens by police, underscored by countless incidents of brutality against protesters, calls for reform have reached a crescendo nationwide. One of the many possible suggestions now before Congress is a bipartisan proposal to curtail the 1033 Program. The chance of it getting through the current administration, where Trump has encouraged law enforcement to "look tough" and governors to "dominate" protesters, is slim.

Meanwhile, Western states — which have some of the highest rates of killings by police — are also some of the biggest recipients of military gear, an indication of how militarized any given agency has become. "Militarization via 1033 is a symptom of the larger rot at the core of the institution of policing," said Casey Delehanty, assistant professor of political science at Gardner-Webb University. Delehanty co-authored a 2017 study showing that increased proliferation of military equipment fosters a military-style culture in law enforcement, encouraging military-style responses to problems and leading to an increase in police-inflicted violence, even by officers who are not militarily equipped at the time.

PORTLAND, OREGON: Portland Police Bureau Chief Jami Resch resigned from her post in June, following intense criticism over the Bureau's response to protests in that city, including firing tear gas and "non-lethal" projectiles into crowds. The American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon called the police response "excessively violent and dangerous."

Police in Oregon have killed 123 people since 2013, with all but about 20 of the killings occurring outside of Portland, often in rural areas or small towns. This aligns with nationwide trends: Police shootings have dropped somewhat in the biggest cities, but they've climbed over the last several years in rural areas.

SALT LAKE CITY: On May 30, riot gear-clad police officers poured out of a giant armored vehicle onto a Salt Lake City street to confront protesters. Instead, they found a 67-year-old man, carrying only a small camera and a cane, whom they knocked to the ground as he hobbled away.

The protesters in question were demonstrating against the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis. But a few days later, they were given another reason to hit the streets when body-cam videos were released showing Salt Lake City police officers shooting an armed robbery suspect, Bernardo Palacios-Carbajal, 20 times in the back.

BAKERSFIELD, CALIFORNIA: Since 2013, officers with the Kern County Sheriff's Department and the Bakersfield Police Department have killed at least 38 people, 18 of whom were Latino. The two agencies have also been major recipients of military equipment, acquiring several unmanned vehicles, night-vision image intensifiers, explosive ordnance disposal robots and dozens of M16s.

On June 3, a white motorist hit and killed a Black man who was part of a protest in Bakersfield, one of three such incidents in the city over the course of a week.

PHOENIX: Perhaps the most militarized police force in America was the Maricopa County Sheriff's Department, headed up by Sheriff Joe Arpaio. By 2014, the department had amassed a multimillion-dollar arsenal, including a .50-caliber machine gun. But in 2015, the Department of Defense kicked the county out of the 1033 Program and took back its gear, because Arpaio had misplaced weapons. Arpaio was voted out of office in 2016 and in 2017 was convicted of contempt for violating court orders regarding racial discrimination, only to be pardoned shortly afterward by President Donald J. Trump. Arpaio is running for sheriff again this year with the slogan: "Make Maricopa County Safe Again."

POLICE OFFICER GEAR IN 1968

OFFICER GEAR IN 2020, AFTER MILITARIZATION

Acquisitions by Western states:

10,294 assault rifles
312 armored vehicles
77 aircraft
38 body armor

National rank for most police killings per capita		Annual killings per 1 million people	... per 1 million Black people	... per 1 million Indigenous people	... per 1 million Latino people
NEW MEXICO	1				
ALASKA	2				
ARIZONA	4				
COLORADO	5				
NEVADA	6				
MONTANA	8				
WYOMING	12				
WASHINGTON	15				
CALIFORNIA	16				
IDAHO	18				
UTAH	19				
OREGON	20				
U.S. AVERAGE					

State military acquisitions

$$$ Value of equipment received via 1033 program, 1990-2020*

$5 $10 Value of equipment, per capita population

$34.4 million

$3.7 million

$19 million

$11.7 million

$4.3 million

$17 million

$10.7 million

$26.3 million

$132.6 million

$89 million

$21.2 million

LARAMIE, WYOMING: As protesters gathered in Laramie for Black Lives Matter protests, they also carried signs that said, "Justice for Robbie." They referred to Robert Ramirez, who was killed by Albany County Sheriff's Deputy Derek Colling in 2018 during a traffic stop. Colling had previously worked with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, where he was involved in two shootings, including one that killed a 15-year-old boy.

DENVER: After shooting protesters in late May with rubber bullets — knocking one person unconscious and rendering another blind — the Denver Police Department was ordered by U.S. District Court Judge R. Brooke Jackson to cease using chemical weapons or projectiles against persons engaging in peaceful demonstrations. The judge wrote that "some of the behaviors of what I hope and believe to be a minority of the police officers in Denver and the nation during recent days (and before), not only vis-à-vis persons of color but against peaceful protesters of all backgrounds, have been disgusting. ... The Denver Police Department has failed in its duty to police its own."

FARMINGTON, NEW MEXICO: Farmington, a town of about 45,000, has a SWAT team that boasts a "a four wheel drive armored vehicle equipped with a ballistic resistant exterior, explosive shielding, radioactive detection devices, explosive gas detectors. ..." Officers from various law enforcement agencies have killed at least seven people in and around Farmington — which is notorious for violent racism toward Indigenous peoples — since 2013.

WINSLOW, ARIZONA: In March 2016, Winslow Police Department Officer Austin Shipley confronted a 27-year-old Navajo woman named Loreal Tsingine, who had been accused of shoplifting at a Circle-K, and threw her to the ground. When Tsingine approached Shipley with a tiny pair of medical scissors in her hand, Shipley shot her five times. She was one of at least 14 Indigenous people killed by police in Arizona over a seven-year period. Shipley resigned, but was never charged with the killing.

The Winslow Police Department has received 27 M16 rifles, an armored truck and a grenade launcher from the 1033 Program.

*Law enforcement agencies also acquire military-grade equipment from sources besides the 1033 Program. Those acquisitions are not included here.

Infographic design by Luna Anna Archey, Officer illustrations by Minus Plus. Sources: U.S. Defense Logistics Agency; mappingpoliceviolence.org, U.S. Census estimates, 2019.

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Elizabeth L. Otto | Louisville, CO
Stella K. Parker | Fort Collins, CO
Jay Pearson | Santa Fe, NM
Adrian Pfisterer | Boise, ID
Felicia Probert | Santa Fe, NM
Susan Putnam | Aurora, CO
Robert & Pat Raburn | Oakland, CA
Sharon Ramey | Denver, CO
Ladonna Redmond | Minneapolis, MN
Craig H. Reide | Langley, WA
Edwin & Sylvia Reis | Washington, DC
Paul Richardson | Los Alamos, NM
Joan Roberts | Phoenix, AZ
Lee Rottler | Castle Rock, CO
Ruth Roy | Gold Beach, OR
Kirk Schroeder & Carol Savonen | Philomath, OR
Alan Schussman | Flagstaff, AZ
Mary Shanahan | Grand Junction, CO
Alan & Mary Shank | Snohomish, WA
Bruce Sillers | Issaquah, WA
Pat Simons | Albuquerque, NM
Arthur & Judith Slater | Sebastopol, CA
Zach Smith | La Verne, CA
Barbara & Tim Smith | Moab, UT
Sandra Spencer | Littleton, CO
Tara Stevens | Boise, ID
Meera Subramanian | West Barnstable, MA
John Sullivan | Laramie, WY
Paul William Taylor | Red Lodge, MT
Marcus Taylor | Central Valley, UT
Gary Thomas | Naples, FL
Paul Thornquist | Henderson, NV
Gene Tison | Santa Fe, NM
Dean Tooley | Edgewood, NM
Eric W. Vaughn | Centennial, CO
Tracy Villano | Bend, OR
Reed Waite | Seattle, WA
Peter J. Walter | Portland, OR
Carl & Gerry Weinberg | Walnut Creek, CA
Anne Wenzel | Palisade, CO
Dorothy & Andrew Werner | Santa Cruz, CA
Carol Whipple | Eugene, OR
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John Winkel | Arvada, CO
Winston the Wonder Spaniel | Colorado Springs, CO
Loel Woolridge | Fort Collins, CO

Dear Friends

The coronavirus pandemic, economic troubles and nationwide protests of police brutality and anti-Black racism: These are turbulent times in the Western United States, but staff at High Country News are grateful to be here, covering the stories that matter.

Our morale received an unexpected boost from a May tweet sent by Nicolas Gonzalez, communications manager for the Audubon Society. It seems that while quarantined in Los Angeles, Gonzalez had a few drinks during a virtual happy hour with friends and "drunkenly subscribed to three years of @highcountrynews." Gonzalez called it "definitely one of my better decisions under the influence." We can find no fault with his decision-making. Thanks for the support, Nicolas — would that more people shared your enthusiasm for good journalism. We'll gladly raise a glass to you, even if it has to be virtual, too.

Some of *HCN*'s good journalism was on recent display on the airwaves. Assistant Editor Anna V. Smith appeared on *Here & Now* from WBUR, to discuss COVID-19 infection rates — and the slow federal response — in Indigenous communities. Around the same time, Contributing Editor Nick Bowlin (that's me) chatted with the hosts of *Colorado Edition* from KUNC about newly relaxed taxes for oil and gas drillers on public lands.

Finally, we are sad to hear that Lynda Goldstein, a longtime supporter of *HCN*'s intern and fellow program, passed in April, in Denver, after a short illness. According to the obituary sent by her daughter, Julie, Lynda moved to Colorado with her husband, Richard, in 1967, and became well-known as a community activist. She was "deeply committed to the Jewish community and to supporting women and girls," and loved spending time in the mountains. We are grateful to have known her.

Do good, be good.

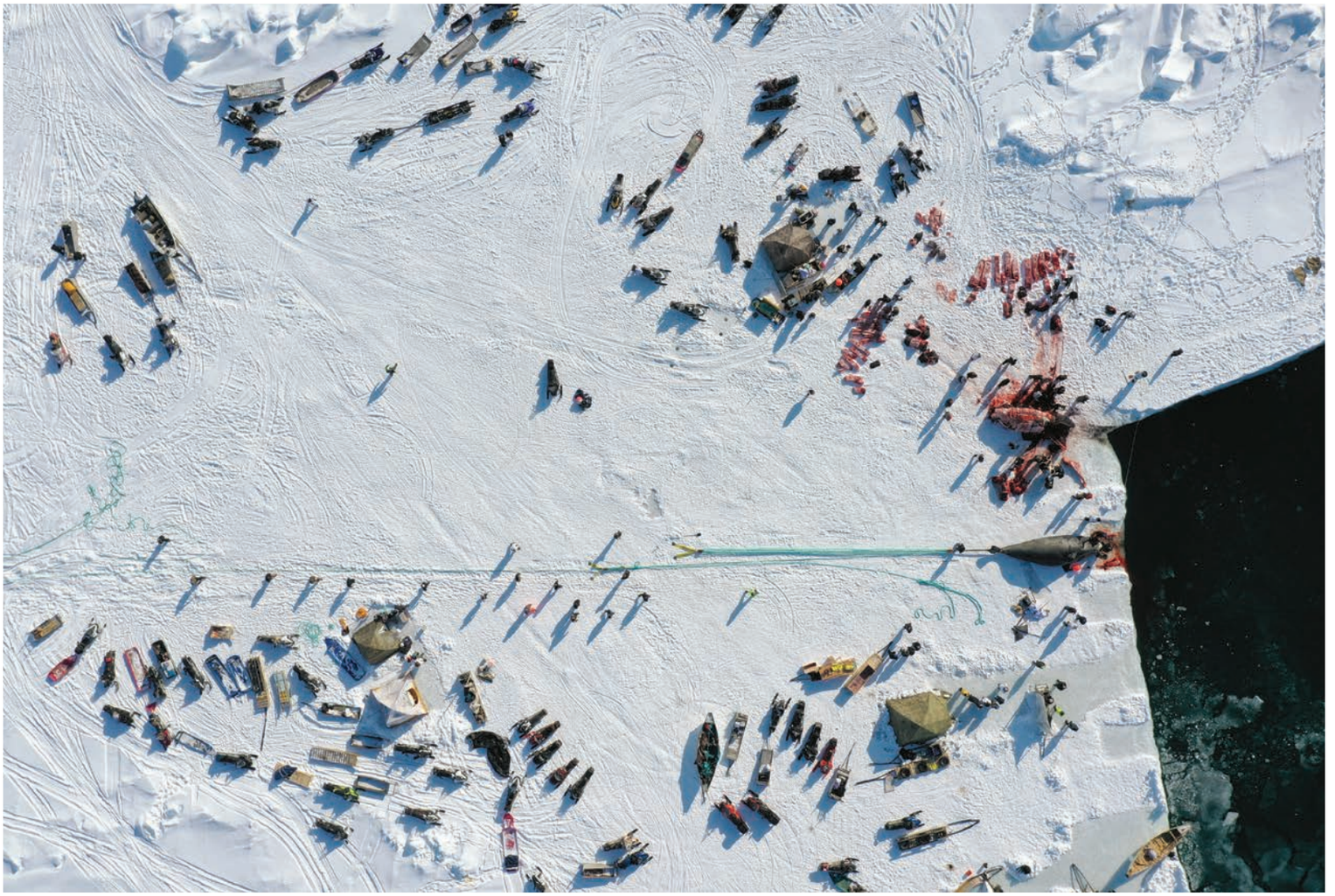
—Nick Bowlin, for the staff

Traditional whaling is practiced in tune with the unpredictable weather of the Arctic. When wind pushes floating ice near the shorefast ice, the whalers must wait — somethimes for weeks — until it shifts again.
Kiliii Yuyan

‘What choice do we have?’

As the Arctic warms, the Inupiat adapt.

By Jenna Kunze



UTQIAGVIK SITS AT THE VERY TIP of the United States, saddled against the Arctic Ocean. The Alaska Native Inupiat are set apart from other Indigenous peoples by their subsistence hunting of the bowhead whale. Even today, this unique, centuries-old practice determines the social structure, reflects community values and supplements the people's nutrient-rich diet. Nearly all of Utqiagvik's roughly 5,000 residents, the majority of whom are Inupiat, rely on hunting to support their way of life.

Which is why Harry Brower Jr., an Inupiaq whaling captain and Arctic Alaska mayor, finds it odd when outsiders try to explain things to him.

"I'm reading about this research on bowhead whales in different countries," he told me one afternoon in February. I met Brower in a mahogany-clad office decorated with relics of his hometown: mounted walrus tusks, paintings of icebergs at sea and a portrait of Brower and Utqiagvik's first mayor, Eben Hopson, standing with other community members under "the Gateway to the Arctic" — two huge whale bones arranged in a dramatic arch.

"Here are two words I read about this morning," he said, pointing to a yellow Post-it on his desk inscribed with the words "hyperboreus" and "parsimonious." Until he Googled the term, Brower didn't know what it meant, though he is, in fact, a hyperborean: an inhabitant of the Far North. "(Scientists) all speak a different language," he said. "They do."

While serving as mayor of the North Slope Borough, which encompasses eight separate communities and about 10,000 people, Brower also chaired the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission. The AEWC was formed in 1977, after the federal government, worried about low bowhead whale numbers in the Bering Sea, banned the Inupiat's subsistence hunt. In response, local whalers conducted their own census, which proved that the whales were being undercounted by the thousands when they swam underneath the ice. The Inupiats' research resulted in an increased quota. This anecdote is a well-worn story in Utqiagvik — formerly known as Barrow — a point of pride marking a time the Inupiat bested the federal govern-

This work was supported by the Pulitzer Center's nationwide Connected Coastlines reporting initiative.

ment by showing more precise knowledge of their lands and waters.

IN THE LAST TWO CENTURIES, the climate has been severely altered by human forces. But it has always been changing in some form here, according to the Inupiat. Evidence of past ecosystem shifts is preserved in the great tusks of a mammoth found in the perennially frozen earth and in the oral histories repeated like mantras. The term "climate change" strikes a different tone up here.

Life below 0 degrees Fahrenheit has always been challenging, so the Inupiat story is defined by adaptation. When the mammoth became extinct, the Inupiat adapted. When Western influences crept north, the Inupiat replaced their dogsleds with snow machines, their seal oil lamps with electricity. Today, the Arctic is warming at twice the global average, necessitating a new era of adjustments in life on land and sea. The weaker sea ice endangers hunters, while melting soil threatens homes and city infrastructure. The encroaching sea is eating away at the shoreline.

"What other choice do we have?" Kaare Sikuaq Erikson, an Inupiaq science liaison at the village corporation, said. "People assume that we're entering this new Arctic, when in reality we have faced adversity for thousands of years. We've always been able to adapt and be resilient. This is no different."

THE ARCTIC — "GROUND ZERO for climate change" — is warming more rapidly than the rest of the planet because of a positive feedback loop called Arctic amplification. Rising global temperatures melt the reflective surfaces of snow and ice each year, exposing the darker areas they cover, and the open water and bare ground absorb sunlight, rather than reflect it. This absorbed light creates heat, melting more snow and ice.

Last year, temperatures in Utqiagvik and the state of Alaska broke the federal government's 120-year record. The shift has happened so quickly in the North that it has outrun the research tools used to measure it. In 2017, it changed so fast that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration warned scientists that the data was potentially flawed. But the data proved accurate: It was the area's warmest recorded temperature to date.

"Nobody disputes that things change," Alaska climatologist Rick Thoman said. "The question is: Why are they changing now? Why aren't there mammoths on the North Slope now? You can't answer the question without invoking greenhouse gases. From a Western science perspective, that is the only conclusion."

The Arctic has lost 641,000 square miles of sea ice in the month of March alone — an area roughly the size of Alaska, according to National Snow and Ice Data Center records. Warmer temperatures also make for a later freeze and an earlier breakup of the ice, shrinking the time frame for spring whaling.

Whaling is the pinnacle of Inupiat culture and the subsistence lifestyle. It takes place in spring and fall, when bowhead whales migrate past Utqiagvik. Inupiat hunters say the whales "give themselves" to worthy hunters, so preparation is year-round and meticulous. Women carefully craft sealskin boats, sewn together with caribou tendon, and whaling crews clean out their ice cellars. Community members store whale and other raw meats in traditional belowground refrigerators dug about 20 feet into permafrost. (Both climate change and urban development are now causing some cellars to thaw, spoiling the meat.)

Each spring, hunters use ice picks to build trails over frozen sea ice. Once the paths are smoothed, they drive snowmobiles several miles to reach open water. At the ice's edge, they assemble camps, then wait for a bowhead to pass. As soon as a whale is spotted, the crews slide their sealskin boats into the water, and a crewmember attempts to harpoon the animal. When a whale is struck, the captains signal other crews by VHF radio. Other hunters rally to the boat, and everyone pulls the whale onto the ice shore.

But landing a bowhead has become increasingly dangerous: Each whale weighs up to 120,000 pounds and must be pulled onto the less stable sea ice.

Inupiak brothers Jack and Brower Frantz are co-captains on their uncle's whaling crew, having risen through the ranks since they were teenagers. "When we were growing up, it always seemed like the ice was a constant," Jack said. "We always knew it was going to

Utqiagvik community members join together to tow a bowhead whale to shore after three successful hunts in a single day in April. In a good year, about 10 whales are caught in spring whaling season and shared among the community for food throughout the year *(left)*. **Yves Brower**

JR Nungasak scrapes a bowl clean inside a whaling camp tent as he takes a break from the perpetual watch of whaling *(below)*. **Kiliii Yuyan**

be good. The last five years, it just seems like it's hit or miss."

Brower Frantz, now 34, remembers the long snowmobile ride to the ice edge, roughly 15 miles from the shore. When he was a teenager, it took more than two hours. "I felt safe driving out there by myself, and I was just a kid," he said. Now, the ice frequently breaks off within a quarter-mile of the shore, making the past five years the most unsafe he's experienced.

On land, Utqiagvik residents face a different but related instability underfoot: permafrost thaw. Last summer, Utqiagvik endured the wettest summer on record, with twice as much rainfall as usual. Rain thawed the ground several feet deeper than normal, past the "active" layer of permafrost, which is normally frozen year-round. During freeze-up, the infrastructure built into the usually immobile permafrost — water lines, telephone poles and house pilings — all began pushing up out of the ground. Now, utility poles tilt at worrisome angles, and some homes appear to be teetering on stilts.

Bill Tracey, a local assemblyman who represents Point Lay, a village about 200 miles southwest of Utqiagvik, said the thaw there is so bad that once-narrow crawlspaces under the homes can now hold ATVs.

"The biggest change is that it's gotten so warm that the permafrost is thawing so far down that all of the pipes are moving a lot and breaking," said Yves Brower, Harry Brower's second cousin, who heads the water and sewer department in Utqiagvik. He is acutely aware of the impacts of the changing climate: The week we spoke, nine different water pipes broke, spouting like geysers out of various paved roads.

Not all of Utqiagvik's pipes are buried in the permafrost. The majority are housed in a utilidor, a 3-mile-long tunnel of water, sewer and electrical pipes. The utilidor — which cost $800 million, funded almost entirely by oil money — is Utqiagvik's single most valuable asset. It helped bring the borough into the 21st century. Before it was built, in the 1980s, most residents hauled ice in for water and used "honey buckets" for sewage.

IN THE LATE 1960S, the largest oilfield in North America was discovered on Inupiat land, 200 miles east of Utqiagvik. The Inupiat lobbied to form the North Slope Borough. Once they had an incorporated government, they were able to collect property taxes from oil and gas infrastructure built on their land. Ever since, that money has made up the majority of the North Slope Borough's property tax revenue. Last year, it came to $377 million, borough financial director Sandra Stuermer said.

Oil money not only afforded the North Slope the construction of the kind of infrastructure most of America had enjoyed for the past 100 years, it also provided the funds necessary to maintain it in harsh conditions — conditions exacerbated, ironically, by climate change. Today, the money generated from property taxes pays for all borough operations, including the state and federal bond debts for maintenance of infrastructure in all eight villages.

"Barrow has been lucky," Yves Brower said. Like most locals, he still refers to his town by the name a British whaling officer gave it in the 1800s, rather than using its Native name, which the village voted to return to in 2016. "We've been really wealthy from our oil money."

For many here, oil money represents opportunity and autonomy. In 2018, the median household income of North Slope Borough residents was $75,431. Many are grateful for the wealth, even as the greenhouse gases emitted by fossil fuel use continue to warm the Arctic. Now, however, the Inupiat are facing yet another challenge: the potential shift of the global economy away from those fossil fuels.

In December, citing climate change, Goldman Sachs announced it would stop financing new oil exploration in the Arctic. A number of other banks followed suit. Mayor Harry Brower penned an editorial for the *Wall Street Journal*, condemning the investment bank for claiming stakeholder engagement as a core business principle while failing to consult the people of the North Slope.

"The way we see it, caring about the land and wildlife should also mean caring about the Indigenous people who inhabit the land," he wrote. "We aren't hungry for oil, we are hungry for progress and understanding from those on the East Coast and beyond. We don't need your protection or judgment. We need your respect. We need to be treated like fellow Americans."

TODAY, AS ICE CONDITIONS worsen, whalers are finding new hunting methods, using technological improvements that help keep hunters safe in the risky work they do to feed their communities. As technology improves, the Inupiat adapt.

The University of Alaska Fairbanks has mapped out hunters' trails to whaling camps, for example, and this research has become an increasingly valued tool for contemporary hunters. Matthew Druckenmiller, who developed it, is now a research scientist at the National Snow and Ice Data Center. In partnership with whaling crews, the borough and local whale biologist Craig George, Druckenmiller used GPS navigation to map the trails from 2008 to 2011. The project, which was inspired by an elder's attempt to hand-draw maps years earlier, overlaid GPS trail locations with surveys of ice thickness and with satellite imagery showing the general type of ice and its extent. The resulting maps are distributed throughout the community during hunting season. Whaler Jack Frantz said the maps are regarded as helpful and educational for the younger hunters who haven't spent years studying ice conditions.

Though Druckenmiller's student research ended in 2011, he continues the study every year. Whalers use the map data to direct others to their camps to help drag whales onto the ice for butchering. Druckenmiller calls the information "supplemental" to whaling crews' traditional practices. "To be resilient to the environment relies on having multiple tools at your disposal," he said. "This is just one of them."

Previously, hunters sometimes struggled to locate trails in the vast expanse of tundra, said Bernice Oyagak, an Inupiaq whaler. "Now, it's cool, because (they) send us a map and they say, 'Here's their trail,' " she said. The map also shows ice thickness, making it "kind of scary to know when you're driving over a mere two feet of ice," she said. "But I guess it's better to know it than to not know it, because you're hauling back so many pounds of meat. It can be dangerous out there."

The work of adaptation never ends. Now, as increasingly tough whaling years leave freezers empty, the Inupiat hunt more caribou. With coastal erosion eating away several feet of beach each year, the borough is seeking federal and state bonds to build a $300 million seawall. When the drinking water lagoon become polluted, the city put in place infrastructure to collect snowmelt that now runs through spigots. And now that permafrost thaw and coastal erosion threaten homes, a local housing authority is building adjustable homes on sleds. The Inupiat adapt, bearing the brunt of global climate change — a harbinger of what's to come in a world that remains stubbornly reliant on fossil fuels.

"We're taking on all the risks because of these global and environmental changes that are occurring," Brower said. "We've endured the train wreck. The train wreck is here. Everything is spilled all over the ground, and we're just looking at it and trying to figure out: What do we do now? Who's responsible? Now we have to deal with it."

Still, the Inupiat remain undaunted by an unknown future. "We have to to be a survivalist here in the Arctic," Brower said. "We're strong. We can survive."

In a festival tradition that goes back millennia, Inupiat villagers join together to toss successful whalers into the air to celebrate a successful whaling season and to give thanks to the whale for its gift *(above)*.

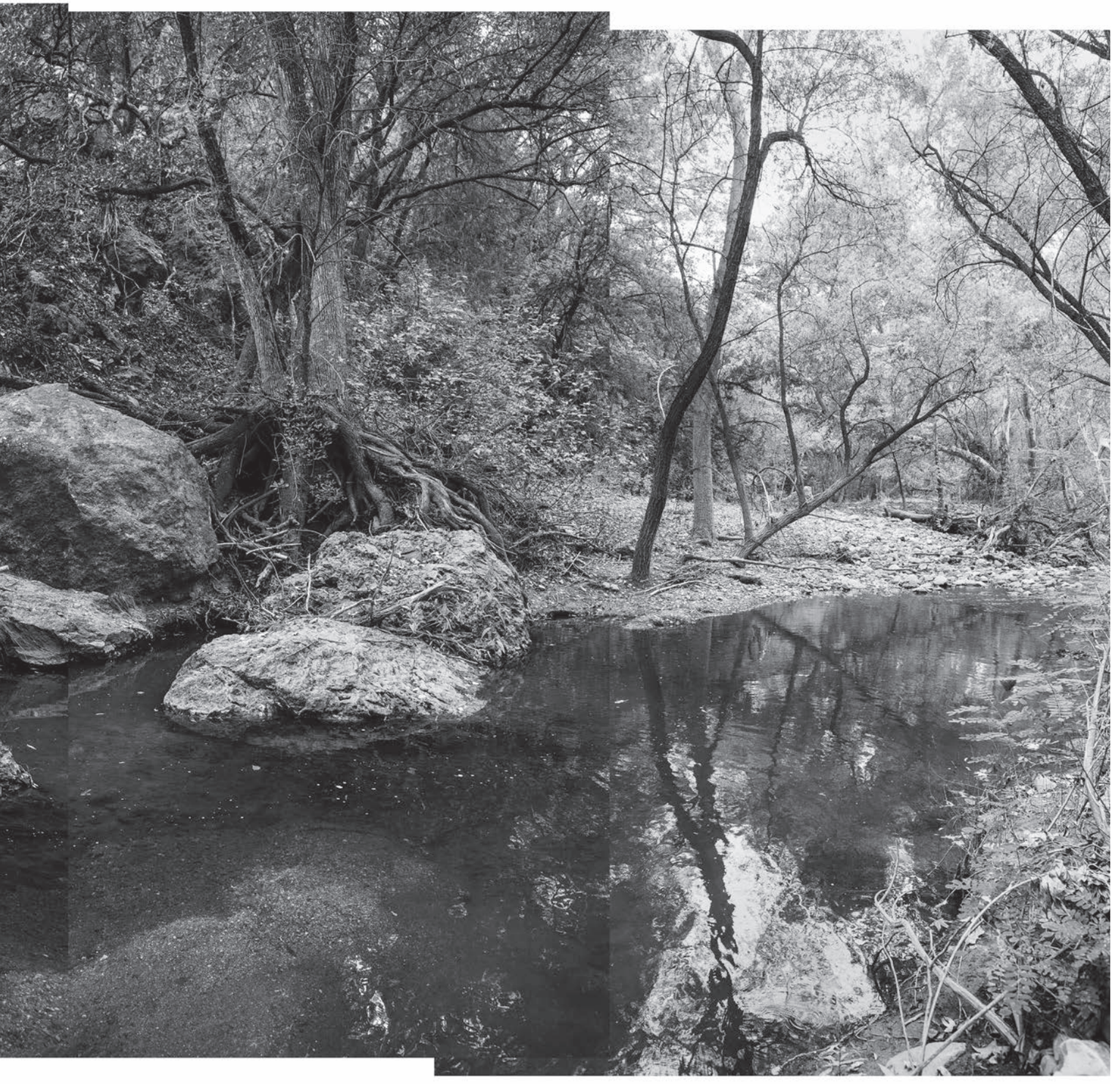
The village of Utqiagvik, where most of the 5,000 residents rely on hunting to support their way of life *(left)*.

Kiliii Yuyan

Fish Out of Water

The Yaqui catfish was going extinct. Then came the border wall.

By Maya L. Kapoor | Photos by Roberto (Bear) Guerra



IN THE SPRING of 2016, biologists at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service came to a terrible realization: The Yaqui catfish, the only catfish species native to the Western United States, was on the cusp of disappearing. After a week of searching, they could catch only two wild fish. They estimated that, at most, just 30 fish remained.

For approximately two decades, the last known Yaqui catfish in the United States had been kept in artificial ponds built in and around San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge, on the Arizona-Sonora border, and at a local zoo. Creatures of rivers and wetlands, they had not reproduced. Still, federal and state biologists felt they had to try one more time. In a last-ditch breeding effort, the agency gathered 11 fish and shipped them to a hatchery in Kansas. Within weeks, all of them died. Eventually, even the one geriatric catfish left on display at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum had to be put down.

Today, the Yaqui catfish, a whiskery-looking creature that evolved at least 2 million years ago and was once common enough for people to catch for food, is functionally extinct in the United States. There may be a few still hidden in Arizona's ponds, but not enough to keep a population alive. According to the Fish and Wildlife Service's 2019 five-year

review of the species, it's on the brink of global extinction; even as the catfish faces ongoing threats in Mexico, scientists know enough about the its basic biology to save it.

To people for whom "Sonoran Desert" conjures up images of steadfast saguaros or sun-struck lizards, the fact that a native catfish species existed in such a dry place can be surprising. In reality, prior to European colonization, the region supported rich waterways and aquatic communities. The current extinction crisis speaks to an uncomfortable truth: In a land of finite resources, every choice, big or small — irrigating an alfalfa field, taking a swing on a golf course, burning fossil fuels — means choosing what kinds of habitat exist, even far away from town. And that means choosing which species survive.

Now, the hunt is on to find more Yaqui catfish in Sonora, Mexico. But as the election season ramps up, the Yaqui catfish faces a new threat: The Trump administration is racing to complete the border wall before the 2020 presidential election, blasting desert mountains, tearing up old-growth saguaros and destroying the ancestral homelands and cultural resources of tribal nations such as the Pascua Yaqui, Tohono O'odham and Hopi. According to Laiken Jordahl, a staff member with the Center for Biological Diversity, wall construction will require 700,000 gallons of water each day.

To be clear, the Yaqui catfish is no jaguar. It's no beauty; it's not terrifying; its babies aren't even all that cute. A reclusive fish, it never swam in more than a relatively small portion of U.S. waters. In almost a year of researching them, I still haven't gotten a glimpse of one. When I lived in Arizona, my favorite catfishes were different species entirely, probably channels or blues; they arrived before me breaded and lightly fried at a small restaurant just south of the University of Arizona campus, accompanied by iced tea, somehow fitting into my convoluted rationalizations about being vegetarian. And yet the Yaqui catfish's looming extinction bothers me for the simple truth is represents: The Borderlands can't have its rivers and destroy them, too.

Thomas Hafen, Chuck Minckley, Alex Gutiérrez-Barragán and Alejandro Varela-Romero (pictured from left) study a map of the Yaqui catfish's range, discussing where to take eDNA samples during fieldwork in northern Sonora, Mexico, in September 2019 *(above)*.

Thomas Hafen filters water through eDNA sampling equipment in Cajón Bonito. In a few months' time he will get the results: Both Yaqui catfish and introduced channel catfish, which hybridize with them, are present *(above right)*.

The protected habitat of Cajón Bonito, in Sonora, Mexico, where biologists still find Yaqui *(previous pages)*.

BIOLOGISTS KNOW surprisingly little about Yaqui catfish, dusky animals that live at the bottom of ciénegas and streams, growing up to about two feet long. Only about 2% of their historic range lies within the United States; the rest is in Mexico. Living mysterious lives in gloamy places, Yaqui catfish inhabit a world rich in ways we humans can never imagine. Like many catfish, they are covered with tastebuds instead of scales. Catfish are named for the long, flexible barbels that sprout from their faces like a cat's whiskers, helping them feel and taste their world. Yaqui catfish may communicate with each other through drummings and stridulations, and they may hunt by tracking the electric discharges from other animals' nervous systems.

The Sonoran Desert's fishes have evolved fascinating adapta-

tions: Some give birth to live young; others snuggle down and wait out dry spells in the mud. But the past few centuries have been especially rough for them. As the Borderlands' human communities keep growing, and climate change makes the region hotter and drier, streams stop flowing and wetlands vanish. Meanwhile, introduced species, including channel catfish originally from Central and Eastern North America, push out, or hybridize with, native species. Like most of the Southwest's aquatic species, Yaqui catfish have struggled to survive since European colonization.

Today, a *river* in the Southwest often means a dried-out, sandy wash where trash and the skeletal remains of cottonwoods bleach in the sun. But before colonization, networks of riparian areas, wetlands and slow-moving rivers flowed through the region, where Indigenous peoples have lived and farmed for millennia.

A combination of colonialism and human-caused climate change turned rivers and wetlands to dust. Cattle, introduced in the 1500s by the Spanish, overgrazed the land, congregating around and trampling sensitive desert river systems. Farms, mining and the extirpation of beavers all disrupted the Southwest's rivers, which abruptly channelized in the 1800s, changing from meandering ciénegas to deeply etched arroyos. In the 1900s, enormous dam projects began sending the Southwest's water far away, irrigating California's agriculture, even as Sunbelt cities kept growing. By 1973, when the Endangered Species Act passed, such intensive pumping meant that the region's ciénegas were almost all gone, including the tiny fragment of Yaqui catfish habitat in southeastern Arizona.

Generally, the Endangered Species Act protects critical habitat for rare species, the logic being that a plant or animal can't survive if there's nowhere left for it to live. San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge, designated in 1982, was a different approach to saving species. An archipelago of manmade pools in a sea of desert shrubland, the refuge was meant to be a place where native fish species could survive, even as their natural ecosystems drained to sand. The Yaqui catfish lived there, some for decades; what they didn't do was reproduce. These fish, creatures of deep pools and flowing rivers, seemed to need something that the artificial ponds didn't provide to breed.

Meanwhile, residents of the Southwest — including me, for approximately half my life — have washed our dishes, cleaned laundry, swum in pools, watered plants, and generally gone about our daily lives by tapping into what water persists, including the Colorado River and underground aquifers. Today in the Sonoran Desert's dry creekbeds, one can sometimes see a black band in the soil wall — all that remains of miles of rivers and wetlands.

BECAUSE ONLY a small part of the Yaqui catfish's range lies in the United States, American researchers hope that they can collaborate with Mexico to save the species from global extinction, and maybe even donate a few more fish to the United States. But Mexico's Yaqui catfish, which historically inhabited thousands of miles of river systems throughout Northwest Mexico, are disappearing too, and the race to protect them is hobbled by a basic lack of information.

On the Sonoran Desert's version of a fall day, the afternoon high hovering around 90 degrees Fahrenheit, a binational group of researchers gathered in Cajón Bonito, a canyon that cuts through former ranchland purchased by a wealthy American, Valer Clark, about a mile south of the U.S.-Mexico border. They were there to collect that missing information.

Emerged from their vehicles, the researchers gathered an assortment of buckets, field gear and notebooks and began walking in the creek, stopping periodically to document its condition. The river clattered through the small canyon, carrying dried leaves above its sandy bed. It also carried evidence of living things that had stepped, swam or sprouted in the water, by way of environmental DNA, or eDNA, fragments of genetic material left like microscopic calling cards. It was these cards that Thomas Hafen, a graduate student at Oklahoma State University, hoped to pick up. As they waded in the river, Hafen and his research assistant, Alex Gutiérrez-Barragán, periodically sampled the river. Wearing medical gloves, they gently scooped water into a filter designed to strain out eDNA. After a battery-powered pump had sucked through enough water, they used forceps to peel the filter out of its cup, carefully fold it up, and place it in a container for shipment to a lab in Montana. In several months' time, they would know whether any Yaqui catfish had passed by recently.

A friendly, quiet worker in his mid-20s, with brown hair and a stubbly beard, Hafen spent two years before college on a Latter-day Saints mission trip in Mexico, becoming fluent in Spanish. Now, he was surveying as much of the remaining Yaqui catfish habitat in Mexico as he could for traces of the elusive animals, hoping, eventually, to be able to identify the best habitat for the species. If Yaqui catfish breed in captivity, Hafen's research will help identify where to release their young, and which rivers to protect.

As Hafen strained water samples, Sonoran Desert fish expert Alejandro Varela-Romero held a bucket and binoculars and peered into a deep, slow pool of green water swirling gently in the lee of a boulder. A thoughtful man in his 50s, with dark hair peppered gray and a mustache, Valera-Romero wore plastic-rimmed glasses and a T-shirt bearing a Spanish translation of the famous quote by evolutionary biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky: "Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution." He called out the scientific names of tiny darting fish I could barely see. He had a feeling that a Yaqui catfish might appear.

It certainly was hard to imagine a location more hospitable to native fish than Cajón Bonito,

where smoky-black catfish could float gently above the riverbottom, sheltered by sloping banks and submerged branches. Hawks circled overhead, while songbirds called from the bushes. Earlier that day, a skunk had excavated a small dig below a tree stump no more than 10 feet away from where the researchers were working, and then apparently curled up for a nap. But even here, channel catfish — one of the biggest threats to Yaqui catfish — had infiltrated. When Hafen got his eDNA results months later, they would show that almost everywhere in Mexico where he found Yaqui catfish, he'd found channel catfish, too.

"In the past, there were no exotics in the (river) basins," Varela-Romero explained. "When the (Mexican) government started building reservoirs, federal officers had a brilliant idea of buying exotic fishes like channel catfish and putting them in the reservoirs, to give to the people the opportunity to eat fish," even though, he said, everyone already ate the native ones.

As these introduced species have pushed the Yaqui catfish to extinction at lower elevations, the species survives higher up, in hard-to-reach, isolated mountain headwaters. There, though, illegal drug grows threaten the fish. Varela-Romero said that in the past, while sampling Sonoran rivers for native fish, he came upon poppies growing wild on the banks. Their seeds had washed down from opium grows.

"The problem is that money from the U.S. pays for those activities," he observed. The economics can get personal: Varela-Romero's father's car was once stolen in Hermosillo, Sonora. It turned up months later in Yuma, Arizona, after being used to run drugs across the border.

Because the Yaqui catfish is dying out, Varela-Romero said, "you develop some kind of love. ... We call it *cariño* en español." He always got excited when he saw a Yaqui catfish in the wild, wondering each time how many more he

might see. Today, though, he had no luck. The catfish, if any were nearby, stayed hidden.

IF HAFEN AND HIS TEAM represent cutting-edge fisheries research, with fussy portable filters and slick sampling methods, Varela-Romero embodies an older approach to natural history, his expertise earned through hours spent studying different species, counting bent spines, describing the exact color of scales, trying to think like a fish. Another biologist on the trip, Chuck Minckley, was an original member of the Desert Fishes Council, a nonprofit research organization for desert fish biologists in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands. Minckley missed the first meeting because he was drafted for military service in the Vietnam War, but he hasn't missed one since. Now in his 70s, he waded slowly down the canyon as Hafen's crew sampled the water, pausing to rest at times on an overturned bucket. His ancient black Lab, Shadow, raced happily through the shallows, huffing like a freight train.

Varela-Romero and Minckley are determined to catch and breed Yaqui catfish in Mexico as quickly as possible, even though no one really knows how. It's easy to read their efforts as a comedy of errors, with fish found, lost, misidentified. In reality, with low budgets and improvised tools, the researchers are learning how to work with the species. The problem is that their learning curve has crashed into an extinction curve. After years of neglect, the Yaqui catfish is rare enough that every fish matters, making it hard to experiment with ways to breed them, or even to keep them alive.

One afternoon in Mexico, the researchers attempted to recover eight Yaqui catfish caught in Cajón Bonito, which had escaped from some netting in a holding pond. This involved using a broken kayak paddle to maneuver a rowboat, which Minckley had purchased as a teenager to take duck hunting, out to the middle of the pond, and pulling up yards of soggy netting.

The men excitedly hauled a catfish to shore in a bucket and gently transferred it to a shallow rectangular container. The small, soot-gray animal burrowed into the corners, seeking an escape with its mouth and barbels. We crowded over it, and I found myself getting unexpectedly emotional, looking at what might be one of the last of an under-studied, barely known species, trying to escape from a plastic box. I felt foolish a few minutes later, when Varela-Romero checked its pit tag and announced that it was actually a Yaqui-channel hybrid. I wondered whether the loss of a species that looked just like one of the most common fish species on the planet really mattered.

Only later did it occur to me that perhaps, if I couldn't tell the difference between a Yaqui catfish and a channel catfish, that was because they communicate in the language of fish, not primates — that their seeming interchangeability said more about my limited understanding than it did about their limited distinctions.

Using a boat Chuck Minckley has owned since he was a teenager, he and Thomas Hafen check netting for Yaqui catfish that escaped into a holding pond at Rancho San Bernardino in Sonora, Mexico *(left)*.

A catfish that was pulled from a net at Cuenca Los Ojos was at first thought to be a Yaqui. After they checked its pit tag, however, they realized it was a hybrid of a Yaqui and a channel catfish *(below)*.

THE SAME ECONOMIC PRESSURES that push Yaqui catfish toward extinction today have wreaked havoc on local human communities for centuries. Even as American and Mexican researchers try to save the species, tribal nations such as the Pascua Yaqui are working to re-establish control over their natural resources, including the Yaqui catfish.

"If we had a tapestry of our history on this side of the border, it would probably be missing a bunch of big chunks," Robert Valencia, then-chairman (now vice chairman) of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe, told me. Valencia and I met in a conference room at the Pascua Yaqui Tribe's administrative offices, about 20 minutes away from downtown Tucson. Valencia, who is in his 60s, has dark hair and a thick salt-and-pepper mustache. He wore what he called his "end of summer" shirt — a red Hawaiian-print button-down. To Valencia, the tribe's history is too important to lose. "We can't let things go," he said. "As a matter of fact, we're doing the opposite. We're looking at — on both sides of the border — what are important parts of history we don't know, or we need to know more?"

At one point, Valencia wrote down a Yaqui word for me in my notebook, after I struggled to sound it out myself. "What it means is, 'In the beginning,' " he explained. "We have to always remember what we had in the beginning. To me, that's number one."

To Valencia, the catfish ties Yaqui peoples to the Río Yaqui region, in part by embodying the importance of water to the tribes. As the flow of Borderlands water

and species has been curtailed, so, too, has the movement of Yaqui peoples across their ancestral lands.

Considered Mexican by the United States, the Pascua Yaqui Tribe only gained federal recognition in 1978, despite its presence on both sides of the border since long before the United States or Mexico existed. In 1964, the tribe secured the land in southern Arizona that would become its reservation from the Bureau of Land Management, after surviving the Yaqui Wars, a persistent attempt — first by the Spanish government and more recently by Mexico — to kill off Yaqui tribes and use their land along the Río Yaqui for mining and large scale agriculture. "If you read about our history, there was an unwritten extermination policy against our people in Río Yaqui," Valencia said. "They killed us, shipped us off as slaves in Yucatán, did whatever they could." People were sent as far away as the Caribbean and Morocco, never to return.

In the late 1970s, Valencia's uncle, who was tribal chairman, successfully fought to gain tribal recognition from the U.S. government. Today, the Pascua Yaqui Reservation includes approximately 2,000 acres southwest of Tucson, bordered partly by Tohono O'odham land and partly by the city's growing sprawl. Yaqui people regularly move back and forth across the U.S.-Mexico border, although that's been harder since the 9/11 terror attacks, Valencia said. Valencia's mother, who was born in the U.S., grew up in the Yaqui pueblo of Tórim in Mexico. Valencia remembers her reminiscing about rivers "teeming with fish," before Mexico built three dams along the Río Yaqui.

On the one hand, the delayed recognition of its sovereignty means the tribe is only now addressing quality-of-life issues that go back decades, Valencia said. But he sees advantages to its independence from the federal government. "Because we weren't entrenched, we don't have federal programs that are based here; we didn't want any," Valencia said. "We always insist on directing whatever effort it is, whether research, whether programs, because what we found over the years, if we let other people do things for us — it fails, every single instance." Yaqui catfish conservation seems to fit this pattern: In 2015, after three years of applications, Valencia won a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to create monitoring and educational programs about Río Yaqui fish on both sides of the U.S-Mexico border. Not long after, he found out about the 2016 die-off of Yaqui catfish at the Kansas fish hatchery.

Working with the eight Yaqui pueblos in Mexico, Valencia wants to create family-based "microhatcheries." Partly, this is for cultural reasons — the Yaqui catfish is a traditional food — but it would also be part of the Yaqui pueblos' long battle for the Mexican government to honor their treaty rights, which include extensive control of water and other natural resource in the Río Yaqui basin. Currently, Mexico's dams force Yaqui communities in Mexico to rely on water contaminated by agricultural runoff laden with pesticides and heavy metals. According to the *Latin American Herald Tribune*, Mexico defied its own Supreme Court to build an aqueduct to pipe Río Yaqui water to Sonora's growing capital city of Hermosillo, further ignoring Indigenous claims to the watershed and its natural resources, including its fish.

The Pascua Yaqui Tribe has already built microhatchery prototypes. One sunny morning in September, I met James Hopkins (Algonquin and Métis), a law professor at the University of Arizona who directs the Yaqui Human Rights Project Clinic and has legally represented Yaqui pueblos in Mexico, in a parking lot near the Pascua Yaqui Tribe's Casino del Sol. On roads made slick and puddled by recent rain, we drove together to Tortuga Ranch, a former cattle ranch that the tribe now owns, to examine its prototype aquaponics operations. A hoop house held burbling tanks where luminous koi fish swirled under bright green vegetation. Further efforts to raise Yaqui catfish were on hold for now, until more Yaqui catfish become available. But even without the catfish, microhatcheries of fish such as tilapia or channel catfish could be important routes to nutritional independence for Yaqui families in Mexico.

"(Yaqui pueblos) want a clean, sustainable protein source," Hopkins said. "There's a huge infant mortality rate (in Mexico), primarily because all their protein from the local area — fish, dairy from local cows, goats, pigs — is going to be carrying persistent chemicals, mainly DDT."

The northern Sonoran landscape as seen at the Cuenca Los Ojos San Bernardino Ranch, just south of the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge *(right)*.

Robert Valencia, then-chairman (now vice chairman) of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe, who says the catfish ties Yaqui peoples to the Río Yaqui region, in part by embodying the importance of water to the tribes *(below)*.

On the U.S. side of the border, Valencia would like the Pascua Yaqui Tribe to raise Yaqui catfish in captivity, in part for a commercial market. "It's one of those things I think can be successful," he said. "The people have some knowledge of the species itself." Hopkins, though, expressed a more cynical reason for growing Yaqui catfish in microhatcheries. "Anything you're trying to return back to nature, your plan has to fit with the larger state plan," Hopkins said. For Arizona to take interest in the Yaqui catfish, there had to be a commercial value, such as a restaurant market for the fish, or an interest in sport fishing.

"I've been transparent with people like Chuck Minckley and others, saying, 'Look, if you bring the fish back, where's it going to go?' " Hopkins told me. "It's going to have to be a commodity in its own way."

ONE WARM FALL DAY last September, I visited San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge, a remote landscape of rolling hills with a backdrop of sharply angled mountains at the Río Yaqui headwaters in southeastern Arizona, where the last Yaqui catfish in the U.S. were caught for the failed breeding effort. Traces of catfish eDNA still turn up in ponds here, although it's uncertain whether that DNA is from living fish, or the remains of dead ones. This is where the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would like to reintroduce Yaqui catfish, if Mexico agrees. Up close, the ponds seemed peaceful: small, cattail-ringed pools rippling in a rising breeze.

But now, the ponds themselves are endangered, collateral damage in the Trump administration's determination to construct a border wall before the November election. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, wall construction continues at a breakneck pace, using local water to spray down dusty roads and mix concrete. As of this writing, Customs and Border Protection has not provided *High Country News* with requested groundwater use estimates.

"We have to always remember what we had in the beginning. To me, that's number one."

According to Myles Traphagen, a field biologist and GIS specialist who previously worked at San Bernardino, no environmental analysis has been conducted on the impacts of wall construction on the region's water, or on its fish. "Since there was no NEPA required, no prior studies, we are essentially navigating in uncharted territory, with no baseline for what the final effects might be," Traphagen said. Refuge staff declined to comment on the impacts of the border wall.

On my drive back to Tucson, the clouds gathered into a gray comforter, trailing rain far to the south. It was my favorite kind of dappled desert weather, the filtered light deepening the green on hillsides and softening the craggy mountains. In the distance I spotted a bright white post — a historic border marker, rising from the shrubs. Past that, the roof of a ranch house in Mexico. Trucks passed me slowly on the dirt road, spraying water to keep down the dust. It took me a few minutes to realize why: They were preparing for the construction crews to arrive, to build the border wall. Perhaps the next time I drove through, those mountain views would be gone. So, too, might the springs that the refuge's fishes relied on. Without water, there would be no future here for the Yaqui catfish.

I later called Bill Radke, who has managed San Bernardino for about two decades, and asked him whether falling groundwater levels in the refuge might be just one more threat to the Yaqui catfish, or the final nail in its fishy coffin. Radke would not comment on the effects of the border wall construction, but he acknowledged that groundwater levels have always been a big concern for the survival of fish at the parched refuge.

"You almost have to end your story that way, because I don't know that any of us can say that for sure," Radke said. "What's that adage about how far you can lean off a cliff before you fall? You don't know until you lean too far."

Reporting for this story was supported in part by the Fund for Environmental Journalism of the Society of Environmental Journalists.

(continued from page 7)
welfare checks or possible overdoses. In 2017, such teams answered 17% of the Eugene Police Department's overall call volume. This has saved the city, on average, $8.5 million each year from 2014-2017, according to the White Bird Clinic.

Though CAHOOTS uses the police department's central dispatch, it is distinct from the department. Employees do not carry guns or wear uniforms; instead, they wear casual hoodies and drive vans with a dove painted on the side. CAHOOTS' methods are designed to prevent escalation, Black said. "If an officer enters that situation with power, with authority, with that uniform and a command presence, that situation is really likely to escalate."

It's a false assumption that people experiencing a mental health crisis will respond violently, Black said, and a police response is often unnecessary. CAHOOTS fielded over 24,000 calls last year; less than 1% of them needed assistance from police, and no one has ever been seriously injured. "That type of mentality really contributes to the othering that has permitted oppression and marginalization to persist," Black said. "By and large, folks who are unhoused, who are experiencing behavioral health issues, are much more likely to be the victims of violence than the perpetrators."

CAHOOTS differs from other mental health partnerships with the police in important ways: Staff employ "unconditional positive regard," a phrase from psychology that means complete support and acceptance of the people they encounter, and the organization is run as a "consensus collective," rather than a hierarchy. Every employee's voice carries equal weight.

Each crisis worker completes 500 hours of training in areas including medical care, conflict resolution and crisis counseling. Around 60% of CAHOOTS' patients are homeless, and about 30% have severe or persistent mental illness. "The patient that we're serving is the expert in their situation," Black said. "They know that we're a voluntary resource and that we're not going to take their rights away just because we've shown up on scene."

Dorothy Siemens, an artist who grew up in Eugene and still lives there, said that she, her family and her friends all call CAHOOTS, rather than the police, when they see someone in distress. The option makes her feel like a more responsible community member. When Siemens managed a downtown cafe, she used the service often. "I really don't have the tools, and I think the police in our community also don't have the tools" for people in crisis, she said. "There really shouldn't be one group of people who is expected to cover all of those bases, especially a group of people who are weaponized and militarized. ... Their training shows them 'that's something I have to respond to with force.' "

INCREASINGLY, COMMUNITY organizers are reaching out to CAHOOTS, hoping to develop similar programs. Since 2013, the city of Portland, Oregon, just a couple hours north of Eugene, has seen a 60% increase of "unwanted person" calls to 911, according to a Willamette Week analysis of Portland Police Bureau data. In 2017, an *Oregonian* analysis found that 52% of arrests involved homeless individuals, even though they comprise less than 3% of Portland's population.

In 2019, Portland City Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty and Street Roots, a homeless advocacy publication, introduced Portland Street Response, a police alternative based on the CAHOOTS model. The pilot program, which was officially approved and funded by the city last November, focused on a southeast Portland neighborhood where 911 calls were on the rise. The program is now on hold because of the coronavirus, but Hardesty hopes to get on the ground soon. As the city considers cutting its police budget, Hardesty is pushing for $4.8 million to go towards Portland Street Response instead. "We are long overdue for investments in police alternatives, including Portland Street Response," Hardesty, the first Black woman elected to Portland's city council, said in a statement to *High Country News*. "There's no doubt we need to reimagine what it looks like to get the right responder to the right situation at the right time."

Nationwide protests have spurred renewed urgency for programs like these, which show a stark contrast to the typical police response. This month, the Coalition for Police Accountability in Oakland presented a final report to the city council to begin its own pilot program, MACRO, this summer. In Denver, in May, Vinnie Cervantes worked as a medic with the Denver Alliance for Street Health Response, which he also directs. It's part of a mutual aid nexus that emerged during protests in the city over the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Cervantes and others treated protesters who were left bleeding and bruised after police fired off tear gas, rubber bullets and flash-bangs and pummeled them with batons. To Cervantes and others, it was yet another example of how quickly police resort to excessive force. "Our community stepped up to collaborate and create a network of support to solve a larger public safety crisis," Cervantes said. "That's something we can take beyond protest."

Policing and jails account for 30% of Denver's overall budget. The repurposing of those funds would be a huge opportunity for collective efforts like Denver Alliance, which resembles the CAHOOTS model. But no single model will work for every city, said Cervantes. Each program needs to be adaptive and reflect its community; Eugene, after all, is much smaller and has a whiter population than Denver, Oakland or Portland. "It's really important that it is community-based, by people that look like us and that have our shared experience," said Cervantes, who is Latino. Otherwise, the program will only replicate the same systemic problems.

In June, Cervantes' organization helped start a pilot program in partnership with the city of Denver, called Support Team Assisted Response. Cervantes hopes to develop a full-fledged program by 2021. But, for now, on the streets, "we're literally seeing our own proof of concept of how we can take ownership of crisis ourselves, and have solutions," he said. "We don't have to view everyone as a threat."

Vinnie Cervantes, director of Denver Alliance for Street Health Response, talks to people about new programs and lawsuits stemming from police response to protests in Denver. **Carl Payne / High Country News**

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Publications & Books

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Public Notices

PUBLIC NOTICE - Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment Hazardous Materials and Waste Management Division

Notification of Issuance of Emergency Permit No. #CO-20-05-29-01 for Treatment of Hazardous Waste under the Colorado Hazardous Waste Act.

Name of Permittee: Colorado Department of Transportation.

Location of Treatment: Detonations will occur in-place on unoccupied property administered by either the State, or U.S. Forest Service throughout Colorado where CDOT has conducted avalanche control activities.

Avalanche Control personnel from the Colorado Department of Transportation have been authorized to treat by detonation the following waste.

Misfired/unexploded avalanche control ordnance or explosive devices found during searches for these devices in the vicinity of avalanche paths located in avalanche-prone areas throughout Colorado. The total amount of waste explosive devices that may be treated by detonation is unknown. Each device to be detonated can contain up to 2 kilograms of Pentolite explosive or Nitramon explosive product.

Detonation is a safe management method for these explosive/shock-sensitive wastes. This emergency permit will expire 90-days from the date of this permit.

COLORADO
Hazardous Materials & Waste Management Division
Department of Public Health & Environment

(*continued from page 12*)
tapping into a long history of farmworker solidarity in the Yakima Valley. In the 1960s and 1970s, agricultural industry organizers east of the Cascades found common cause with the emerging national "Movimiento," which included the likes of César Chávez and Reies Tijerina, and began forming unions and community support groups among local Hispanic agricultural workers. Organized labor in the area has since dwindled. But vestiges of the early farmworker movements remain, including Radio KDNA, a public Spanish language news station — one of the few places local workers could get basic information on COVID-19.

After leading the initial walkout on May 7, Olivares stepped back to let other voices take over. "The hardest part was to dare to do it," said Olivares, who credits her mother with teaching her the importance of speaking out, and God for making her a courageous woman. "But once you dare to jump, you have others there to support you."

One of those voices belonged to Agustín Lopez, who joined the strikes at Allan Bros. Knowing a bit more about how strikes worked, Lopez made sure that the workers stood together on their walkout until the final decision was made to declare a strike and form a picket line. "I'm not the guy that started the walkout," Lopez said. "It was my job to support my co-workers."

Once the workers at Allan Bros. took the leap, others across the valley felt empowered to follow. Eventually, workers from six other packing facilities in the Yakima Valley went on strike. Rosa León, a worker at Matson Fruit Company, said that the lack of social distancing within the facility, and management's practice of selling — rather than giving — masks to workers, motivated her to join the strike. "COVID-19 gave us the power to speak up," León said. "I've been there four years, and never before have workers organized."

As the movement gathered momentum, community members, union representatives and nonprofit legal centers joined the cause. Familias Unidas por La Justicia (Families United for Justice), an independent farmworker union from the Skagit Valley in western Washington, advised striking workers. Columbia Legal Services helped workers file an unfair labor charge with the National Labor Relations Board against Allan Bros. Fruit Company. Allan Bros. CEO Miles Kohl contested the charge in interviews with local news organizations. Neither Allan Bros. nor Matson Fruit Company responded to requests for comment from *High Country News*.

Eilish Villa Malone, an attorney for the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project who works primarily with immigrant agricultural workers, also took part, rising at 4 a.m. to organize delivery of meals, coffee and supplies to strikers before and during her normal workday. "At first, I was just out with my friends in solidarity, then all of a sudden I was completely engrossed," said Villa Malone. As she traveled between strike sites, she also educated workers — particularly the undocumented ones — about immigration rights.

After 22 days, striking packers at Allan Bros. started to return to work, with negotiations underway between a newly formed workers' committee and ownership.

Just as she was the first to walk off, Olivares also wanted to be the first to return to work. She was welcomed back respectfully, and the strike officially ended the next day.

Back on the job, Olivares was given gloves and a face shield. Line speeds on the conveyor belt had been slowed down to ease the work and allow more distance between the workers. Olivares appreciated the changes, but worried that the shield she was given could get caught in the machinery and injure her. She brought her concerns to a manager with whom she'd been at odds in the past, who came back 30 minutes later with a different option. The quick response felt like a major improvement and a sign that workers were more likely to be heard in the future.

Workers at all seven packing plants have now returned to work after gaining concessions on better pay, safety and the formation of worker committees to advocate on behalf of their peers. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, D, also released new workplace safety standards for agricultural workers after protests at the Capitol in Olympia and a lawsuit against the state Department of Health and the Department of Labor and Industries.

"Everybody needed a little push — owners, management, peers, even those that didn't join the strike," Olivares said. "We pushed ourselves to change; now everyone is better for this push."

"COVID-19 gave us the power to speak up."

Outside the Yakima Valley town of Naches, a group of women picket at the edge of Highway 12 during the first week of the strike at Allan Bros Packing Inc. **Rodrigo Rentería-Valencia**

PERSPECTIVE

Toward full-time wildland firefighting

More permanent opportunities would give many of us stability.

BY ANASTASIA SELBY

Los Padres National Forest firefighter Jameson Springer watches a controlled burn on the so-called "Rough Fire" in Sequoia National Forest, California, in August 2015. **Max Whittaker**

WHEN I BEGAN WORKING as a hotshot firefighter for the Forest Service in 2001, I was hired as a part-time, temporary worker. At the time, over half the crew was made up of part-time employees. Today, the Forest Service employs approximately 10,000 wildland firefighters, but still less than half of them are permanent full-time workers.

When the Forest Service was formed in the early 20th century, it had only a handful of forest rangers. If a fire broke out, men were pulled out of saloons and other public places to fight it. Since then, the agency has ballooned in size, and its wildland firefighting has changed dramatically. Much of the weight of firefighting now falls on the shoulders of the Forest Service. The agency already helps manage 500 million acres of land, but it's also called in whenever fires get big enough to require national support. Half its annual budget is spent on wildfires, with spending increasing exponentially even as the agency's overall budget remains nearly static. This spending eats into other Forest Service responsibilities, such as fuel management and mitigation, maintenance and the tending of forest and grassland health.

The unpredictable nature of wildfires, longer fire seasons and the increased development of housing and communities in fire-prone areas makes predicting a yearly budget a complex and sometimes impossible task. Shifting toward a full-time force is a move in the right direction. It can increase firefighter security and stability and improve the health of our forests and grasslands, as well as help contain the volatile fire seasons we've seen in recent years. Adding more permanent firefighters to the roster would have several effects, all of them far-reaching and significant. The most obvious would be the year-round staffing of crews, which currently operate on a seasonal basis.

Less obvious are the ways in which this shift could change the fundamental culture of wildland firefighting. Many firefighters travel far from their home base during the winter, and there's a high turnover rate, with many leaving the profession altogether after only a couple of years. As a seasonal worker, I would have been supported by full-time work and the benefits that could come with it. Of course, the impact of the long hours would have to be mitigated, but financial security would help.

There's also an ecological intimacy that can be developed by staying on the forest for the winter. Eliminating the transient nature of seasonal positions could integrally connect firefighters to their local forests, aiding in the development of local fire regimes and strengthening relationships with other local agencies, both government and nonprofit. It could also increase employee retention, decrease training costs and lower the risk of injury or death. Imagine, for example, local fire crews working with Indigenous populations and nonprofit groups to improve fire health year-round.

Currently, seasonal employees lack access to the main perks of government employment: health insurance, paid time off and retirement packages. Access to health care should be essential for firefighters, and many current seasonal employees would be happy to trade winters off for steady employment and benefits. Meanwhile, year-round employment could help stabilize the Forest Service budget, clear its $5.2 billion maintenance backlog and, over time, create healthier forests and grasslands, increasing carbon sinks and leading to less destructive wildfires.

When I worked as a seasonal firefighter, it felt like my life was on pause in the winters. I eagerly waited for the start of fire season. Ironically, that signified stability. If my peers and I had been employed full-time, we would have worked better together, gained a deeper understanding of our local jurisdictions and had more opportunities for training and education. We also would have been insured and felt more respected as employees. Ultimately, the decision to grant the Forest Service increased funding to support more permanent employees could lead to a more positive outcome, not only for the agency and its employees, but for the ecological systems that are integral to our survival.

Anastasia Selby is currently working on a narrative nonfiction book, HOTSHOT, which describes her time as a wildland firefighter and details the history of forest management and Indigenous land practices in the Western United States. She is based in Seattle.

Bureau of Lost Management

Narrow interests now dominate the agency's direction.

BY JIM KENNA

I'VE SPENT OVER 40 YEARS — spanning seven presidential administrations and across five Western states — serving the American public. Nearly all of that time was with the Bureau of Land Management and Department of the Interior. I believe that Americans value their public lands: They see them as part of being American, and they expect to see them passed intact to the next generation.

The BLM's mission is not ideological and does not give preference to certain land-users. Its legal mandate calls for managing public lands for a variety of uses, treating energy generation and conservation equally. But now, the agency is losing sight of that mission. I worry that the nation is on a path that will deeply embed private interests into public lands.

Jeopardizing millions of acres of federal lands and skewing land-use plans to maximize certain uses — with little interest in, or acknowledgment of, meaningful public participation — goes decidedly against the BLM's mission.

Like most of my colleagues, I felt a profound responsibility to engage in public dialogue and involve communities. This is how we ensured that we were making the best-possible, best-informed decisions on behalf of present and future generations. It's disappointing to see today's leadership devaluing iconic landscapes, diminishing public participation, and catering to the financial ambitions of narrow, favored interests.

Since he took office, Interior Secretary David Bernhardt's aggressive agenda has favored corporate interests. This push has continued despite the pandemic, ignoring public outcry against despoiling cherished Western landscapes.

The BLM has recently moved ahead with oil and gas lease sales on more than 200 thousand acres of public land in Wyoming, Nevada, Montana and Colorado despite the oil market glut. The pandemic has made it easier for the agency to sidestep the public comment process for projects in extremely sensitive areas, most recently in the Western Arctic and around Chaco Canyon in New Mexico.

"Oil and gas companies cannot be the agency's only concern."

No urgent need drives this cavalier attitude toward the public. Oil companies already hold about 10,000 unused drilling permits, yet they have swept up roughly 42 million more acres in nine planning areas across the American West and Alaska. If these lands are important to the nation's energy portfolio, a focused case should be made for them.

Why the push for leasing now, during a worldwide oil glut? Leasing now will lock in low financial returns for taxpayers and lower revenues for state and local governments. If the Interior Department really wanted to help oil-patch workers, it would promote the job of cleaning up abandoned wells.

Secretary Bernhardt panders to oil and gas interests by reducing royalties, handing out small business loans meant for local businesses, and leasing millions of acres for pennies on the dollar. His actions — carried out under the cover of a national emergency — do not serve taxpayers, state and local governments, or the public interest.

Instead, the Interior Department should be assuring the American people that our country's public lands will remain open to the public. Americans should know that their public lands will provide open space for families to safely recreate, support local economies and contribute to clean air and water. This should be just as true after quarantine.

Oil and gas companies cannot be the agency's only economic concern. The BLM coordinates with hundreds of local communities across the West. In 2015, the agency identified 374,000 jobs and $88 billion in economic output tied to public lands. The benefits were spread across a broad range of land uses, including outdoor recreation, such as hunting, fishing and hiking. Local workforces depend on public lands in ways people might not expect. The land also provides field sites for scientists and heritage sites for Indigenous nations.

Over 97% of BLM employees live in communities adjacent to the lands they manage. Engaging broadly with elected officials and tribes, state agencies, county commissioners, interest groups and user groups must continue to be their priority, just as it was when I was a state director.

Careful checking of facts on the ground, and dialogue with both neighbors and experts, helped us sense the public interest of a diverse society. The current administration seems to value short-term expediency over seeking and honestly representing community knowledge and opinions.

A century ago, a rock in Wyoming called Teapot Dome gave its name to a notorious scandal. Hoping to create a strategic underground oil reserve, then-Interior Secretary Albert Fall skirted public scrutiny and leased drilling rights to two oil companies that he had financial ties with. After years of congressional investigations and court battles, Fall was convicted of bribery. The current situation is not perfectly analogous to the 1920s, but it does provide us with a cautionary tale. Public awareness and involvement are good hedges against corruption.

After decades of service, I'm deeply disappointed by the direction the present BLM leadership has taken. It saddens me to think about how dispirited many dedicated colleagues now feel. Many of them have scientific backgrounds and they know the present trajectory is not sustainable. Nearly all BLM employees are passionate in their desire to serve the public. We should respect them in doing so.

Let's all hope that the current BLM and Interior leadership listens to the people who are in touch with local communities and knowledgeable about public lands. Ultimately, let us hope the landscapes we love as Americans are handed to our children and grandchildren intact.

Jim Kenna retired as the California state director for the Bureau of Land Management in 2015 after 40 years of public service. He is currently based in Medford, Oregon, and serves on the board of the Conservation Lands Foundation.

REVIEW

Post-apocalyptic feminism

In Lauren Beukes' *Afterland,* only women survive. Can they rebuild?

BY KIMI EISELE

Michelle Urra / HCN

IN THE ANNALS OF HISTORY and literature, it is usually girls who dress as boys — or women as men — to survive in a man's world. Joan of Arc, Sarah Edmonds and Malinda Blalock did so to fight in the wars of their time. Many women writers have used traditionally male pen names to free their work from gendered misconceptions and reach wider audiences.

But in Lauren Beukes' new novel, *Afterland*, set in 2023, in the wake of a global pandemic, a boy must present as a girl to cross the United States and eventually return home to Johannesburg, South Africa. The boy is 12-year-old Miles, son of Cole, an artist who loses her American husband to an influenza-like disease called human culgoa virus, which morphs into an aggressive prostate cancer fatal to most boys and men. Miles, fortunately, is immune.

The novel opens as Cole and Miles — now "Mila" — flee the California hospital compound where they've ended up after coming to the States to care for Miles' cousin. Their getaway is orchestrated by Cole's sister, Billie. When Cole finds out that Billie wants to sell Miles' sperm on the black market, however, she attacks her sister and escapes with her son. Together, they embark on a road trip across a changed America.

Reading about a fictional pandemic's aftermath in the middle of a real one is eerie. *Afterland*'s virus is worse than the one that causes COVID-19 — it's much deadlier, and it infects at least 5 billion people. But there are unsettling parallels, from the virus' mysterious machinations to the rapid infection rates. Cole's relatives, exposed on a trip to Disneyland, pass sniffly days in a hotel room, and some of them eventually contract the cancer. Around them, airports, shops and cafes close. "You can't imagine how much the world can change in six months," Cole thinks. "You just can't."

Beukes, a South African novelist, propels the story forward with stolen cars, flying bullets and rest stops in quirky communities. The West — and America itself — are portrayed as barren and lawless, where women brandish tire irons, guns, knives, lies and apologies to survive. This "frontier" becomes a metaphor for life-after-pandemic. Whenever the writing slows, the reader can see the landscapes. "In the early morning light, the highway is a gray crayon swipe through the salt flats crossing into Utah, craggy mountains reflected in the water," Beukes writes, comparing the view to an arid stretch between Johannesburg and Cape Town. She reminds us that it's not just the Western U.S., but the whole world, that is now ravaged; everyone is squinting through an unclear dawn.

At times, complexities are lost in the novel's quick pace. Cole and Billie's rivalry remains somewhat opaque, and we see women's roles framed — still — by the patriarchy. There's the criminal life, with its unscrupulous employers. There's the sex worker life, finally legal. And there's the nun's life, where "sisters" empty their hearts by apologizing for their transgressions. There's nothing wrong with sex workers or nuns, but I wanted to see a wider panoply of options for sexual and spiritual expression.

Cole and Miles eventually join the sisters, disguising themselves all the way to Miami, where Mila must choose between the group's vision of redemption and her own mother's. *Afterland* becomes a fierce love story, one that maps the treacherous roads a mother will travel to protect her child. Beukes gestures to the layered dynamics of gender and race (Cole is white and her son/daughter is Black), but prioritizes the story's action and momentum.

I often wanted the story to meander along side roads and linger in the homesteads, to look at how women were gardening, doctoring and building to keep society functioning. We see women undertakers and soldiers, but I longed for a post-male society that pushed past patriarchal structures, offering new models for problem-solving, safety and well-being. Am I asking for too much too soon? The story takes place only three years after the virus takes hold. Maybe the matriarchy will come to *Afterland* in time.

We do encounter a self-sufficient commune in Salt Lake City — "a bunch of anarchists, socialists, off-the-gridders, and other free radicals" who turn gardens into farm allotments. "Some people see what's happened as a chance to reinvent themselves," says Vana, a meteorologist. In front of the house sits a tractor, painted with the words "The Future Is Female" — but "Female" has been crossed out and replaced with "Fucked."

Cole and Miles/Mila don't stay long before they hit the road again, danger pressing down. Perhaps if they'd stayed a bit longer, they'd have glimpsed a future that was female, and not so "fucked" — a place where women work together to find solutions, feed one another, provide homes and grieve the dead. This may not be the future they are traveling to, but I hope it's where the rest of us end up.

Afterland
Lauren Beukes
416 pages, 416 pages,
hardcover: $14.99
Mulholland Books, 2020.

Lauren Crow / HCN

Q&A

#BlackBirdersWeek takes on racism

Sheridan Alford and the stand 'against police brutality.'

BY EMILY BENSON

SHERIDAN ALFORD'S LOVE OF BIRD-WATCHING stems from a simple fact: "Anybody can do it." Old or young, through expensive binoculars or with the naked eye (or ear), in a bucolic park or from a city window, anyone can connect to the avian world around them. Alford, a graduate student in natural resources at the University of Georgia, in Athens, Georgia, studies African American participation in bird-watching, trying to understand why some Black people engage in the activity and others don't.

She's also one of the co-founders of a social media push, #BlackBirdersWeek, which launched on May 31. The campaign was sparked by the viral video in which a white woman threatened a Black birder in New York's Central Park, announcing that she was calling the police "to tell them there's an African American man threatening my life."

"I think a lot of us identified with that scenario," Alford said in a recent interview. In response, she and other members of a grassroots group, @BlackAFinSTEM, who work in science or related fields, decided to organize a week of social media prompts. They hope to boost the visibility of Black nature enthusiasts, highlight the value of racial diversity and promote dialogue within the larger (and largely white) birding community.

High Country News caught up with Alford the day before the launch, during a tumultuous weekend of nationwide protests over police violence against Black people. In Western cities, from Albuquerque, New Mexico, to Denver and Seattle, peaceful daytime protests provoked by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis gave way to overnight chaos, as police fired tear gas and rubber bullets into crowds, and buildings and cars were destroyed. Officials responded with curfews, emergency declarations and National

Guard deployments. The organizers of Black Birders Week addressed the synchrony of their project and the civil unrest directly on Twitter: "We want it to be clear that we stand with the protesters fighting against police brutality even as we organize a protest specific to being #BlackinNature," they wrote.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Who should participate in Black Birders Week? Who is it for?

It is for Black birders. But who can participate? Anybody and everybody, and we encourage everybody to participate! We love seeing the support. When you're trying to fight for something that you believe in, sometimes you just want to know that someone else is in your corner, fighting that same fight with you.

We are not excluding anyone. The whole purpose is to highlight and showcase Black birders, and anybody can do that.

Why is the Black Birders Week initiative important at this moment?

At this point, things are popping up in cities around the country that are either racially driven or stereotypically driven, prejudice, whichever word you would like to use. The climate is shifting to where a lot of the acts against people of color or Black people are being filmed, and they are available to the general public —a lot of people are now seeing what some people have experienced their entire lives.

But we think that it's very important to highlight the work that people are actually doing and kind of drive that conversation to, yes, look at us, and please acknowledge the hardship we go through — but as you acknowledge those hardships, also look at what we've been doing in our research, or what we've been doing in our communities to better the climate as a whole. So I think this week kind of fell exactly where it needed to, as far as time frame.

It's happening right at the same time as these nationwide protests.

And there was no way we could've predicted that!

Do you see the initiative and the protests as parallel? Or not?

I see them in parallel. ... As a Black person, I feel for my people, within the riots and the protests and all the things that are happening across the country. And I think it all just further affirms and identifies what it is to be a Black person in America.

People need a break from a lot of the hurt that they're feeling. I know a lot of my counterparts are like, I'm not going to get on social media today, I'm going to take the day to myself. I think providing this uplifting and celebratory week will give people that break that they need to mentally gather themselves as a lot of these racially charged and very heated discussions are being had all across the country.

You need the heat, but you also need something to offset that sometimes. I feel like that's what Birders Week will provide.

It seems like these are two different ways to respond to the same thing — systemic racism — two different ways to try to dismantle that.

Right. Two sides of the same coin; really, the same side of the same coin. It's just different ways of hitting it at different angles, and all of it can only help, at the end of the day.

It feels like this campaign is a celebration of the diversity within the birding community — is that right?

I would say celebration, as well as a safe space. Because not everything is peaches and roses, and there are dialogues that need to be had. ... Hopefully, we'll be able to touch on some of the issues that people are truly feeling in their hearts and kind of hash things out.

What do people need to hear?

The biggest thing is just allowing peoples' voices to be heard. A lot of times, someone will say that they've created a safe space or, they'll say, like, "Oh, yeah, we want to hear what you have to say." But then when you actually step out and say it, it's not received well, or it's discounted or discarded.

It's really just about voices and accountability and understanding that everyone, especially Black people, are human beings, and we would like the same treatment as everyone else.

The climate is shifting to where a lot of the acts against people of color or Black people are being filmed, and they are available to the general public — a lot of people are now seeing what some people have experienced their entire lives.

What do you hope people watching or participating in Black Birders Week will take away from it?

I think that one of the biggest takeaways will be to kind of disprove or muddle the generic stereotype of what a birder or a bird-watcher is.

A lot of times on bird walks, the people on the walk will automatically look to the men in the group for answers. ... So it's always important to be like, actually, no, the woman said that, or actually, no, this Black person actually knows a lot about this bird; to just kind of change the narrative about what not only a Black birder is, but what a Black scientist is.

It seems like birding in particular is well-suited to this initiative.

I definitely agree. The reason I love it is because it's so accessible.

You can literally bird watch on your way to work every day. ... Bird watching is simply the observation of birds, whether you do that from your house, whether you go to a park specifically to do it, whether you have binoculars or you're just looking at the biggest bird you can see.

How's the reception been so far?

The reception has been amazing and astounding. We're all just really grateful, and really appreciative, and glad that people are looking for it; it seems to be something that a lot of people didn't know they needed.

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

Sienna Gonzales / HCN

MONTANA

F. Scott Fitzgerald famously observed that "the very rich … are different than you and me." He didn't add that it's because some of them own helicopters, but apparently helicopters do make their owners feel special, perhaps even entitled to break a few laws. Two friends riding horses through Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness recently were surprised to find a couple fishing close to a helicopter that was conveniently parked on a sandbar. It's illegal to fly or land a helicopter in designated wilderness, so one rider asked the man if it was his helicopter. The man replied, "Yeah, nice way to go, ha." When the rider then asked, "What makes you think that's OK to park it in the wilderness?" the man replied, "We are below the high-water line. It's OK. Please move along, and if there's any problem you have our tail numbers." The rider, who would only give his name as John "for fear of retribution," found that answer insufficient, reports the *Hungry Horse News*. "The conversation became heated," according to John, and the helicopter couple "thought it best to leave." Helicopter owners Sam Schwerin and his wife, Sara, who is on the advisory board of Montana State University, later had a public-relations firm release a statement about the incident, which the Forest Service says is under investigation. The statement said the Bozeman couple thought they'd landed outside the wilderness and not on the South Fork of the Flathead.

UTAH

A highway patrolman just outside Ogden, Utah, pulled over a swerving Dodge Journey recently, expecting to find a seriously ill driver inside. Instead, he discovered a 5-year-old named Adrian, whose head barely reached the top of the steering wheel. Adrian had a perfectly reasonable story: He was driving to see his sister in California, where he planned to buy a Lamborghini, because that's what you do when your stubborn mother won't buy one for you. "He might have been short on the purchase amount," reports CBS News, "as he only had $3 in his wallet.

COLORADO

Who better to give tips on life under quarantine than that master of social isolation, Billy Barr? For almost 50 years, Barr told the *Mountain West News Bureau*, he's been the only full-time resident of Gothic, a former mining town almost 10,000 feet above sea level, just outside Crested Butte. In the 1970s, he started measuring snow levels "because he was bored." That inspired his first rule of successfully living alone: "Keep track of something," whether it's the rainfall or the birds outside your house. Because once you start doing that, he said, you become part of a network of people doing the same thing. Over the decades, Barr's snowpack records have informed many studies of climate change. Rule 2 is "Keep a routine," so that even if you forget what day it is, "you know what time it is." Rule 3 says to "celebrate the stuff that matters, rather than the stuff you're supposed to celebrate." For Barr, that's Jan. 17, when the sunrise goes back to what it was on the solstice. And because visits to town — an 8-mile ski trip each way — can be stressful, he celebrates his return by watching a favorite movie and eating a good meal: "Woohoo! Big party time." Rule 4 says: "Embrace the grumpiness," because sometimes it helps to complain about, say, endless snowfall. Fortunately, Rule 5 provides his antidote for irritability: watching movies. Barr owns 357 movies, and especially enjoys "fluff-oriented" ones like *The Princess Bride* and *Love, Actually*, as well as Bollywood spectacles like *Bride and Prejudice*. About 20 years ago, Barr added a movie room to his cabin, furnished with a comfortable chair for himself, plus "two other chairs with the idea that I'd invite people up. And I never do." He's a happy man.

THE WEST

When Yellowstone National Park was still closed due to COVID-19, an impatient woman sneaked in to photograph the hot springs. But while walking backward near Old Faithful to get the perfect shot, reports *Big Sky Town Crier*, she "tumbled into a thermal feature." Burned and probably embarrassed, she drove 50 miles before park rangers intercepted her and called in a helicopter to fly her to a hospital in Idaho. No word on how the unnamed woman fared, but last fall, a tourist staying at the Old Faithful Inn suffered a similar fate. Out on a stroll one night, poking around with a flashlight, he tripped into a hot spring near the geyser's cone and suffered severe burns.

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#IAM THE WEST

SUNNY DOOLEY
Navajo storyteller
Chil Chil Tah, New Mexico

For 35 years I've been a storyteller, but there is no Navajo word for "storyteller." That's an imported word. I just grew up always being told reasons why things are the way they are and reasons why we do what we do in the proper manner. I personally was not aware that those were "stories." A story at its core, at its heart, is healing. When a person is ailing, they step into a story and that is either the blessed way or the unblessed way.

Cable Hoover / HCN

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
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