High Country News

How land acknowledgments come up short

Subsistence fishing on the LA River

COVID-19 behind bars

Vol. 53 / May 2021
No. 5 • hcn.org

BEAUTY AND BIODIVERSITY IN THE BORDERLANDS

The Los Angeles River is reflected under a freeway overpass, while, in the background, willow trees grow on an island in the soft-bottom stretch known as the Glendale Narrows. **Roberto (Bear) Guerra**

Know the West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. 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. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are $37 a year, $47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898.

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Meet HCN's new editor, Jennifer Sahn

WE USUALLY RESERVE THIS SPACE for a wide-angle glimpse of what you'll find inside the magazine, but this month, I want to discuss a different beginning: the newest member of our staff.

Editing *High Country News* is not a job for the faint of heart. We cover the West's thorniest issues and gravitate without hesitation toward difficult conversations. And you, our readers, expect incisive, fair and meaningful work. *HCN*'s new editor-in-chief, Jennifer Sahn, is up to the task.

Jennifer spent her formative years at *Orion* magazine and later helped lead *Pacific Standard*. In her 20-plus years in the business, she has earned a reputation as a thoughtful and demanding editor. Conservationist and author Terry Tempest Williams wrote to me recently to praise Jennifer as "smart, tough, rigorous and instinctive. ... She nurtures and challenges her writers at once."

Editor-in-Chief Jennifer Sahn.

Jennifer understands the power of journalism to drive dialogue, bridge cultural divides and create real change in the world. Just as importantly, she has a deep love for the West. She thrives in those places where the human and natural worlds meet — *HCN*'s native habitat.

With Jennifer at the helm, you can expect *High Country News* to stay true to its deep roots in Western soil and committed to giving you the information you need to work for a better future. The West faces daunting challenges, but we remain determined to enlighten and inspire our readers. We know you expect nothing less.

We want to express our deepest gratitude to Katherine Lanpher, who served as interim editor-in-chief this winter. Katherine worked tirelessly with our staff and freelancers to "commit great journalism," as she likes to say. She supported our editorial team through a divisive national election, an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, a rise in anti-Asian hate crimes and gun violence that hit much too close to home.

Katherine is a veteran of daily newspapers, public radio and digital news, and her tough-minded, quick-to-laugh approach proved just the right medicine for our team — and me — during these trying times. For the care that you put into each word that went into the magazine, Katherine, we thank you. Thanks, too, for taking such good care of us.

This issue showcases the wide-ranging "work of the word" that Katherine has fostered. Luke Swenson and Jack Dash's photo essay about the Atascosa Highlands introduces us to a tiny sliver of Arizona that hosts an incredible abundance of life. We hear about people who look to the LA River for sustenance and about a second-grade class in Denver tackling wolf reintroduction. There's a potent critique of land acknowledgements and a report on Eugene, Oregon's search for unique solutions in the fight against climate change.

Read on and enjoy. Here's to fresh beginnings.

Greg Hanscom, executive director and publisher

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Scrub grassland and oak woodland ecotone *(above)*.
Luke Swenson and Jack Dash

A group of middle school friends walk home across the railroad tracks in Whitehall, Montana *(right)*.
Louise Johns / HCN

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The first ecological survey of the Borderlands' Atascosa Highlands.

BY LUKE SWENSON AND JACK DASH
TEXT BY PAIGE BLANKENBUEHLER

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Carex chihuahuensis (Chihuahuan sedge), from *Atascosa Borderlands*, a visual storytelling project.
Luke Swenson and Jack Dash

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REPORTAGE

Montana counties band together to reinvigorate passenger rail 18

The newly formed Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority aims to connect a rural and divided state.
BY SURYA MILNER

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.

RACISM AGAINST ASIAN AMERICANS

Jane Hu's article about the cowardly attack on her enraged me ("The long Western legacy of violence against Asian Americans," hcn.org, 3/5/21). I was a teenager growing up in Southern California during World War II, but was unaware of the anti-Japanese American feelings, probably because my parents were able to separate our fellow citizens from the foreign enemy. I went to high school with Japanese American students but was unaware of the internment camps. Beginning in 1955, I was active in judo for 40 years and then learned of how they had been treated. I was disgusted, as were most of my generation.

It is beyond unfortunate that some of these feelings are being renewed by a few of our less-American citizens who blame others for their worries.

Tom Neff
West Linn, Oregon

DID JAMES PLYMELL NEED TO DIE?

Just want to say how much it means to me that *HCN* covered Plymell's death ("Did James Plymell Need to Die?" March 2021). The story was barely covered at the time, and that never felt right. Your coverage got the real story, which is about the intersection of an imperfect human life with the efforts of our small cities to criminalize homelessness. I live in Plymell's community and have been part of the efforts to push back on the downtown exclusion that the article describes.

"We continue to use far too much water, mainly because we are trying to support far too many people in an arid environment that can't handle it."

It means so much to me that you got the real story and connected James' loss with what determined it. It also gives us a starting place for our advocacy.

Daniel Dietz
Albany, Oregon

Stories can make you feel sadness, frustration, exhilaration. Leah Sottile's "Did James Plymell Need to Die?" made me angrier than I can remember feeling after reading any story. The graphic showing Plymell's officer contacts reveals 47 incidents from 2012 to 2019. And the officers involved in the Taser attack claimed they did not know Plymell? Ignorance is no excuse for murder. Every officer in Oregon's Albany Police Department should have been intimately aware of Plymell and his mental health issues well before the minor incident that ended his life. Leadership starts at the top. Officers should have known better even without the head's-up. Thank you, Leah, for following through big-time on a grant from the Fund for Investigative Journalism.

Richard Trout
Hobbs, New Mexico

HIGH AND DRY

In response to "High and Dry" (March 2021), I agree, our water crisis in the West is terrifying. However, to me, what's truly terrifying, is that we've known this for decades. *HCN* does a wonderful job of reporting on the crisis, yet we never change. We continue to use far too much water, mainly because we are trying to support far too many people in an arid environment that can't handle it. And, to make it worse, we waste at least half of that water with our lawns, pools, golf courses and long showers. We regard farmers as competitors for water, when they are using it to grow our food. Isn't it time to start thinking about long-term population control and reduction, instead of accepting continued growth as "business as usual"? Is our own insanity going to take us down, or are we going to start actually doing something about our overpopulation?

Julie Smith
Golden, Colorado

THE NEXT MINING BOOM?

Thirteen years ago, I was fortunate enough to live and work with my spouse in a remote region of Nevada near the Ruby Mountains. I'm not sure I saw a single person besides my partner during the entire field season. I have yet to return to this spot and now, after reading your recent article on the new lithium mine "The next mining boom?" (March 2021), I doubt I ever will.

Ranchers like the gentleman quoted in your article deserve honest answers. Even more do the tribes that have inhabited remote regions of Nevada/Oregon for eons. But what do I know? I'm just some simpleton with a flip phone who would much rather squint into the sun than at a smartphone screen.

Ether Kell
Idahome Road, Idaho

A RECONCILIATION

Thank you for your heart-warming article, "A reconciliation," on the tribes reclaiming the National Bison Range (February 2021). Anna V. Smith drew me right into the landscape, the people and the issues with her excellent writing style. The article also gave me hope that a few of the massive wrongs vested upon our Native peoples are being addressed, at least in a small way.

Steve Jesseph
Raleigh, North Carolina

LIFE AFTER COAL

I write in appreciation of Jessica Kutz's piece about the end of the Navajo Generating Station and the Navajo Nation's struggle for control of its energy ("Life After Coal," February 2021). I really enjoyed the calm, in-depth exploration of the whole story.

It has strong resonances here in Australia, where Indigenous peoples have nothing like parity with the non-Indigenous people who run the show on their land.

Jackie Clark
Australia

JOAN DIDION'S FRONTIER

I have read Alex Trimble Young's review of *Let Me Tell You What I Mean* twice now ("Finding meaning on Joan Didion's frontier," February 2021) and cannot find any relevance to the usual subject matter of *High Country News,* which in itself has diverged so much from the original news information of the West. Thanks for allowing me to express my opinion.

Carolyn Shaw
Flagstaff, Arizona

Has Eugene, Oregon, found a 'superpower' for climate action?

A new natural gas contract could help fund the city's climate ambitions.

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

TYEE WILLIAMS HAS BEEN on the frontlines of climate change as a wildland firefighter. He helped battle the Pine Gulch Fire, one of three record-setting fires in Colorado last summer and fall — all scorching examples of how the climate crisis is intensifying wildfires in the Western U.S.

Back home in Eugene, Oregon, Williams is on another vanguard of the climate fight: a push for the city to cut fossil fuel consumption. That work includes pressing the Eugene City Council to revamp its operating agreement with the local gas utility, Northwest Natural, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

In testimony before the city council in February, Williams shared his experience, which included digging a fire line to protect natural gas infrastructure. "On one side I could see the glow of the wildfire, and on the other hillside I could see flares from the gas wellheads from fracked gas," Williams said during a virtual public meeting. To him, the connection between fossil fuel emissions and worsening wildfires is clear. "As someone who will have jobs created by Northwest Natural, I would like to say, I'm not appreciative of it."

The current operating agreement with Northwest Natural is set to expire in May. Renegotiations, however, are stalled, in part because the city is pushing to include funding for its ambitious climate plans in the contract. Natural gas accounts for about 40% of fossil fuel use in the city, so the city sees reducing gas burning as a key to reaching climate commitments. By tying climate action funding to the gas company's operating agreement, the city is testing a new tool for municipalities across the Western U.S. looking to phase out fossil fuels.

Avery Temple of the advocacy group Breach Collective speaks during a March protest outside the offices of Northwest Natural, the Eugene, Oregon, gas utility. The "die-in" represented deaths due to fossil fuel pollution. **Robert Scherle**

The contract dispute between Eugene and Northwest Natural is over the utility's franchise agreement, which grants it the ability to bypass certain bureaucratic hurdles: for example, filing a permit or getting an inspection every time it installs a new hookup. The expiration of the agreement doesn't mean gas customers will suddenly have their gas shut off. But it would mean the gas company will face more red tape, and Eugene will miss out on the approximately $1.4 million the gas company pays each year under the agreement.

One of the main sticking points in the negotiations, which started in 2019, is a carbon fee program proposed by the city. It would add at least $740,000 per year to existing franchise fees charged to Northwest Natural, and would primarily fund residential energy-efficiency programs. It would also pay for carbon offsets and investments in renewable natural gas — gas from non-fossil fuel sources like landfills and feedlots. Eugene asserted that the fund is a condition of any new contract, while Northwest Natural argued that it should remain separate from the franchise agreement.

Climate and environmental justice advocates see the negotiations as part of a just transition away from fossil fuels. "We can't just say we don't want natural gas," said Aimee Okotie-Oyekan, the environmental and climate justice coordinator for the Eugene-Springfield chapter of the NAACP. "We need to be building the alternative." The carbon fee program would pay for home improvements like insulation, which reduces energy consumption and lowers bills.

Throughout the ongoing contract disputes, Northwest Natural has maintained that its infrastructure can be part of climate solutions, particularly with renewable natural gas. "No matter the outcome of discussions with the City of Eugene, we are moving forward with our vision of a carbon-neutral pipeline by 2050," Kim Heiting, Northwest Natural's senior vice president of operations, wrote in an email.

But Eugene isn't willing to wait on an uncertain future of cleaner gas. In 2014, the city passed an ordinance to reduce fossil fuel use to 50% of 2010 levels by 2030. Despite overall emissions reductions in recent years, natural gas emissions in the city continue to grow. Not reaching an agreement with Northwest Natural could lead to protracted court fights, increased energy bills for customers and more work for city staff as they deal with an influx of permits, but Eugene Mayor Lucy Vinis said that isn't what she worries about most. "My biggest concern is that we're facing a climate crisis," she said.

Standing firm against the gas company is about climate leadership, Vinis added. "That's why we want to succeed — this is an important pathway, and we'd hope other cities would follow." Policy experts see Eugene leading the way for other municipalities, like King County, where Seattle is located, by providing an example of how to leverage franchise agreements as a tool for climate action, said Eric de Place, the director of the nonprofit Sightline Institute's Thin Green Line program, which fights fossil fuel infrastructure expansion in the Northwest. Making gas companies pay for climate resilience as a condition of franchise agreements "is a superpower when it comes to decarbonization," he said. "It changes the nature of the conversation dramatically."

Mature cannabis plants filled a greenhouse before they were pulled by law enforcement authorities in Cudei, New Mexico last year *(above)*. **Don Usner / Searchlight New Mexico**

Rows of unpermitted greenhouses filled with illegal cannabis plants could be seen in the northeastern corner of the Navajo Nation last summer, with the distinctive peak of Shiprock in the distance *(right)*. **Wufei Yu / Initium Media**

Dineh Benally in a 2014 photo taken when he was a candidate for Navajo Nation vice president. Here, Benally looks on as running mate Joe Shirley speaks at an event in Window Rock, Arizona *(facing)*. **Adron Gardner**

Pine Ridge or bust

Even as Dineh Benally's illegal cannabis operations on the Navajo Nation are under investigation, he's looking for more opportunities across Indian Country.

BY ED WILLIAMS & WUFEI YU

LAST YEAR, DINEH BENALLY, the former president of the San Juan River Farm Board on the Navajo Nation, oversaw the transformation of 400 acres of cropland into illegal marijuana farms across the Shiprock chapter in the northeast corner of the reservation.

Despite a state, federal and tribal crackdown on the operation, multiple sources told *Searchlight New Mexico* and *High Country News* that Benally is attempting to establish new cannabis ventures in other Native communities. A source confirmed this to the *Navajo Times*.

Navajo Nation Police Chief Philip Francisco said that law enforcement did not know Benally's whereabouts and presumed he was in hiding after the November raids. Benally has several pending cases in tribal courts, and at least one federal investigation remains underway.

"We can't find him to serve paperwork" for those cases, Francisco said on Thursday. "We haven't seen or heard anything from him for a while."

At its peak, the cannabis operation employed more than 1,000 Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants, mainly from California, as well as local Diné children as young as 10. *Searchlight New Mexico's* investigation revealed that Benally and his partners paid laborers as little as $5 an hour in cash, and that dozens of labor-trafficking victims of Chinese descent endured harsh working conditions and suffered racist confrontations, culminating in a harrowing armed standoff in which protesters set several greenhouses on fire. Last November, law enforcement agencies seized more than 60,000 pounds of illegal marijuana plants from grow sites in Shiprock — one of the largest cannabis busts in the country, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency.

Through his business partners in Los Angeles at the time, Benally, who dubbed himself the "father of Native American hemp," portrayed the farms as legal operations to investors and workers of Chinese descent. On the Navajo Nation, he advertised his black-market project as a legal hemp operation meant for economic development.

IN MARCH 2020, members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe voted to legalize medical and recreational marijuana on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, becoming one of the first Native American nations to set up a market for recreational cannabis in areas bordering states where it is illegal. Tribal leaders told The Associated Press that they envisioned creating a marijuana resort, calling marijuana a "healing plant" that could alleviate poverty and historical trauma. The tribe's marijuana laws, which were finalized by the Oglala Sioux Tribal Council in late October, allow only tribal members to grow and sell marijuana.

For months, Benally has traveled to South Dakota, according to three investors and workers who were involved in his Shiprock operation. In late January, the Oglala Sioux Tribal Council voted to bar Benally from conducting any business on the reservation, citing concerns over the marijuana bust in Shiprock.

Yet Benally has continued to maintain a presence on the reservation. As recently as Feb. 6, Benally gave a presentation to tribal members on behalf of the Palliation Collaborative, an organization that promotes the use of medical cannabis on tribal lands. In that presentation, Benally echoed much of the same rhetoric he employed to promote his cannabis operation in Shiprock.

"We, the Native people, want excellent, superior health care," Benally told the audience. "We want agriculture, development. We want trade and commerce. But most of all, we want to stand on our own two feet."

Meanwhile, Benally's previous partners from the Shiprock operation confirmed that he has also approached them about his Pine Ridge marijuana plans and solicited their investment. As of mid-March, none of his previous partners expressed any interest, citing the fallout from the Shiprock deal and the millions of dollars they lost. "Don't ever make a deal with Dineh," Irving Lin, a Taiwan-born marijuana entrepreneur who coordinated between Benally and dozens of marijuana investors in California, told *High Country News* and *Searchlight New Mexico*. "He's lost his credibility."

Dineh Benally and his attorney, David Jordan, did not respond to requests for comment by press time.

As Benally pursues ventures elsewhere, Navajo families whose lands were home to his illegal Shiprock operation are now facing the loss of the right to farm on their properties. On March 16, the San Juan River Farm Board voted to start the process of stripping land-use rights from farmers who participated in Benally's marijuana operation — a fraught process that, if successful, would take away farming rights from dozens of families.

"This is a big deal," said Anita Hayes, who holds a land-use permit in the Shiprock area. "This is Indian land. This belongs to the farmers from generations and years back."

This story was produced in collaboration with Searchlight New Mexico.

REPORTAGE

A South Valley solution?

In New Mexico, one community's fight for environmental justice could be aided by a new wildlife refuge.

BY JESSICA KUTZ | PHOTOS BY GABRIELA CAMPOS / HCN

Crows take flight as the sun sets at Valle De Oro National Wildlife Refuge in early April.

ALBUQUERQUE'S SOUTH VALLEY was once a thriving oasis of food production watered by a network of centuries-old irrigation canals, or *acequias*. Today, it's home to several historic neighborhoods along the Rio Grande, including Mountain View.

After much of the area was rezoned in the 1960s, the residents, who are mainly Chicanos and recent immigrants, came under siege by the structural forces of environmental racism that dictate who lives near polluters and who doesn't. Mountain View was soon enveloped by industry — auto recyclers, Albuquerque's sewage plant, paint facilities and fertilizer suppliers — that left a legacy of contaminated groundwater, two Superfund sites and high levels of air pollution.

Now, six decades later, Mountain View is facing yet another transformation. In 2012, the community became the first in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southwest region to have a piece of land within it — 570 acres — designated as an "urban wildlife refuge" and managed by the agency. The Fish and Wildlife Service started the program 11 years ago as a way to connect with new and more diverse segments of the population — including the 82% of Americans who reside in cities — by meeting people where they live. The preserve, known as the Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge, sits on land that once was a dairy farm. After years of planning, its visitor center will officially open this fall.

Since this is one of the few wildlife refuges located in an industry-burdened community, refuge staff and community leaders are working to leverage its open space to create a healthier environment, not just for raptors and swallows, but for the people of Mountain View, as well.

The refuge is a work in progress, currently undergoing a slow transition from fallow farm fields to wetlands. The visitor center is under construction, and trails that will eventually carve through a restored Rio Grande bosque, the cottonwood forest that lines the river, are still being planned out. It's very much in an "ugly duckling phase," refuge manager Jennifer Owen-White said on the phone in late February. But despite its incomplete state, the refuge has remained open: Student groups visit it on field trips, and, during the pandemic, it has provided an important green space for the locals.

For communities like Mountain View, where 74% of residents identify as Latino, this kind of access to open space is rare. Several studies have revealed the unequal distribution of green space in the U.S., where white residents have greater access to parks than low-income communities of color.

But this piece of undeveloped property is notable for another reason, too, said Richard Moore, a local environmental justice activist who now serves on the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council. When the former dairy farm went up for sale in 2010, there were rumors that Albuquerque's sewage treatment plant, also located in Mountain View, was eyeing it as a place to expand its operations. "One of the solutions was to save those acres in a primarily Chicano community there," Moore told me last November. "Once that happened and we were able to get it declared as a federal refuge, that locked everything out except what the community wanted in."

Moore is one of several organizers who fought for decades against industrial pollution in Mountain View and across the country, rising to national prominence in the environmental justice movement. He's now working with the refuge to align the priorities of the land with those of the community through his nonprofit, the Los Jardines Institute. One way of doing this has been through the creation of *The Valle de Oro Environmental and Economic Justice Strategic Plan* — the first of its kind to steer a wildlife refuge's goals. The plan was developed by the Institute and the refuge's nonprofit arm, the Friends of Valle de Oro.

The refuge's role goes beyond the typical mandate to protect wildlife and plants; it is also engaged in developing community resources, such as a "living classroom" where students can learn about the flora and fauna. It's also hiring local teens for seasonal youth corps positions, among other types of community engagement. Still, Owen-White knows there is a lot of work to do when it comes to engaging with the local residents. "But trust gets built over generations, not over five years or seven years," she said.

As part of building that trust, the refuge staff has promised to notify residents of hearings for proposed new industrial projects. Most recently, a construction permit for an asphalt plant was approved in October less than a mile from the refuge. Residents filed a petition to appeal the permit, arguing that siting more industry is a form of discrimination that "violates the state's constitutional legal guarantee of equal protection and due process," said Eric Jantz, an attorney with the New Mexico Environmental Law Center, who is representing community groups.

Though it can't legally get involved, the wildlife refuge has submitted its own comments to the city's Environmental Health Department about the plant's possible impacts on wildlife. And the Friends of Valle De Oro has signed on as a co-petitioner. It's a striking example of how the community's needs and the refuge's needs intersect. After all, what is harmful to wildlife and the land is generally harmful to people.

But it also points to a frustrating reality: That residents see their own health prioritized only if there is wildlife habitat in their neighborhood deemed worthy of protecting. "Unfortunately, people tend to — or at least people with money and power tend to — gravitate more toward protecting these places than their neighbors," Jantz said. He's alluding to a criticism voiced by environmental justice organizers for years — that the conservation movement and its supporters have been more focused on preserving the environment as a place for wildlife than as a place where people also live.

Mountain View residents like Magdalena Avila worry that as more outsiders become invested in the refuge — 80% of the nonprofit's membership is composed of wildlife and outdoor enthusiasts based in Albuquerque and elsewhere — the neighborhood's makeup, and its cultural identity, could change. "Valle de Oro cannot become more important than the people of this community," Avila told me over Zoom one afternoon from her home.

Avila first moved to Mountain View in the 1990s, and to her, it's always felt like home. "(There's) a cultural rootedness that makes it special," she told me. "Here you'll hear parties, especially around graduation or in the summer, *puro mariachis* and *banda* and stuff, all that ambiance is just very *raza*, I love that." For decades, she has worked as a public health researcher and an activist, and up until last year, she taught classes about health equity at the University of New Mexico. Moore, Avila and Avila's husband, Lauro Silva, became strong voices in the early environmental justice movement. (Silva is also a co-petitioner on the case against the asphalt plant.)

For Avila, Mountain View has to be seen as an equal partner, with community members having more ownership over Valle de Oro's future. She'd like to see benefits that extend beyond programming, like full-time jobs for residents — in other words, more equitable representation at the refuge.

Aryn LaBrake, the executive director of the Friends of Valle de Oro group, says she understands Avila's concerns. The aim of the refuge's youth corps program is to train residents for future employment, she explains. She hopes the refuge can be seen as a model for other partnerships working across class and culture or race. "The refuge, their staff, the friends group and our staff are absolutely committed to going above and beyond to provide support to our local community."

Meanwhile, there are still some big issues to tackle, including how to mitigate Valle de Oro's potential impacts on the community. New amenities like a refuge and a bicycle trail that leads to it could raise property values. The phenomenon is called green gentrification, and Avila fears that if the community members don't stay vigilant, Mountain View will hollow out and go the way of other tourism-based towns like Santa Fe — becoming an artifact of itself.

"Part of organizing and community engagement and the social justice is to ensure the grounding of the Chicanos in this community, the immigrants in this community, the residents of that legacy that is here," Avila said. "We don't want to be erased."

Richard Moore, the co-founder of the Los Jardines Institute, sits near the institute's hoop house and newly planted crops in early April *(top right).*

Artist Nanibah (Nani) Chacon's mural near the Valle De Oro National Wildlife Refuge's new visitor center depicts its pollinator garden. Chacon's mural is one of five created by female artists to represent the different habitats in the refuge *(bottom right).*

Caitlin Robb, 8, shows a drawing she made in her STEM Lab class on reducing conflict around Colorado's controversial wolf reintroduction.

REPORTAGE

'Wolves are AMAAAAZING!'

A Denver-area STEM class shares ideas for reducing conflict around Colorado's wolf reintroduction.

BY PAIGE BLANKENBUEHLER | PHOTOS BY ELI IMADALI / HCN

AS HAPPENS SO FREQUENTLY these days, a Zoom room on a morning in March filled with participants. Faceless black blocks assembled, while four 8-year-olds, Rhyker, Zach, Karma, Amelia — or, as they would be called that morning, the "Wolfteam Friends" — jittered in front of a camera from their classroom in Northglenn, a Denver-area suburb.

"Thank you for being here," a boy wearing a light-blue button-down with a tie said carefully into a black microphone. Amelia took the floor, her pink bow bobbing. "Our idea is to help people learn to live with wolves!"

Three groups of second-graders planned to speak that day (two of them in person) to a crowd of some 30 far-flung onlookers, mostly comprising educators, conservationists and parents.

"We are going to be teaching ranchers that the cattle ..." Amelia's voice became hushed "... has to remain still." Their poster presentation, with slides shared over Zoom, detailed their plans to advertise their ideas at feed stores and markets. The hope is that well-trained herding dogs and some fine-tuned techniques can help ranchers train livestock to keep calm rather than scatter in the presence of a predator.

The Wolfteam Friends occasionally got distracted: "Wolves are not a threat!" they all whooped. They took turns describing some of their slides. One showed a wolf with its neck stretched out and snout pointing upward: "And, and ... um this is how wolves communicate when they're lost: *howwwwlll!!!*"

They all added in unison: *"Owwwwwwwwww!"*

"Do you know why they don't care?" Amelia asked, referring to the calm, unruffled cattle, getting back to the crux of their presentation. "Because wolves like hunting running animals, not ones that are bored like bison." Her voice dropped low and then *soared* in pitch. "OMG you should love wolves and you actually should because wolves are awesome. ... Wolves are AMAAAAZING! Because they help the ecosystem and are amazing," she said, tugging at her hot pink face mask.

They concluded their presentation by howling.

In dresses, blazers, large pink bows, some sporting fluffy wolf ears, the group of a dozen second-graders from the STEM Lab, a K-8 elementary school with a "problem-based learning" approach, presented their proposals, sourced from months of research, about how to prepare the public for wolf reintroduction. They had a range of suggestions "to help people overcome fear."

Last November, for the first time, voters undertook a groundbreaking conservation experiment when they opted to reintroduce gray wolves to the state. Colorado Parks and Wildlife is tasked with the reintroduction — and now, these students are taking a whack at it, too.

Back in the classroom, the "Wolves Explorers" were up. A boy with a blond mohawk introduced their idea. "In order to protect humans, our project is lasers and alarms in campgrounds," he said. "Our stakeholders are campers," he said as the next slide appeared: "And here's the sound going off."

"Humans are the biggest threat to wolves," one of the girls in the group said. "Scaring wolves away from humans protects the humans and the wolf. The red laser does not hurt wolves. Sounds don't hurt, they only scare them."

"What a fabulous idea you have there!" said Kevin Crooks, the director of Colorado State University's Center for Human-Carnivore Coexistence, from his very own Zoom block. "I actually think that could work."

EACH YEAR, STUDENTS at the STEM Lab research and present proposals and solutions for a real-world problem. This year's project — reducing conflict around Colorado's contentious wolf reintroduction — began in January after parents, teachers and STEM Lab leaders chose the topic. "Last year, students had been working on whether or not we even should introduce wolves," said Andrea Overton, the STEM Lab coordinator. Now it was time for the next steps in the reintroduction, and educators thought the topic posed enough perplexing problems to keep the students busy. "With such a narrow margin in the legislation passing," Overton said, "it was clear there were issues around this. You know, clearly not everyone here agrees."

Wolf reintroduction has been notoriously inflammatory, not just in Colorado, but also in other Western states that have brought back populations of *Canis lupus*. The issue is a thorny one, involving conflicts between property owners, conservationists and communities. There are few neat solutions to the question of exactly where wolves belong, especially when wilderness overlaps with livestock, hikers, pets and neighborhoods.

In the months before the presentations, the three second-grade classes at STEM Lab met with experts from Colorado Parks and Wildlife, land managers, and activists from the environmental organization Defenders of Wildlife. They watched countless videos and read articles as they researched the topic. They didn't meet in person with ranchers or agricultural workers — as suburban students, they lack proximity to those perspectives — but they watched videos from groups opposed to reintroduction. "We made sure that students explored all sides of the issue," Overton said. "We wanted them to approach this from the lens: How can this be successful for humans and wolves? How can we minimize negative impacts from humans and wolves living together again?"

Besides presenting proposals for keeping cattle calm and using lasers and sounds to scare away wolves, the students urged people to be smart around wolves: "Put your hands over your head or put your jacket over your head and make yourself big, so that the animal knows you are too big to mess with. LEAVE ME ALONE!" said Saanvi, who was wearing wolf ears. She was one of the students presenting in the group that opted to stay fully remote for the school year. "And don't forget. ... *BEEEEEE SMART!*"

Crooks, who is with CSU's Center for Human-Carnivore Coexistence, sat on the expert panel judging an earlier presentation; he is also a professor at the university's Department of Fish, Wildlife and Conservation Biology. He was struck by the enthusiasm and optimism of the young presenters.

"Wolves are symbols of much deeper issues, conflict and unresolved societal debates. Some of those attitudes and values are formed early in age," Crooks told me by phone after the presentations. "It's really important to start to engage young people at early ages to start to educate them about these kind of conservation issues — but also to hear from them about their ideas.

"To hear children offering those suggestions in a very positive manner," he said, "it's just encouraging. It gives you hope about the future."

The STEM Lab is a suburban school, located in a suburban county, accustomed to non-rural issues. In several interviews after the presentation, teachers, parents and organizers told me they hadn't heard any criticism of the project from parents or the community. When Proposition 114, the ballot measure on wolf reintroduction, was finally called weeks after the November election, voters opted by a razor-thin margin to say yes, indeed, bring wolves back to the state. The win, with urban and suburban counties largely carrying the victory, illuminated the rural-urban divide (though there were tipping-point rural counties containing towns such as Aspen, Durango and Telluride that were more widely in favor of reintroduction). Adams, an urban county spanning parts of Denver, the city of Aurora, Thornton and Northglenn — home to the STEM Lab — voted for Prop 114 by more than 8,500 votes. "It would be interesting and useful to have those same kinds of discussions with kids in rural communities where you have more of their parents or families or communities dealing with conflict with predators — not just wolves but predators in general," Crooks said. "Those whose livelihoods might be more tied to agriculture or hunting."

After the presentation, I connected with JP Robb, whose daughter, Caitlin, was in the third group and whose dog, Frank, a 45-pound shepherd-collie mix, "sleeps on the couch and lives a very nice life." Caitlin had discovered her own "wolf passion" back in October; when Robb and his wife were weighing whether to vote "yes" or "no" on Prop 114, Caitlin chimed in an emphatic "yes!"

"We were like, 'What?' She was 7 years old at the time," Robb told me. "We just asked her, 'Why do you think wolves are great?' and she said something like they keep the ecosystem in Yellowstone in balance — maybe she said 'nature' — but in any case, I was really surprised by that. And she was just like 'Yeah! When there are no wolves there are too many elk and they eat too many plants and there are no places for the birds to go.' I remember thinking, wow, what are you doing in school? This is awesome."

Caitlin will be 10 by the time wolves are officially back on the landscape in 2023.

"These days, she's reading a lot and her latest thing is that she really wants to see one," Robb said. "We backpack and hike a lot as a family, and she asked me recently: 'Do you think they're bigger than Frank?' "

"Oh, yes," he told her, "I think they're bigger than Frank."

Caitlin and her father, JP Robb, sit for a portrait outside their Broomfield, Colorado home *(far left).*

Caitlin shares a moment with her dog, Frank, at home *(near left).*

REPORTAGE

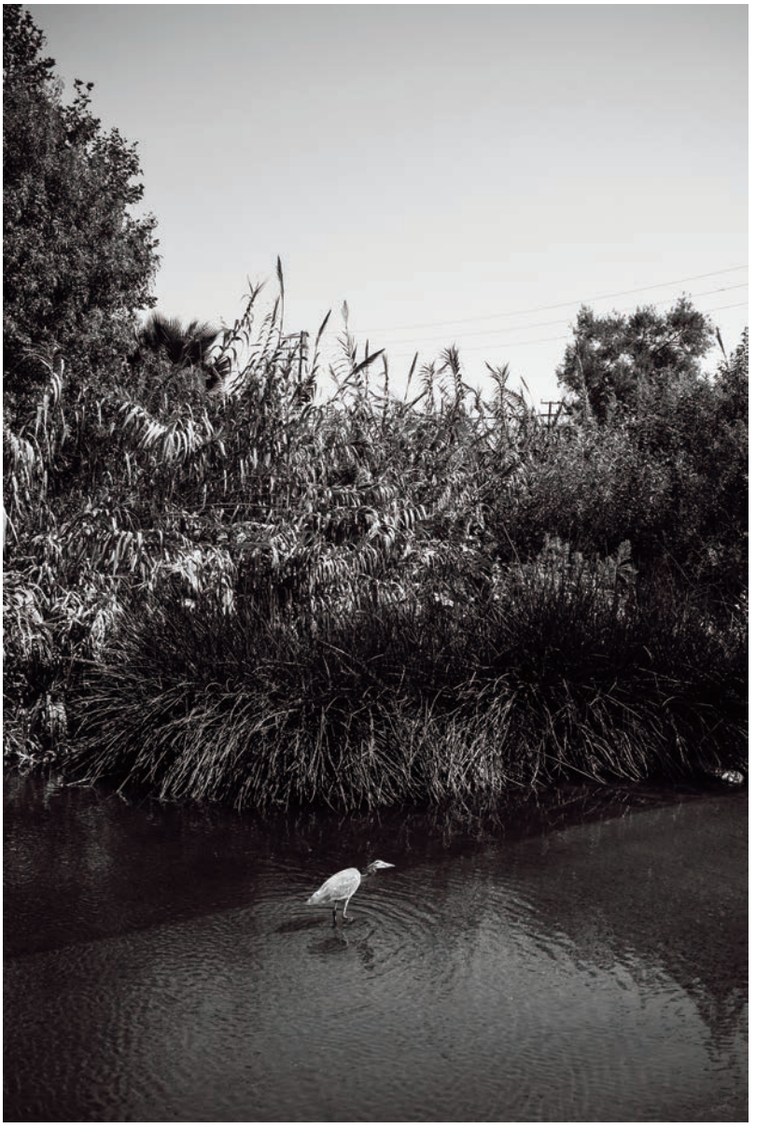
The Los Angeles River's overlooked anglers

Unhoused Angelenos use the urban river as a source of sustenance, but a proposal to revitalize the waterway could push them out.

BY MILES GRIFFIS | PHOTOS BY ROBERTO (BEAR) GUERRA

Samuel (last name not given), an unhoused resident of the LA River, fishes for a meal under a freeway bridge near "Frogtown," a river-adjacent neighborhood that has seen a steep rise in property values in recent years (*left*).

A great blue heron searches for fish in the 11-mile long stretch of the river known as the Glendale Narrows *(below)*.



ON A MARCH AFTERNOON on the Los Angeles River, two anglers waded in the concrete channel of the Glendale Narrows, casting their lines for carp and largemouth bass. Above them, a belted kingfisher perched on a mattress that had been caught in the crook of a budding cottonwood during a recent storm surge. Some recreationists enjoy catch-and-release on the river, but others — low-income and unhoused people who need sustenance — were hoping to leave with coolers, buckets or even shopping carts full of freshly caught fish.

For over 10,000 years, the Los Angeles River — known to the local Gabrieliño-Tongva tribe as Paayme Paxaayt — has provided food, water and a way of life to residents of the Los Angeles Basin. Steelhead trout once spawned in its headwaters and helped feed the numerous villages along its course. But since 1938, the 51-mile river has been bound in concrete. Now, many worry that its fish aren't safe to consume, a stigma that has long loomed over angling here.

"Most tend to think the quality of the water in the Los Angeles River is poor, but it's fairly clean water," says Sabrina Drill, natural resources advisor for the University of California Cooperative Extension. While toxicity varies by species and location on the river, a 2019 LA River report found that a person can safely consume 8 ounces of common carp, bluegill, and green sunfish, up to three times per week. Still, Drill did not recommend this, since most of the studies contained small samples.

Yet many unhoused and other low-income Angelenos — over a thousand people a year, according to some experts — supplement their diets with the urban river's fish and crustaceans. Nearly 9,000 of the estimated 66,000 unhoused people in Los Angeles County live along the river, where they've set up camps and shelters — even small gardens with fruit trees, bushes and terraced agriculture, hidden off its concrete banks.

Their future, however, has become even more tenuous with the recent draft of the LA River Master Plan, a massive proposal to revitalize portions of the river with pavilions, cultural centers and multimillion-dollar parks. The plan — developed by a committee of nonprofit organizations, municipalities and governmental entities, assisted by public comment — will be released later this year. But already advocates have raised concerns, and groups like the Eastyard Center for Environmental Justice are worried about the prospect of "green gentrification," which occurs when housing prices rise after parks are built in historically marginalized communities.

The draft plan's environmental impact report suggests that many homeless encampments are likely to be removed during construction, and that law enforcement patrols will increase to prevent new ones from forming. The plan offers no housing solutions for the thousands of people currently living on the river.

Homeless advocates worry that those who will be most heavily impacted by the plan had no chance to comment, since many who live on the river lack reliable access to the internet or are unable to attend public meetings. "What's

(continued on page 36)

Firearms frenzy

Putting recent events in context.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

ON MARCH 22, a young man pulled into the parking lot of a King Soopers in Boulder, Colorado, got out of his car and shot an elderly man several times before walking into the store and shooting people indiscriminately with a semi-automatic weapon. By the time his rampage was over, 10 people were dead, including grocery store workers, shoppers and the first police officer who responded to the call. This was just six days after a shooter killed eight people, mostly Asian women, in Atlanta, Georgia. Then, just over a week later, on March 31, another man shot and killed four people, including a 9-year-old-boy, in Orange County, California.

The shootings kicked off what has become a gruesome and familiar routine. Calls for tighter controls on firearms rang out from the halls of state capitols to Washington, D.C., followed closely by cries from the National Rifle Association, warning followers that the government is coming for their guns. Americans then embarked on a gun-buying frenzy.

It's hard to imagine how firearms manufacturers can keep up with such a surge, however. During most of the Trump administration era, sales were relatively flat — even after a gunman killed 58 people at a Las Vegas music festival — because gun-lovers knew that Donald Trump wouldn't sign any new gun laws. But when COVID-19 hit the United States, guns and ammo began flying off the shelves at unprecedented levels. The busiest week ever for the FBI's background check system was in March 2020, rivaled only by the weeks following the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting.

A few months later, gun dealers had another hectic week, when Black Lives Matter-related demonstrations reached a crescendo. They were even busier following the election of President Joe Biden, who as a senator had helped pass a ban on assault weapons. In 2020, the FBI conducted 40% more background checks than the previous year. The National Shooting Sports Foundation estimates that this translates to some 21 million guns actually sold, with about 8 million going to first-time gun buyers.

It was a boon for Ruger and Smith & Wesson, the nation's largest firearms manufacturers, both of which reported record sales and profits last year. But the rush to acquire guns correlated with a significant and deadly uptick in gun-related violence.

Last year, there was a pause in mass shootings as narrowly defined — meaning incidents in which a single gunman kills four or more people in a public place. (Drug- or gang-related shootings and most domestic violence shootings are not included.) That's only a tiny sliver of the bigger picture, however.

Gun violence actually escalated dramatically last year, leaving record numbers of people dead or injured. And if gun sales are any indication, there's no end in sight: This January was the busiest month ever for the firearms background check system.

Infographic design:
Luna Anna Archey / HCN
Sources: Gun Violence Archive; The Trace; Open Secrets; Rand Corporation; Smith & Wesson financial report; Small Arms Survey; Ruger financial report; U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; Federal Bureau of Investigation

393 million

Number of firearms owned by civilians in the United States as of 2017, according to the Small Arms Survey

120; 19; 1

Number of firearms per 100 people in the United States; Germany; and Japan, respectively.

The 10 busiest weeks for the National Instant Criminal Background Check System since its implementation in 1998 (as of March 31, 2021):

1. March 15-21, 2021
1,218,002 (Mass shootings in Georgia and Colorado)

2. March 16-22, 2020
1,197,788 (Coronavirus outbreak)

3. Jan. 11-17, 2021
1,082,449 (Capitol insurrection)

4. March 22-28, 2021
1,080,245 (Mass shootings in Georgia and Colorado)

5. Jan. 4-10, 2021
1,071,820 (Capitol insurrection)

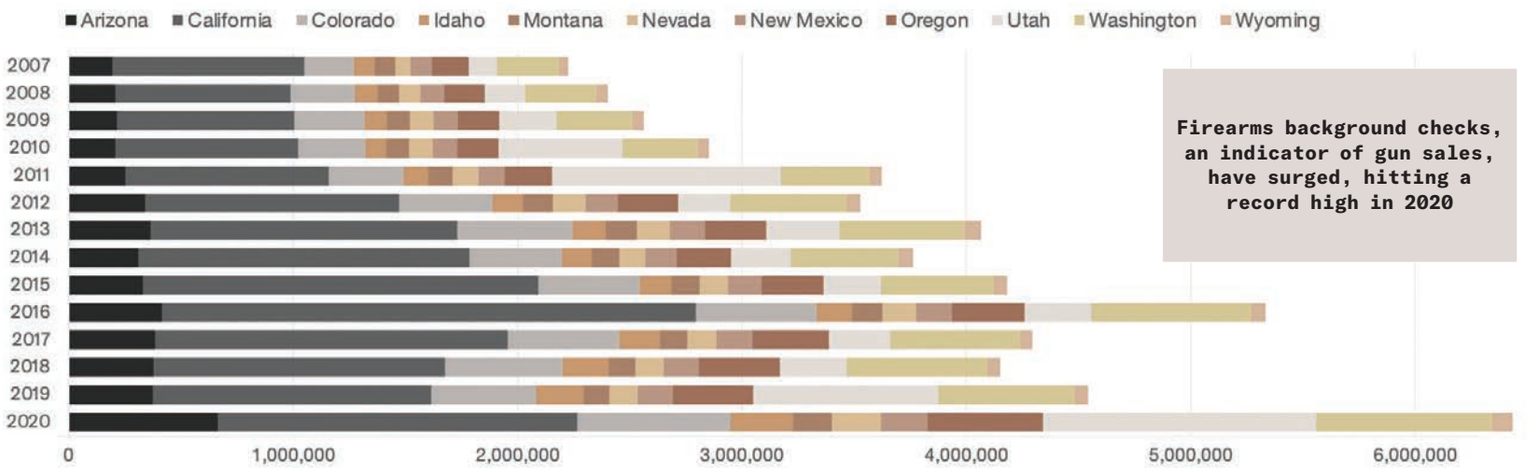
6. June 1-7, 2020
1,004,798 (Black Lives Matter-related demonstrations)

7. Jan. 18-24, 2021
976,637 (Inauguration)

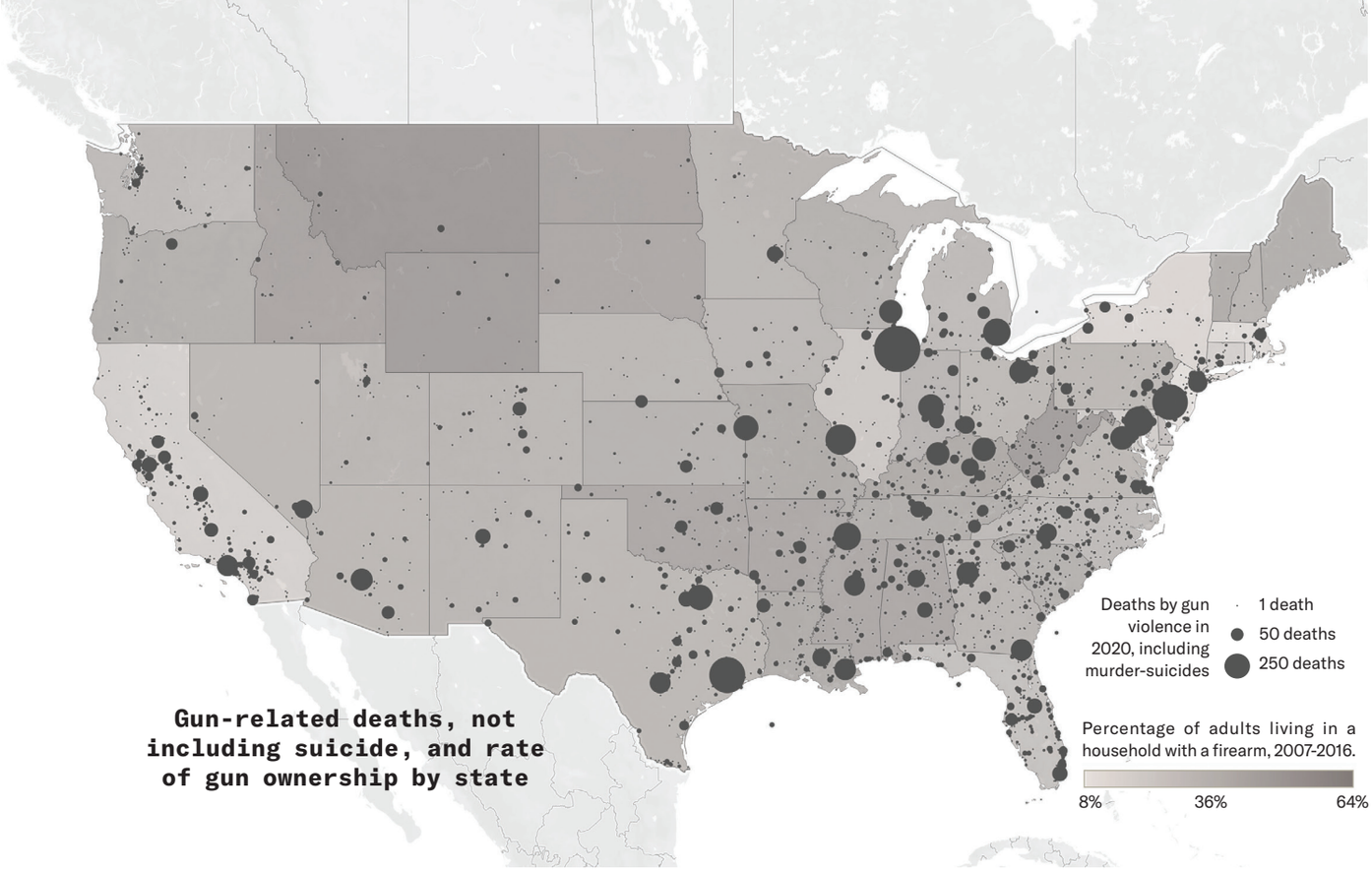
8. Dec. 14-20, 2020
973,470 (Biden wins election)

9. Dec. 17-23, 2012
953,612 (Sandy Hook shooting)

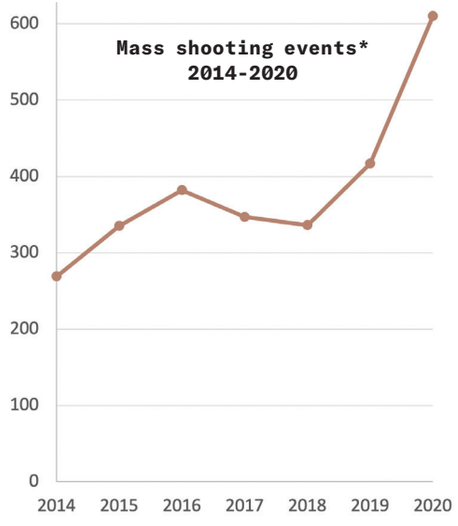
10. Nov. 2-8, 2020
936,673 (Election Day)



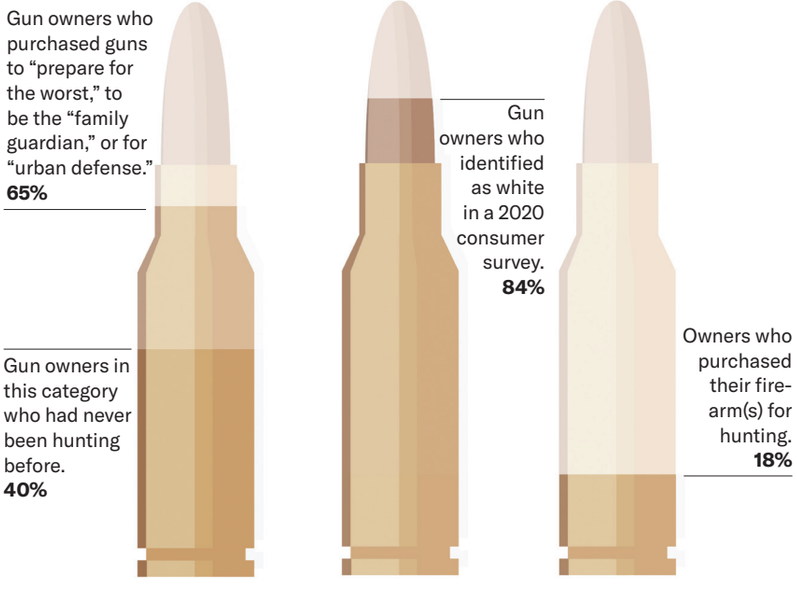
Firearms background checks, an indicator of gun sales, have surged, hitting a record high in 2020



Gun-related deaths, not including suicide, and rate of gun ownership by state



** Gun Violence Archive definition: At least four dead or injured (not including perpetrator).*



19,379; 15,442
Number of people killed in gun-related violence in 2020; and 2019, respectively (not including suicides).

2
Number of hours after the Boulder shooting that Rep. Lauren Boebert, R-Colo., sent out a fundraising email to her constituents warning, "Radical liberals in Washington ... are trying to violate your due process and criminalize the private transfer of firearms." Boebert owns a gun-themed restaurant in Rifle, Colorado, called Shooters.

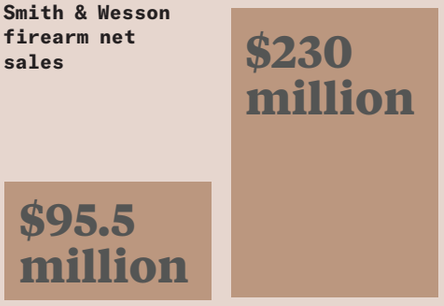
397
Number of murders committed with "blunt objects," including hammers, in 2019. In the wake of the Boulder shooting, Rep. Boebert told Newsmax: "In America, we see more deaths by hand, fist, feet, even hammers."

$10.2 million
Amount spent by gun rights groups on lobbying in 2020.

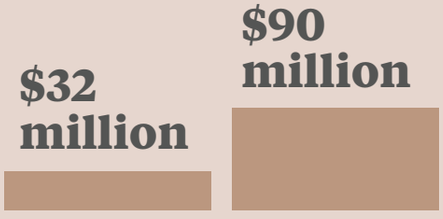
$749,317
Amount gun rights groups have contributed to Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, during his political career.

42,997
Number of guns purchased in Colorado in February 2021, a 17% increase from February 2019.

Smith & Wesson firearm net sales



Net income, after taxes, for Ruger, the manufacturer of the AR-556 used in the Boulder shooting



$566 million, $665 million

Total revenues to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Wildlife Restoration fund from excise taxes on firearms and ammunition for fiscal year 2019; and 2020.

Railroad tracks run through Whitehall, Montana, a town that began as a vibrant railroad depot in the late 19th century. **Louise Johns / HCN**

REPORTAGE

Montana counties band together to reinvigorate passenger rail

The newly formed Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority aims to connect a rural and divided state.

BY SURYA MILNER

MARY JANACARO HENSLEIGH grew up on a cattle ranch between Three Forks and Whitehall, Montana, on a long, flat stretch of golden grassland between Bozeman and Butte in the Jefferson Valley. At 10 years old, she was steering the family's pickup. But she didn't leave the valley until she took a train trip as a teenager, in the 1970s.

Hensleigh visited Washington state, then the Midwest. After high school, she headed to Kansas for college, feeling buoyant about the future. When she returned in 2007 to take care of her elderly parents, she found her hometown, Whitehall, population 921, largely unchanged: The place was still hemmed in by hay bales and alfalfa, still served by one Ace Hardware store and a single bank. The train of her childhood, though, was gone.

Now, as the mayor of Whitehall, Hensleigh represents Jefferson County in a statewide coalition working to revive that rail line. The line would span 600 miles and connect the state's residents, including elderly, disabled and non-mobile people, to doctors' appointments, shopping centers and to one another. "The possibilities are endless as to how you could utilize this train service," Hensleigh said.

The coalition, the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority, was the brainchild of Missoula County Commissioner Dave Strohmaier. In 2020, Strohmaier rallied support from a dozen urban and rural counties, passed a joint resolution among county commissions to create the authority, and began meeting with Amtrak and Montana's congressional representatives to discuss funding and infrastructure. Strohmaier wants to revive the rail line that ran from Chicago through southern Montana and on to Seattle from 1971 to 1979. That line, the North Coast Hiawatha, hit most of the state's major population centers, whereas Montana's only current passenger rail line, the Empire Builder, connects a strip of rural towns from eastern Montana to Whitefish before continuing on to the Pacific Northwest. "This is serious," Strohmaier said. "This is not just a collection of rail buffs or guys who like to dress up in conductor outfits and reminisce about the good old days."

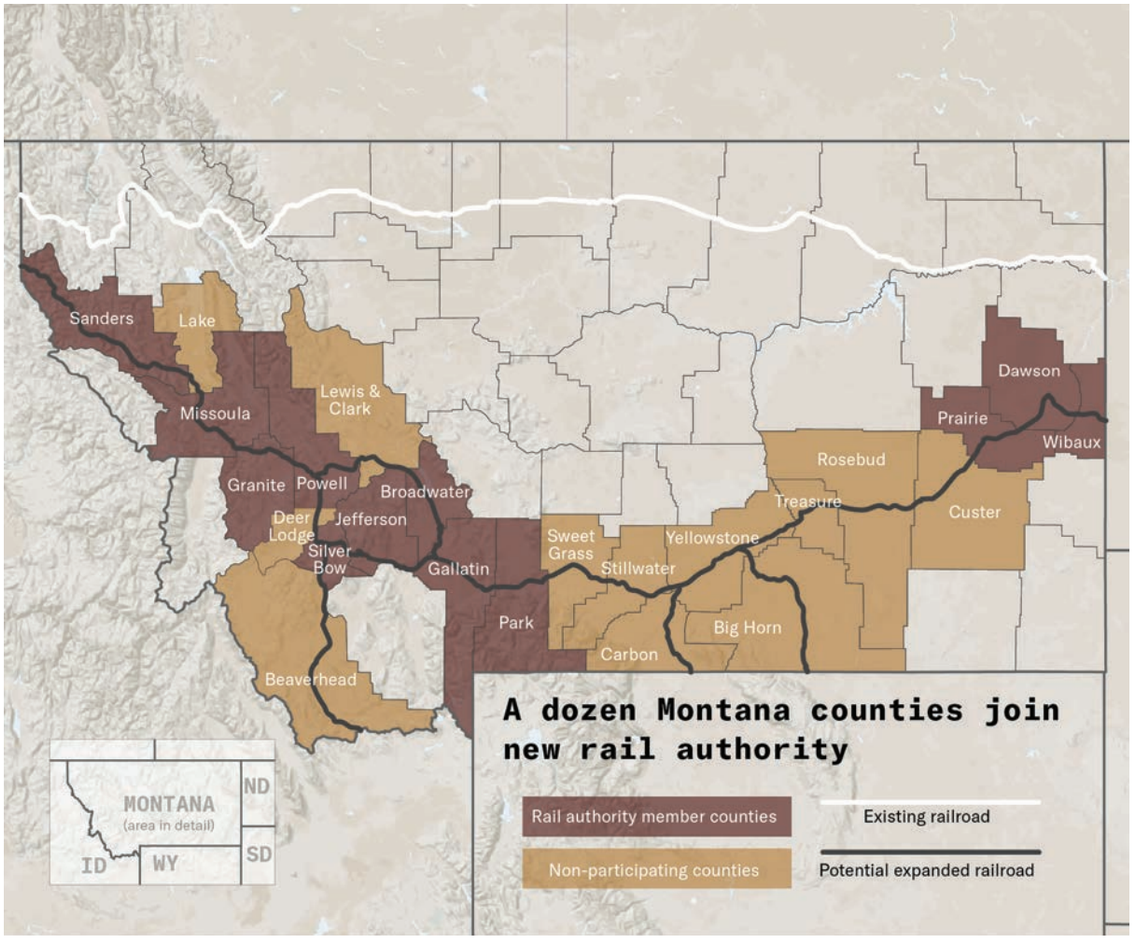
Proponents are approaching passenger rail as an engine of equity across a politically and economically divided state. In the town of Pablo, Montana, on the Flathead Reservation in northwest Montana, Robert McDonald sees a revitalized railroad as a potential salve against the barriers that families face securing reliable transit to doctors' appointments. Last July, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes wrote a letter in support of the rail project. "The belief is that passenger rail is a significant opportunity to provide enhanced transportation," said McDonald, the communications director for the tribes. "It should also be an opportunity for business expansion or development across the state."

Good transportation, the kind that's both publicly accessible and frequent, is a key engine of social and economic mobility,

said David Kack, director of the Western Transportation Institute, a research center focused on rural transportation. Montanans who are disabled, too young or too old to drive, or who otherwise lack access to a car, suffer acutely from lack of transportation, especially in rural areas. Nearly one-fifth of Montanans don't have a driver's license, and not everyone has access to a car. "We need to provide options for people," he said. "So when you take the car away and the keys away, it isn't like a death sentence."

While the rail authority has the support of over a dozen counties, some commissioners across the state view passenger rail as an expensive vestige of the past. Yellowstone County, Montana's most populous county, declined to join the authority because of the estimated price tag — past estimates projected that the rail service would cost over a billion dollars. New passenger rail would also compete with freight cargo on Montana's single tracks. "It just doesn't make sense for commerce," said Don Jones, a Yellowstone County commissioner.

That kind of local hesitation, coupled with a state legislature that's been slow to pursue public transportation, makes for a tough battle. But the new rail authority is fueled by the belief that political and social forces have come together to restore southern Montana's passenger rail.



They're optimistic that the Biden administration's commitment to building out transportation infrastructure nationwide is a harbinger of expanded transit across the state.

Now, the Big Sky Rail Authority needs to secure funding to conduct a preliminary engineering study, purchase train sets and subsidize Amtrak's implementation of the system. It's looking to a few different avenues for funding. These could include the reauthorization of the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, expected this May, Congress's annual budget reconciliation process or the Biden administration's $2 trillion dollar infrastructure plan, announced on March 31, which promises to invest in reliable mass transit. Strohmaier is determined to expand passenger rail's reach throughout the state, whatever it takes. "If there has ever been a time where the stars have aligned politically to make something big happen, it is now," he said. "We don't want to squander this moment."

THE LATEST

Tilsen charges dropped

Backstory

In July 2020, 21 protesters, mostly Indigenous, were arrested when President Donald Trump visited Mount Rushmore. A confrontation ensued: The Air National Guard, dressed in riot gear, fired pepper balls, and Nick Tilsen (Oglala Lakota), president and CEO of the Indigenous nonprofit NDN Collective, took a National Guard riot shield, which was later returned with the slogan "LAND BACK" spray-painted over the word "POLICE." If convicted, Tilsen faced up to 16 ½ years in prison ("The battle for the Black Hills," January 2021).

Followup

In late March, charges against Tilsen and the other protesters were dropped, according to a news release from NDN Collective. A final charge against Tilsen will be dropped once he completes a diversion program. "Tens of thousands organized, called, donated to our legal and bail fund and signed the petitions to drop these charges, and we acknowledge their invaluable support," said the release. Tilsen credited his fellow land defenders' hard work: "We organized, we fought, and we backed them into a corner." —Jessica Douglas

Friends,

A year and a half ago, we set out with backpacks full of ambition on a quest to raise $10 million to strengthen our journalism and transform *HCN* into a modern, digitally savvy newsroom. We needed funds well beyond our annual budget to deploy enough staff and technology to cover the West's growing news deserts, and to bring even more readers reliable reporting so they could remain informed.

It was a lofty goal, but we were buoyed by our 50-year legacy, and by the staunch mettle of our community of readers — people who have inspired and fueled our work from the beginning.

The past 18 months have presented obstacles that none of us could have imagined, but still, our community has rallied. Not only have you powered our journalism through the depths of a pandemic, you have brought us within striking distance of our $10 million goal.

Between now and June 4, when we will finally gather (virtually) to celebrate *HCN*'s 50th Anniversary, we need to raise $700,000 to complete the campaign and make the investments that will help keep us around for the next half-century.

If you haven't already, please join me, the *HCN* staff and board and the hundreds of readers and donors who have made a donation or pledge. **Donate: hcn.org/50More**

This is a mountain we climb together.

Greg Hanscom
Executive Director/Publisher

PLEASE SUPPORT HCN'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY CAMPAIGN:

- Via phone: 800-905-1155
- Donate securely online: **hcn.org/50More**
- Mail a check to *HCN*, PO Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428
- Bid on an auction item or raise the paddle at our virtual celebration and fundraiser (*see opposite page*)

The West Illuminated:

Celebrating 50 Years of Independent Journalism

Be our guest

Friday, June 4, from 6:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. MT

We hope you will join us as we look back on 50 incredible years of journalism in the West. Enjoy powerful performers and speakers, along with live and silent auction items and a paddle raiser to help us finish the final leg of our 50th Anniversary Campaign. Admission is FREE! Please register to join the festivities: ***hcne.ws/west-illuminated***

PROGRAM

- Guest speaker John Echohawk, executive director of the Native American Rights Fund
- Reading by author Terry Tempest Williams
- Messages from our executive director, Greg Hanscom, and our new editor-in-chief, Jennifer Sahn
- Live Auction and Paddle Raiser
- Poetry by Claudia Castro Luna

SILENT AUCTION

From May 22-June 4, bid on a delightful array of donated items to help support the future of nonprofit journalism for the West.

Earrings - 2" Navajo basket-style hoop Arizona artists: Nanotine and Heather from Bear Blossom Design. Tribal affiliation: Diné/Miwok/Paiute
Value: $75

Mosaic artwork
Canyon Sunset, 6"x6" mosaic on cradle board; Materials - smalti, glass rods, milk glass. Colorado artist: Carol Turtness Newman
Value: $200

Book of photography
Autographed copy of *The Unsettled West, Reflections from 50 years of High Country News*. Colorado artist: Paul Stanley Larmer
Value: $100

LIVE AUCTION & PADDLE RAISER

After the main program, we'll invite guests to help raise the remaining funds for our 50th Anniversary Campaign. There will be a broad range of bidding amounts to include all levels of generosity!

A mountain goat billy in Glacier National Park, Montana (*opposite*). **Sumio Harada / Minden Pictures**

Red Rock Canyon, Nevada (*above*). **Bob Wick / BLM**

This event is powered by Handbid. When you register, you will receive a link to view the live event on June 4, and be able to peruse and bid on silent auction items between May 22-June 4. Credit card registration through Handbid is required to bid on auction items and to participate in the live paddle raiser at the end of the program. Contact us with questions: development@hcn.org

HCN readers: Funding our work for 50 years

THANK YOU. HCN readers provide more than 75% of our operation costs. You can join this list of dedicated supporters by giving $50 or more. Send checks to P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428, call: 800-905-1155 or give online at hcn.org/give2hcn

CHAMPION OF THE WEST ($50,000 AND ABOVE)

Gates Family Foundation | Denver, CO

INDEPENDENT MEDIA GUARDIAN ($25,000-$49,999)

Tom & Caroline Hoyt | Boulder, CO

MEDIA LEADER ($10,000-$24,999)

David Bonderman | Fort Worth, TX
William & Mary Greve Foundation | New York, NY
Miami Foundation, Fund for Nonprofit News | Miami, FL
Page Foundation | Hailey, ID

PUBLISHER'S CIRCLE ($5,000-$9,999)

In memory of Nancy Jean Ring | Frisco, CO
Peter A. Gilman & Margaret LeMone | Boulder, CO

PHILANTHROPIST ($2,500-$4,999)

Patagonia.com | Ventura, CA

STEWARD ($1,000-$2,499)

Anonymous (2)
In honor of Laura Dixon & James Baker | Bend, OR
Bill Johnson & Cheri Ferbrache | Denver, CO
David Kapell | Hobe Sound, FL
Peter Kirsch & Pat Reynolds | Denver, CO
Jennifer Light | Clarkston, WA
Susan Martin & Richard L. Martin | Santa Fe, NM
Sharon Metcalf & Randy Smith | Vashon, WA
Judy Muller | Norwood, CO
Mary Carol Staiger | Alta, WY
Verne Stapenhorst | Mesquite, NV

GUARANTOR ($500-$999)

In honor of David Ruiter
Ben Eastman Jr. | Denver, CO
Cornelia Butler Flora | Ames, IA
Fred Gentry | Olympia, WA
June Heilman | Pocatello, ID
Enno F. & Penny Heuscher | Cedaredge, CO
Eric Hirst | Bellingham, WA
Greg Lower | Santa Fe, NM
Cindy Rogers & James Tory | Toronto, ON
Stapp-Longenecker Family Foundation, U.S. Charitable Gift Trust | Richland, WA
Heidi & Clifton Youmans | Helena, MT

BENEFACTOR ($250-$499)

Anonymous (4)
Andes Georges Family Charitable Fund | Longmont, CO
Glenn O. Clark | Hanover, MA
Tom & Bonnie Clarke | Denver, CO
Andrea Commaker | State College, PA
Seth Cothrun & Harper Hall | Tucson, AZ
James Engel | Long Valley, NJ
Michael & Karen Fried, Community Education Fund, Montana Community Foundation | Broomfield, CO
Joe & Mary Gifford | Denver, CO
Don Hagedorn | Columbia, SC
Pam & Joe Hale | Palm Bay, FL
Len & Carol Harlig | Scottsdale, AZ
Mark Harvey | Basalt, CO
Elaine & Dave Hill | Boulder, CO
Tom & Carlyn Jervis | Santa Fe, NM
Gina Johnson | Denver, CO
Alexander Kinsey | Denver, CO
Kenneth Levy-Church | Sag Harbor, NY
Doug Marek | Greeley, CO
John & Kathy Matter | Cedar Crest, NM
Estee Rivera & Eric Murdock | Estes Park, CO
Rachel Nunn
Liz O'Rourke | Arvada, CO
Lou & Nancy Patterson | Fruita, CO
Barrie Ryan | Tucson, AZ
Auden Schendler & Ellen Freedman | Basalt, CO
Shane & Paige Smith | Paonia, CO
Broc Stenman & Judy Sterett-Stenman | Palm Springs, CA
Glen & Joy Stocking | Seeley Lake, MT
Lawrence Wallin | Montecito, CA
Melissa Wyers | Washington, DC

SPONSOR ($150-$249)

Steven Basch | Denver, CO
Kathleen Brennan | Denver, CO
Nick Bucy | Denver, CO
Carole Childs | Pahrump, NV
Ramona Colwell | Carlsbad, CA
Jason Corzine | Denver, CO
Paul Frank & Anne Clare Erickson | Moab, UT
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Thomas Magarian | Portland, OR
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Marc A. Sylvester | Sonoma, CA
Lloyd Throne | Medford, OR
Robert Wigington | Boulder, CO
Thomas C. Wylie | Centennial, CO
Ira Yates | Paonia, CO

PATRON ($75-$149)

Anonymous (3)
In honor of Carl Sagan
In memory of Bill & Pat Fender | Carbondale, CO
Shayne Brady | Denver, CO
Joe Casey | Green Valley, AZ
Chevron Humankind Matching Gifts Program | Princeton, NJ
David & Sharon Damkaer | Monroe, WA
Nancy Easter | Tucson, AZ
Hal Eby | Reno, NV
Patricia Flores | Northridge, CA
Michael Floyd | Vail, CO
Bengt Freepins | Richland, WA
Margaret Fuller & Matthew Scott | Stanford, CA
Cecelia Goodnight | Hood River, OR
Sue Halliday | Moab, UT
Frederick Hollander | Berkeley, CA
Taylor Kiessig | Washington, DC
Allyson King | Moscow, ID
Jesse & Jodi King | Evergreen, CO
Leslie Knuti | Arvada, CO
Rudi Lambrechtse | Tucson, AZ
Jerry Lidz | Eugene, OR
William Lindsay | Vail, CO
John Machen | Longmont, CO
McAfee Fauver Family Fund | Boulder, CO
Thomas & Gloria Meyers | North San Juan, CA
Sarah Michael | Sun Valley, ID
Erin Minks | Alamosa, CO
Caroline Munger | Bayfield, CO
Marcie & Robert Musser Advised Fund, Aspen Community Foundation | Aspen, CO
Bob Osborne | Salida, CO
Bryan Pollard | Farmington, AR
William Ritchie | Ilwaco, WA
David M. Rose | Silver City, NM
Carol Rutter | South Lake Tahoe, CA
Robert Sanborn & Trina Merriman | San Francisco, CA
Cynthia Scott
Mary Sexton | Choteau, MT
Pat Simons | Albuquerque, NM
Jon Snyder | Tacoma, WA
Ralph & Betsy Stephens | Chevy Chase, MD
Bill Stirling | Aspen, CO
Dick Stoner | Coalville, UT
Susan Suazo-Sanchez | Ignacio, CO
Rob & Lacey Thayer | Davis, CA
Teresa Urbanowski | Wheat Ridge, CO
Eve Vogel | Amherst, MA
Kristiina Vogt | Mukilteo, WA
Carl von Ende | Dekalb, IL
Paul Wack | Morro Bay, CA
Josh & Brooke Williams | Seattle, WA
Veronica Wisniewski & Edoh Amiran | Lynden, WA
David & Susan Work | Victor, ID
Gerhard Zinserling | Chicago, IL

FRIEND ($50-$74)

Anonymous (8)
In honor of my father, Mike Thompson
In memory of Justas Bavarskis
John T. Allison | Hamilton, MT
Wesley Allred | San Francisco, CA
Jon Archer | Bend, OR
Lloyd Athearn | Petaluma, CA
Cris Barbero | Salt Lake City, UT
Chuck & Anne Baynton | Cambridge, MN
Steven Beck | Golden, CO
Russell Bodnar | Aztec, NM
Joseph Brown | Aspen, CO
E. Bujanda | New York, NY
Gene Byrne | Palisade, CO
Steven Cates | Sacramento, CA
John & Darlene Cotton | Kent, WA
Sharolyn Craft | North Las Vegas, NV
David Croze | Kenai, AK
Diane Curlette | Boulder, CO
Tamara Enz | Wheeler, OR
Jim Evans | Vashon, WA
Stanley Fitzpatrick | Seattle, WA
Joe Fitzsimons | Sheridan, WY
Patricia Garner | Erie, CO
Grace Gosar | Laramie, WY
Doug Graham | Littleton, CO
Richard & Gail Grossman | Bayfield, CO
Romey Haberle | Tacoma, WA
Linda Halstead-Acharya | Columbus, MT
April Hanna | Corrales, NM
Kenneth Harrington | Carlsbad, NM
Jim & Lauren Harrison | Cottage Grove, OR
F. & B. Hartline | Butte, MT
Sheila & Allen Henry | Fountain Hills, AZ
Ron Hill | Batavia, OH
Vernon & Melinda Hill | Grand Junction, CO
James Hinds
Vicky Ho | Anchorage, AK
Ted Hoefer III | Longmont, CO
Anita Jackson | San Ramon, CA
Jerry & Donna Jacobi | Santa Fe, NM
Charlie Jancic | Escondido, CA
Mike Jenkins | St. Anthony, ID
Arthur Kaufman | Boulder, CO
Linda Kervin | Logan, UT
Edward Kikumoto | Idleyld Park, OR
Lloyd Kimball | Lakewood, WA
Lee & Katherine Kirkham | Fort Collins, CO
Will & Marilyn Koenitzer | Flagstaff, AZ
Rob Kroese | Coeur d'Alene, ID
Dave Kwinter | Walnut Creek, CA
Ellen Lapham | Ridgway, CO
Wade & Kristi Laster | Flagstaff, AZ
Wendy Lauritzen | Arkansas City, KS
David R. Lewis | Logan, UT
Carol Linneman | Merced, CA
John Lucido | Gunnison, CO
Vanessa Lynch | Tacoma, WA
Jennifer Macalady | Centre Hall, PA
Sara Markey | Denver, CO
Michael Martin | Salt Lake City, UT
Corina McKendry | Manitou Springs, CO
Peggy & John McMahon | Boise, ID
Susan & Brian Melka | Sequim, WA
Wayne Melquist | Port Angeles, WA
Wolfgang Meyn | High Rolls Mountain Park, NM
Richard Miller & Susanne Miller | Idaho Falls, ID
Judith Moores | Davis, CA
Richard Morehead | Fort Worth, TX
Linda Morgan | Spokane Valley, WA
Stuart Mork | Seattle, WA
William R. Morris | Dolores, CO
Fran Nimick | Colorado Springs, CO
Leon Nuvayestewa | Polacca, AZ
Bob & Barbara Oakleaf | Lander, WY
Mitch D. Owen | Boise, ID
Barbara Peterson | Watkins Glen, NY
Reola Phelps | Denver, CO
Scott E. Pike | Hillsboro, OR
Margaret Priver | Huntington Beach, CA
Elizabeth Stanek | Mosier, OR

WELCOME TO THE SUSTAINERS' CLUB

Anonymous (3)
George & Kathy Albino | Telluride, CO
Jonathan & Nancy Koch | Berthoud, CO
Julie Lechtanski | Fort Collins, CO
Kara Woo | Newberg, OR
Kathryn MacKay | Ogden, UT
Michael Ciscell | Nampa, ID
William Spencer | Boulder, CO

Staffing ch-ch-changes



HCN bids a fond farewell to three wonderful longtime employees, Graham Lee Brewer, Maya L. Kapoor and Alan Wells.

'LAND-GRAB UNIVERSITIES' WINS BIG

Former *HCN* Indigenous Affairs Editor **Tristan Ahtone** and historian Robert Lee won both a **George Polk Award** and an **Investigative Reporters and Editors Award** for their for their two-year investigation into the expropriation of Indigenous lands for the land-grant university system.

In "Land-Grab Universities," published in our March 2020 issue, Tristan (Kiowa), now editor-in-chief of the *Texas Observer*, and Lee, who is at Cambridge University, located 99% of the nearly 11 million acres taken from 250 tribes through broken treaties, illegal seizures and outright genocide, and then transferred to fledgling land-grant colleges under the Morrill Act of 1862.

This "well-documented account sent shockwaves through campuses across the country where students and faculty demanded that institutions like MIT, Cornell and Cal-Berkeley find ways to right a 150- year-old wrong," the Polk Award press release noted. IRE judges commented, "This investigation produced a foundational piece of journalism that forces a reckoning with dark origins of many of our nation's universities."

This is the third time that *HCN*'s journalists have won George Polk Award. The first went to Ed and Betsy Marston for the 1986 series "Western Water Made Simple," and the second to Ray Ring for his 2006 feature, "Taking Liberties," about a deceptive campaign to pass libertarian land-use ballot measures.

A CHANGING OF THE GUARD

There's one downside to running an award-winning Indigenous Affairs program, and that is that the people responsible become very hot commodities: Tristan was scooped up by the *Texas Observer* last spring, and now his successor, **Graham Lee Brewer,** has accepted a job with NBC's national digital enterprise team.

Graham (Cherokee) has been part of our Indigenous Affairs team since the beginning. This past year, he has covered Indigenous communities grappling with complicated land, water and wildlife issues. He has helped *HCN* increase its cultural competency, training our staff — and other newsrooms, too — even as he became a trusted source for national outlets such as NPR News and the *Code Switch* podcast.

While we search for a full-time replacement for Graham, *HCN* board member **Bryan Pollard** is taking a leave of absence from the board to serve as interim editor for the Indigenous Affairs desk. Bryan is a member of the Cherokee Nation and a former editor-in-chief of the *Cherokee Phoenix* newspaper. Since Bryan was deeply involved in the conversations that led to the creation of *HCN*'s Indigenous Affairs desk, it seems only right to have him at the table as we plan the next chapter.

Bryan will oversee the team members: Assistant Editor Anna V. Smith, Fellow Jessica Douglas, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians, and **Christine Trudeau,** who has just joined us as a contributing editor. Christine, a citizen of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, is an investigative journalist who has covered Native communities across the Western U.S. She will oversee much of the desk's natural resource coverage.

MORE FAREWELLS

We bid adieu, too, to Associate Editor **Maya L. Kapoor,** who is joining North Carolina State University's English department. There, she will lead the undergrad journalism program and teach journalism and creative writing, with an emphasis on science journalism — Maya's forte. Her first story with us was about how humans nurtured the mosquito. She was a finalist for an award from the National Association of Science Writers for a piece about forensic scientists working on the U.S.-Mexico border. And her July 2020 story about the imperiled Yaqui catfish won a AAAS Kavli science journalism award, and will be republished in *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2021.*

Finally, we salute *HCN*'s departing IT manager, **Alan Wells.** When he joined the organization in 2015, Alan was a member of a team that maintained servers and developed bespoke software in-house. Since then, we have shifted to an IT team of one, worked through a massive update in our subscription fulfillment software, and adopted a multitude of new platforms like SalesForce and Slack. Alan has been there through it all, helping to electronically duct tape the whole thing together.

While we're sad to see all these great people go, we are curious — and very excited —to see what they end up doing next. —*Greg Hanscom*


Interim Indigenous Affairs Editor Bryan Pollard at Lake Tahoe, Nevada (*left*). **Matt Kieffer**

Contributing Editor Christine Trudeau at La Jolla Shores in San Diego, California (right). **Danielle Dean**

Border wall construction is visible from Cumero Mountain, Atascosa Mountains, Arizona.

THE MOUNTAIN ISLANDS IN THE DESERT SEA

The first ecological survey of the Borderlands' Atascosa Highlands.

Photos by Luke Swenson and Jack Dash

Detail of *Opuntia santa-rita* (Santa Rita prickly pear) *(top)*, *Graptopetalum bartramii* (Patagonia leather petal) and Sycamore Canyon *(right)*.

For a few weeks in April and May,

the elegant trogon *(Trogon elegans)* breeds in the rugged Atascosa Highlands that straddle the Arizona-Mexico border, flashes of its brilliant crimson belly occasionally visible among the sycamore trees. The birds are migrants, exiled from a historic range that extends through Mexico as far south as Costa Rica. Driven by climate change, habitat loss and wildfire, they flee north in search of a cooler land.

Trogons are one of the many rare birds found in the four small mountain ranges that make up the highlands at the junction of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts. Some of the peaks rise 6,000 feet above the surrounding desert, creating their own ecosystems, each so distinct and biologically diverse that they are known as "sky islands."

The Atascosa Highlands are the homeland of the Tohono O'odham and Hohokam people, and the area is full of the remnants of human history: the Indigenous stewards whose controlled burns encouraged an even greater variety of vegetation; the 19th century miners who scoured Walker Canyon for silver; the buffalo soldiers of the 10th Cavalry who fought in World War I. The land is scarred by the infrastructure of an arbitrary border, with razor-wire fences and forbidding walls, and it continues to be threatened by border construction. But people still move across the landscape, sharing their stories and lives, engaging in commerce along International Avenue in the border-straddling city of Nogales, which hugs the Highlands' southeastern edge.

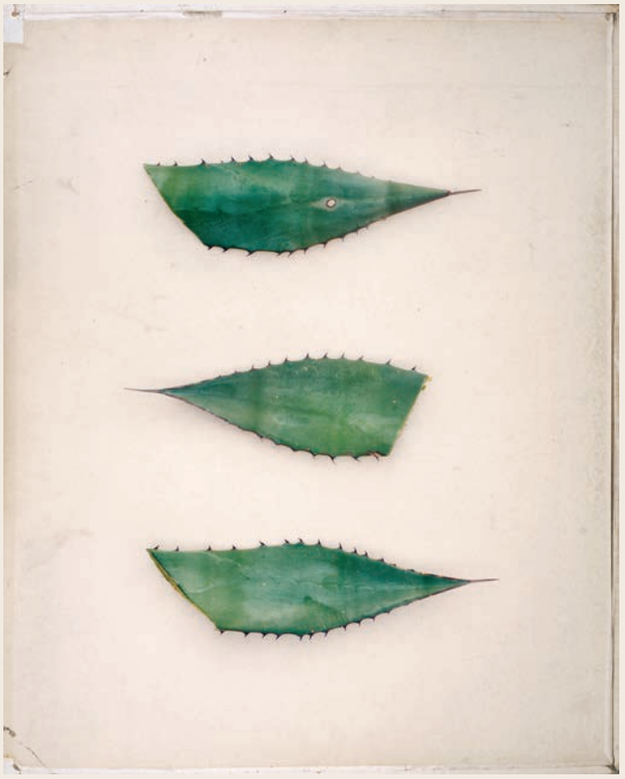
This part of the Borderlands has been widely examined through the lens of politics and human migration, but scarcely considered on its own terms. Yet it is an ecological utopia, a place of rich biodiversity and myriad communities of wrens, warblers and trogons, oak groves and acacia, javelina and mountain lions, prickly pear and piñon.

The images presented here are part of an ongoing project by ecologist Jack Dash and photographer Luke Swenson, who have created the first — and so far, only — survey of this region's biodiversity. It began when the University of Arizona Herbarium decided to make a catalog for future study. But as Dash started to document the highlands' natural environment, he realized he couldn't address the landscape without acknowledging the impact humans have had on it — and continue to have, through large-scale projects and the impacts of climate change. He discovered that there is no dividing line between history and natural history. With the Atascosa Highlands hosting roughly half of Arizona's bird species and one-quarter of its flora, including several species that are not known to exist anywhere else in the United States, the project has become both an elegy and a baseline, a chronicle of the region at this particular moment in time, and a way to acknowledge what was there before it is gone.

—Paige Blankenbuehler

Baccharis sarothroides
Desert broom (left)

Lobelia laxiflora
Sierra Madre lobelia
(right)



Cirsium arizonicum
Arizona thistle
(left)

Agave palmeri
Palmer's agave
(right)

Opuntia engelmannii
Engelmann's prickly pear (left)

Noccaea fendleri
Alpine pennycress (center)

Delphinium scaposum
Barestem larkspur (right)

Mentzelia montana
Blazing star (left)

Mimosa dysocarpa
Velvetpod mimosa (center)

Juniperus arizonica
Arizona juniper (right)

Lobelia laxiflora
Sierra Madre lobelia (left)

Elionurus barbiculmis
Woolly balsamscale (center)

Tillandsia recurvata
Ball moss (right)

Canyon scrub *(top)*, *Buddleja sessiliflora* (butterfly bush) *(bottom)* and tailings from the now-defunct Ruby Mine *(right)*.

Atascosa Borderlands, a visual storytelling project about a remote stretch of the U.S.-Mexico border, was created by ecologist Jack Dash and documentary photographer Luke Swenson. atascosaborderlands.com

Notice to our Advertisers — You can place classified ads with our online classified system. Visit hcn.org/classifieds. May 13 is the deadline to place your print ad in the June 2021 issue. Email laurad@hcn.org for help or information.

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

Business Opportunities

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

Employment & Volunteers

Legal director — The Legal Director will work closely with the Executive Director in cultivating a renewed vision at the New Mexico Environmental Legal Center (NMELC) that integrates diversity, equity and justice. Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), women and LGBTQ+ candidates are encouraged to apply. SALARY: $75,000 to $92,000. START: June 2021. JOB LOCATION: New Mexico. Applicants must live in or be willing to relocate to New Mexico. EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE: Five-10 years of litigation experience in administrative, state and/or federal courts, with a strong background in environmental, constitutional, and/or civil rights law. Admitted and in good standing with the New Mexico State Bar or eligible for admission. APPLICATION DEADLINE: May 10, 2021. https://nmelc.org/employment/.

National Bighorn Sheep Center hosts the Wind River Retreat in Dubois, Wyo. — Enhance your writing or photography skills with world-class instructors in the beautiful Wind River Mountains. All skill levels welcome. Continuing education credits available. 307-455-3429. sara@bighorn.org. bighorn.org.

Community Forester Job — The Clearwater Resource Council located in Seeley Lake, Montana is seeking a full-time community forester with experience in both fuels mitigation and landscape restoration. Résumés will be reviewed upon receipt, and the position will be kept open until filled. For a full job description, go to crcmt.org. No phone calls, please.

***HCN* is looking for leaders!** *High Country News*, an award-winning media organization covering the communities and environment of the Western United States, seeks new members for its board of directors to help steer the organization through an exciting chapter of innovation and growth.

HCN is committed to creating an organization that reflects the diverse and changing West. We strongly encourage prospective board members from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds including Black, Indigenous, and people of color, women, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ people.

To nominate yourself or someone you know, send a letter, résumé and background information to board.jobs@hcn.org. For full position description, visit: https://www.hcn.org/about/jobs.

High Country News

Merchandise

Earth Cruiser FX for sale Overland vehicle for travel on or off-road. Fully self-contained; less than 41,000 miles. Recently fully serviced. Located in Redmond, Ore. $215,000. 541-526-5164. proger@bendbroadband.com.

Western Native Seed — Native plant seeds for the Western U.S. Trees, shrubs, grasses, wildflowers and regional mixes. Call or email for free price list. 719-942-3935. info@westernnativeseed.com or visit us at www.westernnativeseed.com.

Professional Services

Steve Harris, experienced public lands/environmental attorney Comment letters, administrative appeals. Federal and state litigation. FOIA. 719-471-7958. tinyurl.com/y5eu2t6q.

ECA Geophysics identifies suspect buried trash, tanks, drums and/or utilities and conducts custom-designed subsurface investigations that support post-damage litigation. 208-501-9984. www.ecageophysics.com.

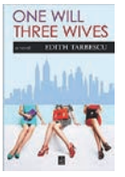
Publications & Books

Taos Horno Adventures: *A Multicultural Culinary Memoir Informed by History and Horticulture*. Richard and Annette Rubin. At nighthawkpress.com/titles and Amazon.

***Copper Stain* —** Tales from scores of ex-employees unearth the human costs of an economy that runs on copper. https://www.oupress.com/books/15051942/copper-stain.

***The Land Desk* —** Western lands and communities — in context — delivered to your inbox three times a week. From award-winning journalist and *HCN* contributor Jonathan P. Thompson. $6/month; $60/year. landdesk.org.

***One Will: Three Wives — A Murder Mystery* by Edith Tarbescu.** *One Will: Three Wives* is packed with a large array of interesting suspects, all of whom could be a murderer ... a roller coaster of plot twists ... - Anne Hillerman, *New York Times* best-selling mystery author. Available on Amazon. www.edithtarbescu.com.



Real Estate For Rent

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

Real Estate for Sale

Small farm at base of Mount Shasta, Calif. — Certified organic fruit/berry/veggie/flower farm. Small home, two barns (one has an apartment), and more. Approximately two acres just in the city limits. Famously pure air and water. Skiing, mountaineering, bike, hike, fish, boating, more. jardinway@yahoo.com.

Land and cabin on Colorado-Utah line — 18 acres with small solar-ready cabin. Off-grid, no well. Great RV location. Surrounded by state wildlife area and national parks. abajocabin@gmail.com.

The Crazy Mountain Inn — Built in 1901, the Crazy Mountain Inn has 11 guest rooms in a town-center building on seven city lots (.58 acres). The inn and restaurant serve hunters, fisherman and adventure tourists. Charles M. Bair Family Museum is a local attraction. Contact broker for more info and virtual tour at 406-926-1996 or j.maslanik@murphybusiness.com. https://www.crazymountaininn.com/

Nova Scotia ocean-front — Camp or build on two-plus acres in Guysborough. FSBO. $36,000 U.S., firm. Laurie's phone: 585-226-2993 EST.

Tours & Travel

Canyonlands Field Institute Field seminars for adults in the natural and human history of the Colorado Plateau, with lodge, river trip and base camp options. Small groups, guest experts. 435-259-7750. cfimoab.org.

FOR SALE — Yellowstone Llamas, successful Yellowstone National Park concession. Flexible packages. 406-580-5954. www.yellowstonellamas.com.

WE DEFEND WOLVES

According to leading scientists, gray wolves still need protection under the Endangered Species Act. But that didn't stop the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from putting politics over science and stripping wolves of their legal protections across the contiguous U.S.

Within weeks of wolves losing federal protections, Wisconsin authorized people to shoot and kill 216 wolves—nearly a fifth of the state's total—in a 60-hour period, during breeding season.

We are in court to prevent tragedies like this, and to help wolves recover and thrive across the West and nationwide.

Stand with us!

Western Environmental Law Center

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

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Oregon Business 100 Best NONPROFITS to work for in Oregon 2020

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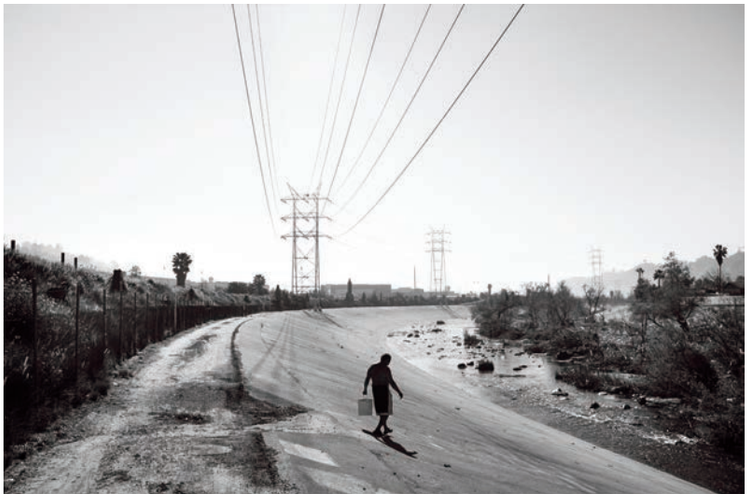


An abandoned tent near the Glendale Narrows stretch of the river (*above*).

The LA River as seen just east of downtown Los Angeles (*top right*).

José Carlos (last name not given), an immigrant from Guatemala who has lived here for more than 10 years, walks down the bank to the river to bathe *(right)*.

continued from page 15)

happening on the Los Angeles River is a humanitarian crisis," says Jason Post, who has been studying the river for six years. "The reality and experiences of LA River anglers and of people who, on the day-to-day, live in and along the river are not reflected in the master plan. You have economic revitalization and park construction prioritized over people's ability to live and survive."

What we know about the river's modern community is limited, but its members are part of a long history of invisible Angelenos who have lived and fished along the riverbanks for more than a century, both before and after channelization. In "Unnatural Nature," a study published in the December 2020 *Geographical Review*, Post and co-author Perry Carter examined how anglers have reimagined and repurposed this far-from-pristine space as parkland and urban wilderness.

Their study, which noted the inequities in the park-poor city of Los Angeles, showed how the river provides refuge, food and shelter for some anglers and unhoused people. None of the 23 sustenance anglers I spoke with in the three months I reported on this story wished to speak on the record. Many couldn't afford fishing licenses and so were operating outside of the law; others said they had been harassed by law enforcement. In the past, anglers and unhoused Angelenos have been given loitering tickets while on the river. Others feared encampment sweeps.

Carolina Hernandez, the Los Angeles County Public Works principal engineer and spokesperson for the LA River Master Plan, says that while the plan doesn't specifically address fishing or sustenance fishing on the river, it does prioritize healthy ecosystems that allow angling. Social justice and environmental groups were on the plan's subcommittee, but no homeless advocacy groups were involved, and very few unhoused residents attended meetings. "There was not a direct survey of our unhoused community in the LA River Master Plan," Hernandez told me. The plan is a road map, she added, one that shouldn't supersede specific project engagement.

Recently, in Glendale Narrows, I saw how intimately those experiencing homelessness interacted with the river. One woman washed her clothes in the current as her cat watched a stand of black-necked stilts feeding in the shallows. In the distance, three men played darts on a sandbar island, their tents lined up below a large cottonwood. Another man sat patiently nearby with his tenkara rod cast in the flow. Beside him, a small red cooler held a medium-sized carp.

One unhoused resident I met near an encampment farther upriver told me he's lived along the waterway for over a decade, constantly moving his camp up and down the river to stay hidden. The man, who is in his mid-40s, told me he bathes in the river, eats carp from it, and currently sleeps at the mouth of a storm drainage. "I don't know where I would go if (the master plan) swept me away from my home," he said. "The river keeps me alive."

Some images are from Roberto (Bear) Guerra's photo essay, "A Possible River" for Emergence Magazine. *The final image is also from "South of Fletcher: Stories from the Bowtie," for the LA arts organization Clockshop.*

So you want to acknowledge the land?

Some notes on a trend, and what real justice could look like.

BY SUMMER WILKIE

LET'S BEGIN BY acknowledging the land. If you want to sincerely acknowledge the land, go to it. Put your hands in it. Put your feet in it. The soil is alive. The microscopic communities in it remember everyone who lived here; they shaped one another. Go to the forest, or to a prairie or a creek. We're lucky to have little green places and public spaces. This is where you acknowledge the land — away from walls and doors and concrete and lawns.

But the purpose of a formal land acknowledgment is not only to acknowledge the land. These statements, increasingly shared as openings for events and on websites, are meant to communicate solidarity with the injustices experienced by Indigenous people. Land acknowledgments can range from perfunctory to profoundly moving, and when they are poorly worded or produced in certain contexts, they can cause uncomfortable cognitive dissonance for Indigenous people.

It is sad that the simple acknowledgment of stolen land and centuries of historical and cultural erasure feels like progress. For Indigenous students at the University of Arkansas, our institution's recently adopted land acknowledgment doesn't even begin to address the lack of representation of Native people in northwest Arkansas. Until action is taken to identify and empower Indigenous people, land-based justice is carried out, and inaccurate history is no longer taught in schools, a land acknowledgment statement feels mostly empty — even belittling and alienating.

Indigenous people played an unintentional part in the establishment and legacy of the University of Arkansas. The Osage ceded most of the Ozarks to the United States in 1808 with the understanding that they would be protected and allowed to hunt and reside on what remained of their ancestral territory. However, only 62 years after the ratification of that treaty, the Osage were confined to a reservation in what the United States then called Indian Territory, now the state of Oklahoma. Their population had declined drastically due to disease and the systematic slaughter of their primary food source, the American bison. The outright fraud and cruel treatment experienced by Native people allowed settlers to move freely into Fayetteville, some of them Cherokee people seeking opportunity and refuge from the violence and land theft in the East. Many more Cherokee passed through Fayetteville during their own forced removal.

Today, the region's First Peoples, primarily the Osage, Quapaw and Caddo nations, endure as federally recognized tribal nations in Oklahoma, where they continue to rebuild after centuries of systemic injustice.

While every land acknowledgment at the University of Arkansas mentions these nations, their people, families and communities continue to live with the consequences of two centuries of upheaval and genocide. A board of trustees policy was established in 1985 to waive out-of-state tuition for citizens of these tribes and a few others with a history in Arkansas, but no formal agreement or invitation has ever been extended encouraging their young people to return to Arkansas for school.

The university does not prioritize building the relationships it needs to recruit Native students from these tribes. Indigenous history is not a required course. The university's research agendas do not benefit the nations; Native American students don't even have a room on campus designated for their use.

I hope you can understand why Native American students might feel more irritated than honored when their classes begin with a compulsory land acknowledgment statement, or when they stumble across one on a website.

Land acknowledgments rarely mention the fact that when Indigenous people were removed from their ancestral land, they were forced to abandon sacred ceremonial sites. These sites were, and still are, pillaged and ruined by colonial settlers. Personal collections of "artifacts" amassed from looting sacred sites in Arkansas and Oklahoma eventually wound up in the University of Arkansas Museum Collection. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, passed by Congress in 1990, required that some items be returned to the tribes' descen-

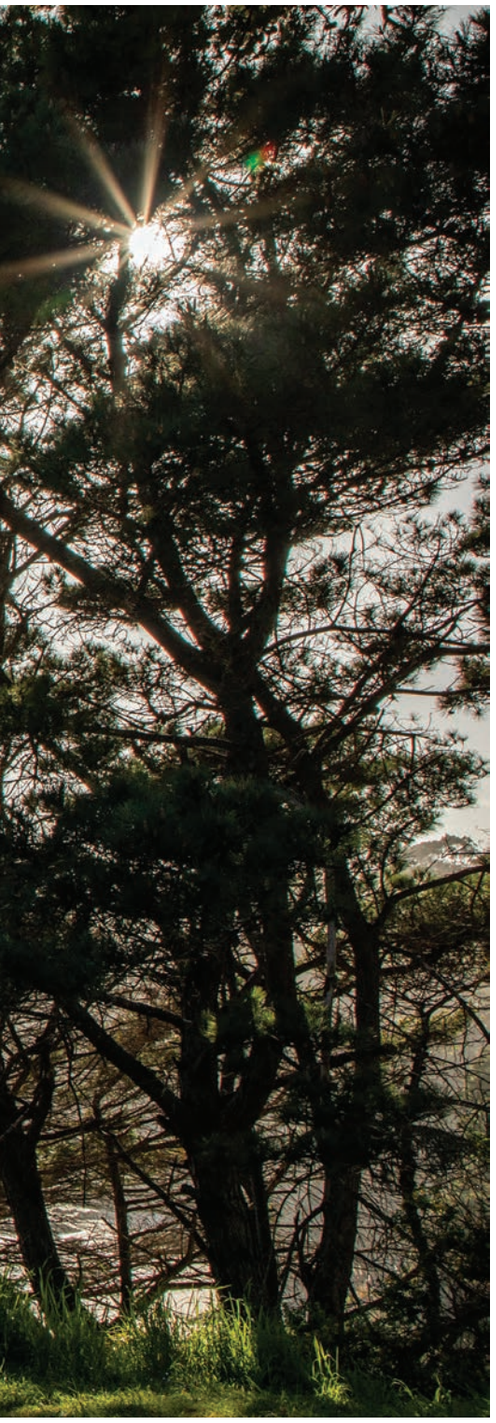
"It is sad that the simple acknowledgment of stolen land and centuries of historical and cultural erasure feels like progress."

Parcels of the Pomo Nation's historical territory in Northern California were among those taken to establish the University of Arkansas.
Christie Hemm Klok

dants, but many remain stored in the museum's collection.

Indigenous students can attend the university without ever even knowing about the beautiful art and cultural heritage created by their ancestors and currently shelved behind closed doors. Museum staff have started working to improve outreach to Native American students, and I'm hopeful that new and lasting partnerships can raise awareness about local Indigenous history and begin to heal the injustice done to First Peoples. However, as long as the narratives remain in the hands of academia, stripped of cultural significance and deprived of an accurate historical narrative, the collection simply contributes to the institution's continued erasure of the original residents and their descendants, in a kind of cultural genocide.

Tribal governments should be empowered to research, care for and share their own cultural objects at the University of Arkansas and elsewhere. Universities should share all existing academic research related to these objects and ensure that future research is guided by or carried out in collaboration with tribal institutional review boards. Achieving environmental, cultural and social justice requires reconnecting contemporary Indigenous people with the



ancestral sacred sites from which the objects were stolen. The onus is on universities to build the relationships and programs needed to reconnect Indigenous people with their sacred objects and places when tribal governments lack the resources to do so.

High Country News investigated the origins of the land granted by the federal Morrill Act of 1862, also known as the Land-Grant College Act, in its "Land-Grab Universities" story (March 2020), which revealed the appalling connection between the establishment of the University of Arkansas and other institutions and the forced dispossession and continuing exploitation of Indigenous people throughout the country. Nearly 10.7 million acres of Indigenous land were seized and granted to states for the creation of colleges. In Arkansas, almost 150,000 acres were given to the state and then sold to raise the principal endowment for the University of Arkansas. These profits are represented in the university's financial profile to this day.

The land sold to establish the university was taken by fraud or force from tribes in nine states, including California, where many parcels were stolen from tribes who faced genocide into the late 19th century. According to Benjamin Madley's book, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873*, an alarming 80% of the Indigenous inhabitants of California were killed, with the state funding the murder of men, women and children. Among the nations and bands from present-day California whose land benefited land-grant universities are the Pomo, Miwok, Shoshone, Diegueno, Tejon and Round Valley Indian Tribes (Yuki).

The parcels in the Arkansas land grant came from more than 140 tribal nations and bands. *High Country News* partnered with researchers to publish an open-source database that makes it possible to identify each individual parcel of land and the treaty or transaction that granted its cession. This information makes it possible for the university to identify every tribal band and nation whose land directly benefited it. These communities should be included in any land acknowledgments, but more importantly, the university should begin the work of compensating Indigenous people for the stolen wealth from that original endowment, as well as for any advancement made possible from the original land grant.

Something tangible is required to begin the reconciliation process.

To borrow a concept from the Black Lives Matter movement: Passivity is complicity. The University of Arkansas and other land-grant institutions continue to passively benefit from the genocide and exploitation of Indigenous people, and land acknowledgments without any attempt to begin reconciliation reek of racism and privilege. Given the lack of awareness about Indigenous people and history, institutions and organizations should continue to create and revise land acknowledgments, but they should also acknowledge that their statements are not sufficient.

Our lands aren't all that was taken from us. Our place-based knowledge and lived experience, grounded in thousands of years of oral tradition, continue to be ignored by academia. The educational system was a violent and coercive means of social control and assimilation, and it has been a source of trauma for many of our young people. Our languages and the unique perspectives held within them are nearly extinguished. Even where we can still access them, our foods, medicines and waters are depleted or polluted, undermining our physical, emotional and spiritual health. These issues are all connected to land.

The land isn't a stagnant, inanimate object, and its value is not solely monetary. Land is a complex system of life. Ecosystems are always changing; they hold the shape of all who manipulate them and retain a record of terrestrial and cosmic influence. The influence of contemporary humans is crude and harsh. We are a young society — all of us who are here now. The influence of those who were here for thousands of years before us can still be seen in the landscape. They shaped the land, and they were shaped by it. They acknowledged the land. They communed with the land. Their descendants are knowledge keepers.

We need action to restore these connections. We need action to restore Indigenous rights to the land. Action is the form of acknowledgment needed to support the rights and well-being of Indigenous people.

We all return to the land, eventually.

"Something tangible is required to begin the reconciliation process."

Summer Wilkie, a citizen of the Cherokee Nation from Baron, Oklahoma, is a University of Arkansas alumnus and currently serves as the university's student coordinator for Indigenous people. The Native Governance Center has published a guide for land acknowledgments. Acknowledgment of inequity is a step toward antiracism. This story originally appeared on the website Arkansas Soul.

Illustration by Krystal Quiles; source photo of Rahsaan “New York” Thomas by Eddie Herena.

PERSPECTIVE

COVID-19 behind bars

The coronavirus caused California to temporarily and partially address prison overcrowding. Will the vaccine mean a return to previously packed conditions?

BY RAHSAAN “NEW YORK” THOMAS

IN JANUARY, ALFRED KING, a 68-year-old man with a Santa Claus belly bulging out of a Nike Dri-FIT shirt, stood before my cell gate at California's San Quentin State Prison, holding up a small white card. "I got my shot — I'm good to go," he said, smiling as he handed through the bars proof that he received his first Moderna coronavirus vaccination.

King, who has asthma, has been in prison for 41 years. He barely survived a prison outbreak of valley fever, a deadly fungus that attacks the lungs. The coronavirus vaccine meant that he might not die trapped in a cell as the disease spread through the overcrowded prison system.

I handed the card back. Although the vaccine might slow the spread of the coronavirus, I knew it was no cure for the prison overcrowding that has been slaughtering us for decades. The pandemic had forced California to reduce prison populations for the time being. I worried that, with vaccinations, we would go back to those previous deadly conditions.

Men like King and me were caught up in the "tough on crime" agenda of the 1980s and '90s, when harsh sentencing requirements, including California's three-strikes law and sentence enhancement laws, packed the California prison system to nearly double its design capacity. More recent laws have eliminated or modified some sentencing enhancements and made others discretionary. Most of those developments aren't retroactive, even though I've observed that many over-sentenced prisoners are in our 50s or older, and studies show we no longer pose a threat to public safety.

Today, prisons remain overcrowded because of racist sentencing practices. For example, more than 90% percent of the people sent to prison from Los Angeles County are people of color. Blacks make up just 9% of LA's population, but comprise almost 40% of LA's state prison population, according to a special directive by Los Angeles County District Attorney George Gascón.

Over-sentencing people and packing them into prisons is deadly, and California's prisoners have been battling unsafe conditions through lawsuits for decades. In 2011, the Supreme Court upheld a decision by a federal three-judge panel, finding that overcrowding causes unnecessary medical deaths. The ruling ordered the California Department of Corrections (CDCR) to reduce its prison population from nearly double occupancy, to almost 138% of design capacity.

During my 17 years in the California prison system, I caught norovirus, which had me expelling feces and vomit simultaneously for a week while my cellie held his nose. I caught the flu and three other respiratory illnesses. I was at San Quentin during chickenpox and Legionnaires' disease outbreaks. Last year, I caught the coronavirus. My symptoms included a pounding headache, nasal congestion, chills and fatigue — and the bitter feeling that the CDCR would rather let me die than see me free.

"The courts move too slowly to save us."

California's long history of prison overcrowding has been made even more deadly by the coronavirus pandemic. According to *The Appeal*, during the worst of the outbreak at San Quentin, between May and August last year, at least 2,000 incarcerated people — more than 75% of the prison's population — and almost 300 staff members contracted COVID-19.

In May of 2020, Ivan Von Staich, who was incarcerated at San Quentin, petitioned the California court system for placement in a CDCR-supervised residential facility, alleging that prison officials had failed to heed warnings about the coronavirus pandemic and acted with deliberate indifference, in what amounted to cruel and unusual punishment. By mid-October, 29 people had died, including one staff member. Prison advocates, medical experts and formerly incarcerated people warned that the virus would be deadly in the poorly ventilated, overcrowded cellblocks, yet parts of the prison, including mine, were kept at nearly double their design capacity, with the CDCR housing two people in cells originally designed for one person.

Finally, a three-judge panel found that San Quentin prison officials subjected us prisoners to cruel and unusual punishment because, despite warnings from medical health experts to reduce the prison's population by half to allow social distancing, the CDCR kept sections so overcrowded that catching the coronavirus became an unsanctioned part of our sentence. The CDCR reluctantly began transferring some people and paroling others early. Emergency releases were granted to some lifers at San Quentin.

The judges ordered San Quentin to reduce its population by 50% by transferring or paroling people, including elderly people serving life sentences for violent or serious crimes if necessary. In the ruling, the judges called the pandemic the "worst epidemiological disaster in California correctional history."

The population at San Quentin dropped from about 3,500 people in June, to about 2,700 in January. Gov. Gavin Newsom eventually expanded COVID-19 early releases to prisoners considered medically high-risk, including chronically ill prisoners over 65, and prisoners with underlying respiratory illnesses. But violent crime exclusions kept cellblocks that held men serving life sentences — including King and me — overcrowded, even though the judges noted that 75% of lifers are in the CDCR's lowest-risk category for public safety, with a recidivism rate of just 1%, compared to California's overall recidivism rate of almost 50%. As of March 2021, the governor had granted just nine COVID-19 releases to lifers at San Quentin.

The corrections department has fought the ruling, even as more men have died — including Mike Hampton, an elderly guy I knew who was serving life for a burglary career under the three-strikes law. Hampton became a Christian and got married while incarcerated. COVID-19 snatched his life months before his scheduled parole board hearing. (Details of his death were not confirmed by the CDCR.)

Despite all the deaths, the population of North Block, where I am housed, remains over design capacity, though the CDCR recently disputed this by email.

The courts move too slowly to save us. Von Staich's ongoing COVID-19 litigation, started a year ago, has no end in sight. Even if the ruling stands, the coronavirus vaccine may allow the CDCR to overcrowd the California penal system to its earlier levels. North Block may again see single-person cells filled to double capacity. Across California, the prison system could erase the reductions achieved in response to the coronavirus.

To reduce overcrowding, the CDCR should speed up the process of releasing the Mike Hamptons of the system: people over-sentenced for serious crimes where no one was hurt. Then, consider releasing those of us who committed violent crimes but have since changed our lives and, at this point, would be assets to society.

History teaches us that overcrowding spreads disease. If California does not immediately release more people, the coronavirus vaccines may turn the state's prisons back into overcrowded petri dishes, with prisoners like me awaiting the next deadly viral outbreak.

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas is a writer, journalist and social justice advocate currently incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison. He directs, produces and co-hosts the award-winning podcast Ear Hustle.

Alaina E. Roberts outside the Cathedral of Learning in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. **Nate Smallwood / HCN**

PERSPECTIVE

Injustices that linger

The descendants of those once enslaved by tribes continue to push for equality.

BY ALAINA E. ROBERTS

LAST JULY, INDIAN COUNTRY REJOICED in a rare win for tribal sovereignty in the nation's highest court. In a ruling that would reshape the jurisdictional landscape of Oklahoma, the U.S. Supreme Court found that since the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Reservation was not disestablished by an 1866 treaty, the tribe still has authority over criminal matters within its boundaries. Legal experts describe the decision as one of the most monumental federal Indian law cases in modern history.

But for many in this part of Indian Country, a similar win for tribal sovereignty was met with a different reception. In February, the neighboring Cherokee Nation Supreme Court struck the words "by blood" from its Constitution, similarly ruling that the rights outlined in the Treaty of 1866 would be upheld. This came after a 2017 U.S. District Court ruling found that the treaty guaranteed tribal citizenship to the descendants of "Freedmen" — the Black women and men once held in bondage by the tribe.

The Cherokee Nation Supreme Court decision reflects an argument that the tribe's attorneys have made in adoption cases involving Cherokee children: Tribal citizenship is about more than race, it's about nationality. Native nations are sovereign bodies whose citizenship revolves around treaties, legislation and historical precedent, and this ruling represents the Cherokee Nation's willingness to reckon with its past participation in slavery, if in a halting and largely unwilling fashion, similar to the United States.

As a historian and a descendant of Black and mixed-race people enslaved by Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians, I am well aware that this issue is complex. But I believe, as I discuss in my forthcoming book, *I've Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land*, that Native nations must confront their slaveholding pasts, just as they push the United States to reckon with its own settler colonial sins.

From the 1700s to 1863, members of the Cherokee Nation, including some of its most wealthy and politically influential families, enslaved Black people. They fought in the Civil War partly to protect slavery, as well as to preserve their own land and sovereignty.

After the war, in the treaties known as the Treaties of 1866, the United States pushed the Cherokees — as well as the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole Nations — to provide formerly enslaved people with the rights and privileges of citizenship. However, the treaties also included a land allotment provision — part of a broader and more insidious federal plan to seize yet more Native land for white American settlers, thereby eroding tribal sovereignty along with cultural traditions.

These five Indian nations use the same treaties today to fight for legal recognition of their Oklahoma land claims and tribal sovereignty. Now, as the Cherokees have done, they must also be willing to honor the treaty promises they made regarding the Black people who lived and labored in their nations and shared their ancestry and cultural traditions.

After 1866, Freedmen went on to serve in tribal leadership positions and contribute to their nation. But they were never fully accepted by some as Cherokee citizens. Attempts to limit the rights of Freedmen or to cull them from tribal citizenship began immediately, including one led by the famed Cherokee chief, Wilma Mankiller, who spearheaded two resolutions barring Freedmen descendants from citizenship during her tenure (1987-1995). When citizenship is rescinded, Black Cherokees are unable to access tribal health care, education benefits and other privileges. This denial of acceptance is not merely symbolic, it can be a death sentence.

The impetus for the Cherokee Supreme Court's decision was a challenge put forth by Robin Mayes, a candidate for tribal council. He argued that another candidate, Marilyn Vann, was not eligible to run for this position because, as a Freedman descendant, she was "not (legally) Cherokee by blood as required by the Constitution." His challenge was tossed out within a matter of days and followed by the Cherokee Nation Supreme Court's ruling. But what if it had not been? Would Cherokees have continued on, knowing that they were sanctioning second-class citizenship, where Black Cherokees could not hold office? Is this the sort of tribal sovereignty Native people across this country want to support?

Indian Country should care about its treatment of Black Cherokees and other Freedmen descendants. We are the canaries in the coal mine that is the complicated morass of kinship, belonging and nationhood; we are a constant reminder of the importance of shared history and treaty obligations.

Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. has advocated for acknowledgment of Freedmen, and introduced a program to reconfigure tribal museums and other public history venues to include Freedmen history as part of the Cherokee narrative. We need more tribal leaders who see publicly reckoning with past injustices as a strength, rather than a weakness.

Alaina E. Roberts is an assistant professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh.

REVIEW

A transgender chapter of Colorado history

In *Going to Trinidad*, a small town's legacy of gender affirmation surgery reveals the many outcomes of transition.

BY CLAIRE RUDY FOSTER

THE HISTORY OF transgender people in the United States is nearly invisible, buried in institutional archives. Our personal stories are often preserved as medical or psychological "case studies" that portray us as disfigured and mentally ill — even criminals. When these documents record gender transitions, they emphasize "the surgery" — the procedures that can often offer good outcomes for transgender people, but can neither predict future happiness nor resolve systemic transphobia.

In *Going to Trinidad: A Doctor, A Colorado Town, and Stories from an Unlikely Gender Crossroads*, journalist Martin J. Smith leans heavily on medical histories to tell the intimate, sometimes hair-raising stories of transgender people and the small clinic in remote, rural southern Colorado that served them in the second half of the 20th century. The book both illuminates and obscures the complexity of transitioning.

Trinidad dives into the life and practice of Dr. Stanley Biber, at one time the leading surgeon in the U.S. for gender-affirming surgery and one of the few doctors in the world who worked with transgender patients. His office in Trinidad, Colorado — a small town just 13 miles north of New Mexico — changed thousands of lives between 1969 and 2010. Few other clinics in the country did similar procedures; gender-related surgeries were on par with back-alley abortions, advertised through whisper networks. At that time, with assimilation into cisgender society considered the best possible outcome, genital surgery was seen as essential, because it would allow transgender people to "pass" and blend seamlessly into the mainstream.

Biber's wildly progressive surgical clinic is set against the backdrop of a historic mountain town. "Trinidad has always been the kind of place where road-numbed motorists traveling Interstate 25 between Denver and Santa Fe exit just long enough to top off their gas tank, refill their go-cups, and use the bathroom," Smith writes. Even today, Trinidad's only hospital has just 25 beds. The town's name became synonymous with "sex-change," a cultural association so common it was mocked on the animated sitcom *South Park*.

Smith spent two years researching Trinidad and tracing the stories of Dr. Biber and two trans women who sought his services: Claudine Griggs, and another woman who used several names: Walt Heyer, Christal West, Andrea West and Laura Jensen. They represent two disparate clinical outcomes. Griggs, who transitioned socially early in life, is a more "successful" case (defined as resulting in heterosexual marriage, stable employment and raising children). Heyer, on the other hand, struggled with mental illness and addiction; eventually, she attempted to detransition after a religious experience. For Griggs, the change offered freedom. Heyer's story ends less happily, perhaps because the surgery failed to solve her problems; no medical procedure could answer the questions that troubled her. Smith's extensive research fleshes out the women's medical histories, creating moving, believable portraits that extend beyond a doctor's notes.

Trinidad treats both women with empathy, but they are still primarily patients. The book's emphasis on surgical procedures inadvertently reinforces stereotypes, as does its casual use of dated words now considered offensive, like "transsexual" and "transvestite." Sex change is genital in this book; when someone acquires a long-coveted vagina, she "becomes a woman."

But if genitalia defines gender, how do you explain trans people whose gender presentation aligns with their identity without surgery? *Trinidad* has occasional moments that reveal these nuances. Griggs visits Dr. Biber, believing the procedure can alleviate her intense dysmorphia. Awakening post-op, she sees sanitary pads and flowers by her bed, and thinks for a moment that the pain she feels is the ache of labor. But there is no baby; she realizes that she is still "a transsexual woman." She remains herself — just in a new body. Heyer, too, finds that the procedure does not alter who she is: "The problems (she) hoped the surgery would fix — aggravation, distress, depression — were still an issue. The battle that for years had raged inside her continued."

The harrowing transphobia *Trinidad* describes permeates every aspect of life for the women who sought treatment. Their experiences range from job loss to sexual assault. Even Biber himself, who was by all accounts a compassionate practitioner, believed that with adequate therapy, most people would simply accept their lot in life and surrender their dreams. (He thought the penile-scrotal flap surgery he performed was "horrible-looking.") Transition does not remove transphobia, nor does it solve the problem of being transgender in a deeply transphobic culture. But it does offer transgender people true autonomy over their bodies, dignity and relief from life-threatening gender dysphoria.

As a record of institutionalized perspectives on transgender people and the dominant beliefs concerning us at the time, *Trinidad* is indispensable. In a world that demeans, dehumanizes and discriminates against trans people, it is the story of a doctor who offered them a sense of ownership over their bodies. Ultimately, it's a brutal telling — hard to read, though vital to hear.

Going to Trinidad: A Doctor, a Colorado Town, and Stories from an Unlikely Gender Crossroads
Martin J. Smith
264 pages, hardcover: $27
Bower House, 2021.

Daryn Ray / HCN

Lauren Crow / HCN

Q&A

How to tackle the climate crisis fairly

Geographer Diana Liverman explains what climate justice means.

BY MAYA L. KAPOOR

Geographer Diana Liverman has been a leading climate researcher for more than 40 years: In a grainy 1997 C-SPAN video of a White House conference about global climate change, she can be seen seated next to President Bill Clinton, discussing the consequences, such as hotter summers and the spread of tropical diseases, that Americans might soon face. Today, she is regents' professor in the School of Geography, Development, and Environment at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she studies the human dimensions of the climate crisis. Liverman is particularly concerned with how climate change — and potential solutions, whether technological or political — impact disadvantaged communities.

Despite dedicating her career to what some people might consider a depressing field, Liverman is inspired by her research, which shows the many ways in which people are already addressing the climate crisis. But she often gets frustrated when she tries to convey her reasons for hope.

This was particularly true in 2018, when Liverman co-authored what became known as the "Hothouse Earth" academic paper. It described how the planet might stabilize at a dangerously warm average temperature, with disastrous consequences for humans and ecosystems. But it also detailed how people could steer the planet away from that worst-case scenario, stabilizing the Earth at a much safer average temperature. To Liverman's chagrin, most media coverage focused only on the worst-case scenario, rather than the paper's more hopeful aspects.

Later that same year, Liverman was frustrated once again by the media's coverage of her research. A special working group of international scientists, which she chaired for the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, published a report that found, essentially, that the sooner people worked to get climate change under control, the easier it would be. But headlines reduced its complex research down to an overly stark message, saying that people had only 12 years to save the world from climate change.

Now, under a Democratic administration, Americans may be more willing to share Liverman's cautious optimism. Since being sworn in, President Joe Biden has signed a slew of executive orders signaling that the United States is ready to act on the climate crisis. After four years of a Republican administration that denied climate science and pushed fossil fuel extraction — to the detriment

of Western ecosystems, Indigenous nations and communities of color — Biden has made climate change action a priority. What's more, he's pushing for solutions that explicitly address environmental justice.

That's crucial, because as researchers and community activists have long known, climate action is not the same thing as climate justice. Liverman cautions that climate adaptations — actions taken to cope with a warmer world, such as helping coastal communities survive sea-level rise, or protecting the elderly from extreme heat — can lead to further social inequalities, if they're not carefully designed.

According to Liverman, climate justice means taking into account who is most responsible for the crisis, who is most vulnerable to its impacts, and who wins or loses from policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and help people adapt.

High Country News spoke with Liverman recently about how her childhood sparked her interest in climate justice, what she wishes the media would get right about the climate crisis, and how to make sure climate adaptations are fair.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

In your research, you're not necessarily the person who's taking ice cores or measuring atmospheric levels of various greenhouse gases to study climate change. Instead, you really focus on the human side of climate change, with a particular emphasis on inequality. How did you become interested in that?

I was born in Ghana, in West Africa, because my dad was working on the development of dams. And when I was a kid there were famines in the Sahel (the transitional zone between the Sahara and the Sudanian savanna). So I've had this long-term interest in West Africa.

I think what drew me into the human dimensions was my initial interest in drought and famine when I was an undergrad, and realizing that vulnerability mattered. The impact of (less) rainfall was fine if you were well-off and had access to water. But if you were poor with no land and no water, then you were really going to suffer. So I got that insight into the importance of vulnerability, and how it was very much determined by inequality.

About 10 years ago, I started thinking about how climate adaptation had justice dimensions. I had students and projects looking at how adaptations can benefit men and not women, or better-off communities rather than less-well-off communities. I think this question of justice in responding to climate change is fascinating.

What do you wish people better understood about the causes and solutions of climate change?

The one that's sort of a long-standing annoyance is people who think that it's the fault of women having too many babies. I really wish people would stop obsessing about population numbers — because women are choosing to have fewer children — and focus much more on consumption, and how we can reduce the carbon footprint of consumption. You don't have to tell people, "You can't do anything," but you can say, "Here are the things that you can consume that have a lower environmental footprint."

I'd like the (research) to be more nuanced about business. I do work with some (climate adaptation) networks that are business-related, and I don't think you can just blanket-blame business and capitalism for climate change. I think it's got to be part of the solution as well, and will be.

How could climate change adaptation create new vulnerabilities or inequities?

There's a paper we just published, written for Norway's minister of International Development, on adaptation interventions, and what makes them successful. A team from all over looked at about 60 studies. We found that a lot of times, the adaptation was creating inequality.

For example, to receive adaption funding for irrigation you might have to own the land. Women might not own the land, or poor people might not. To be able to have air conditioning as an adaption, you have to have a certain income level.

There's a really interesting historical example if you look at New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina. The adaptation was to build dikes to protect the area, so you've got that historic adaptation of building a dike, often to protect the better-off neighborhoods. And then, climate change exceeded their capacity, and it was often poorer people who were in the lowest-lying areas.

In your 2020 essay "Our Climate Future," published in the anthology *Dear America: Letters of Hope, Habitat, Defiance, and Democracy*, you brought up how the media responded to your "Hothouse Earth" research paper. You wrote that you tried to talk to journalists about what people could do, and in many cases already were doing, to address climate change, but that most people who interviewed you just wanted to talk about —

— Apocalypse Earth?

Yeah. What do you wish the media could get right in its climate coverage?

The whole idea of that paper was that it was in two parts. The first was, "If we don't do something, we could get runaway (global) warming." And then the second part of it was, "But here's all the things we can do, and here are the signs we're already doing it."

And the media just picked up on the first part. And it was sort of frustrating.

That came out just a few months before the IPCC 1.5 report (a report prepared by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial temperatures), which was also picked up as an apocalyptic vision. The story was, "We've got 12 years before it's the end of the world." And that was so not the message we were trying to convey!

I got quite upset about young people just feeling paralyzed by that message. The message wasn't that the world's going to end. It's, "The world will be a bit warmer, and it will be harder to reduce emissions, if we delay." Which is sort of a softer message.

On his first day in office, President Joe Biden signed an executive order prioritizing the climate crisis. How did you feel about that?

I was happy, both in terms of personal politics, but also in terms of the science. But most of it was just reversing what (President) Trump had done and going back to (President) Obama. And Obama had not done enough.

At this point, we can't just reverse. And I don't think they are just reversing; I think they're trying to go beyond that. But the first day, it was mostly just reversing things rather than going the next step.

Disclosure: In 2015 and 2016, Maya L. Kapoor worked part-time for a research institution that Liverman then co-directed; Kapoor was not her direct employee.

"Here's all the things we can do, and here are the signs we're already doing it."

Heard Around the West

Tips about Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org.

BY BETSY MARSTON

ALASKA

"I've heard of salmon jumping into boats, but never anything like this," reports the *Sitka Gazette*. Tom Satre, who runs a charter service out of Juneau, was taking a group cruising on his 62-foot fishing boat when four juvenile black-tailed deer swam toward him and circled the boat in the icy waters. "We could tell right away the young bucks were distressed," he said. Satre opened his back gate, "and we helped the typically skittish and absolutely wild animals on board. .... I've never seen anything like it!" Once on the boat, the exhausted deer collapsed, shivering. Satre dropped his unexpected passengers off at the small community of Taku Harbor, about 22 miles southeast of Juneau. The first hopped onto the boardwalk, "looked back as if to say 'thank you,' and disappeared" into the forest. But the smallest deer, he said, was so knackered Satre had to take it "off the boardwalk in a wheelbarrow." Fortunately, it quickly recovered and vanished into the trees.

Armando Veve / HCN

OREGON

Sometimes, if we're lucky, animals save us. A 60-year-old man was riding his mule through Milo McIver State Park in northwestern Oregon, when he fell off and lay on the trail, unable to rise. Not long after, two hikers saw a mule coming toward them, acting very much as if it had stepped out of a long-eared equine version of the TV show *Lassie*. "It kept stopping and looking back to make sure we were following it," said Doug Calvert, one of the hikers. The mule led them to its injured rider, reports the *Oregonian*, and they called 911. Its job done, "the mule went back on the trail" and disappeared. (The next day, it was found near the trailhead's parking lot.) Both Hickory, the mule, and the unidentified man are said to be doing well.

MONTANA

Then there are those humans who behave bizarrely — never an endangered species in the West. In Bozeman, Montana, a man recently rode his horse into the Town Pump store, browsed a bit, then rode off without buying anything. "Store cameras recorded the odd shopping trip," reports *Q2 News*. The store's Facebook page politely suggested that next time, the rider should maybe "ask your bronco to wait outside."

IDAHO

In Pocatello, Idaho, a birthday party at the Odyssey Bar got seriously out of hand after two men began arguing, reports the *Idaho State Journal*. The fight moved outside, and one of the men knocked the other down and starting slugging him. In response, the pinned-down man "grabbed the puncher's head and bit off his nose." The injured man was taken to the hospital, and both men were cited for misdemeanor disorderly conduct. There was a silver, or at least a nasal, lining: "Someone at the bar retrieved the nose and put it on ice so it could be reattached."

THE WEST

Sometimes state legislators say exactly what they think, reports the *Washington Post*, an "outbreak of alarming honesty" that can get them into trouble. For example, Arizona state Rep. John Kavanagh, R, defended restrictive voting laws on the principle that "everybody shouldn't be voting." Since the "quality" of voting is what really counts, it's no loss if "uninformed" people can't do it.

And in Cheyenne, Wyoming, Republican state Rep. Jeremy Haroldson's bill proposed rewriting the state's public school curriculum. He said there are two sides to the history of American slavery, and Black Americans are stuck in a mentality "worse than slavery itself." Haroldson, a freshman legislator and pastor, argued that "slavery was not maybe what it has been painted as in this nation, completely." But when he denounced widespread ignorance of the U.S. Constitution, Haroldson came a cropper, thanks to Democratic state Rep. Cathy Connolly, who asked him about the 19th Amendment. Haroldson had to demur, saying he'd have to look it up. "It's the right to vote for women," she told him, "and it's not in your bill. I'm curious about that." Haroldson's bill failed to advance on a 7-2 vote.

Then there's Boise, Idaho, where lawmakers rejected a $6 million federal grant designed to improve early childhood education. As Republican Rep. Charlie Shepherd explained, the grant would hurt "the family unit" because no one should make it "easier or more convenient for mothers to come out of the home. ..." This did *not* go over well with Idaho women, reports The Associated Press. Some protested at the Statehouse with signs like "Who let the moms out?" They urged legislators to accept the Trump administration grant, which would help library programs, childcare providers and homeschooling families.

DID YOU KNOW?

There are ways to protect livestock without killing wolves.

PHOTO CREDIT: MATT MOYER

Some producers of beef and lamb graze their livestock on the open range of national forests and other public land where wolves and other carnivores live.

The best way to prevent wolves and other predators from attacking livestock has always been with regular human presence like shepherds and range riders.

Livestock guardian dogs along with the use of tools like electrified fladry (pictured above), pulsating lights, and noise-makers help to deter predators.

LEARN MORE on our blog at:

LivingWithWolves.org

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#IAMTHEWEST

BETSY WILKERSON
City Council member
Spokane, Washington

I grew up in this neighborhood before the freeway came. I used to walk through this park, but the freeway came through and divided the Black community. It also divided the Jewish community. In government, money is where the power is at. We can talk money, but in the end you got to take it all the way back to: How are you going to help the people of Spokane? That's my question.

My biggest job has been to bring people in. The people of color didn't know anybody. They didn't trust anybody, so they never showed up. They wanted to be a part of the process, but were never invited in.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
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