

High Country News

A photograph of a young child with dark hair, wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt with a small floral pattern and pink pants, running across a lush green grassy field. The child is seen from behind, with their hair blowing in the wind. In the background, a city skyline with several tall buildings is visible under a clear sky. The scene is bathed in the warm light of late afternoon or early morning.

The premature death
of a rail trail
Hallucinogenic
toads
Lithium mining
threatens sacred sites

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GREENSPACE
REVOLUTION

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Ivan Bender, caretaker of the Hualapai Tribe's Cholla Canyon Ranch in western Arizona, points out the boundaries of the tribe's property from a site where exploratory drilling for lithium deposits has taken place.
Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN

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. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$37 a year, \$47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898.



EDITOR'S NOTE



We are water

THE OTHER DAY, I WENT FOR A WALK in the forest as a light rain fell and the sun intermittently shone down through the trees. Everything was gloriously moist and plant life was abundant. A creek tumbled in and out of view, churning with aquamarine swirls and pearly froth. The precipitation wasn't heavy enough to soak through my light jacket, but it was enough to sustain the trillium blooms and coax the rhododendrons closer to blossoming. In the Mount Hood Wilderness, there seemed to be enough water to go around, though much of Oregon was already experiencing extreme drought.

A few days earlier, I had driven to Portland from California's Central Coast, where the lush greens of spring had already faded to a tawny brown, the oak trees and their shadows drawing a stark contrast. My route bisected Shasta Reservoir, the largest human-made lake in the state. Shasta Dam is operated by the Bureau of Reclamation, which builds and maintains dams and canals for water storage, delivery and power generation. As of mid-May, Shasta Lake was at 54% of average capacity, and predictions suggested that it might fall to its lowest level in 40 years ... perhaps even lower.

I crossed the Klamath River, where 70% of juvenile salmon surveyed over a recent two-week period were found dead. (*See story on page 7.*) The Klamath is managed for the benefit of many: salmon, agricultural users, commercial fishermen and the Klamath, Karuk, Hoopa Valley and Yurok tribes. These constituencies are often described as competing interests, though the salmon certainly don't see it that way; the salmon are just trying to stay alive. And then there are the interests of the river itself, upon which — or I suppose I should say whom — the Yurok Tribe bestowed the rights of personhood in 2019.

The truth is, all these interests have legitimate reasons to want to make use of the Klamath. But when water is in short supply, everybody suffers. How much water, for how much agriculture, versus how much water for salmon? How much for sustaining other fish species of cultural importance to the Indigenous people who have stewarded this river for thousands of years? The calculus grows more impossible with each passing drought.

There is simply not enough water to go around in the West this year. There will be even less in the years to come. Future droughts may not end at all, merely fluctuate between classifications, from moderate to exceptional. And exceptional may someday become normal. Without water, we are nobody, we are sad sacks of skin-covered bones. We cannot base our lifestyle or our economies on using more water than is available. We'll need to learn to treat water like the precious element that it is. As the water protectors remind us over and over through their acts of resistance: Water is life.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief

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FEATURES

Reclaiming LA

How communities in Los Angeles are turning industrial sites into pockets of green.

PHOTOS BY STELLA KALININA | INTRODUCTION BY JESSICA KUTZ

22

Derailed

How a trail in rural Oregon became a target of far-right extremism.

BY LEAH SOTTILE | ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOAN WONG

28

ON THE COVER

Carina Lizárraga on Memorial Day with her parents and siblings at Los Angeles State Historic Park in Chinatown. The park is located on the former site of the Southern Pacific Transportation Company's River Station. **Stella Kalinina / HCN**

Sheep graze the artificial hillside of a decommissioned landfill in California's San Gabriel Valley to help mitigate the risk of fires (above).

Stella Kalinina / HCN

The Sonoran Desert toad, threatened in New Mexico and thought to be extinct in California, is being poached in Arizona for its hallucinogenic secretions (facing). **Maricopa County Parks and Recreation**



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A hallucinogenic toad in peril 14

How one species got caught up in the commodification of spiritual awakening.
BY JESSICA KUTZ



Ongoing fish kill on the Klamath River is an ‘absolute worst-case scenario’ 7

Unprecedented drought in the Klamath Basin leaves communities wondering how they will survive the summer.
BY ANNA V. SMITH

When Indigenous religious freedom and public-lands management clash 8

Demand for lithium-ion batteries threatens a landscape in western Arizona that is sacred to the Hualapai Nation.
BY MAYA KAPOOR | PHOTOS BY ROBERTO (BEAR) GUERRA

‘I’m scared of getting sick from the water’ 11

Some rural California communities have waited nearly a decade for state regulators to repair their tainted drinking-water systems.
BY CLAUDIA BOYD-BARRETT
PHOTOS BY MARTIN DO NASCIMENTO

Public lands inundated 16

Record numbers of visitors are swarming the outdoors.
FACTS & FIGURES
BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

How will humans live through ecological collapse? 41

In *Believers*, Lisa Wells profiles ordinary people who want to lead less destructive lives.
REVIEW BY ANDRU OKUN

Farmworker organizing in Washington is undoing discriminatory labor policies 42

A conversation with Victoria Ruddy and Elizabeth Strater of the United Farm Workers.
Q&A BY CARL SEGERSTROM

The female inmates battling wildfires 44

In *Breathing Fire*, Jaime Lowe uncovers the benefits and drawbacks of California’s inmate fire program.
REVIEW BY JENNY SHANK

Wildfire needs new narratives 45

The podcast *Fireline* is a start.
REVIEW BY SURYA MILNER

#iamthewest 48

Alex Kim, racial justice engagement specialist, Missoula, Montana.
BY TAILYR IRVINE

DEPARTMENTS

- 3 EDITOR’S NOTE
- 6 LETTERS
- 15 THE LATEST
- 18 DONORS / READER PROFILES
- 46 HEARD AROUND THE WEST

LETTERS

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

THE FIRE NEXT TIME

It was with great interest that I read the June issue of *HCN*, especially the article about the Salmon-Challis National Forest (“The Fire Next Time”). We lived there for eight and a half years (’77 to ’85), when I worked as a range specialist for the Bureau of Land Management for four-plus years and then on the Salmon Ranger District for another four-plus years.

It’s amazing that now, 36 years later, the agencies, the users, the environmentalists and other interested parties are still often at odds with each other over the management of our natural resources. No one group is to blame for the recent disastrous wildfires or other environmental problems. All groups have a stake in the guilt. Compromise and cooperation are what it will take to solve the problems. Each group needs to put aside its own agenda and work with the other groups on what they have in common and what they can agree on. Natural resource management

is not an exact science, like chemistry or physics. It really is an art to be able to manage our resources wisely. But it can be done.

Lamar B. Taylor
Buffalo, Wyoming

I read with great interest the June 2021 article, “The Fire Next Time” by Carl Segerstrom.

Similar events have occurred on the national forests and grasslands in Texas. The Forest Service everywhere is trying to avoid doing required environmental analysis. This is wrong, illegal, and the agency knows this.

Megafires are not stopped by thinning, prescribed burning or other forest management actions. They are driven by the local weather and national climate, including human-caused climate change, drought and winds.

Brandt Mannchen
Humble, Texas

THE WISDOM OF TREES

Thank you for another excellent

issue, and especially Claire Thompson’s book review (“The wisdom of trees,” June 2021). As a retired national park ranger-naturalist, with two forestry degrees, I’m painfully aware of the split within the forestry community. Trees are finally getting some recognition, and not just as homes for the cute fuzzy aboveground beasts they shelter.

Eric Burr
Mazama, Washington

UNCERTAIN WATER SUPPLY

Thanks for Sarah Tory’s story on Phoenix’s water-depletion myopia, “Uncertain water supply” (June 2021). Tory did a great job of summarizing the history comprehensively, yet comprehensibly. That’s talent.

I live in Phoenix and fear for the future. Phoenix is built out, but the main industry, just beyond Phoenix’s borders, remains housing development, even though the conditions point to a bad ending. I never thought I’d applaud polyurethane sod, but there you are.

Kate Nolan
Phoenix, Arizona

KEEP GOING

I’ve been reading *High Country News* since I fought fires in Wyoming in 1977. *HCN* looks better than ever, with great photos of the Atascosa and its plant life — as well as the LA River (both May 2021), and your articles are as smart as ever and more wide-ranging (i.e., culturally diverse). Keep it up, keep going: That’s why I subscribe.

Sesshu Foster
Alhambra, California

NOT RENEWING

It is with a bit of remorse that I have to tell you that I will not be renewing my subscription this fall, thus ending my continuous subscription of 38 years. While I understand some of the journalism changes you have made, I find myself reading fewer articles in *High Country News*. I regret the reduced focus on environmental issues. While the increased focus on Native Ameri-

can issues is admirable, I am less interested in those stories. Good luck.

Chuck Stearns
Whitefish, Montana

EXCEPTIONAL

Your efforts bring me such a tingly kind of joy. Every issue is out of the park! You are the mythical exceptional American. Thanks.

Jon Herman
Roslyn, Washington

FAR AFIELD

When I first subscribed to your magazine, I was ready to put on my boots to explore Colorado and adjacent states and write to Washington, D.C., regarding matters pertaining to wilderness. As time has gone by, your magazine has gone so far afield from your original purpose that I no longer agree with your mission.

Barbara H. Hannah
Grand Junction, Colorado

BEST WISHES

I’ve been an on-and-off subscriber and occasional contributor to *High Country News* for so many years I’ve lost track — roughly 25. I just received the June issue, along with a sticker saying it is my last one and that I need to renew. I opened it to read your inaugural Editor’s Note (by Editor-in-Chief Jennifer Sahn) and was absolutely delighted to discover a kindred spirit. All — literally all — of my spiritual experiences have been in wild places, and at age 59 I still go into the wilderness, often alone, to nurture that connection and restore my sense of faith and my sense of responsibility to protect nature and its inhabitants, and to create a path for humans to live sustainably with our fellow travelers on this Earth. On the strength and inspiration of your inaugural issue, I’m renewing my subscription and sending a contribution to *HCN*. We may never meet, but I will think of you and send you my best wishes with every issue I read.

Tom Starrs
Portland, Oregon

CORRECTIONS

We neglected to note that research travel for our June feature, “The Fire Next Time,” was made possible by a grant from the Society of Environmental Journalists’ Fund for Environmental Journalism. Thank you, FEJ! In our May 2021 Heard Around the West column, we said that Tom Satre told his story about deer swimming out to his boat to the *Sitka Gazette*. It was actually the *Juneau Empire*. We regret the errors.

Ongoing fish kill on the Klamath River is an ‘absolute worst-case scenario’

Unprecedented drought in the Klamath Basin leaves communities wondering how they will survive the summer.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

THE VIDEO SHOWS clear river water washing over rocks as sunlight dances in the shallows. Small slivers of white that look like leaves float on the surface. But they aren’t leaves; they’re the bodies of juvenile salmon, most of them no longer than a finger, dead from a warm-water disease exacerbated by drought on the Klamath River. The caption to the video, filmed by Yurok Vice Chairman Frankie Joe Myers, is stark: “This is what climate change looks like when we don’t act.”

Fish have been dying on the Klamath since around May 4, according to the Yurok Tribal Fisheries Department. At that time, 97% of the juvenile salmon caught by the department’s in-river trapping device were infected with the disease *C. shasta*, and were either dead, or would die within days. Over a two-week period, 70% of the juvenile salmon caught in the trap were dead.

This spring, the Klamath Basin is already in extreme and exceptional drought — one of the worst drought years in four decades. Irrigators upriver from the fish kill were told in mid-May that for the first time since the “A” Canal in the Klamath Project began operating in 1907, they would not receive any water from it. The irrigators say they need 400,000 acre-feet of water, but this year, they will receive just 33,000 acre-feet from the Klamath Project — a historic low. The situation has put pressure on an embattled region already caught in a cyclical mode of crisis due to a drying climate. “For salmon people, a juvenile fish kill is an absolute worst-case scenario,” Myers said in a statement.

In a statement about this year’s drought, Klamath Irrigation District President Ty Kliewer said, “This just couldn’t be worse. The impacts to our family farms and these rural communities will be off the scale.”

Last summer was also dry, and farmers and their supporters held a tractor convoy to protest the lack of water and the Bureau of Reclamation’s allocation decisions. Meanwhile, the Yurok Tribe’s Boat Dance ceremony



These juvenile salmon, collected by the Yurok Fisheries Department’s in-river trapping device, were killed by a warm-water disease. **Matt Mais / Yurok Tribe**

was canceled because of low flows last August, and after a dry winter, heated litigation around water allocation persists. In June, several irrigators set up an encampment by the Klamath Project head gates, which have been forced open by irrigators during past droughts. “This drought is not a fluke event,” Yurok citizen and tribal counsel Amy Cordalis testified in an early June House hearing on the ongoing drought in the West. “It is part of a larger pattern of drought brought on by climate change. Climate change is no longer some vague future threat — we are seeing its effects happening now, in real time.”

Wet years used to be the norm, and dry years were uncommon, but in recent years that’s changed, especially since 2014, said

Barry McCovey Jr., Yurok Fisheries Department director and Yurok citizen, who has studied fish disease on the Klamath for 20 years. This year’s drought is part of the new climate regime the basin is shifting into. “Good water years where there’s plenty of water to satisfy all the needs of the basin are rare now,” McCovey said.

With the forecast so grim so early in the year, communities are already seeking aid. A first round of drought relief allocated \$15 million for irrigators, and \$3 million for the Klamath Basin tribes, though the tribes — along with commercial fishermen and nonprofits — have requested \$250 million in relief. In a virtual forum this May with congressional representatives, Ben DuVal, president of the Board of Directors of the Klamath Water Users Association, called for a settlement agreement to bring “long-term stability” to the basin. “It can be done; it has been done elsewhere,” he said. Such agreements have been attempted in the past with varying degrees of success, though one of the last major efforts, the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement, never made it through Congress. (The Klamath Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement, which is still in effect, details the planned removal of four dams on the Klamath.)

Large-scale agreements like that require significant federal involvement. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) has indicated her interest in Klamath issues, but has not yet talked about an agreement. In April, acknowledging the impact of climate change and the difficult summer ahead, she reversed a number of memos and assessments by the Trump administration, saying they were issued without tribal consultation and don’t reflect the current administration’s goals. Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., has urged Haaland to appoint a “Klamath czar” — a “high-level operative who can make quick and important decisions.” The planned removal of four dams on the Klamath, meanwhile, is still awaiting approval by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

The ongoing fish kill is reminiscent of the traumatic 2002 die-off, in which 60,000 fall run adult chinook salmon died of disease because of low water in the Klamath. The optics that year were much more dramatic — the bodies of the fish were everywhere, piled on the banks of the river, floating downriver — but the mass death of juveniles means they’ll never make it out to the ocean, and never get a chance to lay their eggs. Given the life cycle of a salmon, it also guarantees that the salmon run years from now will be abysmal. “Everyone’s going to keep on suffering if we don’t come up with a plan that works moving forward,” McCovey said. “And we don’t have much time left.” ☀



Ivan Bender, the caretaker of the Hualapai Tribe's Cholla Canyon Ranch, was the first to realize that exploratory drilling was taking place around the perimeter of the tribe's property.

When Indigenous religious freedom and public-lands management clash

Demand for lithium-ion batteries threatens a landscape in western Arizona that is sacred to the Hualapai Nation.

BY MAYA KAPOOR | PHOTOS BY ROBERTO (BEAR) GUERRA

ONE AUTUMN EVENING four years ago, Ivan Bender, a Hualapai man in his mid-50s, took a walk with his fluffy brown-and-white Pomeranian, Sierra May, to check on the ranch-land he tends. Nestled in western Arizona's Big Sandy River Valley, the ranch protects Ha' Kamwe' — hot springs that are sacred to the Hualapai and known today in English as Cofer Hot Springs. As the shadows lengthened, Bender saw something surprising — men working on a nearby hillside.

"I asked them what they were doing," Bender recalled. "They told me they were drilling." As it turns out, along with sacred places — including the hot springs, ceremony sites and ancestral burials — the valley also holds an enormous lithium deposit. Now, exploratory work by Australian company Hawkstone Mining Ltd. threatens those places, and with them, the religious practices of the Hualapai and other Indigenous nations. But this threat is nothing new: Centuries of land expropriation, combined with federal court rulings denying protection to sacred sites, have long infringed on Indigenous religious freedom.

Cholla Canyon Ranch, where Bender is the caretaker, includes approximately 360 acres about halfway between Phoenix and Las Vegas, flanked to the west by the lush riparian corridor of the Big Sandy River. The valley is part of an ancient salt route that connected tribes from as far north as central Utah to communities in Baja California and along the Pacific Coast. It has been documented in the songs and oral traditions of many Indigenous nations.

"There are stories about that land and what it represents to the Hualapai Tribe," Bender said. "To me, it holds a really, really sacred valley of life in general." According to Tribal Council member Richard Powskey, who directs the Hualapai Natural Resources Department, the Hualapai harvest native plant materials along the river

corridor for everything from cradleboards to drums.

The mining company (USA Lithium Ltd., which has since been acquired by Hawkstone) hadn't told the Hualapai Nation it was searching for lithium on nearby Bureau of Land Management lands. That evening, Bender was shocked to see the destruction taking place. The company eventually bulldozed a network of roads, drilling nearly 50 test wells more than 300 feet deep in the sacred landscape.

This summer, Hawkstone plans to triple its exploratory drilling, almost encircling Canyon Ranch and the springs it protects. In the next few years, Hawkstone hopes to break ground on an open-pit mine and dig an underground pipeline to transport the slurry about 50 miles to a plant in Kingman, Arizona, where it will use sulfuric acid to extract the lithium from the ore. Lithium, which is listed as a critical mineral, is crucial for reaching the Biden administration's goal of replacing gas-guzzling vehicles with electric vehicles, and Big Sandy Valley is relatively close to the Tesla factory in Nevada. Altogether, Hawkstone has mining rights on more than 5,000 acres of public land in Arizona for this project. Yet tribes whose sacred sites are at risk have almost no say in its decisions.

Public lands from Bears Ears to Oak Flat contain countless areas of cultural and religious importance. But when tribes have gone to court to protect these sites — and their own religious freedom — they've consistently lost. Courts have narrowly interpreted what counts as a religious burden for tribes, largely to preserve the federal government's ability to use public land as it sees fit.

The roots of this policy are centuries deep. In the landmark 1823 case *Johnson v. M'Intosh*, the Supreme Court ruled that Indigenous people could not sell land to private owners in the United States, because they did not own it.

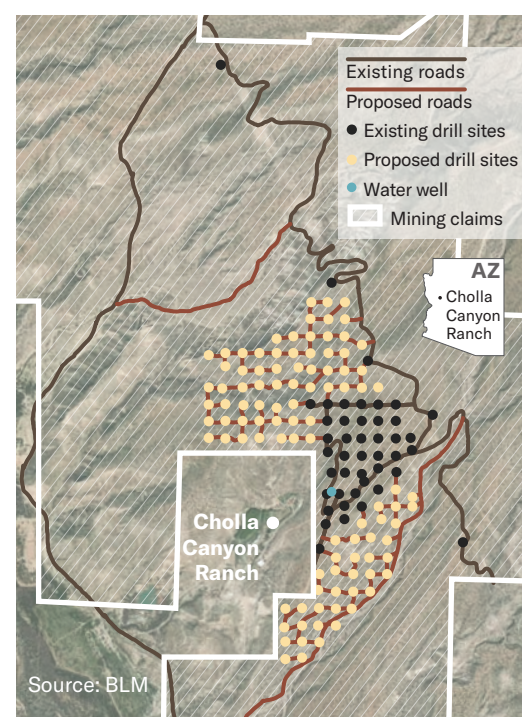
Instead, Christian colonizers were the rightful owners, based on the Spanish colonial "Doctrine of Discovery," a racist and anti-Indigenous policy holding that non-Christian, non-European societies were inferior, and that Christian European nations had a superior right to all land.

"Part of what justified the claiming of the land was that (colonizers) would teach the Indigenous people Christianity," Michalyn Steele, an Indian law expert at Brigham Young University and a member of the Seneca Nation of Indians, said. "If they rejected Christianity, then they essentially forfeited their rights to the land and resources."

By the late 1800s, the U.S. had banned Indigenous religious practices, forcing tribes to socially and politically assimilate, and to adopt Christianity through agricultural, lifestyle and religious practices.

More recently, courts have continued to weaken protections for Indigenous religious freedom on public lands. In the precedent-setting 1988 case *Lyng v. Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Association*, the Supreme Court ruled that the Forest Service could widen a logging road in Northern California's Six Rivers National Forest, even though it would destroy a region that played an essential part in the religious beliefs of tribes, including the Yurok, Karuk and Tolowa. The Supreme Court reasoned that although the location might be utterly wrecked, that destruction did not violate the Constitution, because it would not force tribal members to violate their religious beliefs or punish them for practicing their religions.

"Even assuming that the Government's





The Cholla Canyon Ranch protects a Hualapai sacred site named Ha' Kamwe' — known in English as Cofer Hot Springs.

actions here will virtually destroy the Indians' ability to practice their religion, the Constitution simply does not provide a principle that could justify upholding respondents' legal claims," Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote in the majority opinion.

The court ruled, in part, to avoid granting tribes broad control over their ancestral lands through the exercise of their religious freedom. "Whatever rights the Indians may have to the use of the area ... those rights do not divest the Government of its rights to use what is, after all, *its* land," the ruling said.

Though Congress partially protected that sacred region by adding it to the Siskiyou Wilderness Area, the *Lyng* ruling still reverberates across Indian Country today, creating what Stephanie Barclay, the director of the University of Notre Dame's Religious Liberty Initiative and a former litigator at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, calls a "double standard" in how Indigenous sacred sites are treated.

Barclay compared the situation of tribes such as the Hualapai, which rely on the federal government to access sacred sites, to that of Jewish prisoners who adhere to a kosher diet, or Sikh members of the military whose faith forbids them to cut their hair. In all of these cases, religious freedoms are controlled by the government. But, Barclay said, tribal members don't get the same religious protections.

"If the government is unwilling to accommodate an access for different Native peoples so that they can practice their religion in those sacred sites, then it won't happen," she said. But the Supreme Court has narrowly interpreted religious protection of Indigenous sacred sites on public lands, to the point of allowing wholesale destruction.

In a recent *Harvard Law Review* article,

Steele and Barclay urge the federal government to protect Indigenous religious practices as one of its trust responsibilities, and to be very cautious about allowing destruction of sacred sites on public lands.

As things stand, state and federal agencies may permit irreversible damage with little input from affected Indigenous communities. Indeed, communication between the BLM and Hualapai Nation about Hawkstone's Big Sandy River Valley lithium impacts has been almost nonexistent. Although the BLM invited the Hualapai Nation to consult with the agency in June 2020 about Hawkstone's exploration plans, the agency later rebuffed the tribe's request to be a coordinating agency on the project. It also rejected the suggestion that a tribal elder walk through the area and educate the agency about the cultural resources and history that mining might imperil.

The BLM said that it found only four cultural resource sites in the proposed drilling area. Of those, it said it would attempt to avoid one, which was eligible for protection under the National Historic Preservation Act. Meanwhile, in its publicly available environmental assessment, the agency stated that the project's impacts on Native American religious concerns or traditional values were "to be determined," and that it was consulting with the Hualapai Tribe, among others. As of this writing, BLM staff had neither agreed to an interview nor responded to written questions from *High Country News*.

For its part, in March Hawkstone said that "All (I)ndigenous title is cleared and there are no other known historical or environmentally sensitive areas." Hawkstone's report ignores the fact that even when tribes lack legal title to their traditional lands, those spaces still hold religious and cultural importance.

When asked for comment, Doug Pitts, a U.S. advisor at Hawkstone Mining, emailed *HCN* that, given the early stage of the project, "we do not feel a discussion on the project is worthwhile at this time."

Even without a clear legal path forward, the Hualapai Nation has not given up on protecting its religious practices from lithium exploration. Nor is it alone: In April, the Inter Tribal Association of Arizona, representing 21 nations including the Hualapai, passed a resolution objecting to the lithium mining, calling the BLM's environmental analysis "grossly insufficient." Recently, the BLM agreed to extend the comment period until June 10. But Council member Powskey pointed out that during the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline — which in part concerned the destruction of burials — the authorities' response was violent, and tribal nations, for a long while, were the only ones who seemed to care. And in the end, the pipeline was built.

Big Sandy is not the first battle the Hualapai have fought to protect sacred landscapes in this remote corner of Arizona, where wind turbines, gold mines and other private interests already have destroyed culturally important places — and it won't be the last. "You know, there's more to come," Powskey said.

Meanwhile, the likelihood of more lithium exploration around the ranch upsets caretaker Ivan Bender. The double standard in how Indigenous sacred sites are treated galls him.

"They come in here and desecrate your sacred land," he said. "Would they appreciate me if I go to Arlington Cemetery and build me a sweat lodge and have me a sweat on that land?" he asked, comparing the valley to another site long considered sacred. "I'd rather they go somewhere else and leave history alone." ☀

"To me, it holds a really, really sacred valley of life in general."

'I'm scared of getting sick from the water'

Some rural California communities have waited nearly a decade for state regulators to repair their tainted drinking-water systems.

BY CLAUDIA BOYD-BARRETT | PHOTOS BY MARTIN DO NASCIMENTO

WHEN RAMONA HERNANDEZ turns on her kitchen faucet in El Adobe, California, an unincorporated town just a few miles southeast of Bakersfield, the water that splashes out looks clean and inviting. But she doesn't dare drink it.

"You worry about your health," she said in Spanish as she sat in her tranquil front yard one morning early this spring, her elderly mother-in-law working in the garden behind her.

"I'm scared," Hernandez said, "of getting sick from the water." Drinking the tap water in this tiny community of dusty ranches and unpaved roads could expose Hernandez to arsenic. So, for years, she and her husband, Gerardo, have shuttled twice a week to the nearby town of Lamont to load up on bottled water. At a cost of about \$80 a month, it's enough for drinking and cooking. If they had the money, Hernandez, 55, would buy bottled water to shower with and use for her chickens. But given her husband's salary as a farmworker, she says, that's not a realistic option.

Like more than 300 communities across California, El Adobe lacks safe drinking water. Since 2008, the arsenic levels in one of its two wells have regularly exceeded the safety standards set by federal and state authorities, often by more than double. Long-term exposure to arsenic in drinking water is linked to diabetes, high blood pressure and cancer.

Contaminated drinking water affects an estimated 1 million people in California, many of whom rely on private wells or small community water systems like El Adobe's. A majority of these residents live in the Central and Salinas valleys. These are largely low-income, rural and Latino communities, where lack of access to clean water exacerbates the health disparities that already exist due to structural inequities. Since 2012, California law has recognized that access to safe and affordable water is a human right, but action has lagged behind the language.

Arsenic levels in El Adobe's other well are currently deemed safe, but the well can't

provide enough water to meet year-round demand. That means that many residents of the unincorporated town, including the Hernandezes, continue to pay for water they can't drink. The El Adobe Property Owners Association charges households \$125 a month for tap water, money that also covers streetlights and road maintenance (although only one road is paved). Most residents also buy bottled water at the store. Others take their chances and drink the tap water despite the risks. Many townspeople are low-income farmworkers and retirees, and buying bottled water is a significant expense.

"I can't afford bottled water all the time," said Kyle Wilkerson, 40, a father of three who lives on a fixed disability income. He's also president of the El Adobe Property Owners Association, a small cadre of community members who

manage the town's water infrastructure almost entirely as volunteers.

Wilkerson said he worries about his own health as well as that of his family. "But what am I going to do?" he said. "You get to the point of, it is what it is."

And indeed, people in towns like El Adobe have few options. Arsenic can be removed from water, but it's prohibitively expensive for most small towns. An arsenic treatment facility requires millions of dollars to build and another \$100,000 or more per year to operate, said Chad Fischer, an engineer who works at the California Division of Drinking Water's district office in Visalia, which regulates water in the region.

El Adobe is so small — just 83 homes — that if community residents split the cost of a treatment system, they'd spend tens of thousands of dollars each and face dramatically increased water rates. "The math is awful," Fischer said. "It ends up being unaffordable."

It's possible for individual users to install an advanced filtration system, such as reverse osmosis, in their homes, usually under the sink, to remove arsenic. But these systems can cost hundreds of dollars to install and maintain. Some small water systems do install these in people's homes, passing on the cost to consumers, but the state considers this a temporary fix. Inexpensive pitcher-type filters do not remove arsenic.

A permanent solution was supposed to be coming for El Adobe. In 2013, with funding from the California State Water Resources Control



Cheryl and Edward Blackhawk at their home in El Adobe, California. They retired here after being assured that the water system would be fixed within a year, but four years later, they're still hauling water.



Board, El Adobe commissioned a report that concluded that the best option for the community was to connect with the larger water system in Lamont. According to Scott Taylor, general manager of the Lamont Public Utility District, the state promised to grant Lamont enough money to build the connecting pipeline, service lines and new wells needed to accommodate the increase in users and replace aging infrastructure.

“Eight years, it still hasn’t happened,” said Taylor. “I think it’s bureaucracy. For example, when we submit any kind of a document, a cost estimate, an engineering report ... for whatever reason, it takes them two to three months to review it. If it took any of my staff a month to review a document, I don’t care if it’s 100 pages, I’d fire them.”

Blair Robertson, a spokesman for the California State Water Resources Control Board, said the state is still waiting for Lamont to purchase land for the new wells and drill test wells to see if water at the proposed sites is contaminated. There is currently no start date for the project, which is estimated to cost between \$13 million and \$22 million and will probably be split into several construction phases. Formal state approval of the project will likely be in 2022, Robertson said, but there’s currently no time frame for when El Adobe residents will have clean drinking water.

Planning and implementing a water system consolidation takes time, Fischer said, especially when the community, like El Adobe, is small and lacks a team of engineers and other professionals to manage its water supply. Lamont has its own water problems with contaminants and aging wells, which have added to the difficulties of the project, he said. Projects usually take five or more years to accomplish, he added, depending on their complexity. But it has already been eight years, and construction has yet to begin.

BEYOND THOSE DELAYS, dozens of other communities in California are also waiting on construction projects for clean water. Approximately 110 other out-of-compliance water systems in the state are planning or considering consolidation with another system. Sometimes, the larger communities resist appeals to absorb the smaller systems because they fear it will increase costs and strain their own water supply, particularly as droughts continue. The state often offers financial incentives to encourage consolidation, and can mandate it, if necessary. Other times consolidation isn’t even an option because a community is too remote.

In 2019, California passed a law that established a program called Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER), designed to help fund water improvements for communities that struggle to provide clean water to their residents. The state water board is working to complete a needs assessment to determine which water systems need help and to what extent, according to a recent report by the state’s Legislative Analyst’s Office. However, the state is still “in the very early stages of implementation,” and “much work remains to be accomplished” before all Californians have access to safe and affordable drinking water, the report stated.

Cheryl Blackhawk, 67, and her husband Edward, 69, are fed up with not having safe water in El Adobe. They moved to the town four years ago from nearby Greenfield, seeing it as a quiet and affordable place to retire. At the time, the seller assured them that the water connection to Lamont would happen within a year. They’re still buying water bottles by the caseload from Walmart.

“You can’t go to the faucet to get water to drink,” said Edward Blackhawk. “You can’t cook.”

Contaminants aren’t the only problem. Like innumerable systems across California and

Scott Taylor, general manager of the Lamont Public Utility District, where wells have been polluted with the highly toxic agricultural chemical 1,2,3-trichloropropane (*above, left*). Ramona Hernandez outside her home in El Adobe. She and her husband, Gerardo, pay for water as part of their \$125 monthly homeowners’ association fee, but they can’t drink it (*above, right*). El Adobe is one of some 300 communities in California that lack safe drinking water (*facing*).

the country, El Adobe’s wells, pipes, pumps and other water infrastructure are showing their age. El Adobe’s most critical well, the one without arsenic, was built in 1967, the same year Ronald Reagan became governor of California and labor activist Cesar Chavez initiated a nationwide boycott of the state’s table grapes. The community’s arsenic-laced well was built in 1985.

The life of a well depends on the chemicals in the local soil and water, and the quality of the well materials and construction, said Dave Warner, community development manager at Self-Help Enterprises in Visalia, which helps low-income communities access funding for water projects. But an old well, especially one that dates back to 1967, “is really pushing it,” he said. Over time, the casing inside the well corrodes, and sand and other contaminants can get into the pump, causing it to fail. Still, drilling a new well costs more than \$1 million, according to water officials. Securing state funding for it can take more than a decade, Warner said.

The precariousness of the situation is not lost on Edward Blackhawk. Without functioning wells and pumps, people’s faucets would run dry. Toilets wouldn’t flush.

“If these wells go down, we’re out of luck,” he said. “We’re out of water.”

THREE MILES DOWN THE ROAD, Lamont has its own water struggles. Five of the town’s

eight wells are contaminated with a highly toxic chemical called 1,2,3-trichloropropane, or 1,2,3-TCP. The chemical was added to soil fumigants used in agriculture during the 1940s through the 1980s. It persists in the environment indefinitely and is recognized as a carcinogen by the state of California. The state started regulating the chemical in drinking water in 2017, which meant communities like Lamont had to find a way to remove it.

Just like arsenic, 1,2,3-TCP is expensive to get rid of. A treatment system costs over \$1 million per well, plus about \$100,000 a year to change the filter, said Taylor. Lamont has installed treatment systems on four wells, using money from a settlement with Dow Chemical and Shell Oil, the companies allegedly responsible for the contamination. But two of the treatment systems are leased, and the utility district still doesn't know how it will pay for them long-term. Two other wells still need 1,2,3-TCP and arsenic treatment systems, respectively.

Lamont's population of 15,000 is almost entirely Latino, and many residents are farmworkers. The average per capita income is just over \$13,000 a year. Plans to raise water rates last year to help cover some of the district's expenses were delayed because of the pandemic. Even so, dozens of accounts fell into delinquency as people lost jobs and struggled to pay bills. The district is now short about \$70,000 from delinquent accounts, Taylor said.

Lamont's wells are also nearing the end of their lifespan. Last year, shortly after the district installed a \$1 million filtration system for 1,2,3-TCP on a 60-year-old well, the well

collapsed. Taylor said he "raised holy hell" with the state water board and obtained emergency funding to build a new well, which is now under construction. Another three wells need replacing, he said. Those new wells may also need treatment systems. Funding for that is supposed to be included in the consolidation project with El Adobe.

So far, Lamont has managed to provide clean water to residents, but that could change if another well breaks or demand increases enough to require making a contaminated well operational, said Taylor.

"It's a little discouraging," said district board member Miguel Sanchez. "You're trying to comply with all these regulations, and the system is crumbling."

BUT CALIFORNIANS NOW have a reason to be more optimistic: A \$2 trillion proposal by President Joe Biden to fund infrastructure improvements across the nation, including for clean water, could provide their state with more money for these types of projects. Biden's plan — if approved by Congress — would include \$111 billion in clean water investments. The proposal seeks \$10 billion to monitor and remediate new drinking-water contaminants and to invest in small rural water systems like El Adobe's. The plan also requests \$56 billion in grants and loans to upgrade and modernize America's aging drinking water, wastewater and stormwater systems. Support for low-income communities and communities of color is a big focus of the proposal.

It's not yet clear how much of the money

would go to California. However, Gov. Gavin Newsom has called Biden's plan "a game changer."

And Warner, with Self-Help Enterprises, agreed. Right now, there's not enough state and federal money available to efficiently tackle all of California's water contamination and infrastructure problems, he said. Biden's plan "gave me a lot of hope," he said. "But it's got to get approved."

Meanwhile, Susana De Anda, co-founder of the Community Water Center, an environmental justice organization based in Visalia, applauded California's SAFER program, but said communities need help faster. A short-term solution would be for the state to implement a rate-assistance program for low-income residents who are struggling to pay their water bills, including those who pay for water twice because their tap water is contaminated, she said.

"We want solutions now," she said. "It's a huge problem, and we have generations that have been condemned to this reality."

In El Adobe, Hernandez worries that she may be inhaling contaminants or absorbing them through her skin when she showers. The concentration of arsenic in the water is still safe for bathing, according to state regulators, and arsenic does not evaporate into the air, but Hernandez remains distrustful, particularly since she and her husband both have lung problems.

If only officials in Sacramento could spend a day in her shoes, she said. "How would they like it?" she asked. "They don't have to worry about having a shower, about drinking the water."

At the edge of the community, Cheryl and Edward Blackhawk checked on El Adobe's second well, the arsenic-laden one, and its water tank, which sits inside a small enclosure littered with tumbleweeds. Cheryl Blackhawk, who serves as financial secretary for the property owner's association, said she fears that drought conditions this year will lead to falling water levels that result in higher arsenic concentrations in the well.

Her husband, standing quietly beside the aging pump, confessed he's beginning to doubt the connection to Lamont will actually happen.

"There's a lot of people out here who think it's dead in the water," he said softly. "And it's not just us. There are hundreds (of communities) like us in the state." ❀

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27.61 inHg ↓ 104°F 07/19/2018 09:55PM SPUR CROSS



27.61 inHg ↓ 105°F 07/19/2018 09:55PM SPUR CROSS

REPORTAGE

A hallucinogenic toad in peril

How one species got caught up in the commodification of spiritual awakening.

BY JESSICA KUTZ

LATE ON A THURSDAY EVENING in July 2018, three intruders were caught on a wildlife camera at the Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area, a park north of Phoenix. Holding flashlights, they scoured a Mexican lily-filled pond near a popular hiking trail, on the hunt for Sonoran Desert toads. A young woman squealed as she held up a fat one — both hands wrapped around its belly — and dropped it into a plastic bag. Later, a young man wearing a tattered cowboy hat and a tank top came into view, his face and hand looming large in the camera frame as he clenched a grocery bag. A jumble of legs pressed frantically into the thin plastic, captive amphibians trying to escape their new prison.

“That is like the last thing I expected to see,” Kevin Smith, Spur Cross Ranch’s sole park ranger, said. He estimates, from the footage, that the thieves grabbed at least a dozen toads. Though the recordings — and the story’s peculiar nature — made local and national news, briefly causing a stir, the culprits were never caught. What happened to the creatures isn’t hard to guess, however: In recent years, psychedelic enthusiasts have been rounding up Sonoran Desert toads in order to obtain their secretions, which contain a powerful hallucinogenic substance called 5-MeO-DMT.

In “toad medicine circles” — underground ceremonies that take place across the country in swanky areas from Malibu and Santa Fe to

what one participant described as “on the floor of a chic apartment on the Upper West Side” of New York City — the psychedelic has become the latest trendy shortcut to spiritual awakening. Ceremony participants often lie down on the ground, on blankets and sarongs, and smoke the dried secretions — a Schedule 1 drug — which induce an otherworldly state that lasts for about half an hour. Many who’ve undergone the experience refer to the poison as a “god molecule” that has cured their addictions or helped them achieve a deeper connection to the Earth. Shrines, T-shirts and tattoos of toads all profess reverence for the species.

The practice has gone from an obscure desert phenomenon in the ’80s to an increasingly popular psychedelic in recent years. In his new memoir, Hunter Biden, President Joe Biden’s son, claimed that 5-meO-DMT helped temporarily cure his addiction to crack. “The experience unlocked feelings and hurts I’d buried deep for too long,” he wrote. “It served as a salve. I stayed sober for a year afterward.” Since 2018, the World Bufo Alvarius Congress in Mexico has attracted hundreds of participants annually from across the globe. (*Bufo alvarius* is the toad’s former scientific name; it has since been renamed *Incilius alvarius*, and is also sometimes called the Colorado River toad.) Many ceremonies take place in the country, and, increasingly, for white tourists in popular destinations like Tulum on the Yucatán Peninsula,

where retreat costs can range from \$200 a session to all-inclusive packages upwards of \$3,000.

The toad’s newfound popularity concerns Robert Villa, president of the Tucson Herpetological Society and a research associate with the University of Arizona’s Desert Laboratory on Tumamoc Hill. “There’s a psychedelic renaissance that’s happening,” he said, “and there’s a whole sect of this community that is devoted to the Sonoran Desert toad, extracting (it) for psychedelic use.” Villa became aware of the toad’s growing popularity after working in 2017 as a consultant for an episode of a Vice docuseries, *Hamilton’s Pharmacopeia*, in which Mexican practitioners are on camera noting the decline in local toad populations in the state of Sonora. While those who collect the bufotoxin on both sides of the border claim to do so in a sustainable fashion, often releasing the toads afterward, Villa said there’s no real way to do this. “Toads offer those secretions in a defensive context, in a stressed and violent context,” he said. “Ultimately, people are self-medicating at the expense of another creature.” As the toad’s secretions become increasingly popular, Villa is raising the alarm about the practice’s cascading cultural and environmental impacts.

THE SONORAN DESERT TOAD, as its common name suggests, is primarily found in the Sonoran Desert, which stretches from California and Arizona to Mexico. Its habitat also extends slightly into New Mexico. The landscape is home to a diverse array of species that have evolved to flourish in the harsh environment. For most of the year, the toad hibernates in underground burrows. In the summer, when the monsoon season hits, it resurfaces to breed in shallow ponds and streams.

It’s during this window of time that it is vulnerable to being snatched from its habitat. But determining the scope of the poaching is difficult. The species is listed as threatened in New Mexico — a 2006 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service report cites myriad reasons for this, including overcollection



Trail camera video images of the July 2018 poaching that occurred at the Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area in Maricopa County, Arizona. **Maricopa County Parks and Recreation**

— while in California it is believed to be extinct. But in Arizona, where its range is significantly larger, it is still considered abundant. “We think poaching takes place. And there have been some anecdotal reports of it (happening),” said Thomas R. Jones, Amphibians and Reptiles Program manager with the Arizona Game and Fish Department. “But even our law enforcement guys don’t have a good feel for toad poaching,” he added, though “that could be because it’s not on their radar.”

Evidence of the growing demand, however, can be found at the U.S.-Mexico border, where Jeff Moore, a senior wildlife inspector with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said that people have been caught attempting to bring the toad or its secretions into the United States. “We have encountered it and are working with other partner agencies on the enforcement,” Moore said, adding that because of ongoing investigations, he could not comment further on the scope of the trafficking.

Whenever demand for a trafficked species grows, however, there are going to be consequences. When the psychedelic peyote, which is native to West Texas and Mexico, became popular with people outside the Indigenous communities where its ceremonial religious use originated, this led to a black market and a steep decline

in the cactus. Steven Benally, a Diné founding member of the Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative, told the *Los Angeles Times* last year, “To these outsiders, we say, ‘Leave peyote alone. Please.’” Beyond the ecological impacts, this type of trade often has cultural implications. As Taylar Dawn Stagner (Shoshone, Arapaho) wrote in *High Country News*, describing the current “new age” obsession with white sage: “It’s become so popular that it has been commodified to the point of erasure, robbed of its Indigenous roots and cultural importance.”

Oddly enough, the toad’s secretions have no documented historical use in tribes either in Mexico or the U.S. Yet practitioners are still marketing it as a traditional pan-Indigenous remedy, lumping it together with other substances, including peyote and ayahuasca.

The toad itself *is* culturally significant to the Yaqui Tribe in the Mexican state of Sonora and the Pascua Yaqui in Arizona, playing a symbolic role in tribal stories and ceremonies. But during the last decade, the tribe has noticed a decline in local populations, according to Villa, who consulted with tribal members in Mexico in 2014.

The toad has not been classified as endangered or threatened at the federal level in either Mexico or in the U.S., and it would require

extensive monitoring efforts before such a designation could be achieved. Jones said it’s not always easy to determine when to start monitoring a species. “What is often the case is that people like me will say, ‘Yeah, they’re abundant. I see them all the time, like I used to.’ And then, after about 10 years, someone says, ‘Hey, you know, I haven’t been seeing them like I used to.’ And then you start monitoring them in some place and discover that either they’re still there or that they’ve declined.” Jones said. “But because there’s no standard monitoring effort that’s going on for a species like that, it’s really hard to gauge.”

Given that species like the Sonoran Desert toad already face multiple threats, including climate change and rapid urbanization, over-collection can have consequential impacts. “It really kind of shocks me, actually. The fact that people assume, based on its abundance, that it’s fine,” said Villa, who has spent the last few years raising awareness about the toad and its plight. “When you begin to notice something’s happening in those populations, it’s too late.” ☼

THE LATEST

Shareholder revolt

Backstory

In February 2019, ExxonMobil shareholders attempted to pass a resolution that would have pushed the company to adopt stricter and more transparent emissions targets in response to climate change. Exxon fought back, blocking the vote through the Securities and Exchange Commission, which under the Trump administration stalled similar resolutions at other companies, dismissing the idea as “micromanagement” (“Can the tools of capitalism curb climate change?” April 2019).

Followup

In May, the oil industry received a major shock: Against executives’ wishes, ExxonMobil’s shareholders elected three new members to the board of directors, all with the expertise to help transition Exxon away from oil and gas and toward clean energy. Calling it a watershed moment, Fred Krupp, Environmental Defense Fund president, told the *Washington Post*: “It’s no longer tenable for companies like ExxonMobil to defy calls to align their businesses with decarbonizing the economy.” —Jessica Kutz



Zion National Park, Utah, this May.
Bridget Bennett

FACTS & FIGURES

Public lands inundated

Record numbers of visitors are swarming the outdoors.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

LAST SPRING, AS THE FIRST WAVE of measures to halt the spread of coronavirus kicked in, travel screeched nearly to a halt, and the hospitality and tourism industry slowed considerably. Locals in public-land gateway towns predicted doom — and also breathed a big sigh of relief. Their one-trick-pony economies would surely suffer, but at least all the newly laid-off residents would have the surrounding land to themselves for a change.

For a few months, the prognostications — both positive and negative — held true. Visitation to national parks crashed, vanishing altogether in places like Arches and Canyonlands, which were shut down for the month of April. Sales and lodging tax revenues spiraled downward in gateway towns. Officials in many a rural county pleaded with or ordered nonresidents to stay home, easing the burden on the public lands. It was enough to spawn a million #natureishealing memes.

In the end, however, the respite was short-lived. By midsummer, even as temperatures climbed to unbearable heights, forests burned

and the air filled with smoke, people began traveling again, mostly by car and generally closer to home. They inundated the public lands, from the big, heavily developed national parks like Zion and the humbler state parks, to dispersed campsites on Bureau of Land Management and national forest lands.

It was more than just a return of the same old crowds. Millions of outdoor-recreation rookies apparently turned to the public lands to escape the pandemic. Nearly every national park in the West had relatively few visitors from March until July. But then numbers surged to record-breaking levels during the latter part of 2020 — a trend that was reflected and then some on the surrounding non-park lands.

If nature did manage a little healing in the spring, by summer the wounds were ripped open again in the form of overuse, torn-up alpine tundra, litter, noise, car exhaust and crowd-stressed wildlife. Human waste and toilet paper were scattered alongside photogenic lakes and streams. Search and rescue teams, most of which

UTAH

9 Pounds of human waste a Zion National Park ranger collected along a single stretch of trail late last year. He also cleaned up more than 1,000 drawings or etchings people had made on the rock.

The volunteer search and rescue team in Washington County, Utah, responded to **170 incidents in 2020**, exceeding the previous record by almost 40 calls.

Visitation at Utah's state parks in 2020 was up by **1.7 million people** from 2019, with some parks, such as Goblin Valley, seeing two to three times the number from previous years. Judging by this spring, that new record is likely to fall in 2021.

IDAHO

7.7 million Number of visitors to Idaho's state parks in 2020, a 1.2 million jump from 2019, which itself was a banner year. "It's a mind-boggling number," said Brian Beckley, chairman of the Idaho Parks and Recreation Board, in a news release.

are volunteer, were overwhelmed, with some being called out three or more times a week. Meanwhile, the agencies charged with overseeing the lands have long been underfunded and understaffed — a situation exacerbated by the global pandemic. They were simply unable to get a handle on all of the use — and increased abuse.

There is no end in sight: The first five months of 2021 have been the busiest ever for much of the West's public lands. And tourist season has only just begun. ☀



Trash hanging from a tree (*left*) and a sign (*middle*) at a popular dispersed camping area in Wyoming's Bridger-Teton National Forest, in July 2020.

People gather to catch a glimpse of Grizzly Bear 399 and her four cubs on May 25, 2021, in Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming (*right*). **Ryan Dorgan**

Boulder Creek, Colorado, in 2020 (*below*). **Andria Hautamaki**

WYOMING

Last year was a banner year for Wyoming's state parks, which received **1.5 million more visitors** than in 2019. But thanks in part to waning revenues from taxes and royalties on fossil fuels, state lawmakers slashed the Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources budget by \$1.1 million this year.

28,890; 43,416

Number of visitors who entered Yellowstone National Park during Memorial Day weekend 2019, and 2021, a 50% increase.

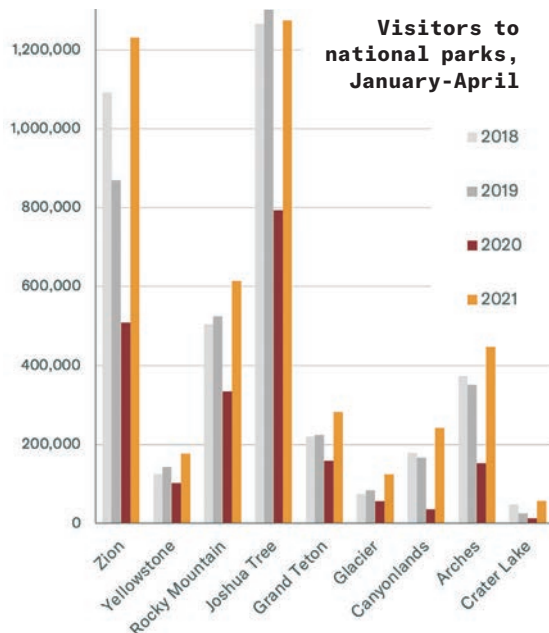
OREGON

Oregon's state parks were getting overrun by out-of-staters, leaving no place for residents to recreate or camp. So, in August, **state officials upped camping fees for nonresidents**. Even if it doesn't deter people from visiting, it might help make up for the state parks' \$22 million budget shortfall.

WESTWIDE

28% Amount by which camping participation in the United States grew during 2020, which adds up to about 7.9 million additional campers.

10-14 months Approximate wait time to get a modified van from Storyteller Overland, which makes Mercedes Sprinters #vanlife-ready. Storyteller COO Jeffrey Hunter told KIRO Radio that coronavirus-related demand for the vehicles — priced at \$150,000 to \$190,000 — has surged so much that the company doubled its workforce.



COLORADO

On the busiest days prior to 2020, up to 200 people made the trek to the utterly Instagramable Ice Lake Basin in southwestern Colorado. But late last summer, **400 to 600 people per day** inundated the place. In October, a hiker started a wildfire that burned 500 acres and forced the helicopter-assisted evacuation of two dozen hikers. This summer, the trail is closed.

23% Amount by which 2020 visitor numbers at Colorado state parks exceeded those from 2019.

For years, most of the public lands around Crested Butte, Colorado, have been open to dispersed camping. But after **the free-for-all got out of hand in 2020**, public-land agencies halted dispersed camping, designated a couple dozen sites and implemented a reservation system. By April, all of the sites were booked through Labor Day.

12 Number of avalanche-related fatalities in Colorado during the 2020-21 winter, matching the record high (since 1950) set in 1993.

34 Number of drownings on Colorado's lakes and streams in 2020, a record high.

NEVADA

The Las Vegas tourism and gaming industries took a massive hit in 2020, as **visitation plummeted by 55%** compared to 2019. Only about 42% of the city's 145,000 rooms were occupied, on average; lodging tax revenues were less than half of normal. At the same time, crowds converged on the area's public lands like never before.

10,000 Estimated number of people who entered the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area near Las Vegas on a single day in April 2020. The Bureau of Land Management temporarily closed the scenic loop road in response and implemented a timed-entry reservation system.

MONTANA

30% Increase over previous years in number of applications for nonresident deer- and elk-hunting permits for 2021.

Sources: National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, Outdoor Industry Association, Wyoming State Parks & Cultural Resources, Colorado Parks & Wildlife, Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Town of Silverton, Great Outdoors Colorado, Teton County.

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A photograph of a grizzly bear mother standing in a grassy field with her three cubs. The mother bear is on the right, standing on her hind legs, looking towards the camera. The three cubs are on the left, also standing on their hind legs, looking towards the camera. The background is a lush green field with some trees in the distance.

A grizzly bear mother stands with her three cubs, in Katmai National Park, Alaska.
Shin Yoshino / Minden Pictures

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Daniel Horton & Rita Kester | Rio Rico, AZ
Ken Jacobsen | Seattle, WA
Linda Kahan | Olympia, WA
R.L. Latterell | Shepherdstown, WV
Don Macalady | Golden, CO
Anna Mahorski | Boulder, CO
Sara Maples | Klamath Falls, OR
Marilyn McCord | Bayfield, CO
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Robert T. & Mary T. Neher | La Verne, CA
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John H. & Barbara Ormiston | Hamilton, MT
Carol Petrovsky | Boise, ID
John Pitlak | Belen, NM
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Laura & Paul Ricks | Ouray, CO
Dave Saylor | Albuquerque, NM
Jeff Sconyers & Debra Godfrey | Seattle, WA
Marilyn Stone | Lexington, KY
Robert B. Smith | Hemet, CA
James Stickman | Seattle, WA
Eric Waltari | San Francisco, CA
Beth Walukas | Lummi Island, WA
John & Paula Warren | Garden City, ID
Greg Woodall | Hurricane, UT
Thomas C. & Pamela A. Wylie | Centennial, CO

MEMBERS FOR 10-14 YEARS

Anonymous (4)
In memory of Keeley Bihr | Albuquerque, NM
In memory of Ignacio Bravo | Los Angeles, CA
In memory of Dan Crawford
In memory of Mama Laura | Lake City, CO
In memory of Dave McKee
In memory of Howard Lewis Patterson
In memory of Richard West Sellers | Santa Fe, NM
In honor of Cameren, Aaron & Quentin
In honor of Vernon & Wes Stewart | Abiquiu, NM
Russ & Larrine Abolt | Santa Fe, NM
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Robert & Barbara Bonner | Northfield, MN
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Harrison Carpenter | Longmont, CO
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Susan Linner | Lakewood, CO
Paul W. Martin | Tonasket, WA
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David & Vicki Page | Ridgway, CO
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Jim Parys | Durango, CO
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Robert Perry | Boulder City, NV
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Sherman Stephens & Martha Taylor | Flagstaff, AZ
Marilyn Stone | Paonia, CO
Daniel Stonington | Seattle, WA
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Donald Sullivan | Denver, CO
Liz Taintor | Steamboat Springs, CO
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William Tweed | Bend, OR
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Robin Waples & Paula Jensen | Seattle, WA
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John Wise | Hidden Valley Lake, CA

MEMBERS FOR 5-9 YEARS

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In memory of Carolyn Barker | San Jose, CA
In memory of Kenneth Tegtmann | Coyote Hill, CO
In memory of Tia Pullen | NH
In memory of Stewart Udall
In memory of H. Lloyd Keith | Arlington, WA
In memory of Norma McCallan | Santa Fe, NM
In memory of Ken McDonald | Portland, OR
In memory of Glen H. Phillips | Boulder, CO
In memory of John & Edith Pierpont |
Santa Fe, NM
In memory of Laurel Dana | Jackson, WY

In memory of Gladys Richter | Bozeman, MT
In memory of Tom Bell
In memory of Betty Wigington | Denver, CO
In honor of Alyssa Pinkerton | Paonia, CO
In honor of Sarah Bartelt | Fargo, ND
In honor of Paul Larmer | Paonia, CO
In honor of Ashley Krest | Paonia, CO
In honor of Ray Haertel | Bend, OR
In honor of the staff at HCN
In honor of Dan Stonington &
Emily Stonington-Hibbard
In honor of Jim Proctor | Bellingham, WA
In honor of Farley Maxwell
In honor of Bob & Julie Philyiky | Rochester, MN
Linda Adams | Kernville, CA
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Catherine Allen | Rico, CO
Joanne Allen | Albuquerque, NM
David & Kay Anderson | Colorado Springs, CO
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Toni Bell | Shepherd, MT
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Len Gallagher | Mancos, CO
Rosanne Garrett | Denver, CO
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Janie Gebhardt | Pocatello, ID
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Pat Grediagin | Bend, OR
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Gary W. Hawk | Missoula, MT
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Tanya Henderson | Shoshone, CA
Renita Herrmann | San Francisco, CA
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Crozet, Virginia
Lois Horst | Magalia, CA
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James Irving | Shelton, WA
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Joan E. Miller | Seattle, WA
William Mohrman | Lone Tree, CO 80124
Thomas Moore | Troy, ID
Douglas & Laura Moran | Denver, CO
Ray Mosser | Portland, OR
Deborah Summer Muth | Red Lodge, MT
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Ridgefield, WA
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Elizabeth Penfield | Savannah, GA
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Carolyn Prinster | Glenwood Springs, CO
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Paula Reitz | Red Lodge, MT
Robin Richard | Cortez, CO
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Bruce M. Riley | Garberville, CA
C Lee Rimel | Edwards, CO
Lynda Roberts | Sausalito, CA
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Donald Ross | Dolores, CO
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PB Schechter | Denver, CO
Frances Schneider Liau | Pasadena, CA
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Karin P. Sheldon & James Thurber | Lafayette, CO
Leila Shepherd | Twin Falls, ID
Christine & Mike Siddoway | Colorado Springs, CO
Robert L. Slatten | Toledo, OR
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Larry & Debbie Smith | Butte, MT
Larry & Margie Smith | Johnstown, CO
Florian & Lou Smoczynski | Madison, WI
Alicia Springer & Christopher P. Thomas | Chico, CA
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Jim & Peggy Stewart | Ferndale, WA
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Chuck Tonn | Pagosa Springs, CO
Janna Treisman | Fall City, WA
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Robert & Jill Welborn | Prineville, OR
David Wells | Twin Falls, ID
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In memory of Skyre Criswell
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In memory of David L. Ford | Lake Oswego, OR
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In honor of JR | Crested Butte, CO
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In honor of Travis Cody Kerekes Martin | Tucson, AZ
In honor of Milo Nichols | Boise, ID
In honor of John Ramaley | Redding, CA
In honor of Ed Walford | Colorado Springs, CO
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“I give monthly to HCN because of its quality journalism and unique perspectives. I look forward to receiving my issue every month because I know there will be interesting stories that I wouldn’t find anywhere else.”
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“I’ve been a Sustainers’ Club member for over 15 years and a reader for even longer. I grew up in the West, and everything HCN writes about reflects issues that are important and relevant to me.”

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Mary McGilvra | Portland, OR
Mike & Leah McGinnis | Vail, AZ
Lucy Ware McGuffey | Durango, CO
Jane McKendry | Davis, CA
Jana McKenzie | Fort Collins, CO
Candace McNulty | Prescott, AZ
Richard & HeideMarie McSwain | Salem, OR
Marcia & John McWilliams | Bellingham, WA
Robert & Catherine Melich | Louisville, CO
Mark Mellbye | Lebanon, OR
Isabel Melvin | Aspen, CO
Roger Millar | Olympia, WA
Barbara Wolf | Sacramento, CA
Claire Miller | Surprise, AZ
Linda M. Miller | McKinleyville, CA
Evan Milton | Denver, CO
Stuart Miner & Mary Hashem | Denver, CO
Jerry Mishler | Corbett, OR
Charles & Melda Montgomery | Yamhill, OR
Dennis Moonier | Tigard, OR
Paula & Gregory Moore | Pueblo, CO
Sheila Morris | Westminster, CO
Karen & Douglas Morton | Walla Walla, WA
Prashanth Mundkur | Menlo Park, CA
Adele Myers | Meadow Valley, CA
Marchy Woodwell Neilson | Jackson, ID
Damie Nelson & Carl Levi | Pinos Altos, NM
MaryCarol Nelson | Hailey, ID
John Neville | Sedona, AZ
Ann E. Nichols | Manitou Springs, CO
Eunice Nicholson | Denton, TX
Kate Niles | Providence, RI
Jodi R. Norris | Flagstaff, AZ
Kenneth Norton | Aurora, CO
Phil Norton | San Antonio, NM
Christine O'Connor | Portland, OR
David & Pamela Palmer | Farmington, NM
Arthur Paolini | Niwot, CO
Patrick Park | Salt Lake City, UT
Don Parker | Golden, CO
Ed Parker | Twisp, WA
Parker Family | Springville, CA
Kevin Parks | Hotchkiss, CO
Don Parsons | Dillon, CO
Dorothy Johnson & Greg Parsons | Wheat Ridge, CO
Jim & Mare Payne | Cerro Gordo, IL
Sarah Perkins & Pamela Kaye | Marina, CA
Amy Anderson & Tim Peterson | Bend, OR
James Petri & Christie Owens | Longmont, CO
Ralph Pezoldt | Claremont, CA
Brian Phillips | Stony Brook, NY
David Pierson | Sandy, UT
Alyssa Pinkerton | Fort Collins, CO
Jonathan & Mikala Pleitner | Port Washington, WI
Mike & Phyllis Podolske | Hillsboro, OR
Jayne Poorbaugh & Malcolm Miller | Salida, CO
Elizabeth & Christopher Pope | Friday Harbor, WA
David & Mirjana Prather | Salem, OR
Robert W. Putsch | Canyon Creek, MT
Charles Quimby & Susan Cushman | Golden Valley, MN
Joe & Andrea Quiroz | Lander, WY
Kenneth Ragland | San Pedro, CA
Michael Ransom | Albany, OR
Jerry & Zoe Ravert | Florence, AZ
Dorothy & Peter Raymond | Loveland, CO
Stephen & Mary Sue Record | Block Island, RI
Scott Redmond | Belgrade, MT
Craig Reger | Logan, UT
John & Diane Reich | Sedona, AZ
Mike Riley | Bend, OR
Raynelle Rino-Southon | Oakland, CA
Jay Rodman | Placitas, NM
Lisa Ronald | Missoula, MT

Tom Ronning | Arvada, CO
Margaret Rostkowski | Ogden, UT
Richard L. Rubin | Arroyo Seco, NM
Angelica Rubio | Las Cruces, NM
Penny & Mike Rucks | Reno, NV
Deborah Ruehle | Sandpoint, ID
Dave & Marilyn Sabold | Winthrop, WA
Rachel Sams | Albuquerque, NM
Christopher Sanderson | Albuquerque, NM
Bruce Saunders | Gunnison, CO
Dustin Saxton | Riverside, CA
Tim Schirber | Commerce City, CO
David Schirokauer | Denali Park, AK
Larry Schneider | Grand Junction, CO
Alyssa Schrems | Albany, OR
Carrie Scoggins | Cottonwood Heights, UT
Lucy & John Scopinich | Boise, ID
Kate & Charles Segerstrom | Sonora, CA
Gordon & Janis Shackelford | El Cajon, CA
Kathleen Sheehan Dugan | Bigfork, MT
Christine Sheeter | Emeryville, CA
Sally Sherman | Boise, ID
Pixie Siebe | Anchorage, AK
Jeanne Simonelli | Bisbee, AZ
Lin Skavdahl & Steffany Raynes | Bellingham, WA
Kenneth Smith | Saratoga, CA
Mike & Jan Smith | Eugene, OR
Jim & Nancy Soriano | Vashon, WA
Timothy C. Spangler | Littleton, CO
Doug Spencer & Kathleen Parrish | Evergreen, CO
William Spencer | Boulder, CO
Andrew Spivack | Emeryville, CA
Robert & Darlea Stack | Salt Lake City, UT
Starr | Newcastle, ME
Hannah Stevens | Paonia, CO
Aria Ann Stewart | Somerville, MA
Robert Stoffregen | Moraga, CA
Oliver & Erescene Stokes | Sierra Vista, AZ
Liz & Gordon Stonington | Paonia, CO
Dan Stowens | Kennewick, WA
John Lissoway & Suellen Strale | Chimayo, NM
Isaac Sullivan-Leshin | Albuquerque, NM
Daniel Strizek | Lakewood, CO
Laura Stuntz | Fort Collins, CO
Lorraine Suzuki | Los Angeles, CA
Bill & Kathleen A. Tanaka | Shoshone, ID
William Taylor | Sacramento, CA
Gail & Marv Tester | Cottonwood Heights, UT
Steven Teynor | Millcreek, UT
John Thiemeyer | Portland, OR
Amy Timmerman | Woburn, MA
John Tirman | Cambridge, MA
Larry E. Tomberlin | Mountain Home, ID
Sue Trevathan & Jim Bazemore | Seattle, WA
Gail Trotter | Lacey, WA
Jean T. MacGregor | Olympia, WA
Patricia Verde | Longmont, CO
Patricia & Gwinn Vivian | Tucson, AZ
Kenneth J. Vogler | Boulder, CO
Kristiina Vogt | Mukilteo, WA
Denise Dralle Wade | Gallatin Gateway, MT
Eliza Walbridge | Blue Bell, PA
Frederick Walker Jr. | Del Mar, CA
Terry & Janet Walmer | Lakewood, CO
Lynn & Marie Walz | Lafayette, CO
John & Anita Ward | Klamath Falls, OR
Libby Wargo Welker | Sandpoint, ID
Erich & Edie Warkentine | Bishop, CA
Maurice Warner & Nancy Wich | Seattle, WA
Michelle Warren | West Lebanon, NH
Thomas Wasmund | King George, VA
Neil A. Weaver | Brush Prairie, WA
Jana Weber | Pinedale, WY
David Wegner & Nancy Jacques | Tucson, AZ
Alacia Welch | Paicines, CA
Nadia White | Missoula, MT
Patty & Bert Whitley | Oro Valley, AZ
Arianna & William Whitman | Seattle, WA
John Whitmer | Bellingham, WA
Barbara Willcox | Grass Valley, CA
Larry & Becky Williams | Columbia Falls, MT
Patricia Williams | Salem, OR
Judy & Don Willott | Bainbridge Island, WA
Susan Wilson | Big Timber, MT
Karen Wolfgang | Portland, OR
Kara Woo | Newberg, OR
Slim Woodruff | Grand Canyon, AZ
Lee-Lani Wright | Cottage Grove, OR
Owen Zaret | Easthampton, MA
Lynn Zonge | Carson City, NV
Paquita Zuidema | Coral Gables, FL

HCN COMMUNITY



WE ARE BOTH sad and happy to announce the departure of Carl Segerstrom, our Spokane-based assistant editor. Sad because Carl is an incredibly productive and wide-ranging journalist: Since he joined *HCN* as an intern in 2018, he has tackled economic inequality, explored the West's unique and fragile ecology, and challenged long-held assumptions about the conservation and climate-action movements. On Jan. 6, in just two days, he wrote a thought-provoking piece on the links between Western extremism and the Capitol insurrection. We're happy, though, because Carl is joining the Local Inland North-west Cooperative, which is revitalizing the Spokane area's food system. He wrote a lovely feature about LINC last year. We wish him well.

On June 4, Executive Director Greg Hanscom and Philanthropy Director Alyssa Pinkerton gathered in Denver for our final 50th anniversary celebration and fundraiser. “The West Illuminated,” featuring Native American law pioneer John Echohawk, poet Claudia Castro Luna, and a gaggle of *HCN* editors and writers, attracted more than 600 viewers, who contributed a combined \$125,000. Wow! We are deeply grateful to this community for supporting independent journalism for the West. You can watch the event on YouTube: [hcne.ws/celebrate-watch](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcne.ws/celebrate-watch) And it's never too late to donate!



The Chen Lin brothers at Los Angeles State Historic Park in Chinatown. The former Southern Pacific rail yard opened to the public as a park in 2017.



Reclaiming LA

How communities in Los Angeles are turning industrial sites into pockets of green.

PHOTOS AND REPORTING BY STELLA KALININA
INTRODUCTION BY JESSICA KUTZ

TUCKED NEXT TO THE 105 FREEWAY, just east of the Los Angeles International Airport, is the Lennox Community Garden. Once an agricultural hamlet, Lennox is now a densely built neighborhood cornered by two freeways. There is little room for green spaces. But in 2012, residents set out to change that, transforming an abandoned parcel of land owned by the California Department of Transportation into a series of raised garden beds packed with vegetables — a veritable oasis in this urban landscape.

In the San Gabriel Valley, 30 miles to the east, community members are fighting to turn a closed landfill into hundreds of acres of permanent open space. The landfill was closed 25 years ago, and its terraced grassy slopes are already home to mule deer, gray foxes and a variety of birds. And in Baldwin Hills, a state agency is hoping to purchase land that is currently dotted with operational oil pump jacks, transform it into hiking trails, fields and parks, and then put it into public use and ownership.

This reuse of industrial space, often spearheaded by communities of color that have historically lacked easy access to parks and gardens, provides an inspiring blueprint for how to reclaim and replenish the land, both for ourselves and the generations to come, Los Angeles-based photographer Stella Kalinina told *High Country News*. “It’s a regenerative process,” she said. “They are healing the land, healing our cities and healing people.”

This story was created in collaboration with Mother Jones.



Drone photographs by Keri Oberly

WISHING TREE PARK in West Carson has been 25 years in the making. This site was created to serve as a buffer zone between the Del Amo Superfund Site toxic-waste pits and the community. Between the 1940s and 1970s, Montrose Chemical dumped hazardous levels of DDT in a ravine on which homes were later built. The DDT was removed in the 1990s, and 67 of the houses were torn down, but some heavy metals remain. As an extra precaution, another two feet of clean soil has been added. “The park is going to be a jewel for our community, which has had nothing. So many community members died waiting for this park; kids grew up without this park,” said community activist Cynthia Babich.

**Cynthia Medina, assistant director of the Del Amo Action Committee,
with her daughter, Valerie Medina**

“Who knew when we moved in here, 40 years ago, that there was so much underground? About 10 years ago now, 23 homes on my street, in the front, all the yards were taken out because of the (DDT) contamination.

Now, we are not really planting vegetables because our dirt isn’t good dirt. We had at one time about 75 chickens, including all the little babies. But then, all of a sudden, we would lose all 12 babies. They were just dying. So then a university came and did an egg study. The agency that does our food tests said the eggs weren’t safe for consumption. And we stopped growing our vegetables, because I was afraid to feed the kids.

In my heart, I know that this (home) was not healthy for my kids. My oldest son was diagnosed at 9 years old with diabetes. Both of my daughters have a blood disorder. One of my daughters has rheumatoid arthritis, so she’s bedridden. And when my granddaughter was here, she had problems. She’s now 22 and suffers from asthma.” —Cynthia Medina





PARQUE DOS RIOS is located at the confluence of the LA River and Rio Hondo, between the 710 Freeway and the two rivers. It is one of several projects currently in progress in the city of South Gate, all of them created to add more park space, restore habitat and clean the runoff that flows into the LA River. The landscaping and park features will be installed in the coming weeks, and the park is scheduled to open this July.

THE BKK LANDFILL holds the potential to preserve hundreds of acres of open space in the highly developed West Covina area to benefit local communities and wildlife.



Brian Jobst, co-founder of Livable West Covina

“In many ways, the BKK Landfill is a huge hidden gem in the San Gabriel Valley. There, people and nature have already begun to make amends for a troubled past. The past is written. This is about the future of BKK and our community. We’re ensuring that BKK’s final chapter protects public health and becomes a thriving shared space for people, nature and even low-intensity commerce, like solar energy. We’re trying to do our best to make sure that next chapter puts health and well-being ahead of profit.

There’s 26,000 people that live within one mile of the BKK Landfill, and 176,000 that live within three miles. There’s huge population density in this area. And West Covina doesn’t have a lot of parks; we’re below the county average for park acreage per person. It would be remarkable if people could walk or bike to a park loaded with native vegetation and wildlife, and simply enjoy nature. Doing that shouldn’t mean you have to drive to the mountains.”



LENNOX COMMUNITY GARDEN was a vacant site left over following the construction of the 105 Freeway in the 1980s. The community garden opened in 2012.



Frank Alvarado, community gardener

"I've been living here in the community of Lennox for 40 years. I remember this place when it was a bunch of houses. In the early to mid-'80s, Caltrans (the California Department of Transportation) took over, tore down the buildings and started building the 105 Freeway. Everybody who used to live here, they bought them off. People moved out.

I've had this garden for the last four or five years. I got it because my kids were younger back then. Now they're like 15-16, and they don't want to come over here anymore. I decided to just keep it and plant vegetables. It's good entertainment after work. I come over here and just water my plants, clean up, and get my mind off all the troubles that you might have. It keeps you active, instead of being a couch potato at home. Then you get to meet people over here, too. There are not enough parks here, for sure. I guess we ran out of space around here."



LOS ANGELES STATE HISTORIC PARK

opened in 2017 at the former site of the Southern Pacific Transportation Company's River Station. In one of LA's landmark environmental justice victories, a large and diverse alliance of community and civic groups fought for years to turn this contaminated former rail yard into a park instead of a massive warehouse complex.

Stacey Gray and Alex Kellerman, park visitors

Gray: "I know where to go for parks. But I don't feel like parks are generally accessible in LA as much as they could be."

Kellerman: "I don't know if I agree. I feel like there's a ton of parks."

Gray: "If you have a car."



KENNETH HAHN STATE RECREATION AREA is the cultural center of the **BALDWIN HILLS PARKLANDS**. It holds a special place in the hearts of the area's Black and brown communities, having hosted countless family reunions, birthdays and quinceañeras since 1984. However, many community members fear that the area's cultural fabric is now threatened by gentrification.

Lawrence Dotson, hike leader with Hike to Yoga

“When I first started coming here, it was a great place to just roll around in the grass and have fun. It was like a big playground. And then when I was in college, I needed breaks, so I would come here and let my imagination run wild. I will go up in the hills hiking. There are so many pathways, so many things to do to get lost. And then, after the riots, it became a sanctuary. It was a place just to calm down and cry, to let out the frustration, the rage, the sadness of watching my neighborhood burn down.

Having grown up here, this park was like a friend. I'd go here and just be anything I wanted to be. I'm just going to my own world and have trees around me, blue skies, green grass, a waterfall. As I got older, I said, 'OK, my health is important. Here's a place to go exercise. I know the trails and how to challenge myself.' Then my son was born, so I was like, 'Yeah, this is perfect. Let me introduce him at an early age to all the beauty and nature that's right here around the corner.' It's nice to see a kid just so amazed at the simple things, like a rock.”



Irma Muñoz, founder of Mujeres de la Tierra

“With the women that I have worked with through my nonprofit Mujeres de la Tierra (Women of the Earth), I have seen them come together and fight against contaminated lands. They want to understand the science. How did this get contaminated? And who contaminated it? And how long has it been contaminated? And what is it contaminated with? Is it impacting the water, the air? How is it impacting community health? Let's find out!

The power of one is unbelievable. It takes one person to decide, 'I want to make change,' and then say, 'We can do it.' But it's got to be a we. As Dr. (Martin Luther) King says, you do not need a master's degree or bachelor's degree or Ph.D. to do good. All you need to have is the heart and soul desire to make change. And I do believe that's in everybody.” 🌸



DERAILED

How a trail in rural Oregon became a target of far-right extremism.

By Leah Sottile | Illustrations by Joan Wong

UP THE SLOW RISE of a country road, in the shadow of an oak tree, one of the oldest gravestones in the Yamhill Carlton Pioneer Memorial Cemetery lies flat against the wet green earth. Until his death nearly 140 years ago, a white settler farmed here, preached and claimed that he carried bullets in his back from an Indigenous boy's gun. Presumably, those bullets are buried, too: a reminder of the way stories can eventually become Western myth.

Downhill from the graves, plots of freshly turned soil mark the sites of future homes. Beyond them lies an abandoned railroad line, now just a stretch of trees and bushes. And beyond it a patchwork of hazelnut trees and farmhouses and green velvet vineyards stretches out toward the distant Coast Range. It is a sedimentary view of history. If we tell ourselves stories to live, the dead of Yamhill County have a full view of the truth of this place: what it was, what it is and what it will be.

One cold and windy day in late March, an organic fruit and vegetable farmer named Casey Kulla parked his car near some old headstones. Kulla's jeans were mud-splattered, but his shirt was fresh. He was in his early 40s, a thin man with a big smile and a neatly shaved head.

In 2018, Kulla was elected one of Yamhill County's three commissioners, besting the conservative incumbent. Over the last 40 years, this county in western Oregon's Willamette Valley has become one of the world's premier wine-growing regions, bringing an influx of money and visitors. Kulla, who is unusually liberal for a conservative county, ran on a platform of smart planning for inevitable growth and protecting vulnerable people in the community. At the time of his election, he was also a cannabis farmer.

Philip Higgins, the son of Quaker back-to-the-landers in

Yamhill, met Kulla at the cemetery. Higgins, who is a commercial real estate broker, grew up understanding "that when you don't have a lot of spare money, the government doesn't seem like it's there to help you."

Kulla pointed to a metal tab on Higgins' pants pocket. "See the little clip on it?" Higgins smiled and pulled out a Kershaw folding knife. Kulla, in turn, fished out a grafting knife from his pocket, well-worn from harvest.

The two men joked about how they contradict the rural stereotypes they seem to signify: Kulla wore Vivobarefoot shoes, Higgins wore a Rolex. "This," Higgins said, rolling up his sleeve to display it, "is the urban-rural divide." The men cracked up laughing.

But as they walked down the hill toward the old railroad right of way — the unlikely source of so much local anger — their tone changed. "Yamhill County *is* the urban-rural divide personified," Higgins said.

In Oregon, as in other Western states, "urban-rural divide" is shorthand for the cultural, political and economic tensions between the few urban centers — Portland, Eugene, Salem, Bend — and the many rural communities. That divide, Kulla said, is fundamental to understanding the place. He wishes it wasn't real, he said, "but it is."

In 2013, the county received a grant to purchase the abandoned railway right of way near the old graveyard. The plan was to repurpose it as a public trail: the Yamhelas Westsider Trail, named for the Kalapuya Tribe, whose homeland this is, and the rail line that trundled through in the 1870s.

The route would eventually span 12 miles. Rail-to-trail projects exist all over the United States; there are 23 in Oregon. Supporters believed it would encourage visitors to come and celebrate the place's natural beauty.

Illustration sources: Casey Kulla image courtesy of Kulla (*left*); Mary Starrett, OregonLive/The Oregonian (*right*); Lindsay Berschauer, YouTube capture / KOIN 6 (*center*); Yamhelas Westsider, YouTube capture; McMinnville winery, George Rose via Getty Images; Map, Yamhill County.

D



COUNTY

“People want to come here and experience (Yamhill County),” Higgins said, “and preserving that experience is really what we need to be doing, so we aren’t all of a sudden full of Quiznos and Starbucks.”

But the trail has since become the center of a local culture war. “We don’t talk about abortion in our community, or guns,” Kulla said. “We talk about if you support the trail.” He is currently its lone supporter on the county commission.

The project was first imagined in 1991. Locals supported it: As recently as June, an online petition in its favor had more than 3,200 signatures.

But the trail, like the railroad that preceded

whispers over the mountains, cautioning the wine grapes about ripening in haste.

The county’s 10 small cities differ widely, reflecting the cultural collisions that define, and divide, Oregon. The county seat, McMinnville, has a four-year university and an annual UFO festival commemorating the time a farmer snapped an infamous photo of a flying saucer. In the 1960s and 1970s, rural communes attracted hippies and agrarians. Nearly 10% of the locals claim veteran status.

In the mid-1800s, white settlers grabbed up land and established a provisional government in what would become the state of Oregon. They banned people of color, and the federal govern-

supported it. Locals loved the idea; one wine-maker donated \$16,000 to the cause. The state gave the county a \$1.5 million grant to help purchase the right of way, and the commission hired engineers to build a bridge outside Yamhill that was needed to develop the trail.

An early phase would span 2.8 miles, connecting the towns of Carlton and Yamhill, two communities linked in many ways: The schools share the name Yamhill-Carlton, and the entire area is deemed an AVA — an “American Viticultural Area” — for the loamy soil that allows grapes to flourish here. There is no Yamhill without Carlton, and no Carlton without Yamhill.

And yet the towns differ widely.

Though timber built Carlton, wine revived it: Nearly every Main Street storefront now houses a wine-tasting room. A bakery sells mushroom truffle *gougères* and complicated artisan breads. Gardens behind white picket fences burst with tulips like spring fireworks.

In Yamhill, most of the storefronts stand vacant, and yard signs and flags project a different vibe: “Blue Lives Matter” and “Don’t Blame Me, I Voted for Trump.” A billboard next to a red barn yells: “The United Nations is Not Your Friend!”

Hand-drawn signs at T&E General advertise ribeye steaks for \$9.99 and “ice cold ice.” Around noon, the warm aroma of fried chicken strips and jojos wafts outside, and the parking slots fill with pickup trucks.

Trail construction between the towns began in 2020, with the bridge. But by spring 2021, building had come to a halt, and the half-completed bridge stood along the trail’s path, connected to nothing at all.

LAST YEAR, TWO WOMEN ran for the single open seat on the County Commission. One issue dominated the race: the trail.

Commissioners set budgets, oversee land-use decisions, and deal with contracts, development and economic growth, among other things. Farmers pay close attention to commission elections, because the county’s economy, and identity, is agricultural.

Candidate Barbara Boyer was a well-known farmer in her mid-50s who co-founded the local farmers market. She has accolades from the state Board of Agriculture, the Agriculture Heritage Commission, the local Soil and Water Conservation Board. She preached compromise and conversation, and waved away political drama with a smile and big laugh.

Boyer’s opponent was a 40-year-old Arizona native and Republican political consultant named Lindsay Berschauer. She has long brown hair and big eyelashes, and often wears

“We don’t talk about abortion in our community, or guns. We talk about if you support the trail.”

it, would cut through farmland. A group of more than two dozen farmers — some with property alongside the right of way, others from 20 miles away — say the trail would impact how they farm and what they can spray. It would encourage trespassers and maybe attract tent encampments for unhoused people. They say land-use laws mean farmers shouldn’t have to change, no matter what the community wants.

They also say the county didn’t involve them in the planning. “(County officials) pissed people off,” Higgins said. “And Yamhill County is one of those places where if your great-grandfather pissed my great-grandfather off, we’re probably not getting married.”

In a state where politics is dominated by the urban-rural divide, it’s as if the proposed Yamhill County trail is the actual place — the exact line — where that divide begins.

PORTLAND — OREGON’S LARGEST CITY

— is only 12 miles northeast of Yamhill County, but Yamhill is a different world, where rows of crops are so straight and parallel, the land looks as if it’s been groomed with a giant comb. Two-lane highways cut through fields of grass seed, hazelnuts and grapes. Usually, traffic flies down those roads, but now and then it creeps behind a combine. Sometimes the rains come heavy, blown in from the west, over the jawline of mountains that guard the valley from the stormy Pacific. People say it’s that ocean air that creates so much bounty, so much green: like a voice that

ment forced Indigenous people to reservations. Around 30 tribal communities from around the state — known today as the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde — were relegated to what is now the county’s southeastern edge. Just 2% of the county currently identifies as Indigenous, compared to 77% who are white.

In the early 1900s, the town of Carlton became a timber hub, with a manmade lake where big logs bobbed after floating downstream from the rugged Coast Range. Then came the Great Depression and the Tillamook Burn, which ultimately destroyed 350,000 acres of forest. By the late 1960s, the timber industry had all but vanished from the county.

Places like this inspired Beat writer Ken Kesey’s 1964 novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, about a hard-headed family of Coast Range loggers. Their motto was “never give an inch” — to anyone. It’s been called the greatest Oregon book of all time, perhaps because it expresses a haunting truth: Rural ways of life have vanished before, and many Oregonians fear that it will happen here again.

In the 1870s, at the urging of farmers and loggers, the rail line was constructed to connect Yamhill County to the rest of the state. Over the next century, though, it was abandoned. In the mid-1980s, the rails were pried up, and, over time, the right of way became an overgrown strip of forgotten land.

When the Yamhelas Westsider Trail was first conceived, the county’s three commissioners

power suits. She is known for her willingness to stir the pot. “I would consider myself a consultant who likes to push the limit,” she explained at a forum in 2016. She had worked for Oregon Transformation Project, an organization fueled by anti-Portland rhetoric, which poured tens of thousands of dollars into conservative political coffers, exhorting voters to halt “Portland Creep.” Congestion, density and crime, its billboards warned, were coming for outlying areas.

Until recently, Berschauer lived in a spacious waterfront home on the Willamette River, according to public records. But during the race, she presented herself as a working-class candidate who idolized the Oregon logger. During the election, Berschauer wore a Carhartt vest and jeans.

Her platform boasted that she was a gun owner and a protector of “individual freedoms.” She was proud to be endorsed by Timber Unity, a grassroots group that talks about rural solidarity but welcomes far-right extremists and conspiracy theorists.

During a virtual debate in April 2020, Berschauer called the trail “a symbol of Metro invading our county,” “Metro” being the regional government that manages growth in the Portland area. It was the Portland Creep argument

all over again, and it seemed to resonate: Berschauer’s fundraising committee received at least \$13,900 from farmers opposing the trail.

Days before ballots were due, glossy postcards arrived in voters’ mailboxes, featuring mugshots of Boyer and a list of offenses dating back to the 1990s, including a DUII and marijuana possession. The political action committee behind it had not received any contributions in at least two years — until that month, when it received one of its largest ever: \$10,000 from Stimson Lumber, one of Oregon’s oldest logging operations. (Stimson also donated \$5,000 to Berschauer’s committee.)

Turnout was low, but Berschauer won by more than 3,500 votes. Her victory signaled a change: The county didn’t want conversation and compromise. It wanted people like Berschauer.

Among her supporters was a 41-year-old farmer named Ben VanDyke, who grows hazelnuts alongside the proposed trail section between Yamhill and Carlton. He’s a thin man who wears a goatee and a stain-flecked ballcap, and gives off the air of someone who is not easily upset.

Dozens of farmers oppose the trail, and several share the VanDyke name. Ben — like his dad, and his grandfather — runs a farm in

Yamhill. He and his family live in the house he grew up in, on the farm where his father taught him to farm. From there, he produces hazelnuts for Nutella, ships grass seed throughout the U.S. and to China, and dispatches blueberries around America to live short happy lives in clear plastic cartons on grocery store shelves.

This spring, there was little to see on the nearby right of way: just a different section of the corridor Kulla and Higgins had walked a few weeks before. “To us, it was abandoned,” VanDyke said. “We didn’t really think much of it.”

When his family first got wind of the project, they weren’t worried. “When we heard about it, it was, ‘Oh, there’s no way this is going through because Yamhill County is still a very ag county,’” he said. “Then we started to figure out that there’s some backers that really wanted it.”

The group hired a high-powered land-use attorney and triggered a cycle of complaints to the state Land Use Board of Appeals. By mid-2020, after several remands from the board stalled the trail’s momentum, the county began to move forward with a master planning process to make sure all concerns were properly addressed. But by then, the farmers didn’t want their concerns addressed; they didn’t want the trail, period.

Illustration sources: Lindsay Berschauer, YouTube capture/KOIN 6; Landscape, Carl/Flickr; Tractors, YouTube capture/KOIN 6; Truck, Kelly Jordan/Statesman Journal; Map, Yamhill County



“(People) think we’re an anti-trail group, and that’s so far from what we are,” VanDyke said. But that particular trail, in that particular spot, was too much of a change. “We’re just trying to uphold land use.”

The fight — like Kesey’s novel — is about not giving an inch. “It’s not like this is the Alamo,” VanDyke said. But he also said if farmers change anything — even by creating a few feet of buffer, even if the community wants the trail — it opens the door for Yamhill County to slowly become an extension of Portland.

“That land is the only thing that puts the food on the table for my family,” VanDyke said. “If I do anything to destroy that, I’m destroying my entire heritage.”

“That land is the only thing that puts the food on the table for my family. If I do anything to destroy that, I’m destroying my entire heritage.”

BY JANUARY 2021, the Yamhill County Commission was majority anti-trail. Newly elected Commissioner Berschauer joined one of the project’s loudest opponents: Commission Chair Mary Starrett.

In Zoom meetings, Starrett’s square gives off a homey ambiance, with a pot of flowers behind her and crimson drapes filtering soft sunlight. She is in her 60s, with brown hair cut in a short, wavy bob and glasses balanced on the end of her nose.

Starrett has opposed the trail since she was elected in 2014. During the 2020 election, she endorsed Berschauer. “For 7 years I have opposed spending money on this project until and unless the County could get all the necessary land use approvals,” she wrote in an email to me. “The newly-elected commissioner campaigned on the folly of allowing the trail and won her race over her pro-trail opponent.”

In the 1980s and 1990s, Starrett hosted the popular *AM Northwest* program on the local ABC affiliate in Portland. A newspaper once praised the TV anchor’s “winning personality.”

But by the mid-2000s, Starrett was better known for her politics. She co-founded Oregonians for Life, an anti-abortion group, and authored conspiratorial columns for the website *News with Views*. The website — which the Southern Poverty Law Center branded an

anti-government group in 2019 — runs columns from a roster of far-right ideologues. In 2004, Starrett questioned the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “If we judge Martin Luther King Jr. on ‘the content of his character’ and ‘not the color of his skin,’ surely no banks or schools or post offices would be shut down for a day,” she wrote. “Few have the guts to state the truth.”

In 2006, Starrett ran for governor as the candidate of the Constitution Party, which promotes theocratic views. She received few endorsements beyond the Oregon Firearms Federation, a gun rights group helmed by her brother, and support from Oregonians for Immigration Reform, a white nationalist organization.

Her platform in the Salem *Statesman Journal*

illustrated a type of bigotry that has long been acceptable in Oregon: white supremacist talking points that never use the word “white.” “I believe until we start looking at why things are such a mess in this state, nothing will change,” she wrote. “Look at the advocacy commissions for Latinos, Asians, women, African Americans and Native Americans. The Oregon Constitution is clear that no group should receive extras that other groups aren’t privy to.”

Despite the overt racism, more than 50,000 people — about 3.6% of the total turnout — voted for Starrett for governor.

Starrett has had a long political career in Yamhill County and could run for a third term as commissioner next year. She is open about her extremist views, but they seem palatable even to more moderate voters, perhaps because of the down-home niceness she projects.

But the brash and argumentative Berschauer has inflamed the locals. Niceness, it seems, is what separates the two women; one a known quantity, and the other not. (Despite multiple requests, Berschauer did not comment in time for publication.)

“When you have people who cater to resentment and everything is an existential fight — *everything* — it really becomes difficult to find common ground and problem-solve,” Sal Peralta, a city councilman in McMinnville, said. “That’s

really where we’re at right now.

“Yamhill County has always been a conservative county,” he added, “but it’s never been mean-spirited.”

Berschauer shrugs off criticism: “I wasn’t elected because I’m a go-along-to-get-along woman,” she wrote on Facebook in February 2021.

That was right after a virtual meeting during which Berschauer berated county employees, wondering aloud whether they had committed “fraudulent actions” by working on the trail. For almost five hours, Berschauer, wearing tortoiseshell glasses that reflected her screen, admonished staff. At one point, she thrust photographs of the unfinished bridge toward the camera, demanding: “Where is the money going to come from then to finish this bridge?”

In the end, Berschauer made a motion to withdraw the land-use application for the trail, which would effectively kill the project, stopping the planning process and halting bridge construction. It would also mean the agencies and parties that gave more than \$1 million would want to be repaid.

Kulla cautioned his fellow commissioners against halting the process.

“We can move forward with this in a way that honors everybody in our community,” he said — taxpayers, trail supporters and the farmers who felt ignored. “As a farmer, I respect them just as much as anybody else.”

But Starrett asked for the vote anyway. She and Berschauer voted “Aye”; Kulla opposed.

Thirty years after its conception, the trail died an unceremonious death. (Though Kulla remains optimistic: “As long as the county owns it,” he said, “there can be a trail.”) But by then, it was arguably the least of Yamhill County’s problems. The arguments over the trail had gone on so long, and drummed up so much anger, that a gap had formed in the community — a space just large enough for people with far-right ideologies to shoulder their way inside.

And so, by February, the story of the trail wasn’t really about a trail. It was a story about a community divided, about extremism and bigotry, about powerful people who try on a working-class identity like a costume.

IF NEWSPAPER ARCHIVES are any indication, the term “urban-rural divide” has been in use for nearly 100 years. But since the 1990s, no state’s papers appear to have used it more frequently than Oregon’s.

Around the time the trail was first discussed, in 1995, a Salem *Statesman Journal* commentator wrote that state legislators’ infighting stemmed from their different worldviews. “What

the urban-rural split represents is two Oregon's, each trying to impose its values on the other," he wrote. In 2009, a longtime political columnist wrote that the state's biggest challenge was "the urban-rural divide."

"People in the Portland-centric Willamette Valley don't appreciate the challenges facing rural Oregon, and vice-versa," he wrote. "Too many Oregonians cling to outdated stereotypes of one another."

Timber Unity provides one such stereotype: Rural Oregonians who are working-class and mad as hell.

The group is many things: a grassroots organizing force, a social media hashtag, a political action committee. Its public Facebook group has more than 26,000 followers, and its private group boasts more than 60,000. In 2019, organizers said it sprang from Oregon's urban-rural divide. "We're tired of being steamrolled," the group's lead organizer said. "There are other parts of the state of Oregon other than just Portland."

In June 2019, logging trucks swarmed the state Capitol, horns blaring, as loggers in hard hats waved signs. Tractors circled, protesting a controversial bill aimed at capping greenhouse emissions, which would have required industries to buy permits in order to, essentially, pollute the air.

But before the vote, Republicans threatened to walk out of the Statehouse — an act of political theater that made national headlines.

Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, warned legislators that if they did leave the Capitol, a building topped with a gilded statue of an ax-holding "Oregon Pioneer," she would send the Oregon State Police after them.

Republican State Sen. Brian Boquist — whose district includes part of Yamhill County — responded. "Send bachelors, and come heavily armed," he told reporters. "I'm not going to be a political prisoner in the state of Oregon. It's just that simple." Later, when journalists characterized his words as a "thinly veiled" threat, he corrected them: "Nothing thinly veiled" about it — a shocking promise of violence by a sitting elected official.

The next day, they went into hiding, effectively killing the bill.

Boquist had merely echoed the rhetoric on display at the Timber Unity rally outside the Capitol. Men stood on the building's steps, holding banners that read: "Where We Go One, We Go All" — the slogan of Q-Anon, a conspiracy theory that claims Satanic pedophiles have infiltrated the federal government and only former President Donald Trump can stop them.

There were Oregon Three Percenter sweat-shirts and hats — garb of the far-right militia

group — and Oregon Pushback signs: "Legislators want to take your guns." Proud Boys — a violent far-right group — mingled. And all of it was Timber Unity.

Later, when asked about the groups assembled under its banner, one of Timber Unity's leaders did not disavow them: "We're not the free speech police," she said.

"Timber Unity purports to be a voice for rural working Oregonians in the natural resources field," said Lindsay Schubiner of the Western States Center, which combats white nationalist groups. "I think that's a disingenuous way of presenting themselves. And they have a lot of supporters who are involved because of what they say their mission is. But I think that it's also really important to note they create space for dangerous far-right groups to create influence and reach their supporters."

On Jan. 6, 2021, Angelita Sanchez, a board member and spokesperson of Timber Unity's political action committee, attended the rally before the storming of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. — an insurrection that has now resulted in more than 400 arrests.

Sanchez, who remains on Timber Unity's board, is an administrator of the group's private Facebook group. Berschauer is also an administrator.

"They're trying to have it both ways: engaging in anti-democratic and far-right approaches, while working to be seen as a mainstream organization working for rural Oregonians," Schubiner said.

Berschauer has never been shy about her association with the group. "I'm proud to stand with #TimberUnity," she wrote online. "The elitism of many of our state lawmakers and special interest groups is costing our working families their livelihoods." VanDyke, who campaigned for Berschauer, said he doesn't care about her connection; his family is happy with the job she's done so far.

In 2020, Timber Unity endorsed 11 county commissioner candidates across Oregon, including Berschauer. Nine were elected. "In general, the Timber Unity candidates and the candidates (Berschauer) has historically backed — those folks have done really well," McMinnville City

Councillor Sal Peralta told me. "There's a lot of money going toward those county commission races, and there's a lot of effort going toward making Oregon county commissions more extreme."

Timber Unity's effectiveness — from electing candidates to derailing the climate bill — coupled with its extremist connections has made it something of a boogeyman in Oregon. Several sources for this story declined to comment on anything related to it out of fear.

In a meeting of one group of citizens that I attended, a presenter said that, in Oregon, Timber Unity "may be stronger than the Republican Party."

AT ITS FOUNDING, Timber Unity received \$5,000 from Andrew Miller, the CEO of Stimson Lumber. Miller has some of the deepest conservative pockets in Oregon. Since 2008, he's personally contributed upward of \$387,000 to conservative candidates and causes, and his company has donated \$2.3 million. In 2016, Miller made headlines for funding a PAC that sent out a glossy mailer digging up the criminal history of an Oregon mayoral candidate. It was similar to the flyer about Boyer, Berschauer's opponent. (Miller said he was not behind the Boyer mailer.)

Miller has deep Oregon roots: Stimson Lumber, which was founded by his great-great-grandfather, has logged in Oregon since the late 1800s. The company owns timberland in Yamhill County worth "a couple hundred million dollars," including Spirit Mountain, a place sacred to the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. He also owns local hazelnut farms.

He is skinny and soft-spoken. His company is known for donating a 75-foot-tall Douglas fir to the city of Portland for its Christmas Tree Lighting. He lives in a 10-bedroom home in one of Portland's ritziest neighborhoods.

Miller told me that other than his initial contribution, he has "no active role" in Timber Unity. "For some reason people think I'm a master puppeteer or the man behind the green curtain," he said.

According to Miller, the group was born out of rural Oregon's deep resentment of Portlanders,

"There's a lot of money going toward those county commission races, and there's a lot of effort going toward making Oregon county commissions more extreme."

who view the sparsely populated part of the state as “a drive-by on the way to somewhere,” he said. “Or maybe a recreational weekend. It’s not really a connection with the people, the communities.”

He believes state politics, and urban Oregonians, tend to ignore rural life. “Urban Oregon (has a) conceit and arrogance in wanting to tell rural Oregonians, ‘No, let me tell you, Mr. Trailer Trash, Mr. Logger. ...’” he said. “I’m going to tell you how you should be living your life, and it’s going to be based on my standards.”

Steve Pedery, conservation director at Oregon Wild, said his nonprofit became “extremely concerned” about Timber Unity because of Miller’s involvement. “What we feared was the timber industry in Oregon, sensing that it was losing even more of its social license in the state, was gonna go full Trumpian. ‘If we can’t have it, no one can. We’ll burn it all down,’” he said.

“We don’t actually have a ton of timber here. I think (it’s) sort of fascinating — that story we’ve told about ourselves has become more true than the truth.”

To Pedery, Timber Unity simply exploits Oregon’s urban and rural stereotypes, making the divide a tool for recruitment.

“They have come to stand for the working rural Oregonian in a way that the Republican Party doesn’t,” City Councilor Peralta said. “And I think it’s ironic because ... this is an organization that is, first and foremost, promoting the interests of very large and powerful people in the state.”

That appeal to rural resentment has worked in Yamhill County. Megan Corvus, a lead organizer with a local grassroots group called Progressive Yamhill, said the group has found a foothold here, where she was born and is currently raising a family.

“Timber Unity has a ton of fans here,” she told me. “We don’t actually have a ton of timber here. I think (it’s) sort of fascinating — that story we’ve told about ourselves has become more true than the truth. And people don’t want to hear the truth.”

Pedery said the term “rural” works as a kind of code: “We don’t mean Indigenous,” he said. “When we say ‘rural,’ we don’t mean Hispanic farmworkers. It has become weaponized in this state’s politics, and most states in the West, as

a way to sort of create rural backlash against the general cultural grievance that urban areas, brown people, educated people (and) liberals have too much sway, and we should go back to the way it used to be.

“It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to think about that value proposition and go, wait a second,” he told me. “There is a racial component to that.”

And there is a racial component to the Yamhill County story, too: Two months after Republicans walked out of the Statehouse and Timber Unity made its grand political entrance, Commissioner Starrett was fighting diversity training for county employees. She questioned whether white privilege was real, drawing on myths about Asian Americans, saying Asians “have better credit scores, they have more wealth. ... We could talk about Asian privilege.”

Her comments drew local outrage, even though they merely echoed sentiments she’d expressed for decades. The following week, dozens of citizens testified in support of the training at a meeting that lasted more than two hours.

Progressive Yamhill’s Corvus was the second person to speak. She is a white woman married to a Black woman, with whom she has two biracial children. “I had no opportunity in the culture that I was raised in here in Yamhill County to even fundamentally understand what it would mean to be a Black person in this country,” she said. “I have learned so much by being given access to training like this. ... I now recognize myself as racist. I was raised in a culture that is fundamentally racist, that believes in white supremacy.”

Corvus told me Starrett’s jaw dropped when she called herself racist. “It’s OK to say that we are racist, as long as we recognize it and work to end the ways in which we are racist, to become anti-racist,” Corvus said.

Only two people supported Starrett. One — a farmer who is now part of the organized opposition to the proposed trail — said diversity training would “chip away at cultural norms.”

The other was Berschauer. “I am very

concerned this curriculum promotes a political bias and ideology,” she said, adding that she thought elements of the training might violate people’s constitutional rights.

Behind the scenes, Andrew Miller also expressed fury. He wrote to Kulla, who supported the training: “Do you think I should feel guilty for being a successful white man? ... Do I feel guilty? Not in the least.”

Kulla suggested they meet in person to have a more productive conversation.

Miller declined. “I strongly disagree with your public position that white people need to be trained to be better human beings, or need to feel guilty about their existence,” he wrote back. “You are the worst type of racist.”

Sal Peralta, the McMinnville city councilor, is one of the few people of color in a leadership position in Yamhill County. He said that every time he spoke out against Timber Unity or its supporters, his personal information — and sometimes his photograph — were shared online. He thinks he’s targeted because he’s Latino.

One morning this spring, he found a toilet in his front yard. “I don’t know if that was Timber Unity,” he said. “I also have a Black Lives Matter sign in front of my house. I don’t know why it happened, but I can tell you I have been singled out clearly and deliberately so many times that it wouldn’t surprise me if it was deliberate.”

SHORTLY AFTER THEY KILLED THE TRAIL — which Berschauer lauded as a victory for private property — Berschauer proposed an ordinance making the county a Second Amendment Sanctuary, effectively nullifying new gun laws within its borders. (Starrett had tried but failed to pass it in 2019.)

The ordinance “defends the Right to Keep and Bear Arms,” Starrett wrote in an email. “It promotes the idea of ‘Shall not be infringed’ by eliminating the local enforcement of many of the state and federal firearms regulations that restrict the ability of individuals to protect themselves, their families, and others.” It is also part of a trend in Oregon, and in the rest of the country, backed by militia groups and powerful gun lobbyists, to subvert the Constitution.

The idea echoes the 1970s Posse Comitatus movement. Latin for “power of the county,” Posse Comitatus argued that county sheriffs are the highest law enforcement authority. The idea came from a white supremacist from California who urged citizens to form “posses” and hoard firearms in order to combat globalistic forces, particularly the United Nations.

The movement’s reach extended across the West. One southern Oregon posse made the



Casey Kulla image courtesy Casey Kulla; landscape, George Rose/Getty Images; Road, YouTube capture/Yamhelas Westsider; Map, Yamhill County

news when it “seized” the county dogcatcher; another, in 1975, threatened an Oregon state senator with death if he didn’t repeal a land-use conservation law.

Posse Comitatus evolved into today’s Patriot movement, the far-right subset on full display at the Jan. 6 storming of the Capitol. The movement cares deeply about county-level government, seeking seats on commissions in order to oversee land use, private property rights and gun regulations.

Yamhill County’s sheriff, Tim Svenson, said there were “so many unknowns” about the sanctuary ordinance that he couldn’t answer questions about it. “I can tell you that I have been a strong supporter of Second Amendment rights and have testified in Salem to that effect,” he said. “I am not a fan of passing gun laws that further restrict lawful gun owners.”

“There is definitely a real concern,” Kulla said. People have “essentially been told by the board of commissioners that they can do whatever they want with their guns here.”

Berschauer introduced the ordinance in February. A month later, I met with Kulla and Higgins, the real estate broker, at the site of the trail. Higgins believed it was all posturing — a

show put on by the other commissioners. “I may be putting a little more Machiavellian spin on it than is probably necessary, because of the financial liability of unwinding the trail,” he said. “If you can divert people’s attention to this Second Amendment silliness, that sort of makes people look away from the tax implications.”

Kulla tromped off into a bramble of overgrowth, returning with a handful of pods. “That’s really interesting,” he told Higgins, picking through the bits in his palm for mullein seeds. “Your observation is way more gentle and light-hearted than mine.

“Before there was a U.S. Capitol attack by insurrectionists, there was a forced entry of the Oregon state Capitol,” he reminded us.

That happened on Dec. 21, 2020, during a special session of the state Legislature. Republican Rep. Mike Nearman — whose district includes the southernmost edge of Yamhill County — made headlines after he opened a locked door at the Oregon Capitol, allowing a crowd of unmasked protesters waving Trump flags to enter, leading to confrontations with the state and local police. In early June, video surfaced of Nearman giving out his phone number and implying, with a wink and a nod,

that he could let them into the building. He now faces criminal charges, and mid-June, he became the first representative in state history to be expelled from the Legislature.

The week before Nearman opened the door, Kulla’s email was flooded with strange messages — conspiratorial, demanding, sinister. The Yamhill County Commission was set to vote on reassessing its COVID-19 restrictions. “It was clear something was going to go down,” Kulla said. “They were attempting to obstruct democracy.”

The emails came with such speed and ferocity that they felt coordinated, as if someone was directing people to put pressure on Kulla, or worse: Frighten him.

“We will prevail,” read one, “even if it means washing this fine country in blood.” Kulla forwarded it to the county attorney.

“Before email, we got this same driveline on paper from the Posse Comitatus,” the attorney replied. Now it was coming from a new brand of the far right, “who construct their own legal fictions to justify lawlessness.”

Still, it felt like a threat. Kulla started sleeping with his phone next to the bed. And he moved his hunting rifle closer to the house. 🌿

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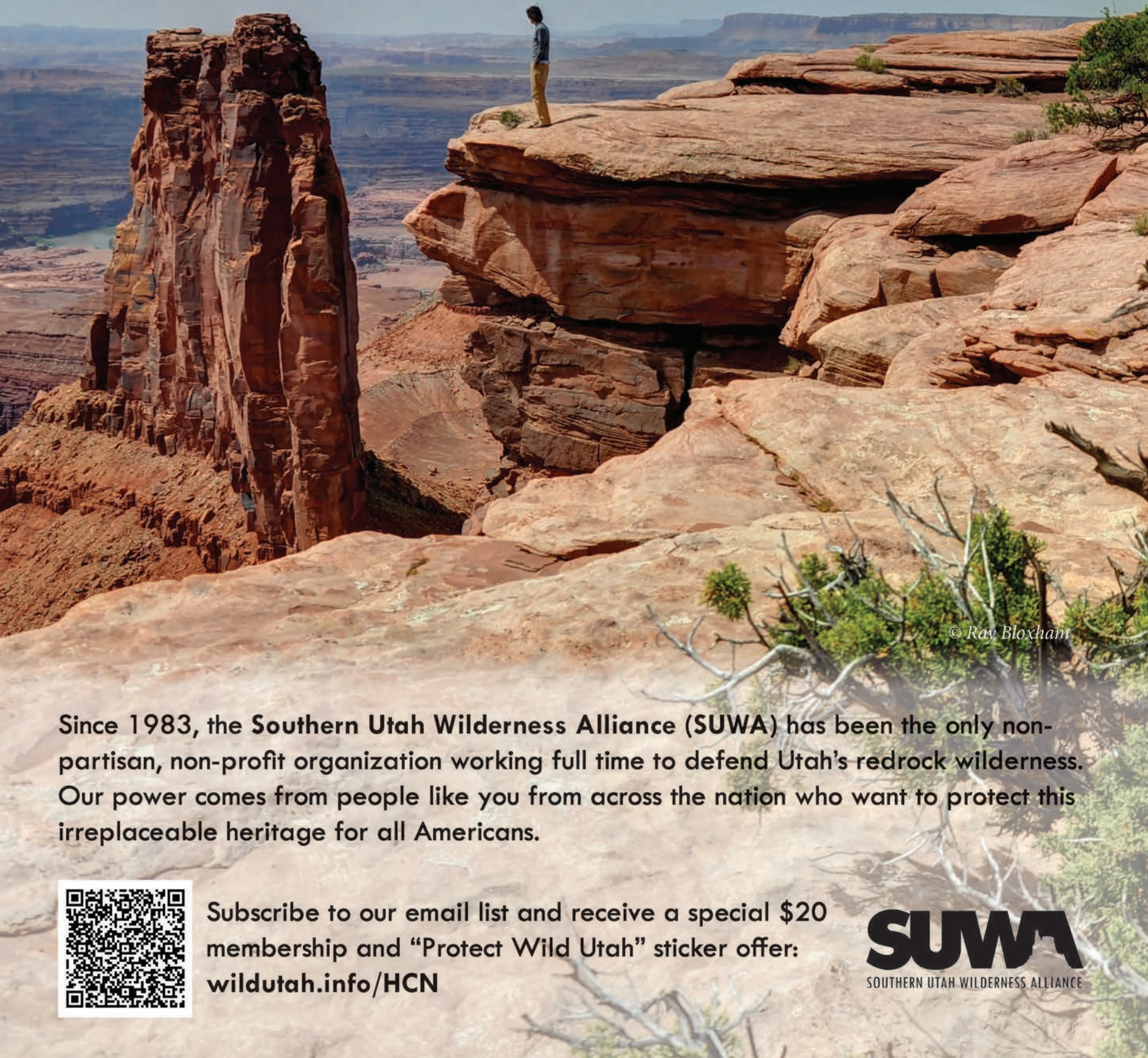
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How will humans live through ecological collapse?

In *Believers*, Lisa Wells profiles ordinary people who want to lead less destructive lives.

BY ANDRU OKUN



“THE END OF THE WORLD”

is a slippery concept; writing the phrase, I feel the need for quotes to avoid giving the impression that I can define it. It makes sense, then, that the ways we deal with the prospect of doomsday would vary. In *Believers: Making a Life at the End of the World* — the nonfiction debut of Lisa Wells, a poet and essayist living in Seattle — the author writes, “If we imagine that our civilization is already in collapse, the question we are faced with is this: How, then, shall we live?” Her book is a direct response to major ecological issues — increasing carbon emissions, declining biodiversity, thawing permafrost — but collapse is not really the focus; rather, it is “the backdrop, the central prophecy.”

Prolonged thinking about the apocalypse can inspire hefty, extensively researched books on how the crisis will affect our species and others (*The Sixth Extinction* and *The Uninhabitable Earth* among them). It can also plunge a writer into fatalism. But Wells merely edges up to the cliff, using her eco-anxiety and grief as a starting point to examine how different people reckon with planetary catastrophe.

And yet, there are no survival bunkers or billionaire isolationists in this book. Instead, the *Believers*’ eight chapters introduce us to “relatively ordinary people” with a shared belief “that their inherited way of life was destructive.” Most

of them are based in the Western United States. Wells spends time with Finisia Medrano, an itinerant transgender woman who traveled the Western backcountry by foot and horse for decades, living off the land and planting as she went. In the woods of northwest Oregon, Wells studies with a wildly impressive tracker named Fernando Moreira, whose attention to detail leads her to consider our habitual disconnection from the natural world. In New Mexico, she meets with a group of Mennonite rewilders. In Paradise, California, she discusses devastating wildfires and the role of humans in ecosystem restoration.

Believers is digressive and its scope broad, the book’s many threads tied by Wells’ appraisal of environmental damage and repair. She’s largely successful in this intertwining, although some storylines are better executed than others. A chapter that fluctuates between a reconciliation ceremony in Taos, New Mexico, and a mental breakdown on a trip to Philadelphia feels off-kilter. (Sometimes, the language itself feels circular; while reading, I underlined a sentence that struck me. When the same sentence appeared 10 pages later, its repetition felt more accidental than intentional.) Still, Wells’ prose, rooted in her poetry, gives her a unique advantage when writing about living through this unstable moment in history, “feeling the tenuousness of

all we take for granted.”

Some of *Believers*’ best moments involve Wells digging into the cultural delusions of the frontier, “the foundational myth of the American West.” The land that’s been taken was already inhabited, she reminds us; colonization is an ongoing process. Any examination of nature in America requires acknowledging this violence and its attendant fantasy of emptiness. “What does it mean,” she asks, “to ‘go back to the land’ in a country that was never yours?” This line of questioning undergirds her thinking on the limits of the environmental movement, which she weaves into this history through recollections of coming of age in the Pacific Northwest during the radical environmentalism of the 1990s. There are times when Wells appears uncomfortable as a memoirist — reticent about some difficult portions of her life — but, like the subjects she profiles, her memories ground *Believers*’ big questions in personal stakes.

The current forecast indicates that climate change — a phrase I’ve avoided using until now, although you’ve likely been thinking of it all along — is destroying our chances of inhabiting the Earth long-term. Settler colonialists’ failure to understand the interrelationships between plants, animals and people set us on our current course. As Wells notes, edible gardens are

Finisia Medrano, left, at Lone Pine Ridge, Idaho. **Adrain Chesser**

thought to have once blanketed the West; game was abundant, salmon filled the rivers, and flocks of migrating birds were so thick that they sometimes darkened the sky for days. She is clear that there is no going back — “no return to innocence” — but she believes there’s still hope and real value in acting on behalf of future generations.

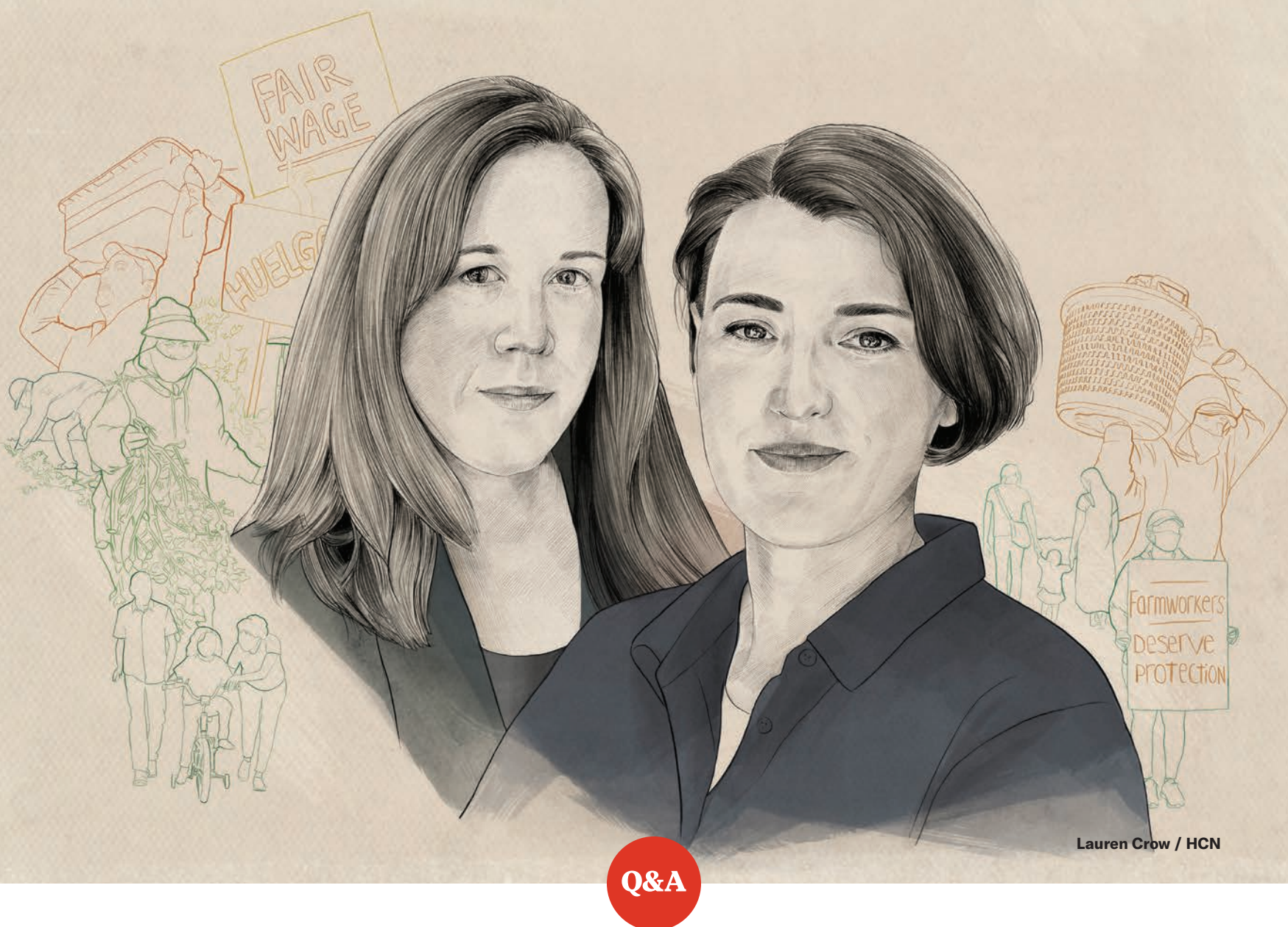
In the Sierra Nevada, Ron Goode, a North Fork Mono elder, gives Wells a tour of a hidden meadow he first sought to restore over 15 years ago. Walking with the assistance of a cane, he introduces Wells to the plants that he helped steward — black oaks and milkweed; yarrow and manzanita. Deer, bears, bobcats and birds have all become regular visitors to a patch of earth that was once choked with brush and illegally dumped garbage. Now it’s a biodiverse habitat for a growing number of species; Goode has found “his joy and his purpose,” his “ecological niche.” As Wells writes, “The span of a single human life is almost no time at all, and yet we can do so much to keep our world living.” ☀

Believers: Making a Life at the End of the World

Lisa Wells

353 pages, hardcover: \$28

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021.



Lauren Crow / HCN

Q&A

LAST YEAR, when the COVID-19 pandemic kept most people home and emptied supermarket shelves, U.S. farmworkers stayed on the job. Unable to work from home, they sustained their vital but dangerous industry. But they also organized for better working conditions and pay. In central Washington's fertile Yakima Valley, workers at apple-processing warehouses led wildcat strikes last May and June, ultimately winning the right to form workers' committees, obtain better personal protective equipment and earn higher wages.

In November, dairy workers won a Washington State Supreme Court case that forced their employers to pay them for overtime work. Federal and state laws exempt agricultural workers from certain labor protections, creating a vulnerable class of workers in an industry that depends on minority and migrant

Farmworker organizing in Washington is undoing discriminatory labor policies

A conversation with Victoria Ruddy and Elizabeth Strater of the United Farm Workers.

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

labor. The court ruled that the state law preventing overtime payments was unconstitutional.

On May 11, Gov. Jay Inslee, D, signed a bill codifying that decision. The law, which passed with an overwhelming bipartisan majority, will phase in overtime payments for farmworkers over the next three

years. By 2024, agricultural laborers, like most hourly workers, will receive time-and-a-half wages for hours worked beyond 40 per week. Today, Washington has the most comprehensive overtime protection for farmworkers of any state.

For farmworker advocates, securing overtime pay is part of

a rising wave of efforts aimed at undoing discriminatory labor and immigration policies. Similar legislation is under consideration in Oregon and Colorado as well as at the federal level. In a press release celebrating the Washington law, President Joe Biden urged Congress to pass legislation addressing farmworker protections. "For too long — and owing in large part to unconscionable race-based exclusions put in place generations ago — farmworkers have been denied some of the most fundamental rights that workers in almost every other sector have long enjoyed," Biden said. "It is long past time that we put all of America's farmworkers on an equal footing with the rest of our national workforce."

A week after the Washington law was signed, *High Country News* spoke with Victoria Ruddy, who lives in the Yakima Valley and

is the Pacific Northwest regional director for the United Farm Workers (UFW), a nationwide agricultural worker union, and Elizabeth Strater, the UFW's director of strategic campaigns, about organizing and what's next for the movement. This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

What was the driving force behind the overtime protections recently passed in Washington?

Victoria Ruddy: Farmworkers work in one of the most dangerous industries in the state. And I think that's kind of the background of this lawsuit, and how we got to winning overtime pay. Farmworkers are regularly exposed to the elements and face wage theft and sexual harassment. They're exposed to chemicals and toxins. They're disproportionately likely to be killed or injured, or even get sick, which we saw during the pandemic, as farmworkers were getting sick and literally dying at work.

That's really the foundation for farmworkers fighting to be treated as equals and to organize for justice. And that's what they did here in Washington state. ... It really is just about being treated as equals. It's about health and safety. It's about the fact that the human body isn't designed to work 16 hours a day, or 70-plus hours in a week.

How did the pandemic impact farmworker organizing?

Ruddy: I think the pandemic in general has empowered farmworkers. We did a lot of work with the H-2A (seasonal agricultural visa) workers, who were getting sick by the hundreds. A lot of those workers speaking up and elevating their voices is what was able to bring about a lot of the protections and emergency rules that came through last year. I think we do still have some of that momentum from the pandemic, and workers feeling empowered to talk about what was going on.

The pandemic elevated the fact that farmworkers are killing themselves to keep our food system

intact. The fact that farmworkers were getting sick and dying to produce food for Americans during the pandemic was something that pushed people to have to think about where food comes from, and why it's so important that we protect farmworkers.

How are Washington's new overtime laws affecting farmworkers and their communities?

Ruddy: A lot of the workers that we're hearing from, particularly workers with families, are talking more about the impact on their family life and their children versus an economic impact. This is more than just economics. This is really about farmworkers having time to see their kids, to spend time with them, to do homework with them, to be home to rest, things like that. That's what's really on a lot of people's minds.

There have been a handful of voting rights cases in Yakima and the Tri-Cities area recently that have sought to balance racial representation in city government and counter the impacts of gerrymandering, which has left the majority Latino population underrepresented in local politics.

How are these voting rights cases related to farmworker organizing?

Elizabeth Strater: The two issues are intermingled in a really deep way. The folks that are living in these rural communities that are Latino voters are far more likely to be folks that are working in jobs that are disproportionately vulnerable to labor abuses. It's not just one issue: It's not just overtime, it's

not just the representation of the city council; it's all part of the same big picture where these communities have just been systemically disenfranchised.

And it's by design — we don't need to be coy about it — it's by design. It's ultimately upholding a system of power that is based on exploitation and injustice. And you can trace it all the way back to slavery: Why do you think farmworkers are excluded from the Fair Labor Standards Act? Why don't they have NLRB (National Labor Relations Board) rights? Because that's work that's traditionally associated with slavery, and there's no way the Southern congressmen were going to pass it in the 1930s. (The federal Fair Labor Standards Act, which granted overtime pay to most workers but not farm laborers, was enacted in 1938.) And that's why we're still there.

How does Washington's passage of overtime protections fit into the larger national context of farm labor organizing, and what's next for this movement?

Strater: If you look at the bipartisan and overwhelming vote in Washington state, that's the writing on the wall. When you get those overwhelming bipartisan votes, (and) then that message of congratulations to Washington state from the president — President Biden reaching out saying this is a racist exclusion, it's archaic, it's time to right a historic wrong — these are all just showing that there's this wider awareness of the moral question: Do farmworkers deserve the same basic rights as other people? Does

any industry get to feel entitled to limitless labor from any one kind of body?

Two days after the bill signing in Washington, Rep. Raúl Grijalva, D-Ariz., reintroduced the Fairness for Farm Workers Act, which is the federal overtime bill. You look at different state laws that are moving and have some real momentum — like Oregon, like Colorado — (and) you also look at some of the federal signals that are coming, (and it's) like this tipping point is being reached.

Ruddy: We have a lot of support and organizing going on with our farmworker leaders here in the Yakima Valley, hundreds of leaders who are organizing folks around immigration reform. It really is so closely tied to labor rights, because when farmworkers feel like they're safe to express their concerns, when they have a legal status and don't feel like they're going to be threatened with deportation if they speak up about sexual harassment, or about not having clean bathrooms, or not having hand-washing stations, or whatever the issue might be — they need legal status to be able to do that.

I think farmers for too long have taken advantage of the fact that farmworkers are vulnerable because many of them don't have legal status in this country. So I think that's the next step. Farmworkers are essential, and they deserve to have legal status and to not feel scared to talk about all the labor abuses that they're experiencing at work every day. ✨

“The pandemic elevated the fact that farmworkers are killing themselves to keep our food system intact.”

The female inmates battling wildfires

In *Breathing Fire*, Jaime Lowe uncovers the benefits and drawbacks of California's inmate fire program.

BY JENNY SHANK

IN 2016, A BOULDER STRUCK and killed 22-year-old Shawna Jones while she battled the Mulholland Fire in Malibu, California. Jones was part of an inmate crew from Correctional Camp 13, making her the first incarcerated woman to die while fighting a fire since 1983, the year women first joined California's inmate firefighting program, which started in 1946.

After Jones' death, the *Los Angeles Times* published a bare-bones article about the incident. It revealed little about Jones, but it drew the attention of California-raised journalist Jaime Lowe, who was determined to discover more. Lowe's years-long investigation resulted in *Breathing Fire*, an immersive, comprehensive look at Jones' life and the lives of other incarcerated firefighters, as well as California's history of inmate firefighting and its growing reliance on it. Given the new reality of California's fire season, which "lasts 13 months," as environmental historian Stephen J. Pyne puts it, often all that stands between a family's home and a conflagration are the inmates that labor, sometimes for 24 hours straight, to restrain the flames.

Inmates comprise up to 30% of California's wildland fire crews. At the time Lowe reported this book, around 200 of these firefighters were female, making up three out of California's 35 inmate fire camps. Inmates do difficult work, establishing "a line, usually a few feet wide, by cutting through trees and shrubs and removing anything that could burn." For this grueling and risky labor, they earn \$2.56 per day while

in camp, and up to \$2 an hour while fighting fires. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation estimated that paying such minuscule wages for this vital work, rather than the standard hourly rate, "saved the state at least \$1.2 billion" over 13 years.

Lowe delves into California's history of compulsory labor, including a cruel law passed in 1850 that allowed white people to accuse Indigenous people of lacking employment, whereupon they could be arrested and sold into four months of slavery at a public auction. Lowe draws a direct line from this to the inmate labor that contributed to the construction of much of California's infrastructure, including building the Pacific Coast Highway and carving out the 22-mile stretch of land to create Sunset Boulevard. When World War II brought personnel shortages, corrections officers began forcing inmates to fight fires.

Lowe vividly paints the realities of present-day firefighting. Her precise descriptions of sensory details — the air is "congested with blackened particles" — and firefighting and inmate lingo make readers feel as if they're in camp with the women, jumping out of bunks at the 3 a.m. siren and piling into a buggy to race off toward a roaring wildfire. Lowe also weaves in accounts of the women's lives, including their stints in standard prison facilities before they joined the firefighting program. Most were sentenced for drug offenses, as only nonviolent offenders who complete an intense training regimen can join the program. But even though

her interviewees see the benefits of their work, Lowe notes that "most bristled at the idea that they volunteered." When an incarcerated woman wants to avoid the trauma of prison, from sexual assault to solitary confinement, "she might be looking for any alternative," Lowe writes. "She might even be willing to risk her life."

Breathing Fire doesn't shy away from complicated truths. For many women, the program offers relative dignity and purpose compared to the grim realities of incarceration. Besides receiving good food and exercise, they get to live in the forest of Malibu, where their families can visit them under pine trees rather than the fluorescent lights of a prison. Fire-threatened residents hold up signs to thank them for their work. Because the forestry programs are popular among inmates, talked up as "a prison Shangri-La — lobster, shrimp, ocean breezes," there is no sustained opposition to them, despite the low pay. But even these benefits are short-lived: Former inmates face many obstacles if they seek to build a career in firefighting, given laws that prevent the state from hiring ex-felons and parolees. As Lowe pieces together Shawna Jones' story through public records and interviews with her fellow inmate firefighters, family and friends, it becomes clear that Jones felt the firefighting program turned her life around. Had she lived, she would have tried to pursue it as a career.

In recent years, the firefighting program has dwindled. In 2016, 65% of California voters approved



Incarcerated firefighters working on the Detwiler Fire in Mariposa County, California, in 2017. **Peter Bohler**

Proposition 57, which allows nonviolent felons with convictions for multiple crimes to seek early parole after they complete the full sentence for their most significant crime. Its backers aimed to ease prison overcrowding, but it also depleted the pool of potential firefighters. The proposition highlighted a point that David Fathi, the director of the ACLU National Prison Project, expressed to Lowe: "If these people are safe to be out and about and carrying axes and chainsaws, maybe they didn't need to be in prison in the first place." In the meantime, as questions surrounding criminal justice loom, the megafires will continue to rage, keeping California in perpetual need of firefighters. ☀

Breathing Fire: Female Inmate Firefighters on the Front Lines of California's Wildfires

Jaime Lowe
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MCD Books, 2021.



REVIEW

How to live with fire

Wildfire needs new narratives.
The podcast *Fireline* is a start.

BY SURYA MILNER

FLAMES CASCADED DOWN hills, engulfing old oak trees as firefighter Lily Jane Clarke watched, transfixed. She was standing in the thick of the August Complex, a giant 2020 wildfire that burned over a million acres of Northern California forestland. “It’s beautiful,” she said, speaking into a recorder, her voice light and measured. It was also destructive: The blaze consumed nearly 1,000 structures and killed one firefighter. The August Complex was a stark reminder that wildfires are getting bigger, hotter and more devastating across the West. But even as she inhaled thick smoke beneath an

orange sky, Clarke was riveted by the fire’s brilliance, its beauty and might.

Clarke’s reverence and awe captivated Justin Angle, a marketing professor at the University of Montana and the host and creator of the podcast *Fireline*, released this spring. A six-part series from Montana Public Radio, *Fireline* attempts to reconcile two seemingly incompatible views of wildfire: a catastrophe that amplifies climate anxiety, and a “part of the natural world, like the view from a mountaintop,” as Angle describes Clarke’s outlook. Combining illuminating histories of wildfire in the

Western U.S. with details from the frontlines today, Angle finds room for both splendor and severity. At the same time, he explores how Westerners might live alongside fire in our inevitably entangled future.

For conveying a sense of what that future might feel like, Angle’s choice of medium is ideal: Sounds of fires crackling, boots crunching on gravel and wind rustling in trees punctuate the series, bringing the listener closer to its subject — the people and communities grappling with wildfire and climate change.

The first of Angle’s stories traces the Forest Service’s history of suppressing fires, beginning in 1910, when one of America’s largest-ever forest fires, the legendary Big Burn, scorched huge swaths of Montana, Idaho and Washington. Its destruction and death toll inspired a century-long effort to eliminate wildfire from the landscape. But many Western ecosystems require low-intensity burning to rejuvenate the soil. Without periodic fires, in fact, fuel accumulates and forests grow denser, leading to hotter and deadlier fires that sear the soil instead.

To understand the importance of controlled, low-intensity fire, Angle visits two members of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. The pair, a father and son, use prescribed burns to revive their ancestral lands and encourage the growth of camas, a culturally significant plant with star-shaped purple flowers, near the Flathead Reservation’s Mission Mountains. For millennia, the tribes have viewed fire as a gift, using it to maintain and shape the landscape before European settlers, with their Dante’s *Inferno*-esque fears, commenced a regime of fire suppression.

From there, Angle and his team traverse the West to unearth other narratives that see fire as more than just an enemy, invader or destructive force. They tell the story of the anthropologist who believes that food cooked over a fire is what set humans apart from apes, for example, and talk to a former firefighter who tracks declining mental health

among firefighters as “fire season” begins to encompass the entire year.

Fireline’s final two-part episode considers the wild-land-urban interface, or WUI, the neighborhoods on the outskirts of cities and towns that bleed into undeveloped land. The nation’s fastest-growing land-use type, it already includes one in three houses across the U.S. In conversations with forest rangers, volunteer firefighters, social scientists and homeowners across the West, Angle shows how practical actions aimed at fire resistance in the WUI, such as retrofitting homes and thinning nearby forests, are possible only through prolonged and intentional trust-building. Near Missoula, this happens through “listening sessions” between the Lolo National Forest and at-risk communities, and plans such as Wildfire Adapted Missoula that seek to help officials and residents create fire-resilient neighborhoods. Coordination is necessary to, as Angle puts it, “see a future that’s not just doom and ash and gloom.”

By early June of this year, the Intermountain West was experiencing historic drought. “It is possible that this may be the baseline for the future,” Elizabeth Klein, an Interior Department senior counselor, testified before Congress near the end of May. The situation is grim — nearly every state in the West has seen its biggest wildfire since the year 2000, Angle reminds us, and scientists say that fire season is 80 days longer now than it was in 1970.

Fireline acknowledges those realities but resists succumbing to fear, hopelessness or, worse, resignation. Instead, listeners receive new lenses through which to view fire: reverence, gratitude, wonder, curiosity, resolve. *Fireline*, then, comes as a sort of salve against the arresting panic that’s dominated mainstream fire narratives since the Big Burn. It’s not an antidote to fire itself, nor a robust game plan for moving forward. It’s an invitation to understand the West’s long and troubled relationship with fire, and to envision a new one. 🌸

Heard Around the West

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

BY BETSY MARSTON

THE WEST

We always enjoy the *Boatman's Quarterly Review*, a classy publication that celebrates the boat people who not only challenge tough rapids but also share their knowledge of the Colorado River's history, environment and geography. Tourists sometimes arrive with ideas that need more context, to put it mildly. One passenger asked river guide Shyanne Yazzie, 28, who was born and grew up on the Navajo Nation, this doozy: "How did John Wesley Powell get his boat over the Glen Canyon Dam?" Probably the same way dinosaurs crossed the Grand Canyon: They had the foresight to travel before it existed.

Every visitor to Colorado has heard some classic weather-related axioms: "You know it's windy when a chain blows out flat," or "If you don't like the weather, wait a minute and it'll change." According to the *Colorado Sun's* Jason Blevins, the state boasts 12 temperamental seasons: Winter, Fools Spring, 2nd Winter, Spring of Deception, 3rd Winter, Road Construction, Actual Spring, Summer, Fire, False Fall, 2nd Summer, Actual Fall. What he didn't mention is that residents experience three or more seasons on any given day.

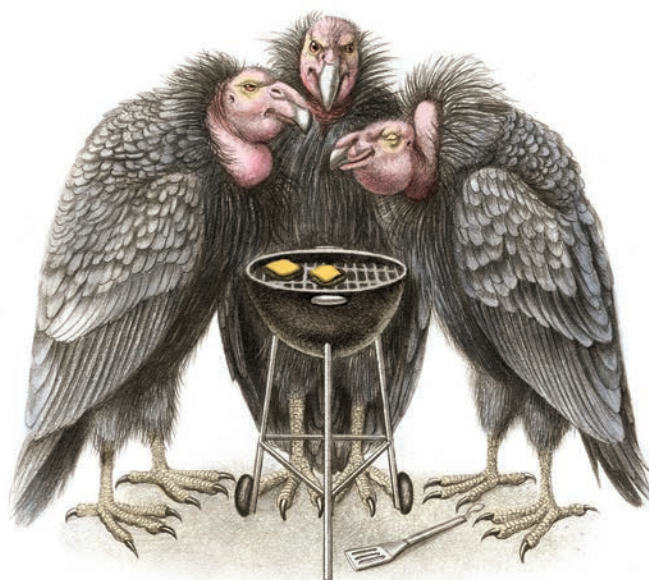
In Hailey, Idaho, the *Idaho Mountain Express* facilitates lively exchanges between anonymous locals through its "Miscellany" column. Hailey residents Irene and Mike Healy noticed one testy exchange, which began with a complaint: "Groups of women running in our neighborhoods at 5 a.m., chatting about Pilates and avocado toast: Stop scaring the wildlife!" Response: "Dear 5 a.m.

eavesdropper ... you are missing out on better conversation. Get your lazy butt out of bed and join us! The elk barely look up from their grazing. They aren't complaining. ..."

MONTANA

Last summer broke records as people sick of lockdown headed West in droves to national parks and rivers. This summer, even more of us are likely to hit the road, which likely means another bout of "Rivergeddon," as writer Todd Wilkinson dubbed it in *Mountain Journal*. Rivergeddon means traffic jams on rural roads as people in waders line up side-by-side in the Madison and other iconic Montana rivers, all of them casting for fish in willy-nilly fashion. You've got to feel for fish that get caught and released over and over again. Meanwhile, float trips can so clog the river that passengers

might as well be crammed onto the same boat. Hilary Hutcheson, a longtime fly-fishing guide, told the Associated Press that last summer brought a lot of first-time anglers as well as first-time campers: "Montana was their third choice after going to Disneyland or going to Europe." That required her to employ some diplomacy, "telling people that bear spray isn't a repellent you spray on your kids like insect repellent." Often, visitors wanted to replicate what they'd seen in movies like *A River Runs Through It*, i.e., the "full wader set-up," as opposed to fly-fishing from rafts. As Jim Robbins reported in *The New York Times*, "gridlock in a natural paradise" may not be new to the West, but it has definitely accelerated, leading some residents to question whether tourism's benefits outweigh the impacts of too many people.



Armando Veve / HCN

ALASKA

Betsy, the elusive 600-pound cow that escaped a Father's Day rodeo three years ago, used to be glimpsed wandering the countryside around Anchorage, reports the *Anchorage Daily News*. But her owner, rodeo promoter Frank Koloski, believes those days are over: "I think she's moved on to greener pastures, if you know what I mean." It wasn't for lack of pursuers that the legendary bovine remained at large: Anchorage police flew a drone over Far North Bicentennial Park, state troopers, police and fire departments conducted searches, and even the FBI became involved — sort of. "She walked right up to the front doors of the FBI building," Koloski said. But when he got there "to lasso the errant cow, all he found was marks on the glass left by Betsy's breath." Way to go, Betsy. Live free or die.

CALIFORNIA

Admittedly, having 10 or 15 enormous carrion-eating California condors camping out on your roof and loitering on the railings has its drawbacks, what with their primitive table manners. As Seana Quintero, daughter of homeowner Cinda Mickols, put it, "My tiny little mom was staring down a bunch of birds half her size ...(and) they kept messing stuff and pooping everywhere." Still, Quintero told AP that her mom remains in "awe" of her uninvited guests, knowing their extraordinary comeback from near-extinction. She understands why they'd want to visit their historic hunting grounds, but wishes they would find another restroom: "Trees are fine but not the house, please." ☀

Native Women in Science

Making a difference in Indigenous communities and beyond

Dr. Naomi Lee Leads Vaccine Development

At Northern Arizona University, research leaders like Assistant Professor and chemical biologist Naomi Lee, PhD, explore, discover, and find solutions to the most critical health challenges facing Arizona and the world today.

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#IAM THE WEST

ALEX KIM

**Racial Justice Engagement Specialist
Missoula, Montana**

As a kid, I always played around outside, but my introduction to outdoor recreation wasn't until I moved to Montana. I was intimidated because I grew up around a very diverse community, a very Korean American community; I always felt welcomed, because I saw people like me. When I moved out here, it was a lot harder. Outdoor opportunities are not always announced to people of color, and there are cost barriers to get started. The BIPOC outdoor program I piloted is really for anybody that wants to get outside and do things for free. Creating that community opens the door for people to have the confidence to be outside. Especially in Montana, where there's so much outdoor recreation, it should be easy for anybody to have access.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
Let us know on social.

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