

High Country News

A man with dark hair, wearing a black baseball cap with an orange bison logo and a grey t-shirt, is looking down at a plant in a field. The background is a soft-focus green field with tall grass and yellow wildflowers.

IN THE
GRACES OF
GRASSES

Public health
officers under fire

Making a home
on public land

Defunding detention
in rural Arizona

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Cleanup begins at a trailer park in Talent, Oregon, in March 2021, six months after the Almeda Fire destroyed close to 2,500 homes there and in the nearby towns of Phoenix and Ashland. **Alisha Jucevic**

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. For correspondence addressed to High Country News, HCN or to the editors, permission to publish will be considered implicit unless specifically stated otherwise.





Eyes on the future

THE MOON HAS CIRCLED THE EARTH six times since I arrived at *High Country News*. This is the sixth issue that I've helped to produce. But the days, months, hours have all been tainted with COVID-19, having the quality of seeming longer than usual, somewhat dreamlike, and suffused by an almost atmospheric presence of both fear and hope, as we persist with our mask wearing and hand sanitizing, nervously holding our breath in elevators, hoping someone won't unwittingly give us COVID or vice-versa. When I'm out in my community, life unfolds like a mirage, a drive-in movie playing on a giant screen — and there's one of the fun upsides to all of this: Defunct and nearly defunct drive-in theaters have reclaimed their utility.

There have been other benefits. In the early days of the pandemic, a lot of us drove less, avoided air travel, and explored places closer to home. We gathered outdoors with friends and family, in backyards and driveways, on trails and in campgrounds, to which we flocked in droves. All in all, we saw more sunsets, starry skies and moonrises. Back then, as our orbits shrank and we reconsidered what we thought we needed to live well, at least some of us said: Let's remember, when all this is over, that it's possible to live more lightly on the Earth.

We discovered that there were positive aspects to slowing down and staying put. More of us switched to outdoor forms of exercise. More of us started growing food and baking bread — skills that may become more essential in the rugged world to come. Will these habits endure? What will we carry forward from the days when we traveled less and baked more? Will it be enough?

While COVID-19 continues to thwart our best-laid plans, climate change is drying up glaciers, rivers, wetlands and streams. It is fueling more destructive fires, hurricanes, heat waves and floods. It is disrupting agricultural and hydrological systems, settlement and migration patterns. It's happening quickly — and yet the warning signs have been here for decades. Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* was published in 1989. Our failure to act in a way that is meaningful is a long-standing one.

There is little doubt that humanity — especially our youth — will emerge from this pandemic changed. But in what ways? And what will it mean for the West? Will housing in places that have moderate climates and enough water become inaccessible to all but the highest earners? Where will the rest of us live, and what kinds of hardships will we face? In the West, we are experiencing a public health crisis and a climate crisis and a housing crisis and a water crisis all at once. There's no easy fix for what we are living through. The West of the future has yet to be imagined, and that is part of what we aim to do in this magazine. Thank you for imagining with us.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief

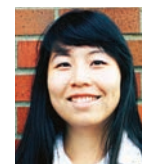
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As the housing crisis in the West deepens,
more people are choosing to dwell on public lands.

BY SARAH TORY | PHOTOS BY BLAKE GORDON AND MAX WHITTAKER

ON THE COVER Tyrus Brockie, a member of the Aaniiih Tribe, collects seeds on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana as part of a grasslands restoration partnership between the Fort Belknap Indian Community and the Bureau of Land Management. **Tailor Irvine / HCN**

Steven Fitch, right, stokes a campfire in the fire pit while members of his family look on, including his wife, Kunisha, standing, and 5-year-old Prince'Elijah. A substantial rainstorm moved through the camp that night (*above*). **Blake Gordon / HCN**

Animal hair caught in the barbs of a traditional barbed wire fence in Clark, Wyoming (*opposite*).
Kathy Lichtendahl / HCN



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LETTERS

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

A HOSTILE COUNTRY

Very well done! Many thanks ("A Hostile Country," September 2021).

Before your description, I was not fully aware of the obstacles wolves encounter heading south from Wyoming. It explains why there have been so few in Colorado. In contrast, they have done well west of the Yellowstone/Wyoming/Idaho area where they were reintroduced back in the mid-'90s. I was not aware that three of the pups from the Moffat County wolves had been shot.

I will continue to wonder why Durango and Telluride voted for the wolf measure. Maybe most of the population are California and Texas urban-area expats who believed the rather romantic wolf image fantasy? Neither community has an ag-based economy.

David McCord
Denver, Colorado

OUR GREATER SELVES

Before reading Maggie Doherty's review ("The making of our greater selves," September 2021), I had just been listening to a podcast called *Telling Our Twisted Histories*. The show, hosted by Kaniehtiio Horn (Mohawk), seeks to "decolonize

our minds" by setting the record straight about Indigenous history, culture and thought.

I haven't read Douglas Chadwick's *Four Fifths a Grizzly*, and I suspect it's a good book. But the idea of interconnectedness has been around for millennia, part of the Indigenous worldview. People of European descent have dismissed this attitude as primitive as we pursue accumulation, extraction and overconsumption. When writers blame all humans for our present condition, they exclude the voices that have long resisted the resource-focused capitalist/Christian view of the earth and creation. If genetics and other cutting-edge science helps more of us to see ourselves as part of a holistic living system, I'm all for it. But let's acknowledge that this is not a new idea, and start listening more carefully to people who have been teaching these principles all along.

Zoé Edgecomb
Charlottesville, Virginia

CASITAS AGAINST DISPLACEMENT

Great story on accessory dwelling units, or ADUs ("Casitas against displacement," August 2021). You

covered different approaches and dug into the up- and downsides. Not saying that's unusual for *HCN*, but just wanted to pass on my compliments.

Jim Hight
Buena Vista, Colorado

SUCKED DRY

Killing the land, pumping the aquifers dry, disturbing the entire ecosystem ... for what? Maybe 25 years before it is abandoned because there is nothing left!? This was the most depressing and disturbing article ("Sucked Dry," August 2021); it was all I could do to finish it. We will end up destroying ourselves, guaranteeing we will be ancestors to no one.

Donna Buessing
Brentwood, California

REWILDING IS A TWO-WAY STREET

Thank you for vindicating my suspicions that deer read the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* ("Rewilding is a two-way street," July 29, 2021). Will re-up my subscription.

Wendy Wolfson
Irvine, Colorado

DERAILED

I was pleased to see "Derailed," the piece on the Yamhelas Trail project (July 2021). Leah Sottile did a very nice job on the whole sad, sordid mess. It is mind-boggling how such a positive project, popular (except for a select few), could get derailed (pun intended) by said select few.

What is all the more exasperating is that there is such a need for off-street options for walking, bicycling and horseback riding. Bicycle trails are rare here, and the few that exist are not connected, forcing one to take the streets. Road cyclists use the wonderful, curvy, narrow but very busy roads around here, and it is dangerous.

Another sad aspect is that the valid concerns of the adjacent landowners can be — and from all appearances — were going to be dealt with. This right-of-way is no different than all the roads around

here, similarly adjacent to private property. There are no restrictions on any for agricultural or horticultural practices. I've been sprayed and dusted on several occasions, including while riding a road motorcycle. Just part of the deal.

As Sottile pointed out, it has become far more than just a rails-to-trail project through some beautiful countryside. As with seemingly every possible issue in this country of late, it has turned into a political flashpoint. Sad.

Craig R. Busskohl
McMinnville, Oregon

FISH KILL ON THE KLAMATH

Anna V. Smith's report on the Klamath River fish kill in the July edition ("Ongoing fish kill on the Klamath River is an 'absolute worst-case scenario,'" July 2021) mentions the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement, which failed to pass Congress. The report failed to note that, if it had become law, it would have locked in Klamath River flows.

Since the 1980s, both Republican and Democratic administrations have orchestrated and Congress has approved over 30 tribal water settlements. While each is unique, tribal governments have generally given up or agreed not to exercise senior water rights. In exchange, tribes receive funding for water infrastructure, sewage systems and tribal government operations.

But who in their right mind would sell or compromise a senior water right in the West?

I believe historians will look back at the current settlement period as the second big rip-off of the Indigenous peoples of North America: First, they took the land and tried to exterminate the people; now they are taking the water, with the acquiescence of tribal governments that are themselves colonial creations.

Felice Pace
Klamath Glen, California

CORRECTION

We jumped the gun, or preheated the oven, in our September Heard column about Wyoming allowing roadkill to be turned into dinner. Sara DiRenzo of the state's Game and Fish Commission tells us draft regulations are still being written. See <https://wgfd.wyo.gov/News/Draft-road-kill-collect-regulation-open-for-public>



A herd of elk heads west toward the mountains after crossing busy Highway 120 just north of Cody, Wyoming, in the spring of 2021.

REPORTAGE

Behind the wire with a fence ecologist

How researchers are using science and data to help wildlife.

BY MICHAEL PARKS
PHOTOS BY KATHY LICHTENDAHL

ONE SMOKE-TINGED JULY morning on Horse Prairie — a plateau of big sagebrush and dusty washes overlooking Horse Prairie Creek in southwestern Montana — a man sat at the helm of a skid-steer loader. Attached to its front was a spool-like contraption called a Dakota wire winder and post puller. Four volunteers threw up their thumbs — *Ready!* — and the man flung a switch. The winder spun up, and a stretch of woven wire fence lying on the ground jerked into motion.

Soon, a hundred-plus years of tangled Western history had become a tidy bale.

Andrew Jakes joined the volunteers in a cheer. The group was the last in a two-week parade

of helpers who had come out to Horse Prairie, and Jakes believed their hard work wrestling fences would be worth it.

Jakes is a biologist with the National Wildlife Federation and an expert on pronghorn antelope. In 2018, he and four colleagues published a paper calling for more research on how fences affect ecosystems. They also coined a term: “fence ecology.” Today, the growing subdiscipline is not just revealing how fences can harm Western wildlife; it’s also informing solutions.

Fence ecology research shows that the West is a wiry place, containing enough fencing to circle the equator 25 times. Sage grouse, peregrine falcons and



Two pronghorn contemplate crossing a barbed wire fence blocking access to the rest of the herd near Clark, Wyoming (top).

Volunteer Jimmy Owens removes a strand of barbed wire from a fence during an event called the Four Bear Fence Tear near Wapiti, Wyoming, in May (bottom).



for roads; fences are hard to see on satellite imagery. And even as satellite-based mapping improves, researchers say it's difficult to distinguish between an impassable woven-wire fence and, for example, a dilapidated or smooth-wire fence that's more permeable to wildlife.

Recently, though, fence ecologists have begun to unravel some mysteries. Using models, they've estimated the locations of fences over large areas and painstakingly mapped them in a number of important habitats. And they're studying the paths of GPS-collared animals: If a mule deer makes a 90-degree turn in a section of roadless rangeland, for example, it could be because of a problem fence.

On Horse Prairie, one of Jakes' colleagues, Simon Buzzard, combined all three tools — modeling, mapping and GPS-collar data from a Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks pronghorn study — to identify stretches of fencing that appeared to impede ungulate movement. "We had collars from 40 animals," Buzzard said. "Many of them stopped right here," at the 2.1-mile stretch that the volunteers took down in July.

other birds collide with fences, and ungulates must navigate an endless obstacle course. A 2021 paper found that pronghorn in Wyoming encountered fences an average of 249 times in a single year and changed their behavior around the barriers nearly 40% of the time. Fences often ensnare and kill large animals; woven wire with barbed wire on the top, like that on Horse Prairie, is particularly lethal. Fences also separate mothers from calves, exclude herds from prime

habitat and exhaust and injure animals. "Probably a quarter to half of (pronghorn I've seen) have scarring at this point, from trying to get under," Jakes said.

A number of nonprofits, land trusts, ranchers, tribal nations and government agencies have already removed or modified thousands of miles of harmful fences. But because fences are difficult to study, these projects haven't had much science to guide them. There is no global fence map, as there is

The removal effort was the result of a cost-sharing agreement among the National Wildlife Federation and the landowners on either side of the fence: the Bureau of Land Management and two ranchers. The section that came out is the first of 10 miles of fence that Buzzard and Jakes hope to fix through a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant this year.

Still, the sheer scale of fencing in the West presents a daunting challenge, and many questions remain unanswered. For example, how do fences affect the long-term health of wildlife populations? And how do different species learn about and use wildlife-friendly fences? "Until we have a large amount modified and recorded," said Wenjing Xu, a Ph.D. candidate at UC Berkeley who has led or co-authored several recent fence ecology papers, "we don't know how well or fast (animals) will respond."

Back on Horse Prairie, piles of fencing were stacked on a flatbed trailer by noon. The following week, a contractor would put up a four-strand barrier with a smooth top wire 40 inches off the ground — low enough for "jumpers" like elk, deer and moose to go over — and a smooth bottom wire 16 inches above the earth, high enough for pronghorn, as well as calves of other ungulates, to slide under. (Jakes' research shows an 18-inch bottom wire is even better, but for now, he said, 16 inches is a major step forward.)

"Yesterday, we saw nine elk with one little calf," Buzzard said to Jakes as they drove across the newly reopened range. "If that old fence had been up, would that calf have been able to cross under?" ☀

WHAT WORKS

Defunding detention

In St. Johns, Arizona, a judge saw a need for a youth center instead of a detention facility.

BY RUXANDRA GUIDI

ST. JOHNS, ARIZONA, calls itself “the town of friendly neighbors.” With a population of around 3,500 people and a surrounding landscape of ponderosa pine forests and rolling hills peppered with cattle, the quaint town is as bucolic and all-American as it gets. It’s why Michael Latham moved here with his wife and kids back in 2009.

“My wife’s mom is from St. Johns, and we would come here for family things,” says Latham, who was raised in the Mormon Church and studied law at Brigham Young University in Utah. He had been working at a law firm in Phoenix but wanted to spend more time in the courtroom. So after they moved to St. Johns, he ran for office and told his wife, “We’ll either win, or we’ll move again.”

They won, and, in 2014 he became Apache County’s Superior Court judge. Latham had no specific vision for his new role, aside from wanting to try new approaches to old problems. “In small counties and towns, a lot of times things are being done the way they’re being done, because that’s how they’ve always been done,” he told me.

At the top of his list was reforming the town’s underutilized juvenile detention facility. Latham knew that the facility, which was built to hold up to 11 kids, cost the county over \$1.2 million a year even though it sat empty for six to eight weeks at a time. “When you average 1.7 kids a day, those costs just stop making sense,” he said. “In a small county like this, you just don’t have the numbers and you don’t ever want to make the numbers.”

Apache County wasn’t the only place with empty juvenile halls. Nearby rural counties like Navajo and Gila saw only one or two kids a day held in detention. It was unclear to Latham whether police were doing fewer referrals or whether kids simply weren’t getting into trouble as much.

The more he looked into it, the more he

thought St. Johns resembled the many communities, both rural and urban, across Arizona and the West, where juvenile crime was decreasing even as public opinion about harsh punishment had started to shift.

IN THE 1980s, America faced growing rates of both adult and juvenile violence. In the decade between 1980 and 1990, arrests for offenses like murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault rose by 64%, according to the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Institute. The nationwide juvenile arrest rate for murder almost tripled during that time, from five to 14 young people out of every 100,000.

There were several reasons, sociologists thought, for the spike in violence, including an increase in the use of handguns as well as the growth of illegal drug markets, especially for crack cocaine. And the future was expected to be even worse: The ’90s had already been dubbed the “Superpredator Era.”

Coined by Princeton University sociology professor John Dilulio, the term superpredator referred to “a young juvenile criminal who is so impulsive, so remorseless, that he can kill, rape, maim, without giving it a second thought.” Speaking to the press in 1995, Dilulio predicted that the number of juveniles in U.S. custody would rise exponentially over the next few decades; these young cold-blooded criminals, he claimed, “fear neither the stigma of arrest nor the pain of imprisonment.”



When Michael Latham became judge of Apache County, Arizona, in 2014, one of his priorities was to reinvent the county’s underutilized youth detention facility (left).

In August 2017, The Loft celebrated its opening as a youth community center (above).

Amy S. Martin for 70 Million



The former youth detention center now features pool tables and plenty of areas for young people to hang out in a safe space (top).

Paul Hancock, Hannah Wilkinson and Victor Chávez are mentors at The Loft (bottom).
Amy S. Martin for 70 Million



Dilulio's critics slammed his warnings as racist and partisan. And Dilulio turned out to be wrong: Even though the population of 10- to-17-year-olds continued to grow, violent crime in America began to drop starting in 1994, falling to its lowest point in two decades. Dilulio later publicly apologized for his grim predictions, saying his approach was misdirected.

But the damage had been done. Sensationalist media coverage of children committing gruesome crimes frightened Americans, and by the late '90s, nearly every state in the country had

begun treating minors like adults, even sentencing them to life without parole. By the year 2000, more than 100,000 young people — mainly Black and brown teenagers — were in custody in the U.S., and larger detention facilities were being built to accommodate them, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

That was around the time Victor Chávez began work as a corrections officer for the Navajo County adult corrections system in Arizona. Chávez defies the corrections officer stereotype: He has a mellow, friendly demeanor and

was a mentor for the local Boys & Girls Club. He sought to reduce the incarcerated population through a program called Intensive Supervised Probation, which allows convicted offenders to rejoin their communities while they are monitored by someone like Chávez. Some people, he explained, do well on probation and go on to have successful lives. "But when you have to revoke them, then they end up having to go (back) to prison," he said, his voice cracking a bit. "Sometimes that gets to you. And it does to me. As I get older, I have more empathy for people and their families."

By 2015, Chávez had a family of his own. And he was ready for something different; he wanted to provide more hands-on mentorship. One day, he got a call from Paul Hancock, a former fellow corrections officer who was now director of Juvenile Court Services for Apache County.

"He was like, 'Victor, we're going to do something,'" he said. "'Hopefully, it's going to be really awesome. And I'd like you to come be a part of it.'"

Hancock told Chávez that the Apache County juvenile detention facility, located about an hour and a half from where he worked in Navajo County, was closing. The new judge, Michael Latham, had some ideas for how to use the space, and he wanted forward-looking people like Chávez to be part of a social experiment.

TWO YEARS AFTER Chávez spoke to Hancock, the Loft Legacy Teen Center in St. Johns celebrated its grand opening in August 2017. A YouTube video of that day shows Judge Latham talking to a group of about 30 excited teenagers. "Hopefully, this is something that will be here for decades," he said to loud cheers from the kids. Standing over to one side, Chávez and Hancock, the two former corrections officers-turned-mentors, smiled. They were dressed in casual clothing — T-shirts, jeans, baseball caps — just like the teens in the audience.

The Loft occupies the old juvenile facility building on Cleveland Street, but it looks very different now. Repurposed and cleaned up, it resembles an industrial loft space: The white walls are finished with wood and aluminum, and there are couches and beanbag chairs in every room.

In one area, teenagers can study and use

free internet from 2:30 to 5 p.m. during the week. There's even a fully equipped recording studio, and a music space with a keyboard and electric guitars. The setup was inspired by The Rock, a teen center started in Phoenix by the legendary rocker Alice Cooper.

"We started off with one pool table, but it was wildly popular," Hancock said as we watched the kids trickle in after their high school let out. "And the great thing about pool is that it's like a social game. You can't play pool and not talk to somebody. So we have kids that don't know each other at the high school, but they know each other really well here."

For Hannah Wilkinson, The Loft, which opened in her freshman year, became a refuge. Her parents were strict, so she spent most afternoons during high school here. It made such a difference that, after graduating from high school, she became a mentor.

The job basically requires her to hang out with younger kids and model good behavior. Sometimes, she has to act as the disciplinarian, even though, at 19, she looks as young as the teens she supervises. "Some kids will just come up and start talking," Wilkinson told me. "If there's a life in danger or something illegal going on, I have to report it. I've only had to do that once, thankfully."

One of The Loft's regulars is a 17-year-old I'll call William. (I've agreed to not use his real name because St. Johns is a small town and what he tells me could impact his life.) "I'm one of the biggest nerds you'll ever find in this town," he joked when we met, without turning away from the X-Box. William, who dropped out of school after eighth grade, comes to The Loft religiously to play video games. Like Wilkinson, he lacks an ideal relationship with his parents, and sometimes he comes in just to talk with her.

As a socially alienated teenager who's not

into sports, William has often felt like he doesn't belong. "Most of the time, if you talk to certain people, you feel like you're getting judged or something. But when you talk to them here, they don't immediately jump to one conclusion," he said. William's mentors are working with the high school counselor, trying to help him return to school.

While he chatted with Wilkinson in the main room, I talked to Richard Gwinn at the reception desk. "I'd like to think we are part of a bigger shift," Gwinn, a former sheriff's deputy, told me, explaining how The Loft works to keep young people out of the criminal justice system through truancy prevention and mentorship programs. "And I think it has worked, because we've had a tremendous reduction in the number of referrals." The year The Loft opened, juvenile arrests in Apache County dropped by 55%. And the center operates at roughly a quarter of the amount it cost the county to run the juvenile facility.

Still, the drop in juvenile arrests is due to more than a local shift in resources. In 2011, the state established a detention-screening tool that determines whether a juvenile should be put in detention in the first place. "If a judge or a probation officer gets upset with a kid and the response is detention, the tool kind of re-guided them and said, 'No, this kid really isn't a public risk,'" said Joseph Kelroy, the director of the Juvenile Justice Services Division at the Arizona Supreme Court.

Other states are attempting more ambitious reforms. California is shutting down its Division of Juvenile Justice altogether; by July 2023, its three remaining facilities will close and California will replace it with a new Department of Youth and Community Restoration, which promises rehabilitation along with educational and job training.

California's shift amounts to a massive undertaking. But The Loft has shown that it's

possible to move to a care-first model even in a rural county in a politically conservative state. If the teen center continues to partner with local organizations to address illegal activity and minimize arrests, the mentors say, youth detention facilities will eventually become obsolete.

DURING MY VISIT this spring, I was invited to attend graduation and watch as 66 local teens received their diplomas. About half of the kids came through The Loft, part of the first high school class that has had the youth center as a resource since freshman year.

Backstage, Hancock and Chávez chat with William, who is there to film the ceremony and stream it online for everyone who couldn't attend due to the pandemic.

While they wait for the ceremony to start, Hancock and Chávez urge William to go back to school, as they often do. "Just get your high school diploma," Hancock says. "Then you could study video or animation. Wouldn't you like to graduate like the kids here today?"

William looks shyly at the ground. He seems unaffected by their words, perhaps a little confused. But as long as he spends time at The Loft, Hancock and Chávez will keep encouraging him. Try sports, they'll say, or video or music — whatever.

The graduates' names are called and they throw their caps in the air as Kool & the Gang's "Celebration" plays over the loudspeakers. William checks in with Chávez, who says he's good to go home. "See you on Monday!" Chávez shouts, as William makes his way out of the auditorium. ☀

This story was created in collaboration with the 70 Million podcast. You can hear an audio version at 70millionpod.com

THE LATEST

Land swap denied

Backstory

The growing central Idaho resort town of McCall sits on the southern edge of Payette Lake, which is largely surrounded by endowment land: state-owned, publicly accessible land that generates funds for public schools, often through timber sales. In February, Trident Holdings LLC, a private investment company, proposed swapping what it claimed were equally valuable timber lands in North Idaho for about 20,000 acres of endowment land around the lake. The company said it intended to build houses and expand a park there, despite community opposition ("Growing pains," April 2021).

Followup

In August, the state denied the proposed exchange. Endowment land must be managed to maximize long-term financial returns, and an Idaho Department of Lands estimate found that the North Idaho tracts were not worth as much as the area around Payette Lake: less than \$75 million compared to more than \$365 million, reports *BoiseDev*. "In my opinion," wrote a state advisor, "there are better strategies ... that would provide significantly more net benefit to the endowment than the proposed exchange." —Emily Benson

REPORTAGE

Collecting seeds and connecting with grasses

Aaniiih and Nakoda young adults are restoring prairie ecosystems — and their own relationship to the landscape.

BY KYLIE MOHR | PHOTOS BY TAILYR IRVINE



Grassland restoration project participants retrieve game cameras on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation at the end of their field season in early August (*above*).

Field technician Haile Chase-The Boy collects sweetgrass to later braid (*opposite*).

LAUGHTER AND the chirping of grasshoppers mingled on a mild August morning as several young women, members of the Aaniiih and Nakoda tribes, searched for sweetgrass, running vegetation through their fingers as they tried to determine whether they held satiny sweetgrass or rough sedges. One held strands of sweetgrass in her mouth as the plant's scent, reminiscent of vanilla and oak, drifted through the air. Sweetgrass is braided, used in smudging

ceremonies and presented as a gift by many Indigenous people, both here on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation as well as across the United States and Canada. "Can I come back next summer?" Savannah Spottedbird, a 17-year-old member of the Nakoda Tribe, shouted across the meadow, waving long blades of grass. "I want to do more of this!"

The moist meadow was surrounded by stands of aspen; sweetgrass is often found in

wetlands and along riverbanks, where it stabilizes the soil against erosion. Fort Belknap encompasses 623,000 acres of mostly prairie grassland in north-central Montana. The reservation is home to both the Aaniiih (Gros Ventre) and Nakoda (Assiniboine) tribes, which share a single government as the Fort Belknap Indian Community. Tyrus Brockie, a 22-year-old member of the Aaniiih Tribe, stood near Spottedbird, busily snipping off seed tops and



tribal lands and tried to force assimilation into U.S. society.

The grassland restoration project was created to revitalize the land, but it also helps the young adults who do the work. “They may not know it yet, but it’s empowering for them,” said project coordinator Dan Werk (Aaniiih), the Tribal Historic Preservation Office’s cultural liaison. “These youth are going to be able to take ownership of healing the land at Fort Belknap.”

THE IDEA FOR the project began in Alberta, Canada, where program director Cristina Eisenberg, who is of Raramuri and Western Apache heritage, has led similar fieldwork with the Kainai First Nation since 2013. “To me, what matters most is empowering young people,” said Eisenberg, an ecologist at Oregon State University. In 2018, the BLM’s plant conservation and restoration leader introduced Eisenberg to Wendy Velman, the head of the BLM’s botany program for Montana and the Dakotas who was working separately to partner with tribes on seed collection. The two women were invited to meet with the Fort

Belknap Tribal Council in 2019, and they began the grassland restoration project last year.

The council wants the project to assess and collect seeds from the reservation’s most sensitive plant populations. The plants are mostly used for medicinal purposes, and, except for sweetgrass, their names are kept private. Seeds from five other species were also collected: western wheatgrass, bluebunch wheatgrass, junegrass, Sandberg bluegrass and green needlegrass.

The BLM funds the partnership along with the Society for Ecological Restoration, a conservation organization. The agency prioritizes native plants in restoration projects through its national native seed collection program; seeds from the region in question typically germinate better than seeds brought from afar. But the seed supply is limited. “With the federal government wanting to put more native plants out there,” Velman said, “who better to tell us what’s supposed to be on the land than those that have been here forever?”

Last year, the grassland restoration project collected seeds only

from federal lands, but this year, the council invited the program to use tribal lands, too. There were clear differences in the seeds collected from the two areas, possibly owing to past grazing or fire. The BLM plots next to the reservation were struggling in what turned out to be the worst drought in at least 30 years. “Everything was pretty much dead by the second week of July,” Eisenberg said. But many of the tribal plots flourished into the summer, ultimately accounting for the majority of seeds collected.

Twenty-three pounds of seeds were collected this year, stored in neatly labeled paper bags, and shipped to a U.S. Forest Service cleaning facility in Oregon. The BLM owns seeds collected on public lands, while seeds collected on tribal lands belong mostly to the tribe, which has agreed to keep the first 10,000 seeds of each species at federal facilities in Washington and Colorado as part of a national native seed collection.

Still, the vast majority of the seeds — there are 181,000 in just one pound of green needlegrass — will go back to Fort Belknap. The tribal council can sell the seeds

dropping them into a paper bag.

The young adults were part of the Fort Belknap Indian Community Grassland Restoration Project, a partnership between the reservation and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Gathering seeds from healthy plots is the first step in restoring dry, dusty degraded land in the area, a visible mark of colonization. Changes in land use here can be traced back to the Dawes Act of 1887, when the federal government subdivided





Dan Werk, cultural liaison for the Tribal Historic Preservation Office, is the grassland restoration project coordinator and a mentor for the young adults (top).

Sweetgrass picked by a young woman learning about botany and important tribal plants this summer (bottom).



to the BLM, use them to restore degraded land or perhaps start its own native seed-growing business. Project leaders hope to plant some of the seeds on tribal lands in a few years, once the tribal council approves a restoration plan and the plots are ready for planting. The BLM eventually plans to sow seeds in the region as well.

PRONGHORN DARTED away from a dirt road, white hindquarters flashing, as a gaggle of field technicians drove to their first site of the day, a prairie field in the reservation's southeast corner. It was August, the end of the season, and they needed to collect the

game cameras they had set up there to study the impact wildlife have on the site's plants.

The air was humid and smoky, redolent of bug spray and sage, primed by an early morning rain. Tyrus Brockie, the senior field technician, wore gaiters over his boots to protect against rattlesnake bites. He pointed toward his uncle's ranch, where he helps run cattle. Brockie had become newly fascinated by the landscape: "Now, I've got my head down all morning," looking at the grasses, he said. He's considering studying natural resources at the Aaniiih Nakoda College: "This job makes me want to go and learn."

Young participants in the restoration program, who are paid, can progress from community fellows to entry-level, then senior, field technicians. Community fellows like 22-year-old Sakura Main spent a week with the team this summer, alongside her little sister and cousin, while senior technicians like Brockie work the full eight-week field season. "I didn't know restoring grasslands was so important," said Main, an enrolled Aaniiih member. "When it's in your backyard, you don't always notice it."

Their next big project was creating a restoration plan for a desolate 1,000-acre plot of tribal land choked with invasive noxious weeds near Snake Butte, a prominent landmark. The land's natural vegetation was destroyed when the plot was plowed and planted with a wheat crop that recently failed. Now, tribal leaders hope to annex the Kirkaldie Tract, as it's called, to a nearby bison pasture, but it needs to be revegetated before it can support the animals. The tribes have begun reintroducing bison to their traditional grazing lands for ecological and cultural revitalization.

The program also promotes cultural connection with the help of speakers like Dan Werk, the cultural liaison. The speakers share

tribal stories, traditions and history along with the seed collection. Werk enjoys seeing the participants work together, giggling as they learn how to create botany plots on top of Snake Butte and search for fossilized seashells in prairie coulees. The teens and young adults are referred for field work by Fort Belknap Social Services and the 477 Employment and Training Program, a Bureau of Indian Affairs initiative created to reduce tribal unemployment. Many of them face challenges ranging from falling behind in school to battling addiction. "This program is just one piece of the puzzle to help our kids, help build their self-worth and self-pride," Werk said.

Werk often speaks of his grandparents, who guide his vision for the program. He recalls them talking about riding their horses from one end of the reservation to another back in the 1940s and '50s, when no fences impeded the journey. As they aged, he said, they were comforted by memories of the freedom that came from moving through a landscape unmarred by barriers. Werk wants others to experience that same freedom — to someday know what it's like to drive across intact prairie "and see nothing but native grasses," he said. "That's all going to be part of healing." ☀

*“I didn’t know restoring
grasslands was so important.
When it’s in your backyard,
you don’t always notice it.”*

Savannah Spottedbird, 17, records notes after
gathering seeds (*right*).

Grassland restoration project fellows explore
tribal lands on the prairie (*below*).



Fuel for the electrical fire

Utility equipment sparks blazes, but climate change stokes them.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

LATE ON THE HOT AND SUNNY

morning of July 13, 2021, a distribution troubleman for Pacific Gas & Electric drove up the Feather River Canyon in Northern California to check out a possibly blown fuse on one of the utility's lines. His route took him past the blackened skeletons of trees burned by the Camp Fire in 2018. Sparked by PG&E's equipment, it raged through the town of Paradise, killing at least 86 people.

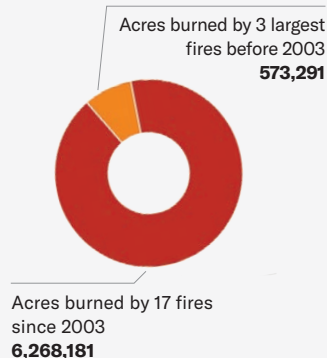
The troubleman — delayed by roadwork — reached the location of the tripped fuse, near the Cresta Dam, at 4:40 p.m. Sure enough, two of the three fuses on the Buck Line had been tripped. As his truck's cherry-picker bucket lifted him up to the fuses, he suddenly noticed a fire, estimated at about 600 square feet in size. There was a Douglas fir leaning against the line nearby.

He shut off the third fuse, killing power to the system, then descended to the ground to call dispatch, emptying first one, then another extinguisher on the flames, to no avail. Shortly thereafter Cal Fire aircraft arrived, followed by a ground crew. But the grass, shrubs and trees were simply too dry — baked by the kiln-like combination of drought and hot temperatures — and the flames swiftly got away from them, crawling and then exploding up the canyon's slopes.

By the next day, the 600-square-foot blaze had grown to 600

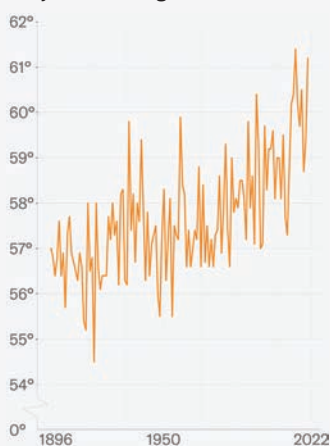
Burning up

17 of the state's 20 largest fires have occurred since 2003.



Heating up

Average temperatures in California and the West have climbed steadily over the last 127 years and now are higher than they were during the Dust Bowl.



acres and was spreading north and east at a rate of thousands of acres per day. It joined up with the 2,000-acre Fly Fire — which may have been started by a white fir toppling onto PG&E electrical equipment — and leveled the town of Greenville, forcing the evacuation of tens of thousands of residents. The pyrocumulonimbus plume it spawned rose thousands of feet into the air and sent smoke wafting across the West, affecting the air quality of communities as far away as Colorado. More than six weeks after it started, in early September, the Dixie Fire was still raging, having burned more than 800,000 acres of forest and hundreds of structures. And it was just one of a dozen or so blazes tearing across the state and the region.

PG&E's equipment, with some help from that errant Douglas fir, may have provided the spark that ignited California's second-largest fire on record — the exact cause is still under investigation — but climate change clearly fueled it and numerous other recent megafires, from last year's record-breaking conflagrations in Colorado, to this summer's destructive blazes in Montana and Oregon. The entire West has been heating up significantly over the past century, exacerbating the effects of two decades of drought and priming dry forests to burn more intensely than ever before. ☀

15,000

Number of firefighters on the frontlines of 16 major California fires as of Sept. 1.

1.88 million

Acres burned in California this year as of Sept. 1.

2.68 million

Total acreage of 86 large fires burning across the Western U.S. as of Sept. 1.

August 30

Date on which the U.S. Forest Service closed all national forests in California due to extreme wildfire hazard.

80 degrees Fahrenheit

California's average temperature for July 2021, the hottest July ever for the state as well as for Nevada, Oregon and Washington.

153,000

Acres of forest in California's carbon offset program that had been burned in wildfires this year as of Aug. 24.

1,282

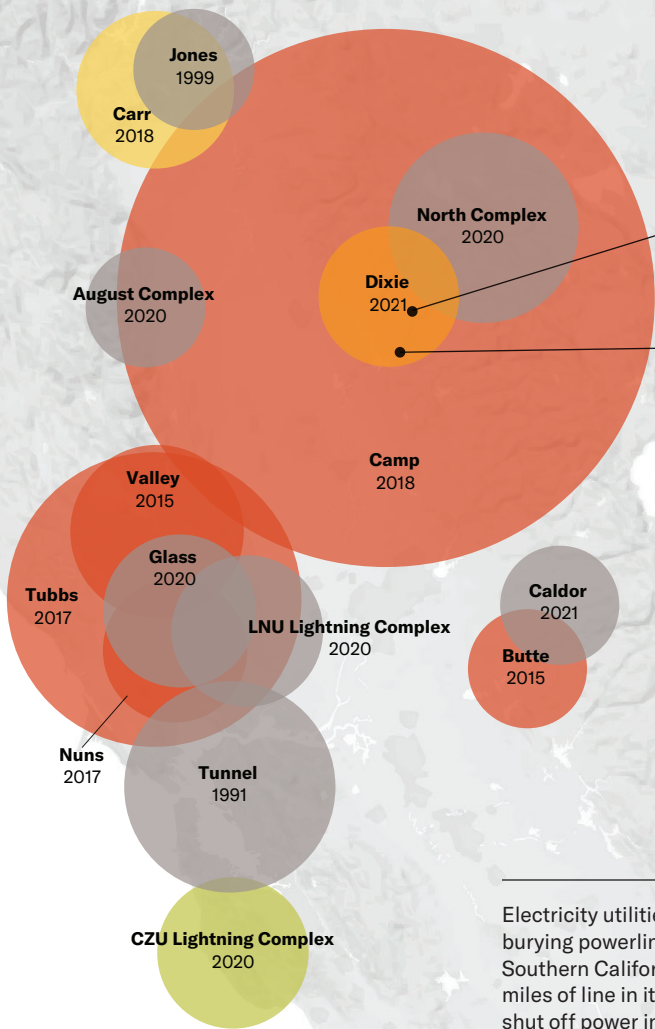
Number of structures destroyed by the Dixie Fire as of Sept. 1, when it had reached a size of 844,801 acres, making it the second-largest fire in California history.

1.03 million acres

Size of the largest fire in California history — the August Complex — which burned in the northern part of the state in 2020.

811

Number of structures destroyed by the Caldor Fire as of Sept. 1; an additional 35,000 structures were threatened.



The massive Dixie Fire got its start here, possibly after a Douglas fir toppled into a PG&E powerline. It then burned through more than 900,000 acres of forest.

One of the most visible manifestations of California's drought — aside from the catastrophic blazes — is Oroville Reservoir, which dropped so low that hydropower generation was no longer possible.

As the Caldor Fire approached Lake Tahoe in early September, ski resorts cranked up their snowmaking machines in a desperate attempt to keep the slopes from burning.

Electricity utilities can mitigate fire risk by burying powerlines or insulating them, as Southern California Edison is doing to 4,500 miles of line in its service area. Utilities also shut off power in high-risk areas during times of serious wildfire hazard, and some are constructing microgrids to reduce the need for long-distance powerlines.

SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY

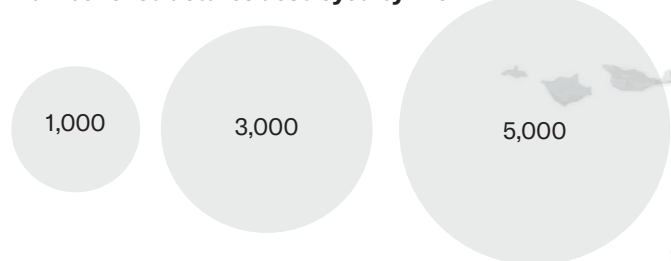
California's most destructive wildfires

The 20 most destructive blazes — in terms of structures burned — in California history.

Cause of fire:

- powerlines/electrical
- powerlines/electrical, under investigation
- lightning
- human-caused
- undetermined or under investigation

Number of structures destroyed by fire:



Infographic design: Luna Anna Archey / HCN

Sources: Cal Fire, National Interagency Fire Center, Documents from the U.S. District Court Northern District Of California, PG&E, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Utility ignitions, payouts, plunges

Some of the most destructive fires in California history were ignited by electrical utility equipment, and Northern California's Pacific Gas & Electric is one of the worst offenders in this regard.

6

Minimum number of the 20 most destructive fires ignited by electrical equipment in California.

122

Minimum number of fatalities resulting from California fires sparked by electrical equipment.

84

Number of counts of manslaughter PG&E pled guilty to for its role in starting the 2018 Camp Fire, which leveled the town of Paradise. The official death toll was 86, but an investigation by the *Chico Enterprise-Record* found an additional 50 deaths indirectly linked to the fire.

\$13.5 billion

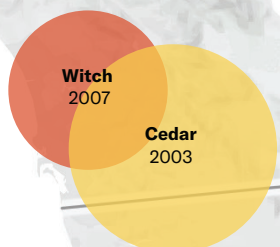
Amount of a PG&E fund — half of it made up of company stock — for compensating victims of past fires caused by the utility's equipment.

\$2.6 billion

Amount by which the value of the stock in the compensation fund dropped after PG&E indicated it may have ignited the Dixie Fire this year.

\$15 billion to \$20 billion

Estimated cost of PG&E's project to bury 10,000 miles of powerlines to reduce wildfire hazard.



The aftermath of wildfire

A year later, residents of small towns in southern Oregon demonstrate strength and resilience as they rebuild.

PHOTOS BY ALISHA JUCEVIC



A row of homes in Talent, Oregon, next to an area devastated by the Almeda Fire. The fire displaced thousands of families in the southern part of the state, destroying almost 2,500 homes in Ashland, Talent and Phoenix on Sept. 8, 2020.

WHEN STRONG WINDS SENT EMBERS FLYING toward the southern Oregon towns of Talent and Phoenix last September, state fire resources were already stretched thin. A limited number of firefighters faced flames that would soon consume entire neighborhoods.

For photographer Alisha Jucevic, the Almeda Fire was personal. Jucevic went to high school in Ashland, where the blaze began. Her brother pumped water from a nearby creek to protect his house from the flames; her sister lost property she owned and rented out. What started as a breaking news assignment for *The New York Times* in the wake of the fire morphed into a yearlong project documenting how communities are rebuilding, long after national media attention faded. “It didn’t feel right to just stop following it,” Jucevic said. “I still wanted to go back.”

Her photos chronicle divergent paths to recovery. The fire displaced thousands of people, particularly low-income families, migrant workers and members of the Latino community, who were already struggling with the area’s housing shortage. But, with help, many families have since managed to find a new place to stay. Jucevic captured what regrowth looks like, from meeting new neighbors to graduating from high school. While the sadness lingers and many families still search for housing, Jucevic said, “It was amazing seeing the resiliency of these families through all of this, just how much hope there is for rebuilding and for the future.” —*Kylie Mohr*





(Counter-clockwise, from left) Fabiola Granados and her sister, Melanie Cortez Ayala, 8, head back to their hotel room after picking up the free daily lunch in the lobby in Medford, Oregon, in November 2020. The family, who lost their home in the Alameda Fire, lived in a hotel room until December, when they were able to move into temporary FEMA housing in White City, Oregon. Granados, who has spina bifida, frequently travels to a hospital in Portland, over four hours away, for treatment. In May, the family was able to find an apartment and move out of their FEMA housing.

Julio Flores and his son, Ethan, 3, leave a restaurant in Medford with their family after celebrating the graduation of Flores' oldest son, Bryan, in June 2021. The family, who lost their home in the Alameda Fire, currently live at the Rogue Valley RV Park.

The photographer's sister, Rose Otter, her husband, Chris Presicci, and their children, Enzo and Poppy, look at a blueprint showing their property in Talent after meeting with a general contractor to discuss rebuilding.



Rosa Carrera, left, and her daughters, Jenny Flores, center, and Rosita Carrera, right, embrace as, for the first time, they see what is left of their home in mid-September 2020. The family of eight had lived in Phoenix for 15 years. "We have a lot of people who are opening their doors to us, but it's hard when you just want to go home at the end of the day," Jenny said. "This was our safe zone" (left).

Eli Otter, the photographer's brother, replaces a fence around his property in Talent in late December 2020. He, his girlfriend and a best friend managed to save the home by pumping water from a nearby creek. He wanted to leave the charred boards as a reminder of the fire (right).





After they lost their homes in the fire, Marco Rodriguez, left, his wife, Angelina Camargo, second from left, and Angelina's brother, Marcelo Camargo, second from right, pooled their insurance money to purchase a single home in Medford. The family gathered there on Dec. 26, 2020. "It feels so nice to have a house for Christmas and a safe place for my kids," Marco said.



Above, Cherie Grubbs and Daniel Verner in front of their new home in Phoenix in December 2020. The couple lived in neighboring trailers until both burned down. Grubbs said they went from the honeymoon phase to the commitment phase overnight because of the fires. “The thing that saved both of us was having each other,” Verner said. “I feel that I’m alive today by having Cherie.”

A historically low water line at Emigrant Lake, outside Ashland, on April 2, 2021. More than 20 families who were displaced by the fire live in trailers at the Emigrant Lake RV Park.

This photo essay was supported in part by a 2020 Yunghi Grant.



Graduating seniors throw their caps in the air during the Phoenix High School commencement ceremony in June 2021. About 30% of the graduating class lost their homes in the Almeda Fire.

Above, Maggie Taylor-Cheek, 19, left, embraces her boyfriend, Bryan Flores, 18, after Bryan’s graduation at Phoenix High School on June 12, 2021. Taylor-Cheek and Flores both lost their homes in the Almeda Fire. They’re attending different colleges this fall, but Taylor-Cheek said they’re not too worried about the distance. “The couple that survived the fire can survive anything,” she said.

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Maya Kapoor, former *HCN* associate editor, speaks with Edward Bartell at his Quinn River Valley ranch while reporting her recent article on lithium mining in Nevada. **Russel Albert Daniels / HCN**

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Adam Reynolds | Redmond, WA
Ronald Rogers | Bend, OR
Phil Samuel | Louisville, KY
Linda Siegle | Cerrillos, NM
Priya Sundareshan | Tucson, AZ
J.L. Trizzino | Chico, CA
John & Helen Whitbeck | Salt Lake City, UT

WELCOME NEW & RENEWING SUSTAINERS’ CLUB MEMBERS

Anonymous (5)
In honor of Farley Maxwell
In honor of John Ramaley | Redding, CA
In memory of Glen H. Phillips | Nederland, CO
In memory of Skyre Criswell
JoAnne Allen | Nathrop, CO
Devon Arguello | Trinidad, CO
Brad & Tina Barber | Salt Lake City, UT
Grant Barnard | Red Lodge, MT
Judy Bell | Centralia, WA
Charles Brandt & Timothea Elizalde | Belen, NM
Susan & Brad Brickman | Seattle, WA
Bill & Catherine Camp | Montgomery Creek, CA
Andrew & Nancy Carson | Wilson, WY
Jeffrey & Carol Dawson | Denver, CO
Sue Detloff | Longbranch, WA
Joe Godleski | Fort Collins, CO
Robert B. Haight | Riverton, WY

Michael G Harrison | Albuquerque, NM
Janet Hodder & Mike Graybill | Coos Bay, OR
Jane & Gary Houk | Carson City, NV
David Kirkpatrick | Livingston, MT
John Koenig | Eugene, OR
Steve Lindly | Cheyenne, WY
Charles E. MacFarland | Rainier, WA
Michael McLeod | Federal Way, WA
Wendy Beth Oliver | Milwaukie, OR
Jack Paul | Bend, OR
Marith Reheis | Golden, CO
Penny & Mike Rucks | Reno, NV
Terrance Ryan & Mary Lynn Ryan | Madison, SD
Florian & Lou Smoczynski | Madison, WI
Mary Lou Soscia | Portland, OR
John Wise | Ashland, OR

“I’m so glad you’ve begun to include stories about Indigenous communities and other non-white, non-ranching or outdoor recreation communities in HCN. At first I was surprised by the change, because like many white people who are not native to the West, I thought the whole point was conserving natural lands and the environment. Now, I’m more interested in environmental justice and the diversity of people who inhabit this region.”

–Mary Humstone, Fort Collins, Colorado

HCN's revolving, evolving family

FLORENCE WILLIAMS CAME TO *High Country News* as a precocious, college-age intern in 1987. She did so well that she was hired as a staff writer in 1989, churning out meaty feature stories until she departed in 1992. Nearly two decades later, as a nationally recognized journalist and book author, she joined our board of directors. Now, after serving in virtually every possible board position, Williams is stepping down. “In many ways, *HCN* and I have grown up together as family,” she said. “I remember picking apricots behind the office in Paonia, Colorado, and when the first fax machine arrived. I learned to pay better attention to my prose through Betsy Marston’s edits and better attention to thinking through a story idea with Ed Marston’s guidance.” Williams believes *HCN*’s future is bright despite the tumultuous changes in media and in the West. “I can’t wait to see where *HCN* goes next, and I will be cheering always.”

HCN board member **Bob Fulkerson** started reading *HCN* in 1985 when his name appeared in a story about activists fighting a nuclear waste dump in Nevada. “I soon realized it was easier to get *HCN* reporters to write about the dump than the reporters in Nevada,” recalled Fulkerson, who is also stepping down this month. “And it had the added advantage that our funders would be more likely to see it.” One of those funders was Bill Mitchell, a board member who was a staffer at the Brainerd Foundation. After Fulkerson became director of the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada in the early 2000s, Mitchell (who died in 2016) asked him to join *HCN*’s board. We’re delighted he accepted; Fulkerson has spiced up many a meeting with his razor-sharp insights and determination to keep *HCN* relevant in a changing world. “Bill told me from the start that he wanted me to help push an all-white institution toward better representation of all communities in the West. I tried my damndest, Bill. I know we’re heading in the right direction now.”

One way we know we’re on the right track is by the success of our alumni.

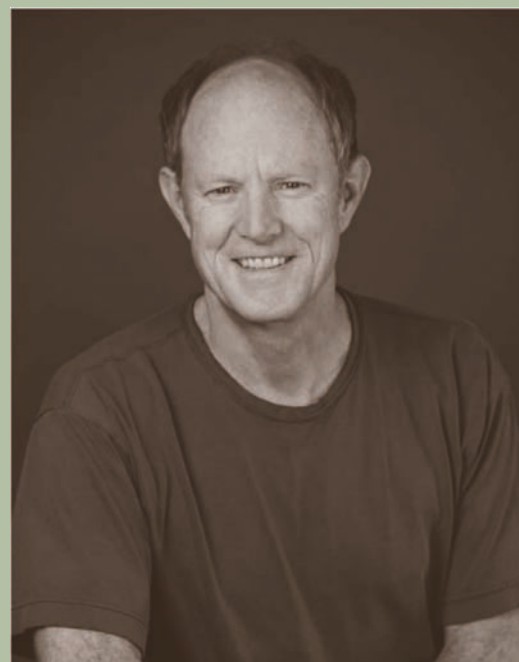
Tony Barboza, who credits his 2000 *HCN* internship with starting his journalism career, has just been named to the *Los Angeles Times*

editorial board after 14 years as a *Times* reporter covering climate change and environmental justice. Barboza anchored an award-winning 2017 project on the construction of subsidized housing near polluted freeways and the problems with the government-mandated air-filtration systems that are supposed to capture vehicle exhaust. According to a press release, “Barboza will draw on his deep expertise to help our readers understand the actions needed, globally and locally, to cut pollution and rebuild our energy system to slow the existential threat of climate change and adapt to life on a hotter planet without leaving hard-hit communities behind.”

Jodi Peterson, an *HCN* editor from 2005 to 2019, has found a new niche on Colorado’s Front Range. She’s now chief editor for Colorado State University’s Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands (<https://cemml.colostate.edu/>), located in Fort Collins. CEMML works with the Department of Defense, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, National Park Service and other agencies to better manage military lands and their natural and cultural resources. Peterson said, “The conservation potential of the DOD’s 25 million acres of land is something I first learned about at *High Country News*, in David Wolman’s 2010 story ‘Accidental Wilderness’ about the diverse and undisturbed ecosystems found at Washington’s Hanford site and New Mexico’s White Sands Missile Range.”

We brought in some outside expertise in August and September. **Max Ufberg**, who has worked for *The Intercept*, *Medium* and *Pacific Standard*, led a series of workshops for our editorial staff to help us recalibrate and fine-tune our process for producing timely online news and analysis. We’re also pleased to have had **Chris La Tray**, a member of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians, help with our reviews section. Chris is the author of *One-Sentence Journal: Short Poems and Essays from the World at Large*, which won the 2018 Montana Book Award and the 2019 High Plains Book Award for Best First Book. His forthcoming book, *Becoming Little Shell*, is due out from Milkweed Editions in 2022.

—Paul Larmer, for the staff



HCN board members Florence Williams (top) and Bob Fulkerson (above) depart our board after long tenures.



Former *HCN* intern Tony Barboza, who has been named to the *Los Angeles Times* editorial board.



By Jane C. Hu | Illustrations by Hokyoung Kim

The Public Health Officer Emergency

The far right's role in forcing the officials who protect community health out of office.

TAMALEE ST. JAMES ROBINSON was working late again. It was fall 2020, and in Flathead County, Montana, where Robinson was serving as interim public health officer, COVID-19 cases had jumped tenfold from the summer. The schools were still open, and new cases meant Robinson routinely worked 10-hour days, even on weekends. Around 9 p.m., a truck pulled into the empty Health Department parking lot, in clear view of Robinson's office window. Something about it felt wrong; the truck's engine was idling and its running lights were on. Robinson decided to move away from the window and take cover behind the two monitors at her workstation. That way, she thought, they can't get a clear shot at me.

Eventually, the truck left. Robinson wondered if she'd overreacted. She thought about the previous week and realized that she'd been on edge ever since the county sheriff had called her. "Do you know how to shoot a gun?" he'd asked. He told Robinson that a man had threatened her, saying that he wanted to challenge her to a public duel. The sheriff told Robinson that such threats would not be tolerated, but he thought she should know about it, just in case.

This is not what Robinson expected when she moved here. Her original plan was retirement; after two decades working in public health in Billings, Robinson wanted to enjoy the mountains and lakes and relax with her husband. But in 2019, when she was asked to help chair the Flathead County Board of Health, she agreed. Then the pandemic hit, and the health officer, who had been offered another job, asked her to

act as the county's interim health officer while the Flathead City-County Health Department hired a replacement. "You could probably do it part time, maybe three days a week," Robinson recalls being told. At the time, cases in the area were mercifully low; the pandemic had yet to hit Montana the way it had places like New York and Seattle. Robinson agreed to serve.

But shortly after Robinson took office in July, local COVID-19 cases spiked. The state of Montana issued a mask mandate for businesses, but enforcement was left to local and regional officials. At the same time, the state's department of education deferred all decisions about masking in schools to local officials, as did the Montana High School Association, which manages school sports throughout the state. "Everything was thrown at local health officers," Robinson said. "We had to make those decisions. And then when we made those decisions, based on our best information, (other leaders) came out against them."

Before COVID-19, local health departments were all but invisible to the general public. Their work kept communities running — they handled septic tank regulations, infant and maternal health programs, food safety inspections, air and water quality readings and immunizations — but they rarely attracted attention. "Nobody realizes it day to day, because they don't have to deal with (those issues) — because we prevent it," Robinson says. Few citizens knew the names of their local health officers or health department board members.

But the pandemic changed everything. As COVID cases increased in Montana, discussion swirled around what precautions to take, and Robinson became an easily recognizable public figure — and a convenient scapegoat for local citizens' fears and frustrations. Every day, hateful emails and phone calls accused her of threatening people's constitutional freedoms and destroying businesses. Protesters lurked outside her office, holding signs that proclaimed "Tamalee is a tyrant" and "Got dictatorial powers? Tamalee does."

By mid-October, hospitalizations and deaths in Flathead County reached an all-time high. There were so many cases that the Health Department announced it could no longer adequately conduct contact tracing. Robinson presented a mitigation plan that would limit the size of gatherings, reduce capacity at bars, restaurants and churches, and introduce a 10 p.m. curfew for businesses that served alcohol. Before the October Board of Health meeting — held on Zoom after maskless protesters began swarming city council and school board meetings — 136 citizens submitted written public comments, about 60% of them in favor of additional restrictions. Dozens of people called into the meeting, and public opinion was split — eight citizens voiced their support for restrictions, while 10 opposed them. Invited experts — a local hospital CEO, the school district superintendent and an infectious disease doctor — all emphasized the seriousness of the recent spike and the need to mitigate the disease's spread. In her remarks, Robinson spoke of the power of community: Health officers can't unilaterally make the orders, she said. Rather, it was her job to find mitigation strategies that would protect hospitals and staff while also keeping schools and businesses open.

After Robinson spoke, Annie Bukacek, another Health Board member, said she needed to address some points before they

considered mitigation options. Then she launched into a series of misleading comments about COVID testing and the danger the virus presented to children.

Bukacek, a practicing physician, had been a controversial figure in the Flathead community for years, known for her staunch opposition to vaccination and abortion. When county commissioners appointed her to the board in early 2020, they said they hoped her inclusion would help promote a "diversity of opinions." They got their wish; Bukacek frequently pushed back against the board's actions, especially after the pandemic hit. She was the only member to vote against a March directive to close gyms, restaurants and bars. In early April, while most of the country closed schools and businesses in an effort to stem the spread, Bukacek organized the city's first anti-lockdown protest. A YouTube video in which she accused medical professionals of manipulating COVID-19 death certificates went viral. Shortly after, board member Michael Nicosia resigned, writing in a letter that he could not, "in good conscience, continue to serve as a member of the Board of Health alongside Dr. Bukacek." Board members came to expect that Bukacek would shoot down any public health proposal. "Every initiative or anything we tried to do, Annie fought against," says Robinson. "And I said, 'This is ridiculous — we have to fight our own fellow board members to manage the COVID situation?'"

The week before the heated October meeting, Bukacek's Facebook posts encouraged opposition to the board's recommendations. She uploaded a photo from a protest in Kalispell, Flathead County's seat, which she captioned "RESISTANCE (sic) to TYRANNY in the FLATHEAD." Around the same time, the county commissioners issued a statement saying they lacked the power to enforce the governor's mask mandate and would support "the Constitutional rights of Montanans" to choose

whether to mask up.

Ultimately, the Board of Health voted 5 to 3 against implementing any mitigation strategies. In the following weeks, the state pursued legal action against Flathead County businesses that refused to comply with the mask mandate. But with local officials unwilling to enforce the state mask mandate, let alone adopt new precautions, Robinson felt her recommendations were useless. Even worse, she feared they were putting her in danger. Robinson had worked through anthrax scares, smallpox outbreaks, H1N1, even Ebola, but she had never faced protests or been threatened like this. "None of those were politicized the way this was," she said.

The day after Thanksgiving, Robinson resigned. In her letter, she detailed the "lack of support" for public health personnel and the "toxic environment" in which she worked. "It's clear that the underlying motivation by several members of your groups is more closely aligned with ideological biases than the simple desire to do what's best for the health of the community," she wrote.

Robinson is just one of dozens of public health officers and board members in the Western U.S. — and at least 250 across the nation — who have left their positions over the course of the pandemic. Many, like Robinson, resigned, including the entire four-member staff of Montana's Pondera County, who quit en masse in November, citing a lack of support from the county. Lori Drumm, the health officer in Montana's Powell County, described her resignation in a *Washington Post* article: "I am part of a larger wave of public health officials resigning across the country, threatened with violence, facing political pressure to change guidelines or just burned out from the stress."

Other officials have been abruptly ousted from their positions. Emily Brown, then-director of the public health department in Rio Grande County, Colorado, was

fired in May. In Spokane County, Washington, health officer Bob Lutz was fired in November 2020; the circumstances are under investigation by the state, and Lutz, through his attorney, has called the decision politically motivated. In response, roughly half of the Spokane Health Advisory Committee resigned, writing that they "will not be complicit in supporting administrators who have worked to subvert the public's health."

Lori Freeman, CEO of the National Association of City and County Health Officers (NACCHO), says the departures started soon after the pandemic took hold in the U.S. Three NACCHO board members resigned in a six-week period, either because they quit or were fired from their positions as health officers.

Freeman began to track firings and resignations across the country. Her data show that around 40% of them took place in seven Western states: Wyoming, Montana, California, Colorado, Washington, Oregon and Arizona. The departures point to an underlying theme, says Freeman: "People don't like to be told what to do." The U.S. has a long history of anti-science sentiment, but COVID-19 created new opportunities to politicize science. Once public health advice was reframed as a threat to personal freedom, officials like Robinson could be vilified as "tyrants," harassed and intimidated by their own communities.

The public outcry against pandemic restrictions may appear to be a grassroots phenomenon, but it's not that simple: Regional and national networks have been hard at work organizing opposition in local communities. Freeman agrees with anti-extremist experts that after COVID-19 hit the U.S., public health was targeted by militia groups and a constellation of far-right, anti-government activists who have long tried to claim the American West as their haven.

"I JUST GOT MY FIRST middle finger," says one woman to another,

laughing. It's a sweltering day in July, the sky tinged the sickly yellow of smoke from Oregon's Bootleg Fire. The two women are among about a thousand protesters gathered outside St. Luke's hospital in Meridian, Idaho. Cars speed by the people lined up on the sidewalk; most honk in support, but not all. "Your first ever?" the other woman asks, incredulous. "No," says the first woman. "My first today. I was involved with the recall effort for the Boise mayor, and I got it all the time!"

St. Luke's, one of Idaho's largest hospital systems, is among several that have announced that all employees will have to be vaccinated. The day after that announcement, dissenters created a Facebook group to plan a series of rallies; this is their second. Through this Facebook group and its sister groups on Telegram, organizers discussed logistics. Some participants, worried that cars parked at St. Luke's might get towed away, recommended parking on nearby streets and walking over. "The commie-Nazis at (St. Luke's) won't stop us!" one commenter wrote. Merchandise was for sale, too; the two women protesters are wearing identical royal blue shirts with the phrase "#StoptheMandate" emblazoned across the front, advertised on Facebook and Telegram groups for \$10 a pop.

If not for the political chants and signs, the protest would resemble any other community gathering. Children play soccer on the well-tended grass surrounding the hospital parking lot; friends hug and strangers complain about "fake news." Protesters in medical scrubs display their hospital badges, chanting, "I will not comply." Others demonstrate in solidarity with what they see as an infringement on those workers' rights, and what it might mean for their own freedom: "What will they mandate next?" one sign reads.

Meridian is 500 miles south of Kalispell, but the signs echo the talking points repeated by Annie Bukacek and other Kalispell citi-

"It's clear that the underlying motivation by several members of your groups is more closely aligned with ideological biases than the simple desire to do what's best for the health of the community."

zens. A variety of related political beliefs and causes appear in other signs: Between two trees hangs a banner that reads "Free the D.C. Prisoners of Biden," with a link to a fundraiser to support those charged for participating in the Jan. 6 insurrection. One man waves a large black flag that proclaims "Rigged election," while several others carry the Gadsden flag, a symbol popular with far-right militias. Members of the Proud Boys, an organization the Southern Poverty Law Center has designated a hate group, stand on a corner, dressed in their usual matching black-and-yellow Fred Perry polos and hats. (Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes has disputed this designation, filing a libel suit against the SPLC; the suit is currently pending in Alabama federal court.)

An LED sign outside the hospital reads 95 degrees. Families take refuge in the shade of the trees, fanning themselves with their signs. Two men walk the demonstration's perimeter, placing trash cans along the sidewalk; one wears a shirt with the slogan "CLAIM USE AND DEFEND / PEOPLE'S RIGHTS." They unload bags of ice and bottles of water from a pickup truck without license plates, filling the trash cans with them as protesters rush over, eager to enjoy a cool beverage. A campaign sign is affixed to the front of each drink-filled trash can: "Ammon Bundy for Governor."

Bundy is best known for his leadership in two armed standoffs with government officials, first at his family's ranch in Nevada in 2014, and then at Oregon's Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016, where one person died. He and his family espouse the (legally dubious) belief that the U.S. Constitution does not allow the government to own land. For years, the Bundys publicly decried what they saw as federal overreach on public lands. After Malheur, Bundy moved to Emmett, Idaho, a bedroom community just outside of Boise. When the pandemic struck, he focused his militant energy on COVID-19.

That April, Bundy convened a small group of dedicated followers, who discussed how best to shift public concern away from the virus and toward "our freedoms and our rights." The following week, the group grew to several dozen, and Bundy saw the start of something bigger — an opportunity to build a new network focused on defending constitutional freedoms, during COVID and beyond. "One of the things we've done, we've put a way that people can basically join, if you wanna call it that, People's Rights, or whatever you want to call it," he told the group. "We have a contact list that's now probably over 300 people, so that's a good little start."

The name People's Rights stuck, and within weeks, the organization created Facebook groups, a text line, email lists and a website, complete with onboarding materials for new members and local leaders. They allied with other groups, like the anti-vaccination activists of Idahoans for Vaccine Freedom and the Idaho Freedom Foundation, to stage events and protests. The group seeded dozens of chapters across the U.S.

To experts studying extremism, the rise and popularity of People's Rights comes as no surprise. "The pandemic was a great time for anti-government militia groups," says Travis McAdam, the director of Combating White Nationalism & Defending Democracy at the Montana Human Rights Network. "They were really able to use the pandemic, the frustration and anger at public health directives, as a way to sort of recruit people into their movement." People like Bundy and Bukacek, a member of the radical right-wing Liberty Fellowship, have long denounced "government overreach." Now, by focusing on pandemic shutdowns, they have tapped into a reserve of people newly sympathetic to what they see as a fight for their "constitutional freedoms."

THREE MILES from where the protest took place and seven months earlier, Idaho's Central

Health District hosted its December board meeting. Cases in the county had approached an all-time high, so the agenda was focused on COVID. The board would be briefed by local physicians and then vote on whether to expand the mask mandate from two of the district's counties to four.

The meeting began as usual: The chair took roll over Zoom, calling the names of the commissioners and health-care professionals representing each county. When Ada County Commissioner Diana Lachiondo's name was called, there was a brief pause while Lachiondo tried to compose herself. "I'm sorry," she said. "I just got a text from my neighbor saying that there are protesters at my house, so I'm going to step off for just a moment to call the police, because my kids are there."

"I've also got protesters outside my house," said Ted Epperly, the board's designated physician. Nevertheless, the meeting continued: The chair finished roll call, and an invited guest began a presentation on COVID's impact on health-care workers. Epperly stood up and peered through the blinds on the window behind him as if there was something on the other side, while Lachiondo, phone held to her ear, wheeled on and off the screen as she made multiple calls. Suddenly, she began to cry and disappeared offscreen. When she returned, she unmuted herself, her voice wavering: "Can I interrupt you for just a moment?" She explained that the protesters were banging outside, and that she needed to leave to make sure her sons were safe.

The district director also left his screen to make sure his staff was aware of the situation. After he returned, he waited a few minutes before interrupting the physician. "I'm sorry, but I got a call from the mayor, and it sounds like the police and she are requesting that we stop the meeting at this time because of the intense level of protesters in the parking lot," he said. Outside the Central District Health building, hundreds of people had gathered

at a protest planned through the local People's Rights chapter.

It's no coincidence that protesters targeted Lachiondo and Epperly in these protests: Out of the health board's seven members, they were both known for their consistent support of public health directives. Fifteen people appeared outside Epperly's house, yelling, flashing strobe lights through the windows, beating cymbals, pounding on drums and garbage cans. When his wife walked out through the garage to see what was going on, the protesters chased her back inside.

At Lachiondo's house, protesters carried airhorns; one also held a bullhorn, which he used to blare clips from the movie *Scarface*. They set off car alarms and banged on Home Depot buckets with sticks and chalked "NO LOCKDOWN" on the sidewalk outside the house. Susan Lang, who livestreamed the event on her Facebook page and later wrote about the protest on the People's Rights website, let out a guttural Tarzan-esque howl. "Lockdown Lachiondo lies!" Lang shouted. "Diana Lachiondo is trying to steal our rights!" she yelled, breathing heavily. "You guys, sometimes I admit I feel a little bit aggressive and PISSED OFF! I don't know, there's just something about having my constitutional rights stolen, I go a little nutty!"

Lachiondo's sons, then 9 and 12, were home alone; their grandmother had gone out to walk the family dog. The older son called to ask what to do. "I felt that I had let my kids down," Lachiondo recalled. "The sound of my son's voice — he was terrified. It was just such a helpless feeling." The next day, the protesters were back; after footage of Lachiondo's tearful signoff from the board meeting made national news, they staged a second protest, which Bundy himself attended.

Bundy and his People's Rights network have been a regular presence in the network of anti-COVID-restriction demonstrators during the pandemic. They've targeted other public health offi-

"I just got a text from my neighbor saying that there are protesters at my house, so I'm going to step off for just a moment to call the police, because my kids are there."

cers, including Spokane's Bob Lutz and Bozeman's Matt Kelley, and they've been a mainstay at the Idaho State Capitol, staging protests and crowding into the building without masks despite the building's mandate. In August 2020, after Bundy repeatedly entered the building without a mask, troopers removed him from it using a wheeled chair. He was then arrested and barred from entering the Capitol for the next year.

In the end, the targeted political pressure worked. Commissioner Lachiondo was voted out of her position in the fall and replaced by Ryan Davidson, a far-right political activist who was recently investigated by the Idaho attorney general for approaching a judge on Ammon Bundy's behalf to ask whether "any accommodation could be made" for Bundy and his followers' refusal to wear masks in court. (The attorney general concluded that Davidson's actions, "while disconcerting, did not constitute a crime.") With Lachiondo also off the Health Board, Davidson and two other Ada County commissioners replaced her with Raúl Labrador. Labrador is a former congressman who flew to northern Idaho to support a brewery that reopened in May in defiance of the governor's COVID restrictions. He is known to be sympathetic to the Bundys and their various causes.

At the end of June, Epperly's appointment as the board's physician was set to expire. Just a few days before it ended, he learned he had not been reappointed, marking the end of his 15-year tenure. In August, the Ada County commissioners replaced Epperly with Ryan Cole, a staunch opponent of mask and vaccine mandates who has publicly called vaccination "needle rape." He has also faced criticism for claiming that mRNA vaccines can cause cancer. (They do not.)

Epperly, who was born and raised in Idaho, says it no longer feels like the state he knows and loves. A retired Army colonel, he says that the last year feels like a war. The pandemic "brought out



a lot of the nastiness that either I didn't see before, or has actually kind of been imported from multiple people moving into the states that are far right — because Idaho has always been a magnet for the far right," he says.

Lachiondo, who was also born and raised in the state, has also seen change: People are moving to Idaho because they believe it's a sanctuary for what they call "personal freedoms" — gun rights, lower taxes and lax vaccine laws. The networks they're tapped into are far-reaching. "I had people protesting at my house on Dec. 8, and it was like, 'Who are these people?' These are the same people, the same networks, that were at the Capitol on Jan. 6," she says. (At least two People's Rights leaders have been charged in connection with the Capitol attack.) "We are like this weird canary in a coal mine. ... People should be paying attention."

CHERILYN DEVRIES, a community organizer with Love Lives Here in Flathead, Montana, has been monitoring hate speech in the area for years. Since the early 2000s, a spate of high-profile neo-Nazis have moved to the area, eliciting outcry from the community. The leaders of such movements may have changed over the years, but their attitudes live on in the militia and Patriot movements, and in groups like People's Rights, which have largely organized online. Lately, the entry points into extremism are shifting, too — all thanks to social media.

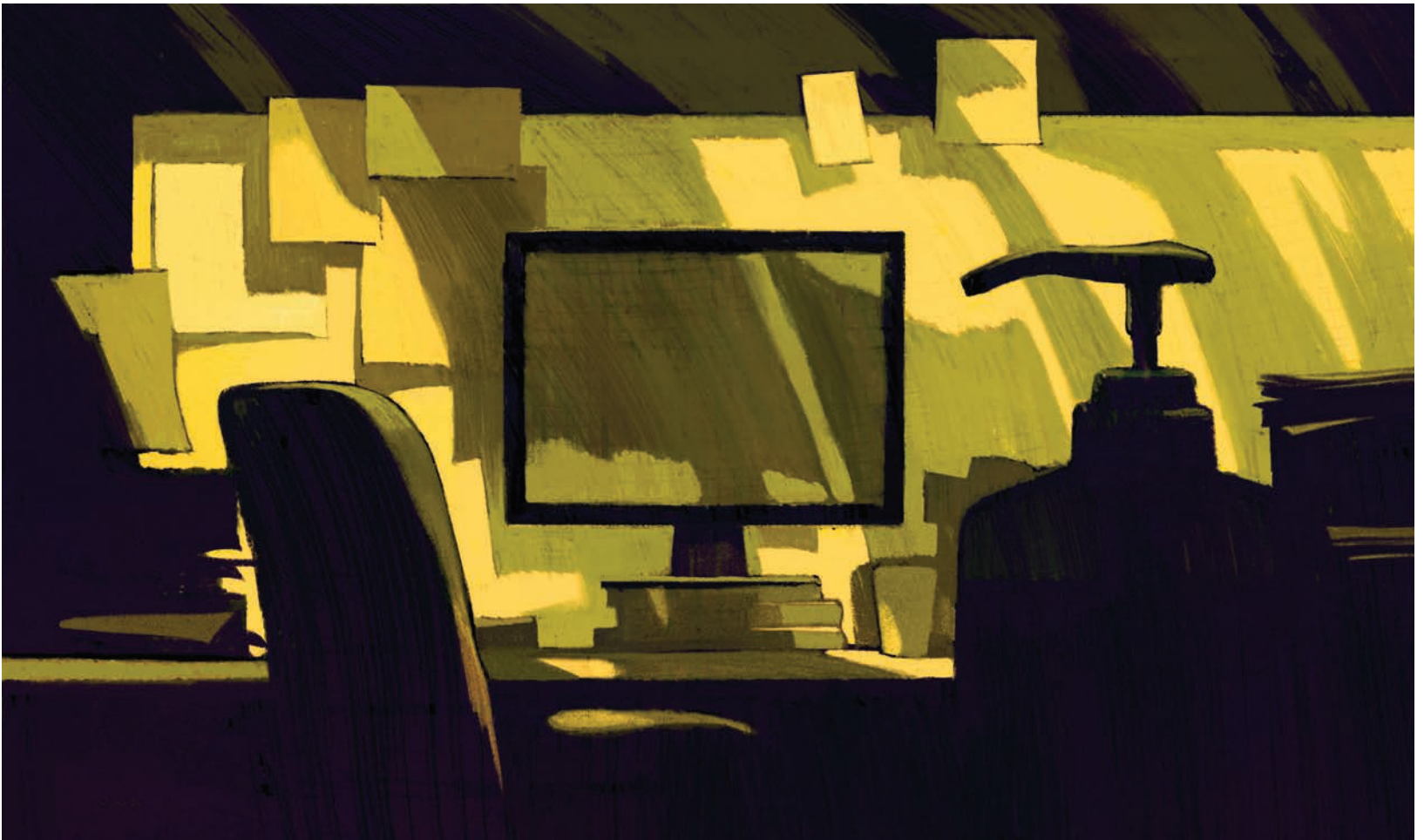
According to the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (IREHR), People's Rights had around two dozen Facebook groups with thousands of members until October, when the platform deactivated them. (It also deactivated the personal Facebook pages of several People's Rights leaders, including Bundy himself.) But there are still

many related groups out there: IREHR found that hundreds of People's Rights group members, including the leaders, also belonged to more than 200 militia-related Facebook groups.

Members clearly value the sense of community in these groups; they enjoy connecting with like-minded neighbors and organizing kickball games, worship services and swap meets. People's Rights groups on Telegram and MeWe typically have a few hundred members, who bond over their shared views and commiserate about their very real frustrations: the fear of losing their jobs and the sense that their communities are being increasingly polarized. But the groups also serve as a portal to conspiracy theories, misinformation and outright disinformation. Members propagate dangerous falsehoods and direct people to their own often more-extreme pages, or to other hateful groups.

Racist screeds and calls for violence are not uncommon. In the echo chamber of social media, this leads users to believe that extremist ideas are more popular — and therefore trustworthy — than they really are.

These online groups can grow rapidly, then coalesce around real-world events, which in turn draw more members. The group organizing the Boise #StoptheMandate protest was created just two weeks before its first rally. (The night before the rally, the group had around 3,000 people; just a week later, that number had nearly doubled. At press time, the group had nearly 11,000 members.) Groups like these play a vital part in rallying people to take action in other ways, including protesting at health board buildings or individuals' homes, or contacting local government. Internet groups serve as a "trough of misinformation that people are feeding off of," says DeVries, re-enforcing the values



and beliefs that lead them to rally against their local governments and officials.

Travis McAdam says that the Montana Human Rights Network has encountered People's Rights members who aren't aware how the group began or even who its leaders are. After an op-ed linking People's Rights to Bundy appeared in a small Montana paper, the local People's Rights chapter discussed it. "It was really interesting to see on their Facebook page — all these people, that I think most of which were genuinely saying: 'This isn't Ammon Bundy! Ammon Bundy's not telling us what to do!'" says McAdam. But, he says, that's exactly what's happening: "Everyone who signs up as one of their area assistants, as part of their orientation package, sees a video of Ammon Bundy telling them what to do, and how to do it."

Anti-extremist experts like McAdam worry that groups like People's Rights will continue to use

the tactics they've honed over the course of the pandemic and mobilize their followers to take up arms on a variety of other issues. They fear this could lead to some dangerous places. "We all know what the Bundy family playbook is, and we know how that ends: It ends in armed standoffs with the government," says McAdam. "This is a ploy by Ammon Bundy to use the pandemic to recruit members into a broader movement. And when the pandemic is over, he will have this whole structure that he can use and move into his whole next thing."

There are hints that this is already happening. In the Flathead, anti-COVID restriction activists used their momentum to put together a slate of anti-mask candidates to run for the school board; ultimately, one of them was elected. Just as activists targeted health board meetings, they also targeted school board meetings; people showed up unmasked, and the meetings had to be moved to Zoom.

Ambitious politicians with extremist views have also rallied activists opposed to COVID restrictions. Idaho Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin, who is well-known for her ties to extremist groups, is running for governor in 2021, and has connected with voters over COVID-19 politics. In May, when Gov. Brad Little was out of state, she tried to issue an executive order banning mask mandates, a stunt the governor condemned. McGeachin has participated in two Telegram groups related to the #StoptheMandate movement, sharing her press releases and crowdsourcing information from members.

Ultimately, that's why Bundy campaign signs appeared at the #StoptheMandate protest; anti-COVID vaccine activists have become an important part of his base. In his campaign documents, Bundy — who promises "health freedom" — warns that the government is taking control of

people's bodies, using words like "tyranny," "force," and "immoral." That July afternoon in Meridian, Bundy himself appeared, wearing his own blue #StoptheMandate shirt. He greeted a supporter and stopped to shake hands with a man holding a book called *Adverse Effects of Vaccines*. And while political pundits doubt that Bundy could win the election, his campaign serves as an end in itself: With his name in the news and his views becoming part of the public discourse, militia talking points are becoming part of the political mainstream.

ONE JULY AFTERNOON, Tamalee Robinson took a break from entertaining out-of-town guests to meet me in her old office in Flathead. They'd been hiking, golfing, boating — finally, Robinson was enjoying the retirement she initially imagined when she moved to the valley. It had been seven months since she'd been

in this room, and she marveled at the posters of Glacier National Park on the wall. A painting of two black Labs hung by the window where protesters used to appear. “I didn’t put anything up on the walls, because I thought I was going to be here for maybe three months,” she said. She ended up being the interim health officer for half a year, and when she resigned, she had no idea who would take her place.

Ever since the departure of Robinson’s predecessor, the last health officer, the Flathead City-County Health Department had struggled to find a permanent replacement. After months of interviews, it offered the job to two applicants, both of whom declined, given the area’s skyrocketing housing prices and the tense political climate. “When those two candidates turned the job down, it was like, I don’t know if we’ll ever get someone,” she told me.

Just as Robinson finished speaking, the new health officer walked into the room. Or more accurately, the county’s old health officer: Joe Russell started at the department in 1987, working his way up to become health officer in 1997, where he served until he retired in 2017. When Robinson resigned, Russell was asked to come back.

Few communities in Flathead County’s position are lucky enough to have an experienced former health officer who is willing to come out of retirement to take the reins again. In many places, vacant positions have gone unfilled. In others, interim officers serve as temporary replacements, but lack the necessary requirements for a permanent position.

NACCHO CEO Freeman is worried about the turnover. “We’re losing leadership,” she says, “and there aren’t many public health experts left to fill those positions.” Freeman has seen this in her own field: Friends are leaving their jobs, retiring early, or taking time off to deal with professional burnout. “That is scary, because these are true, trusted, longtime profession-

als that have a lot of institutional knowledge, a lot of expertise,” she says. “The long-term impacts of these departures, I think, are going to be felt for some time.”

Once the pandemic emergency wanes, communities will need public health experts to tackle other issues, many of which have been neglected over the last 18 months. The decline in immunizations means more cases of preventable diseases, like whooping cough and measles. Lack of attention to mosquito and vector control leads to the unchecked spread of serious diseases like West Nile virus. Reduced capacity for drug surveillance means more overdose deaths. Freeman mentioned a local health official who was worried about the area’s opioid programs. “They worked really hard for two years to reduce their opioid-related deaths by 20%, and they’re back right up again,” she said. These are the programs that have to go on — and the ones that risk serious failures if communities can’t find qualified experts to replace the officials they ousted.

For Russell, the on-the-ground response to COVID has been easy, but navigating local politics remains tricky. He showed us the angry letter he’d received after he issued a cease-and-desist order for serving food without a license. The vendor in question believes that food safety laws are unconstitutional. “I’m dealing with a constitutionalist that wants to sue me for about a million dollars,” he said — something that never happened to him when he was health officer in the ’90s, 2000s or 2010s. “What COVID did was polarize — it polarized this community a ton. And that’s been hard; it’s gone past COVID.”

That polarization has led to major limits to public health’s powers. In spring 2021, Montana passed two bills. House Bill 121 gives county commissioners and city councils final say on declaring health emergency orders and health regulations and fees, and gives those governing bodies power to appoint health officers.

The other, HB 257, prohibits local public health departments from enacting ordinances that would limit customers’ access to businesses or events at any place of worship. At least 14 other states have introduced or passed similar legislation, and in many states, including Montana, Washington and Idaho, the language of those bills appears to be heavily influenced by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a well-funded legislative group known for developing model bills that advance conservative interests.

Montana’s HB 121 means that long-held public health regulations are more vulnerable to political pressure, especially if corporate interests and money are involved. Russell gives the example of septic systems, a decidedly unsexy but crucial part of public health infrastructure. Flathead County has strict septic system regulations: Whatever bordering counties recommend, Flathead County requires. That results in a higher level of water treatment, designed to maintain high water quality. But if commissioners are under pressure to change that — if, for instance, local business owners decide they don’t want to adhere to such strict standards — they could try to force elected officials to loosen policies by threatening to vote them out of office, much the way groups like People’s Rights rallied citizens to protest pandemic restrictions. “Water quality is one of the most important things we have here,” says Russell. “I don’t think they would ever go after that, but you never know.”

Bills like these also mean that public health officials have less authority to do their jobs. HB 257 prohibits public health officers from issuing quarantine orders, an essential aspect of controlling infectious disease. “If you ban quarantine, you’re removing one of the basic tenets of public health infection,” says Freeman. She worries that giving final power to local lawmakers could put people’s lives at risk. After all, as she notes, legislators are

not in session year-round, meaning that they could be slow to respond to a public health emergency. “If you aren’t able to act quickly — immediately — then people get sick, people die, while you’re messing around making this decision.”

As the delta variant spreads throughout the U.S., health officials are once again wondering how their communities will react. Freeman fears another wave of officers might get pushed out of their positions, or end up resigning or retiring early to escape harassment and intimidation.

So far, in the Flathead, Russell says he has yet to face the harassment Robinson did. But even if he does, both Russell and Robinson remain hopeful that the most vocal extremists are not in the majority in their community. “The loudest people are the fringe,” says Robinson. Russell mentioned a petition he received, where the signees stated that they were against all public health actions. Forty-eight people signed it; Russell contrasts that with the 18,000 Flathead residents who have been vaccinated so far. “I’ll put my 18,000 people that want to get vaccinated, and have, against those 48 any day,” he says.

For now, the pandemic drags on, along with ever-changing guidance on how best to protect the nation’s citizens. Freeman says militia activity is ramping up again; in the #StoptheMandate group, organizers are encouraging their followers to pressure the Central Health District Board. But the work of public health continues. As the end of the workday neared, Russell excused himself to answer some emails. As we said our goodbyes, Robinson turned to Russell. “If it goes into another cycle of vaccinations, I’d be happy to help you vaccinate,” she said. “Or if we see uptakes in cases and you have to do some more clinics, just call me. I’d be happy. I’m here.” ☀

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In a tent set up on Bureau of Land Management land near Carbondale, Colorado, Steven Fitch holds up Amoriah, the baby, while his wife, Kunisha Fernandez, finishes preparing dinner for the evening during a rainstorm. Two of their other children, Caliyah and Prince'JahZiah, hang out by the small heater.

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a dark shirt, standing inside a large, light-colored tent at night. She is leaning over a small white table, cooking with a pan. The tent is illuminated from within, and the background is dark. The title 'MAKING A HOME OF IT' is overlaid in large, bold, white capital letters on the right side of the image.

MAKING A HOME OF IT

As the housing crisis in the West deepens, more people are choosing to dwell on public lands.

By Sarah Tory | Photos by
Blake Gordon (Colorado) and
Max Whittaker (California)



K

UNISHA FERNANDEZ, her husband, Steven Fitch, and their four children had spent five years in Las Vegas when, last spring, Fernandez saw a YouTube video of a family camping full-time: “A day in our life! Family living in a tent.” Fernandez found it captivating — four girls and their dad walking on the beach; dinner cooked on a campfire overlooking the ocean; life under starry skies.

Fernandez watched another video like it and then another, over and over again, like a playlist, and she thought about how her family had never gone camping together. That night, she shared it with Fitch. “Wouldn’t it be cool if we did this?” she asked.

Fitch agreed. The two met in San Diego, where they both grew up. Fernandez, 31, worked remotely for a company that retrieved medical records, while Fitch, 33, worked as a mover, but they struggled to find a two-bedroom apartment for less than \$2,000 a month. In 2016, they moved to Las Vegas because they heard housing was cheaper there, but after a few years, rents started going up in Las Vegas, too, and Fernandez found the heat excruciating.

It was a system neither Fernandez nor Fitch wanted to be a part of any longer. “Why do I have to pay so much just to have somewhere to live?” Fitch thought. “What kind of life is that?”

In the YouTube video, they glimpsed an alternative — a way to get out. So they showed it to their kids: Caliyah, 9, Prince’Ellijah, 5, Prince’JahZiah, 1 1/2, and Amoriah, 4 months old at the time. “How would you like to live outside full-time?” they asked.

Fernandez and Fitch were prone to spontaneity, and a week later, they had sold most of their possessions and traded in their car for a used minivan. They bought two large floor tents, six cots, camping chairs, a battery-powered shower head, solar lights, a fold-up table and a cooler. On June 5, 2021, they piled everything into their minivan and drove away from Las Vegas for good, heading toward the nearest green space on the map: Lake Mead.

First, they drove east to Utah, and then to western Colorado, into the Elk Mountains. A few miles from the town of Carbondale, down a rugged dirt road, they found a free primitive camping area — fire pits, no amenities — on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land. They set up camp on a large flat spot near a creek shaded by pine trees.

Fernandez was surprised by how much the kids loved their new life in the forest. Their clothes were often dirty and they got mosquito bites on their faces, but they could run around in the woods, picking up pine cones, collecting leaves, learning the sound a woodpecker makes and how water flows in a river. Instead of buying them toys, Fernandez was giving them experiences — and she liked that.

FERNANDEZ, FITCH AND their kids are part of a growing contingent of Americans living nomadically in vans, RVs and tents on U.S. public land. Most of those approximately 625 million acres are managed by federal agencies, including the BLM, the Forest



Service, the National Park Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Many tribal, state and municipal agencies also allow camping on their public lands. Most nomads opt out of established fee-based campgrounds in favor of free dispersed camping — also known as primitive camping, boondocking and dry camping — a time-honored tradition across the West that often involves driving up a forest access road to a pullout without toilets, running water or other amenities. The rules vary across the different land-management agencies, but most allow campers to spend 14 days in one location. For some nomads, camping is a lifestyle choice, popularized by Instagram hashtags and the possibilities of remote work. For others, though, it's a necessity owing to crises such as lost jobs, mental illness and housing costs.

Longtime vehicle-dweller Bob Wells, the creator of CheapRVLiving.com and a guru for nomads on tight budgets, sees nomadism as a response to deeper societal crises. There's no way to

*“Why do I
have to pay
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Prince'JahZiah checks on his little brother, Amoriah, as Fernandez tends to him at their campsite in Thompson Creek, near Carbondale, Colorado (left).

Caliyah helps Fitch as they gather wood from a fallen cottonwood to make a fire at camp for the night (center).

Prince'Elijah walks through the woods to the “secret” play area that he set up near the family's campsite (right).

track the exact number of nomads, but one indicator is Wells' website, which has surged in popularity since the 2008 recession, when 10 million Americans lost their homes. Wells was inundated with letters and emails from people saying, “I can't live anymore” — something that's continued as the country's affordable housing crisis has worsened.

If the recession shook the foundations of American societal norms — the belief that if you worked hard and saved money, you could have a stable middle-class life — the pandemic jackhammered the rest, said Wells, 66, who recently played himself in the Oscar-winning film *Nomadland*. “I think things are going to be very different going forward,” he told me, noting the “flood of people leaving California because it's so expensive and crowded.” And climate change, Wells believes, will only accelerate that trend. With wildfires and extreme temperatures, he said, “We're going to be a planet on the move.”

In January 2011, Wells held a gathering in the desert outside

of Quartzsite, Arizona, halfway between Los Angeles and Phoenix, for an event he dubbed the “Rubber Tramp Rendezvous.” That first year, 45 vehicles showed up. By 2019, an estimated 10,000 were there. One of Wells' most popular YouTube videos, *Living in a Car on \$800 a Month*, now has over 4 million views.

Whatever the motive, the growing presence of campers on public land is having an impact, from trampled vegetation and improperly buried human waste to trash piles deep in the woods. The cleanup costs incurred by nonrecreational campers in hotspots like Oregon's Willamette National Forest were as high as \$250,000 in 2018. Those biophysical impacts — as well as the growing threat of wildfires — spurred land managers to restrict or shut down dispersed camping in places like Colorado's Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests near Boulder, the Tahoe National Forest in California and the BLM's Carson City District outside of Reno, Nevada. As increasing numbers turn to the West's public lands for solace and escape, the conflicts



around dispersed camping are raising difficult questions over what exactly it means to camp, and what — and who — the public lands are for.

EVEN BEFORE the pandemic, land managers noticed a growing number of nonrecreational campers. A 2015 study found that Forest Service law enforcement officers and other officials in many parts of the U.S. were encountering a steady flow of people using public lands as a temporary residence. The largest share were transient retirees, followed by displaced families and homeless individuals. Nearly half of the 290 officers surveyed reported that encounters with nonrecreational campers had increased over time. Officers in the Rocky Mountain Region, the Southwestern Region and California encountered nonrecreational campers most often; more than half of the officers in both regions reported coming

across such campers at least once a week, as did 42% of officers in California.

The findings make sense in the context of America’s housing crisis and rising homeless population, said Lee Cerveney, a research social scientist with the Forest Service’s Pacific Northwest Research Station, which spearheaded the 2015 study.

Western states have some of the highest rates of homelessness, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s 2020 Homeless Assessment Report. California tops the list, with 161,548 people experiencing homelessness — 28% of the entire country’s unhoused population. Mental health problems, addiction, childhood trauma, interaction with the criminal justice system and poverty all play a part in whether someone becomes homeless. But the main reason? They can no longer afford rent.

In the San Francisco Bay Area,



A camper trailer set up on public land near Mammoth Lakes, California. Dispersed campers must move every 14 days (top).

A sign marks a part of national forest land near Mammoth Lakes where dispersed camping is not allowed (above).

for instance, the median price of a home was over \$1.3 million in 2021 and the median rent as of August was \$2,795 for a one-bedroom apartment. Meanwhile, California’s homeless population rose 16% between 2007 and 2020. When the pandemic hit, the state rental market tightened and people lost jobs and income. In Marin County, the number of people living in cars and RVs nearly doubled between 2019 and 2020. During the same period, Sonoma County — where a series of devastating wildfires starting in 2017 has already pushed more people into homelessness — saw a 42% increase in homelessness among older adults, as well as an increasing number of people living in vehicles. “It’s become a strategy or alternative form of shelter,” said Jennielynn Holmes, chief programs officer for Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Santa Rosa, a nonprofit that assists the unhoused. “People

purchase a rundown vehicle and then park it somewhere and live in it for a number of years,” she said, often on city streets or in encampments on the outskirts of town. With dispersed camping banned in most urban areas, other long-term vehicle dwellers have left California entirely, living on the road in states where gas and other necessities are cheaper.

For Cervený, the survey was illuminating in less tangible ways, too. All the websites and social media promoting nomadic lifestyles seemed to ignore the more troubling social, economic and environmental conditions behind the trend. “What does it say about our society that so many people are feeling like they don’t have options for living except to move around in an RV or a camper?”

THE LAST TIME Dirk Addis paid rent was May 2002. A month later, he moved from San Diego to Mammoth Lakes, a popular mountain town in the Eastern Sierra, to work in a gear shop. Even then, the town had limited affordable housing options, so Addis decided to try living out of his van for the summer on the Inyo National Forest, which encompasses all but 4 of the town’s 24 square miles.

When I met Addis, 54, one afternoon for coffee, he wanted me to know that he is not homeless — nor does he even really “live” in his vehicle.

“I live on planet Earth,” he said. “I just happen to sleep in my van during inclement bouts of weather. Otherwise, I’m sleeping outside under the stars.”

Addis averages 200 nights a year sleeping this way. His cousin calls it NUTS: Nights Under The Stars.

But for all its romantic connotations, Addis’ lifestyle was born out of a housing crisis. Like Fitch and Fernandez, Addis is, what he calls, “homeless by design” — partly because the local housing alternatives are unappealing at best and nonexistent at worst.

Like most ski towns, the majority of Mammoth’s homeowners do

*“I live on planet Earth.
I just happen to sleep
in my van during
inclement bouts
of weather.”*

Dirk Addis poses for a portrait in his van in Mammoth Lakes. Addis has been dispersed camping in his van for 19 years.



not live in Mammoth. They live in Southern California and come to ski on weekends or spend a few weeks during the summer. In the hills around Mammoth, empty lots sell for over \$1 million, and new five-to-seven-bedroom mansions regularly sell for up to \$5 million. Most of the more affordable housing is in a series of densely packed condominiums and small A-frames built in the ’60s and ’70s near the center of town. But with Airbnb’s arrival 10 years ago, many of the second-home owners who previously rented their condos to locals switched to nightly rentals instead, exacerbating an already strained housing market. According to a report from Mammoth Lakes Inc., a local housing nonprofit, more than half of Mammoth Lakes’ households cannot afford market rate rents in the town.

Addis, who currently works as a maintenance man for a condo complex, is blunt about Airbnb: “It has fucked ski towns,” he said.

Addis quickly realized that he would have to work at least two, probably three, jobs, and spend at least half of his earnings on rent — most likely for a tiny studio apartment or a condo with multiple roommates.

“What the hell!” he said. “No!”

So Addis stayed in his van that winter. Then another winter, and another, moving every 14 days to a new site to stay within the laws. He was not the only one who saw the forest as Mammoth’s best available housing option. In the early 2000s, when Addis began living in his van, he estimated there were at most 20 people living on the forest during the summers, and five who did it year-round like him. Now, he said, there are roughly 100 people in the summer and probably about 30 during the winter, when it can snow 5 feet at a time.

WHEN STACY CORLESS, the District 5 supervisor for Mono County, moved to Mammoth more than 20 years ago, a longtime local named Hal lived in the woods year-round. Other Mammoth residents

thought he was quirky and rugged, but as more people took up residence in the forest, Corless saw people's opinions about forest living change.

"Somehow that was OK, when it was just this one individual," Corless told me. "Now it's less palatable to residents." She recited the complaints she's heard in recent years — trash, human waste, illegal campfires.

During the summer of 2020, rising tensions over dispersed camping exploded when recreational visitors arrived to the Eastern Sierra in unprecedented numbers, eager to escape their pandemic-induced confinement. The surge of visitors combined with the unhoused put dispersed camping in the city's crosshairs.

On Labor Day weekend, the Scenic Loop, a road that circles through Forest Service land just outside of Mammoth, was packed with RVs and wall-to-wall campers. "It looked like a homeless encampment," said Corless. That Friday

evening, the Creek Fire started near Shaver Lake, roughly 40 miles away. Mammoth residents watched as an apocalyptic-looking smoke cloud formed in the sky above them while the nearby forest grew more and more crowded with weekend dispersed campers. Corless' phone started ringing. "You've got to do something," people said. "There are so many people on the Scenic Loop — get the sheriff out there!"

For Corless and other local officials, the chaos of last summer jolted them into action. The general feeling was, "We gotta figure this out," she said.

Last winter, Corless and other Mono County officials joined their counterparts from neighboring Inyo County on a 65-person Zoom call. Together, they came up with a plan to deal with the recreational visitors. The end result was a multi-pronged approach: a free app showing the entire Eastern Sierra with clearly marked boundaries indicating where dispersed camping was allowed and where it was

not; an outreach campaign called "Camp Like a Pro" to educate visitors about the rules of responsible dispersed camping; volunteer stewards to remove fire rings and talk to campers; new porta-potties and dumpsters in popular areas; and a more consistent enforcement strategy among the various law enforcement agencies.

DESPITE THOSE EFFORTS, the previous summer's surge put an unwelcome spotlight on people living in the forest around Mammoth. As the summer of 2021 approached, some Mammoth residents began calling for an outright ban on dispersed camping in the Eastern Sierra — for visitors and locals like Addis alike. In late April, Chris Leonard, a teacher at Mammoth High School and a fly-fishing guide who's lived in Mammoth for 17 years, penned an op-ed in the local newspaper after counting 10 RVs and vans camped in the forest east of town.

"This is a major issue," he wrote, noting that in summer 2020, Inyo National Forest was "overrun" with dispersed campers who might leave behind trash, drive through areas not meant for vehicles, harm or disrupt wildlife, and create major forest fires. Already, the Mammoth Lakes Fire Department had been called to the forest twice in the previous two weeks that summer to put out abandoned campfires.

"The threat is huge," he added. "It is also very, very unsightly."

One afternoon in Mammoth, I met Leonard, who has a small fish tattoo on the left side of his neck and a direct, no-nonsense vibe. When I asked him about the op-ed, he acknowledged that he had been too extreme. "It was not the correct approach," he said. "I realize that now."

Leonard told me that the new efforts to manage dispersed campers, plus a decrease in visitors compared to last summer, had helped soften his views. Still, he considers the RVs, in particular, an eyesore. He offered to drive me out to a popular dispersed camping

area — a wide basin east of town near Hot Creek, one of his favorite fishing spots.

We stopped at a pullout overlooking the creek. Leonard pointed to a group of RVs parked off on a hillside. "So, it's an unofficial RV campground," he said. "Is it right, or is it wrong? I don't have the answer to that question. I'd prefer they're not there, but they're there."

Later, he admitted he has the luxury of saying all this as a homeowner in Mammoth. "It's easy for me to be up on the pedestal being like, 'Get the fuck out of the forest,' when I can go home to my house every night," he said.

Recently, Mono County voted to ban overnight camping in the parking lots of county parks and on paved roads. Corless worries the ordinance will push people living in the forest farther from town, instead of solving the problem. Mammoth, like many mountain towns, has not protected its existing low-cost housing or built additional units to the extent necessary. A few years ago, Mammoth purchased land in the town's center for more affordable housing, but those units won't be ready for another couple of years. "You can't catch up from 40 years of policy that didn't address housing needs in a year," said Corless.

FOR FITCH AND FERNANDEZ, nomad life turned out to be more challenging than it looked in the videos. A week after they arrived, they piled in the minivan for a day trip to some nearby hot springs. When Fitch pressed on the gas, the car didn't move — the transmission had blown. Their campsite had no cell service, so Fernandez walked partway into town to call Triple A, but their car was too far from a main road for a tow truck.

Without money for a new car, they were effectively stranded. This was not something Fernandez anticipated when she dreamed of their new life, but she told herself that everything happens for a reason.

Instead of moving around as planned, they stayed where they

"It's easy for me to be up on the pedestal being like, 'Get the fuck out of the forest,' when I can go home to my house every night."



Chris Leonard poses for a portrait while guiding for fly fishing on Hot Creek near Mammoth Lakes, California.

were. Fitch found work as a mover in Carbondale so they could afford to buy a new car. For the first few days, he commuted the 18 miles roundtrip from their campsite into town using a bike someone gave him — until his boss discovered he didn't have a car and loaned him a moped. Meanwhile, Fernandez cared for the kids back at their campsite.

One afternoon, I visited. Fernandez emerged from the tent looking tired — Amoriah, normally an easy baby, had been crying all morning. Fernandez popped a marshmallow into her mouth and handed Amoriah to Fitch. Together, we walked down to the creek, which was the color of chocolate milk after the recent monsoon. The storms had surprised them. “People told us Colorado was dry,” Fernandez said.

The last week of July it rained every day. The rutted road down to the campsite became so slick with goopy mud, that Fitch couldn't get to work. He lost his job. A few days later, a BLM law enforcement



Everything in the forest is part of the children's playground, including the family van. Here, Prince'Elijah starts a game of climbing, while Prince'JahZiah is helped up by his stepsister, Caliyah.

officer told them they had stayed there too long and had to leave. Fernandez, who was alone with the kids, tried to explain their situation, but it didn't matter. The rules were the rules.

The next day was Fitch's 33rd birthday, but there was no time to celebrate; they had to figure out their next move. It felt like they

were getting evicted, Fitch said. “We were getting kicked out with no transportation and had no place to go,” he told me.

I asked if the setbacks had made them reconsider their decision to live on the forest. If anything, Fernandez said, it had motivated them to keep going, to keep experiencing these wild places. This was land that belonged to them, but where they rarely saw other Black families like theirs. The situation reminded Fitch of a Lauryn Hill song he likes called “Get Out.” “I get out,” Hill sings, “I don't respect your system/I won't protect your system.”

A day later, the family rented a U-Haul and began moving to a new location. Next time, Fitch said, they would make their own campsite deeper in the forest, somewhere no one could find them. ☼

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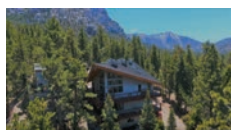


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The white savior's last stand

Well-intentioned white people trip over themselves in Jenny Shank's new story collection *Mixed Company*.

BY ALEX TRIMBLE YOUNG



COLORADO-BASED WRITER

Jenny Shank's new short story collection, *Mixed Company*, is focused on the racial and class divides in her home state — even when the action takes place elsewhere. The first story, “L’homme de Ma Vie” (the man of my life) is set in Paris, France. The protagonist, Nicole, daughter of a Colorado ranching family, is married to Etienne, a French immigrant she met in college. “L’homme” unfolds as a poignant tale about the intimate negotiations of a binational marriage and the unspoken toll taken by intergenerational trauma. But moving underneath these themes is an unlikely Western.

Nicole's 3-year-old daughter Adele — perpetually clad in a cowboy shirt and boots — emerges as the story's central concern.

Nicole is visiting Paris in part to introduce Adele to Etienne's schizophrenic mother. In her intense anxiety about the emotional impact this visit could have on her daughter, Nicole imagines herself as the savior of her family and the hero of her own Western. “I would save Etienne and Adele both. I already had the cowboy hat. Adele would grow, learn, love, and thrive. She was born in Colorado, but she would belong everywhere.”

This desire for a cowboy (or in this case, cowgirl) hero who will redeem the damaged inheritance of Europe and transform the West is as old as the Western itself. It's also one of the themes that unites the stories in Shank's collection. In these tales, white women living in the greater Denver area attempt to reach out across the frontiers of race (and often class) in attempts to build a community that defies Colorado's reputation as a bastion of white privilege. In almost every story, the protagonists learn a hard lesson about the failures of the institutions — whether they're public high schools, not-for-profits, or universities — that Americans have relied on to bridge racial

divides since the civil rights era.

One of the most provocative stories, “La Sexycana,” opens on Charlotte, a middle-aged white woman working in local journalism. Charlotte discovers that a woman she had once mentored in a “Big Brothers and Sisters” type of not-for-profit program, Araceli Ramirez, has turned to online sex work (under the nom-de-Only-Fans “La Sexycana”) to pay her way through college. This discovery leads Charlotte to reminisce about the awkward yet hopeful outings and tutoring sessions during which she felt like she was making a connection with her working-class Latina mentee.

Like so many of *Mixed Company*'s stories of white intentions gone awry, Charlotte's tale climaxes with a cross-cultural showdown that is equal parts devastating and cringe-inducing. I won't spoil her nightclub confrontation with “La Sexycana,” but suffice to say it doesn't end with Charlotte's triumphant fulfillment of her white savior dreams.

“Charlotte figured out that doing something the whole world claimed to believe was worthwhile

didn't actually mean that it was,” the story concludes. Similar realizations come to other protagonists in *Mixed Company*: the white adoptive parents who painfully watch their Black son pull away from them; the white public school student who realizes that the diverse school she is bused to is hardly a model of interracial harmony.

Mixed Company is full of such compelling if occasionally toe-curling tales of botched attempts at interracial outreach, but it sidesteps the ongoing presence of white supremacist violence and attitudes in the West. Nor does it bring to life the long tradition of resistance taking place on the other side of the racial frontier — from the ongoing struggle of Ute, Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples for their homeland, to Corky Gonzales and the Crusade for Justice, to the Black Lives Matter protests in response to Elijah McClain's death — that have made space for people of color in the Denver area since the settlement's founding. Shank's seemingly benevolent white protagonists are revealed to have unconscious and deep-seated biases, but the forces that produce such prejudices

Mixed Company: Stories

Jenny Shank

245 pages, softcover: \$22
Texas A&M University Press, 2021.



A woman holds up a sign depicting Elijah McClain playing the violin during last year's march against racism and police violence, in which protesters walked five miles from Aurora to downtown Denver. **Eli Imadali**

go largely unexplored.

To acknowledge this omission is not to identify a shortcoming in *Mixed Company* as much as it is to locate the collection in its moment. Most of the stories in *Mixed Company* were written in the two decades leading up to the sea change set into motion by the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. They give us a revealing glimpse of white life in a multiracial city whose tensions are clearly building toward a rupture. In her most affecting stories, Shank's protagonists come to the realization that they have been following a time-worn script in which they play the part of Western hero on a racial frontier. They're forced to confront this script as part of the problem, even if they can't quite grasp what can or should come next. In their failures, white readers should painfully recognize aspects of our own. ✨

ESSAY

Sightings

What we share and what we keep quiet in small mountain towns.

BY ANA MARIA SPAGNA

FOR MANY YEARS, in this tiny mountain town, we avoided certain signs. Oh, we had trailhead signs and wooden slabs on brush-hidden driveways adorned with family names. But there was an unspoken rule: No signs for political candidates. Even when a neighbor ran for the state Legislature and his face graced fence-line billboards elsewhere in the county, we didn't see many here. Why? There was no need. With fewer than 100 year-round residents in our remote corner of the Northwest, we knew where everyone stood. Or we thought we did. We just didn't want to know. We needed each other too much to risk conflict.

Until last year. Everywhere you turned in 2020, you saw signs. On barns, on bumpers, painted on asphalt, dragged by a prop plane. Candidate names and Confederate flags, rainbow stripes and coiled snakes. One color for the country, one for town. Lines drawn. Curtains closed. The inevitable result, perhaps, of long-suppressed anger.

By the time of George Floyd's murder, tensions ran high. Disputes over masks had moved past clenched-jaw truce to all-out screaming matches. Friendships were lost. When a few people decided to gather in support of victims of police violence, my wife and I thought long and hard before making a sign. I worried: Would the sign amount to virtue signaling or worse, needling neighbors who'd choose not to attend? What about the unspoken rule? Didn't I care about peace in my community? Yes, but this sign was not for a candidate or an issue. The sign would signal support for people's very lives. I thought about how it would've felt if, a decade earlier, during debates about our love for each other, we'd seen signs of support. It would've meant the world.

We painted a sign, took it to the protest, and left it up where we'd gathered along with a smattering of others. Someone took it down. We put it back. Eventually, the sign disappeared. Let me tell you: I was very angry.

I moved soon thereafter for a short-term job across the country. Eight months was the longest time I'd spent away in more than 25 years. I returned eager for a new start. Mask mandates had lifted. Election season had passed. Most delightfully: Animals appeared everywhere.

I'd forgotten how wildlife sightings create community. A few years ago, I came upon a wild turkey running between four-foot-high snow berms. Except we don't have wild turkeys. I told the story shyly at a dinner party. *I saw it too*, my neighbor cried. *I saw it, too!* Once, in midsummer, I came upon a mountain goat walking the same stretch of road. Mountain goats don't visit the valley floor when the temperature's over 90. Not usually. Not ever. I pulled my Tercel next to a Dodge Ram and rolled down the window. *Did you see?* I asked. *Did you?* the driver asked. We shook our heads, grinning. One winter, trumpeter swans showed up on the lake. In the post office, ever since, swans dominate every conversation: *How many did you see today?*

This early summer, we saw more fawns than usual, more rattlesnakes, more bears: a blond with black haunches, a cinnamon yearling, a big black male sitting mid-road in the dark. River otters on a dock. Ermine in the woods. Harlequin ducks riding rapids. Some we learn about secondhand. Four new fisher kits somewhere in the county. Cougar, bobcat, elk and wolverine: camera-caught and ghostly.

Why so many? Maybe the pandemic gave nonhumans silence and space, a chance to reproduce? I doubt that's true. What's new is we're out of the house. We're talking again. There aren't more animals, just more sightings, more casual conversations, more connections. I am relieved.

I am also worried. We've heard rumors of other sightings, animal visitors so unwelcome I dare not name them. If they move among us, what will become of our common ground? We'll have to confront conflict again. We'll take sides and take stands, as our consciences dictate, as we must, and we'll hope the frayed thread between us can hold. After all, fire season is now upon us, when we need one another more than ever.

Meanwhile, a small fawn hops on spindly legs, skitters down the road, and trails its mother into dense brush. Keep moving, I think: Grow stronger, outwit predators, avoid hunters. Nothing's easy for this tiny unspeakably beautiful creature. I look around to see if anyone's sharing the moment: *Did you see?*

This time, it's only me. ✨

The time of the Indigenous critic has arrived

Now that the industry is finally greenlighting Indigenous films and TV series, Indigenous critics ought to lead the conversation.

BY JASON ASENAP



Jolene Yazzie / HCN

TYPICALLY, WHEN IT'S TIME for the Q&A portion of a film screening, a few people duck out early; that's just how it is. But you can usually count on good responses from those who stick around. Usually. One night in Colorado, though, things went a little differently. I was with my cast-mates at the 2017 Durango Independent Film Festival, waiting for a Q&A session for our film *Chasing the Light*. Directed by Blackhorse Lowe, it's an artsy, hilarious, brash modern work that deals with heavy themes in funny ways. At the start, the protagonist, Riggs, wants to kill himself, but his friends knock him back into reality. In one sequence, when he tries hanging himself, one of them stops him, and they down-

play the incident as autoerotic asphyxiation gone awry. Shot in black-and-white, *Chasing the Light* demands a certain patience. The first 20 minutes slowly set the tone, then the film leads you down a path of misadventures in Albuquerque and the modern Southwest.

The 50 or so people at the Durango festival that day probably watched a film much darker than they expected, especially since it was part of the "Native" program. But that night was supposed to be our reward for getting to make the film, in a way. I considered myself friends with everyone involved in *Chasing the Light*, and I was excited that we could all drive to the screening. My character — named Doral, like the cheap cigarettes — was

pretty sleazy, and I couldn't wait to see the audience's reaction.

That is, until a white woman told us all onstage, in front of the crowd, that we were *not* good representatives of Native work. A *white lady* told us this. I sat there, biting my tongue. What I *wanted* to say was that while she surely had her own opinions — many, no doubt, derived from Hollywood — about what Indigenous narratives could and should look like, as far as we were concerned, speaking as actual Indigenous filmmakers, she could kindly fuck off. Instead, I deferred to the director, figuring it wasn't my place. Blackhorse, of course, was used to this sort of thing, or more skilled in the art of diplomacy, and he patiently tried

to explain his work to the woman, describing what he was doing with narrative and story. At least, that's how I remember it. Honestly, I was so angry that I sort of erased this part of it from my memory.

In 2021, with shows like *Rutherford Falls* and *Reservation Dogs* beginning to break through to the mainstream, it's important for Indigenous critics to rise to the occasion and critique these works as only we can. Because in our absence, and even in our presence, the kind of mistaken ownership of the Indigenous narrative that I witnessed in Durango will constantly have to be reckoned with. The false tropes and stereotypes long propagated by major studios have only been amplified

by critics and audiences conditioned to misunderstand what we're doing — both in revealing our humanity as Indigenous people and fulfilling our mission as artists. These must be dismantled before you can even begin to do the work of actual criticism. Indigenous creators come from a background of Indigeneity, and Indigenous critics understand Indigeneity and can provide insight that non-Indigenous critics might overlook, or even romanticize. You will never hear me accuse another Indigenous filmmaker, as that white woman did, of not being the right kind of “representative.” You might hear me accuse an Indigenous filmmaker of being corny, but that's something else entirely. As we work at dismantling misconceptions, we must keep in mind that Indigenous work deserves the same respect and intellectual discussion that any other work does. Simply being a cheerleader isn't enough — either for us or for the work itself.

In early 2019, Tristan Ahtone, who was then *High Country News'* Indigenous Affairs editor, had an idea. *What if we did an Indigenous film review every month for a year?* Up to that point I'd written a piece or two about film for HCN, but a review every month seemed ambitious. I liked the challenge, but had to ask Tristan: *Are there enough Indigenous films to get us through a year?* I still had contacts from my time as a fellow at the Sundance Institute, from my own short films and from working on other productions. Screening my work at film festivals over the years expanded my horizons as well. But writing about Indigenous film every month for a full year — could it be done?

I shook the tree. Turns out that 2019 was a good year for thought-provoking Indigenous films. Filmmaker Jeffrey Palmer finally gave fellow Kiowa citizen and renowned writer N. Scott Momaday the cinematic profile he deserved in his documentary, *Words from a Bear*. Momaday's regal persona is made for the screen, and in my opinion he's

never received enough media coverage. Tantoo Cardinal made an amazing comeback in Darlene Naponse's edgy film, *Falls Around Her*. Naponse devotes a film to an older female Native rock star whose life is full of romance and intrigue. Show me another film like this, and I'd watch it, too, gladly. (There isn't one.) Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers and Kathleen Hepburn co-directed an experimental film with a long title, *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* — a film that, frankly, challenged my sensibilities. It threw itself headfirst into the concept of telling a story in real time, and while I wasn't entirely sold on the idea, it reminded me of something I think about to this day: Good art, or at least thought-provoking art, ought to make you react, perhaps in binary ways. Love it or hate it, but *talk about it*. Mediocrity is death, and it's for squares.

With seven pieces over 12 months, Tristan and I came pretty close to meeting our initial goal. But the number was less important than the fact I got to spend that year looking at these films from my own perspective, which is decidedly Indigenous. The Indigenous films and TV shows of today, unlike those of the past, don't feel like they have to show all their cards at once. They can spread their ideas out over a season in a series format, or exploit the freedom of a film or documentary to ignore the once-obligatory industry diktat that forced us to water down and generalize for the comfort of non-Indigenous audiences. Studying TV in the Institute of American Indian Arts' ABC program in 2006, I remember the creative executives who parachuted into Santa Fe to critique us. “You have to think universally,” they said. The work I wanted to do was too Native-centric; there had to be commercials, after all, to sell stuff to white people, their biggest demographic. That's where the money was made, back then. In their view, there weren't enough Indigenous people to

spend money on the products being advertised. We had to think about the overall demographic; we had to think generically. Now, fortunately, cultural specificity is not only encouraged but rewarded. And, despite everything, there's still money to be made.

Heretofore, in my reviews, I've straddled a fine line. I try to write critically while recognizing that at times I'm writing about personal friends, some of whom are still coming up, still finding their voices. And I still create work myself; right now, I'm in post-production of a short film. I already know what it's like to face feedback; I've been to film festivals and been rewarded by people laughing and applauding my work. But I've also seen people criticize work I've been in, sometimes fiercely. And just as French filmmakers Éric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut wrote about French cinema for *Cahiers du Cinema*, we need Indigenous critics to encourage conversation. We need critics willing to look at our own Indigenous artists with a critical eye. We need to attempt to detach ourselves, to give ourselves enough space to be able to say: “This is good,” or “This is not so good,” and to explain *why*. Just as we Indigenous critics celebrate recent Indigenous breakthroughs in film and TV, we have to claim this space for ourselves, to express honest, thoughtful opinions on the work, and, when necessary, make mistakes and missteps, just as other artists do. The mainstream is new territory for us all.

My feeling is that good art can represent the collective thoughts and dreams of people and their communities. Often it's not formal, at times it can get messy, but that's what makes it beautiful. Good art breaks boundaries and makes you think, and talk, and argue about it.

And so, to answer the question I posed earlier, do we have enough Indigenous work to critically watch and write about? I think the answer now is yes, we do. We've reached that goal. High-fives all around. Now, how do we *write* about all of it? ❁

As we work at dismantling misconceptions, we must keep in mind that Indigenous work deserves the same respect and intellectual discussion that any other work does. Simply being a cheerleader isn't enough — either for us or for the work itself.

Heard Around the West

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

BY BETSY MARSTON

WYOMING

“Wealth can breed carelessness,” F. Scott Fitzgerald observes in *The Great Gatsby*. A telling example of this appeared in a recent *Jackson Hole News&Guide* story. Apparently, an unnamed Jackson resident moved away to the East Coast in 2018, *before* picking up the 16,000 shares of software-company stock he’d just bought. Then he somehow forgot about the whole thing, even though the shares were worth \$6.72 million. (It’s just so easy to let the small change slip through one’s fingers.) It took a three-year search by Jeff Robertson, the state’s Unclaimed Property Division communications director, to finally locate the stock owner; the money, he said, amounted to Wyoming’s “largest (recovered sum) ever.” Was the owner giddy with joy about the windfall? Not really. Robertson said the reaction was simply, “Yeah, this is definitely something that we need to take care of right away.” As Fitzgerald famously put it, “You know, the rich are different from you and me,” to which Ernest Hemingway even more famously replied, “Yes, they have more money.” That’s particularly true if losing track of almost \$7 million is not that big a deal.

COLORADO

In the fall, bears enter a period of binge-eating called “hyperphagia,” when they consume up to 20,000 calories a day to fatten up for winter hibernation. One particularly hyperphagically inclined black bear near Estes Park, Colorado, developed a useful knack for opening unlocked cars, entering eight vehicles in a row and success-

fully “scoring some food,” leaving behind nothing but a few muddy paw prints. Unfortunately, this kind of breaking-and-entering, if encouraged, amounts to “unnatural and unsustainable behavior,” a Colorado Parks and Wildlife staffer told the *Denver Post*, and it does not bode well for the bear if it’s found. Elsewhere, just outside Rocky Mountain National Park, another bear broke into a resort four nights in a row. But “he just disappeared, as soon as they came and set a trap for him,” said Sandy Garcia, co-owner of the Della Terra Mountain Chateau. A smart criminal always knows when the jig is up.

MONTANA

A grizzly near West Yellowstone became notorious for behaving badly last summer — ripping open tourists’ food containers and tents. At one point it even slept “on the

hood of a truck while a family took shelter inside.” But this time, the bear’s brazen behavior was rewarded: The bear, known as Bo, got a job. Bo now works at the Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center in West Yellowstone, where he helps test-drive, or test-destroy, the latest “bear-resistant containers,” to figure out how well they work. Whether it’s a cooler or a dumpster, “it’s Bo’s job to crack them,” reports KBZK-Bozeman. Center naturalist Tut Fuentesvilla said landing a gig like this was perfect for 450-pound Bo, whose future in the wild was precarious: “We knew the outcome was likely to not be good.” When he’s not finagling his way into bear-proof containers, Bo enjoys playing with some of the younger bears, Fuentesvilla said, and he’s always enthusiastic about exploring what the center calls the “enrichment” in his habitat.



Armando Veve / HCN

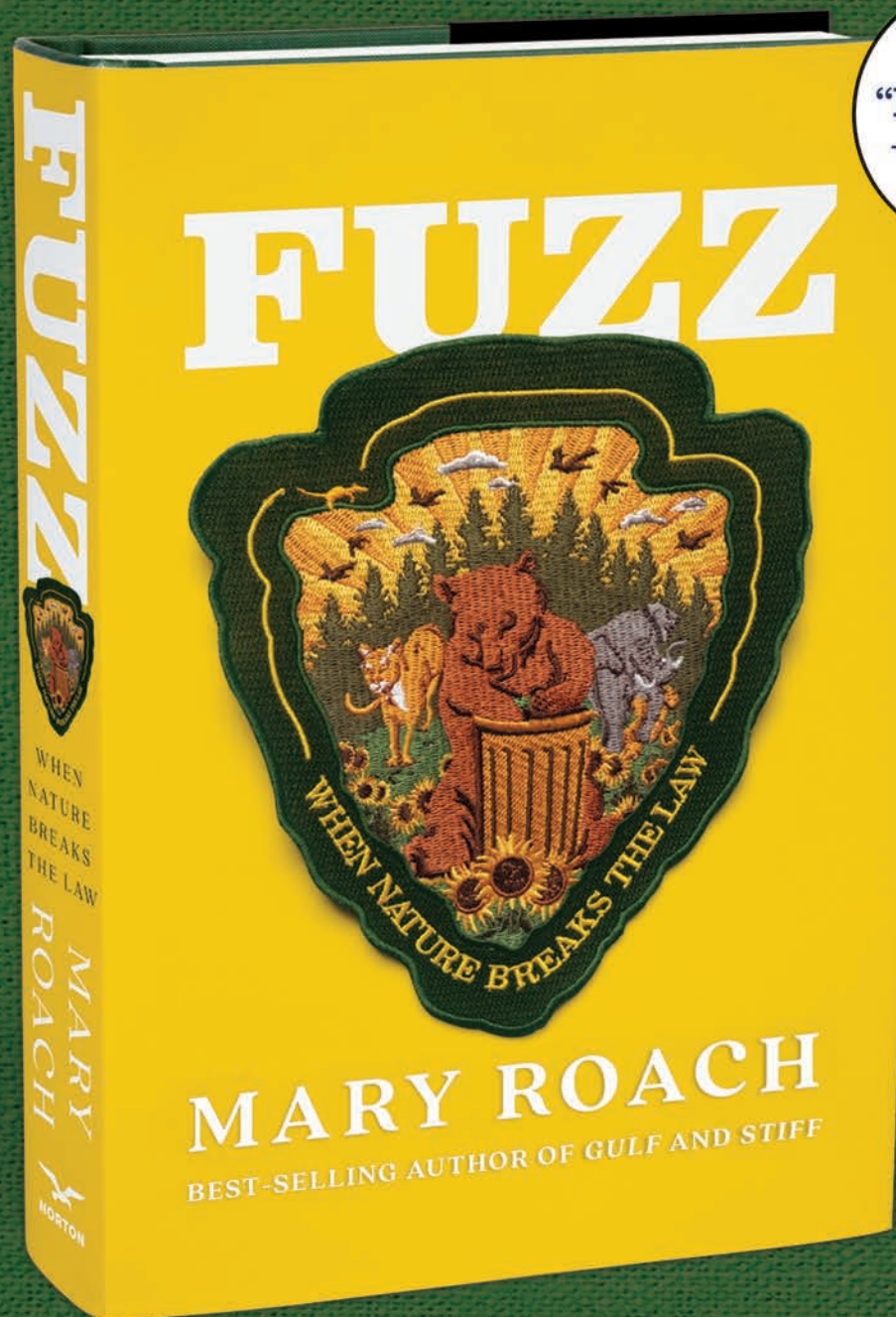
WASHINGTON

After emergency crews in Yakima, Washington, dragged a submerged blue Suburban from the Yakima River, the owner offered a bizarre explanation for how his car ended up there, KIMA reports. Its thermostat was broken, the driver said, so when he realized he needed to fill the radiator with water, he decided it was easier to just put the car in the water than to put water in the car.

CALIFORNIA

If you’re a naturalist working in the Southwest, life can be painful. Desert ecologist Jim Cornett, author of 40 books, told the *Los Angeles Times* that Joshua Tree National Park in Southern California is steadily losing its namesake Dr. Seussian “goofy” trees to heat and drought. Asked if climate change was the cause, Cornett said, “We’ve run out of other explanations. ... We are watching life on Earth struggle to adapt.” The retired Northern Arizona University professor found one species, thorny creosote, that’s still flourishing, “but he couldn’t imagine people would ... get out their cameras for a tour of Creosote Bush National Park.” However, there’s a healthy stand of Joshua trees, some more than 30 feet tall, in a rather unlikely place — Death Valley National Park. Cornett said this “spectacular forest” established itself at Death Valley’s Lee Flat, at a relatively cool 5,300 feet. For three decades, he’s seen young trees growing there, and he thinks Death Valley might become “the best place in California to see Joshua trees.” Cornett’s parting thought was hopeful: “In this one corner of a changing planet, for now, the trees are OK.” ☀

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#IAM THE WEST

LEIGHAN FALLEY
Glacier Pilot
Talkeetna, Alaska

I love the idea that the roads end somewhere, and that there's still this big intact biosphere. The only way to see the state, or get to anywhere in the state, is with an airplane. I use my flight tours as a platform to try and reach people who don't necessarily know about protected lands, or, say, climate change, or any of that. You know we're flying around in an airplane that's burning a lot of Jet A (jet fuel), but also there is this value of showing people the things that are worth protecting. People regularly say it's the most amazing thing they've ever seen, or burst into tears of joy. That happens at least once a week. If they don't know how amazing it is, then they're not going to care about it as much.

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