

High Country News

A black and white photograph of a herd of wild horses galloping across a vast, open landscape. The horses are in motion, kicking up dust or grass, and are silhouetted against a bright, hazy sky. The foreground is a dark, textured expanse of land.

Green groups are
starting to unionize

Training Indigenous
fire practitioners

The ecological legacy
of heatwaves

VISIONS OF
WILDNESS

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A cultural burn takes place at the Andrew Reasoner Wildlife Preserve near Eugene, Oregon. In October, 15 Indigenous fire practitioners attended trainings, both in-person and online, in preparation for the burn.
Jessica Douglas / HCN

Know the West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$37 a year, \$47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898. For correspondence addressed to High Country News, HCN or to the editors, permission to publish will be considered implicit unless specifically stated otherwise.

EDITOR'S NOTE



Loving the world despite everything

THE IDEA OF RESILIENCE as an objective used to annoy me. For a while, it was all anyone in the environmental movement wanted to talk about. Given that disruption is inevitable, people asked, how can we prepare for it? What can we do to make the apocalypse less grim and more laden with opportunity? How can we rebound from tragedy, build back better and somehow come out ahead? I think part of my resistance was that I wanted my apocalypse to be grim, as much as I wanted to pretend that it would never happen. But that was before COVID-19 brought mass death and prolonged isolation, before a wave of record-breaking fire seasons, before we passed the threshold of 400 ppm carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Now I imagine a future in which we are never not pivoting, a future that will require all the resilience we can muster, along with courage, resolve and a heavy dose of common sense. Perhaps there will be an opportunity to lighten our loads, both materially and mentally, so that we may become more nimble in the face of the unprecedented challenges we'll face: the mega-droughts, mega-fires, heat waves, storms, pandemics and famines. Perhaps when tragedy touches those who have thus far been spared, we'll learn true empathy at last, so that we may spend less time and energy on conflict and more on kindness.

When I think of the resilience that will be required to navigate the world to come and imagine the habits and sensibilities we'll need to prepare for it, I think about people who live close to the land — ranchers and farmers, field naturalists and Indigenous communities. They'll be ahead of the rest of us; they've learned the habit of paying attention, and how to act in concert with the nonhuman world. It takes hard work, but in practice it also looks a lot like affection, a devotedness behind every gesture and action. I will be grateful for any opportunity to discover better ways of doing things. Learning to live sustainably on this planet, and especially here in the West, is going to be necessary, sooner or later. You cannot use more water or timber or oil than there is. A reckoning is nonnegotiable.

Perhaps resilience is believing that there will be a kind of comfort in the discomfort, that our spirits will remain intact, that our capacity to love the world and one another cannot be diminished by hardship. In fact, maybe that capacity to love is the very thing that will get us through.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief

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Buffalo, wild horses and the politics of belonging on the Wind River Reservation.

BY STEPHEN LEZAK | PHOTOS BY RUSSEL ALBERT DANIELS

Betting the Ranch

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Cody Easterday wagered hundreds of millions of dollars on the price of beef. He lost.

BY LEE VAN DER VOO | ILLUSTRATIONS BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO

ON THE COVER

A large horse herd at the Wind River Wild Horse Sanctuary in Lander, Wyoming, on the Wind River Reservation. **Russel Albert Daniels / HCN**

Jason Baldes feeds his horses at his home in Morton, Wyoming. Baldes, a member of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe, and his wife, Patti Baldes, a member of the Northern Arapaho Tribe, manage bison herds on the Wind River Indian Reservation (*above*).

Russel Albert Daniels

The Sakura family, photographed at the Minidoka incarceration camp circa 1944: Chester, who was on furlough after completing basic training at Camp Shelby in Mississippi with the 442 Regimental Combat Team, Agnes, and their sons David, 8; Chester Jr., 3; and Gerry, 4 (*facing*).

Courtesy of David Sakura



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The fight over a windswept landscape

A green energy proposal in Idaho threatens memories of Japanese American incarceration.
BY KYLIE MOHR



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After the Northwest “heat dome” this summer, scientists are monitoring ecosystems for signs of ruin — or resilience.

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The affordable housing crisis outside Jackson Hole.

BY NICK BOWLIN

- The wealth abyss**

Income inequality proliferates across the West.

FACTS & FIGURES
BY JONATHAN THOMPSON
- What would a healthy Klamath River look like?**

If it wasn’t dammed, overirrigated and degraded by habitat loss, the Klamath would be a very different place. Under balanced conditions, anadromous fish disseminate marine-derived nutrients throughout the basin to create thriving networks of interconnected life.

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BY BRIAN OASTER

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- Bears Ears is more than a bargaining chip**

Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk unpacks the deeper implications — and limitations — of Biden’s national monuments proclamation.

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- Rekindling with fire**

An Indigenous writer reclaims her relationship with fire in the landscape of her ancestors.

ESSAY BY JESSICA DOUGLAS
- Mammalianorphism**

A biologist grapples with the emotional lives of wolves.

REVIEW BY TED KERASOTE
- #iamthewest**

Autumn Harry, Pyramid Lake Paiute, graduate student at the University of Nevada, Reno.

BY ALEJANDRA RUBIO

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HEARD AROUND THE WEST

LETTERS

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

RADIOACTIVE NEIGHBORS

I enjoyed “Radioactive Neighbors” (November 2021) immensely and was not surprised to learn that the government is on the side of the company rather than seeking to protect the lives and livelihood of Native Americans. I take issue with one statement in the article. Archaeologists have been aware of — and pleading the cases of — Indigenous people for decades. However, they are virtually all employed by the Bureau of Land Management and other federal and state agencies. Their reports have been modified by management to support the government’s positions, which are generally in support of business goals to develop resources at the expense of the local populations.

Henry W. Simpson
Layton, Utah

WHITE SANDS DISCOVERY

This is an eye-opening article (“The White Sands discovery only confirms what Indigenous people have said all along,” November 2021). Our country’s original founders are in much need of recognition, support and help in any way possible.

Wayne Blumberg
Fort Collins, Colorado

TOTALLY OFF BASE

I understand and applaud HCN’s effort to give Indigenous peoples a strong platform to express their views. You have had many fan-

tastic interviews with Indigenous scientists that I have thoroughly enjoyed reading.

However, the rant by Nick Martin regarding the White Sands footprint discovery was totally off-base. Oral history, while possibly suggestive of actual past events, is not definitive physical evidence.

I suggest that the honest way to have handled this situation would have been to present supporting evidence, followed by a peer review of other scientists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who are experts in the field. That is how real science is done.

At least one person at HCN should have understood that emotional intensity, hyperbolic rhetoric and a sense of grievance do not add anything to scientific discussion. You recently ran an article about the need to have rigorous criticism of Indigenous television programming. I suggest that you extend that reasoning to Indigenous science as well.

Nelson Vore
Centennial, Colorado

A MEANINGFUL PIECE

Nick Martin’s piece about White Sands is one of the most meaningful pieces I’ve read on the ways that science, academia and mainstream media conspire to exclude Indigenous peoples from our history and stories.

Fernanda Santos
Via social media

WHAT YOU CAN’T SEE CAN HURT

Thanks to Jonathan Thompson in the November issue for “What you can’t see can hurt.” I now understand that our natural gas distribution system is even more polluting than I thought.

Hard Chunk
Boulder, Colorado

High Country News always knocks it out of the park on infographics, and this is no exception. Thanks for making the importance of the Environmental Protection Agency and Bureau of Land Management’s efforts to cut methane emissions so clear.

Jon Goldstein
Via social media

NO CHOICE LEFT BUT TO FIGHT

The means and manner in which the Hmong and many other cannabis growers are growing cannabis in Shasta Vista are highly toxic and an environmental disaster (“No choice left but to fight,” November 2021). The racist vitriol is unacceptable; the environmental impact should be the news here. Correct the laws for taxation and establish environmental regulations that treat cannabis like any other agricultural crop.

Michael Otvos
Via social media

THE 1871 MURDER OF CHINESE ANGELENOS

Thank you for Wufei Yu’s article about the 1871 massacre of 19 Chinese Angelenos (“150 years ago, 19 Chinese Angelenos were murdered in California,” Oct. 22, 2021). We need to be reminded that unspeakable acts of violence occurred against different groups at different places and different times in our history. Perhaps we would, as a country, be more willing to confront current societal problems if we had learned about these unfortunate events when we were in public school, instead of relying on publications like HCN to inform us.

David Kapell
Hobe Sound, Florida

THE PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICER EMERGENCY

As a nursing home administrator in Washington state, licensed since 1979 and concerned about the condition of and the political fronts that public health has weathered and is now facing, I read Jane C. Hu’s article with interest (“The Public Health Officer Emergency,” October 2021).

The political infusion of right-wing folks who are abandoning science and reality in the face of knowledge, history and practice is increasingly scary and medieval. To deny facts and defame those who work to keep our society and environment in good health is an indication of poorly educated and frustrated citizens.

Ralph K. Allen Jr.
Nine Mile Falls, Washington

THE KLAMATH RIVER AND THE YUOK PEOPLE

I am writing to tell you how deeply moved I was by Brook Thompson’s article about the ongoing tragedy of the Klamath and her people (“The familial bond between the Klamath River and the Yurok people,” September 2021). As a person who has always felt deeply connected to the land, water and sky, I can empathize with the loss and suffering that she describes so eloquently. I only wish that there could be a solution imminent, but I fear that the alienation of Western “culture” from the natural world is so deep that for most it is irreparable. Thank you, Brook, for showing the consequences of such separation.

Stephen Wilder
Willow, New York

GREAT DEPTH AND UNDERSTANDING

We gift an ongoing subscription to our local library in Homer, Alaska, and love that Alaska gets more and more coverage in HCN’s pages. You tell stories with great depth, which gives us a greater understanding all the way around. Thank you!

Rika and John Mouw
Homer, Alaska



REPORTAGE

A temperature spike's lasting legacy

After the Northwest “heat dome” this summer, scientists are monitoring ecosystems for signs of ruin — or resilience.

BY JULIA ROSEN

DURING THIS SUMMER'S stifling heat wave, Robin Fales patrolled the same sweep of shore on Washington's San Juan Island every day at low tide. The stench of rotting sea life grew as temperatures edged toward triple digits — roughly 30 degrees above average — and Fales watched the beds of kelp she studies wilt and fade. “They were bleaching more than I had ever seen,” recalled Fales, a Ph.D. candidate and marine ecologist at the University of Washington. She didn't know if they would make it.

Never in recorded history had the Pacific Northwest experienced anything like the “heat dome” that clamped down on the region in late June 2021. Temperatures reached a withering 116 degrees Fahrenheit in Portland, Oregon, and 121 degrees

in Lytton, British Columbia — the highest ever recorded north of the 45th parallel.

Scientists said the event would have been “virtually impossible” without climate change. It killed hundreds of people, damaged roads and power lines, and devastated crops. It also caused widespread ecological fallout, the full extent of which scientists have yet to grasp.

Initial reports were sobering: A billion shellfish and other intertidal animals baked to death on the coast of British Columbia. The Portland Audubon Society declared a “hawkpocalypse” as it tended to scores of sick and injured birds. And in eastern Oregon, state officials estimated that tens of thousands of sculpin, a bottom-dwelling fish, perished in streams already throttled by drought.

Kelp beds are exposed during low tide along the Oregon coast. Organisms faced a stress test during this summer's “heat dome.” **Bazzano Photography / Alamy**

By fall, headlines and memories had faded, but the heat wave's impacts linger on. In fact, researchers have learned that short bursts of high temperatures can pose a greater threat to plants and animals than long-term warming, and may even increase the risk of extinction.

In one recent study, researchers looked at 538 species from around the world, nearly half of which had already disappeared in at least one location. They found that the doomed populations endured greater (and faster) increases in maximum yearly temperature than others. Surprisingly, though, they often experienced smaller changes in average temperature, said John Wiens, an evolutionary ecologist at the University of Arizona and a co-author of the study. “The most important variable is these hottest summer temperatures.”

Extreme heat can kill organisms outright, especially if they are also exposed to intense sunlight. Dehydration sets in and organs fail as enzymes stop working and proteins sustain damage. The trauma can make survivors more susceptible to disease and predation, and reduce or delay reproduction. Hot weather can also cost animals by discouraging them from foraging or hunting. And these events are happening more often: By 2040, heat waves are projected to become 12 times as frequent as in a non-warming world.

After the latest episode in the Pacific Northwest, researchers began tracking the damage to a variety of species and ecosystems, like coastal forests, which fared especially poorly. Scorched leaves turned hillsides sickly shades of orange, and trees already stressed by drought dropped their needles prematurely. But the deadliest impacts may be invisible, said Christine Buhl, an entomologist at the Oregon Department of Forestry: Thirsty trees, for example, may have suffered damage to their roots and vascular systems if they couldn't

pull enough moisture from the ground. “We will know in coming years how bad it was,” Buhl said.

Australia provides a grim preview. After a string of heat waves hit the western part of the country in 2010 and 2011, scientists documented widespread tree death, among other impacts, which later contributed to beetle outbreaks and wildfires, said Joe Fontaine, a fire ecologist at Murdoch University in Perth. Even now, he said, “you can still go around and find the legacy of that event.”

Yet heat waves may also help species adapt to long-term warming by driving rapid evolutionary changes, said Lauren Buckley, a climate change ecologist at the University of Washington. They can weed out unfit individuals, giving those that tolerate hotter temperatures an advantage. Scientists have seen evidence for such shifts in populations of Douglas fir and fruit flies. But “there's sort of a sweet spot,” Buckley said, between a stress test and a massacre.

It's too early to know whether the recent temperature spike hit the sweet spot for some — if any — Northwest species. On San Juan Island, however, Fales found a measure of hope. After the heat wave, Fales surveyed the damage to the kelp she studies and determined that while it had lost about half its biomass, most of the plants were still alive. Many mussels survived, too.

That may be because warm spring temperatures spurred them to mount defenses prior to the heat wave, Fales said, by producing heat-shock proteins that repair other damaged proteins, for example. But there's another possible factor: By celestial happenstance, summer low tides on the island always occur during mid-day, exposing intertidal organisms to peak temperatures and making it “a hotspot location,” Fales said. Perhaps the kelp and its neighbors had already begun to adapt. ☀



The fight over a windswept landscape

A green energy proposal in Idaho threatens memories of Japanese American incarceration.

BY KYLIE MOHR

DAVID SAKURA WAS 6 years old when the U.S. government imprisoned his family at the Minidoka incarceration camp in the high desert of south-central Idaho. He remembers his mother attempting to create a sense of normality for her children by taking him and his brothers for walks — through sagebrush and past rattlesnakes, armed guards and barbed wire — to picnic in the shade cast by a guard tower.

Now, energy developers are eying those same windy plains. Magic Valley Energy, an affiliate of LS Power, wants to build the 400-turbine Lava Ridge Wind Project, along with associated substations, roads and transmission lines, within and adjacent to Minidoka's historic footprint. The facility would more than double Idaho's wind-generating capacity, producing enough power for about

300,000 homes.

But survivors of Minidoka and their descendants fear that the project — with wind turbines taller than the Washington Monument, increased traffic during construction and the noise that accompanies energy production — will fundamentally alter the landscape, part of which is now a national historic site. The incarceration experience was desolate and isolated, they say, and interrupting the landscape with a wind farm will make it harder for visitors to understand what it felt like to be there as a prisoner. "I think it'll be completely distracting, disruptive and disrespectful," said Erin Shigaki, an artist whose father was born at Minidoka and whose maternal grandparents met there. *(Shigaki also created the photo illustration at left.)*

Sakura, Shigaki and other members and allies of the Japanese American community are pushing back on the 76,000-acre project, which would be located primarily on Bureau of Land Management land. During World War II, 13,000 people were imprisoned at Minidoka simply because of their ethnicity. Now, as state and federal governments aim to cut carbon emissions, the proposed wind farm raises questions about how the green energy transition is occurring, and whether some sites

should be off-limits despite the urgency of climate change.

Some descendants worry that the wind farm will affect how they connect to their family history. Julie Abo, whose mother was incarcerated at Minidoka as a child, visited the site in 2014. She thinks it will be harder to put herself in her mother's shoes with a wind farm looming nearby. "I was looking out and imagining what it would look like, that they had a similar experience," Abo said. "I was thinking of my mother being there, looking out, and living in that land and experiencing that land the way I was experiencing it, too."

There are concerns that the turbines will detract from efforts to educate the broader community about Minidoka, too, so that everyone might remember what happened there. "A big part of telling that story is for people to really feel what it was like to be there so many years ago," said David Inoue, executive director of the national nonprofit Japanese American Citizens League. He said the camp was put out in the "middle of nowhere" for a reason. "You lose that when you build a wind farm. ... If we're going to retell our history, we want to retell it in the most accurate way that we can."

Survivors also say the project's proposed location reinforces

a sense of powerlessness. "The project itself is another nail in the coffin of forces beyond our control that really affect who we are as a people," Sakura said. "We were transported, we were imprisoned by forces beyond our control and now our memory, our spiritual lands, are being assaulted by this voracious appetite of an energy industry and its investors."

DAVID SAKURA'S SON, Dan, is now spearheading opposition efforts as an advisor for the nonprofit education and preservation organization Friends of Minidoka. "The government would never consider putting hundreds of massive wind towers in the viewshed of Flight 93 National Memorial, the Sand Creek Massacre (National Historic) Site in Colorado or Gettysburg," Dan Sakura said. He and others would like to see the project moved, or, at the very least, composed of smaller turbines located farther from Minidoka. One hundred and two survivors, many in their 90s, and a handful of descendants sent the BLM a joint statement to that effect in October. And Friends of Minidoka recently became an official consulting party under the National Historic Preservation Act, in order to participate in meetings with the BLM and share information about the project.

Illustration by Erin Shigaki / HCN

Source photos: Participants at the 2019 Minidoka Pilgrimage, by Eugene Tagawa (center). Family portraits made during incarceration at Minidoka (bottom, pictured from left): the Tanaka family (Alice Tanaka Hikido and Mary Tanaka Abo in front), courtesy Alice Tanaka Hikido; the Sakura family (David Sakura in front, center-right), courtesy David Sakura; and the Shigaki family, courtesy Erin Shigaki. Top: View down a street in Minidoka, courtesy of the National Archives, photo no. 210-G-11G-414.

Magic Valley Energy thinks a wind farm and Minidoka can coexist. “We’re not looking to deface their site that they hold of great importance,” said Luke Papez, LS Power’s project manager. Still, LS Power already relocated the site once, due to potential impacts to sage grouse habitat and complaints from the residents of Dietrich, Idaho. The new site is less windy but still desirable, Papez said, and it lacks endangered species issues, though environmental groups are concerned about the turbines’ impact on birds of prey.

Magic Valley Energy hosted open houses in the nearby towns of Twin Falls and Shoshone this spring and said the National Park Service, which administers the historic site, has been involved in the process for over a year. The company did not, however, reach out to Friends of Minidoka directly.

Before it can proceed, Magic Valley Energy needs a right of way from the BLM. The authorization process began in fall 2020, as the agency started consultation with the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes and coordination with state and local governments, according to a BLM spokesperson. This fall, it began soliciting public comments and holding virtual meetings. Next, the agency will draft an environmental impact statement, which will lay out the project’s predicted repercussions and a range of alternatives. “They always talk about

an *environmental* impact statement, but in this case it should be an *emotional* impact statement, for the feelings of people,” said Lois Saito, a descendant of a Minidoka survivor. The BLM is expected to issue a decision by early 2023.

In the meantime, many survivors and descendants feel like they’re being forced to choose between fighting climate change and protecting their past. The struggle is reminiscent of one that happened almost a decade ago, when the city of Los Angeles planned a large solar energy project near Manzanar National Historic Site in central California, another former incarceration site. Following opposition, that project was put on indefinite hold. “We certainly recognize the need to do something, that we’re in an existential crisis around global warming

and the need to move away from fossil fuels,” Inoue said. “What we’re asking is: Do we always need to be doing these types of projects at the expense of minority communities and our history, our stories?”

Renewable energy experts say planning ahead would help the energy transition. Sarah Mills, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Michigan who studies how to predict opposition to wind and solar projects, said local, state and federal leaders should decide now which landscapes are off-limits to development rather than wait until a developer has already chosen a site. Alice Kaswan, who studies climate justice and climate change policy at the University of San Francisco School of Law, said, “We really don’t want to replicate the distributional injustice that existed under fossil

fuels, where communities of color and marginalized populations are experiencing a disproportionate burden from our fossil fuel economy.”

For now, Alice Hikido, who was incarcerated at Minidoka when she was just 9 years old, is participating in the process as best she can: by writing a letter pleading with the BLM to relocate Lava Ridge. Some of her earliest memories in that landscape flood back as she considers what to say. She remembers the heat, the dust and the wind, which blew dirt into every sliver of the room her family shared. “The wind out there is very powerful, that’s for sure,” Hikido said. “My whole feeling is, (how) can you make a choice between renewable energy and this desire to preserve a sacred place? There’s got to be another location.” ☀

“We were transported, we were imprisoned by forces beyond our control and now our memory, our spiritual lands, are being assaulted by this voracious appetite of an energy industry and its investors.”



THE LATEST

Teton bighorn fate

Backstory

According to biologists, backcountry skiers are one of the top threats facing an isolated herd of bighorn sheep in the Teton Range today. Research shows the sheep abandon areas frequented by skiers and rarely return, expending calories they need to survive the winter. In response, world-renowned athlete Kim Havell started avoiding sensitive areas and tried to convince others to voluntarily do the same (“When the love of skiing endangers wildlife,” March 2020). “We’re pushing wildlife out of their habitat,” she said.

Followup

In October, a working group of biologists proposed over 20,000 new acres of winter closures to protect the bighorn sheep. Some of the skiing community pushed back, despite the years of local feedback incorporated in the group’s proposal. Now, Grand Teton National Park and two national forests in Idaho and Wyoming must decide how to proceed. Renee Seidler, Jackson Hole Wildlife Foundation’s executive director, supports the closures, saying in a public meeting, “I don’t want to be part of the generation” that lets the mountain ungulates go. —Kylie Mohr

Growing pains

Unions at green groups are recharting the future of the environmental movement.

BY JESSICA KUTZ

A FEW YEARS AGO, Erica Prather, the national outreach representative for Defenders of Wildlife, and her partner allowed every piece of plastic they used for an entire year to pile up in their living room, spilling over into their garage. It was a reminder that their waste is permanent. They called the mound of Styrofoam containers, dog bags and other trash their “Pile of Petroleum Past.” As someone who cares about the state of the planet, it was an example of Prather trying to live her values.

She wants others, including her own employer, to live their values too. But it wasn’t until Bernie Sanders ended his candidacy for the presidency in 2020 that Prather moved to a different, more drastic form of action: “I remember this moment when I was weeping during his concession speech, and he was like, ‘There are ways that the progressive movement can move on,’ and he literally said, ‘Unionize your workplace.’”

And unionize she did. Prather used the organizing skills she’d honed for years as an advocate for endangered species and applied them at her own workplace, Defenders of Wildlife. Quickly, other employees jumped on board; they voted to form their union in September.

And they are not the only ones. Employees at several other green groups have successfully formed unions over the last year, including Greenpeace USA, the

Sunrise Movement, the Center for Biological Diversity and the National Audubon Society.

Environmental organizations have long sought to affect change outwardly — to promote biodiversity and stave off extinctions or to curb the impacts of the climate crisis. Now the organizations’ employees are turning to unions to change their workplaces from within, by fighting for higher wages and better benefits, and by forcing their organizations — whose leadership is predominantly white — to be more diverse and inclusive.

Green groups haven’t had the best track record in this respect. Earlier this year, a report produced by a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) consultancy firm hired by Defenders of Wildlife was leaked. Its contents, which detailed a “culture of fear,” were damning for the organization: The 144 employees surveyed described an unwelcoming environment for BIPOC employees, who experienced “tokenism, microaggressions, cooption of ideas” and bore the brunt of DEI work. In response to the report, Defenders’ president and CEO Jamie Rappaport Clark told *E&ENews* that the organization “is deeply committed to fostering a positive, inclusive and safe workplace where all voices are heard.”

The National Chapter of the Audubon Society, one of the nation’s oldest environmental organizations, is also aiming to improve representation. Tykee



Tykee James speaking at an Audubon for All rally in June outside of Audubon's Washington, D.C., office. **Courtesy of Tykee James/Audubon for All**

James, Audubon’s government affairs coordinator, started working at the nonprofit in 2018, the same year he co-founded a group for people of color. In 2020, he helped lead the unionizing effort at Audubon. “There needed to be a staff-led, staff-centered, POC-centered effort to support marginalized and historically excluded people in this organization,” James said. The group provided a novel opportunity for people to talk about their working conditions. “But being outspoken still felt risky,” James said. “One thing that we always feared was getting fired.” Unionizing felt like a smart next step. They won their election in late September.

James hopes Audubon’s union will help management create DEI initiatives and trainings that staff can support. “We can have an opportunity to provide feedback (on DEI) that’s meaningful and moving,” James said. “When workers don’t have a say, it’s the Black and brown, it’s the most marginalized, it’s the historically excluded people who feel those burdens first and worst.”

Both Audubon and Defenders of Wildlife are in the nascent stages

of their union efforts. They could take a cue from the Sierra Club, which signed a five-year contract with its shop, the Progressive Workers Union, in 2018. Prior to contract renegotiations, several employees — particularly women of color — were “seriously underpaid,” said Larry Williams Jr., who co-founded the Progressive Workers Union and worked there until recently. The union negotiated a contract that included pay raises, retirement and health benefits, and transparency around issues like how to get a promotion. Women of color at the Sierra Club also fought for a specific fund to be added to the contract to address inequities in pay and to cover the price of trainings and professional development, among other matters.

In a way, the motivations behind forming a union aren’t all that different from fighting extractive industries. And environmental workers are connecting the dots. “They recognize the exploitation of natural resources is just as bad as the exploitation of human resources,” James said. “If we stand up against that exploitation of the earth, we have to stand up against the exploitation of us.” ☀

Teton troubles

The affordable housing crisis outside Jackson Hole.

BY NICK BOWLIN

THE RESIDENTS OF the Rockin' H Mobile Home Park in Victor, Idaho, found eviction notices attached to their doors in June 2020. The park had recently been acquired by the business next door, a summer vacation getaway called Teton Valley Resort, which offers RV hookups, tipis, luxury cabins and a spa. These are boom times for Teton Valley's outdoor and tourism business, and the resort wanted to expand.

The residents were given 90 days to vacate — not enough time under a state housing law. Brian Stephens, an attorney with the Intermountain Fair Housing Council, which represents several of the families involved, noted that trailer park evictions present special issues. "There's a piece of property to move," he said. "You're not just leaving an area; you're finding a new place to put your home."

This was the issue for Mario and Celerina Hidalgo and their five kids. Their neighbors all left, but the family remained, fighting the eviction in court. In spring 2021, development began in earnest around the Hidalgo family's trailer: Bulldozers excavated trenches and toppled a tree outside their front door. A digger idled for several hours outside their window one day. Workers put up a chicken wire fence around their yard.

"We felt really scared and threatened. Not having anywhere to go, we felt like everything was closing in on us," Mario Hidalgo said in September. "It was terrible," added Dario, his 18-year-old son.

The new owner, Randy Larsen, framed most of these incidents as misunderstandings. He grasps why the Hidalgos are upset, he said, but city zoning laws forced him to build a sidewalk near the family's trailer.

Asked about the loss of affordable housing due to the park's closing, Larsen responded that seasonal workers use his RV spots during the summer; last winter, he said, he provided about 80 rentals for employees at Jackson Hole and Grand Targhee ski resorts. He also offered the Hidalgos and other families in the park free housing in a bunkhouse-style building on the resort. "I'm really honestly a guy that wanted to create some housing," he said. "There's a crisis here."

On that, Larsen and the Intermountain Fair Housing Council agree. For Stephens, this case is about more than one trailer park. Displacing working families to make way for vacation cabins is the Mountain West's housing crisis, distilled.

"This was one of the last affordable housing areas in Teton County," he said.

TETON VALLEY SITS JUST WEST of the Idaho-Wyoming border, beneath the jagged peaks of the Teton Mountains. The regional economy once relied mainly on agriculture, but today it's dominated by outdoor recreation and tourism, driven by Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks and the ski resorts dotting nearby slopes.

Over the mountains to the

east is Jackson Hole. Dubbed "a tax haven with a view" by local real estate firms, Jackson, Wyoming, attracts some of the world's wealthiest and most powerful people — including Christy Walton, widow of Walmart heir John Walton, and Google CEO Eric Schmidt — billionaires who flock to the area, snapping up multimillion-dollar mountain properties. This is due in part to Wyoming's lax corporate disclosure laws and lack of income, inheritance, estate, real estate sales or capital gains taxes. America's most extreme levels of income inequality are found in the Jackson Hole metro area.

A small army of service workers cleans the mansions, serves the drinks, runs the chairlifts, grooms the ski slopes and mows the lawns of the hyper-wealthy. For a long time, they could find an affordable place to live over the mountains and across the border, in towns like Victor or Driggs, Idaho. The mobile home park reflected this reality: All the residents were Latino families, and many, like the Hidalgos, worked for tourism-dependent businesses. Mario and Celerina Hidalgo moved to Teton Valley from Mexico in 1999, then worked packing potatoes and cleaning houses before they found better jobs in local restaurants. Recently, Mario Hidalgo noticed that affordable rentals were becoming increasingly scarce, even as more tourists seemed to visit every year.

The pandemic pushed this trend into overdrive. Part of this is the Zoom Boom — people with the option to work remotely have sent housing prices skyward in small towns across the mountain West. In a recent analysis of Zillow real estate data, Headwaters Economics, a nonpartisan research group, found a 15% increase in housing prices from July 2020 to July 2021 in Teton County, Idaho, which includes Driggs and Victor. Prices spiked to unprecedented levels in communities up to an hour's commute from Jackson. (Meanwhile, in Jackson, the market, somehow, continued to climb: The

overall sales volume through 2021's third quarter — \$2.166 billion — was more than double the previous high.)

This has implications for renters, too: Higher housing prices mean fewer people can buy, which leads to rental shortages. This is abundantly clear on the community's Facebook pages, which are almost entirely consumed with housing issues. In late September, one frustrated resident wrote incredulously about a tiny home, less than 800 square feet, that was selling for half a million dollars. The competition for rentals is so fierce that posts from prospective tenants tend to read like job applications, complete with references and professional headshots. Some applicants describe living out of their cars on public lands. Pet-owners fervently vow that their pets are well-behaved. Many emphasize that they are longtime locals, members of the community who would like to stay here, if only they could afford it.

Joseph Goddard, for example, who runs a small construction and landscaping business and snowboards on weekends, learned this summer that he would lose his housing in the fall. After months of searching, he eventually found a place. He said the Driggs rental market is noticeably worse than it was even just a year ago. "The market out here has gone all the way to the damn moon," he said.

This is not Teton Valley's first experience with a housing boom. In the early 2000s, the county approved and platted new developments in droves. Then came the crash of 2008. Thousands of half-completed "zombie" houses were left scattered across the valley. With housing prices once again going gangbusters, the community feels a sense of whiplash, said Anna Trentadue, an attorney for Valley Advocates for Responsible Development. (Trentadue is one of the lawyers representing the Hidalgo family.)

Some people want to encourage new development; others want



tighter regulations to promote the right kind of growth. Policy changes could be coming: Teton County's planning and zoning commission is holding hearings regarding a possible overhaul of the county zoning system, which is outdated and offers few tools for controlling development. But the process is moving slowly. The change is desperately overdue, Trentadue said. "The floodgates are open for speculative development; the whole community can see that."

BY MID-NOVEMBER, ONLY the Hidalgo family's trailer remained at what was once the Rockin' H Mobile Home Park; the family itself moved out in July. They knew they would have to leave eventually, Mario Hidalgo said; they felt "smothered" by the resort. But the legal struggle between the family and the resort isn't over. As of press time, the two sides were in the final stages of a potential settlement. And there is a

separate active complaint, alleging racial discrimination and unlawful evictions, filed on behalf of the Hidalgos and three other families, before the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The process has been ugly at times. Larsen alleged that the Hidalgo family failed to pay rent. According to documents reviewed by *High Country News*, however, the family provided rent checks through July 2021. Larsen then said that the resort returned the checks and accused the family of squatting. That same month, a resort employee told the Hidalgos they had three days to leave or the sheriff would evict them; the county attorney ultimately told the family's lawyers that she would instruct the local police force to run any eviction actions at the park by her.

Mario Hidalgo said they would have left earlier, but the local housing crunch prevented it. "We kept looking for a new place to rent or a



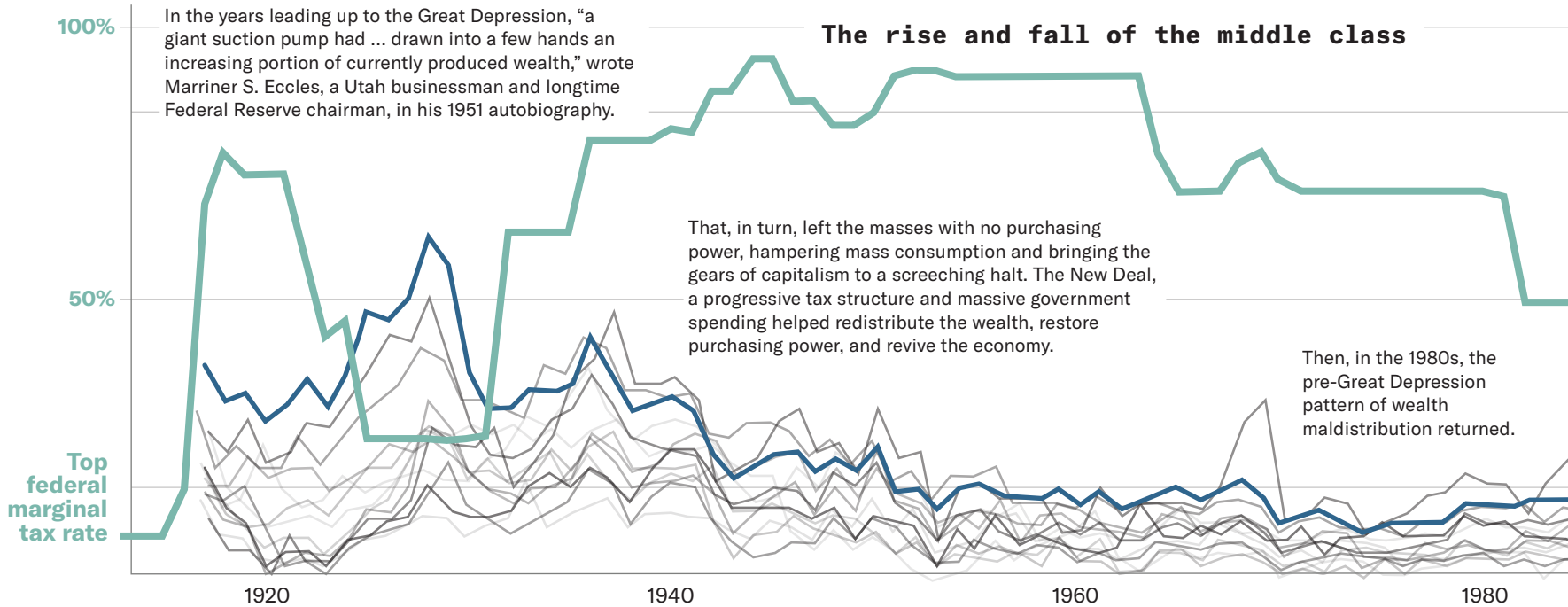
new place to move the trailer, but we couldn't find a place that would accept us to rent or find rent within our range," he said. Eventually, the family found a townhome in Driggs. At the trailer park, their lot fees were \$500 per month; the rent at the new townhome is \$2,300. It was the cheapest place they could find. ☀

The Hidalgo family's trailer, surrounded by construction for new development by Teton Valley Resort. The family moved out in July, even as they continued to fight their eviction (top).

Homes in East Jackson, Wyoming. The Jackson area has the highest levels of income inequality in the U.S. (above).

Jr Rodriguez / HCN

The rise and fall of the middle class



WASHINGTON Until the 1980s, Washington's gap between the rich and poor was among the nation's narrowest. While the state is still in better shape than the U.S. as a whole, inequality is rising, and there are pockets of severe disparities, including the Seattle metro area.

\$113 billion Net worth of Seattle-based Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, who owns a 29,000-square-foot home in suburban Seattle.

\$75 billion Amount Bezos' worth has increased so far during the pandemic.

King County, Wash.
Average income of the top 1%: **\$2,303,961**
Average income of the bottom 99%: **\$78,736**
Top/bottom ratio: **29.3**

OREGON Oregon has become increasingly unequal since the 1980s, but economic disparities remain less pronounced than in most other Western states. Still, there's a stark difference between the state's affluent areas and rural communities battered by the timber economy's decline.

CALIFORNIA The San Jose metro area, otherwise known as Silicon Valley, is the most economically unequal metro area in California, the nation's seventh-most unequal state. San Jose's top-earning tech bros rake in as much money in a few days as many farmworkers in neighboring San Joaquin County earn in a year.

\$41.52 million Silicon Valley-based ServiceNow Inc. CEO John Donahoe's 2017 total compensation.

\$1.35 million Median 2021 home sale price in the San Jose metro area.

9,706 Number of unhoused people in Santa Clara County, home of San Jose, in 2019.

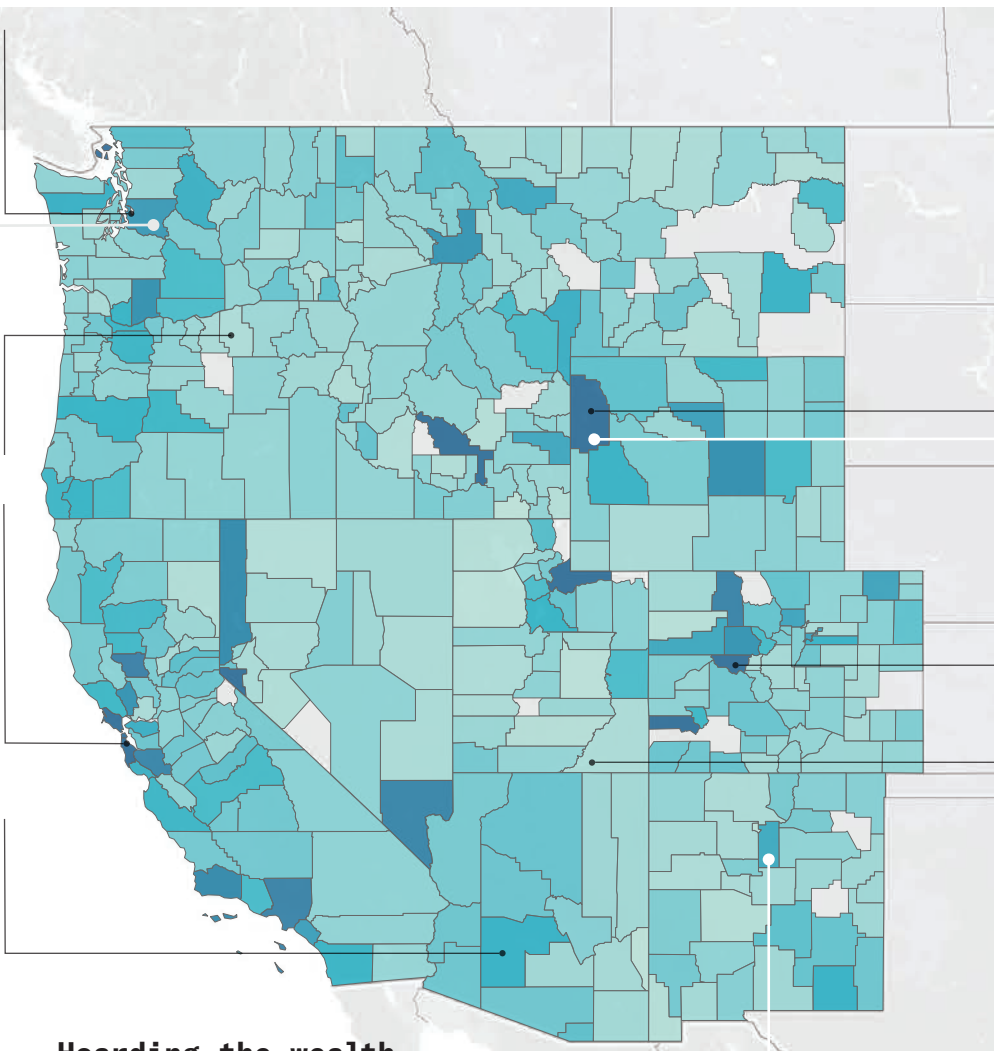
ARIZONA The greater Phoenix metro area provides one of the most striking examples of the way racial inequality, income inequality and thermal inequality combine to foment crisis. Huge wealth disparities exist from neighborhood to neighborhood. The wealthy flock to Arcadia, with its lush lawns and relatively thick tree cover, while lower-income people of color end up in Maryvale, Central City or Estrella, where little greenery can be found. Not only are the lower-income neighborhoods hotter, but the residents often can't afford air conditioning or the electricity needed to power energy-intensive units, meaning they disproportionately suffer from climate change-exacerbated extreme heat.

\$236,000 Median household income in Phoenix's Paradise Valley area.

323 Number of heat-associated deaths in Maricopa County, home of Phoenix, in 2020.

53 Percent of those that died who were unhoused at the time of death.

\$21.5 million Sales price in 2021 of a French-inspired, 12,000-square-foot villa in Scottsdale's affluent and guard-gated community of Silverleaf.



Hoarding the wealth

Average income of the top 1%, divided by the average income of the bottom 99%

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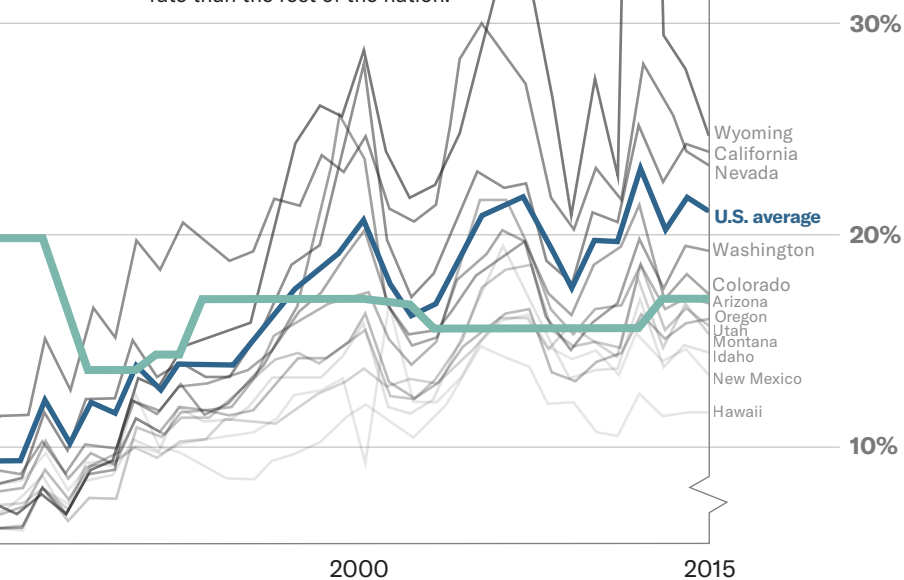
Data not available. See hcn.org for data on Alaska and Hawai'i.

Santa Fe County, New Mexico

Average income of the top 1%:
\$1,225,228
Average income of the bottom 99%: **\$49,688**
Top/bottom ratio: **25.3**

Once the most economically egalitarian region, the West has become more unequal at a faster rate than the rest of the nation.

Share of income captured by the top 1%



WYOMING For years, the ultra-rich have flocked to Teton County, Wyoming, for the skiing and the scenery, and because it's a refuge from taxes: The state has no income, estate, gift or corporate income tax, making it the most economically unequal county in America. When the first wave of the pandemic hit in spring of 2020, billionaires fled their urban residences to hole up in Jackson-area mansions, with some purportedly bringing their own ventilators and other medical equipment. Meanwhile, with average housing prices soaring to more than \$3 million, all but the wealthiest are getting squeezed out, creating a major labor shortage. The same pattern appears in other mountain resorts, such as Telluride, Colorado, and Park City, Utah.

Teton County, Wyo.

Average income of the top 1%: **\$22,508,018**
Average income of the bottom 99%: **\$158,290**
Top/bottom ratio: **142.2**

\$22.5 million Average income of Teton County, Wyoming's top 1%.

\$49,950 Average income of the bottom 99% in neighboring Teton County, Idaho, where many Jackson workers live.

26 Number of \$10 million-plus home sales in Teton County during the first nine months of 2021.

COLORADO Nearly all of Colorado, from its major urban areas to its mountain resort communities, is facing a housing crisis that's both a symptom of and a contributor to income and wealth inequality. Growing numbers of people who can't afford rent have flocked to tent communities and public lands on the fringe of tourist towns. The resulting labor shortage has forced restaurants in places like Telluride to limit services or shut down altogether. Colorado law prohibits the levying of real estate transfer taxes, so communities have begun taxing short-term rentals to raise funds for affordable housing.

\$13.16 million Average sale price for a single-family home in Aspen, Colorado, during the first nine months of the year.

\$3.1 million Price of the least-expensive home sold in Aspen thus far in 2021.

\$19.50 Hourly wage for a housekeeper at Hyatt Residence Club Grand Aspen.

UTAH Utah fares better than the U.S. as a whole when it comes to income equality, perhaps due to its collectivist roots: Early Mormon leaders Joseph Smith and Brigham Young encouraged disciples to follow the United Order, which called for redistribution of a community's wealth. The church continues to operate food banks and assist the poor in other ways, but in the last seven decades it has also embraced capitalism, becoming one of the nation's largest landowners.

\$4.8 million Average income of the top 1% in Summit County, home to Park City.

\$28,074 Median per capita personal income in San Juan County, Utah.

FACTS & FIGURES

The wealth abyss

Income inequality proliferates across the West.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

WHEN JOHN LONG established Maryvale, Phoenix's first suburb, in 1955, the nation's economic topography was about as flat as the desert valley floor. There were pockets of poverty and enclaves of wealth, but huge disparities — even in those freewheeling *Mad Men* days — were kept in check by progressive taxes, New Deal-era policies and powerful labor unions. The result was a strong, sizeable middle class hungry for housing. Maryvale provided just that, its modest homes with their all-electric kitchens affordable for everyone from the unionized construction workers who built the homes and the defense industry workers buoyed by Cold War federal spending to the public schoolteachers who taught their children.

But in the 1980s, the nation's economic Zeitgeist shifted, trickle-down theory and Reaganomics took hold, corporations outsourced labor, federal spending declined and unions ebbed. CEO pay skyrocketed while working-class wages stagnated. Tax rates for the top income earners gradually fell, allowing them to siphon a greater share of the wealth away from the masses and into their own hands. The middle class eroded, leaving in its place a gaping abyss between the ultra-wealthy and everyone else. Today, the gap is wider than ever before, further exacerbated by pandemic-induced economic woes and Trump-era tax cuts for the rich.

This is seen in neighborhoods and communities across the

West: Old working-class bastions like Telluride or Crested Butte become billionaire magnets, while “down-valley” towns struggle with poverty and underfunded services. Formerly middle-class Maryvale is now one of Phoenix's poorest neighborhoods, its people making one-tenth what their cross-town Paradise Valley counterparts do, yet the median house price is still far out of reach of the average resident.

The disparity sets an inequality feedback loop into motion. Gentrification drives up housing costs, making it hard for the working class to build wealth and forcing minimum wage workers to live in tents or in their cars, which in turn makes it far more difficult for them to find better-paying jobs. The poor have fewer educational opportunities and struggle to climb the economic ladder. People from lower income brackets are more likely to suffer health problems, and exorbitant medical costs render them even poorer. They're also disproportionately affected by the effects of climate change and pollution. At times, the divide between rich and poor becomes a matter of life and death. ☀

Infographic design: Luna Anna Archey

Sources: Economic Policy Institute, U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, Maricopa County, Statistical Atlas, City of Phoenix, Maricopa Association of Governments, Sentinel Hub, Tax Policy Center, Economic Innovation Group, The Viehman Group, Sotheby's International Realty, Redfin, Inequality.org, Americans for Tax Fairness, Curbed Seattle.

What would a healthy Klamath River look like?

If it wasn't dammed, overirrigated and degraded by habitat loss, the Klamath would be a very different place. Under balanced conditions, anadromous fish disseminate marine-derived nutrients throughout the basin to create thriving networks of interconnected life.

ILLUSTRATION AND TEXT BY BRIAN OASTER

Salmon and lamprey spend their adult lives at sea, gathering marine-derived nutrients. Robust salmon populations bolster orca communities, some of which rely entirely on salmon for sustenance. They also support Indigenous communities that care for the river and its ecosystem.



Deadfall and nutrient-rich sediment wash downstream, transforming the estuary into the gentle environment ideal for a juvenile salmon nursery, and for other species, such as Dungeness crab.



Predators like eagles, mink, bears and raccoons catch returning adult salmon and lamprey and carry them into the forest, depositing marine-derived nutrients on the forest floor and leaving meat for insects, which transport these nutrients into the food chain.

The river ecosystem supports Indigenous first food staple crops such as woksas, a flowering water lily with nutritious seeds that grows in marshes around Upper Klamath Lake.



Indigenous people conduct prescribed burns to keep the forests healthy. Ash nourishes the soil to support lush riparian foliage, which shelters salmon fry, shades and cools the water and harbors insects for young salmon to eat.

The stable isotope nitrogen-15 is rare inland but supports healthy forest growth. This and other marine-derived nutrients carried upstream by anadromous fish become redwoods, the cycle that helps produce tree rings. Healthy forests stabilize the soil, keeping the water so clear that young salmon can see bugs to eat.



Salmon need clear water, lazy side channels and ponds with quiet resting places. Beaver dams create all these and provide the drinking water that attracts and supports local biomes. As an added benefit, most wildfires go around them.

Lamprey larvae are filter feeders. They live in the mud for years, cleaning the water and providing food for fish. Their pheromones attract adult lamprey, which follow the scent upriver to spawn, bringing marine-derived nutrients with them.



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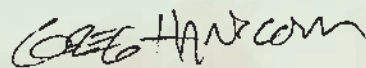
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Onlookers gather as the smokestacks of the Navajo Generating Station come down in December 2020 outside Page, Arizona. **Cassidy Araiza / HCN**

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“As a former Westerner, living in Maryland now since 1967, I so value staying connected to issues and geography that are ‘home.’ Thank you for educating me with your deep dive into important issues in the West.” –Anne Sturm, Barnesville, Maryland

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Paul Larmer's 40-year ride with HCN



Paul Larmer hiking on BLM land near Delta, Colorado. Jay Morley

EARLY ON THE MORNING of June 15, 2009, Paul Larmer, then-executive director of *High Country News*, climbed into the company's Toyota "puddle-jumper" and headed out of Paonia, Colorado, bound for Wyoming. I was the magazine's editor-in-chief at the time and rode shotgun, while intern Jeff Chen squeezed into the backseat. The stated objective of our jaunt around the Cowboy State was to meet with *HCN* donors and readers, but Larmer also wanted to pry us away from our computers and get us out into the actual landscape we covered.

The trip was a classic Larmer-style adventure: We stopped in Rangely to see the effects of 80 years of oil booms and busts — and also rode a barrel bull; we got shooed off the Flaming Gorge Dam and out of the Sinclair Refinery's parking lot by security guards; and we communed with toads in a wildlife underpass in the Absaroka Range, mingled with Mormon Trail re-enactors, and sat down for lunch with *HCN* founder Tom Bell. We even met with donors as promised, from hardcore environmental activists to green-leaning Republicans.

That expedition embodied all that Larmer has brought to *High Country News* in the nearly four decades since he first came to work here: boundless energy and enthusiasm, insatiable curiosity, a remarkable ability to cross cultural and political divides, and a knack for inspiring the same traits in his colleagues. Larmer stepped down as executive director in 2020 and became a fundraiser and writer. Now, he is retiring from *HCN*.

Larmer first stumbled on *HCN* in the early '80s when he was just out of college, working for an environmental group in Washington, D.C. He found a copy of the black-and-white tabloid lying around the office and saw that the new publisher and editor, Ed and Betsy Marston, were looking for interns.

"I called, and Betsy answered the phone

and said, 'We can't pay you anything but if you're interested, come on out,'" Larmer says. So, in January of 1984, he loaded up his Toyota Corolla and headed to Paonia, where he was given a diminutive desk with an electric typewriter and sent out to report on local meetings. Betsy Marston remembers the young intern as "serious and unduly modest, a graceful writer, and sunny company."

Eight years later, after grad school and time at the Sierra Club, Larmer returned to *HCN* as an assistant editor. He was an intrepid reporter, going behind Sagebrush Rebel lines to pen a cover story on local reaction to the establishment of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument and another on the salmon-harming Snake River dams. He did a stint as editor-in-chief before taking the helm when Ed Marston retired in 2001.

Leadership wasn't always easy. Larmer began his tenure in the shadow of the Marstons, who had come to symbolize the organization. A young editorial staff itched to tell new stories that sometimes rankled long-time readers, and *HCN*'s nascent public radio program was gaining attention but draining the bank account. And Larmer was ambitious: He wanted to transform the "newspaper" into a full-color magazine and restructure the organization's revenue streams.

Some of his decisions proved controversial, as when he axed the radio show. But Larmer was usually up for an adventure, so long as it didn't stray from *HCN*'s core tenets. He helped his editorial team find space for stories about gangs in Salt Lake City, for example, and drug addiction in New Mexico — and even published a dystopian science-fiction feature story that helped launch then-staffer Paolo Bacigalupi's writing career.

And of course there were groundbreaking stories about Western lands and communities in transition, Michelle Nijhuis' climate

coverage and the staff's prescient reporting on the Bundys and the Sagebrush Rebellion. Larmer never lost his zeal for the editorial side of things, and he continued to write and edit. He had a gift for infecting writers with his fascination for any topic, no matter how tedious it might seem.

Larmer had a knack for fundraising, too, which he approached much the way he did reporting, drawing people out with his genuine curiosity and fondness for the West and its inhabitants. As executive director, he more than doubled *HCN*'s annual budget, from \$1.5 million to \$4 million, and increased *HCN*'s subscriber base to over 30,000 for the first time ever. He also expanded the editorial team, raising the money that launched a trail-blazing Indigenous Affairs desk.

"Paul stayed true to *HCN*'s deep roots in the rural and wide-open West, but he also took calculated risks," says Greg Hanscom, who served as editor under him in the aughts and succeeded him as executive director and publisher in 2020. "He knew that the West was changing, and understood that *HCN* needed to evolve along with it."

So what's next? For one thing, Larmer is looking forward to exploring the West without worrying about deadlines and finances. He's gotten serious about photography in recent years, capturing images of tiny islands of beauty among the trammled badlands near Paonia. And he's also the lead singer in a local band and has become famous in the North Fork Valley for his pickleball prowess.

Whatever new adventures await him, Larmer will always be a member of the far-flung *HCN* family. "The brilliance is the idea of *HCN*," he says. "It's the readers, the amazing staffers, the love of the land and the eclectic curiosity that ties us all together. I feel very blessed to be part of that community and to be able to nurture it." —Jonathan Thompson



Buffalo on the Eastern Shoshone Tribe's reclaimed property on the Wind River Reservation. The herd is part of a national effort to restore wild buffalo to tribal lands across the West.



All My Relations

Buffalo, wild horses and the politics of belonging on the Wind River Reservation.

By Stephen Lezak

Photos by Russel Albert Daniels / HCN



A

Jason Baldes, a member of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe, and his dog, Willi, in Morton, Wyoming, on the Wind River Indian Reservation (*above*). Patti Baldes, a member of the Northern Arapaho Tribe, stands next to the gate of a bison enclosure (*facing*).

COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, Patti Baldes' phone rang. "Patti? The buffalo are out," said someone from the Wind River Reservation's Tribal Fish and Game Office. "Are they yours or are they Jason's?"

"They're probably mine," Baldes recalled saying. Hers, in that they belonged, like she does, to the Northern Arapaho Tribe. Jason Baldes, Patti's husband, is Eastern Shoshone. The two tribes share the Wind River Indian Reservation in central Wyoming, and each has its own buffalo herd on separate pastures.

By mid-morning, a crowd had gathered along the edge of U.S. Highway 26 to watch the 11 fugitive buffalo. About a dozen teenagers arrived with horses — members of a tribal youth group that teaches horsemanship. The old man in charge of the program instructed his students to smudge with sage as they readied their horses and prepared to herd the buffalo back to their fenced enclosure.

The buffalo had escaped onto land leased for cattle on the northern part of the reservation, where a pair of two-lane highways weaves between foothills, cradling 70,000 unfenced acres of pale Wyoming steppe between them.

"We were secretly just so happy," Patti Baldes said. "But scared." Happy, because after years working to restore wild buffalo to the reservation's open range, they had succeeded. For a tenuous moment, "there were buffalo out there and kids on bareback horses running around." It had been 135 years since Native people had herded buffalo in the Wind River Valley. "It was the most amazing thing ever."

But there was also fear. As soon as the buffalo broke free of their enclosure on private property, they entered a jurisdictional no man's land. The tribal game code, which regulates hunting on the reservation,

made no mention of buffalo. "If we didn't get them in, there's no way we could protect them," Jason said. "People could shoot them, and there would be nothing we could do."

Before the riders approached the buffalo, Jason laid down some ground rules. "I did my best to explain that we needed to keep it low-key and quiet." Instead, the riders gave chase, and the buffalo took off across the open range. "They were treated like cows," Patti said. "Like they could be herded."

"The horses started running," Jason added. "Pretty soon the buffalo were running all over the place. Cars were following the horses through the sagebrush."

Jason, sitting at a dining room table with a cup of coffee above and a snoring dog below, spoke soberly about the escape. Standing opposite, Patti offered her own version of events and occasionally smiled, savoring the memory. They share a sense of pride and responsibility:



Their work led to the reintroduction of buffalo on the reservation following their near-extirpation by colonists in the late 19th century.

The effort began with a partnership between the two tribes, the National Wildlife Federation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Jason led the work wearing two hats; he's both the National Wildlife Federation's tribal buffalo coordinator and the Shoshone tribal buffalo representative. In 2016, the first buffalo were given a home in a small enclosure owned by the Shoshone Tribe. Three years later, the Arapaho Tribe acquired its own herd.

The Baldeses' work is a small part of a larger national effort to restore wild buffalo to tribal lands across the West. (Most scientists prefer the name "bison," but "buffalo" is more commonly used in Native America.) The Intertribal Buffalo Council, of which Baldes is the secretary, has helped return over 20,000 buffalo to 1 million

acres of tribal land. It's a small fraction of the tens of millions that ranged between Alaska and Mexico at the beginning of the 19th century.

At the end of that first day, exhausted and worried about the buffalo after running them for so long, the riders regrouped at the highway. Someone pulled up in a truck with dinner. "We're eating plain sandwiches after trying to get the buffalo home," Patti recalled. "And they *are* home, which was a feeling I think we both felt: Can't we just leave them — like, *just leave them* — right where they are?"

The next morning, Patti and Jason gathered a smaller group from around the reservation. The new strategy — fewer riders and a slower pace — seemed to work. Patti's brother, nephew and another rider went ahead, slowly pushing the reluctant herd. Jason and Patti followed in their truck. They drove across 10 miles of open range before returning the buffalo to their

600-acre pasture — an enclosure less than a square mile in size.

That day's buffalo drive was a modern inversion of an ancient practice. Just on the far side of the reservation boundary, stone cairns still mark the drive paths at "bison jumps," where, for thousands of years, Shoshone hunters sent herds of buffalo tumbling over cliff sides and then gathered below to harvest the meat.

On their way back to the enclosure, Jason, Patti and the riders saw dozens of horses watching them from the sagebrush buttes. They were a small fraction of the unknown thousands of free-ranging horses on the reservation — wild or feral, depending on whom you ask. Like the buffalo, they were also fugitives, unsanctioned occupants of tribal land. But unlike the buffalo, no one had any plans to remove them.

Across Indian Country, tribes are working to restore one species and sustainably manage the other. Both buffalo and horses have troubled places in the American West, mirror images of wildness, colonialism and Indigeneity. Two ungulates occupy the same physical territory — but on seemingly different maps. Each testifies to the unresolved questions of what, and who, the West is for.

WHEN ASKED HOW MANY wild horses are on the Wind River Reservation, Art Lawson, the Shoshone and Arapaho Fish and Game director, couldn't say. "We really don't have a clue," said Lawson. "We have 2.2 million acres that we cover, and I only have three wardens and two U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologists." But he thinks 10,000 might be a reasonable estimate: "We've got to be close to that."

Whatever the population is, Lawson says that it's growing fast, doubling every four years. Now, because of the added grazing pressure, mule deer no longer migrate through the reservation, and bighorn sheep are growing scarce. "There's no feed — there's nothing but horse trails," Lawson said.

To the untrained eye, wild horses are indistinguishable from captive ones. They're lively, well-fed, and colorful enough to fill out a glossary of horse terms: palominos, roans, sorrels, pintos. They look more comfortable on the open range than the skittish pronghorn antelope loping through the same sagebrush. They gather in small herds of about 10, with a single male orbiting the rest, as if to maintain order. When humans approach, the horses form a neat line, like mismatched dominoes staggered behind the stallion.

They range over vast stretches of unirrigated sagebrush steppe, up to the dense groves of aspen that begin above 7,000 feet. Their watering areas and crisscrossing trails are worn to powder. In places, 4-foot-wide heaps of manure known as "stud piles" mark the stallions' territorial claims. They're so numerous now that they rival cattle for the distinction of being the dominant animal in the landscape.

The reservation was established in the 1860s and overseen by the Bureau of Indian Affairs with the goal of assimilating the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho into farmers and ranchers. This left wildlife to fill out the margins, usually in mountainous terrain or areas with poor access to water. Back then, there was constant pressure from hunters. Now, horses are competing with both wildlife and cattle for the landscape's limited forage.

With limited rangeland already under pressure, some ranchers worry that setting aside acreage for buffalo implies taking land away from cattle and sheep. Across the West, many have protested buffalo reintroduction on those very grounds. But that's just one part of the story.

"It's not too hard to see racism around here," Jason Baldes told me on the first day we met. He wore his long hair in a thick braid and two rings in each ear. "The last racist slur I got was opening the gate to the buffalo." Two men drove by, "calling me 'prairie n----r' — that kind of

Geldings at the Wind River Wild Horse Sanctuary near Lander, Wyoming, a privately owned piece of land within reservation boundaries. Its owners contract with the Bureau of Land Management to provide long-term care for 225 wild horses removed from federal rangeland.





crap.” He steered the conversation along, almost dismissively. “This is way bigger than any of those knuckleheads that want to yell at me.”

Although Baldes understands why his work has generated resistance, he’s hardly apologetic about it. “I’m not saying eliminate cattle grazing altogether, but there are places where it shouldn’t be happening.” He sprinted through the history of the Wind River Reservation, beginning with the methodical slaughter of buffalo in the mid-19th century, followed by the sale of the most valuable — water-rich — tribal lands to private buyers. “This notion of taming and domesticating and fencing in, fencing out, plowing up, paving over — in the notion of progress. These undermine the philosophical understanding that Native people had about the interconnectedness of all living beings, about what our role is as stewards.” It’s from that perspective that he said, with a trace of indignation, “Cows are invasive species. Just don’t call them that, because ‘cattle is king’ in Wyoming.”

Baldes’ effort to reintroduce buffalo raises many of the same questions about tribal sovereignty as the effort to deal with a surge in wild horse populations across the West. The European horses brought over by Spanish colonists in the 16th century descended from wild horses that originally lived in North America for millions of years until the end of the last ice age. This history is at the center of wild horse management: Are horses native wildlife, or a feral invasive species?

By the beginning of the 20th century, an estimated 2 million wild horses roamed the West. By 1971, the population had declined precipitously, with one estimate counting 9,500 horses on federal rangeland. Their near-extirpation — like the buffalo’s — took place as agriculture intensified across the West. Some horses were killed to make room for cattle and sheep, others captured for breeding or use on farms and ranches. Many more were rounded up and sold to slaughterhouses, where they were processed for

human consumption abroad or for commercial products like pet food.

In 1971, in response to a wave of national activism, Congress passed a law that criminalized killing wild horses on federal land. In turn, the secretary of the Interior was tasked with managing any populations that grew too large. But beginning in 1988, the secretary’s options for doing so were curtailed. Directives tucked into annual appropriations bills prohibited the Bureau of Land Management from euthanizing healthy animals or selling them for slaughter, directly or indirectly. In 2006, Congress prohibited the U.S. Department of Agriculture from certifying slaughterhouses that processed horsemeat, regardless of whether the horses were wild or livestock. Across the West, wild horse populations began to climb as swiftly as they had once fallen.

In the past 10 years alone, the number of wild horses and burros on federal rangeland has grown from 38,000 to 95,000. The BLM scrambled to manage the problem. Following the prohibition on euthanasia and unconditional sale, the agency hoped that volunteers would adopt the “excess” animals that were removed from overpopulated ranges. But even as the BLM invested more resources into adoption — including a \$1,000-per-animal incentive — fewer horses and burros entered private ownership than were removed from public lands.

At the same time, the BLM, in cooperation with well-organized advocacy groups, such as the American Wild Horse Campaign, administered thousands of doses of horse contraception. Trained volunteers with contraceptive dart guns effectively controlled horse populations on some small ranges. But the practicalities involved in darting thousands of mares across tens of thousands of acres — and repeating the process annually — left the BLM and Congress skeptical that this could provide a large-scale solution. In the past five years, the BLM administered just 3,300 doses.

Another fraught experiment in

Western land management casts a long shadow over this issue. At the behest of ranchers, hunters and their political and cultural allies, predators such as wolves, bears and cougars have been culled across the West. The few animals allowed to survive were concentrated in national parks, forests and wilderness areas, which have limited overlap with the open ranges favored by wild horses and administered by the BLM. Most of the big game on these landscapes, such as elk and antelope, is kept in check by human predation. That used to be the case for wild horses, too.

The legal counsel for one Western Republican congressman put it this way: “We’ve put the BLM in an impossible position, where we’ve given them a job and we won’t let them do the job.”

That’s the story on federal lands. According to a 2013 statement by the National Congress of American Indians, there are over 100,000 wild horses on tribal lands — more than on all federal lands nationwide.

Across the United States, the BLM’s mandate stops at reservation borders. And while the Bureau of Indian Affairs has a legally binding trust responsibility to protect tribal land, it doesn’t have a stand-alone program to aid with wild horse management. Instead, it falls to underfunded agencies like Lawson’s, which lack the resources to even count wild horses, let alone manage them. On the Wind River Reservation, Lawson reported that his agency had not received any funding from the BIA for wild horse management since he started his job in 2017. “With no funding and the very little manpower that the Fish and Game office has —” he paused. “Yeah, it’s definitely going to get worse before it gets better.”

Although the BLM has no jurisdiction on tribal lands, federal policies meant to protect wild horses have reverberated throughout Indian Country. On tribal lands, entrepreneurial individuals used to round up wild horses and sell them at livestock auctions, where they

were often purchased for slaughter. In most cases, this unfolded in a legal gray area — horses, like buffalo, are not normally protected as wildlife in tribal game codes. The arrangement helped control wild horse populations without involving tribal administrators.

Because of the USDA policy change, exports of live horses to Canada and Mexico skyrocketed. But sending horses abroad is costly; it requires a veterinary inspection as well as proof of ownership. In 2013, a biologist employed by the Yakama Nation testified in U.S. District Court that, before American slaughterhouses were shuttered, members of the Yakama Nation could earn \$150 to \$400 per animal. More recently, horses sold for only \$5 to \$20 per head. “Many of these horses cannot be given away,” he added.

In 2013, the National Congress of American Indians encouraged tribes to establish slaughterhouses on their reservations. Many proposals have been made, but none have been realized, often due to scorching public opposition led by animal rights organizations.

In the past 50 years, the shifting cultural and legal landscape has made proposals to euthanize or slaughter wild horses both politically and morally untenable. But the backstop solution favored by the BLM — removing horses from the range and placing them in long-term holding — is utterly infeasible for underfunded tribal governments. None of these policies, laws or ethical frameworks are enforceable on tribal lands, and yet their effect on tribal sovereignty is unmistakable.

“THE NOTION OF WILD, the notion of wilderness, ‘untrammeled by man,’ ‘leave no trace’ — those are foreign concepts to Native people,” Baldes told me last August, leaning back on a couch with a buffalo hide at his feet, one arm resting behind his head and the other gesturing slowly. Baldes is quiet and charismatic, moving nimbly across bodies of knowledge. He often speaks uninterrupted for



several minutes at a time, weaving together ecology (“nephelometric turbidity units”), public policy (the Clean Water Act), and U.S. history (the General Allotment Act of 1887). Baldes doesn’t simply talk; more like a river, he holds forth.

At the center of these overlapping ideas is the conviction that addressing the contemporary needs of Native America must start with the land. When Baldes speaks of buffalo as wildlife, he calls on an opposite vision from the principles underpinning wild horse management.

In the past 50 years, wild horses slipped between the definitional cracks that separate wildlife from livestock. They cannot be hunted like elk or slaughtered like cattle. They have come to stand apart from every other animal in the West. In their idealized state, in the eyes of their vocal defenders, they live with minimal interaction with humanity, opposite the world of society.

This vision of American wildness grew up with urban industrialism, made possible by the false notion of an empty continent. Baldes alluded to the 1964 Wilderness Act, which legally defines wilderness as a place “untrammeled by man.”

“That’s a notion that was

“The notion of wild, the notion of ‘untrammeled by man,’ ‘leave no trace’ — those are foreign concepts to Native people.”

Wild horse trails create a crossroads on the open range of the Wind River Reservation in rural Wyoming.

brought by settlers and Europeans,” Baldes explained. It emerged from the collective colonial erasure that was only made possible by the forced removal of American Indians onto reservations.

For Baldes, “wilderness” and “wild” mean something else: The goal is not to treat buffalo as ornaments in an untouched landscape; it’s to re-establish an intimate relationship of human-animal dependence. “The salmon people are salmon people for a reason. The rice people are rice people for a reason.” He slipped into the past tense: “The buffalo people were buffalo people for a reason.”

On a bright summer morning, Baldes pulled off the highway at an unmarked turnout on U.S. 26 and opened the padlock on a tall livestock gate. A caravan of 10 visitors followed him, including several elder statesmen of Wyoming conservation — a former head of the Wyoming Wildlife Federation, the former president of the National Wildlife Federation, and Jason’s father, Richard Baldes, who is credited with establishing the Wind River Reservation’s first game code in the 1980s, after a bitter political and legal battle.

The trucks and SUVs turned onto a ranch road, crossing an

irrigated pasture. They drove ahead, down a steep grade, through a low creek, and back up onto a flat meadow. The road drew parallel with a 5-foot-tall fence, with six wire strands instead of the typical four. “It’s above and beyond what would be required,” Baldes explained, “so that we can appease the opponents” — those who resist buffalo reintroduction. To the left, the Wind River flowed in braids, 100 feet below the escarpment upon which they drove. On the opposite shore, the foothills of the Wind River Mountains rose and then faded into sepia behind the summer wildfire haze.

Forty buffalo watched indifferently as the visitors approached in their vehicles. The herd moved like honey in the thickening midday heat. A lone magpie perched atop one of the bulls, whose gangly hind legs cut a stark contrast to the rest of its body. Already the largest land animals in North America, they seemed even bigger with their two-tone fleece coats that covered only their front halves.

Baldes, leading the caravan in his pickup, stopped less than a stone’s throw from the nearest cow and her calf. The calf moved toward Baldes’ truck. Her bright black eyes were fixed and curious, framed by scraggly fibers. She ventured closer with deliberate steps while her mother craned her neck to look on from behind.

Baldes put his hand out of the window. The calf raised her nose and met it with a lick. Her curiosity satisfied, she returned to her mother. It was only the second time Baldes had touched a living buffalo since the herd first arrived on the reservation in 2016.

For Baldes, a key principle of the restoration effort is maintaining the genetic integrity of the descendants of approximately a hundred animals that survived a population bottleneck at the beginning of the 20th century. Back then, it became common practice for ranchers to crossbreed buffalo with cattle, with the intent of making buffalo hardier, more disease resistant and better suited to life on a

cattle ranch. Today, there are more than 400,000 buffalo in the U.S. More than 90% of them are ranch livestock; just 30,000 are managed as wildlife in “conservation herds.” Of these, only about 10,000 are free of domestic cattle genes.

Baldes’ insistence on maintaining buffalo without cattle DNA dovetails with his and Patti’s broader vision for decolonizing tribal lands and livelihoods. The way Jason sees it, buffalo with cattle genetics bear the mark of colonialism. “We’re one of the few reservations where we can really subsist, if we want to, off of our wildlife species,” Jason explained. He held a travel-style coffee mug with a sticker that read “SICK OF THE GOOD OLD BOYS.” It’s clear that the hunt itself is only incidental to the Baldeses’ vision. Their larger objective is to have buffalo written into the tribal game code and allowed to roam freely on tribal trust

land, where they could once again form the cornerstone of Shoshone and Arapaho livelihoods. “That’s a change in paradigm from what was brought colonially, what they assimilated us to be,” Jason explained. “It’s cultural revitalization in a contemporary context: land rematriation through buffalo restoration.”

For that reason, the encounter with the buffalo calf was bittersweet. In five years on the reservation, the buffalo herds have come to regard humans without fear. Since 2016, they’ve only known predators on two occasions. Both times, Baldes was there.

In 2019, he shot the first buffalo killed on the reservation in generations. The harvest was accompanied by a community event and a ceremony, and the meat was distributed among tribal members. Today, the skull sits on an outdoor shelf at his home. But

“The salmon people are salmon people for a reason. The rice people are rice people for a reason.”

A lone buffalo shakes itself after a dust bath along the banks of the Wind River.

Baldes speaks ambivalently about that first harvest: “It didn’t feel quite right, because they’re not on the landscape,” he said. Confined in a 300-acre pasture, the buffalo were still living like European livestock. “When we’ve got them managed as wildlife and we go out and we hunt them? We find one and we make a sneak and we harvest it in the field? That’s when it’ll be right.” When that time comes, buffalo calves will no longer sidle up to vehicles.

Back at the house, Baldes gestured west, beyond the buffalo enclosure, across the Wind River, to the miles of sagebrush steppe unfolding in the distance. He explained that those 70,000 acres — the crescent-shaped range bounded by two highways and two rivers — could become the largest patch of tribal land in the nation where genetically intact buffalo are managed as wildlife. That’s the interim target.



He added, “We’ve got hundreds of thousands of acres, not only in the Wind Rivers but also the Owl Creeks.” The Owl Creek Mountains lie just to the north, looking like hills besides the glaciated peaks of the Winds. “They should never have to be in a gated corral again.”

REN FREEMAN is an Eastern Shoshone anthropologist who grew up on the Wind River Reservation in Fort Washakie, “just across the hill” from Baldes. Today, she lives in western Montana, where she directs the Indigenous Research Center at Salish Kootenai College, leads the Intercontinental American Indigenous Research Association, and is a professor of anthropology and Native American studies at the University of Montana and Salish Kootenai College. Although they live hundreds of miles apart, she and Baldes often cross paths in their work, serving on the same committees and presenting at the same conferences.

In conversations with Freeman, the ecological and cultural distinctions between horses and buffalo are blurred at the edges: native/invasive, wild/domestic, European/Indigenous. When explaining the details of her work, she often pauses to ask a careful question of nobody in particular, like a rhetorical checkpoint, before providing the answer. It’s easy to imagine her at the front of a classroom.

“Wild horses and buffalo share a lot of the social-economic-political journey in this country, and when you overlay that with the plight of Indigenous people, you get this triad.” To Freeman, this relationship between horses, buffalo, and humans began in the Pleistocene, when buffalo and horses both roamed freely across North America. The ancient American horse may not have been domesticated — it was likely on the menu of many societies — but Freeman maintains that horses were nevertheless an important part of some early American cultures: “We were always in relationship with horses.” For that reason, she takes issue with those

who dismiss wild horses as feral or invasive. Horses, along with buffalo, should both be considered “native natural wildlife,” says Freeman. “It has only been the politicizing of their history and existence that has placed them in a different category.”

Part of that politicizing, she explains, comes from the idea that horses’ wildness places them apart from human culture. She described her relationship with the reservation’s wild horses with a sense of mutual recognition: “I’m not wild to you; you’re not wild to me.”

Freeman frequently finds herself defending, in her terms, wild horses’ right to exist, especially to those, like Baldes, who are apt to call the animals feral or invasive. She asked, almost rhetorically, “Why can’t we let 1,000 bison mingle and live with 14,000 wild horses?” In these existential politics, she sees parallels to her own Indigenous history. “What has happened to them” — wild horses — “has happened to us.” Ranchers and farmers acquired more land, while the disempowered, human and nonhuman, were pushed to the margins.

The solution, in Freeman’s view, is to let go of the expectation that every inhabitant of the landscape justify its right to exist. She rejects the notion of a survivalist competition between human and animal lives. “It’s similar to our being Indigenous peoples, who share the worldview of relationality and interdependence with nonhuman beings — whether it’s animals, plants, rocks, the sky.” The alternative, Freeman said, is to reconceive management altogether.

Here, Freeman and Baldes agree. This redefinition must start by untangling the idea of management — and its counterpart, wildness — from ideals of dominance and control. “Our land-use change is a shift from a colonial paradigm of agriculture and livestock to that of ecological integrity,” Baldes said. In concrete terms, this redefinition looks like those two days in 2019, when a dozen Arapaho buffalo shared 70,000 acres of tribal

land with domesticated cattle, wild horses and humans. In that moment, the wild, the tame, the social and the feral coexisted without objection to each other. The land was for all of them.

Ultimately, the disagreements over whether horses are wild or feral, or whether buffalo can coexist with cattle, seem trivial. Even the details about game codes and herd management are almost ancillary. Buffalo and horses both serve as living reminders that Western landscapes do not have to be divided between the wild and the tame. Before colonization, humans and nonhumans shared an undivided claim to the land. According to Baldes and Freeman, they still could.

“Buffalo was the foundation for everything, at one time, for our grandmas and grandpas,” Baldes told me. “In a contemporary setting, it can be that way again. Especially here at Wind River, where we have the habitat to actually allow them to exist as the One Above intended. Putting pieces of that puzzle back heals the land. In turn, it will heal our communities. It will heal our families and heal us individually.”

ON A HOT SATURDAY afternoon, Jason Baldes, his dog, Willi, and a friend called Dude, sat in the shade of a horse trailer, waiting for Patti to arrive with the truck.

Baldes’ horses, about 30 of them, trickled in from their pasture to a corral baited with four bales of hay. Wearing a straw hat and black Birkenstocks, Baldes seemed as unhurried as they did. “That’s all training a horse really is: negotiation.” He added, “I don’t ‘break’ anything.”

The conversation turned to wild horses. Someday, if Jason and Patti are successful, wild horses and buffalo will share the same open range. Baldes admitted he didn’t have a simple solution to the question of population control. “I don’t want to go out and shoot a horse and eat it,” he said, sitting next to his own small herd. “Not unless I’m starving” — a horse brayed — “and I had to. But why eat horse when

we have elk, deer, antelope?” He paused. “Buffalo.”

Willi took a turn darting around the horses’ legs before returning to the shade to grin and pant. The grass around us was lush after the recent rain, August be damned.

By now, most of the horses had wandered into the corral, but a dozen still stood on the opposite side of the fence. They regarded each other through the metal crossbars. Time passed. Dude snored in a lawn chair.

At some point, our water bottles ran empty. It was a two-minute drive and three left turns to Sacagawea Cemetery, where we filled our bottles from a spigot mounted on a pipe sprouting from the bare ground beside the asphalt parking strip. The water came out cold and rich and perfect, as Baldes said it would. Two more minutes and three right turns and we were back in the shade.

The conversation, as languid as the afternoon, drifted to grizzly bears, a recent mauling in Yellowstone. At one point, Baldes lit up. “Did you see? There’s a pretty good article that came out in Canada. ...” It was published a few weeks prior in the peer-reviewed journal *Ecology & Society*. Baldes explained how the researchers sampled the genetic diversity of grizzly bears in coastal British Columbia, finding three distinct groups. When they mapped the grizzly genetics, they found that each group of bears corresponded to one of the three Indigenous language groups of that same area (Salishan, Tsimshian and Wakashan).

Dude, no longer asleep, chimed in. “You said they’re your relatives, right?”

“Yeah,” Baldes replied. “We say, ‘All my relations.’” He repeated it three times. First in Lakota, “*Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ*,” then in Arapaho, “*Beisiihi Neito’eino*,” and finally in Shoshone, “*dumuh nahrewuruh*.” “It’s very simple, but significant, because it’s referring to all life. The bears, the wolves, the buffalo, the elk, the deer — all four-leggeds, all winged ones. All of life.” ☀



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INVOICE NO. A-518

Fire Fraud

U.S.C. § 982
Forfeiture

Weight

775
875
6310
2060
6195
405
3695
1365
2265
1130
760
525
1880
2575
30815

2 820
1 585
9 420

Feed
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v/Hd In: Processing

\$84,650.00

\$84,650.00

400

300
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SPECIAL CATTLE ACCOUNT

Purchaser

No.

Kind

Weight

Price

Amount

BETTING THE RANCH

CODY EASTERDAY WAGERED
HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS ON
THE PRICE OF BEEF. HE LOST.

By Lee van der Voo | Illustrations by Cristiana Couceiro

AFTER THE FRAUD at Easterday Ranches was discovered, owner Gale Easterday steered his pickup onto the off-ramp of the highway and drove head-on into a semi-truck that was delivering his farm's potatoes.

The afternoon of Dec. 10 was cloudy but clear, the roads unencumbered. And Easterday, who was 79, had been making his usual rounds in an industrial part of Pasco, Washington. He was at the helm of four generations of farming and ranching, a multimillion-dollar operation that grew, packed and shipped a massive amount of onions and potatoes, plus raised beef on feedlots outside of town. His family owned nearby facilities — huge operations involving conveyor belts and forklifts that hoisted pallets onto delivery trucks. Several of the company's contractors were based in the corrugated metal shops nearby. He often ran errands there, or stopped to chat with the dozens of mechanics employed to tinker with the part of the business he loved best: the farm machines.

But on his way out of town, Easterday steered his Dodge Ram onto a highway off-ramp. It was a particularly confusing stretch, and not an uncommon error for the spot. Police records show as much. He ascended the exit ramp, past signs that warned "wrong way," and rounded the bend onto the interstate, colliding with a vehicle driven by his own delivery

man. It happened very fast. The semi driver could not have avoided it. When he tried, too late, to swerve, the truck and its potato haul screamed across the highway, crossed the center median, and came to a jolting rest on the opposite side, blocking all of the lanes. Officers who questioned the driver found him badly shaken. Another truck had broadsided the semi on its course across the asphalt, and he had scarcely avoided driving over the top of it. Two more cars were struck by flying debris, their occupants mostly unscathed.

Easterday, however, was dead; his Ram decimated. State troopers had the grim task of contacting his family and puzzling over the scene. There were no tire marks where he might have braked, no sign that he had attempted to avoid the crash.

Afterward, along with heartbreak, there was bewilderment and disbelief. Conjecture in the metal shops and on ranches ran the gamut from illness to injury to suicide. But within two weeks of his death, everyone would know what Gale Easterday likely knew that day: Tyson Fresh Meats — one of the nation's largest meat distributors — was investigating Easterday Ranches and slowly discovering that Gale's son, Cody, had sold them hundreds of thousands of cattle that never existed.

The deceit that soon unspooled may seem like a one-off fraud. But while it is indeed an anomaly — an expansive hoodwinking far from normal by ranching standards — it exposed a problem widespread in the beef business, which is that the price of a steak has increasingly little to do with the cost of fattening a steer. That circumstance requires ranchers to shoulder tremendous financial risks. And while it has made corporations the beneficiaries of declining rural wealth, it has also wrought awful wreckage for ranching communities and rural families.

Gale's son tried to outplay this system and lost.

Maybe he was never going to win.

BEFORE THE MATTER of the nonexistent cattle, Easterday was a name of distinction. Easterday Farms had been a part of Washington's Tri-Cities — the agricultural trifecta of Richland, Pasco and Kennewick — since 1958, back when Ervine Easterday, Gale's father, saw his fortune in the new freshwater from the Grand Coulee Dam and purchased land in the Columbia Basin. Four generations in, the Easterdays were a powerhouse of ranching and farming. The farm, at a sweeping 18,000 acres, was 60 times its original size, dominated by the potatoes and onions. The family had launched Easterday Ranches along the way, a "finishing operation" that raised cattle from weaning to the slaughterhouse after four or five months of fattening.

The ranch was mammoth by Northwest standards. By the end of 2020, it was producing 2% of the cattle supplied to Tyson, which is a lot. A multinational monolith, Tyson produced one out of every five pounds of chicken, beef and pork in the United States and made \$43.2 billion in sales every year. As beef industry heavyweights go, Tyson has few equals. Cody, the youngest of Gale's children with his wife, Karen, eventually held the reins of the family's partnership

with Tyson. In 1989, he joined the business with his wife, Debby, when he was barely 18, and the couple became co-owners with his parents.

In the daily hum of this meat-making venture and on the farm, Cody was described by one worker as the embodiment of its bustle.

"He is on the go all the time, trying to see what he can come up with or buy," said Johnny Gamino, who worked as a mechanic on Easterday's many tractors, trailers, trucks and machines for 15 years. "He was almost like anxious — anxious to do something, get something accomplished. He's always on the run."

Working with him and his father was easy to enjoy, Gamino said. Both Cody and Gale treated their staff like equals and looked after them like they looked after their own. When they recruited Gamino, for example, the Easterdays doubled his salary and afterward advanced him \$6,000 to buy the land on which he made his home. To work with the Easterdays was to be part of a circuit of father-and-son pitstops, check-ins and brainstorm. Cody was frequently

at top efficiency, and Gale was often toting Cody's three boys in his pickup, the next generation in training. The duo were industrious, driven and often on the hunt for opportunities and deals, angling to better the farm and ranch.

"What I liked about him was that if anybody wanted to talk to him ... he would make time for us," Gamino said.

By all outward appearances in the fall of 2020, the Easterdays looked better than good. They employed hundreds of workers in their packing plants and on the ranch and farm, and contracted crews for seasonal labor. They were donors and boosters for Republican candidates and campaigns, gifted livestock to fairs in three counties and sponsored one of the region's biggest rodeos, the Pendleton Round-Up. From steer wrestling to barrel races, they were fixtures in arena box seats and in the community, too.

But there was trouble.

Over the fiscal year ending in 2020, Easterday Ranches' gross revenues had declined by almost half from the previous year, from \$111 million to \$65 million. And the ranches' investments had been wiped out entirely. The farm was similarly failing, with gross revenues falling from \$82 million to \$52 million and interest income on investments diving even as the stock market was booming.

Coronavirus slowdowns at meatpackers surely accounted for some of the loss — cattle were hard to sell in 2020 while plants sputtered, labor was scarce and the supply chain shifted from restaurants to grocery stores. But a longstanding problem was also threatening the businesses: For years, Cody Easterday had been piling up staggering debts gambling on the future price of beef. To cover his losses, he invented whole herds of cattle on paper, then sold them to Tyson while pretending to raise them on the ranch. In November, after a Tyson worker came to take stock of its herd, Easterday confessed the phony invoicing — for the cattle

that didn't exist, and feed for the nonexistent animals. One particularly eye-catching invoice charged \$5.3 million for eight lots of cattle that couldn't be found anywhere other than on paper.

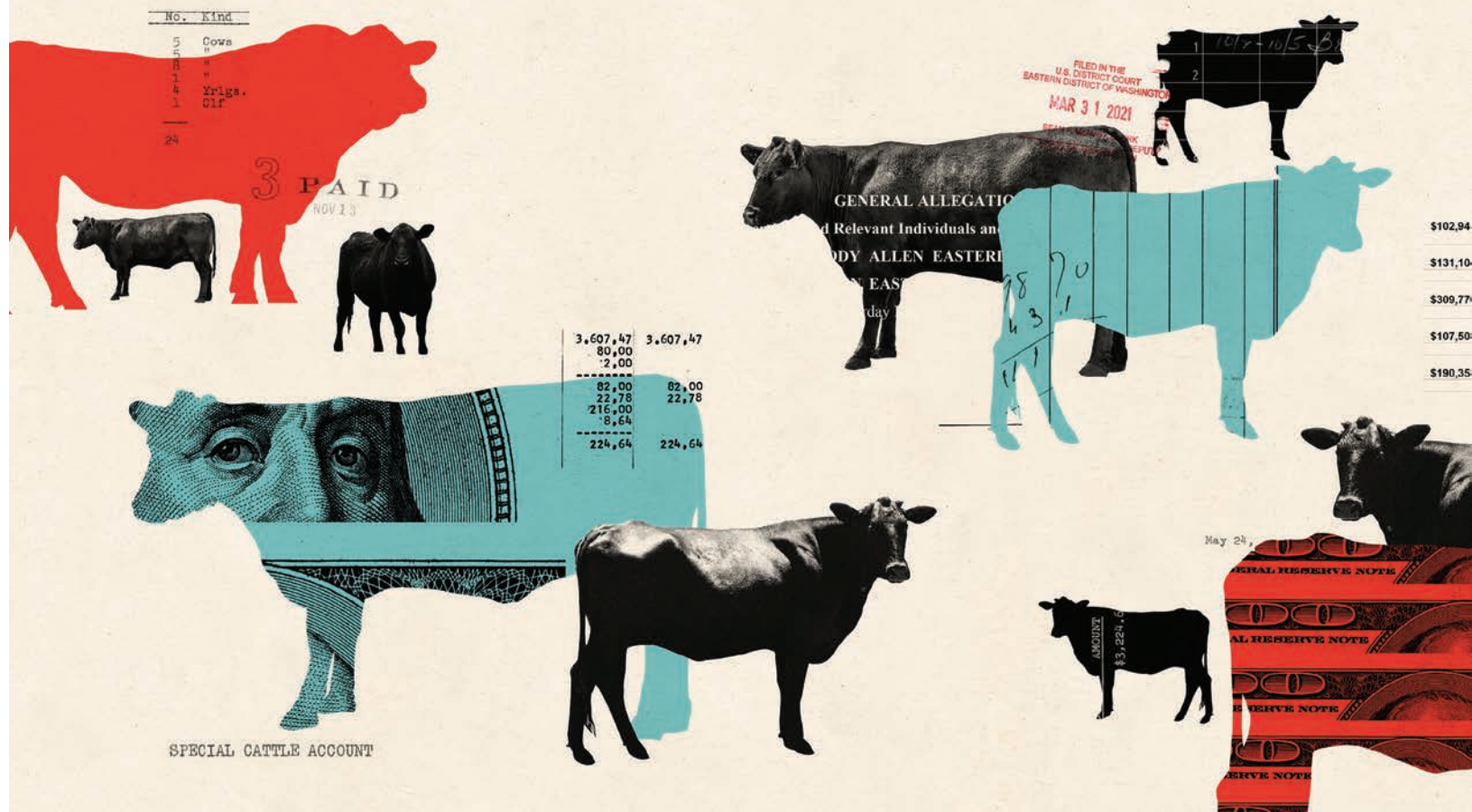
Cody Easterday, through an attorney, declined to be interviewed for this story. Court records explained much of the rest. Maybe the daily ingenuity involved in running the farm and ranch — the deal-hunting and the thirst for productivity — explains a little of why Cody Easterday fell prey to the allure of betting everything his family built. But personal predilection this was not, not entirely.

TO UNDERSTAND HOW the Easterdays unraveled in this system, first you have to know that the system is rigged. And that to be a rancher is to be a gambler — at least in a business sense — because the market for beef is more about enriching corporations than paying ranchers a fair share.

The primary challenge is that 73% of the beef in the U.S. is controlled by four corporations. That's it. Despite the array of colorfully packaged this-and-that in the grocery store, the corporations either create or acquire the brands that give consumers a fairly anemic range of choice. The meat inside might come from different farms, be raised in different ways, or vary in quality. But at the end of the day, it is bought, packaged and shipped by the same few actors. And because of their market heft, these corporations increasingly influence how the products are made and the prices paid to ranchers to make them. Tyson is among these market heavyweights, along with JBS, Cargill and Marfrig.

Ranchers have long complained about lowball prices from these companies. Nationwide, data from the United States Department of Agriculture shows they have reason to. Profits for ranchers have trended slimmer almost every year since the late 1980s, when those prices were first tracked. By 2020, the same year the

To cover his losses, Cody Easterday invented whole herds of cattle on paper, then sold them to Tyson while pretending to raise them on the ranch.



Easterday empire began to crumble, a rancher's share of the value of boxed beef shipped to retailers was 37.3%, down nearly 27% since 2015, when it was 51.5%. This while the consumer price of beef soared higher than ever.

These disappearing earnings were captured by the corporations. They've made enormous gains by pulling profits from both sides of the business: pushing pay for ranchers down while also benefiting from the rising price of beef for consumers. Tyson disputes that the company has this much influence over consumer costs, or that consolidation has been a factor. Feeding America requires scale, its officials say. But this capitalistic pursuit — scale — is a primary reason why so many ranchers are going out of business, especially when drought and the high price of hay add other pressures. It's also why the beef business is consolidating among ranchers like the Easterdays, who instead of raising a few hundred head of cattle on rangeland, raised them by the tens of thousands in feedlots. That industry parlance — feedlots — is shorthand for saying

the cattle are raised in pen after pen after pen on dirt squares that look from the sky like enormous bingo cards.

Inside this system, Easterday was playing an impossible game. As cattle prices steadily declined, his negotiating power diminished. That's because while meatpackers like Tyson were buying up all the brands and slaughterhouses, they eliminated his ability to shop around. There were only two corporations operating near enough his ranch to buy his herds. He was already selling to both, including Tyson.

When he entered into his most recent contract with Tyson in 2014, the corporation offered him a deal that's increasingly common: Tyson agreed to front Easterday the cash to buy weaned calves and to feed them, and to buy the cattle back from Easterday at market rates when they were grown. Tyson would pay premiums for beef quality, and discounts for deficiencies. But while that might seem like a sound arrangement, one with clear expectations and guarantees, it isn't. That's because once the cattle

were grown, Easterday had to repay Tyson the money the company had loaned him to buy and feed them. Plus, he owed 4% interest on that money. And because no one can know what the market price of beef will be in some months, he never knew whether he would break even. So while this deal brought millions in cash from Tyson to Easterday Ranches in the short term, it could also send that money — and sometimes more — back again. If the price of beef was good, Easterday pocketed the difference. If the price was bad, he was stuck for the loss.

This practice is called formula contracting. It's a type of forward contract, or a contract that sets prices in the future. And it is not always a ruinous position to be in. But it is risky when contracting with a company like Tyson, because Tyson's market heft can drive the price of cattle down by eliminating cash competition. Tyson points out the upsides: steady income, reliable markets and easier access to bank loans. But there's no disputing that formula contracting depresses the price of a steer.

By spring of 2020, formula

contracting ballooned to 70% of the market for cattle, more than double what it was 15 years earlier.

CODY EASTERDAY must have faced colossal pressure. In addition to employing workers who depended on the farm and ranch, the Easterdays had hundreds of accounts around town. For fuel, for machinery, for fertilizer and things like hay. In those corrugated metal shops where Gale Easterday spent his last day running errands, he was on a first-name basis with the owners of the local enterprises there. After four generations of success, his credit — Cody's credit, too — it was their name.

Ranchers can manage the financial precarity of raising beef as such a middleman. But to do it well is to treat it more like buying insurance than like a night at the poker table. And ranchers need two things: One is an awful lot of cattle, and the other is a stockbroker.

This is how it works: Ranchers with more than 50,000 pounds of living, breathing, snorting mammal can go to the Chicago Mercantile Exchange — the

agrarian equivalent of the New York Stock Exchange — and buy what's called a futures contract. It's a paper trade, that's all. A place to trade bets with investors who are wagering on the future price of beef. With the help of a stockbroker, ranchers can carefully wager against their cattle to make a little extra profit, just in case the market price doesn't go their way.

Say, for example, that the break-even price on a herd is \$1.30 per pound in June. That rancher might buy a futures contract for \$1.34, looking to make a profit of 4 cents. That way if the market price turns out to be only \$1.20 by June, the rancher might have lost 10 cents per pound on the cost of feeding his cattle, but still netted 4 cents a pound by trading paper. This is how a guy in Greenwich, Connecticut, can come to be placing bets on tens of thousands of pounds of cattle without ever setting foot in a feedlot. And that's a good thing, because he's the only one left driving the price of beef up for the rancher.

Some people play this system quite well. Ron Rowan is the director of risk management for Beef Northwest Feeders, another cattle finishing operation in Oregon, and trades cattle futures for a living. Rowan's knowledge of the beef industry helps him manage the risk at his cattle-fattening enterprise while the guy in Greenwich takes on a share of risk, too. Rowan says the incentives in the formula contracts — the premiums paid for higher quality — combine with this trading to drive better beef cuts and grades. "We're producing — in my opinion, and look at the statistics, too — the highest-quality beef that we've ever produced." More choice prime. Happier customers. Increased demand. Tyson officials point to these benefits as perks of the current system.

But little ranches can't play this game. That rangeland? That Western grit and independence? The smallest of players — specifically the ones that rely on grass and forage to feed cattle — are often

too small to trade on the exchange. They don't have enough pounds of mammal.

"It's not looking rosy," said Toni Meacham, a rancher in her early 40s who has a second income as an attorney. "You've always got Tyson and all those big plants saying, 'You guys have got to get your costs down.' And we're sitting here going, 'We can't pencil that, that doesn't work.'" One of her colleagues bought a grocery store to capture more money on his beef. Another started selling directly to consumers.

Some ranchers forgo the market altogether now. Federal

data shows that the largest percentage of ranchers raise 10 or fewer cattle for themselves, maybe a few friends. In recent testimony to Congress about Western drought, which was so severe in 2021 that irrigation water was scarce, several ranchers described selling off herds at significant losses, unable to buy hay while grass wouldn't grow and profits were too slim to afford it. Whether those ranchers can borrow their way back into business in another year is unknown. But last spring, cattle moved in droves to large feedlots in places like Nebraska, Kansas and Texas where grass was abundant. That means

cattle moved away from the open ranges that are beef's Americana, and off the free-roaming lands that consumers value.

For the ranchers that remain in business, raising beef is an enterprise of scale — scale and futures trading. But for them, there is another potential snag: While futures trades on the price of beef can earn big, they are extremely risky when they angle into gambling.

This is the territory that Cody Easterday found himself in: on a first-name basis with at least one stockbroker. Easterday's first recorded big loss was in 2011,



when court records show he lost almost \$14 million. He lost another \$17 million in 2012. The following year, another \$10 million, then another \$20 million. Then he won: In 2015, a haul of nearly \$7 million turned his luck. But the victory was brief. In 2016, he lost another \$6 million. That year, with losses piled high and cash undoubtedly short, Easterday told employees to submit fake invoices to Tyson, a criminal investigation found, billing for cattle he never bought and feed for those imaginary animals. Then he used the cash to pay down his debts and bet some more.

It worked. Sort of. Tyson paid the tab, and Easterday used Tyson's money to pay down his trading debts. But Easterday quickly lost another \$18 million. So he invoiced Tyson for more cattle and more feed he didn't have. Then he bet again, losing \$58 million in 2018. For the next two years, he was in a nasty cycle, billing Tyson for imaginary cattle, then paying down the losses and trading again. Some of the fake invoices included pen numbers, the animals' gender, even a financial analysis of their prospects in the market. Each sought millions of dollars for thousands of head of cattle. Hundreds of thousands of them were never real.

By the time Tyson began to suspect the fraud, in November 2020, Easterday had lost more than \$200 million in the futures market. When confronted by a Tyson worker, and next a trio of corporate honchos, he told them all he had "screwed up" and "pissed it away on the Merc." He disputed that he had been stealing, called the phony invoices "forward billing" instead.

LOTS OF CATTLEMEN will tell you that Cody Easterday is an outlier. That he fudged receipts, cooked books, made up livestock that were never there. They are quick to note that this is fraud, that it was illegal, that it is very far afield of the normal business dealings of a ranch. They also say that Easterday may have had a gambling problem. All of that might be true.

But what's certainly true is that the price of a steak is increasingly untethered from the cost of raising cattle. And that the scenario drives ranchers to operate on margins so perilously slim that speculative trading is necessary and spectacular failure possible. Tyson officials say their margins are also slim, slimmer than ranchers' margins once you factor in all the costs. Only a portion of the company's \$43.2 billion in sales is profit. But for Easterday, spectacular failure is what happened next.

Tyson's inquiry quickly revealed that at least 200,000 head of cattle purported to be in the care of Easterday Ranches were, in fact, made up. It added up to \$233 million in losses for Tyson. The corporation soon disclosed as much to shareholders, along with its own overstated financials. Then, in January, Tyson filed suit against Easterday Ranches to reclaim the money. By the first week of February, while the Easterdays were likely still mourning the death of Gale Easterday, both the farm and the ranch had filed for bankruptcy, their fates left to a federal court.

In a capitalist system, failure like this is felt hardest by the people with the least protection. The people in the box seats at the county fair — the kind of seat that Cody Easterday still claimed — would survive. It's the workers that earn the least that are at risk to be hardest hit: the seasonal, often undocumented, laborers employed by farms, who are paid piecemeal through third parties for tasks far from the looping highways and bridges of the Tri-Cities, out in the land of irrigation pivots and row crops.

Take Jesus Caldero, for example. He's an occasional laborer who also works at a farmworker housing complex run by a Seattle-based health clinic. In a brightly colored dormitory there one day, he described through a translator how, in early spring, workers begin at 3 in the morning, ground lit by headlamps, to race the rising sun while picking asparagus. "The way you're positioned, after 10 a.m., it's very

hot," he said. He stood to demonstrate, hinging himself at the hips, bending forward to grab a plastic water bottle on the floor by its base. "It's very uncomfortable." The trick, Caldero said, is to get up slowly for the first two weeks. Never fast. After that the body, strangely, adjusts. Workers travel between six and 10 miles in this position every day, paid by how much they pick. Usual earnings are around \$300 a day.

Easterday Farms contracted hundreds of workers annually. When Easterday filed for bankruptcy, it owed \$47,000 and \$454,000, respectively, to two farm labor contractors who supplied such workers. Called FLCs for short, the companies — Rangeview Ag Labor and Labor Plus Solutions — hire the migrant and local laborers who work the fields, most of whom come from the Latinx community. FLCs organize, transport and manage pay for these crews, which in turn supply farms like Easterday with frequent on-demand help doing these most difficult and timely chores.

Spokespeople for both companies declined to be interviewed, but Erik Nicholson, the former vice president of United Farm Workers, who is now a consultant, said the outstanding sums would be painful blows for both. "Most of the FLCs are woefully undercapitalized,"

he said. "They operate paycheck to paycheck. For an FLC, that is a huge hit."

These kinds of losses also hit the corrugated metal shops. At the Olberding Seed warehouse, set on a thin tract of land between the airport and the railroad, the tab was \$160,000. It was \$503,000 at Industrial Ventilation. The Easterdays supported mechanics and parts stores and irrigation specialists all over town, often keeping large accounts open. All told, 230 small businesses were owed money, from small sums to millions. All were at the back of the line by bankruptcy standards, outranked by creditors like Washington Trust Bank, Rabo AgriFinance and John Deere Financial, which piled on their own litigation, anxious to be paid for loans. Those heavyweights were secured by contracts or collateral, something other than friendship.

Repaying all of them seemed an outsized task. In addition to the \$233 million owed to Tyson, there was \$223 million in debts across the ranch and farm for usual things. Mortgages, bank loans, purchase agreements for vehicles. Only \$51 million remained in assets. In a bankruptcy hearing, an attorney for Easterday Ranches acknowledged the shortfall, telling a judge, "The pie is not big enough." He said he was shopping a settlement agreement to avoid the years of litigation that could erupt in a fight for what was left.

Still, few small business owners wanted to talk about the money Easterday owed them. "You don't get paid, you move on," said Brad Curtis, whose farm was owed \$112,000 for feed. He reasoned that if money was left over, much of it would probably be eaten up by attorneys.

Others also demurred, a verbal shrug, as if the shock of losing the money was less than the shock of losing an institution like Easterday Farms. Business with the Easterdays had always been good, they said. Worth the trouble for this stretch of bad. And maybe business

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with the Easterdays would be good again with the cousins or siblings or sons who remained. They suffered the loss and claimed not to be bitter with Cody. They talked of his community leadership. Of sticking together. Of proud traditions like raising your own livestock and eating steak.

AFTER TYSON REPORTED Cody Easterday's fraud, federal investigators swooped in for their own examination, referring to the situation in shorthand as the "Ghost-Cattle Scam," while ranchers called it "Cattlegate." Tyson continued with its own investigation, dispatching the corporate honchos to debrief Easterday in a pair of meetings in which he detailed how he'd scammed them, sharing meticulous notes on the cattle, even the imaginary ones. Tyson employees, shocked by his stoicism and cool demeanor, checked his math by flying drones over the ranch to count the cattle.

On March 24, the Department of Justice charged Cody Easterday with a single count of wire fraud for sending the fake invoices to Tyson over email. It was a crime punishable by up to 20 years in prison and fines. In charging papers, Easterday was also accused, not only of bilking Tyson out of \$233,008,042, but of replicating the scam with an unnamed company and defrauding that one of another \$11,023,084.

Easterday's capitulation was swift. Within a week, he pleaded guilty to the charges, agreed to pay \$244,031,132 in restitution and began awaiting sentencing for possible jail time. By the end of May, the farm was set to be auctioned. Easterday was in Idaho on vacation, visiting his daughter for the birth of a grandchild with permission from a federal judge.

In the interim, because the coronavirus had bottlenecked beef processing and prices for consumers had spiked, pay for ranchers had fallen to an historic low of 31.1% before rebounding to 35.8% by June. The USDA had investigated, as had the American Farm

Bureau Federation. They didn't find any price fixing between Tyson and the other meat companies. Nothing illegal. But before long, white papers began to point to formula contracts as a key driver of the falling rates of pay. The USDA suggested one possible fix could be to create more trading tools for smaller ranchers, allowing those with fewer cattle to get in on the trading game. This way those ranchers who were shipping cattle south could also hedge their herds.

In June, while the Biden administration was talking of breaking up the corporate meat oligopoly, bidders for Easterday Farms and Ranches were few. The bankruptcy court opted not to split the four generations of sprawling business. While small pieces might have stayed in the hands of other smaller operators, the court reasoned it could capture more money for debts more quickly in one whopping sale. The onions and potatoes. Row crops, plus cherries and grapes. A feedlot (another had been sold). Onion and potato storages, other buildings, too. Plus piles and piles of land and land leases totaling 22,500 acres, 12,100 of them irrigated. All were advertised to whatever deep pocket could come along and help Cody Easterday and his lawyers bail water.

Only two buyers made offers. Both were real estate investment firms that turned profits on ag land. One was Cottonwood Ag Management, a subsidiary of Cascade Investment, owned by Bill Gates. The other was Farmland Reserve, the investment arm of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the parent company of AgriNorthwest, which operates farms in and around the Tri-Cities and elsewhere. It won the farm with a bid of \$209 million.

After that, anyone curious to see the old Easterday farm would need an airplane and a bit of time. AgriNorthwest had surrounded and dwarfed Easterday Farms for years, owning hundreds of thousands of acres north of the Columbia River

Easterday's capitulation was swift. Within a week, he pleaded guilty to the charges and agreed to pay \$244,031,132 in restitution.

and east of Highway 395, south to Hermiston and Boardman in Oregon. Though the company hired a quarter of Easterday Farms' staff and rebooted many of their family's contracts in the community, the transition to investor ownership could mean fewer donations to the county fairs, local Republican candidates and other causes the Easterdays championed. Proceeds from the farm and ranch are not intended to benefit whoever lives here now; it's to pad the profits of the LDS Church.

Such behemoths are the heirs apparent to more than just the Easterdays' lost fortunes. In an era of downsizing farms and ranches, they are the chief beneficiaries of farm economies that increasingly revolve around commodities of scale and investment. Maybe this was good news for Cody Easterday, who could finally gain something from the consolidation and higher prices.

WHEN THE SALE WAS OVER, bales of straw were tarped by the hundred in a long, tall row outside a former Easterday feedlot. There were no cattle inside the hundreds of pens, just a flat expanse of soil and an eerie quiet in this place where millions of cattle once lived, and hundreds of thousands of invented ones never did. Down

the hill, a row of farm machines lined a field that sloped skyward to meet the blue day. Tractors, trucks, trailers, a bulldozer, a couple of golf carts, next about to be auctioned.

The family had scrambled for what last money it could. Over the farm's last year, the Easterdays secured \$2.6 million in pandemic-related Paycheck Protection Program relief, the *Tri-City Herald*, a local paper, reported. Court records show credit card bills in Debby Easterday's name were paid — \$153,405.19. And another \$30,249.72 in cash was spent for things like trips to Costco and plants. Someone took a \$3,200 trip to the periodontist. And \$23,000 in tuition was sent to a college in Virginia. The money flowed with an ease unlikely to resume.

Cody Easterday awaits sentencing while the government comes for the rest of what is his. He's still a fixture in the box seats at the rodeo. Got a second hall pass from a federal judge to visit the new grandbaby in Idaho.

The next generation of Easterdays who might have otherwise inherited what he lost — the grandsons who spent their youth riding shotgun in Gale's pickup — now farm farther from the Tri-Cities. The land is southwest of Boardman in Oregon, where much of what's for rent is owned by another real estate investment firm. It's also near the 28,000-cow dairy that Cody's son proposes to operate instead of his father. But it's unclear whether the dairy — a hoped-for venture that's all that's left of the Easterday empire — will ever start up. It has a history of environmental violations under a former owner and may never get the permits it needs. And it's still unknown whether the dairy can avoid being embroiled in the tangle of debts that have ensnared the farm and ranch.

For now, it's just a handful of buildings, plus aisle after aisle of empty cow corrals — another place where the animals that might have lived here are only ghosts. ☼

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Photo by Courtney Gerard

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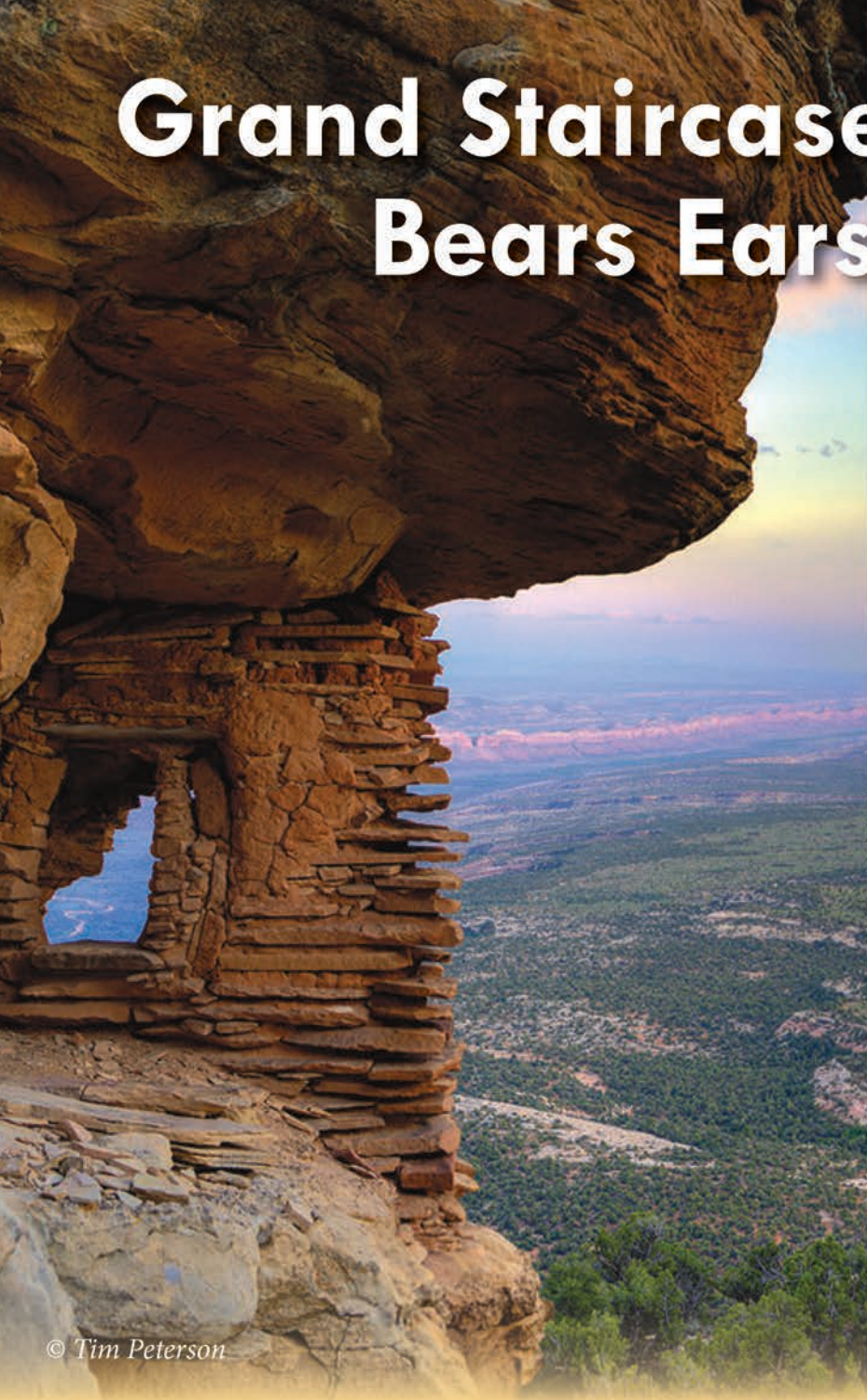
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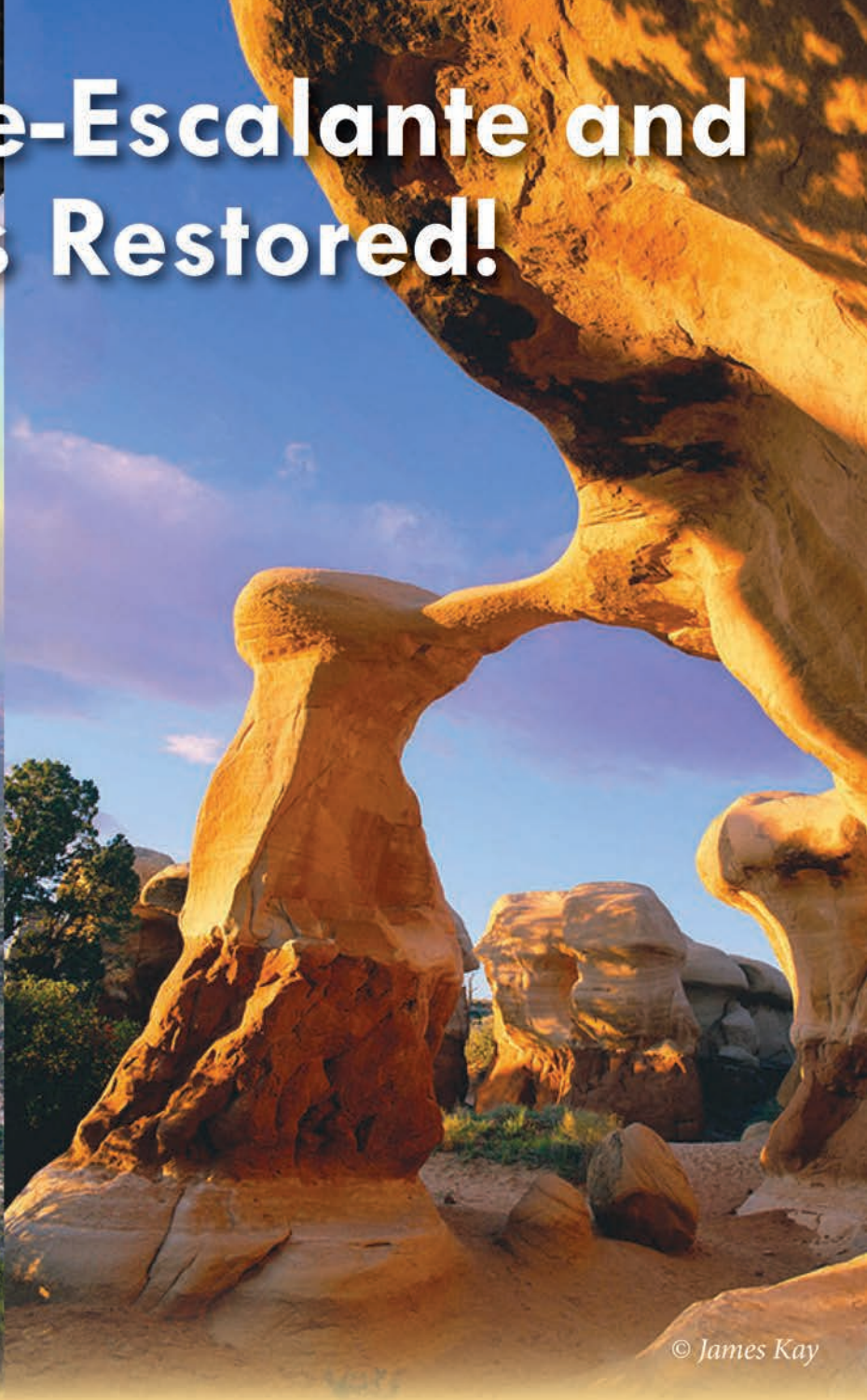
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— Dr. T.K. Hardy, a Texas veterinarian and steer roper

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and Texas. Many rodeo fans and stock contractors decry this event due to its inherent cruelty. Cripples and deaths are routine. Relatedly, only ONE state (California) has a comprehensive rodeo law, Penal Code 596.7. Others should follow suit.

Most state legislatures reconvene in January. Now's the time to reach out to your state representatives, urging the introduction of legislation to outlaw the steer roping event wherever possible.

For those in doubt, see the many YouTube and SHARK videos.

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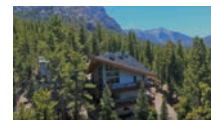
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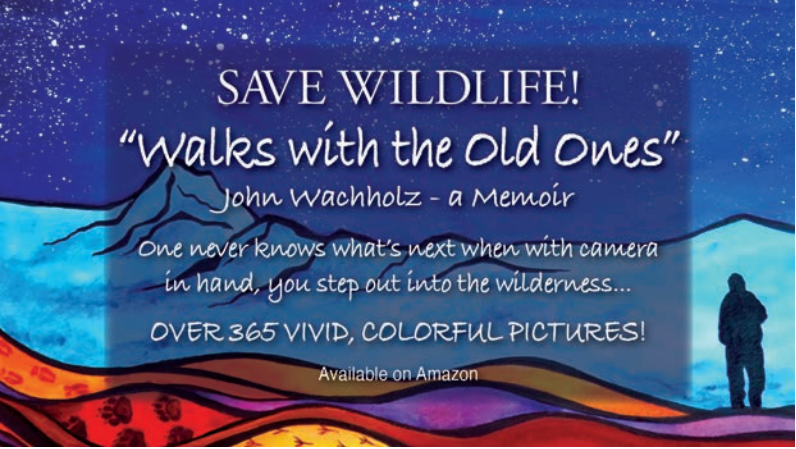
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Q&A

In October, the Biden administration announced that it was reversing the Trump administration's reduction of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments, among others. The decision arrived four years after President Trump's Interior Department reduced the protected area around Bears Ears by 85%, angering the many tribal leaders and citizens who have stewarded the area since time immemorial.

Among those leading the charge to reinstate the Obama-era protections was Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk, a citizen and former head councilwoman of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe. As co-chair of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, Lopez-Whiteskunk has for decades pushed U.S. elected

officials to consult with — and listen to — the tribal nations affected by this series of back-and-forth designations. Lopez-Whiteskunk spoke with *High Country News* about the Biden administration's decision, her family's ties to these lands and what a long-term plan for Bears

Bears Ears is more than a bargaining chip

Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk unpacks the deeper implications — and limitations — of Biden's national monuments proclamation.

BY NICK MARTIN

Ears could look like. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

This fight was personal for so many; your grandmother grew up in the Bears Ears region. Could you explain what it means to

have this area protected again from that familial perspective?

In this fight, I was surrounded by a lot of the knowledge and experience of my elders and ancestors. That was my tie; the politics came later. What was close to my heart was hearing my grandmother share childhood stories, and speak of her watermelon garden, and missing family when she was forcibly taken away to the boarding school. When she ran away from the boarding school, where did she go? She walked all the way back to where her family lived — in the area near Bears Ears.

Each time I would visit her, she would always remind me: "Regina, always remember to come home, no matter where you go. Out there in this world, no matter what you do,

always remember to come home.” As soon as I would come back from Washington, D.C., or any other places that I would travel related to Bears Ears, I worked hard to come back to her — specifically her — and let her know I am home, and I’m safe. Those guiding principles come from a place that is so sacred, and that place is directly connected to land. *That’s* home. She shared a lot of that and helped me grasp why this landscape is important. It was important for the immediate idea of family and connection to family and memories, but it also represented the life and times of our ancestors.

One of the main rhetorical devices employed by the state officials who hoped to see the Trump cuts upheld was that those seeking to restore the boundaries were “outsiders.” How has it felt to have to engage in a political battle where this kind of erasure was so casually deployed?

One of the things that I have come to understand is that when we speak as Indigenous people, we speak to history and to the past. We go all the way back to our origin stories. That’s the starting point of existence in these areas, and that’s validated through ceremony, prayers, songs. One thing that I have identified pretty consistently across the board is a lot of those specifically speaking — and I’m going to call out the opposers, especially within the state of Utah — when they speak of time and their so-called entitlement to these areas, it’s all based in a very current time, which is when a lot of the cities, the towns and communities were established. The activities that were tied to a lot of these establishments were things like gold mining and building the railroads. It was about developing the land.

When you look at the spectrum of time how Indigenous people look at it, the non-Native people of this area have only been in this neighborhood for a very short amount of time in comparison to

how we’re taught we came to be in these places. It’s something that, I think, really speaks to a lot of the guiding principles that our elders have always taught us — to not be greedy, to be open and sharing with people and animals and all the living beings that are out here. Our people teach us not to think you can own air, water and land — that we serve these resources.

We’re not saying we’re entitled to these lands. We’re saying we want these places protected because this is where life has always occurred for our people. I speak that in a broad sense, whether you were Navajo, Hopi, any of the pueblos, Ute, Paiute — it didn’t matter. We were out living on this land, but we never staked or claimed entitlement. We serve these places, and we were very respectful of where we were.

How do you think the Biden administration performed in terms of consulting the appropriate Indigenous parties on this matter over the past 10 months?

I was rather on the disappointed side with the administration. When (Interior Secretary) Deb Haaland came out to the Southwest to visit Bears Ears and met with the tribes and the coalition, it was an opportunity for our federal government and other organizations to determine how these conversations were going to transpire. I was really starting to lose confidence, and I’m still not sure where I’m at. As time marched on, we weren’t really getting any indicators that anything was going to be done.

Conversations were very isolated to specific groups. Granted, I get it — the tribal leaders have the capacity to have those conversations. But we’re forgetting what type of space this is that we’re talking about. It’s public land. We are the public, whether I’m an elected official right now or not.

When you look at consultation, there is really no decision-making mechanism; there is no weight of what traditional knowledge is versus scientific or political values of these areas and discussions. We’re also in a time of COVID-19, and that has kind of dissipated public engagement. Consultation should be with tribal leaders, but again, consultation in practice is so blurred and nonspecific. Consultation in different federal agencies may mean something as minimal as making contact with someone of that Indigenous group, and that does not outline whether that’s a decision-maker, an elected leader or just Joe Schmo off the streets. That demonstrates the lack of seriousness that I often spoke to when I was an elected leader, because we want to be taken as any other elected official in the world, because we are sovereign voices for our tribes, our groups, our nations. But we are taken very lightly because of the whole theoretical world of consultation.

Are you concerned about the fragility of these protections — this being something that could easily change depending on the administration? What’s a better way to ensure long-

term protection for this area, and other areas, waters and sites that so many in Indian Country are working every day to safeguard?

My concern is that the only reason that this is being responded to at this time is because it’s almost throwing the bone to the — I hate to say it this way — it’s throwing a bone to the little Indian people. It’s also on the doorstep of what some communities still celebrate as Columbus Day. You’re telling me that that’s not on purpose?

If we’re going to truly come to equitable, inclusive issues that we can solve together or feel good about, then let’s make substantial changes to where this doesn’t become a change today, and then a new administration comes on, and they change it by throwing the Utah delegation a bone, because they’re one of the sponsors of the infrastructure legislation. (Bears Ears) shouldn’t be a negotiating factor.

When the government takes things like Bears Ears away from Indigenous groups, that’s an act of genocide. We’re so afraid to speak those terms, but we’re not afraid to use them as bargaining tools to make a specific elected official feel OK or feel safe, so that he may be re-elected. Like a game of chess, they’ll serve a purpose — but for how long will they serve that purpose? The next step is to solidify it within legislation in Congress. Maybe these places need to become national parks. As long as they are national monuments, they’re vulnerable to political change. ☀

“We’re not saying we’re entitled to these lands. We’re saying we want these places protected because this is where life has always occurred for our people.”

Rekindling with fire

An Indigenous writer reclaims her relationship with fire in the landscape of her ancestors.

BY JESSICA DOUGLAS

WEARING DEERSKIN LEATHER GLOVES

dampened with drops of diesel and gasoline, I tilted my drip-torch down toward the earth and ignited the dry blackberry bush below. With a flick of my wrist, I made a C-shaped movement and the fuel followed my gesture, lighting the vines and leaves quickly. Aside from the faint crackle of the fire, it was silent where I stood on a hilltop at Andrew Reasoner Wildlife Preserve near Eugene, Oregon. I paused to look at my surroundings. Hundred-year-old Oregon white oaks, draped in old man's beard — a lichen called *Usnea* — reached toward the crisp blue sky. Yarrow leaves poked through the bunches of invasive crabgrass, and sword and bracken ferns dotted the landscape. The hairy yellow leaves of a hazel plant next to me indicated the changing seasons.

I have spent the last three years frequenting this plot of land, driving my rundown Subaru Outback up to the highest peak, never leaving first gear. With each visit, I've grown closer to the kin around me, studying and witnessing the groves of oak, ponderosa pine and madrone trees change with the seasons. This fall, on a morning in mid-October, I went to the wildlife preserve for more than a visit. I was one of 15 Indigenous fire practitioners in training, participating in the first cultural burn on the property in more than 150 years.

Dressed in yellow and green Nomex with a hard hat and eye protection, I blended in with my fellow firefighter trainees: high schoolers and adults representing different tribes — Seminole, Klamath, Modoc and Chinook. Four other trainees and I were part of the Confederated

Tribes of the Siletz Indians. We were joined by personnel from 10 other organizations to carry out an 8-acre burn. We'd trained for the past month, attending both in-person and online classes taught by leaders from Ecostudies Institute, a nonprofit group based in Washington that sought to make the courses more culturally aware and Indigenously centered.

I was eager to see fire reclaim its rightful place within the landscape, eager to reclaim a role in stewarding the land the way my ancestors had, using fire as a tool to maintain the savanna. The Willamette Valley once contained more than 400,000 acres of savanna oak habitat, managed with fire by the Kalapuya people. However, less than 5% of that habitat remains today; development, agriculture and fire suppression have encouraged Douglas fir encroachment.

Carrying out this burn was a significant act for me and my fellow Siletz tribal members. As a Kalapuya descendant whose people lived in the valley, I visited the land with a familiar curiosity, wondering what life was like here for my ancestors. Did they gather acorns from oak trees the same way I did? Did they find comfort, too, when red-tailed hawks circled high above the woodland canopy?

My tribe, like many tribes, carefully stewarded the land, using tools like burning and implementing fire management. But our traditional practices were violently disrupted by colonialism and continue to be impeded by the U.S. government. Our tribe — the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians — is composed of 27 different tribal bands, all of whom were forcibly removed from lands along the coast of Oregon and the inland Willamette Valley and relocated onto a single reservation. Because my tribe was displaced from our ancestral lands, terminated by the federal government, and then restored in 1977, we had to reclaim our knowledge of how fire was used by our people and relearn what it means to work with it. So even though I felt tremendous joy in being able to work with fire for the first time and reclaim a relationship long embedded in my culture, my bones, feelings of frustration and bitterness washed over me throughout my time on the land.

Until recently, the type of burns we conducted were outlawed, as federal and state agencies promoted wild-fire suppression. While there has been an increased appreciation for how Indigenous people cared for and managed their ancestral homelands — accompanied by

the recognition that past U.S. policies of fire suppression decimated ecosystems — barriers still remain for Indigenous people who want to implement cultural burns. It is easy to acknowledge the need for more cultural and prescribed burns. But it's much harder to see them through.

Without the support of local partnerships in the Eugene area, this training for Indigenous fire-practitioners would have been nearly impossible. Relationships between tribes and non-Native organizations need to be Indigenous-led. They also need financial support: It cost the Long Tom Watershed and numerous other organizations around \$20,000 to carry out this training and execute the burn.

Despite the overall understanding that cultural burns have been and remain a tradition we hope to continue, the Siletz Tribe — due to a number of colonial forces — lacks a fire team or crew to carry out cultural burns the way our neighbors, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, are doing. Five Siletz members, including myself, attended this training and participated in the burn. And by rekindling this relationship, we hope to lay the foundation for our tribe to carry out future cultural burns. ☀



Steph Littlebird / HCN

Mammalianism

A biologist grapples with the emotional lives of wolves.

BY TED KERASOTE

IN 1856 JOHN RUSKIN, an English art critic and polymath, called the attribution of human feelings to nature “the pathetic fallacy,” a practice that became known as “anthropomorphism” when specifically applied to animals. It was hardly new: Ancient anthropomorphic art has been found in caves; coyote and raven trickster tales abound in the lore of Indigenous peoples; Hesiod and Aesop wrote about talking birds; and the Brothers Grimm catalogued a menagerie of chatty domestic and wild animals. Following in their footsteps, writers as diverse as Lewis Carroll, Rudyard Kipling, Kenneth Grahame, Beatrix Potter, E.B. White, Walt Disney and Kate DiCamillo have employed creatures large and small — rabbits, panthers, badgers, spiders, elephants and mice — in stories of remarkable insight, wisdom and entertainment.

Naturalist Rick McIntyre adds a notable figure to this list of memorable animal characters in the third volume of his Yellowstone wolf trilogy, *The Redemption of Wolf 302*, which recounts the coming-of-age story of an individual known as Wolf 302, a slacker, Lothario and bad-boy coward, who late in life blooms into a selfless hero and model father. Unlike his literary predecessors, however, McIntyre isn’t writing fiction. One of the world’s most respected wolf observers, he has logged nearly 9,000 days watching wolves since their 1995 reintroduction to Yellowstone National Park, augmenting his observations with those of biologists conducting field surveys from the air, professional and amateur filmmakers, and teams of fellow wolf researchers.

Using this rich data set, he describes with fascinating detail how young Wolf 302 sets off from his natal Leopold Pack to visit the females of the Druid Pack, 25 miles to the east, getting several of them pregnant and royally pissing off their father, Wolf 21 (the hero of McIntyre’s second book), who thrashes but doesn’t kill him. When 302, accompanied by his yearling nephew, returns to the Druids for another visit, both are attacked, and 302 inexplicably turns on his nephew and bites him before both of them manage to escape. 302’s behavior isn’t a

one-off. He soon acts with insouciant disregard for the welfare of his packmates when he lingers by a moose carcass, napping and eating, even though he can hear them battling rival wolves just a mile away. Yet, despite his spineless behavior, females adore him. Suave and solicitous, he manages to breed with them while they ignore the advances of wolves who seem better qualified to be hardworking mates.

Perhaps these females knew something about 302 that human observers didn’t, for by the time he reaches the ripe old age of 7 (Yellowstone wolves live only four to five years on average), McIntyre’s feckless protagonist has undergone a transformation. He helps in the hunt, he fights to defend his pack, he babysits pups, leading lost ones back to the den, and, defying all odds, becomes the alpha male of the new Blacktail Pack, siring a litter born in the very den where he was whelped.

While relating this saga, McIntyre documents the lives of the park’s wolves in absorbing detail: 13% of them die hunting, kicked and gored by elk and bison; 50% die in fights with other wolves, mostly over territory; wolves with black coats possess greater immunity to distemper; mother wolves with gray coats have better overall pup survival; wolves tend to choose mates of the opposite coat color. He then brings us to the moving climax of his story: 302, now an old, respected and beloved father, defends his pups against an invading pack, turning to confront his enemies head-on so the youngsters can escape. From the tracks left behind, McIntyre and his fellow researchers reconstruct what happened:

302, mortally wounded, hobbled off and lay down, the melted snow around his body indicating that he lived long enough for his pups to come back and surround him, their smaller prints speaking volumes: “They would have greeted 302 with wagging tails and licked his face,” writes McIntyre. “Some likely also licked his many wounds. That would have comforted him. ... (He) died knowing he had saved his young sons and daughters. For an alpha male wolf, there is no greater accomplishment than that.”

I couldn’t read this without tearing up, and even though McIntyre cautions that he is only picturing what went through 302’s mind as he died, it’s this kind of emotional anthropomorphism that Ruskin and his followers railed against, and still do, to little effect. Anthropomorphism remains, and in McIntyre’s hands it has created an international advocacy for wolves, and not without good reason. As Charles Darwin noted, all mammals experience emotions like happiness and wonder, gratitude and magnanimity, love and sympathy. Most anyone who has watched mammals closely — particularly canids, wild and domestic — would agree. What we need is a more accurate term than “anthropomorphism” to describe these shared characteristics. Consider “mammalianism.” It might do.

There is a danger, though, in thinking “mammalianism,” for it can delude us into imagining that wolves are just like golden retrievers. They are not. Wolves will sometimes kill a herd of sheep; they also kill domestic dogs. Wolves that engage in such behavior need to be stopped, just as we stop humans who act badly. Yet that shouldn’t give us license to eliminate virtually all wolves outside of national parks, as the no-holds-barred wolf-hunting regulations in Montana, Idaho and my home state of Wyoming are currently, and mercilessly, designed to do. ☀

The Redemption of Wolf 302: From Renegade to Yellowstone Alpha Male

Rick McIntyre

288 pages, hardcover: \$27.95

Greystone Books, 2021.

“Anthropomorphism remains, and in McIntyre’s hands it has created an international advocacy for wolves, and not without good reason.”

Heard Around the West

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

BY BETSY MARSTON

CALIFORNIA

One of the happier wildlife stories this fall involved the army of owls enlisted to fight gophers and mice in Napa Valley's vineyards. The birds are voracious eaters; a family of barn owls can gobble as many as a thousand rodents during the four-month nesting season, averaging around 3,400 in a single year, reports the excellent *EcoWatch*. Realizing what a valuable tool this predator-prey relationship could be — and that it could render the use of poisons obsolete — graduate students at Humboldt State University in California, working under professor Matt Johnson of the university's Wildlife Department, placed 300 nest boxes in local vineyards. The owls are now dining on pesky rodents in 75 vineyards, and, since this is Napa Valley we're talking about, we hope they receive the services of a trained sommelier with their meals: "Perhaps *Monsieur Owl* would enjoy this earthy, full-bodied cabernet sauvignon; it pairs exquisitely with the *gopher bourguignon*..."

COLORADO

Probably everyone has seen pictures of frustrated moose, deer, elk and even bears dangerously entangled in backyard detritus — clotheslines, swing sets, tomato cages, Christmas lights and volleyball nets, among other unnatural objects. In one particularly bad case, a 600-pound bull elk wandered the hills outside of Denver for at least two years with a car tire around its neck, reports the Associated Press. The 4 1/2-year-old elk has been elusive, but Colorado Parks and Wildlife staffers spotted the

animal this fall near Pine Junction, southwest of Denver, where they tranquilized it and finally removed the tire. Unfortunately, they had to cut off the magnificent creature's five-point antlers in order to remove the encumbrance, because they could not slice through the steel-reinforced tire. One result was an immediate weight loss: The elk was 35 pounds lighter after the tire, the debris caught in the tire and the antlers were all gone.

ALASKA

"The people have spoken!" Katmai National Park announced in October, declaring 480 Otis — at 25 one of the oldest brown bears in the park — winner of Fat Bear Week. The mighty chubster wasn't the heaviest, yet he still defeated 11 other ambitious bears eating their way to 1,000 or more pounds. "The portly patriarch of paunch persevered to pulverize the Baron of Beardonkadonk in the final match



Armando Veve / HCN

of #FatBearWeek 2021," the park proclaimed in a florid final flourish of sports-castereeze. The park began the competition, which the *Washington Post* calls the "Battle of the Beefiest," as a way to teach humans about Alaskan bears and how they gorge themselves to prepare for winter hibernation. Some of the bears, according to the *Casper Star-Tribune*, "often get so big they have to dig a hole to stuff their belly in when they lay down to rest." In a weight-obsessed but fast-food-eating society that constantly agonizes about staying slim, the contest joyously celebrates a robust appetite: "During peak season, we have seen bears catch 40-plus salmon in a day (though 20 salmon is more common)," as the park noted on its Facebook page. "And if you estimate each salmon has roughly 4,500 calories pre-spawned, that is a lot of food!" Most people will never visit Katmai National Park, but countless armchair trav-

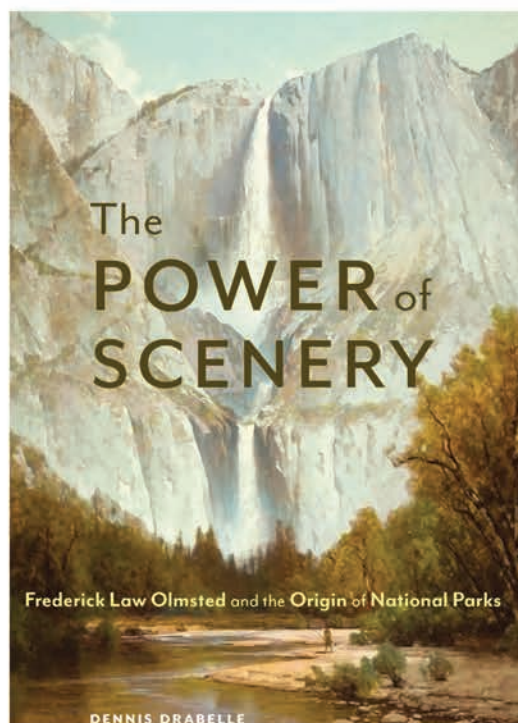
elers on explore.org can experience it via bear cams, taking a vicarious satisfaction in watching the bears live the good life. They hang out in crystal-clear waters in a wilderness paradise and catch migrating salmon simply by opening their mouths as wide as possible.

WASHINGTON

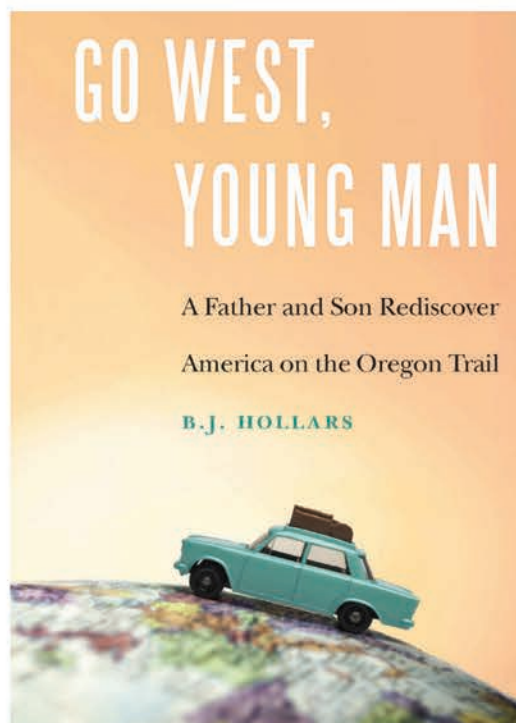
Speaking of ginormous entities, Jeff Uhlmeier of Olympia, Washington, won a pumpkin contest this fall with a "goliath gourd" that achieved a startling weight of 2,191 pounds, reports the *Seattle Times*. Uhlmeier says he did it by cossetting his pumpkin patch, building a shelter over it, running a fan and spraying water on the plants almost continuously. "There's no room to get cocky in the gourd world," he explained.

IDAHO

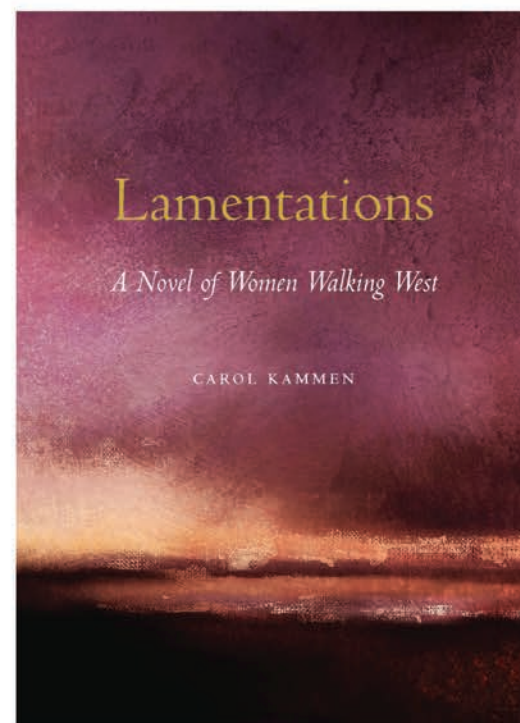
"Nothing to see in Idaho — just a minor coup attempt," launched by the state's ambitious lieutenant governor against the actual governor, Brad Little, reported *VICE News*. Both may be conservative Republicans, but Little supports vaccination against COVID-19, while Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin insists that "natural immunity is more effective." She believes this so strongly that, while the governor was away in Texas, she took it upon herself to prohibit public schools and universities from requiring vaccination or testing for COVID. She also tried, unsuccessfully, to send the Idaho National Guard to the Mexican border. Her grandstanding stint as substitute boss did not last long. Calling her actions "executive overreach," Little swiftly rescinded her actions the minute he returned. ☀



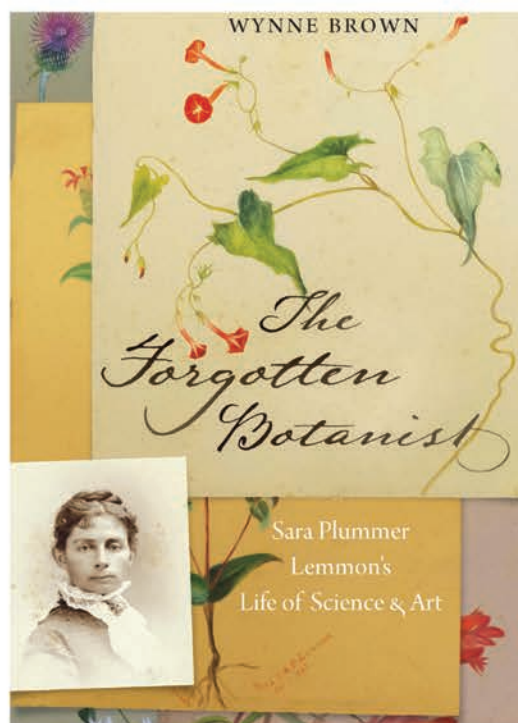
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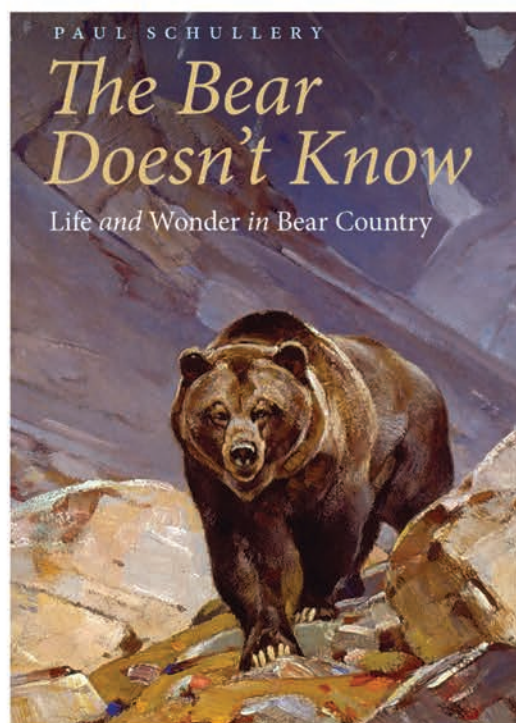
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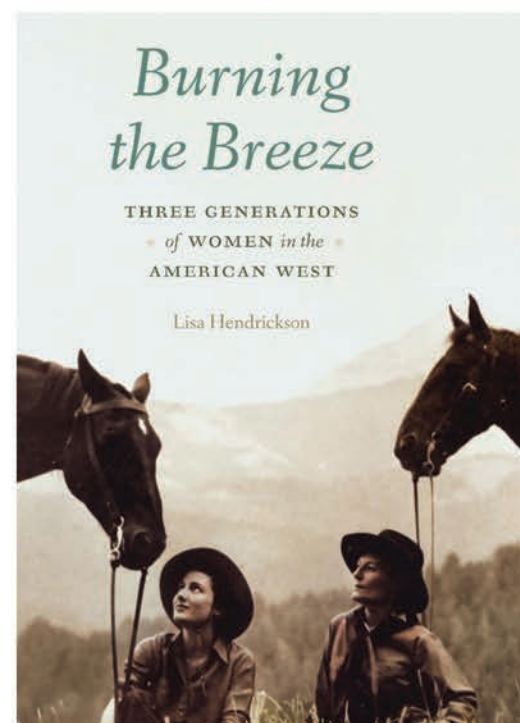
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#IAM THE WEST

**AUTUMN HARRY, PYRAMID LAKE
PAIUTE (NUMU AND DINÉ)
Graduate student at the
University of Nevada, Reno
Kooyooe Pa'a Panunadu, also known
as Pyramid Lake, Nevada**

My life is dedicated to the advancement of Indigenous rights within my communities, including water, land and fisheries protection, and providing awareness of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, queer and Two-Spirit relatives. Our people here at Pyramid Lake have a deep connection to both the Lahontan cutthroat trout and the cui-ui species. These fish are the reasons my people are here today.

I want all of our future generations to experience and develop strong relations to the water and fish. I think about our ancestors who protected our lands and waters so my generation could be here. My goal is to become a fly-fishing guide so when people visit my homelands, they're learning about our Numu (Northern Paiute) culture, stories and history.

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

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