

High Country News

A black and white photograph of a person standing on a narrow wooden bridge over a river, surrounded by steep, rocky cliffs. The person is wearing a hat and overalls, and is holding a long pole. The bridge is made of wooden planks and is supported by a single vertical post. The river is flowing under the bridge, and the cliffs are steep and rocky. The overall scene is rugged and mountainous.

Nuclear is coming for
a Wyoming coal town

A monopoly in Nevada's
gold country

The many benefits
of eelgrass

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EDITOR AT LARGE Betsy Marston

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Jonathan Thompson, Christine Trudeau

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The Friant-Kern Canal as it passes through Terra Bella, California, with the peaks of the Sierra Nevada in the background. Subsidence is causing water flow issues in and around Terra Bella, but is hard to see, as it spans a 30-mile stretch of the canal. **Martin do Nascimento / 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



Notes to self

I'VE JUST RETURNED from a magical place where wonder rules the day. The place has a magnetism that draws me in, so occasionally I pack my gear and drive several hours in order to spend a few days there. I keep returning to this place because it is sublime, beckoning, seemingly larger than life — though everything in it is exactly the size it should be. Being there rekindles and expands my capacity to feel wonder. It reduces life to the essentials: Keep warm, stay hydrated, eat well, range widely. This distillation provides conditions conducive to pondering the big stuff: Am I living a good life? Am I taking care of others? Am I taking care of myself?

It's easy to get lost in the churn of deadlines, notifications, meetings and chores. We bounce from one demand to another, and when we finally come up for air, we wonder where all the time goes. Once a year, I take it upon myself to generate a different kind of to-do list, one that I can come back to often to make sure I haven't lost sight of what really matters — the things by which we measure a life. This year's list goes something like this:

Experience wonder as often and as deeply as possible. Find places that make your heart sing. Take care of your people, your community, your compatriots. Use only what you need. Measure your decisions by how much justice and joy they generate in the world. Take care of the land — the big open spaces and the intimate close-knit ones. Navigate with grace, yielding when necessary and surmounting obstacles that would keep you from staying true to yourself. Keep good company. Help those in need. Release your worries and fears, and indulge in what makes you feel confident and strong. Find your center, look around, breathe in. Respect plant life. Admire animals. Worship rocks. Take a stand for what you believe in.

Make time to hit reset, re-evaluate, and come back always to the land, for the land is what sustains us, home to both our short-sighted mistakes and our deepest aspirations. Practice kindness and compassion. Give more than you take. Be a good human.

Here's to another year of doing the work and keeping the faith.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief

FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS



Emily Benson
Moscow, Idaho
@erbenson1



Nick Bowlin
Gunnison, Colorado
@npbowlin



Maurice Crandall
Hanover,
New Hampshire



Kalen Goodluck
Albuquerque,
New Mexico
@kalengoodluck



Brian Oaster
Portland, Oregon



Daniel Rothberg
Reno, Nevada
@danielrothberg



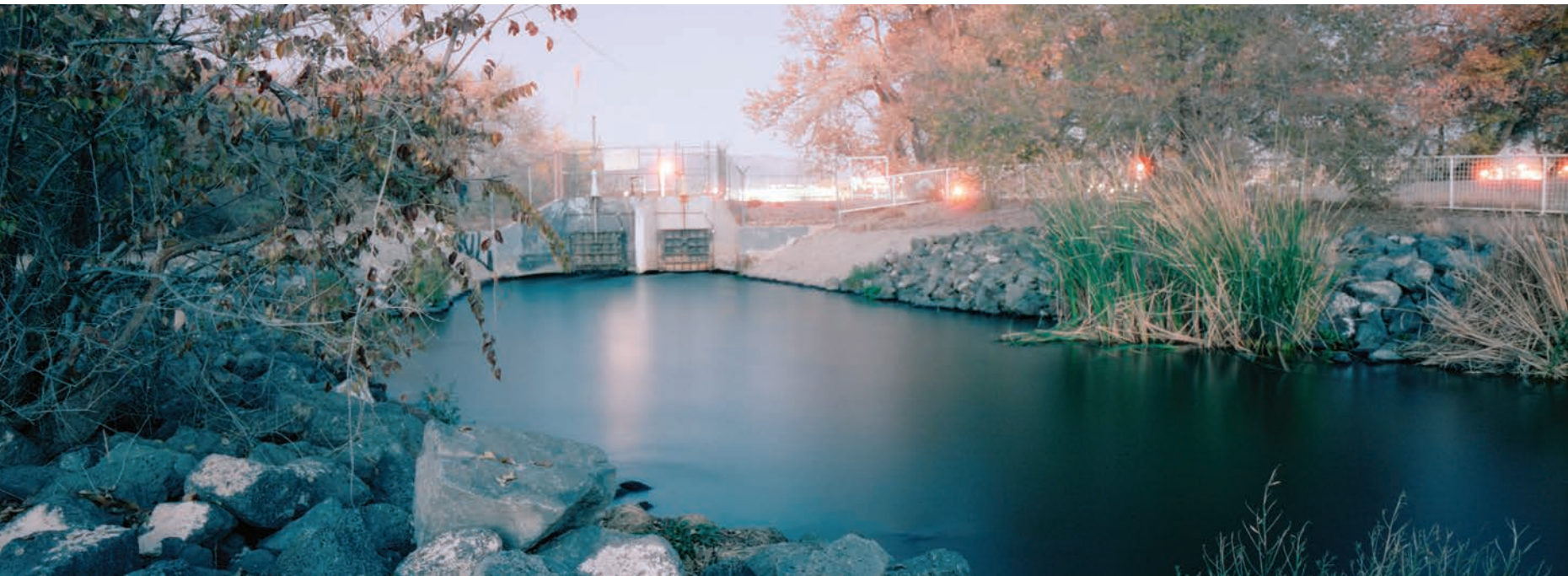
Sarah Sax
Mount Vernon,
Washington
@sarahl_sax



Christine Trudeau
San Diego, California
@trudeaukw



Theo Whitcomb
Portland, Oregon
@theo_whitcomb



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Water Back

Pueblo women in the Middle Rio Grande Valley are leading the fight for Indigenous water rights.

PHOTOS BY KALEN GOODLUCK |

TEXT BY CHRISTINE TRUDEAU AND KALEN GOODLUCK

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Gold Country

After Nevada's two largest gold-mining companies joined forces, the resulting mega-corporation tightened its hold over a community, an economy and its workers.

BY NICK BOWLIN AND DANIEL ROTHBERG | PHOTOS BY NINA RIGGIO

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ON THE COVER

Yakama citizen Everett Aleck crosses a wooden bridge over the Klickitat River, a tributary of the Columbia, during the fall coho salmon run. Hood River, Oregon-based photographer Michael Hanson spent time with Aleck and his family along the Klickitat as part of his ongoing series of wet-plate images, "And the Rain Will Break Us," which explores the history, culture and geography of the Columbia River Basin. **Michael Hanson**

The Rio Grande flowing underneath a bridge on U.S. 550 in Bernalillo, New Mexico, in late November 2021 (*top*). The Southside Water Reclamation Plant, which treats wastewater sewage from Albuquerque homes before releasing it into the river, sits on the southern edge of the city, just five miles from the boundary of the Pueblo of Isleta (*above*).

Kalen Goodluck / HCN

Stuart Thomas stands between rows of oysters at low tide at the Swinomish Shellfish Company, pointing out eelgrass beds several dozen feet away (*right*).

Killiii Yuyan / HCN



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A shellfish company gets into the weeds

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The Swinomish Indian Tribal Community shows how eelgrass and aquaculture can coexist in Puget Sound.
BY SARAH SAX | PHOTOS BY KILIII YUYAN



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LETTERS

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

BETTING THE RANCH

The December issue was the best I've seen in years of reading *HCN*. The topper was Lee van der Voo's fabulous piece, "Betting the Ranch." It was a complex and tremendously insightful story about the way big-shouldered meat distribution companies like Tyson Foods can outmuscle even giant ranchers and dominate the economics of the cattle-raising business. The result was an eye-opening piece on a subject I knew little about.

Jeffrey Marshall
Scottsdale, Arizona

ALL MY RELATIONS

"All my Relations" (December 2021) was an excellent story, full of facts and without "snarky" political overtones or condemnations of some sort. It was very thought-provoking, poignant and sad to read. Such governmental overlap and bureaucracy seem so frustrating.

Jerry C. Reich
Cornelia, Georgia

TETON TROUBLES

Nick Bowlin's article ("Teton troubles," December 2021) singles out

one particular instance of mountain town development but fails to mention the even larger issue we face in Teton Valley. Short-term rentals are eliminating the long-term rental market. Second homeowners and part-time residents see dollar signs and largely don't care about the stresses it creates for the local labor force.

With regards to the Hidalgo family, the article failed to mention that after it incorrectly served a 90-day eviction notice, the resort served notices with the correct number of days as required by law. Residents were then given extra time to vacate due to the hardships created by COVID-19, and alternative living situations were presented as options.

Tony Sloan
Victor, Idaho

THE WEALTH ABYSS

Thank you for the amazing analysis of income disparity by Jonathan Thompson ("The wealth abyss," December 2021). More unequal countries tend to have more teenage pregnancy, mental illness, drug use, obesity, prisoners,

school dropouts, lower life expectancy and lower status for women. The more unequal a country is, the more likely the biodiversity of its landscape is to be under threat. That is all happening right now, right before our eyes.

Julie Smith
Golden, Colorado

DECEMBER ISSUE

I've read *HCN* frequently since moving to Montana in 2014 and have been a subscriber for the past few years. The December 2021 issue stands out to me as one of the best in recent years. The depth and breadth of topics, the engaging infographics, and the photographs and illustration brought life to the excellent stories.

Mark Wetherington
Hamilton, Montana

DECOLONIZING IDAHO'S ROAD SIGNS

I just finished your article on changing racist place names ("Decolonizing Idaho's road signs," November 2021) and wanted to thank you for writing on this topic. I am a California-born Chinese-American, and I always feel a bit better about the suffering my people have undergone when I see things improving for others who have suffered even more. It is good to see positive changes when so much news about threats to people of color is negative.

Pamela Poon
Bozeman, Montana

WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE CAN HURT

Jonathan Thompson's graphic report on methane is excellent and should be widely shared ("What you can't see can hurt," November 2021). One subtext of his reporting is that cattle production produces more methane than the oil and gas industry — 36% (digestion plus manure) versus 30%. When you consider livestock industry methane pollution, along with the fact that up to a third of agricultural water use in the West goes to growing cattle feed, the diminished water yield of public-land watersheds caused by

overgrazing throughout the West, as well as the large areas of Western land given over to feed production, we start to see a problem.

Tom Ribe
Santa Fe, New Mexico

WHITE SANDS DISCOVERY

I read your article — "The White Sands discovery only confirms what Indigenous people have said all along" (November 2021) — and thought about a conversation I had with my 16-year-old daughter. She was livid and outraged about her American history class, because she wasn't satisfied with what she's being taught. She told me, "Native Americans had their ways for thousands of years, and the Europeans came and took it because they could, then tried to make it their own."

Those of us who understand our histories as people of color (my daughter and I are African Americans) know that our stories will never be told right. Our accomplishments are diminished, our history and legacies whitewashed, our pains and struggles erased. Those in the scientific community are unwilling to acknowledge the global footprint of Native Americans and other civilizations, as they stand to benefit (and perpetuate from) whiteness.

Thank you for such a well-written, truth-filled article.

Misty Aoudia
Edina, Minnesota

THE KLAMATH RIVER AND THE YUOK PEOPLE

I was deeply moved 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). I only wish that there could be a solution imminent, but I fear that the alienation of Western (European) "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

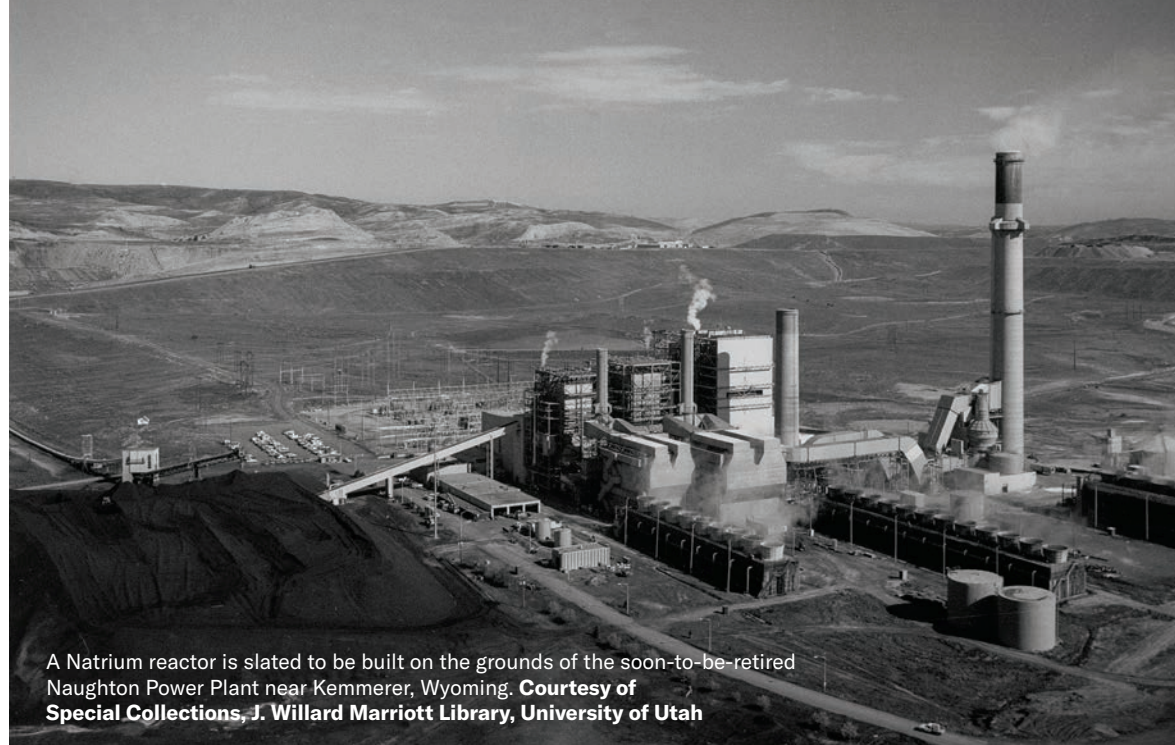
CORRECTION

In our story "Who can own land" (April 2021), we wrote that almost every Japanese American in New Mexico during World War II was forced into an internment camp. Most of the Japanese Americans who were held in New Mexico internment camps were brought there from parts of the West Coast and Hawai'i. Among Japanese Americans who were New Mexico residents at the time of the war, some were incarcerated, but many others were allowed to stay in their homes and jobs. We regret the error.

New nuclear

As coal plants close, Wyoming looks toward a different energy future.

BY KYLIE MOHR



A Natrium reactor is slated to be built on the grounds of the soon-to-be-retired Naughton Power Plant near Kemmerer, Wyoming. **Courtesy of Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah**

SILHOUETTED AGAINST AN open-pit coal mine, steam billows from stacks at the Naughton Power Plant outside Kemmerer, Wyoming. For now, anyway; the coal units will retire in 2025. “I’ve been watching the town for a lot of years, since the railroad stopped using coal, and they said the town was dead then,” said John Sawaya, a longtime resident and retired shop owner. “Then one thing after another seemed to come in and keep the place going.” Now, the new thing is nuclear energy.

Wyoming produces more coal than any other state, but low natural gas prices and a push for renewable energy caused production to fall by 21% in 2020. As coal revenue declines, leaders are looking to nuclear for help. TerraPower, a nuclear reactor company co-founded by Bill Gates, is partnering with power company PacifiCorp to open a 345-megawatt reactor in Kemmerer by 2028 — with a multibillion-dollar price tag, some of which will come from federal funds.

The Kemmerer plant, called a Natrium reactor, is one of several “next generation” nuclear reactors in the works for the West, along with plants in southern Washington and at the Idaho National Laboratory, even as aging reactors largely built in the ’60s, ’70s and ’80s are being retired. Both types of reactors generate power through fission, when uranium atoms collide with neutrons and split, releasing energy in the form of heat and radiation. But they use different materials to collect that heat and cool their cores: Traditional reactors use water, while a Natrium uses liquid sodium. (This is partly why older reactors are clustered east of the Mississippi River; they need access to surface water.) In a Natrium, heat is transferred to molten salt, to be either stored or used to generate power via steam turbines.

Liquid sodium is safer because its boiling point is much higher than water, which can help prevent meltdowns, said TerraPower spokesperson Jeff Navin. “We wanted to create a reactor that is going to dramatically improve on the safety case of existing conventional technology,” Navin said. But not everyone’s convinced: A 2021 report from the Union of Concerned Scientists states that when it comes to both the likelihood of a catastrophic accident and the creation of nuclear waste, the new reactors “fail to provide significant enough improvements ... to justify their considerable risks.”

Sodium coolant can burn if water or air sneaks into closed chambers, and the reactors can experience hard-to-control rapid power increases, according to the group. TerraPower says its design will produce five times less waste by volume per megawatt hour than conventional reactors because of its fuel efficiency. But a recent analysis by geochemist Lindsay Krall, who studies reactor waste, found that reactors using sodium instead of water result in a higher quantity of radioactive materials that need long-term storage.

The project comes as utilities are trying to meet clean power goals across the Northwest. Wyoming supplies energy to states like Oregon and Washington, and maintaining those exports will require a shift toward sources that emit less carbon than coal does. “I think what’s really come together is a broader public recognition of the need to address climate change,” said Alice Caponiti, who leads advanced reactor deployment for the U.S. Department of Energy. “I do think that’s a crystallizing focus.”

TERRAPOWER HONED in on Wyoming in part because its soon-to-be-retired coal plants offer infrastructure and a skilled workforce,

according to Navin. In addition, many Wyomingites have already granted “social license” to industrial electricity generation. “There’s a bucking horse on everything and a pride for producing energy (in Wyoming),” said Scott Quillinan, the senior research director at the University of Wyoming’s School of Energy Resources. A recent city-run survey, for example, found that the vast majority of Kemmerer residents who responded support the nuclear plant. A statewide survey by the University of Wyoming, however, found that many people want more information to better understand the likely trade-offs.

That includes economic impacts. An estimated 1,600 coal jobs statewide could disappear over the next decade, and TerraPower says its plant will provide 2,000 construction jobs and 250 jobs operationally. But the bulk of coal revenue comes from sources other than jobs: coal bonuses, severance taxes and mineral royalties — to the tune of \$2 billion in 2020. Nuclear energy will only bolster local property taxes and state sales and use taxes. The Wyoming Legislature recently passed a bill to tax nuclear energy at \$5 per megawatt-hour, but TerraPower’s facility is exempt. “There’s going to be a revenue gap,” said Shannon Anderson, a staff attorney at the Powder River Basin Resource Council. “(Nuclear) is this shiny object that everyone seems really excited about, but it’s not the transition.”

Still, nuclear energy is giving Kemmerer residents hope. Sawaya believes the Natrium plant will be beneficial — unless construction workers crowd his favorite fishing hole, that is. “I think the town will still be here at the end of the next century,” he said. “Things keep changing, and so far the town’s changed with ’em.” 🌟

Stifled voices on public land

After the Park Service promised transparency and action, it buried its own study on harassment in the agency.

BY LYNDSEY GILPIN



Alexandra Rothermel, a National Park Service employee for eight years, was sexually assaulted by a male employee at Death Valley National Park. **Luna Anna Archey / HCN**

DESPITE KNOWING FOR years about widespread harassment across the agency and promising to take action, the National Park Service buried an internal study that shed new light on the problem, *High Country News* confirmed in mid-November.

The *Voices Tour Report*, which was compiled in 2018, goes further than any past NPS report in describing how women, LGBTQ+, Black and Indigenous people and other people of color are treated in the workplace and left unprotected by agency leadership. In early November, an employee leaked the report to Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), which tipped *HCN* off.

The Park Service hired Fran Sepler of Sepler & Associates, a human resources consultant nationally recognized in workplace investigations, to

do the report. The tour — which mostly occurred between December 2017 and April 2018 — included 53 in-person sessions, 27 web sessions and more than 200 submissions to an anonymous online portal. At least 1,249 voices “were heard,” the report states. All employees were invited to participate, according to emails PEER obtained.

High-level agency officials, including national and regional directors, were given copies of the report and debriefed at a meeting after it was completed, according to a source familiar with the report. But the findings weren’t released to the public or even shared widely with Park Service employees until the morning that *HCN* first published this story online.

Beyond quietly publishing the *Voices* report on its website, the agency has done little of significance to address its findings, according

to current and former employees and another individual with knowledge of the report.

Jenny Anzelmo-Sarles, the agency’s chief spokesperson, told *HCN* that officials received the full report in late 2019 and “had begun initial internal rollout” and were “preparing to distribute it to the full workforce” when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out.

“We recognize our delay in sharing the report could have the unintentional consequence of impacting our efforts to build confidence and trust with employees,” Anzelmo-Sarles said. “One of the most important things we can do is be transparent about what is occurring within the workforce and help break down barriers that dissuade or prevent people from coming forward when they are subject to or witness inappropriate behavior.”

The Park Service said it has implemented programs for bystander intervention, anti-harassment, and employee health and wellness, in addition to reprioritizing funding and improving tracking systems for harassment complaints. The agency hired a consultant in October to launch a “Workforce Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategy,” and has begun working on a plan to improve work environments.

During the tour, hundreds of employees voiced concerns about workplace harassment and retaliation, repeatedly describing a “good old boy network” that promoted or shuffled poor leaders or bad actors to other parks. Many said they felt unsafe — particularly in rural parks — citing racism, sexism and discrimination against those with disabilities and LGBTQ+ employees. They outlined “significant concern for poor treatment of seasonal employees,” who are especially vulnerable to harassment and retaliation.

The report also highlighted broader cultural problems: Consistently, respondents stressed “the need to move away from a paramilitary culture” that has contributed to establishing “unfettered dominance” and is a barrier to diversifying the workforce.

Respondents also stated that people of color had little support, and supervisors did not intervene when racist comments were heard. “Tokenism is a concern,” the report stated, and people of color are held to “higher standards.” It also noted a lack of understanding and compliance with ADA standards and reports of harassment from some employees with disabilities.

Employees interviewed for the report said there is no accountability or consequences for this behavior. “You could kill someone here and keep your job,” one employee anonymously wrote. The report noted that there was “nearly universal agreement that HR systems are not working.”

A December 2016 *High Country News* investigation found that, for decades, the National Park Service has failed to protect its workers from sexual misconduct. In 2000, the agency surveyed employees about gender discrimination in its parks, but that report, as *HCN* previously reported, was never distributed and no meaningful action was taken. Conversations with more than 50 people during *HCN*'s yearlong investigation revealed that the agency has repeatedly failed employees — especially women — at every stage of the reporting and investigation process. Its internal culture was self-reinforcing: A culture of machismo with a history of retaliation against employees who spoke out meant that few people were willing to do so.

Alexandra Rothermel, who worked for the Park Service for eight years, was featured in *HCN*'s 2016 investigation, speaking anonymously due to fear of reprisal for her account of being sexually assaulted by a male employee at Death Valley National Park. Her case was swept under the rug by supervisors, and she has since transferred to another Interior Department agency. Rothermel told *HCN* she is ready to speak out now. She said she believes she participated in a facilitated session for the *Voices Tour 2018* report, but never heard anything else about it — which was shocking to her, because she was paying such close attention to how the agency handled harassment.

“Understandably, every workforce is going to have a lot of problems, but not a lot of other work environments are so intertwined with our lives as the Park Service is, except for the military,” she said. “That amplifies it and makes things worse.”

When she left the agency, she said, “it felt like leaving a cult.”

After *HCN*'s 2016 exposé was published, the Park Service vowed to address the problem.

An agency survey revealed in 2017 that nearly 40% of employees experienced some form of harassment over a 12-month period. The Park Service stated that it would “not tolerate offensive sexual or non-sexual harassing behavior,” but respondents said that the new policy had “no teeth.”

Following its initial efforts, the Park Service hired outside experts to interview employees and create the *Voices* report based on their findings. An email from then-acting Deputy Director Michael Reynolds told employees that the tour was a “key component of our action plan,” and that leadership would provide “regular updates and resources.”

Several current and former employees told *HCN* recently that they never heard anything about the report or its findings. Some were discouraged, because during the 2018 listening tour officials appeared to be taking the issue seriously.

“This process felt different than other initiatives like this in the past,” an employee with knowledge of the report said. “People know these sessions happened. They were there. They shared their painful stories. The fact (that) the report has never seen the light of day is disrespectful. It damages morale and makes the whole process feel like a sham.”

The agency's own high-level officials considered the report's findings critical: An email from then-Associate Director of Workforce and Inclusion Nhien Tony Nguyen from February 2018 said that it would “serve as a cornerstone in our efforts to change the culture that has allowed harassment to persist.”

In response to *HCN*'s request for comment, spokesperson Anzelmo-Sarles said: “We continue to encourage people to talk openly and honestly about workplace concerns and NPS leadership remains committed to being

open and transparent with employees about these issues.”

“The agency's responses to the persistent stream of information that there are deep problems are adequate in some respects, but policies, procedures and compliance-oriented training is hardly enough,” said an individual with knowledge of the report, who asked to remain anonymous.

There is “no doubt the report was put in front of people who had capacity to do something about it,” they added. “There is a dedicated group of career professionals in NPS that understand what needs to be done — they have the skill, capacity and heart — but they rely on leadership to empower them to address this, and for some reason that has stalled.”

The report outlined suggestions from employees on how to improve the culture and systems, including human resources support, high-quality training from outside the agency, alternative ways to deal with smaller issues while avoiding cumbersome bureaucratic processes, and better protection for employees — especially those in rural areas.

PEER sent a letter in mid-November to Park Service Director Charles F. “Chuck” Sams about the report and the agency's toxic culture. “The Park Service does not have time for another series of listening sessions,” Chandra Rosenthal, director of Rocky Mountain PEER, told *HCN*. (Full disclosure: Rosenthal is a sibling of *HCN*'s managing digital editor.) “The frustration and disappointment among the employees that these issues haven't been addressed is palpable. It is time to begin the difficult work of undoing the knots that are holding back the agency.”

One employee who asked to remain anonymous described the problem succinctly, telling *HCN*, “The people who cause the harm are often the ones asked to put the solutions in effect.” ☀

THE LATEST

Just transition defunded

Backstory

When the Navajo Generating Station near Page, Arizona, shuttered in 2019, it was a victory for the environment and for human health. But it was also an economic calamity: Thousands of jobs and tens of millions of dollars in tax revenue were lost (“Life after coal,” 02/01/21). So when Arizona Public Service, a utility company, pledged \$144 million in just transition funds for the Navajo Nation, Hopi Tribe and other affected communities, it was seen as a big win.

Followup

In November, the Arizona Corporation Commission, the state's public utilities commission, slashed the amount of funding APS could give tribes from ratepayer funds. “The ACC has failed to use this opportunity to provide a Just Transition for communities that have shouldered the enormous cost of mining and burning coal here in Arizona,” said Nicole Horseherder (Diné), founder of Tó Nizhóní Ání, a grassroots organization, in a statement. The tribes and nearby communities will now see around \$40 million in assistance. —Jessica Kutz



The Friant-Kern Canal is surrounded by agricultural fields as it passes through Tooleville, California.
Martin do Nascimento / HCN

REPORTAGE

A shallow sales pitch

Agriculture interests say canal fixes in California will help vulnerable communities. But it's more complicated than that.

BY THEO WHITCOMB

CALIFORNIA'S SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY is one of the richest agricultural regions in the world, but growers there have a problem: Unfettered groundwater pumping has caused the land to sink and the regional canal system to break.

If the agencies in charge of the canals don't fix them, water deliveries to thousands of farms and some cities across the valley's \$25 billion agricultural economy will continue to be affected, impacting everyone from farm owners to low-wage farmworkers. But repairs are complicated and expensive.

The Friant-Kern Canal — the waterway that is furthest along in repairs — will eventually cost nearly \$1 billion to fix. The 152-mile-long canal pulls water from the distant San Joaquin River through monocropped acres of vines, trees and

vegetables. It is an essential artery for agribusiness, and so growers and their irrigation districts — and the politicians who represent them — want the expenses to be partially covered with taxpayer money.

But there's an issue with the sales pitch. Proponents claim that repairing the canal is vital for the millions living in nearby towns and cities. This is technically true for some canals and some communities, but in the San Joaquin Valley, 90% of Friant-Kern's water is used for irrigation, meaning that very little goes to the majority low-income Latino farmworker towns most vulnerable to the impacts of drought. Nearly all of these towns rely on groundwater, not surface water, and projections show that the over-extraction of that resource is only getting worse.

There's no clear evidence that the proposed canal fixes will directly benefit these vulnerable communities' water access.

"The same political power that caused the problem is the same political power that is continuing to over-pump groundwater," said Jennifer Clary, the California director of Clean Water Action, a nonprofit advocacy group. "These canals have been flowing past at-risk communities for decades."

ON A HAZY DAY in mid-October, I met Doug DeFlitch, the Friant Water Authority's then-chief operating officer, near Terra Bella, California. DeFlitch, a tall man and a measured speaker, shuffled back and forth with his hands in his pockets as we talked. His job, among other things, involved managing the operation of the Friant-Kern Canal. (DeFlitch recently left the water authority.) We stood together at the canal's lowest point — what DeFlitch calls the "pinch point" — a few paces from the placid water creeping south. "This is ground zero," DeFlitch said, "the bottom of the bowl. We are unable to get as much flow past this location as we once used to."

The reason that the Friant Water Authority is struggling to get as much flow as it used to is that overpumping has caused a portion

of the canal to sink and create a large U-shaped depression. Where the gradual slope previously ferried water downhill through the canal's boxy, open-air concrete mass without a problem, the water now gets stuck in what can be fairly described as a pit — hence DeFlitch's "pinch point."

The Friant Water Authority is responsible for getting Sierra Nevada snowmelt to roughly 15,000 farms and a handful of towns across a million acres of industrialized farmland. But over the decades, those surface water supplies have decreased. To continue growing crops like table grapes, almonds and pistachios — which fetch high prices around the world — agribusinesses, particularly large corporate growers without surface water rights, dug deeper wells and pumped ever more water. This caused the land to sink, and, ironically, the canal the industry depends on to sink along with it.

The impact of overpumping is landscape-scale and nearly beyond perception, save for certain visual clues. The county bridge, once high above the canal, now barely clears the water.

The Friant-Kern Canal is one of three state and federal canals impacted by such woes. It's also in the worst shape: About 60% of its carrying capacity has been lost, meaning that farms past the pit get less water, and the water ends up costing more for others.

There have been attempts to fix this. In 2018, a state proposal would have funded \$750 million in repairs along the Madera and Friant-Kern canals. It failed. Critics maintained that the infrastructure's real beneficiaries — private agribusinesses — should pay for it, not the public.

In 2021, during an exceptionally dry year, the State Water Resiliency Act cleared California's Senate and was poised to deliver nearly \$800 million to the same

effort. In this attempt, the bill covered only a third of repairs across three canals, including the California Aqueduct, which delivers water to large cities in Southern California. But in September, the bill was halted by the Appropriations Committee because lawmakers were unclear on how public funding would benefit disadvantaged communities or the public — one of the measure's central claims. According to Kyle Jones, the policy director at Community Water Center, an environmental justice organization, it also lacked adequate public oversight and accountability. "The attempt to get public funding was originally structured in a way to make people think it did more than it actually did," Jones said. "To say that rural communities should be

happy because they get what's left over from industry is the problem. We've seen this in the environmental justice movement forever."

The Friant Water Authority has already secured over \$400 million — a combination of federal grants, loans and money from farmers most responsible for over pumping. But they still want the state's taxpayers to pay the final third. So far, Gov. Gavin Newsom has promised a separate \$200 million for canal repair funds.

If the water needs of vulnerable communities were the real priority, taxpayer funds might be spent differently, Clary said. "You could build many groundwater-recharge projects for that much."

TOOLEVILLE, an unincorporated town of 290 people, sits underneath

the east valley's foothills. It's entirely dependent on the aquifer, despite being bordered on its eastern boundary by the Friant-Kern Canal. Gloria and Jose Mendoza live a quarter mile away from the canal. When I visited them in October, Jose had just finished pruning a pomegranate tree in the glaring sun and sunk into a camping chair to relax. Before retirement, the couple worked on farms while raising their two children, Jose said. "We were so good at picking oranges we paid off our house in 11 years."

Like nearly all the families in the area, the Mendoza family relies on groundwater pulled from the town's two wells, even though the Friant-Kern Canal is just up the road. However, the well water is contaminated with hexavalent chromium, a carcinogen, and nitrates, the latter a consequence of agricultural runoff. Every day since 2014, they've relied on bottled water to drink. This past summer, one of the wells went dry after pumping caused water levels to plummet nearly 200 feet. "It was scary. We've had so many problems with the water," said Gloria, who volunteers on the Tooleville Mutual Nonprofit Water Association, whose mission is potable water distribution. "We've also had a lot of promises that have not been kept."

Gloria is skeptical of the claim that repairs to the canal would benefit them. "We haven't seen any benefits to this date. That public money should be used for things that are going to benefit the community."

Proponents of publicly funding the repairs disagree. They say that restoring capacity to the canal means getting reliable surface water to agribusiness, which means less groundwater overpumping — one cause of Tooleville's water problems.

But plans developed by local agencies in charge of groundwater show that overpumping will continue for another 20 years, causing water levels to drop up to 200 more feet in some places, according to a study by the University of California Davis Center for Regional Change. This could cause

half the valley's 1,200 public wells and up to 12,000 private wells to go partially or fully dry by 2040.

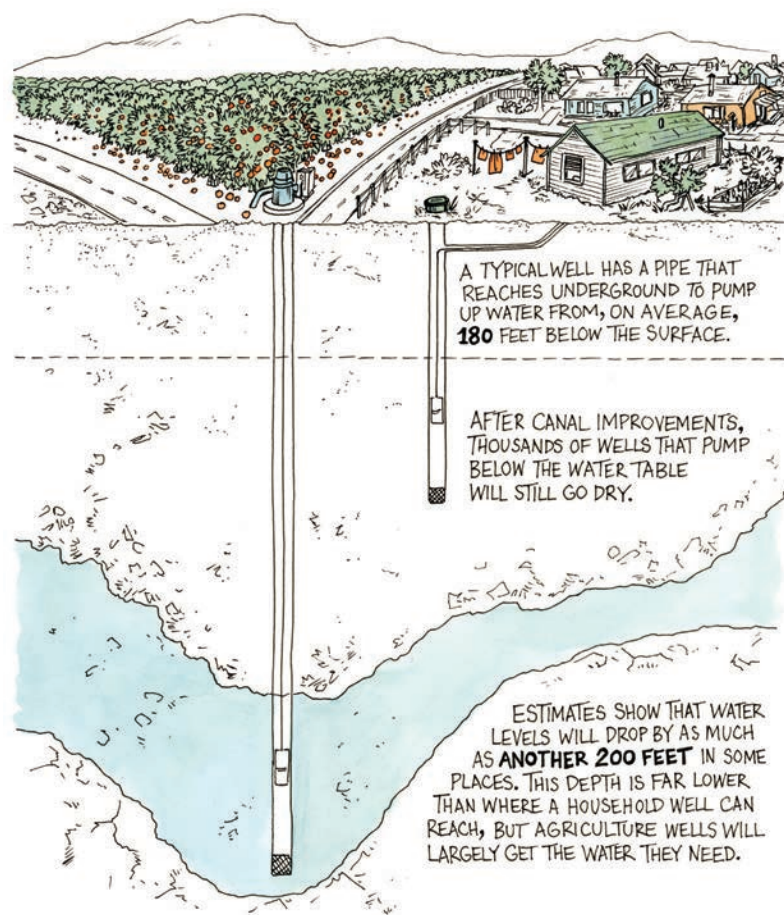
Proponents argue that fixing the canal will help aquifer recharge during wet years, which is essential for getting water back in the ground. But advocates say it's inadequate, and add that directly assisting disadvantaged communities with recharge is still largely theoretical.

The closest example of this in practice can be found 30 miles west of Tooleville. Aaron Fukuda, who oversees the Tulare Irrigation District, showed me a pilot groundwater recharge project for Okieville, a town of just over a hundred people. The pilot project would take canal water and inject it into the ground at a site near Okieville. Fukuda sees this as a template for how the Friant-Kern Canal can benefit disadvantaged communities. "This is essentially a multimillion-dollar science fair project," said Fukuda. "Anecdotally, we know there's some benefits to recharge around disadvantaged communities. But we've never really studied it."

Experts say few districts have done what Fukuda's district has. The pilot project, still a parcel of land with hay bales stacked high, came to the Tulare Irrigation District through a philanthropic gesture by a local landowner, Fukuda said.

Recharge, at most, will only remediate 20% of overdrafted water, said Clary, with Clean Water Action, and that is a very rough estimate. Without reducing pumping, recharge won't provide public benefits to vulnerable communities dealing with dry wells. Reliable surface water to put in the ground is increasingly scarce as climate change eviscerates snowpack in the Sierra Nevada, the source of the Friant-Kern Canal's water.

"It's a huge bonus for them to fix the canal and sell it by saying it's going to help poor people," said Susana De Anda, the director of the Community Water Center. "But it's not true here. If they need it, they need to pay for it. It's only going to benefit them." ☀



Under California's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, local agencies are in charge of setting groundwater thresholds. Studies show that, under the current plans, the majority of the San Joaquin Valley's wells are likely to fail and require costly fixes. About 40% of the threatened wells are in low-income majority-Latino communities. State agencies say the plans don't do enough to protect households.

Emily Poole / HCN

A shellfish company gets into the weeds

The Swinomish Indian Tribal Community shows how eelgrass and aquaculture can coexist in Puget Sound.

BY SARAH SAX | PHOTOS BY KILIII YUYAN



THE LIGHT OF the October full moon bounced across the surface of Washington's Similk Bay. Stuart Thomas stood ankle-deep in the ebbing tide, flipping black mesh bags filled with oysters.

He opened a bag and pulled out a handful of small ones, barely an inch across, shucking them quickly in the light of his headlamp. "These are Olympia oysters," said Thomas, cheerful despite the midnight hour. The only oysters native to the state, they're finally making a comeback after being driven nearly to extinction more than a

century ago by overharvesting, habitat destruction and a commercial preference for introduced species, such as the Pacific oyster.

The flesh inside the Olympia's shell is only the size of a quarter. It tastes sharp, briny and faintly of stone, more ancient, somehow, than the sweet and creamy Pacific oysters that are the mainstay of Washington's farmed shellfish industry.

A self-proclaimed genetics nerd, Thomas is charged with reviving the Olympia oyster for the Swinomish Shellfish Company. The

Englishman had spent years working in Washington's commercial shellfish industry before joining the company, which is owned by the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community. Now he operates under a different set of rules, with a unique prime directive: Do not mess with the eelgrass beds.

"It was made clear to me early on that everything we were to do would have to be in line with protecting the environment," said Thomas.

Less than 40 feet away from him, the



Stuart Thomas, manager of the Swinomish Shellfish Company, harvests oysters on Similk Beach during an October low tide.

according to a lawsuit the Swinomish brought against the federal government in 2018. Food security, both now and in the future, shouldn't be sacrificed for economic gain, the tribe argues; the two can coexist. The Swinomish Shellfish Company is determined to prove that other vital species can thrive alongside an industry that brings in \$150 million a year to the state.

PADILLA BAY, WHICH borders the northern edge of the Swinomish Nation, holds the largest contiguous eelgrass bed in the Lower 48. At very low tide, eelgrass clumps lie fanned out and glistening in the mud. Part of the only plant family to flower completely underwater, eelgrass is essential to Puget Sound's ecological functioning; its abundance is considered a key indicator of the estuary's health.

At high tide, if you thrust your head into an eelgrass bed, you'd see tiny bubbles of gas clinging to the thin, almost translucent green strands. These bubbles are formed by the plant as it breathes in CO₂ from the water column and breathes out oxygen. Studies have shown that eelgrass beds can help mitigate ocean acidification as the water warms — a growing problem for marine animals and the industries that rely on them, especially the shellfish industry.

The plant's importance goes beyond climate change, though.

"Native eelgrass is a foundational element of the marine ecosystem. It provides important cover and feeding areas for juvenile salmon, as well as other marine species, like Dungeness crab," Tino Villaluz, wildlife program manager for the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community and an enrolled member, wrote to *High Country News* in an email. "Aquaculture activities that diminish or destroy native eelgrass also eliminate crucial habitat for salmon."

The fight to protect eelgrass is just part of the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community's larger struggle to protect the habitat that supports many of the foods they rely on for physical and cultural sustenance. For the last few decades, the Swinomish have led the charge to protect habitat for salmon and other species, developing science-based plans to manage populations, restoring tidelands and channels and reforesting streams to keep waters cool.

The tribe, like many coastal Salish tribal nations, identifies as salmon people. But overfishing, habitat loss, dams and climate change have decimated salmon stocks in the sound, straining the tribe's economic and cultural life-line and diminishing tribal members' well-being,

said Villaluz. In 2016, the tribe developed its own set of Indigenous health indicators to better understand non-physiological components of community health. Access to "first foods," such as salmon and shellfish, was identified as being central to tribal members' health and welfare, especially in a rapidly changing world.

Then, in 2017, a shift in federal policy opened up much of Washington's coast to commercial shellfish farming. Fearing that thousands of hectares of mature eelgrass beds — and the species that depend on those beds — could be lost, the tribe went to court.

SINCE 2007, SHELLFISH farming has operated under a sweeping national permitting system overseen by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In 2017, over the objections of the Swinomish and environmental groups, the Corps adjusted its rules: Now, it said, any place where any shellfish farming had occurred in the past 100 years could be considered a continuous operation and thus exempt from stricter eelgrass protection measures. In North Puget Sound alone, this would have included over 2,000 acres with mature eelgrass beds.

The Swinomish sued both the Army Corps and the National Marine Fisheries Service, arguing that their ability to fish for salmon and harvest shellfish in traditional waters required a healthy ecosystem rooted in eelgrass, and that creating such widespread exemptions would imperil eelgrass. They won against the Army Corps, forcing it to switch from sweeping national permits for shellfish farms to individual permits.

But despite that victory, the Army Corps' permitting system may still do far too much damage to eelgrass beds, said Amy van Saun, an attorney at the Center for Food Safety, which also went to court over the permitting changes and intends to sue again now. The Swinomish are still challenging the federal government over how much of North Puget Sound's eelgrass can be harmed by shellfish aquaculture. Meanwhile, they're trying to get better eelgrass protection into Skagit County's shoreline management plan.

The goal has never been to stop shellfish farming, simply to ensure that it doesn't happen at the ecosystem's expense. The same year that the tribe sued the Army Corps, it also opened its own shellfish operation, determined to prove that coexistence is possible. The Swinomish Shellfish Company's 55-acre farm was a private oyster farm back in the 1930s, but the tribe

eelgrass lay flat and unmoving at the water's surface. Its stillness belied the importance it holds for the marine ecosystem in this part of the world. The grasses serve as a nursery, feeding ground and resting spot for a dizzying number of species up and down the food chain, from orcas to zooplankton, including virtually all the marine foods that Indigenous communities use.

But the plant also grows in or near many of the same places that shellfish do, and conservation measures to protect it have fallen short,



Clockwise from top left, this page: Eelgrass at low tide. Calvin Jimmie (Nooksack, right) and Walter Clark (Warm Springs, left) are employees of the Swinomish Shellfish Company. Stuart Thomas displays a Pacific oyster. Facing page, clockwise from top left: Jimmie and Clark clean and sort oysters at the Swinomish Shellfish Company's sorting facility. Laura Wilbur (Swinomish), whose grandfather helped build the salmon-processing facility where the Swinomish Shellfish Company is located, now works for the company. The Swinomish Shellfish Company's oyster farm seen during the flood tide.



permitted the farm as a new operation, with the much stricter protections that new operations require.

THE COMPANY'S OFFICE occupies an old salmon-processing facility, just across the Skagit River from the picturesque town of La Conner. White boxes printed with red and black images of leaping salmon from the old Swinomish-run salmon company, Native Catch, still line the hallways. Retired salmon-canning machines, which Thomas likens to giant pressure cookers, sit empty. Native Catch shuttered in 2016, after decades of declining salmon stocks. A lot of fishermen and women retrofitted their boats for crab and shrimp, and salmon went from being an everyday staple to something that was stored in a communal fridge and reserved for special occasions like weddings, funerals and ceremonies.

Laura Wilbur, a Swinomish tribal member who now works for the shellfish company, spent

her childhood playing at the site, which her grandfather helped build, when it still dealt in salmon. Now, she's one of a handful of full-time employees at the Swinomish Shellfish Company. "I'm excited to work somewhere where I can give back to my community," she said, standing by the storefront where the company sells fresh oysters to the public on Fridays, her long waders pulled up thigh-high.

The shellfish company also sells its oysters at gas stations around the reservation for around a buck a piece. The oysters are becoming a mainstay at community gatherings. "Swinomish Fish Company is not just about revenue for the tribe," Thomas said. During the pandemic, the tribe worked to help alleviate food insecurity in the community. Along with a box of basic staples and fresh produce, sourced from a local farm, it provided more traditional food as well: oysters, cleaned and ready to eat, fresh from Puget Sound. 🌊



When renewables threaten the sacred

How a lack of tribal consent for green energy projects is perpetuating environmental injustice.

BY SARAH SAX

JEREMY TAKALA, a Yakama citizen, was fishing for sockeye and summer chinook a few years ago, just downstream from the John Day Dam on the Columbia River. He was accompanied by a Yakama elder, who pointed to a high ridge towering above them covered in juniper bushes, shrubs and grasses that plunged dramatically into the river over 2,000 feet below. The site is called Pushpum, or Juniper Point, and it is remembered in Yakama legend as a place of refuge for the members of Kah-milt-pa, or the Rock Creek Band. The Yakama, who consider the area sacred, use it for ceremonies and for collecting almost three dozen different kinds of roots, flowers and shrubs.

Takala listened as the elder recounted the area's history and explained the importance of the plants. "I remember him telling me that I have to keep fighting to protect that mountain for the future generations, so that they can continue to gather the first foods and medicines," Takala said.

Now the site, located 20 miles south of Goldendale, Washington, is imperiled. Boston-based Rye Development is eyeing it for the West's largest pumped hydropower storage project, a kind of giant battery that would help the Northwest decarbonize its power grid. And that raises a fundamental question: Will the renewable energy revolution break with the fossil fuel industry's long history of ignoring treaty rights for the sake of development — or will it become yet another venue for environmental injustice?

Northwestern states have made ambitious pledges to reduce their fossil fuel dependence. That means that thousands of megawatts of coal and gas power will have to be replaced across the region, requiring a huge amount of new energy construction — and land. Washington's State Energy Strategy estimates that by the middle of the century, the state will need at least 12

gigawatts of new solar additions, 4 gigawatts of offshore wind, and 2 gigawatts of onshore wind. (The average size of a coal plant in the U.S. is about 0.6 gigawatts; the biggest offshore wind farm in the world, Hornsea One, can generate up to 1.2 gigawatts.)

The Columbia River Basin is key to this development; it's already a renewable energy corridor, with 274 dams on the Columbia and its tributaries, which currently produce over half of the Northwest's electricity, and hundreds of wind turbines that line the area's steep river banks and gorges. Counties like Klickitat, where the Goldendale project would be located, have sought to attract and expedite renewable energy development by, for example, conducting feasibility studies for projects such as pumped energy storage.

In 2017, Rye Development approached Klickitat County and the local public utility district to see if it could secure the necessary water rights and land leases. Situated on over 680 acres of land, most of which is owned by a company in charge of a defunct aluminum smelter by the river, the \$2 billion project would consist of two 60-acre reservoirs, separated by 2,100 feet of elevation and a tunnel fitted with turbines. During times of excess energy, water would be pumped up to the higher reservoir. And during times of high demand when solar or wind energy aren't available, water would be released to the lower reservoir, generating power as it flows through the turbines. According to Rye, it could store 1.2 gigawatts of energy — a significant chunk of Washington's clean power needs.

THE CONFEDERATED TRIBES and Bands of the Yakama Nation strongly oppose the project. Constructing the storage system would essentially destroy Pushpum: The place would

have to be blasted to create the two reservoirs and to carve a tunnel through the hillside. This would irreversibly damage or impact at least nine culturally significant sites found in the Pushpum area, including important archaeological and ceremonial areas, burial petroglyphs, and fishing and food-gathering locations, according to a cultural resources study the Yakama conducted in 2019 as well as several other previous assessments.

"We do want to see green energy projects because we're salmon people, and we know that climate change is real," said Phil Rigdon, superintendent of the Yakama Nation's Natural Resources Department. "But we don't want them on the backs of the resources we depend upon."

It's not the first time the nation has been asked to sacrifice important cultural sites for the greater good of the state, said Takala, an elected Yakama Nation councilmember who serves on the tribe's legislative and fish and wildlife committees. The landscape around the Yakama Reservation is studded with what he calls "sacrifice zones": Between 1933 and 1971, the U.S. built four major dams on the Lower Columbia River, including the John Day Dam, destroying fishing sites and, in some cases, settlements. The abandoned aluminum smelter is still leaking toxins at the site where the Goldendale project's lower reservoir would be constructed. Wind turbines from the nearby Goodnoe Hills wind farm have restricted access to hunting and gathering sites. Proposed large-scale solar farms would further limit tribal members' ability to gather roots, berries and medicine. Meanwhile, for decades, the Yakama Nation has been fighting for cleanup at the Hanford Site, a decommissioned nuclear production facility just a few dozen miles from the reservation.

The Goldendale project is also an example of what tribal members like Takala, as well as other tribes, scholars and the Government Accountability Office, consider a long history of inadequate and inconsistent tribal consultation. Around a third of Washington state falls under the Treaty of 1855, signed by the 14 tribes and bands that were confederated into the Yakama Nation. They ceded almost 11 million acres to the U.S. government, but retained the right to fish, hunt and gather food on those lands. Federal law requires that the Yakama Nation be consulted on projects that would impact its cultural and environmental resources.

But that consultation is often reduced to a single meeting or an email rather than any meaningful engagement with tribes, said Elaine Harvey, a biologist with Yakama Nation Fisheries and a member of the Kah-milt-pa Band. The Yakama Nation has declared that

the siting of the project is inappropriate since it first formally found out about it in October 2017, after Rye Development applied for a preliminary federal permit. The Yakama Council sent letters to Rye Development and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) in 2018 and 2019, noting the detrimental impacts the project would have on an irreplaceable cultural site and arguing that Rye's application omitted crucial information, including the results of a 2013 survey that clearly identified the site as being culturally important.

The Yakama Tribal Council raised this concern when Rye Development first consulted with them in September 2018, but its concerns went unaddressed. Instead, the company agreed to hire tribal botanists and archaeologists to study mitigation options, even though the tribe has stated that mitigation of such a sacred site isn't an option, and that having tribal scientists included in the project does not resolve their concerns.

Erik Steimle, vice president of project development for Rye Development, said that the company has gone "above and beyond" the federally mandated consultation process. But the baseline isn't exactly high. According to the draft license application submitted to FERC in 2019, the agency wrote to the leaders of the Umatilla, Warm Springs and Yakama tribes in March 2019, requesting consultation on the project. Upon receiving no reply, they filed an

internal telephone memo noting their attempts, and the permitting process went on.

THE YAKAMA NATION'S position is clear: Tribes should be included early in a project's development and have significant input on the location before it's finalized. "Only the Yakama Nation can determine what is culturally significant to us," Takala said. "How do you define consultation. Is it just a checkbox?" If the tribe says no, Takala added, then the project shouldn't go forward.

This would be a step toward a consent-based system. Today, even though the federal government must consult tribes on developments that affect them, the project can proceed regardless of whether tribes agree. Consent, however, would mean that tribes could stop developments that harm their cultural, archaeological or sacred sites in unacceptable ways. That's the standard enshrined in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, one that the U.S. originally voted against.

In 2021, 19 tribal nations in Washington, including the Yakama, wrote such a standard into Washington Gov. Jay Inslee's landmark Climate Commitment Act, which he signed into law in May. The bill caps and reduces greenhouse gas emissions and creates a fund to pay for clean energy projects. One section required that state or private developers secure tribal consent,

rather than merely consultation, for energy projects that would significantly harm sacred sites. But at the very last minute, as he was signing the rest of the bill into law, Inslee vetoed that section.

The move was a "low blow," said Takala, who provided input on the legislation, and it angered many tribal nations and their supporters, who felt that Inslee had courted them to help pass the bill and then tossed them aside. Fawn Sharp, president of the National Congress of American Indians and vice president of the Quinault Indian Nation, called it "the most egregious and shameless betrayal of a deal I have ever witnessed from a politician of any party, at any level."

If Rye Development manages to obtain all the necessary permits, the Goldendale energy facility could be operational by 2028. But it's just one of several proposed projects on treaty lands. And without meaningful consultation and consent, Takala worries that the outcome of the clean energy revolution will be no different than previous waves of energy development.

On Oct. 6, the Yakama Tribal Council met once again with Rye Development. That day, the council issued a resolution, affirming that not only did it oppose the Goldendale project, it would oppose all future energy projects that threaten, damage or destroy important cultural sites. "Cultural resources are not a renewable thing for us," Takala said. "How much more of the land — our land — has to be sacrificed?" ❁



River Miles: VI, 2020, oil on paper. Painter and printmaker James Lavadour is of Walla Walla descent and a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, in Oregon, in the Columbia River Basin, where he grew up and still lives and works. He is best known for kinetic landscape paintings that evoke the powerful geological forces that shaped the earth of his homeland, the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon. James told *High Country News* that his inspiration comes from his immersive experience with the land — the connection he feels between the movement of his hand, and the movement and energy of the land itself. The Umatilla Department of Natural Resources has said that the land around Pushpum is of religious and cultural significance to the tribe and has voiced strong concerns about the Goldendale Energy Storage Project to the Washington Department of Ecology. **Courtesy of James Lavadour & PDX CONTEMPORARY ART**

FACTS & FIGURES

Weather whiplash

Climate change spurred a year of contrasts and contradictions in 2021.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

IN EARLY SEPTEMBER of 2021, as the Caldor Fire raged toward Lake Tahoe through eastern California’s drought-addled forests, staff at the Sierra-at-Tahoe ski resort made a desperate bid to fend off the advancing flames: They aimed snowmaking machines at structures and cranked up the water-misting cannons to douse an area that hadn’t seen a lick of rain in months.

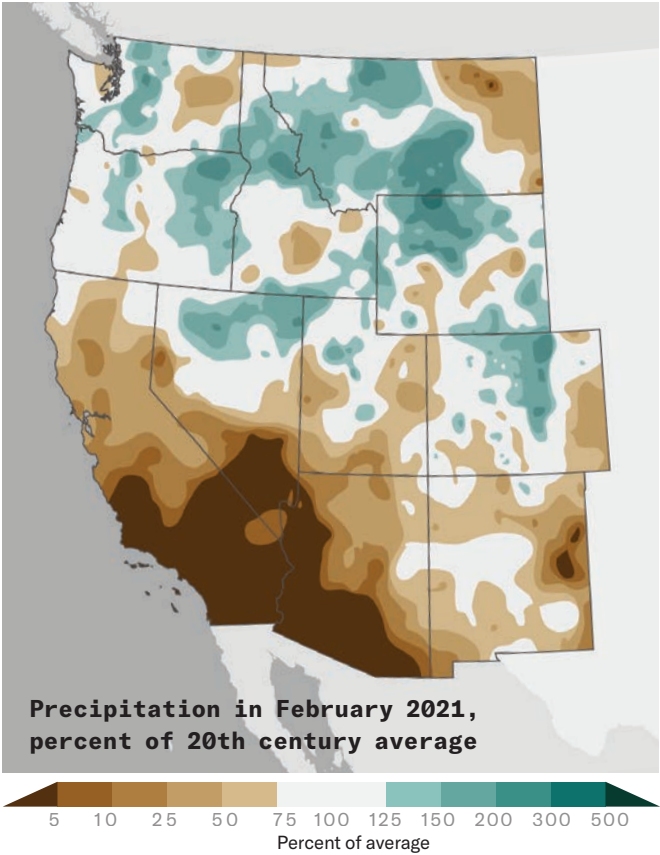
At the same time, some 500 miles due east, little more than a trickle of water ran down the broad sandy bed of the Dirty Devil River in eastern Utah. Then a moisture-laden storm dumped its load on the Henry Mountains, filling arroyos to the brim. Over the course of hours, the Dirty Devil’s flow shot up to a churning 14,000 cubic feet per second — more than four times that of the nearby Colorado River — overflowing the normally dry arroyo’s banks. Water flowed six feet deep through streets and parking lots in Hanksville, sweeping away cars and a 500-gallon propane tank and inundating homes and hotels.

This stark contrast epitomizes 2021 in the West, where the devastating effects of drought were juxtaposed with drenching deluges in neighboring states. But amid all the weather whiplash, there was one constant: Temperatures were above “normal” all year long. ☀

Data visualization: Luna Anna Archey
SOURCES: NOAA, U.S. Drought Monitor, Western Regional Climate Center, National Snow and Ice Data Center, Maricopa County, Multnomah County, NPS, USGS, Greater Yellowstone Climate Assessment, National Weather Service, Washington State Department of Health.

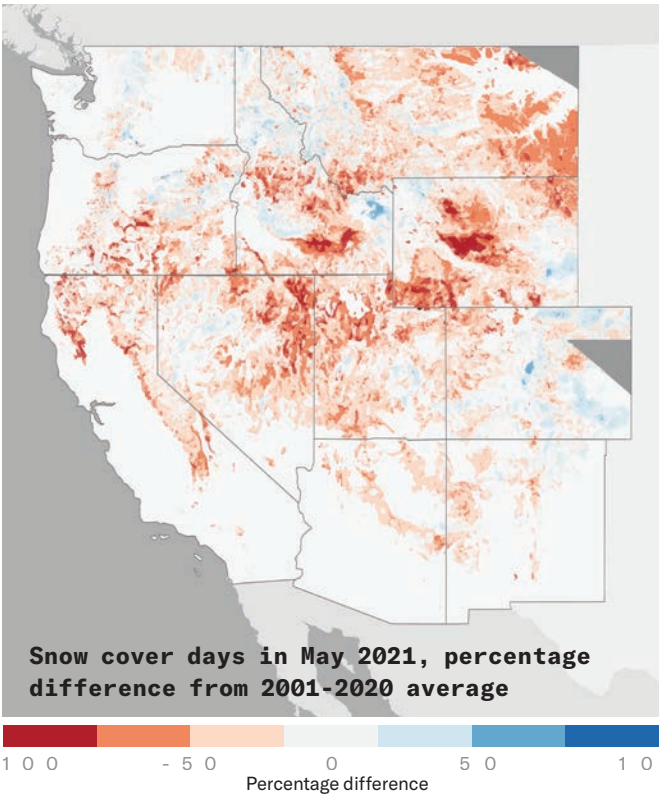
WINTER WOBBLED

► **Feast and Famine:** Fairbanks, Alaska, received just half an inch of snow in January, the lowest on record, while a huge storm walloped Washington, bringing the season’s total on Snoqualmie Pass to 236 inches. Glasgow, Montana, experienced its driest winter ever, while parts of Wyoming set monthly high-temperature records. An atmospheric river doused the drought-smitten West Coast and left more than a half-million people without power in Northern California, while nighttime low temperatures were higher than ever in several parts of the state. Phoenix experienced one of its driest Februaries on record, and seven people died in two avalanches in Utah and western Colorado, which both suffered unusually dry winters.

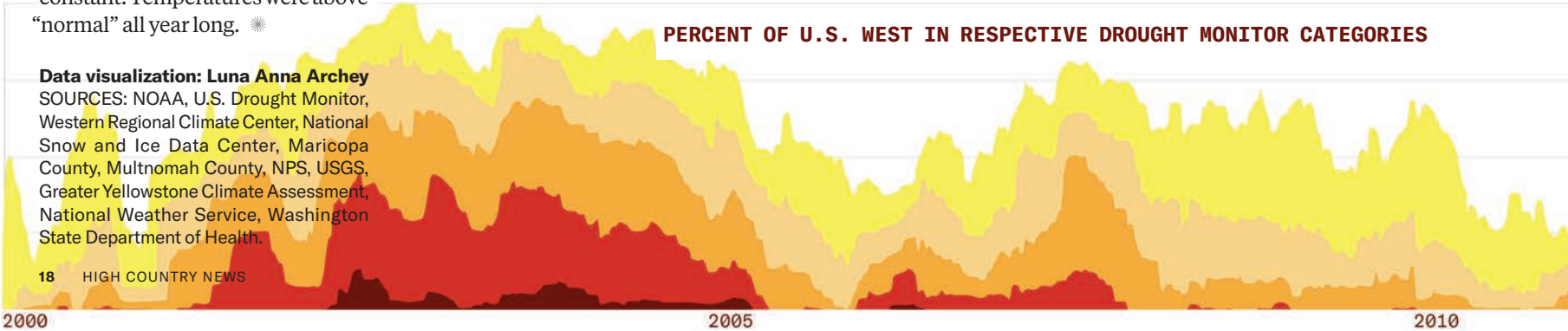


SPRING SWINGS

► **In Like a Lion, Out Like ...** Denver had its fourth-largest single-storm snowfall on record, while Walsh, Colorado, set a March record with a high of 89 degrees Fahrenheit. Phoenix saw its first heat-related fatality of the year on April 11, two weeks earlier than the previous year, and University of California San Diego researchers found that, due to a lack of trees and other cooling infrastructure, poorer neighborhoods with a high proportion of people of color are hotter than white and wealthier areas. A dearth of winter snowpack in most of the West sucked the lifeblood out of spring runoff, leaving little irrigation water for farmers, many of whom didn’t even bother to plant. U.S. Geological Survey researchers predicted climate change in the Upper Colorado River Basin could cause groundwater flows into streams to fall by as much as 33%. Dry, warm weather led to a grasshopper hatch of what many called “biblical proportions” in much of Montana and eastern Oregon.

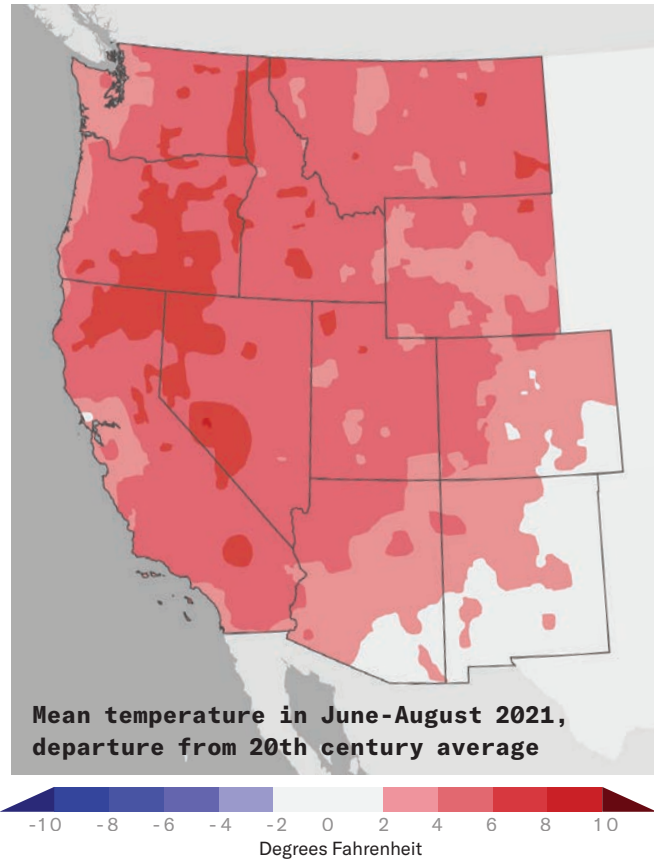


PERCENT OF U.S. WEST IN RESPECTIVE DROUGHT MONITOR CATEGORIES



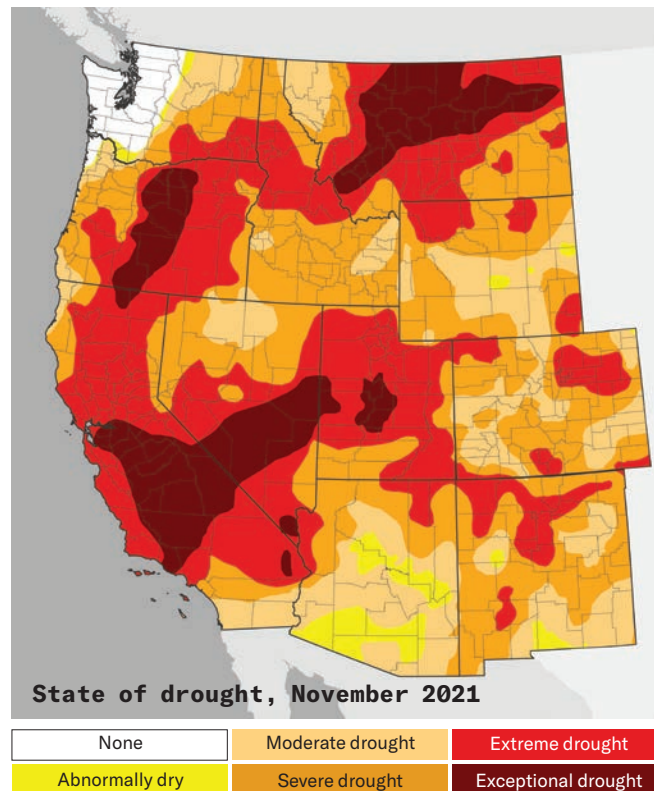
SUMMER SCORCHER

► **Hot and Deadly:** Near Moab, Utah, as the region sweltered from triple-digit temperatures, embers from an abandoned campfire sparked the Pack Creek blaze, which burned through nearly 9,000 acres of drought-desiccated forest, torching numerous structures. A heat dome settled over the Northwest, turning usually mild-temperature zones in Oregon and Washington into deadly pressure cookers and smashing dozens of heat records. Researchers determined the phenomenon “was virtually impossible without human-caused climate change. As warming continues, it will become a lot less rare.” Fires blew up in Oregon, California and Montana, while heavy rains hammered the eastern half of Colorado, turning the previous year’s fire scars into viscous rivers of mud that shut down a major interstate highway for weeks. Two hikers died from heat in Grand Canyon National Park, and flash floods wrecked a road and nearly swept away hikers in Zion National Park. University of Arizona researchers verified that the greenhouse gas emission-driven rate and magnitude of warming over the last 150 years was greater than at any other time in the last 24,000 years.



FOREVER FALL

► **Wet and Wild(fire):** California’s Dixie, Caldor and KNP Complex fires together continued to burn through more than 1.2 million acres of drought-afflicted forests, destroying over 2,000 structures and killing thousands of giant sequoias. Smoke blanketed large swaths of the nation, degrading air quality and endangering human health. Researchers from the University of California Irvine found short-term heat spikes increase the risk of wildfire ignition and severity. Record all-time one-day high precipitation totals were set in Santa Rosa, California, (7.83 inches); Big Meadow, Nevada (5 inches); and Ward Creek, California (11.5 inches). The pilot of a single-engine tanker plane died when he crashed while fighting a mid-November blaze at 7,500 feet in northern Colorado. Researchers from the University of California Irvine found that global warming had “reduced the high-elevation flammability barrier,” leading to more mountain blazes. Autumn rainfall records were set throughout the Northwest, causing catastrophic flooding across the region, and Denver set a new record for the latest snowfall of the year.



2

Number of days in June the high temperature did not exceed 100 degrees in Phoenix, Arizona.

138

Estimated number of people who died of heat-related causes in Washington between June 26 and Aug. 31, 2021.

7

Number of heat-related fatalities in the state in 2020.

54

Number of heat-related fatalities in Multnomah County, Oregon, during the June “heat dome”; most of the victims were older, lived alone and lacked air conditioning, according to the county health department.

252

Number of confirmed heat-related fatalities in Maricopa County, Arizona, between April 11 and Nov. 1, 2021.

2

Number of weeks climate change has lengthened the growing season in the Greater Yellowstone region since 1950.

1.88 inches

Amount of precipitation received in Denver between June 1 and Nov. 30, the lowest since record-keeping began in 1872.

118 degrees Fahrenheit

Temperature at Dallesport, Washington, on June 28, the highest ever for the state.

111 degrees Fahrenheit

Temperature at Porthill, Idaho, on June 28.

56.77 inches

Amount of rain that fell in Quillayute, Washington, between Sept. 1 and Nov. 30, smashing the old record of 51.81 inches set in 1975.

2,261 to 3,637

Estimated number of sequoias over four feet in diameter killed by the Windy and KNP Complex fires in California in 2021.

1.76 inches

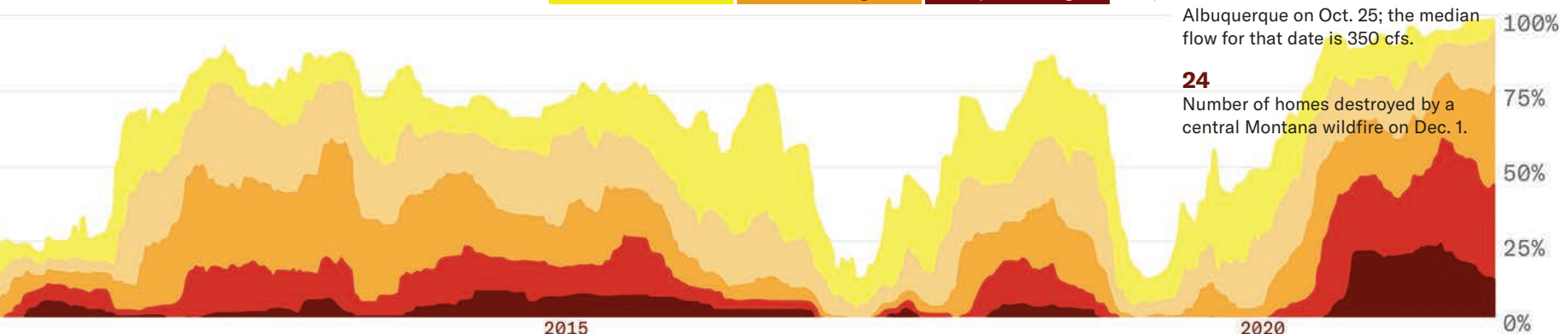
Amount of rain that fell in Cuba, New Mexico, on Sept. 30, a new monthly record for one-day precipitation.

80 cubic feet per second

Flow in the Rio Grande at Albuquerque on Oct. 25; the median flow for that date is 350 cfs.

24

Number of homes destroyed by a central Montana wildfire on Dec. 1.



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High Country News has deep roots in our beloved region. Generations of journalists and staff have poured countless hours into keeping a watchful eye on the West and bringing you the news you need to help this place live up to its potential. Through thick and thin, *HCN* reporters delve into stories and share insights and perspectives you won't find anywhere else.

Visionary leaders like *HCN* founder Tom Bell, the dynamic duo of Ed and Betsy Marston, and Paul Larmer have kept this nonprofit evolving and growing. Each of them led the organization through challenging times, illuminating the most important stories of their day and building the amazing community of readers we have today.

As we bid farewell to leaders like Paul and Betsy, we salute their tireless efforts and vision. But they understand better than anyone that, at the end of each day, and of each era, it is our readers — you — who are the heart of *High Country News*. Thank you for caring about the West. Thank you for supporting independent journalism. And thank you for challenging us to be our best.

With gratitude,



Greg Hanscom, Executive Director and Publisher



Ed and Betsy Marston in the early 1990s, before *HCN* moved across the street to its new, larger location. **James Cook / HCN file**

The *HCN* staff in 1997, with Ed and Betsy Marston shown in the back left. Paul Larmer, center, and Greg Hanscom, center back, would both follow in their footsteps to become editor, then *HCN* executive director. **Pete McBride / HCN file**





HCN COMMUNITY

A fierce defender of the Western word

AFTER 39 YEARS WITH *High Country News*, Betsy Marston is retiring. For longtime readers, it will be hard to imagine the publication without her.

It was Betsy and her late husband, Ed, who brought *High Country News* from its birthplace in Lander, Wyoming, to Paonia, Colorado, in 1983. Both New Yorkers, the Marstons moved to the North Fork Valley in the mid-1970s and started two local papers before taking over *HCN*.

Although Ed was known as the “big ideas” man and chief fundraiser for *High Country News*, Betsy was the seasoned journalist. She graduated from Columbia’s journalism school and was New York’s first woman news anchor on a local PBS station. A dedicated civil rights activist, she brought a strong moral compass to her role as editor.

“She was always hard-hitting,” recalled Ray Ring, a former senior editor known for his investigative stories. “She was the last to back off, always the champion of public lands on staff, keeping those front and center as a core of the mission.”

Together, the Marstons increased the magazine’s influence, quality and circulation — from about 3,000 to 20,000 subscribers by the end of their tenure at the top of the masthead in 2001. Along the way, they racked up awards, including *HCN*’s first George Polk Award, for a series about Western water.

Paul Larmer, who worked with Betsy as an intern, then a staff writer and editor, and eventually, publisher, recalls learning from Marston just by sitting next to her “and soaking in her approach to journalism — curious, innocent-sounding questions that cut to the heart of a story.”

“I never thought of myself as a writer and still don’t,” said Marston. “I’m a workaholic

who fell in love with a quirky paper that cared about public lands, rural people and living Western history.”

Marston was drawn to stories about the exploitation of land, water and wild animals. “Wildlife can’t speak, so we have to do it on their behalf,” Marston said. But she also turned her curiosity to human communities. “What I found living here was a growing respect for people,” she said, even when she didn’t agree with their politics.

An exacting wordsmith, Marston was well known among decades of interns for her high standards. “Betsy showed how you could be an intellectual in the rural West,” said Auden Schendler, who interned at *HCN* in the early 1990s and has since become a leading voice for climate sustainability in the ski industry. “I see myself as a Westerner and a stickler because of that experience.”

Rebecca Clarren, a Portland, Oregon-based journalist and award-winning author, agreed: “That internship changed my life,” she said. “Betsy assigned me big stuff right out of the gate. To have someone believe in you when you’re a young person is essential.”

If Betsy brought moral gravitas to *HCN*, she also found humor and amazement in unlikely places, often featuring them in her popular *Heard Around the West* column. Interns and other staffers recall her frequent bursts of laughter and her unflagging physical energy. “She could hike me into the ground,” said former staff writer Lisa Jones. Clarren remembers Betsy dragging her to kick-boxing classes.

Marston expanded the internship program out of necessity: There was little money available to hire staff in the 1980s. Mary Moran, the Marstons’ first intern, recalled being put to work doing everything from archiving photos to writing news stories to sticking mailing labels on thousands of copies of what was then called the “paper.” Like many interns, she came for months but stayed for years, growing into new jobs at the magazine.

Marston says she enjoyed being a talent

scout and a teacher. “Reporting is like being a plumber,” she said. “You can learn the basics.” She convinced illustrious academics like Charles Wilkinson and Patricia Limerick to write for *HCN*, but she also spotted unknowns — something she continued to do after she and Ed stepped out of their leadership positions in 2001, and she took over the Writers on the Range syndicate.

Wayne Hare was a park ranger who sent in a letter to the editor. Marston called him and convinced him to submit an essay instead, talking about the need for more racial diversity on public lands and in the agencies managing them. Hare went on to write dozens of opinion pieces focused on race, eventually joining the magazine’s board of directors and founding a nonprofit, Civil Conversations. “Betsy gave me the confidence that I can write well and have something to say,” said Hare.

A dynamic 81 years old, Betsy plans to stay busy in her retirement. She will continue editing Writers on the Range, which she and her son, David, now oversee as a separate nonprofit placing columns about Western issues in dozens of newspapers in the region. She will still volunteer on the board of Paonia’s local public radio station, KVNF, the advisory board of the El Pomar Foundation, and the Delta-Montrose Electric Association’s “Operation Roundup” board.

Visitors to town will likely spot her holding forth at a local café or hiking a nearby trail, but they should be warned: They might not be able to keep up. —*Florence Williams*

Betsy Marston, hosting the popular Radio High Country News, in 2001 (above). **Michael Brands / HCN**

Betsy Marston, known for her big laugh, with Steve Mandell, then *HCN* marketing director, and Ed Marston, on one of their many trips around the West to board meetings, in the late 1990s (below).

HCN file photo



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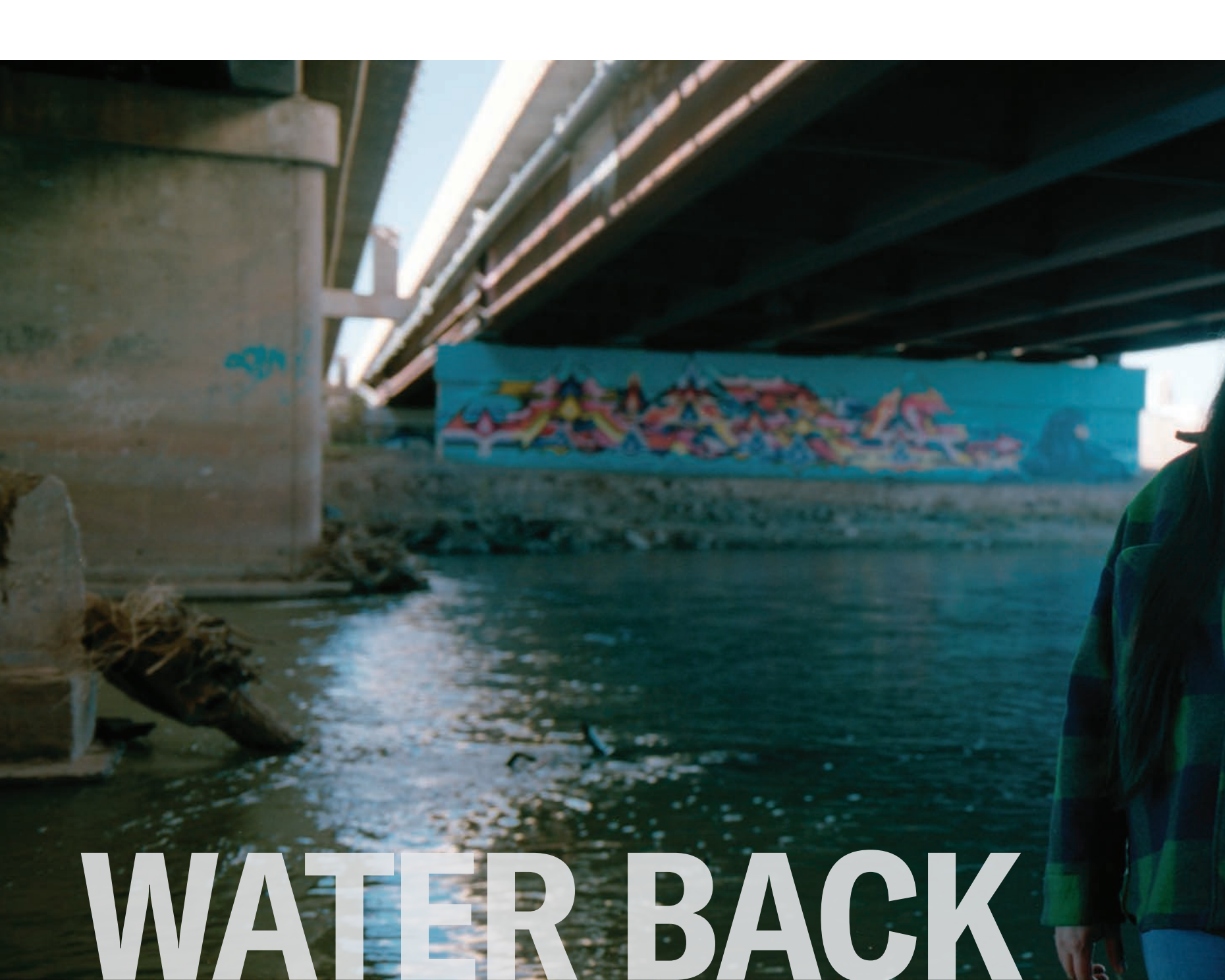
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WATER BACK

Pueblo women in the Middle Rio Grande Valley are leading the fight for Indigenous water rights.

Photos by Kalen Goodluck
Text by Christine Trudeau and
Kalen Goodluck

ON A LATE NOVEMBER MORNING, Julia Bernal walked a stretch of riverbank along the Rio Grande in Sandoval County, New Mexico, between Santa Ana and Sandia Pueblo. Bernal pointed out the area between the cottonwood trees and the edge of the Rio Grande, a 30-foot stretch of dry earth covered in an ocean of tiny pebbles intermixed with periodic sandbars, tamarisk and willow shrubs.

“It never used to look like this,” Bernal said. “The reason the cottonwoods look the way that they do is because of the Cochiti Dam — that hyper-channelization of the river did cause this riparian forest to just kind of (disappear) along with it.”

Bernal grew up in the 1990s watching the

river shrink every year, even as Sandia Pueblo, where she is enrolled, and other Rio Grande pueblos were left out of the state’s surface-water management process. Knowing that her community’s water, central to its culture, was in danger, Bernal resolved to work in the water sector after she graduated college in 2016, perhaps in the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. But everything changed later that year.

Bernal, along with the rest of the world, watched as tribal communities came together at Standing Rock to fight the Dakota Access Pipeline. The event galvanized her, forcing her to confront the fact that it was impossible to work on behalf of the Rio and the pueblos without



centering the Indigenous environmental justice perspective. The time had come — for Standing Rock, for the pueblos, for all Indigenous communities — to enforce their sovereign right to lead on water policy.

“It was a fight to protect water, but also protect culture, respect treaties,” Bernal said. “It taught me a lot about how any sort of planning initiative is going to include some sort of justice component if you’re dealing with Indigenous peoples.”

Later that year, Bernal helped found the Pueblo Action Alliance, which she directs. The organization, which prioritizes youth involvement, aims to advocate for the pueblos’ water rights and explain their complex history. Bernal

is determined, she said, to “ensure that not just tribal nations but communities also have participation in decision-making processes.”

Bernal is not alone — far from it. She is part of an intergenerational group of Pueblo women working, advocating and organizing on behalf of the 19 pueblo nations and their right to be policy leaders when it comes to the future of the Rio Grande. Bernal and her contemporaries fight on several fronts at once: Convincing state and local governments to recognize their legal water rights; getting those rights quantified by the courts; and navigating the reality that pueblo nations have to depend on federal officials to actually enforce the existing water-quality regulations. The state has put the pueblos in a

Julia Bernal (Sandia, Taos and Yuchi-Creek Nations of Oklahoma) in Sandoval County in the Middle Rio Grande Valley. “It’s like this concept of landback. Once you get the land back, what are you going to do with it after? It’s the same thing. If we get the water back, what are we gonna do with it after? How are we going to maintain water?” Bernal, the director of the Pueblo Action Alliance, believes that “landback” can’t happen without “water back.”

*“As mortals,
as humans, we don’t
realize sometimes
how powerful spirit
is. They come
to your aid when
you need it.”*

Treated wastewater flows into the Rio Grande from Albuquerque’s Southside Water Reclamation Plant, which treats wastewater sewage, just five miles north of the Pueblo of Isleta’s boundary.



Judge Verna Teller (Isleta Pueblo) in the Middle Rio Grande Valley at the Isleta Lakes, just south of Albuquerque, New Mexico. “Every day, I thank the Creator that our standards haven’t been challenged, and they’re still active and alive today,” said Teller. “They put the onus on the tribe because we have permitting authority, so we have to monitor the river. We have to monitor that they’re maintaining as much as possible.”



tenuous position regarding water rights, particularly given the two-decade-long drought, and these community leaders are done waiting for the state and federal governments to act.

Indigenous water rights are intensely, often frustratingly, shaped by centuries-old colonial law. The disbursement of water within the United States is determined by a process that prioritizes what are known as senior water rights. According to Indian law and civil litigation attorney Richard Hughes, most federally recognized tribes generally have the most senior water rights across the country, secured by a 1908 Supreme Court Decision known as *Winters v. United States*. The legal precedent for pueblo water rights, however, can also stem from the Mechem Doctrine, from *New Mexico v. Aamodt*, which holds that the pueblos' aboriginal water rights were solidified by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed by the U.S. and Mexico in 1848. Despite their senior status, tribes often wait decades — some for over a century — to have their rights quantified through litigation or settlement with

New Mexico and subsequent congressional approval. Whether through *Winters* or the Mechem Doctrine, this process is particularly cumbersome for the pueblo nations, Hughes says, which are often required to have a documented “precedent for what the tribe would be entitled to were the case to be fully litigated.”

Thanks to New Mexico's attitude, the opportunity for such litigation abounds. In 2020, the pueblos of Santa Ana, Jemez and Zia withstood an attempt by the state to diminish their aboriginal water rights along the Jemez River. The case was the latest entry in a decades-long campaign of antagonism by New Mexico — the very environment that taught Judge Verna Teller how to leverage her people's sovereignty.

Teller, chief justice of Isleta Pueblo, grew up just south of Bernal. And like Bernal, Teller witnessed disconcerting changes in the river. Like other Isleta community members, she was unnerved by the discolored foam in the Rio. After traditional elders had to stop using water in ceremonies in the mid-1980s, they asked Teller to find out what was wrong.

“I just felt obligated to help, because I knew it wasn't just for them,” said Teller. “It was for the whole community, and for everybody in the future — our children, our babies that weren't born yet.”

Before long, elders realized Teller needed to be in a position of authority to hold local and state agencies accountable. Teller was only 35 when traditional elders asked her to run for governor of Isleta Pueblo, and she faced an uphill battle, given the existing council's gender-based discrimination. But once in office, she was able to work with various agencies, legal experts and hydrologists to establish a water-quality standard for Isleta. It took a decade of legal tussling with the city of Albuquerque, but under Teller's guidance, in 1998, Isleta became the first tribal nation to establish water-quality standards under the Clean Water Act.

“It was all spirit,” she said. “I still really get emotional when I think about it, because it was so important to us. As mortals, as humans, we don't realize sometimes how powerful spirit is. They come to your aid when you need it.”



Over the years, however, alleged violations by the city have rarely been punished by federal agencies. And as Teller pushes for Isleta's government to use its regulations to hold New Mexico accountable, others, like Phoebe Suina, also work to ensure that the pueblos keep fighting for their rights to the river and for the Rio's water quality.

Suina, who hails from the Pueblos of San Felipe and Cochiti, is a hydrologist by training and the owner of High Water Mark, an Indigenous-women-led environmental consulting company that focuses on water-resources engineering. "We really need to address the water quality along with the water quantity in this very rigid, restricted framework," Suina said. Like Teller and Bernal, Suina is still grappling with the overarching question that has defined every facet of this struggle: Is adjudication — going to court to obtain a more permanent

answer on water rights and quantification — the best way to strengthen Indigenous water rights? And if not, what long-term strategy should the Pueblo nations pursue to achieve justice, given the flexibility that climate change is going to demand?

"Even today, without the whole complexity of the prior paramount water users and water-right holders — even without all that, just with (the 1938 Rio Grande Compact) — (New Mexico) cannot live up to that agreement because of the drought," Suina said, citing the ongoing litigation between Texas and New Mexico over water. "How do you have an agreement that you cannot live up to?"

For now, the question facing all sides involved in this complex, constantly shifting situation is painfully simple. Teller put it best: "Do we want the courts to settle it? Or do we want to settle it by working together?" ☀





Phoebe Suina (Pueblos of San Felipe and Cochiti) at Alameda Open Space, on the Rio Grande. "Science has said, 'A majority of what you are made of, a majority of what I am made of, is water.' So what we're talking about in terms of water rights, it is you, it is me."

The Rio Grande as seen from Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the Middle Rio Grande region. Quantifying water rights through litigation or settlement is a lengthy process, one that could easily outlast our lifetime, according to Richard Hughes, an Indian law and civil litigation attorney. What it could mean, if adjudicated, is that the rights of the Middle Rio Grande pueblos would finally be defined — inarguably — as superior to non-Native entities and governments. "It would completely turn the whole water-rights situation in the basin on its head," Hughes said.

Gold Country

After Nevada's two largest gold-mining companies joined forces, the resulting mega-corporation tightened its hold over a community, an economy and its workers.

By Nick Bowlin and Daniel Rothberg | Photos by Nina Riggio



Workers at Cortez Hills Mine, a gold deposit discovered in 2002 in the Cortez Mountains in Crescent Valley, Nevada. Western Shoshone tribal members have raised concerns over an expansion of the Cortez Hills mine, which, like many of Nevada Gold Mines' operations, would be located on their ancestral lands.



IN THE FINAL DAYS OF 2019,

Ches Carney noticed something strange on the bulletin boards at the northern Nevada gold mines where he had worked for nearly three decades. Stores in the nearby town of Elko were playing holiday music, but Carney was upset: The labor union documents, normally posted to bulletin boards, had disappeared.

As a union steward for the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 3, he advocated for his co-workers in disputes with the company. Near the end of the year, the name on Carney's paycheck changed from Newmont, one of the world's largest metal miners and an operator of several unionized mines in the area, to something different: Nevada Gold Mines. When Carney confronted a supervisor about the missing union documents, he said he was essentially told that the union was no more and to get over it. The union, which first organized Newmont workers in 1965, negotiated a new contract for about 1,300 production and maintenance workers in early 2019. But by the end of that year, management stopped recognizing it. There was a new boss in town.

Carney, now 66, did a bit of everything as a process maintenance technician — welding, fabrication, examining grease bearings and fixing crushers — as part

of a team of four working across a 25-mile area that sits atop a geologic formation known as the Carlin Trend. The Carlin Trend was created by upsurges of magma that left sediment rich with metal deposits near the earth's surface. Today, this part of northern Nevada is one of the world's largest gold-mining regions, the spine of the local economy. Its history includes a decades-long rivalry between two of the largest mining companies in the world: Newmont, Carney's former employer, and Barrick Gold Corp. In the months before Carney's paychecks changed, the negotiations that led to the creation of Nevada Gold Mines would reshape not only the regional economy, but potentially the entire global gold industry. Barrick and Newmont decided to combine nearly all their Nevada mines and water rights into a single newly formed company. Barrick walked away with a controlling stake in Nevada Gold Mines and now calls most of the shots, largely making management decisions and setting the terms of employment.

Right before Christmas, roughly six months after the two companies formally merged their Nevada operations, one of Carney's Newmont bosses told him he had to sign a new employment agreement with Nevada Gold Mines. His "new job" offered new rules, different



The sun rises over Elko, Nevada. “Barrick owns Elko. Pure and simple,” a former employee said.

benefits — and effectively no more union. The date of his firing and rehiring, he said, was just before the holidays. “It was a total surprise,” he recalled. “Unexpected.”

After the companies combined their Nevada operations, Carney became an at-will employee, suddenly vulnerable to being terminated for any reason. In a subsequent court filing that accused Nevada Gold Mines of failing to recognize the union, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the federal agency that enforces labor law, noted that the new company’s actions “left many employees feeling terrified and betrayed.”

The consequences of Barrick and Newmont’s deal rippled through the mines, the local economy that depends on them, and

the Western Shoshone, Paiute and Goshute tribes, whose unceded ancestral homeland is where much of the mining takes place. In Nevada, the fates of many people and communities are entangled with the gold industry. The merger meant that one megacompany was in charge of Barrick, running what the company boasts is the world’s largest gold-mining complex.

Carney left the company in April of last year, a few months before his planned retirement. When he spoke to us in the fall of 2021, he had moved hundreds of miles away, to Pahrump, Nevada, a Mojave Desert community not far from Las Vegas. By the time he retired, he had worked for Newmont for about 28 years, an experience he said he “enjoyed tremendously.” He spent nearly a year and a half with Nevada Gold Mines; he said the company culture played a major role in his decision to leave mining earlier than he would have liked.

Carney wasn’t the only one who felt defeated. One former employee who worked in Nevada mining for about a decade, speaking on condition of anonymity, said things got so bad after the merger that he resigned, frustrated by what he believed was a “toxic” culture. He felt Nevada Gold Mines erased all boundaries between its employees’ work and personal lives, viewing them simply as “disposable assets.”

Because of the company’s size and influence, he added, Elko “is most certainly a company town.”

“Barrick owns Elko,” he said. “Pure and simple.”

ON MARCH 11, 2019, AFTER DECADES of fierce competition in the Nevada goldfields, Barrick and Newmont announced some unlikely news: They would form a jointly owned company that would soon be named Nevada Gold Mines. Barrick — and its president and CEO, Mark Bristow — would take the

helm. Months earlier, Barrick had merged with Bristow’s Randgold Resources, a multinational mining company with an aggressive reputation. By the time Barrick moved on Newmont’s Nevada mines, Bristow, a South African geologist and big game hunter known for his blunt rhetoric, was leading Barrick and calling the shots. Executives believed that merging the two operations would make their Nevada mines more efficient, increasing value for their investors. (The year of the merger, Bristow took home \$17.4 million in compensation.)

In 2020, according to its financial filings, Nevada Gold Mines took in about \$3.8 billion in revenue. Jewelry still drives a great deal of the demand for gold, but it is also an important investment vehicle. The company employs more than 7,000 people — the vast majority of mining workers in the area. Two smaller, nearby Elko-area operations, the Bald Mountain and the Jerritt

Canyon mines, together employed more than 600 people, according to federal mine labor data.

In reporting this story, *The Nevada Independent* and *High Country News* spoke to more than 40 current and former employees, mining contractors, local residents and industry experts. Some described Nevada Gold Mines as, effectively, a monopoly: a company that had grown so large, its regional influence so vast, that local institutions — from the workforce and the union to the sovereign Indigenous nations and the rest of northern Nevada — were left with little power to negotiate on their own terms. In 2020, according to state data, Nevada Gold Mines accounted for about 75% of Nevada's gold production, most of it sold beyond state boundaries in global markets. And the company is still growing: Nevada Gold Mines is exploring several new prospects and actively pursuing a permit for the Goldrush project, an expansion of its Cortez Hills Mine.

In its most recent state tax filing, Nevada Gold Mines was the second-largest taxpayer in the state, behind only MGM Resorts, the Las Vegas Strip's largest casino operator, and a top taxpayer in four rural counties, including Elko County. The company manages more than 2 million acres of rangeland, and it is one of Nevada's largest landowners. In Eureka County, where the Carlin Trend mines operate, it controls about 60% of all private land, according to an analysis of county records. These landholdings are often tied to valuable groundwater rights: In Crescent Valley, near the Cortez mine, Nevada Gold Mines holds 86% of all the basin's water rights allocated to mining and ranching operations, according to one analysis by researchers at the University of Nevada, Reno. It buys equipment, parts and services from local businesses. To help power its mines, it operates a natural gas plant outside Reno and a coal plant, which the company says will soon become a natural gas plant and solar field, near the small town of Carlin.

"In the past, you'd sit back and

watch these two big guys beat each other up over employees, over contractors, over water stuff," said Glenn Miller, a natural resource and environmental science professor emeritus at the University of Nevada, Reno. "And now there's just one giant company that doesn't have a lot of competition for jobs and talent or for contractors and businesses."

Before Barrick and Newmont merged, workers at all levels of the Nevada gold-mining industry would shift between two major companies. Now, since the creation of Nevada Gold Mines, that choice is gone, and many current and former employees claim the workplace culture has changed for the worse. Company executives have spoken publicly of their desire for a younger workforce, and the company has been hit with several discrimination complaints. Employee turnover has increased.

Greg Walker, the executive managing director of Nevada Gold Mines, acknowledged some workforce dissatisfaction. Walker is an industry lifer from Australia whose mining career has taken him all over the world. He helped run Barrick mines in Tanzania and Papua New Guinea, and he was an executive at the Pueblo Viejo gold mine in the Dominican Republic, one of the largest in the world.

Barrick executives say their new joint venture is not a monopoly. They also say that having one entity, rather than two distinct companies, allows them to spend more money on community programs in northern Nevada. In 2020, Nevada Gold Mines contributed \$8.4 million in social investments. "As a single company, as Barrick or Newmont, we wouldn't have supported these projects in the same way," Walker said.

Catherine Raw, the chief operating officer of Barrick's North American operations, noted that the global gold market is diffuse, disorganized, and China is the top producer. "Just because geologically we are now the biggest player in the Carlin Trend, it

"In the past, you'd sit back and watch these two big guys beat each other up over employees, over contractors, over water."

doesn't mean we monopolize any one of those supply sources," she said. "We're not the only employer around, we're not the only industry, we're not the only customer."

Even the residents who don't work in mining are feeling the fallout from the merger. A Barrick executive has said the company's activities employ about 4,000 contractors, who employ thousands of the more than 30,000 people who live in Elko and neighboring communities. In some cases, Nevada Gold Mines renegotiated deals with existing contractors, leaving some without the business they had once depended on. (Walker acknowledged that Nevada Gold Mines does "negotiate hard" when its contracts expire.) A new company also meant that retirees and their family members could receive different health care and benefits.

At times, the company seemed to resemble a shadow government, especially when it comes to providing what are generally considered public services — funding \$5 million in loans for struggling local businesses during the pandemic, for example, about \$30 million for broadband expansions in the Elko area, and more than \$200,000 for employment programs aimed at Native American teens. In April, Nevada Gold Mines announced funding to help purchase a use-of-force simulator for the local police department. It has also partnered with a health-care company to help operate the Golden Health Family Medical Center, two private medical facilities where injured mine workers are often treated. In the spring of 2020, the company gave its employees \$150 in "chamber checks" to spend at local stores. Industry executives refer to these sorts of contributions as part of maintaining a "social license to operate." Altogether, its contributions make up a tiny fraction of its revenue.

Mining may not be northeastern Nevada's only industry, but it's at the center of daily life in Elko. Each morning before sunrise, coach buses fill with miners at parking lots around town. All day long, seven days a week, the buses

run, dropping off workers at the end of their shifts and waiting to pick up the next group. Around the city, pickup trucks fly safety flags that identify work trucks. At the Goldstrike Mine, one of the area's largest, even the biggest machinery looks tiny in the 1,200-foot-deep open pit. On the outskirts of town, mine suppliers, construction firms and equipment dealerships line the roads. Back in town, a motel sign announces "Miners and drillers welcome." Even the bars evoke mining; in Elko, you can drink at the Silver Dollar Club or Goldie's.

The company reinforces its hold through political lobbying. Nevada Gold Mines makes its donations across party lines and across the state, including in Las Vegas, the hub of Nevada's economic power. In September 2020, as state lawmakers were weighing a tax increase on the industry, the state's Department of Education issued a press release touting the company's \$2.2 million investment in online learning. That same year, the company gave \$500,000 to a political action committee focused on Democratic interests. It also gave \$750,000 to the Republican-aligned American Exceptionalism Institute, a 501(c)(4), known as a dark money fund, according to Newmont disclosure documents. Further hedging its bets, it donated \$500,000 to the Stronger Nevada PAC, a campaign fundraising group led by former Lt. Gov. Mark Hutchison, a Republican.

Politicians of both parties help protect the industry's interests. Adam Laxalt, a Republican running against Nevada Democratic Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto in the state's 2022 Senate election, claimed in a recent op-ed published in the *Elko Daily Free Press* that Cortez Masto has "put radical environmentalists ahead of the miners." Not to be outdone, Cortez Masto broke with factions of her party in October; the Senate committee she serves on extended an invitation to a Barrick executive to weigh in on proposed mining royalties, a policy long supported by Democrats. Soon

after that, she earned a front-page headline in the same newspaper: "Cortez Masto: No Royalties."

THE CONSOLIDATION of Barrick and Newmont's Nevada operations reduced local competition for labor, allowing Nevada Gold Mines to allegedly start treating its workers with a degree of impunity, according to the current and former employees interviewed for this story.

Michelle, a former employee whose name has been changed to protect her identity, shared her story over multiple interviews with *The Nevada Independent* and *High Country News*. Michelle came to Newmont several years ago, amid what she was told was a push to bring more women into the industry. According to data published by *The Wall Street Journal*, Newmont's percentage of female employees rose from nearly 11% of the workforce in 2013 to more than 15% in 2018, but dropped several percentage points just two years later. Meanwhile, Barrick too lagged behind; in 2013, its share of female employees was about 11%, and it has since fallen to 10%.

Mining jobs are coveted in Elko, but they can be dangerous and grueling: The shifts are long, often 12 hours, and the workdays can be even longer — almost 15 hours, if you include the commute. Workers often switch between day and night shifts. At night, industrial mine fields are illuminated by glaring lights from shovels, drills and truck cabs. Break times are closely monitored, and one false move, one small error, can lead to serious injuries. Hiring, Michelle said, was often done by attrition, and workers were weeded out quickly. "It's either a do-or-die kind of thing," she said. "You're either going to make it or you're not."

Michelle was confident that she would succeed in this male-dominated industry. She was no stranger to the mines; some close family members worked in mining. And for many years, she enjoyed the work. Yet once Nevada Gold Mines formed, she said, a tough job got even tougher.

Mine managers, Michelle said, had always emphasized productivity; she recalled a time before the merger when a manager timed her group's bathroom break. But she said the obsession with production only increased once Nevada Gold Mines took over. "That's always been an issue," she said, "and it's worse now." Another female employee said she was encouraged to save time by peeing off the side of her truck. A second female employee told us she urinated behind a truck because her efficiency rates were tracked, and she often felt an unspoken pressure to forgo bathroom breaks. Too many breaks cut into an employee's productivity, which the company monitors closely. ("We work to ensure everyone's rights are respected and voices are heard," Nevada Gold Mines commented.)

Michelle said that the culture at her mine seemed to change, and morale quickly worsened. Management at the mine shuffled around, and she thought the rules were applied inconsistently. COVID-19 brought workplace issues to the fore, and Michelle noticed that many co-workers, even a manager, ignored protective requirements to wear masks or make other accommodations. The sexual harassment she witnessed — and experienced — on top of the COVID-19 issues, got so bad that she feared going to work. She reported her concerns, only to feel rebuffed.

"We think equality exists, until we're in a position where it doesn't," she said.

There are at least six active federal court cases against Barrick or Nevada Gold Mines. The allegations include discrimination, unlawful dismissal based on age and disability claims stemming from workplace injuries. (A number of claims pertain to incidents that occurred under Barrick management before Nevada Gold Mines was formed.) In addition, workers have submitted complaints to the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In 2021, Walker told analysts that an internal culture

survey of employees found "a lot of gaps in what we need to do." The company declined to release the full survey results. COVID-19 has also put a strain on workforce retention and morale. As of November, only about 32% of employees were partially or fully vaccinated.

In an interview with *The Nevada Independent* and *High Country News*, Walker disclosed that the company's turnover rates had about doubled, even though mining jobs tend to have the highest salaries in rural Nevada. (In a U.S. Senate committee hearing, a Barrick executive stated that the average annual salary for Nevada Gold Mines' employees was \$94,000, which he claimed was the highest average industry wage in the state.) In mid-September, he said, the company had 500 vacancies, compared to an average of a few hundred.

Current and former workers interviewed for this story said there had been an increased rate of retirements, resignations and terminations over the past two years, especially among older workers. "I feel that my job is now very much at stake," one employee testified to the federal labor agency. "There have been a lot of rumors. A memo was even sent out by (the company) saying they want a younger workforce." (During the fact check of this story, Nevada Gold Mines did not acknowledge the existence of such a memo.)

Company executives have also spoken openly about modernizing more parts of the company. In one presentation, the company said that its "focus in 2020 is to build some depth in the structure by bringing in younger talent." In an interview with the *Elko Daily Free Press*, CEO Mark Bristow called gold mining an "aging industry" that needs more young people.

"We don't have the luxury to pick and choose," said Raw, Barrick's chief operating officer, noting the high turnover rate. "Our focus is on attracting talent — the best talent."

For Fred Coleman, concerns about age discrimination began



before Nevada Gold Mines formed. Now 78, Coleman worked in the mining industry for almost 30 years. These days, he spends much of his time at home, working on landscaping and small construction projects with his wife, Lawona. On a warm afternoon in August, Coleman, wearing a baseball cap with a Navy logo above an expressive face, gave us a tour of their yard, with its newly built stone wall and a chicken coop. Standing in front of the house he'd purchased partly with the money he earned in the mines, Coleman admitted that he was on the older

side for a mine worker. But he said that he was still fit enough to do the work, and his handshake remains powerful. He joked that he could beat us in arm-wrestling.

Coleman said his first experience with age discrimination came when he worked for Barrick. In the spring of 2018, he recalled, a co-worker told him that the rest of her crew was taking bets on his age. She figured she'd win by going to the source. Coleman was offended, but by that point, comments about his age had become common.

"It was two years of 'When are

you going to retire? Why don't you retire?'" Coleman said.

At the Goldstrike Mine, Coleman drove a haul truck, effectively a 350-ton house on wheels. He was proud of his ability to operate some of the largest mining machinery on the planet. But after Barrick merged with Randgold and Bristow took over as CEO, Coleman believed there was a noticeable change in how supervisors treated older workers like him. Supervisors joked about his age to his face and told him it was time to retire. A member of Coleman's crew, who

As the sun sets, Nevada Gold Mines workers are carried by bus to the Goldstrike Mine near Carlin, Nevada. The mine complex is one of the largest gold operations in the world (top).

Lawona Coleman, left, stands beside her husband, Fred Coleman, in their yard in Elko, Nevada. Fred, a former Barrick mine employee, believes that he was unfairly terminated based on his age (above).

An International Union of Operating Engineers Local 3 sign sits outside a parking lot for buses that shuttle workers to the mines (right).

spoke on condition of anonymity, recalled mocking his age, joking about writing him up for safety violations and saying things like “we don’t need him here no more, he needs to retire.”

Coleman was terminated a month after Nevada Gold Mines was launched. In 2020, he filed a lawsuit against Barrick for age discrimination. The company has denied the allegations. In a court filing, Barrick’s attorneys said his claims were “frivolously pursued” and that his termination was not discriminatory. Coleman’s lawsuit lists at least five other workers over the age of 40 who allege they were fired or say they were pushed out around the same time. (The lawsuit is still ongoing.)

Walker acknowledged that “there are a number of people that feel as though they’ve been discriminated (against)” and he said “those issues should be resolved in the proper channels.”

In other parts of the country where mining is ubiquitous, unions have a large presence. But not in northeastern Nevada: As of last year, Operating Engineers Local 3 — the largest construction trades local in the country, which represents over 37,000 workers in California, Hawaii, Utah and Nevada — represented only about 1,300 employees in the area.

The relationship between Nevada Gold Mines and the union has been fraught since Barrick and Newmont combined their Nevada operations. In a May 2019 letter, Nevada Gold Mines had indicated that the union contract would remain in place. But according to employees in NLRB affidavits, the company seemed to reverse course in late 2019, around the same time Ches Carney noticed that union documents were disappearing. On one bulletin board, mine supervisors posted a note that read: “This bulletin board is for company-related materials only. All postings must be approved by the human resource department.” Over several months, as workers came forward with concerns, the

“I know I may be a little older — but I think I could have worked another three to five years, honestly, and done a really good job for them.”

National Labor Relations Board took the rare step of filing an injunction in federal court to compel the company to recognize the union.

Agents for the board interviewed numerous union workers and representatives as part of the lawsuit. What they found was troubling; the agency chided Nevada Gold Mines, saying its “illegal conduct threatens irreparable harm to national labor policy encouraging good-faith collective bargaining, the unit employees’ right to free choice, employee support for the union,” among other issues. In court documents, the company pushed back in strong terms, arguing that the agency’s “legal theories” were “factually and legally deficient.” Nevada Gold Mines argued that Newmont, not Nevada Gold Mines, signed the contract, and once the employment status changed, that agreement was no longer valid. When we interviewed Walker, he said the company initially wanted the union to hold an election with all Newmont and Barrick employees. But the union argued that even if management changed, its collective bargaining agreement would still be valid.

In August 2020, Nevada Gold Mines settled with the agency on behalf of The International Union of Operating Engineers Local 3 and said it would recognize the union. The union is actively organizing again, handing out flyers and information. Behind one employee parking lot, union leaders posted a sign framed by two American flags: “ALL NGM MINERS BE AT THE VFW AUG 11TH 5 PM - 8 PM Q&A ON BETTER MEDICAL A PENSION A VOICE A UNION!”

Still, the issues have continued, and, in early 2021, the federal labor agency sent a letter to Nevada Gold Mines with new charges from the union. They included allegations of changes to contracts, changes to the terms of employment, discharge and refusal to bargain in good faith.

Supporters of Operating Engineers Local 3 say the union is seen as the last line of defense against the company’s potential overreach and unfair terminations.

Losing those job protections, one worker told the agency, “is going to be devastating to our community.”

Workers who have left or been terminated by Nevada Gold Mines can theoretically find work at a few smaller mines in the area. In a town where everyone talks, others fear that contractors and mine suppliers will not hire them if they leave Nevada Gold Mines on anything less than positive terms. Some workers alleged the company has, in certain cases, made it difficult for terminated workers to even step foot on Nevada Gold Mines property if they are working for a mine contractor. (Walker disputed this, saying that workers are not banned unless they were fired “for gross negligence or something malicious,” including for safety issues.) The federal labor board, in a 2020 complaint, echoed this: It wrote that Nevada Gold Mines “prohibited terminated employees from obtaining future employment with other employers and contractors by banning them from all mining and processing sites operated by (the company).”

Fred Coleman suspects that this is what happened to him. He was fired following an alleged safety violation, which Coleman disputes. Coleman, who has never worked for a unionized mine, said a union would have fought for him. “I would have had somewhere to go for recourse” with his discrimination complaint, he said. After leaving Barrick, Coleman interviewed for other mining industry jobs, but the opportunities evaporated, he said, once potential employers learned he had been terminated. (In a response to Coleman’s complaint, Barrick denied the allegation that he was “blackballed.”) This ignominious end to his mining career, the feeling of being brushed aside from a job that was a major part of his identity, still haunts him. In interviews, Coleman frequently mentioned that he was good at his job.

“I know I may be a little older — but I think I could have worked another three to five years, honestly, and done a really good job for them,” he said.

NEVADA GOLD MINES is already a very large operation, and it wants to get even bigger. Its expansion plans include a project known as Goldrush, what the company describes as a “world-class” deposit near the Cortez Mountains, which rise above the Crescent Valley, roughly 80 miles from Elko and more than an hour by bus for miners. Few people are as familiar with this area as Brian Mason, the vice chairman of the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of the Duck Valley Indian Reservation.

Once a prominent Barrick employee, Mason is now a critic.

The journey from Elko to Cortez Hills is marked by generations of history for Mason and his family, a history that is now entangled with Nevada Gold Mines. As Mason drove with us to the mine in August, he passed the JD Ranch, a place that his grandmother had lived near for years, which is now owned by Nevada Gold Mines. His uncle worked at another ranch now owned by the company. The road leads to the base of Mount Tenabo, a sacred place for many Western Shoshone tribes, and its white cliffs, which long served as a beacon on trips to the Humboldt River.

If you squint from the side of the road, you can see underground tunnels leading to the Goldrush deposit. The fact that the federal government has already allowed Nevada Gold Mines to explore in this area, a significant cultural site, is unsettling to Mason. But the General Mining Law of 1872, a relic of the United States’ ruthless determination to settle the West, is permissive to companies seeking to develop mining claims.

Mason’s relationship with mining, and with Barrick in particular, is complex. For years, his job was to help Barrick improve its relationship with Indigenous communities — to forge compromises that allowed mining to continue on Western Shoshone land. Mason strongly believes that the company should pay and be held accountable if it wants to mine Western Shoshone territory. Mining in northern Nevada is a fact of life, unavoidable



Brian Mason, vice chairman of the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of the Duck Valley Indian Reservation, worked for Barrick for years, but left shortly after Nevada Gold Mines formed. He has since become an outspoken critic of the company’s relationships with tribal nations in Nevada.

and omnipresent, and the tribes in northern Nevada, Mason argues, ought to be compensated.

“Mining companies get it,” Mason said on the drive. “But they’re not going to do something until they’re forced to do something, right? Because they’re businessmen. What we want is going to add to the all-in sustaining cost of that ounce of gold — not by much, but it will add some.”

Mason, a former Marine, often wears his long gray hair in a ponytail. He has a loud, gravelly voice, and, when animated, tends to curse in long inventive blue streaks. In 2011, he began to think about resigning from his job as an environmental supervisor at Barrick. Several years earlier, the company began offering collaborative agreements to Western Shoshone tribes, which had been protesting an expansion of the Cortez Hills Mine, but Mason felt that Barrick hadn’t followed through. When he

put in his resignation, he got a call from a senior executive at Barrick North America. Mason told him why he was leaving. “I can’t work for a company that is not going to do what they tell the tribes they’re going to do,” he said.

Barrick asked if Mason would run a department that became known as Native American Affairs, something Mason believed the multinational company desperately needed.

Using those collaborative agreements, Mason worked to smooth tensions between tribal governments and Barrick. He advocated for Western Shoshone companies to get contracts for water truck deliveries, construction and other services. He helped recruit tribal members for jobs and funneled mining dollars to tribal governments. The division, under his leadership, won social responsibility awards and political praise.

“It’s a business decision

to collaborate and include an Indigenous group,” he said.

After Bristow took charge at Barrick, Mason said he began to observe a “cultural change” in the company. Barrick, Mason claimed, slashed his several million-dollar budget by more than half and appeared to prioritize the bottom line above all else. Around the time Nevada Gold Mines was formed, Mason left the company. Mason suspected that the corporate relationship with the tribes would deteriorate: He said he has watched it happen as the vice chairman of the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of the Duck Valley Indian Reservation. Instead of a company willing to meet a high standard to mine gold on Western Shoshone land, he sees one hoping to skate by with the minimum.

In 2020, Nevada Gold Mines wanted tribes to sign an updated version of a collaborative agreement, but the request was met

with skepticism. In November 2020, Mason helped write a rebuttal letter to the company, explaining point by point why it was not meeting the existing commitments laid out in the collaborative agreement, which several tribes have since signed.

Multiple tribes, the letter said, “do not agree with this collaborative agreement document, especially with the lack of performance of the last year-and-a-half of its social obligation to hire tribal members, the utilization of tribally owned businesses, the sharing of benefits or other items.”

Mason believes that Nevada tribes are far from justly compensated for the extraction that takes place on their ancestral homelands, and many remain cut off from the mining revenue that circulates through northern Nevada. Calling into the state Legislature in May, Mason said that Nevada tribes should receive a portion of mining taxes, which currently go only to state and county governments. But the idea, Mason said, did not gain traction in Carson City, where the company, the governor’s office and lawmakers negotiated a tax deal behind the scenes. “We were never brought to the table,” he said. Mason hopes to continue raising the issue with state legislators and remains determined to seek company buy-in.

Like many of Nevada Gold Mines’ operations, the Goldrush project will take place on land that Western Shoshone tribes claim. The Treaty of Ruby Valley, signed in 1863, provided for the right of safe passage, but it did not hand over ownership. The Western Shoshone have maintained a claim to the land, but the U.S. legal system has not been hospitable to their claims. In 1985, the Supreme Court weighed in on a case involving the Western Shoshone sisters Carrie and Mary Dann — two prominent activists for tribal rights who ranched in Crescent Valley. The court ruled against them, supporting a lower court decision that found the right to the land “extinguished” after the U.S. deposited \$26 million in damages into a Treasury account. After a law

was signed by President George W. Bush in 2004, some tribal members accepted a distribution of the settlement funds, but the U.S. government did little to recognize their land claims under the treaty. In 2006, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination chastised the U.S. over its treatment of the Western Shoshone.

Carrie Dann opposed Barrick’s Cortez expansion in 2008, fearing that it would suck water from Mount Tenabo. In a move that showed the company’s far-reaching influence and power, Nevada Gold Mines purchased the Dann Ranch in 2019, and in 2020, it received permission from the state to use water from the ranch as part of its mining operations at Cortez Hills. For mining companies, buying up ranches is often a way to exert control in an area. Through significant land holdings, companies can effectively create buffers around their operations that shelter them from complaints from local ranchers, including over water use.

Alissa Wood, who leads the company’s communities and corporate affairs division, said that Nevada Gold Mines respects the tribes’ decision not to sign the new agreements and will honor existing collaborative deals. She said the multibillion-dollar company plans to continue fulfilling its commitments. In 2019, it pledged nearly \$14 million over a decade

to a scholarship fund for Western Shoshone high school students. The company also broadened its agreements to include the Confederated Tribes of the Goshute Reservation and the Fort McDermitt Paiute and Shoshone Tribe.

But the narrative the company tells about itself in public is different from the way it operates on the ground, according to Alice Tybo, the vice chairperson of the South Fork Band of the Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone. Tybo, a former employee of the Elko County School District, used to work with Barrick at quarterly dialogue meetings. Those meetings, Tybo said, changed when Nevada Gold Mines took over. There’s more pageantry now, she said, with tribal flags displayed prominently, but less substance. Tybo no longer bothers to attend meetings, saying the flags create “an illusion of participation.” “It used to mean something,” she said. “It doesn’t mean anything anymore.”

In this part of rural Nevada, often forgotten by the rest of the state, money is often short, and Nevada Gold Mines — as well as Barrick before it — have helped fill the gap. The company provides aid to elders, energy assistance and resources for youth programs. In 2020, it donated about \$400,000 in COVID-19 relief funding to Native communities.

“What’s the problem?” asked Davis Gonzales, former chairman of the Elko Band of the Te-Moak Tribe

A Nevada Gold Mines ranch near the Goldstrike Mine (obscured by smoke from the Dixie Fire in late August) in Carlin, Nevada.

of Western Shoshone. Gonzales signed the updated collaborative agreement, which he described as similar to past agreements. In an October phone interview, before he left office, he listed the benefits in the agreement, citing language that spoke of fostering mutual understanding and respect. “If it wasn’t for Nevada Gold, we wouldn’t be where we’re at,” he said. “They’re willing to help us.”

On a warm August day, Mason parked his car near a plaque commemorating the Western Shoshone and looked up at the white cliffs lining the side of Mount Tenabo. From this spot, the crest of the Cortez Hills pit was visible. It felt strange to be back here as a critic of Nevada Gold Mines, he said, after working for Barrick for so long.

At the center of the altered landscape, not far from humming mine trucks and the underground tunnels leading into the Goldrush deposit, he said: “I just wish they’d be better neighbors.” ☀

This story was produced in collaboration between High Country News and The Nevada Independent. It was supported by grants from the Fund for Investigative Journalism and the Hillman Foundation.



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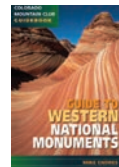
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State Legislation Needed to Ban the Most Egregious Event in All of Rodeo:

STEER ROPING

"I keep 30 head of cattle around for practice, at \$200 a head. You can cripple three or four in an afternoon."

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

Though the rodeo's brutal steer roping event is sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA), it is practiced in only 10 Western states: Washington, Oregon, Wyoming, North and South Dakota, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Kansas, New Mexico

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.

Info: ACTION FOR ANIMALS, P.O. Box 20184, Oakland, CA 94620; email — afa@mcn.org

A chorus of voices from the Northwest

Evergreen: Grim Tales & Verses from the Gloomy Northwest explores the darkness and wonder of life in the region.

BY EMILY BENSON

ON THE PALOUSE, where Washington and North Idaho meet, the rolling fields appear desolate and shorn in January, as the months-old stubble of harvested wheat pokes through patches of wind-crusted snow, like millions of splinters jutting from the earth. It's a sharp contrast to those same hills in July, when the lush green-gold of ripening grain looks like an ocean, wind-blown swells rippling across its surface.

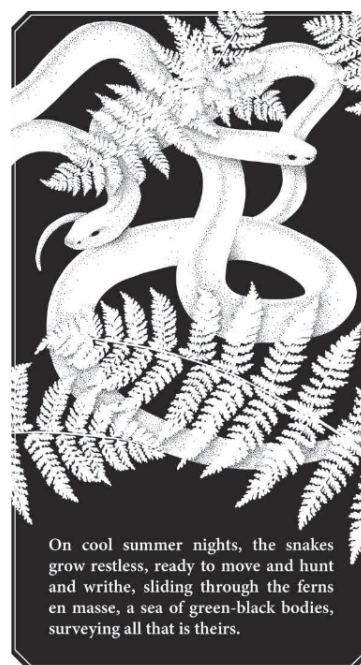
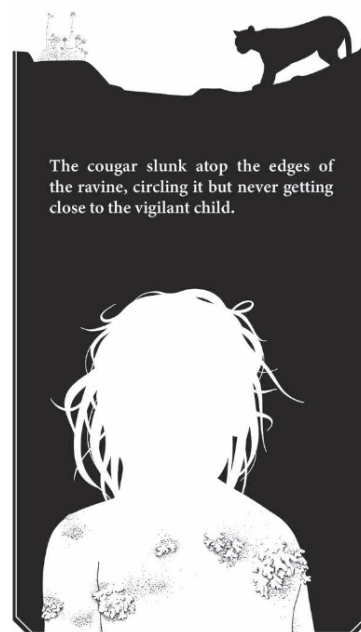
Those mesmerizing summertime waves of wheat are reimagined through a darker lens in "Habitat," a short story by Leyna Krow, in *Evergreen: Grim Tales & Verses From the Gloomy Northwest*, a new anthology of stories, poems and essays. Set in an alternate present or near future, "Habitat" imagines that an invasive neon-green fern has replaced the wheat sprouting from the fields of the Palouse. Rather than wind creating the iconic "shimmer and sway" along its verdant hillsides, the motion is caused by an infestation of fluorescent green snakes — a shift in habitat that has forced the area's human inhabitants to flee.

In casting a fresh and often fantastical eye on the Northwest, Krow's story is typical of the pieces collected in *Evergreen*. From the mountains of Montana to the streets of Seattle, the book creates a vibrant, multilayered picture of the region, one that embraces complexity rather than shallow stereotypes. The Pacific Northwest in particular

has often been portrayed in a binary way, writes co-editor Maya Jewell Zeller in the introduction, either the purview of loggers at "war with the woods," or a "forest pastoral — something either too adversarial or too idolatrous, something dripping with capitalism, hypermasculinity, and Eurocentrism."

Evergreen seeks a deeper examination of the greater Northwest, and largely succeeds. Many of its strongest pieces are by Indigenous writers, including the stunner of a story that opens the book, "Secondary Infection" by Beth Piatote, a Nez Perce writer, on the festering dangers of loneliness. The piece recounts a tale told by the narrator's auntie, about a widow who "lived over that way, over at Yakama." Its spare details embody the region where it's set: A rattlesnake and rocky ridges both bound and animate the story, turning nature into a character and evoking the dry desert landscape of south-central Washington.

In Piatote's story and throughout *Evergreen*, a sense of the mythical pervades the pages. Ruth Joffe's brief yet exquisite "A Girl Plays with Thorns" exemplifies the collection's fairy-tale feel. Though unmoored from any named location, the natural world — and human relationships with it — are fundamental to the story. In it, a mother learns that her young daughter is more independent, and stronger, than she thought, as



Courtesy Scablands Books

briars sprout from the girl's body: "(U)nder her skin ... there is movement. First subtle, like a rustling of plants in a breeze, then deep and sinuous — the creeping of blackberry vines so embedded as to appear part of her musculature."

While *Evergreen* dips toward the Pacific Coast, the heart of the anthology lies in the Inland Northwest, the home of Scablands Books, its publisher, located in Spokane, Washington. Named for the channeled scablands of eastern Washington, a stark landscape of basalt ridges and coulees carved by massive floods about 15,000 years ago, Scablands Books is a boutique

press focused on regional writers. This hometown advantage is evident in the skillful curation of the collection, making it a rich gathering of stories and poems that are chiefly both about and for the Northwest; a view from the inside out, rather than a voyeuristic look from the outside in.

Evergreen includes nearly 80 pieces, about half of which have previously appeared in print. It's a collection focused on contrasts and connections, so perhaps it's fitting that it occasionally strays beyond the Northwest; a few pieces plumb childhood memories from distant places, or examine injustices that cut across the entire nation. As co-editor Sharma Shields writes in the introduction, "I love the ways that our anthology floats free of the Northwest at times, because part of what is here is also what's outside of here."

The book's power lies in those juxtapositions and harmonies, and the way its many voices cohere into a unique and complex whole. *Evergreen* celebrates that complexity, embracing the variety of the region's particular landscapes, but also the intricacies of life itself, despair and wonder and the way the two are fundamentally intertwined: darkness as a source of both terror and magic. Shields and Zeller end the anthology with a poem that does exactly that, "Shrike Tree," by the late Lucia Perillo. The poem describes a dead hawthorn on which a shrike has speared the carcasses of smaller birds, a way of storing its prey:

*They hang there, desiccating
by the trail where I walked,
back when I could walk,
before life pinned me on its thorn.
It is ferocious, life, but it must eat,
then leaves us with the artifact.* ☀

Evergreen: Grim Tales & Verses from the Gloomy Northwest

Edited by Sharma Shields and Maya Jewell Zeller
336 pages,
softcover: \$24.99
Scablands Books, 2021.



PERSPECTIVE

Digital Natives

Social media offers a chance to break centuries of disconnection. But to do so, Native communities need a better platform.

BY BRIAN OASTER

Marty Two Bulls Jr. (Oglala Lakota) / HCN

QUITTING FACEBOOK IS HARD. Like anything addictive, Facebook promises to scratch an itch that it only teases and inflames. We know how bad it is for our personal health, for the safety of marginalized people, and for the health of democracy — and we knew all this before former Facebook data scientist Frances Haugen blew the whistle. Haugen’s stacks of documents exposed, if there were any doubt, how Facebook (or “Meta,” if we must) has prioritized profits over human well-being time and time again. But the ubiquitous big blue book remains persistently sticky.

Facebook is hard to quit, not just because of its dopamine microdosing, but because it provides a basic utility. Despite everything we know about it, the demonstrably untrustworthy Menlo Park monopoly remains the most convenient and effective way to keep in touch with family and friends across great distances. Nowhere is this more true — nor are the stakes higher — than in Native American communities.

When I quit Facebook a few years ago, I wasn’t just sacrificing connections with friends. I was closing the door on a treasure trove of cultural knowledge and resources I knew I was unlikely to find elsewhere. Facebook is replete with ultra-niche cultural groups gathering and sharing tribal knowledge, some of which had been lost or inaccessible for generations. I joined a Facebook group for practicing the Choctaw language, a group for learning about Choctaw first foods, and another group dedicated to studying and revitalizing pre-colonization Choctaw tattoos. Some of these were only for users with tribal connections, to keep out culture vultures and avoid the leering anthropological gaze. Digital friendships blossomed into real relationships at in-person social gatherings and ceremonies that I would never have had access to otherwise.

America spent hundreds of brutal years meticulously disconnecting Native communities. After the Trail of Tears, my family and many others were, for the first time since the dawn of humankind, separated from our homes and homelands. Then, when the United States saw how resilient our sense of community remained in Indian Territory, it instituted assimilationist policies. By putting economic pressure on tribal nations and displacing their citizens using legislation like the Indian Relocation Act of 1956, the federal government drove individual Natives to coastal cities, looking for work. My family, like many others, migrated to California’s Central Valley. We lost the language — but not the accent. We lost the culture — but not the history. We got jobs, became dependent on grocery stores, and, lacking the support of our clan structures, decayed into nuclear families, just like regular

Americans. For a few generations, assimilation seemed to be working. Then, like lightning, it changed: In a single decade, the internet opened a new space for reconnection.

Even those trapped in urban landscapes, without immediate access to tribal communities, could now learn not just what it meant to be Native, but about the differences between pan-Indian culture and our distinctive tribal cultures. We could study our family trees, share stories, even learn to make moccasins. We could snail mail each other heirloom seeds that prescient tribal members had quietly propagated for generations. We could grow these first foods in our gardens and share recipes that have survived since time immemorial, cooking them the same way our ancestors did. We could organize everything from beading circles and stickball games to paradigm-shifting protests like Standing Rock. And a disconnected Native like me could suddenly, preciously, have contact with tribal elders, and learn my place in contemporary tribal society. The first time I heard powwow drums was through a Facebook livestream. Ignited, I began voraciously studying our tribal history and culture. The blinders of my American cultural programming dropped. In my excitement, I stumbled through a chain of humbling *faux pas* that outed me as a reconnecting newcomer. But it didn’t matter; I could not unhear those drums. Culture had found my family again.

This wasn’t due to Facebook alone, but since the platform opened its beta version to public users in 2006, it has played a prominent role in Indian Country. Being Indigenous is about connection to the land and to our communities. Facebook, and social media more generally, have created a new kind of landscape connecting us, and with it raised a great many questions about what Indigeneity and landscape mean in the digital age. COVID-19 has also ramped up the stakes, with some reservation communities relying on social media as their primary means of communication while they abstain from in-person gatherings.

But Facebook offers more than just communication. In the groups I belonged to, moderators had uploaded rare and valuable documents, like old VHS videos in which culture bearers explained the symbolism in beadwork, or PDFs of sewing patterns revealing the differences between regional styles. That’s not something you turn your back on lightly; we need these digital connections and resources. But I believe they should be rooted in ground more solid and less toxic than Facebook.

Twitter also has a strong utility component, with an active, though often hellishly toxic, inter-tribal Native community. Like Facebook, Twitter

exacerbates mental unwellness and enables hate, but at the same time provides an unsurpassed way to follow the work of Indigenous scholars, politicians, lawyers, journalists, novelists, filmmakers and activists. Instagram provides Native beadworkers and artisans with a marketplace, but it’s owned by Facebook and is rife with its own problems, including the way it corrodes self-esteem. Research by the College of Information Sciences and Technology also shows that social media has put image power — the ability to tell one’s own visual stories, as opposed to having them told through racist mascots or Hollywood stereotypes — back in Native hands, which is important for representation and a positive sense of identity. The question facing us, then, is this: How do we replace the positive functions these platforms provide, without replicating their destructive qualities?

It’s clear (to me, anyway) that solutions won’t come from Silicon Valley. Idealistic startups tend to produce nihilistic billionaires, and that’s not who should be safeguarding Indigenous cultural knowledge or sustaining tenuous connections between fellow tribespeople and long-lost kin. A state-operated social media utility platform is another option, but it’s even less likely to seem trustworthy to most Natives. One alternative would be open-source software, like Mastodon. Nobody owns open-source software; anybody can edit the code, and it’s ad-free and volunteer-based. No money changes hands, so nobody can profit by manipulating your emotions or capturing your attention. In this way, open-source software closely reflects certain core tenets of Native civilization, like communalism and egalitarianism, and could possibly provide the grounds for Natives to establish healthy online communities for sharing cultural knowledge. This model already exists, but so far has failed to gain traction with digital Natives, despite a user-led attempt to migrate Native Twitter users to Mastodon in 2018. There are other open-source social media platforms, too, but they’re even fringier, which, for one thing, works against the inclusion of elders. Perhaps it’s time for a new open-source, Native-led platform. What would it take for such a thing to catch on?

Social media has done wonders for cultural preservation, community connection, organizing and representation. This new landscape is powerful and connective. But the way we use social media needs to mature. Natives in the digital age deserve a platform more trustworthy than Facebook or Twitter, something we can rely on like the solid Earth — somewhere we can put down digital roots. 🌱

Religious gatekeeping in red-rock country

A resort capitalizes on a nearby Yavapai-Apache religious site despite having no meaningful relationship with the tribe.

BY MAURICE CRANDALL



TWO YEARS AGO, WHEN A MUSKOGEE CREEK elder and friend asked to visit a site of cultural importance to my own Yavapai-Apache people, I offered to take him to Boynton Canyon, a place of immense spiritual significance. We drove to Enchantment Resort, outside Sedona, Arizona, were let in through the entrance and drove to the back gate, where we parked in the dirt lot that visiting tribal members generally use. Resort employees told us we couldn't park there, however; they needed the parking spaces for a corporate retreat. They escorted our car to the resort's clubhouse and drove us in a golf cart back to the gate into the canyon. Our escort was friendly, and eventually we were able to visit the canyon. But my Muskogee friend expressed disbelief. This was our sacred place, he said. Why did we have to "ask permission" to visit?

Enchantment's sprawling complex rests at the mouth of Boynton Canyon, which is on Coconino National Forest land, effectively making the resort the gatekeeper to sacred Indigenous lands. Yavapai-Apache tribal members can reach Boynton in one of two ways: Either use Boynton Canyon Trail, which winds for several rugged miles until it reaches the Apache Holy Ground just behind the resort; or take the shortcut through Enchantment,

which allows tribal members an easement that provides access to the canyon. Enchantment's policy is to allow tribal members entry at the front gate, passage through the resort, and back-gate access to the canyon. Once you tell the attendant that you're a tribal member, you're allowed through, after checking in at the resort clubhouse to borrow the magnetic key to the gate. Both options present problems: The trail is too difficult for many elders; and using the shortcut forces us to ask for permission to access our own site.

In recent years, the relationship between tribes, resorts and federally controlled public lands has sparked controversy. Citizens of the Hopi Tribe and the Navajo Nation fought for decades for the right to access and protect their sacred San Francisco Peaks from developers with the Arizona Snowbowl ski resort, which is also on Coconino National Forest land. The tribes sought to halt the use of recycled wastewater to make artificial snow on the mountain, with Hopi attorneys explaining in detail how the potential pollution would impact their ability to hunt and engage in ceremony on the peaks. But in 2018, the Arizona Supreme Court ruled against them. Arizona's Glen Canyon Dam and New Mexico's Cochiti Dam were built

in the '60s and early '70s, creating two popular desert oases and recreational playgrounds, Lake Powell and Cochiti Lake, but destroying religious sites belonging to the Navajo Nation and Cochiti Pueblo. Similarly, the ongoing tug-of-war between the last three presidential administrations over Bears Ears in Utah, a place sacred to Navajo, Hopi, Ute and Zuni peoples, highlighted long-standing tensions between private landholders, ranchers, recreationists, the federal government, extractive industries and Native peoples.

Too often, tribal citizens' ability to engage in religious and spiritual practices remains in non-Native hands. Not all Native peoples take the same approach to their sacred lands, but we share certain beliefs: that the land should be protected, that tribes should retain exclusive control, and that Indigenous beliefs and practices connected to specific landscapes must be respected. Enchantment Resort is on a much smaller scale than Lake Powell, and yet the resort, like the U.S. government, has recently been tone-deaf when it comes to our people's relationship with our sacred lands.

For several years, Enchantment worked closely with Apache elder Bob Bear, who advised on issues of cultural importance. The partnership



Boynton Canyon in Arizona, a place of immense spiritual significance to Yavapai-Apache Nation tribal members, is reflected in a window of Enchantment Resort. **Elias Butler**

offered bike tours, including a “Native American Teachings Excursion that showcases traditions and practices of the Apache” and a “Native American Teachings Hike.” The resort’s website states, “Our Native American guide will take you on a beautiful 2 1/2 hour ride outside the Resort where he will share the traditions of the Apache as well as their use of plants for food and medicine and their honoring of the natural world.”

Enchantment’s “expert,” who leads the bike excursion and hike and shares Apache traditions and culture, is George Miraval, affectionately called the “Bike Chief” by his employers. Miraval is not Yavapai-Apache, though he claims Apache heritage (Mescalero and Chiricahua, two Apache groups not from the Sedona area). He has had no meaningful interaction with us, despite living in the Sedona area for over 30 years. But nobody, including Miraval, is qualified to talk about our traditions and culture unless they have a direct relationship to the nation or someone in the tribe, preferably one of our elders, who are the keepers of such knowledge.

Concerned about the ethics of this, I commented on the Facebook post, asking what Apache teachings would be shared, and if they came from local Apaches. Jim Gutttau, corporate director of communications for Enchantment Group, replied, thanking me for my message and saying, “I know that George, our Native American guide, leads quite a few (of the tours).” Gutttau promised to have more information soon. On April 1, Jonathan Mattis, director of marketing and sales for Enchantment Resort and Mii amo spa, one of Enchantment’s amenities, emailed me, writing that “George is a valuable member of our Trail House team and works very closely with a consultant, who is a member of the Yvapai-Apache nation to ensure accuracy and proper representation.” (The misspelling “Yvapai-Apache” appeared in the original email.)

This surprised me, so I contacted Vincent Randall and Gertrude Smith, the directors of the tribe’s Apache and Yavapai Culture Departments, respectively. Neither knew Miraval, nor had they ever been contacted by the resort. I asked Mattis again about the consultant and what information was being taught. On April 7, Mattis repeated that the resort “works with a consultant,” but said that in order to “ensure full privacy,” he was “unable to share any further information.” My followup queries went unanswered.

In essence, it appears that Enchantment has

taken it upon itself to teach its customers about our traditions and culture without consulting with our Culture Department. What’s most troubling is that Enchantment has had every opportunity to act in an ethical manner. After Bob Bear’s death, the resort has made only fleeting efforts to re-establish a relationship with the Yavapai-Apache Nation. On occasion — when new resort buildings were unveiled, for example — Don Decker, a tribal elder, has offered prayers and blessings. And the resort has opened its gates to tribal members and even provided refreshments during our annual Exodus Day celebrations, when we commemorate our return to the Verde Valley in 1900 after 25 years of exile. Decker, however, has expressed concern about Enchantment’s Native American programming, and the fact that it continues to conduct tours and share “Apache teachings” without properly consulting us feels like a slap in the face.

Don Decker’s son, Charles, a gifted Apache artist, has been connected to Enchantment since 2017, doing live painting demonstrations there in an unpaid position. When he sells a painting, the resort, of course, takes its cut. Enchantment also used him as an unpaid cultural consultant, asking him to greet newly arrived guests, provide orientation and translate phrases into Apache, and help secure Native American talent for the resort. Believing that correct cultural representation is critical, Charles Decker has provided information, consulting with elders when necessary. He was led to believe that his relationship with the resort would eventually lead to full-time employment, even a major art commission that would put authentic Yavapai-Apache artwork in the resort’s rooms and facilities. None of these opportunities have materialized, however, leaving the artist dispirited, though he still hopes Enchantment will “make good” on its ethical obligations to the Yavapai-Apache Nation.

Enchantment’s treatment of Charles Decker is emblematic of its actions toward the Yavapai-Apache Nation: offering lip service regarding its commitment to Native peoples and sacred lands, but failing to put in the work to forge — and maintain — meaningful and lasting relationships, all while financially profiting from tours and experiences that purport to share our cultural knowledge. This is why access to Indigenous sacred sites should never be left in the hands of private developers or other non-Native entities. ☀

Maurice Crandall is a citizen of the Yavapai-Apache Nation of Camp Verde, Arizona. He is assistant professor of Native American and Indigenous Studies at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire.

resulted in a 30-minute documentary by Cree filmmaker RJ Joseph titled *Che Ah Chi*, the Apache term for Boynton Canyon, in 2009. Back then, Joseph was Enchantment’s director of Native American Programming, a position that no longer exists. Bear and other elders were featured prominently in the documentary, and it seemed like the relationship between Enchantment and the Yavapai-Apache Nation was headed in the right direction. Unfortunately, Bear’s passing in 2014 left a void. Instead of finding another permanent point of contact, Enchantment pursued a piecemeal approach that has done real harm to the relationship.

Enchantment portrays itself as respectful — even connected — to Indigenous peoples and practices. On March 30, 2021, its Facebook page linked to a write-up in *Artful Living Magazine*, quoting resort owner Dana Tang, who said: “We believe strongly that the best way to experience Boynton Canyon is on foot or on the seat of a bike.” The post, and the article, seemed straightforward enough: Enchantment sits at the base of Boynton Canyon, one of the many breathtaking natural wonders of Sedona’s Red Rock Country, and the resort believes that people should experience the canyon in an immersive way. Enchantment told *Artful Living* that it

Heard Around the West

Tips about Western oddities are appreciated
and often shared in this column.

BY BETSY MARSTON

WYOMING

Who's the most famous person in the Cowboy State? It's certainly not Kanye West, the music mogul, clothes designer and former presidential candidate who recently changed his legal name to "Ye." After spending a little over two years in Cody, Ye put his 3,885-acre property on the market for \$11 million. For locals, neither his presence nor his absence is that big a deal, according to the *Jackson Hole News&Guide*: "A celebrity is not someone they would fuss over, unless that celebrity was John Wayne reincarnated."

Then again, you could argue that 25-year-old Grizzly Bear 399 — the famously photogenic mother of four yearling cubs — is Wyoming's true reigning celebrity. Summer after summer, her habit of hanging out with her current family in Grand Teton National Park has made her a magnet for camera-toting tourists. This fall, she expanded her range and began wandering through backyards in Jackson Hole, generally (like all A-list celebrities) sporting a protective entourage of police officers to direct traffic when necessary. These days, there's even closer scrutiny of the family, thanks to the GPS-equipped collaring of two of 399's cubs. And Bear 399's fan base continues to grow, as shown by a "Grizzly Bear Town Hall" hosted by *Mountain Journal* and *Explore Big Sky*. The event attracted a thousand viewers, with "tens of thousands" more watching a recording. For charisma, it's hard to beat Bear 399, with her trailing kite of adorable cubs and a posse of protectors and persistent paparazzi.



Armando Veve / HCN

ALASKA

If you don't actually need help getting off a mountain, calling the Park Service and demanding an immediate helicopter evacuation as if you're ordering an Uber is definitely bad form. But that's what Logan, Utah, radiologist Jason Lance tried — and failed — to do on Denali, the 20,310-foot Alaska mountain. Lance had given up on trying to summit the peak but was perfectly OK when he met three other climbers on their way down. They spent "hours trying to convince Lance to descend with them to the 17,200-foot base camp," reports The Associated Press, but he refused, insisting that the Park Service more or less owed him a helicopter because "we've paid our fee." The entitled doctor may have spoken too soon: Filing a

false report is just one of the three charges he now faces, and he's likely to owe still more fees before it's over.

ARIZONA

Eighty years ago, when many young Brits came to America to train as fighter pilots, some of them ended up in rural Arizona. World War II aviation buff John Santangini tells us that Graham White's first-person account, *Night Fighter Over Germany: The Long Road to the Sky*, might be too detailed for everyone's taste, but he found one story in the book that seems made for Heard Around the West. White recalled that when he wasn't training to shoot down Nazi bombers, he enjoyed meeting Arizonans, saying they "possessed a remarkable mixture of curiosity and kindness." Once, a woman

who had offered White and another pilot a lift to Phoenix "insisted on going miles out of her way to show us to her cousin, Mary Lou. That lady inspected us carefully, as if we were a new breed of exotic pet of unknown temperament, then delivered her verdict: 'Why, they're just like our boys!' But our driver was determined to prove otherwise and ordered us ... 'Go on, say something!' We duly obliged and she crowed, 'There! Ain't that the cutest accent you ever come across?' Mary Lou agreed, adding, 'They sure picked up the language quickly.'"

Thanks to John Santangini for sending us the excerpt, and thanks to Crista Worthy, Wendy Beye and the many other tipsters over the years who steered us to the hidden gems in their local papers or online and sent in photos of peculiar road signs and other oddments. It's been a true partnership, one also shared with copy editor Diane Sylvain, empress of the light touch. But after a quarter-century of what has truly been a labor of love, I'm leaving to focus on a new job as editor of the nonprofit opinion service Writers on the Range. Meanwhile, Heard Around the West will carry on with a new writer, who, I'm sure, will want to hear your stories about life in the West — all those crazy things that make you laugh out loud or shriek with fury or simply pause and wonder: *What on earth were they thinking?* Because the West is an amazing place, isn't it? So keep listening to it, y'all. We hear you. ☀

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#IAM THE WEST

RANDY KIYOKAWA

**Orchardist, Kiyokawa Family Orchards
Parkdale, Oregon**

Being an orchardist runs in my family. My grandpa came over from Japan in 1905. Eventually, my grandparents had an orchard about five miles down the Hood River Valley, in a town called Dee, Oregon. My parents started Kiyokawa Family Orchards in Parkdale, Oregon, where I grew up, after they returned from Tule Lake internment camp during World War II. I left the orchard when I went to college at Oregon State. Afterward, I lived in Portland for four years, but my dad got ill, and so I came back to help on the farm. I've been here ever since. I felt obligated to take over the operation, but I liked it, and I knew I was always going to come back.

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

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