

# High Country News

For people who care about the West

## GOOD NEIGHBORS

Researchers look to the Southwest  
to learn why we share – and  
what happens when we don't

By Brian Mockenhaupt

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Malpai Borderlands Group members, from left, Peter Warren of The Nature Conservancy and ranchers Warner Glenn and Reese Woodland gather following the group's quarterly meeting. BLAKE GORDON

## On the cover

Branding day at the McDonald ranch in southern Arizona, where neighbors-helping-neighbors is the cultural norm. Here, Will Edington, left, and Obie Valdivia hold the feet of a calf while Bill McDonald castrates it, and Sage Goodwin stands by. BLAKE GORDON



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## Editor's note

### Don't circle too tight

Americans pride ourselves on our generosity, but at the moment we're not doing so hot. In the face of one of the greatest refugee crises of our time, in which up to 12 million people have fled horrific civil war, the United States has agreed to accept 10,000 refugees over the next year. A lot of folks — 54 percent of us, according to one poll — would like to see that number reduced to zero. This is driven by fear, heightened by the Nov. 13 attacks on Paris and their echo of 9/11. In uncertain times, it's all too easy to circle the wagons. But as this issue of *High Country News* demonstrates, there are other, more generous responses to fear of "the other," and they can be found even here — maybe especially here — in the American West.



Contributing editor Cally Carswell, for example, looks at the unlikely coalition that came together to fight the Keystone XL Pipeline — not just "Left Coast" activists, but tribal members, farmers and ranchers, working together to stop what they saw as a threat to their land and livelihoods. These cooperating "cowboys and Indians" added their voices to broader concerns about the pipeline and what it symbolized: the desire to keep fossil fuels in the ground, not just for the good of people today, but for unborn generations unable yet to act on their own behalf.

Gabriel Furshong, meanwhile, reports on the efforts of the Little Shell Tribe of the Chippewa Indians to gain federal recognition. Tribal members have struggled for decades for recognition, hampered in part by historical racism and the forced eviction of Montana tribes, which scattered Native Americans and their collective memory across the West. A new federal rule could make it easier for the tribe to be officially recognized — a huge step toward healing still-raw historical wounds.

In our cover story, Brian Mockenhaupt goes into New Mexico and Arizona to meet with a group of ranchers who have a deep understanding of sharing, or "neighboring," as they call it. The Malpai Borderlands Group is famous for bringing diverse interests together in "the radical center" to take care of both their arid homeland and the people who rely on it. It's not just high-minded talk: Recent research has discovered that these ranchers' odds of survival may actually increase, largely because they're willing to share in myriad ways. With the Southwest facing a future of extended drought and heat, this is a powerful lesson. If incorporated into existing planning and regulatory systems, it could help the region cope with an uncertain future.

The stories all have something else to teach us. We humans do best when we act as good neighbors. The tough part is deciding how big your neighborhood is, and how wide a circle you're willing to make.

—Brian Calvert, managing editor



Dan “Rooster” Leavens hooks a brown trout on the Ruby River upstream of the Kennedy property, after gaining access from a bridge. GROSSENBACHERPHOTO.COM

## Ducks Unlimited author out over billionaire showdown

In November, *Ducks Unlimited* magazine fired its field editor, Don Thomas, over a story he wrote for a separate publication about James Cox Kennedy, a billionaire who has fought for years to block public access to the Ruby River. Kennedy, who owns 3,200 acres on the river, used barbed wire and electric fence to deter those who sought to fish its waters. Thomas' facts were unimpeachable, but Kennedy is a major Ducks Unlimited donor and a former board member, and the strident tone of the piece angered the current board. When Thomas' firing was made public, Ducks Unlimited members objected, accusing the group of siding with Kennedy — against Montana's legendary stream access. For his part, Thomas may be looking for work, but he says the fracas has his favorite issue, public access, “lit up like a neon sign.” **BEN GOLDFARB**

MORE: [hcne.ws/ducks-unlimited](http://hcne.ws/ducks-unlimited)

## Trending

### Coal comfort

Last month, Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton released a \$30 billion plan to bolster communities impacted by the downturn of the coal industry. Her chief rival, Bernie Sanders, vowed to protect workers, even as he declared it time to start fighting climate change by keeping coal in the ground. Clinton's plan, which would retrain workers, fund local schools and lure new businesses to coal communities, mirrors similar proposals from Democrats and President Barack Obama, which have failed to get traction in Congress. Industry representatives called Clinton's plan “a cynical ploy to gain votes,” not a solution to coal's decline.

ELIZABETH SHOGEN

## Powerbrokers

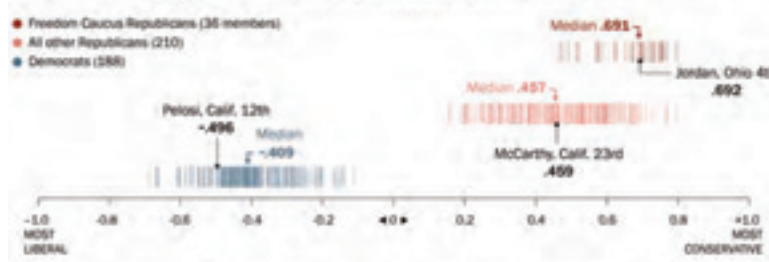
The secretive Freedom Caucus and its eight known Western members have weighed in on core regional issues like immigration and could soon turn to environmental issues. So what is it, exactly?

KRISTA LANGLOIS

MORE: [hcne.ws/freecaucus](http://hcne.ws/freecaucus)

### Typical Freedom Caucus Member Is More Conservative Than Other Republicans

Ideological scores of representatives in the 114th Congress, based on roll call votes:



Note: Not shown is Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, who did not receive a score because speakers usually do not vote. Source: Voteview.com Weekly Consistent Space (WADOMINATE) Scores by Jeff Lewis, Nolan McCarthy, Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal, updated Oct. 13, 2015; Pew Research Center reporting (Freedom Caucus members)

### Freedom Caucus Members Have Less Seniority Than Other Republicans

Share of representatives among each group who have served terms in the House (114th Congress)

|                                 | 1-3 terms | 4-9 terms | 10+ terms |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Total (435 members)             | 47%       | 32%       | 20%       |
| Freedom Caucus Republicans (36) | 72        | 26        | 2         |
| Other Republicans (210)         | 54        | 32        | 14        |
| Democrats (188)                 | 36        | 34        | 30        |

Note: Partial terms are counted as full terms. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. Data are current as of Oct. 15, 2015. Source: Pew Research Center reporting (Freedom Caucus members and analysis of the Congressional Biographical Directory)

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

# 2.5 million

Number of Coloradans a 2014 study estimated would be without water by 2050, without conservation measures in the state.

# 400,000

Amount of water, in acre-feet, municipal and industrial users could conserve under a new state plan.

Colorado's new water plan, finalized in November, offers something for everybody. In addition to conservation, it recognizes the need to develop additional storage, preserve agricultural water, improve recreation, and boost environmental flows — and all despite projections of a shrinking water supply. The plan came from a bottom-up process that involved basin-by-basin conversations about needs and solutions, as well as thousands of hours of public comments. But old conflicts die hard, and some still worry that the plan could mean diverting water from the state's sparsely populated Western Slope to the growing cities east of the Rockies.

SARAH TORY MORE: [hcne.ws/COWaterplan](http://hcne.ws/COWaterplan)

## Audio

*“The true problem with coal plants has been that they just haven’t been able to compete with the low, low natural gas prices that we’ve been seeing these days.”*

—Robert Godby, director of the Center for Energy Economics and Public Policy at the University of Wyoming, speaking as part of an *HCN* Soundtable, “Who will feel the pinch as energy economies shift?” The hour-long program also featured Noah Long of the Natural Resources Defense Council, in Santa Fe; and Tom Huerkamp, board vice president of Delta County Economic Development Inc. in Colorado, where hundreds of miners have lost their jobs. MORE: [hcne.ws/soundtable-fall15](http://hcne.ws/soundtable-fall15)



**Wolves, including this young radio-collared one, are no longer on Oregon's endangered species list.**

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

## Oregon wolves delisted

Oregon has taken its gray wolves — 81 in total — off the state endangered species list. The status change will have little immediate effect, though. Management of the state's wolves is governed by a wolf management plan, created in 2005, which allows the canids to be killed only in self-defense or when caught in the act of chasing or attacking livestock. Wolves in western Oregon also remain protected under the federal Endangered Species Act. Still, the delisting could open the door for the eventual approval of hunting.

JODI PETERSON

MORE: [hcne.ws/ORwolves](http://hcne.ws/ORwolves)

## You say

JEFF SMYTH: “We are told that all those good-paying mining jobs will be replaced by equally good-paying wind and solar jobs, but when does it start? Mines are shutting down, but the alternatives aren't picking up the slack.”

DEB HOCHHALTER: “I still find it outrageous that the coal states have not made an effort over the last several years to expand their economic bases and bring in new jobs. They have been living in a bubble of denial.”

MORE: [hcne.ws/clinton-coal](http://hcne.ws/clinton-coal) and [Facebook.com/highcountrysnews](http://Facebook.com/highcountrysnews)

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## BIG WIND ≠ BIG TOBACCO

Judith Lewis Mernit's Oct. 26 *HCN* cover story, "Clean Energy's Dirty Secret," seeks to paint the wind industry as a villain equal to the tobacco industry when it comes to the science related to their respective industries.

The piece implies that my organization, the California Wind Energy Association, personally attacked a researcher and his work on bird fatalities, which the writer characterized as being properly conducted and peer-reviewed. In fact, our group's argument was focused solely on the quality of the researcher's work and the lack of quality control exercised at the time by the sponsoring agency. We thoroughly documented a wide variety of serious mistakes, which were later verified when a proper peer-review was finally conducted by that agency.

There is no free lunch when it comes to generating the electricity that our society depends on, but the wind industry has been proactively addressing the relatively modest impacts that it has on wildlife. It stands apart from any other energy industry in doing so.

*Nancy Rader*  
Executive director, California  
Wind Energy Association  
Berkeley, California

## THE LEAST OF ENERGY EVILS

"Clean Energy's Dirty Secret," though well-intentioned, grossly misinforms readers about wind energy's impacts and ignores its many environmental benefits (*HCN*, 10/26/15).

Contrary to the impression left by the story, wind farms are not a major source of bird mortality. North American wind turbine sites kill an estimated 134,000-230,000 small birds each year — only a fraction of the 5 billion small bird deaths caused by human activities. Other causes of mortality include buildings (550 million), power lines (130 million) and cars (80 million).

While eagles do occasionally collide with turbines, modern wind facilities represent only 2 percent of all documented human-caused golden eagle fatalities.

Wind energy also saves birds. By avoiding 126 million metric tons of carbon dioxide a year in the U.S., it acts as one of the key solutions for mitigating climate change, recognized as the



"Squawk! Polly wants a home in a natural ecosystem free of invasive species, free of logging, mining, oil and gas ventures, and with a climate that will be stable for the long term."

PETER OMMUNDSEN

biggest threat to birds and wildlife generally. It also helps conserve wildlife and preserve natural habitats in other ways. In 2013, wind power helped save 36.5 billion gallons of water, an amount that could rise to 260 billion gallons by 2050. Wind also reduced harmful air pollutants, such as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, mercury and fine particulates — thus benefiting both human and animal health. By 2050, these air-quality improvements alone could prevent as many as 22,000 people from dying prematurely.

As wind helps displace coal, oil and gas, not as many mountaintops in Appalachia will be blown off to access the coal underneath them, fewer rivers will be buried under mine waste or rendered lifeless from acid mine drainage, and less wild land will be lost to oil and gas development.

*David Jenkins*  
President, Conservatives for Responsible  
Stewardship  
Oakton, Virginia

## QUESTIONS BEYOND ECONOMICS

Kudos to Elizabeth Shogren ("The Campaign Against Coal," *HCN*, 11/9/15) for exposing a wider audience to the ongoing battles raging in Western states over the mining and burning of king coal. Shogren rightly points out that small local communities dependent on the mining and burning of coal — some

of which I myself have lived in — need those involved in the controversy to recognize that individual lives and livelihoods are at stake. As in most extractive industries in the West, locals argue that any curtailment of extractive activity would do irreparable economic damage to the local community. The narrowness of this argument is to make human life little more than an economic transaction, as if we exist only to make money to afford a nicer home or another ATV. As those of us who inhabit these Western environs know, however, our decisions about where and how we live often have as much to do with the quality of our physical settings as they do with purely economic motivations. The discussion about coal (and natural gas, and oil, and uranium) needs to include the larger perspective that these are not economic

questions alone.

*W. Vance Grace*  
Grand Junction, Colorado

## SALVAGE ON

Jodi Peterson's brief on timber salvaging's negative impacts mentioned black-backed woodpeckers but omitted some essential facts ("Log on," *HCN*, 11/9/15). This woodpecker is neither threatened nor endangered. With the huge acreages of dead timber now available in the Western U.S. and Canada, the bird has an overabundance of foraging opportunities, aka "snag forest habitat." Current salvage operations are now harvesting an insignificant portion of the available foraging area. For example, U.S. Forest Service data show that in Montana's national forests, the yearly mortality is about 510 million cubic feet. Approximately 10 million cubic feet is salvaged, leaving 98 percent of the dead trees for the woodpeckers and as fuel for the next fire.

Salvaging dead timber provides raw material for local industries, feedstock for power production, revenue for local governments and school districts, jobs and community stability. It does all this while reducing fire hazards and visitor safety concerns and, by using best forest practices, minimizes impacts on soil, water and regeneration.

*W.V. (Mac) McConnell*  
Tallahassee, Florida

High  
Country  
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# Killing Keystone

*Activists fight new fossil fuel infrastructure — and start to win*

BY CALLY CARSWELL

On Earth Day 2014, a group of farmers, ranchers and Native Americans who live along the proposed Keystone XL pipeline route marched and rode horseback through Washington, D.C., wearing cowboy hats and feather headdresses. On the National Mall, they erected tipis and held ceremonies; a couple of days later, they gave a hand-painted tipi to the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, in President Barack Obama's honor. They gave the tipi the same names that the Lakota and Crow gave Obama in 2008 — "Man Who Helps the People" and "One Who Helps People Throughout the Land." The message was implicit: The man who helps the people rejects the Keystone pipeline. This month, Obama did just that, handing the climate movement its clearest political victory yet.

The fight over Keystone XL gained national attention when prominent environmentalists like Bill McKibben positioned it as a litmus test of Obama's commitment to fighting climate change. The pipeline would have connected the Canadian tar sands to Gulf Coast refineries, and most environmentalists argued that it shouldn't be built because it would lock in the continued exploitation of one of the dirtiest fuels on earth.

But for those who marched on Washington last year, the battle was more personal. Farmers and ranchers in Nebraska feared the pipeline would leak, polluting their land and water and jeopardizing their livelihoods. Tribes worried about water contamination, disturbances to treaty lands, and the possibility of man camps popping up near their communities and increasing crime. Many landowners said TransCanada, the company behind Keystone, tried to bully them into signing easements. "They didn't like that a private corporation could use eminent domain for their own gain," says Jane Kleeb, who organized opposition in Nebraska. "And they really didn't like that it was a foreign corporation."

Together, the self-described cowboys and Indians and the climate crusaders proved a potent political force. Here was a project that could be framed as a high-stakes climate issue that got regular folks



fired up, too — something the 2010 effort to pass federal carbon legislation achieved only insofar as it provoked rabid opposition from Tea Partiers. That cap-and-trade bill was designed by a handful of big green groups to be palatable to big business, but included little to inspire popular support, and environmentalists made scant effort to build a broad coalition to fight for it.

With Keystone, the national groups gave the local concerns additional weight, and the locals provided the national fight with unexpected — and often conservative — spokespeople. It helped that, all over the country, a slew of other proposed pipelines, fracking projects, fossil fuel export terminals, natural gas storage facilities, and coal and oil trains were sparking loud and sustained local opposition. Keystone became a common enemy activists rallied around. They brought populist passion to the national environmental movement — a fervor that it's lacked for years, but that's crucial for pressuring politicians to take stands on controversial issues.

"Keystone was a proof-of-concept that infrastructure fights can garner some political constituency and can be won," says Eric de Place, policy director for the Sightline Institute, a Northwest think tank that opposes coal exports and crude-by-rail facilities. "I spent a huge portion of my life working on carbon pricing and trying to explain demand curves. But when an oil train goes off the rails and explodes" — as has happened in North Dakota and Canada — "it really highlights for people just how dangerous the fossil fuel infrastructure is."

Northwestern communities have already beaten back proposals for major new developments to export U.S. coal to Asia, and now they're working to defeat

additional coal and oil train and shipping terminals. Days after Obama rejected Keystone, the Portland, Oregon, city council passed a resolution opposing any new infrastructure that would increase the city's capacity to store or transport fossil fuels. "Taken collectively, there's real momentum against any new fossil fuel infrastructure," says Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune.

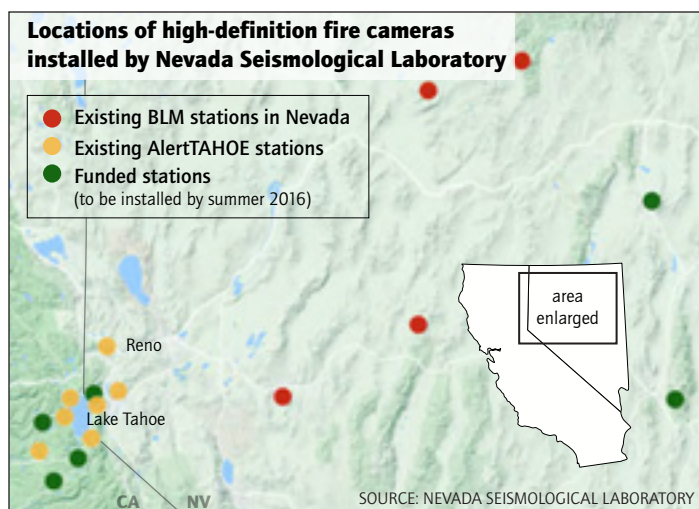
Should oil prices rise, it's easy to imagine that momentum encountering more friction. In *USA Today* recently, Robert Bryce of the Manhattan Institute and Steven Hayward of Pepperdine University argued that the "fracking revolution" that flooded the market with oil and dropped prices is what really enabled Obama to kill Keystone.

In rejecting it, Obama acknowledged that to confront climate change, we have to start leaving some fossil fuels where they are. It was a statement that would have been hard to imagine at the start of his tenure, when "drill baby drill" dominated the energy debate, as well as a symbolic win for climate activists, who are coalescing behind a new campaign to "keep it in the ground."

That idea is gaining some traction. This month, Sens. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., and Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., introduced a bill to end the leasing of federal lands and waters for fossil fuel extraction. The gesture shocked even environmentalists. "It's radical," de Place admitted, in a delighted, if slightly baffled, tone. "This is the sort of thing that only a few people were talking about five years ago. Now, with the rejection of Keystone, we can contemplate a Senate bill that seemed unsayable a few years ago. It's evidence that there's been a broad, titanic shift in the way people talk about energy." □

**Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., center, and Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., left, announce new legislation to stop leasing of public lands for fossil fuel extraction at a news conference last month on Capitol Hill as Sierra Club President Aaron Mair, right, looks on.** AP PHOTO/

PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS



## Snapshot

# Fire lookouts burning out

*Fire detection is becoming more technologically advanced*

Approximately 4,000 fire lookout towers once dotted Western forests, staffed by dedicated lookouts who scanned the surrounding woods for any hint of smoke.

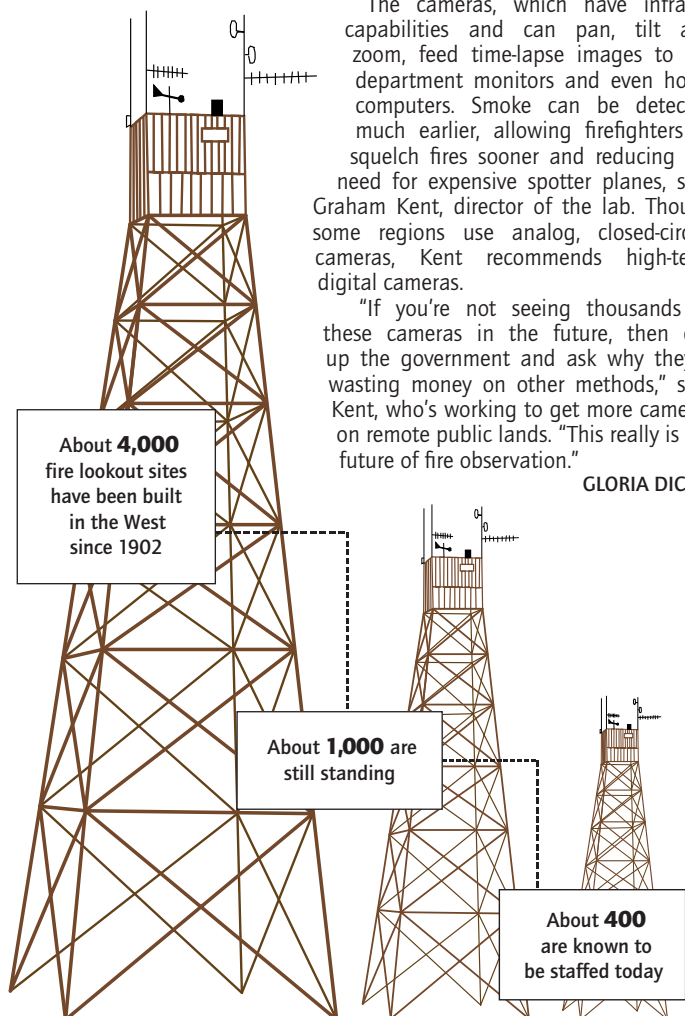
But today, about 400 are in use, largely due to budget constraints and the rise of satellite and spotter plane technology. Some abandoned towers burned, while others became historical sites or lodging for tourists. Now, a new project could make the rest obsolete.

This year, the Nevada Seismological Laboratory deployed a dozen high-definition cameras on mountaintops around the Lake Tahoe Basin (the AlertTAHOE program) and in central and northern Nevada, on both public and private land.

The cameras, which have infrared capabilities and can pan, tilt and zoom, feed time-lapse images to fire department monitors and even home computers. Smoke can be detected much earlier, allowing firefighters to squelch fires sooner and reducing the need for expensive spotter planes, says Graham Kent, director of the lab. Though some regions use analog, closed-circuit cameras, Kent recommends high-tech, digital cameras.

"If you're not seeing thousands of these cameras in the future, then call up the government and ask why they're wasting money on other methods," says Kent, who's working to get more cameras on remote public lands. "This really is the future of fire observation."

GLORIA DICKIE



SOURCE: FOREST FIRE LOOKOUT ASSOCIATION, DESIGN: BROOKE WARREN

# Murrelet malaise

*Birds and timber clash once more in Washington's old-growth forests*

BY BEN GOLDFARB

On an August morning in 1974, a California tree surgeon named Hoyt Foster was 170 feet up a Douglas-fir, trimming storm-damaged branches, when he found himself face-to-beak with a fuzzy, robin-sized chick. The bird possessed webbed feet — a surprising feature, given that the tree stood five miles inland from the Pacific. Foster notified biologists, who realized, to their wonder, that he had found a marbled murrelet, a cousin of ocean-going puffins and auklets. By then, scientists knew where every North American bird nested — except for the marbled murrelet. Nobody had thought to seek a seabird in an old-growth forest.

The murrelet, once known to loggers as the fog lark, does not precisely nest. Instead, it deposits a single green egg — slightly pointed, to reduce rolling — on a moss-cushioned branch within 50 miles of the coast. It needs an exceptionally wide branch to provide a proper platform; only the limbs of huge old trees suffice. "They have such a unique, cryptic ecology," says Kim Nelson, research wildlife biologist at Oregon State University. "That fascinates me. It also frustrates me."

The Pacific Northwest, of course, is no stranger to old-growth-dependent birds. Back in the early 1990s, battle raged over the northern spotted owl, an endangered species jeopardized by logging. In 1994, then President Bill Clinton brokered an uneasy truce: the Northwest Forest Plan, which coordinated management across three states, eight agencies and 24 million acres. Though the plan was primarily designed for the owl, its intended beneficiaries included the murrelet, listed as threatened in 1992.

By some measures, the plan has worked: Federal lands in California, Oregon and Washington have retained 98 percent of their suitable habitat. Yet it hasn't reversed the murrelet's slide — particularly in Washington, where the population has plummeted 50 percent, to fewer than 5,000, since 2001. On state and private land, timber harvest has eliminated 30 percent, or around 215,000 acres, of prime habitat in the last two decades. Oregon and California are bleeding non-federal habitat as well.

After years of delay, the Washington Department of Natural Resources is on the verge of enacting a long-term conservation approach aimed at boosting the

state's murrelets. The strategy, intended to protect existing habitat and regenerate new forest cover over the next 50 years, ranks among the most consequential decisions for Northwest old growth since the Forest Plan. A quarter-century after the owl wars, the fate of hundreds of thousands of timber acres once again rests on an obscure bird.

At 4:30 on a July morning, as pre-dawn light filtered through cedars, I stood in a parking lot in Olympic National Park, neck cricked upward, eyes trained on a patch of pale sky. As day broke, one murrelet, then three, then five, flapped in from the sea, their wings beating frantically to hold their lumpy bodies aloft. Their call floated down to me, a mournful, maritime *Kree!*

My companion was Kevin Schmelzlen, director of the Murrelet Survival Project, an initiative founded in 2014 by conservation groups, including Audubon and the Sierra Club. Schmelzlen, an avowed tree-hugger with a triathlete's build and a lumberjack's beard, cut his teeth in the acrimonious world of wolf conservation. He was glad to have escaped that drama. But rallying the public around a near-invisible seabird that biologists describe as a "potato with wings" posed its own challenges. "Not many people choose the murrelet as their spirit animal," Schmelzlen sighed as another airborne spud winged overhead.

The murrelets had returned to swap shifts with their egg-sitting mates, who flew off to forage. That double life — nest in the trees, feed in the seas — makes it harder to pinpoint why the species is declining. The bird undoubtedly faces marine threats: Gillnets ensnare and drown it, and overfishing robs it of high-calorie food like anchovies and sardines.

Yet research suggests that trouble in the woods, not the water, has caused the most harm. Not only does logging deprive murrelets of nesting sites, it also fragments their habitat, allowing opportunistic ravens and jays to penetrate forests and devour eggs. Researchers find the densest populations near blocks of unbroken old growth. While murrelets dwelling near Olympic National Park have fared relatively well, they've suffered in areas lacking federal land, like southwest Washington. Such gaps, fear scientists, could divide a population that has traditionally stretched from Northern California to Southeast Alaska. "That could have deleterious effects over the long run if it

Correspondent Ben Goldfarb covers wildlife.  
@ben\_a\_goldfarb

creates genetic isolation,” warns Martin Raphael, research scientist at the U.S. Forest Service’s Pacific Northwest Research Station.

Though Washington has long recognized its murrelet problem, it’s only now addressing it. Back in 1997, the Washington Department of Natural Resources, which manages state-owned timber lands, completed an interim Habitat Conservation Plan that protected known nesting sites. At the time, basic mysteries of murrelet biology remained unsolved. When better science emerged, the department vowed, a more enduring plan would take hold.

In 2004, it commissioned Raphael, Nelson and other scientists to design a long-term conservation strategy. Their report, completed in 2008, recommended that the department protect not only known nests, but also a handful of large, contiguous forest patches in southwest Washington and the Olympic Peninsula. Soon thereafter, however, the global recession that struck

the timber industry crippled the agency, and it failed to implement the scientists’ ideas. “We were saying, ‘Hey, we have great recommendations here, let’s keep moving,’” says Kara Whittaker, senior scientist at the nonprofit Washington Forest Law Center. “But the recommendations just sat there.”

As the years dragged on, logging continued within the proposed murrelet reserves. Organizations like Whittaker’s fought back, with mixed results: A 2013 lawsuit saved 12,000 acres in southwest Washington, but in 2014, the state proceeded with two timber sales on the Olympic Peninsula near known nesting sites.

The Department of Natural Resources, which manages 3 million acres as state trust land — forests in which timber sales fund public schools, universities, prisons and other institutions — also faced accusations of flawed science. When scientists at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife surveyed the northern Olym-

pic Peninsula in the early 2000s, they found their sister agency’s models had failed to predict actual murrelet habitat. To Schmelzlen, it was a telling shortcoming. “There’s a conflict of interest when you have an agency that exists to raise revenue through timber sales and is also in charge of finding nesting sites,” he says.

In October, at long last, the Washington Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published five draft alternatives (they’ve since added a sixth) for a long-term approach to murrelet conservation. After environmental review and public comments, a plan could be in place by mid-2017.

The least conservation-minded alternative, which maintains the status quo, would preserve fewer than 600,000 acres of long-term forest cover. Meanwhile, the most robust option, Alternative E, would protect more than 730,000 acres of forest, including the special reserves identified by



**Interior Secretary Sally Jewell unveils a draft of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan in 2014.** U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## THE LATEST

### Backstory

The first wave of major renewable energy projects in Western deserts began in the mid-2000s, with several large solar projects and wind farms approved for California and Nevada.

**In response, federal and California officials started work on the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan in 2008, to guide development while protecting wildlife and recreation.** In 2011, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., proposed amending the California Desert Protection Act to require energy companies to fund habitat mitigation (“Sacrificial land,” *HCN*, 4/22/13).

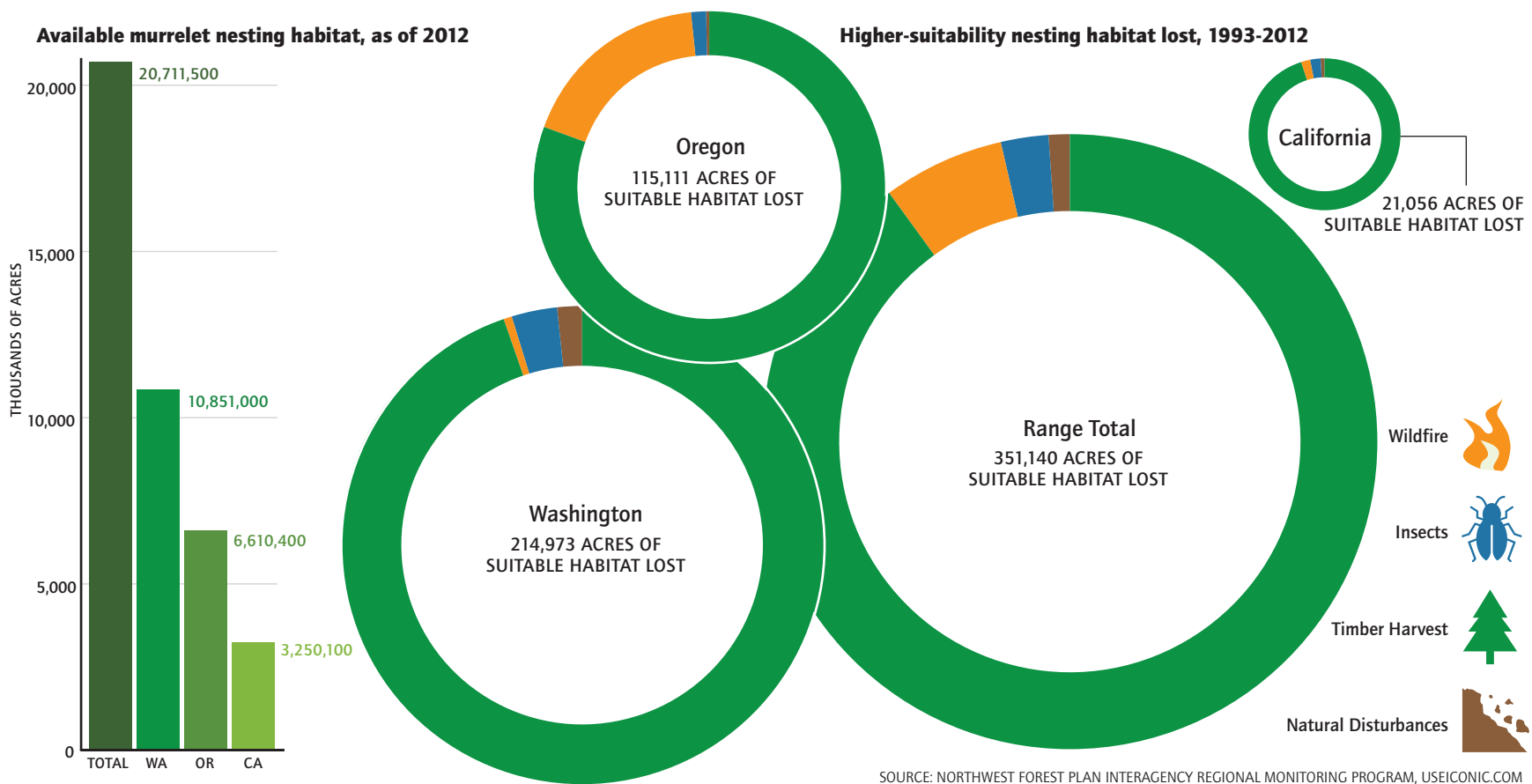
### Followup

In November, officials announced **the first phase of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan, clearing the way for solar, wind and geothermal energy development on 400,000 acres** of public lands in the California desert. The plan also sets aside 5 million acres for conservation and 3 million acres for recreation. The second phase of the plan, for non-federal lands, has no deadline — something that worries both energy and environmental groups, who say the total acreage open to development won’t be known for years.

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**Robert Peck of Oregon State University studies marbled murrelet nests in Valley of the Giants, Oregon, a forest preserve with many large Douglas-firs and western hemlocks, two common murrelet nesting trees.** GARY BRAASCH/GETTY IMAGES



An adult marbled murrelet takes flight. Although murrelets are seabirds, they nest two to 50 miles inland in old-growth trees.

MIKE DANZENBAKER

the 2008 science team. The agency worked with new models created by independent scientists, says Kyle Blum, deputy supervisor for upland resources. “We built a really solid, robust analytical framework using feedback from both the conservation and timber communities.”

Still, the prospect of new regulations raises old ghosts. “The impacts are going to fall on the communities,” predicts Carol Johnson, executive director of the North Olympic Timber Action Committee. In Port Angeles, says Johnson, three

sawmills have closed in recent years, taking 200 jobs. Though those shutdowns had more to do with economic conditions than conservation laws, Johnson fears new restrictions could further hamper industry, costing jobs and needed revenue.

As with the spotted owl, the murrelet battle is a proxy war among interests that care at least as much about forest usage as they do about the bird itself. Yet despite the high stakes, the tussle has remained more civil than the owl wars; no one out here is sporting “Save a Logger, Eat a

Murrelet” bumper stickers. Whittaker notes that the Department of Natural Resources has accepted input from conservation groups and willingly shared information. Even Johnson, who complains about greenies who “never want to see another tree cut,” sees evidence of collaboration. “Nobody looks back fondly on the toxic dialogue of the owl wars,” says the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Bridget Moran. “We all want sustainable forestry to remain a strong economic engine.”

One promising approach: Washington’s State Forest Replacement Program, which reimburses timber-dependent counties for conserving forests that house endangered species. Earlier this year, Schmelzlen and an eclectic alliance of county commissioners and Natural Resources officials lobbied Washington to better fund the program. So far, though, Washington has granted \$1 million only to Skamania County, which hosts spotted owls but not marbled murrelets. (The state is still trying to figure out how to distribute \$2 million more.) For now, the owl still rules.

As the sun rose over Olympic National Park, however, Schmelzlen expressed optimism that the murrelet would eventually garner the support it deserves. “We care about timber communities, but we also care about the bird,” he insisted. After a flurry of activity, the park’s murrelets had settled down for the day, blissfully unaware of the tumult they’d created among humans. “We don’t need to make a species extinct to keep people in business.” □



# A path to legitimacy

*After decades of waiting, unrecognized tribes find hope in a new federal rule*

BY GABRIEL FURSHONG

Donald Davis, a tribal councilman for Montana's Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians, often introduces himself with a joke. "My Dad is half Little Shell, and my mother is a full-blood Norwegian," he'll say, smiling. "So, I'm a Norwindian."

But he grows serious when he describes how his dark-skinned father had to hide his own heritage. "One time, when he took me to football practice," Davis recalls, "I got out of the car, and one of my teammates asked, 'Who's the f--ing Indian?'"

That night, Davis asked his mother whether he was, in fact, Indian. Her answer still haunts him: "Yeah," she said. "But we don't talk about it, because they don't like that around here."

Many American Indians can relate to Davis' story of identity suppression, but it's especially poignant to members of the landless Little Shell Band. They have never been acknowledged under the federal tribal recognition rule, which outlines the criteria tribes must meet in order to establish a formal government-to-government relationship with the United States. The state of Montana recognized the tribe in 2000, but the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) remains undecided — 36 years after the Little Shell Band first submitted its petition for recognition.

For the Little Shell and other unrecognized tribes, however, there may be hope on the horizon. In April, President Barack Obama fulfilled a promise to Indian Country when the BIA announced revisions to the acknowledgement process. On Aug. 1, some of these revisions became law.

The new rule is one of several decisions by the Obama administration that have prioritized tribal sovereignty, says Maylinn Smith, director of the Margery Hunter Brown Indian Law Clinic at the University of Montana. "That's where Obama really gets it: taking actions that allow tribes to exercise sovereignty."

Tens of thousands of American Indians have waited decades for recognition, their lives left in limbo by the notoriously slow federal acknowledgement process. Since the process was established in 1978, 87 tribes have petitioned for recognition. Yet only 51 have received a determination, and about two-thirds of those were denied.

Recognition can have life-changing

consequences: Members of the 567 federally acknowledged tribes gain access to benefits such as housing and health services. They also are considered citizens of sovereign nations, with the power to form their own governments and create laws within their jurisdictions.

Nicholas Vrooman, a white scholar who's worked as tribal historian for the Little Shell since 2010, says "the new rule is more inclusive, allowing for the complexity of the Little Shell history to come forward." Formerly, unrecognized tribes were required to prove continuous existence as a distinct community since 1900, with third parties providing the supporting evidence.

These requirements were difficult for the Little Shell to meet. First, the tribe is composed of people of mixed indigenous and European descent. In Canada, such people are constitutionally recognized as Métis, but the United States offers no comparable legal status.

Second, hundreds of Little Shell people were forcibly evicted from Montana under the Cree Deportation Act of 1896. This law, which followed a disputed treaty in 1863 and a fraudulent agreement in 1892, scattered the Little Shell across the West and into Alberta, Canada, producing unavoidable "gaps in their history," according to Vrooman.

Finally, the only people interested in verifying their complicated history were the Little Shell themselves, leaving the tribe with few options for third-party advocates.

The new rule changes all that. It accepts historical gaps in tribal histories in certain circumstances and allows tribes to present evidence of their own history. "Indian people were justifiably going 'underground' and hiding" in the early 1900s, says Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs, Kevin K. Washburn, "and it is unfair to force them to show external evidence (of their existence) from that time."

The new recognition rule is the latest in a string of decisions from the Obama administration affecting indigenous nations. Since 2009, the Department of Interior has moved aggressively to settle legal claims by more than 40 tribes seeking redress for historic mismanagement of federal trust funds, including the \$3.4 billion Cobell case. The administration also led the charge to permanently reauthorize the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, which provides health care to 1.9 million American Indians and Alaskan Natives. The common thread, says Washburn, is "justice for indigenous people."

The phrase resonates with Davis and other Little Shell tribal citizens, who are hoping that this administrative trend means their request for recognition will soon be granted. That would help right the wrongs that have burdened them for far too long. "Just to know that finally, after all these years, that we're really here, that we're respectable," Davis says. "I've been waiting for that forever." □



Little Shell tribal members in Lewistown, Montana, in 1940. Showing evidence of historical existence is part of the process of getting federal tribal recognition, but there is not much record of the tribe in the early 1900s. COURTESY JAMES ANTHONY WELLS FAMILY



GEORGE FREY / GETTY

## THE LATEST

### Backstory

For decades, the Utah-based Mormon Church has played a leading role in the battle over gay rights in the United States. **In 2008, the church helped bankroll Proposition 8, a controversial ballot measure that sought to ban gay marriage in California.** Mormon leaders supported the campaign, calling on church members to "do all you can." Individual donations totaled more than \$9 million, and Proposition 8 passed ("Prophets and Politics," *HCN*, 10/20/08).

### Followup

In mid-November, **the Mormon Church strengthened its anti-gay stance,** announcing a new policy that bars children living with same-sex couples from baptism and other rites. It also declared that Mormons in same-sex marriages must undergo disciplinary hearings that could lead to excommunication. Church officials said they needed to draw a line between civil laws that allow same-sex marriage and church doctrine, which does not. Afterwards, **as many as 3,500 Mormons officially resigned from the church.**

SARAH TORY

Gabriel Furshong writes from Missoula, Montana. @gfurshong.

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# High Country News: Branching out

The fourth in a series celebrating our 45th Anniversary

# 45 years

*"The show was a reunion of sorts for young Pacific Islanders. ... Famously large, and often tattooed, the young men and women had roots in Tonga, Samoa, Hawaii and other Pacific Island groups. They crowded in with brothers, sisters and cousins, amping up for Dube's outspoken lyrics and mellow backbeats."*

When *HCN's* Aug. 8, 2005, cover story, "The Gangs of Zion," described how a concert at Club Suede disintegrated into a brawl between two rival Salt Lake City gangs, some readers might have briefly imagined that they'd accidentally grabbed *The New Yorker*.

The story was something of a test, remembers publisher Paul Larmer, with its unusual subject and striking full-color photos of Polynesian gang members. It came not long after he and a new generation of staffers, including editor Greg Hanscom, turned the black-and-white newspaper into a full-color magazine. Could *HCN* stay true to itself, while evolving and expanding?

The year before, *HCN* took a similar risk, recalls contributing editor Michelle Nijhuis. In the early 2000s, scientists were increasingly sounding the alarm about human-caused climate change. Could *HCN* bring this abstract topic down to (Western) earth, even as most scientists were only beginning to link it to bark beetle invasions and deepening drought? Yes: Nijhuis wrote an award-winning series of science-based features that gave Westerners an unprecedented look at the already present and predicted effects of climate change on the region.

*HCN's* environmental coverage also branched out, tackling not only on-the-ground issues but the larger movement itself, with contrarian headlines like:

"Where were the environmentalists when Libby (Montana) needed them most?" And *HCN* added firepower to our website in 2003, when we hired our first Web master, future bestselling science fiction author Paolo Bacigalupi. Paolo started *HCN's* first blog and later penned our first fictional cover story — a futuristic tale of bounty hunters who slash tamarisk from riverbanks to survive in a water-strapped West.

The West's public land, water and wildlife remained *HCN's* main focus, but after "The Gangs of Zion" hit the newsstands, readers no longer were startled to find profiles of anarchistic RV communities in the Arizona desert, billboard corporations in Salt Lake City, or Muslim meat-packers in Colorado. These stories grapple with the ways that the West's diverse communities — including the Polynesian immigrants lured to Utah by Mormon missionaries — confront, again and again, the question of how to live in an ever-changing region.

To read "The Gangs of Zion," plus other articles highlighting this era of *HCN*, visit [hcn.org/45](http://hcn.org/45). MARSHALL SWEARINGEN

Staff members editing pages in 2001, and "The Gangs of Zion" cover, two years after *HCN* became a full-color magazine. HCN ARCHIVES, MICHAEL BRANDS



## New staff and fellow

We're hard at work here at *High Country News*, trying to get this issue to press before Thanksgiving. But we still have time to share some gossip from our Paonia headquarters. We are delighted to announce that former intern **Kate Schimel** will be our new assistant editor. Kate proved herself invaluable during her internship and since then has been working as a correspondent in Seattle. We're thrilled to have her on staff — and back in the office. She'll join current intern, **Paige Blankenbuehler**, who's staying on as the new editorial fellow. Former fellow **Sarah Tory** remains with us as a correspondent.

With your support, our interns and fellows go on to do some amazing work. **Lisa Song**, a former intern, recently worked on *InsideClimate News's* investigation into what ExxonMobil knew about climate change, and when. Song, who received a Pulitzer for reporting in 2013, describes how Exxon conducted climate research in the 1970s and nevertheless worked at the forefront of climate denial.

**John Herrick's** decision to take the long way home from Utah to Hopkinton, New Hampshire, brought him to our office. Once a small-town writer himself, he decided to check out the magazine after stumbling on *HCN's* website while covering energy and environment in Vermont.

**Michael Kodas**, associate director of CU Boulder's Center for Environmental Journalism, popped by at the end of October to check up on old colleagues, including **Brian Calvert**, our managing editor, who was a fellow at the center, and editorial intern **Gloria Dickie**, who worked there during graduate school. Michael spent the weekend enjoying local cider and working through edits on his latest book, which explores the global "megafire" crisis.

Also, a clarification: Our

Oct. 26 cover story, "Clean Energy's Dirty Secret," stated that the California Wind Energy Association "hired a biologist," who argued that certain wind turbines were "too big to cut birds in half." In fact, the biologist, who has been affiliated with CalWEA, made that claim separately. We regret the confusion.

—*Brian Calvert and Sarah Tory for the staff*

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# GOOD NEIGH



## *Researchers look to the Southwest to learn why we share — and*

**N**ext spring, the fields around Willcox, Arizona, will again grow lush with corn and alfalfa, pistachios and beans — even grapes for the area’s burgeoning wineries. And the farmers, ranchers and homeowners in this arid part of the Southwest will still be sucking too much water from their aquifer. They have been doing this for years. But now, wells are drying up, forcing people to truck in water or pay thousands of dollars to drill much deeper. Irrigation may soon be too expensive for some and tap water a luxury for homeowners.

Cochise County, like more than 40 percent of the state, relies almost entirely on groundwater. And despite 15 years of drought, many people have resisted limits on groundwater withdrawals. If they can reach it, they argue, they should be able to use it. The growing scarcity only amplifies their urgency: If the resource is disappearing, why not get it while you can? Times are already precarious; if you cut back now, you’ll lose money. Some farmers have gone so far as to plant new crops in fallow areas, hoping their expanded use might be grandfathered in to any future restrictions, even boost their overall water allotment. “It’s like telling my kids the candy jar is going to be closed in five minutes,” local banker, rancher and pistachio farmer Richard Searle says. As a Cochise County supervisor, he’s also the principled dad, warning that the easy way is not always the right one.

This defensive response to duress — to grab what you can, while you can — might seem natural, particularly in the individualistic, independent rugged West. But just an hour south of

Willcox, in the vast stretch of mountains and grasslands called the Malpai Borderlands, I discovered a very different approach to scarcity and change, built around cooperation instead of suspicion.

“How do you use it but not lose it?” says Bill McDonald, as we rumble up a dirt road in his red four-wheeler, his two ranch mutts, Oso and Bingo, balancing in the cargo bed and panting over our shoulders. “That’s what we’re all trying to figure out.” McDonald’s family has run cattle here along the Mexican border since the 1890s, when his great-great grandfather left “too tame” Texas and headed west. We bounce along a dried creek bed until the path peters out, choked by brush and boulders, then continue on foot, pushing through the oak and cat’s claw, to inspect the footprint of a week-old fire.

Six-foot-five and lanky, McDonald walks with an easy lope. A wide-brimmed straw hat shields his face from the high, hot sun. He eyes the blackened patch of the fire’s farthest advance, high on a ridge, and sighs; he’d actually hoped it would burn much more, thinning the brush that makes it hard for him to find and move cattle, and encouraging the growth of young grass. But the fire faltered after burning about 6,000 acres, much of it on national forest land, where McDonald has grazing rights. Still, this marked a success, because nature, not man, had halted the fire. In the past, the Forest Service and state authorities would have attacked the blaze without bothering to consult with local ranchers. Now, ranchers and rangers are working together to return good fire to the land. They’ve become less suspicious of

# H B O R S

FEATURE BY BRIAN MOCKENHAUPT



**Warner Glenn rides on Steer Mountain in the Malpai Borderlands area of southern Arizona, where ranchers are known for their spirit of cooperation.**

BLAKE GORDON

## *what happens when we don't*

each other and more receptive to common goals.

This shift started two decades ago, when McDonald and many of his fellow ranchers realized they faced more than they could handle on their own: conflict with environmental groups and government agencies; a damaged ecosystem whose management was complicated by a patchwork of private, state and federal land; developers carving out 20-acre ranchettes and subdivisions. In 1994, they formed a land-management coalition called the Malpai Borderlands Group to preserve threatened open space and biological diversity across 800,000 acres. This, they hoped, would enable them to preserve their way of life — an aspiration summed up in the group's guiding ethic: "The land comes first."

It sounds idealistic, but it worked. The members have mediated land and water disputes between ranchers and facilitated conservation easements that kept large ranches from being broken up. They have worked with biologists to protect endangered species, including the New Mexico ridge-nosed rattlesnake and the Chiricahua leopard frog, and started a communal grass bank that allows ranchers facing drought to rotate their cattle onto unused land while their own pastures recover.

"You start with something you agree on instead of something you disagree on," says McDonald, the group's executive director. He received a MacArthur Genius Grant in 1998 for his work, which he describes as seeking "the radical center."

The next morning, McDonald heads 10 miles down the dirt road back toward town to the ranch of Warner Glenn, one of his nearest neighbors, for the Malpai group's quarterly meeting.

The ranch's great room is decorated with cattle skulls, landscape paintings and photographs of mountain lions. About four-dozen mismatched chairs are crowded with an unlikely mix of ranchers, state and federal fish and game officers, Border Patrol agents, conservationists and biologists. For several hours, they update each other on projects and plans. The agenda might be mundane, but the diversity of stakeholders is remarkable. The personal relationships can be as important as anything accomplished at the meetings. Early on, attendees stuck with their own kind — ranchers, law enforcement, scientists clustering together. Now they fall into easy conversation with each other. Peter Warren, who works for The Nature Conservancy in Tucson, sums up the group's appeal this way: "We deal with these problems better as a group than each of us can individually."

The Malpai Borderlands Group has formalized a particular Western trait that has long defined daily life around here. "Neighboring," some call it, a way of giving others their privacy while remaining available in case they need you. The notion captures a kind of frontier ideal, an acceptance of the individual's autonomy and self-reliance, tempered by recognition of the precarious and occasionally dangerous nature of outdoor work and the environment. This basic cooperation has roots far deeper and wide-reaching than these particular ranchers and their ancestors; in fact, it fueled humanity's early success and our continued prosperity as a species. And it's a part of ourselves we would all do well to understand, and even cultivate, as we face an increasingly complicated future.

# Respect. Responsibility. Restraint.

Anthropologist Lee Cronk has found these “Three R’s” to be guiding principles among members of the Malpai Borderlands Group, just as they are among the Maasai.

**EARLY ON A SUMMER EVENING** in Rodeo, New Mexico, along the state’s far southwestern edge, Lee Cronk rattles down a gravel road, trailed by a wispy plume of dust. His hands are not calloused, nor his face creased from endless sun, and both those facts — and his rental car — mark him as an outsider. Cronk is an anthropologist who teaches at Rutgers University in New Jersey, and these sparsely populated mountains and grasslands present him with a vastly different scale of distance and familiarity. Out here, a driveway can be six miles of dirt. “People consider each other neighbors if they’re within a two-hour drive,” Cronk says. Prone to soft speech and studied observation, he is here to talk with ranchers about the risks and hazards they face, and about how they cooperate with each other. It’s a line of questioning he started in Kenya three decades ago.

While interviewing Maasai herdsman about cultural change and family structure, Cronk had learned of *osotua*, a voluntary but fairly formal system of sharing and mutual support. Herdsmen in such relationships are obligated to help each other in times of need. If, say, drought or disease kills half a herdsman’s cattle, goats or sheep — often a family’s sole source of wealth and livelihood — his partner or partners will offer some of their own.

Seeking to understand the dynamic, Cronk asked the Maasai to play a trust game. Two players start with equal pots of money; Player 1 gives some to Player 2, and the amount is multiplied by the

experimenter as an incentive. One dollar becomes three, for example. Player 2, if he chooses, can then give something back. Most exchanges were tit-for-tat: If players received a little, they returned a little — no surprises there. But then Cronk asked a second group of Maasai to play the same game, only now he told them it was based on *osotua*. “If Player 1 gave less, he got a larger proportion of Player 2’s pot in return; if he gave more, he got less. Why would that be?” Cronk says. *Osotua* was literally a game changer. That’s because, under this culture’s norms, a person who’s able to give a lot of money must not need much back. But a person who gives a little must need a lot in return.

The relationships are guided by what Cronk calls the three R’s: Respect, responsibility and restraint. The partners take the relationship very seriously, and they don’t abuse it, asking only for what’s needed. They give without expectation of repayment, knowing that should hard times befall them, their partners will do the same. It is a lifeline, as the meaning of *osotua* suggests: umbilical cord.

“The future is unpredictable, and they live in environments that are marginal,” Cronk says. “They can’t minimize risk completely, so they set up these relationships as a way to pool risk.”

*Osotua* relationships are unique to the Maasai, but the challenges they face aren’t. How, Cronk wondered, do other cultures use sharing to protect against life’s uncertainties?

With Athena Aktipis, an evolutionary biologist and social psychologist at the

University of Arizona, Cronk started the Human Generosity Project to investigate why, and how, people share, and why some people, and cultures, are more generous than others. The project now has eight field sites around the globe: five in Africa, one in the South Pacific, another in Mongolia, and the last here, in southern New Mexico and Arizona, among the Malpai ranchers. That’s why Cronk is here on a summer evening as the sun slips to the hills, sitting at Richard Winkler Jr.’s kitchen table.

Winkler grew up on a nearby ranch and bought this stretch of land in 1995. He often works alone; riding his ranch from end to end takes nearly five hours on horseback across rocky terrain. Poisonous snakes aren’t uncommon. Nor are armed drug and human smugglers crossing from Mexico, just a few miles south. But his daily worries more often involve drought and floods, cattle killed by cougars, fluctuating beef prices and broken equipment. “You’re on edge,” Winkler tells Cronk. “Everything is good today, but the next day there is a list of problems.”

Fellow ranchers have helped him brand cattle and ship them to market, and he’s done the same in return. When Winkler couldn’t get enough water for his cattle in a remote pasture, a neighbor told him to bring the cattle onto his land. He didn’t hesitate to make the offer. “It’s in your best interest to have good neighbors, and to be a good neighbor,” Winkler says. “If you’re in a bind, you can call them.”

McDonald, who lives an hour’s drive

Lee Cronk and Collette Berbesque, below, at a Human Generosity Project field site in Tanzania. Below right, Athena Aktipis with outside the *Osotua Hotel*, a tea shop in the Loita Maasai region of Kenya, named for the system of sharing among the Maasai.

COURTESY HUMAN GENEROSITY PROJECT





**Members of the Malpai Borderlands Group, above, talk during a break in a board meeting last spring, below a painting inspired by the jaguar that Warner Glenn saw in the area in 1996, at the Malpai Ranch in southern Arizona. BLAKE GORDON**

from Winkler, got a sharp reminder of this on Thanksgiving Day, two years ago, when he and a ranch hand rode into the rocky, brush-covered hills behind the ranch to move cattle between pastures. Passing through a gate, McDonald's horse spooked, reared up and flipped over backward. McDonald, who was 61, slammed into the ground, and the horse landed on top of him. The saddle horn shattered his sternum. With a punctured lung, three broken ribs and several cracked vertebrae, he propped himself against a tree and waited for his ranch hand to fetch the pickup. His wife drove him 20-some miles down the bumpy road to a clinic in Douglas, where he was airlifted to Tucson. He spent 10 days in the hospital there and more than two months in a body brace, unable to ride.

News spread fast, within hours — via “the moccasin telegraph,” as Winkler calls it. As McDonald recuperated, several neighbors pitched in to move his cattle. It was more than friendship: Had they been injured, they would have needed the same sort of help. And McDonald would surely have obliged, just like his great-great-grandfather a century ago.

As with the Maasai, this kind of sharing strengthens a person's ability to handle life's unpredictable turns. You give to others, if you are able, partly as a way to mitigate future risk. The natural world abounds with this sort of generosity for the collective good — ant and bee colonies sharing food and work tasks, for instance. At the most basic level, we exist because of cooperation, with the evolution of multicellular organisms that share resources, rather than hog them. Such risk-pooling helped early humans survive in volatile conditions and eventually spread across the globe. “Generosity,” Cronk says, “may be a key to the human success story.”

It makes sense. “Everyone goes out and forages during the day,” Cronk says, “and then they come back and share what they've got, because it's unpredictable who's going to be successful and who's not. But everyone needs something to eat at the end of the day.” If that's the case, though, then why did things change? As societies developed, the acquisition of private property and the creation of organized defense systems, buttressed by formalized support networks that ranged from medieval religious and charitable



**Bill McDonald on his ranch near Douglas, Arizona. After he was crushed by a horse on Thanksgiving Day two years ago, his neighbors chipped in to do ranchwork. COURTESY LEE CRONK**

# *“You don’t have an obligation to help*

anybody who knocks at your door. ... You decide who’s in your network, and then you’re

basically insuring yourself through these network interactions.” Athena Aktipis

## **Cooperating for the common good**

Refuting the inevitability of the “tragedy of the commons,” in which individuals act in their own self-interest and against the best interests of the group, Elinor Ostrom won the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics for her work on successful management of common-pool resources, like fisheries, grazing lands and irrigation water.

Her eight principles for managing a common resource:

- 1** Define clear group boundaries.
- 2** Match rules governing use of common goods to local needs and conditions.
- 3** Ensure that those affected by the rules can participate in modifying them.
- 4** Make sure the rule-making rights of community members are respected by outside authorities.
- 5** Develop a system, carried out by community members, for monitoring members’ behavior.
- 6** Use graduated sanctions for rule violators.
- 7** Provide accessible, low-cost means for dispute resolution.
- 8** Build responsibility for governing the common resource in nested tiers from the lowest level up to the entire interconnected system.

SOURCE: ONTHECOMMONS.ORG



**Elinor Ostrom, who died in 2012, won the Nobel Prize for her work in economics.** JOHN SOMMERS II / REUTERS

institutions to modern government safety nets and insurance, took on much of the risk-mitigation role. With increased wealth, people and communities felt less threatened by uncertainty. That was good for individuals and the species overall, though it also lessened our traditional dependence on communal sharing. And these modern constructs can beguile us with a false sense of insulation from vulnerabilities and upheavals. Cronk and his fellow researchers think that a deeper understanding of why and how we share — and how we can do it more efficiently — can offer us strategies both elemental and novel as we grapple with a stressed ecosystem and impending resource scarcity.

**THE HUMAN GENEROSITY PROJECT** team meets weekly in the psychology department at the Arizona State University, just outside Phoenix, with far-flung members joining by Skype. On a sunny Tuesday morning early in the year, with the desert heat already rising, Aktipis and several graduate students and post-doc fellows gather at a conference table with Cronk, who is visiting from New Jersey. The next day, Aktipis and Cronk will be in San Francisco addressing a global meeting of the Young Presidents’ Organization, a group of chief executives and business leaders.

For this audience, they’ll touch on the modern sharing economy, which is really less about generosity than the utilization of excess resources — perhaps an idle car (Uber), or a spare bedroom (Airbnb). Some airlines use a similar model: If a carrier cancels a flight because of maintenance problems, for example, a competitor might offer open seats at a reasonable pre-determined rate instead of profiting from the last-minute market price. It’s a courtesy that will be repaid when that airline finds itself in similar need.

These are market-based transactions, with specific terms of compensation or reciprocity, but sharing takes many forms. Consider blood donations: We give to people in need, knowing that our contribution might ease suffering, or even save a life, and though we don’t expect any recompense, we know that the life saved might one day be our own. Likewise, fire departments rely on mutual aid: If an emergency overwhelms a department’s resources, neighboring municipalities send help if they can, while municipal water departments often support each other in moments of crisis, hoping to soften the blow of future calamities. We learned this from our ancestors,

the ultimate sharers.

After the Generosity Project meeting, I sit with Aktipis and her colleagues on an outdoor patio at a campus cafe. Aktipis, who is 34 and seems perpetually but happily overextended with research projects, speaks at a rapid clip, as though racing to catch up with her own train of thought. She sees the world around her as endless fodder for experiments, and a meal, it turns out, is an ideal window onto sharing interactions. “If you go to a restaurant with someone, they might pay, and you might get it next time. Or you might offer to split it,” she says. “But that might be awkward. Then you’re saying we’re not really close enough to just trade off or not worry about it. But say you invite someone over to your house. You would be offended if they gave you money for groceries. All these scenarios generate different norms for what will and won’t be transferred, and what will be given in return, or not.”

And that’s just between two people. A server brings Aktipis’ lunch: a bowl of soup and a plate of hummus, with tomatoes, cucumbers, olives and pita bread. “Hundreds of people and transactions are involved in the delivery of this food,” she says, urging me to share her hummus. “It’s just that most of them are invisible.”

The people and transactions in such hyper-complex systems, along with their attendant motivations, norms and outcomes, are difficult to hold in your head all at once. In the not-so-distant past, the people who thought about resources and scarcity came up with heuristics, or rules of thumb, to predict how these systems worked. One of the most familiar is the so-called “tragedy of the commons,” which posits that if herdsmen are given a field to share, they’ll wreck it. Out of self-interest, each will graze as many animals as he can, until the commons has been destroyed. This idea is so simple and so familiar that it’s often taken as a given. And places like Willcox, where individuals have acted contrary to the community’s best interests, seem to validate it. But what if it weren’t a given? What if we could recognize the needs of our fellow shepherd — accept that our own fate is tied up with theirs — and therefore be more generous about the whole thing? Today, the concept may at least be calculable, with computer models that can help us understand how people might act when confronted with different kinds of scarcity. These can help us to better know ourselves — and perhaps act in ways good for both ourselves and the community.

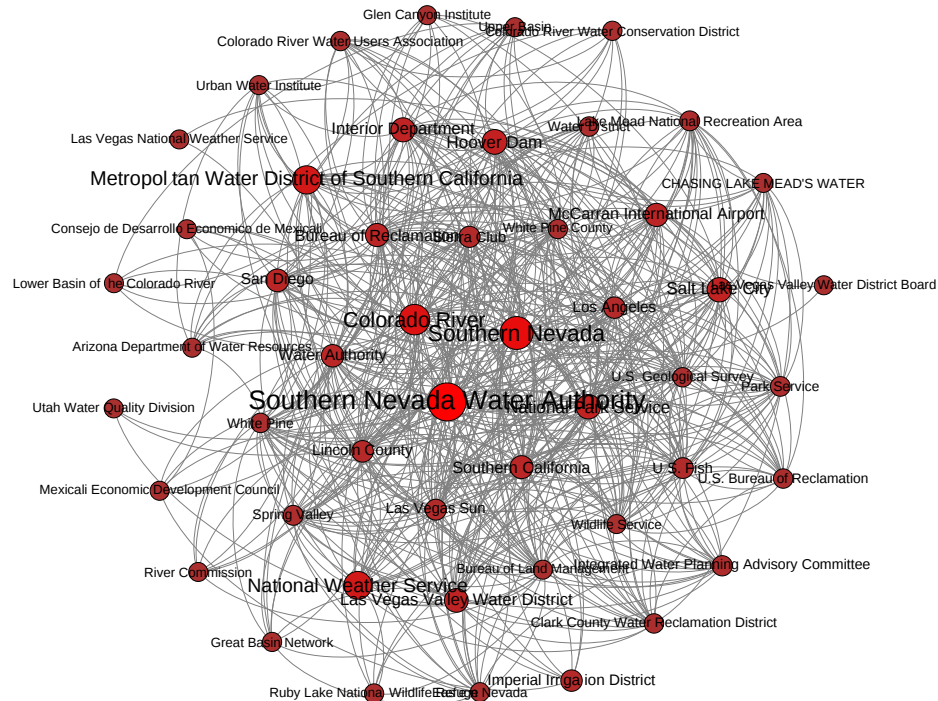
## Making connections

John Murphy, an anthropologist and computational scientist at Argonne National Laboratory outside Chicago, builds elaborate models that explore social and ecological phenomena — in particular, water management. Together with colleagues from several universities, he designed a model of water usage in Tucson, regarding each household as an independent agent with a unique water profile based on price and social factors, such as the willingness to conserve water. These agents are connected to others in the network, much as we're connected to acquaintances through social media, so they can both influence and be influenced by others. If your neighbor replaces her lawn with xeriscaping, for example, you will notice it, and you might follow suit. Or suppose the water department mails out a conservation message: Some households will pitch it, some will adjust their own usage, and some might go further, influencing their network, just as we in the real world might nag coworkers to recycle.

The team validated its model against Tucson's actual water usage over the past two decades, which allows them to project scenarios — not predicting future water availability and use, but offering a planning tool that provides a glimpse of possible outcomes set against adjustments in supply and demand. “The models give us windows that we wouldn't otherwise have,” Murphy says. “What happens *if* ...?”

In future versions, water manager “agents” could adjust prices, negotiate water rights among themselves and collaborate with other managers — or not. What happens if growth exceeds expectations and supplies drop? And what might water rationing or price hikes do to economic growth? The simulation depicts residential water use, but the structure could incorporate myriad factors, including agriculture, which accounts for 70 percent of Arizona’s water usage. Would a price hike for homeowners or water transfers with farmers have a greater impact?

While this model can, of course, be useful to policy makers in Tucson specifically, it offers insight into how these complex systems work in general. As demand and competition for resources increases, such simulations can help us better slice and divvy up a finite pie. Many models have projected supply and demand within the Colorado River Basin and the impacts of drought and climate change, but models like Murphy's look more closely at users within the system, and behavioral responses to variations.



SOURCE: MURPHY, JOHN,  
JONATHAN OZIK, NICHOLSON  
COLLIER, MARK ALTAWHEEL,  
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W6061601

John Murphy and colleagues used data mining of newspaper articles to look at connections between water-management institutions around the West. In the Las Vegas area, Southern Nevada Water Authority got the most mentions, and was perceived as connected to institutions as varied as the Mexicali Economic Development Council and the McCarran International Airport. Once perceived connections are identified, Murphy says, they can be used as a starting point for creating actual networks that could work for the common good. One caveat: Mentions can mean that the institutions either are cooperating, or that they are not.

What would happen, then, if we took these simulations — this weird way of knowing ourselves — and introduced the idea of generosity? What might system-wide sharing look like?

Aktipis and her colleagues have already built a model that charts the health of a community's livestock herds through various shocks and calamities. If you run these through 50 years of increasing volatility, you discover that the ranchers in scenarios governed by *osotua* do better than those without these relationships. Their herds live longer, even as the hardships worsen. And the more partners they have in their sharing network — say, 20 instead of two — the better they do. “If you’re using *osotua* rules, there’s a long tail of survivability,” Aktipis says — a geeky way of saying that generous people are more likely to survive the apocalypse. “If you’re doing better, your partner is doing better.”

Now, Aktipis wants to plug her “agents” of *osotua* into a new model.

The Decision Center for a Desert City, at Arizona State University, studies water sustainability and urban adaptation to climate change. It also runs a model called Water Sim, which is similar to Murphy's Tucson simulation. It projects water supply and demand in the Phoenix metro area, with adjustable variables like groundwater levels, population growth, river flows and conservation programs.

By viewing water use through the lens of *osotua*, Aktipis says, water managers and policymakers might see more

possibilities for cooperation amid unpredictable future supplies and increasing demand. In recent years, managers have made steps in this direction. Phoenix, for instance, now uses some of its excess Colorado River allotment to recharge Tucson's aquifers; that means that if Phoenix faces a shortage in years to come, it can divert some of Tucson's allotment. Testing *osotua*-based scenarios through simulations could help managers tweak their existing systems and forge more sharing relationships, offering them added flexibility and risk mitigation while allowing them to retain their autonomy — something like the ranchers' neighboring, on a very big scale. "You don't have an obligation to help anybody who knocks at your door, crying about how they've had such a hard life," she says. "You decide who's in your network, and then you're basically insuring yourself through these network interactions."

The trick, then, is figuring out how to expand our networks.

**AT OUR MOST INSULAR**, we look out for ourselves, ensuring that our own needs are met first. At our most magnanimous, our generosity and concern can expand across humanity, to, say, disaster victims in foreign lands, because we regard them as part of ourselves and empathize with their obvious need. Everything in between is gradations of tribalism: family, neighbors, church congregations, and the geographical delineations of cities, states and countries. A shared identity

“If everyone would start by thinking, *‘I am part of the community,*  
and I am part of the solution-searching team for my community,’ then that can change  
the mindset from an individualistic way of looking at life to a collective pool of ideas.”

Dennis Sonkoi, Kenyan doctoral student in anthropology, who grew up with the Maasai tradition of sharing



Dennis Sonkoi and Lee Cronk survey the Sonkoi family's herd in eastern Kenya. Sonkoi strives to teach the Masaai traditions to his young daughters, who are growing up in the United States.

COURTESY THE HUMAN  
GENEROSITY PROJECT



Brian Mockenhaupt, a contributing editor at *Outside* magazine, writes from Phoenix, Arizona.

This story was funded with reader donations to the High Country News Research Fund.

often engenders a willingness to give, but while these connections, boundaries and allegiances can facilitate sharing within subgroups, they can just as easily stymie it across systems. The 1922 Colorado River Compact was, after all, an exercise in cooperation, followed by decades of discord.

“It isn’t a question of the personal ethics of the individual so much as it’s the way the map has already been drawn,” Murphy says. “We’ve been handed this situation where there’s a defined ‘us,’ and it’s either us or them, according to that system. These institutional, social and legal architectures end up shaping the decisions that people can make.

“People say they want to be good neighbors,” he adds, but the cultural constraints they’re under “sometimes make that more difficult than they ever intended.”

Dennis Sonkoi, who is working on a doctorate in anthropology at Rutgers under Cronk’s direction, discovered this when he moved to the United States for graduate school. As a boy growing up in eastern Kenya, he and his brothers and often his cousins slept together on one big bed and always shared meals. “We would each be given a spoon, and all eat from

one plate,” he says. “We used sticks when tending the livestock. If a kid would take my stick, I would say ‘OK, you can keep it, but next time, when you don’t need it, I will take it.’ And then I would go out looking for another stick.

“Now I have two daughters,” he says. “When one touches a toy that belongs to the other, ‘Oh, that’s mine, don’t touch it!’ That’s one big challenge I face. How do I make sure that they get to know who they are, get to know that real Maasai lifestyle of not keeping any boundaries between kinship or neighbors?” His neighbors in America still do not engage with each other as freely as people did in Kenya, he says.

But Sonkoi’s first trip to America, in 2004, was different: He visited the Malpai ranchers, who had traveled to Kenya two years before to study Maasai ranching techniques. Among them, he felt surprisingly at home, seeing “that sense of belonging to a group and being there for one another.”

Sonkoi wants to broaden the localized *osotua* concept to help revamp natural resource allocation and management in Kenya, which has become stressed in recent years under the pressure of climate change and population growth.

At the same time, he believes that *osotua* — with its embrace of a shared fate and the need for coordinated action to both safeguard and prosper — can influence resource management in the U.S. Obviously, land management in the American West isn’t as straightforward as two Maasai herdsman pledging to support each other in times of need. But even as our culture shapes our behavior, our collective behavior, in turn, shapes our culture.

“The general concept of *osotua* is in everyone, is innate in human beings, but the environments in which we are brought up shape the ways in which we apply it in life,” Sonkoi says. “If everyone would start by thinking, ‘I am part of the community, and I am part of the solution-searching team for my community,’ then that can change the mindset from an individualistic way of looking at life to a collective pool of ideas.”

Why and how we share may be rooted in biology, but it’s greatly influenced by history, circumstance and perception. And that suggests an opportunity to change behaviors long constrained by inertia.

Which brings us back to Willcox, and the last call for the candy jar. Out here, inertia is the last thing people need, as the ground slowly collapses and wells dry up and residents ponder a waterless future. In Willcox, a sense of collective fate has slowly begun to emerge.

Sharing becomes more complicated as needs become uniform. If everyone faces the same problems, individual needs can trump cooperation or a concern for the collective good; when resources dwindle, our instinct is to grab what we can. But the prospect of drastic, state-imposed regulations or uniform restrictions on future resource uses was enough to shift the existing strategy of bemoaning the problem, yet ignoring it, to something closer to neighboring. Last year, Searle, the county supervisor, helped assemble a group of farmers, cattle ranchers, homeowners and power plant operators to devise a solution. “If our parents had taken care of this, we wouldn’t be at the table right now,” he says. “But it was just as contentious then. The reality is this is Arizona, and we’ve been chasing water since Day One.”

Nevertheless, once the coalition was formed, something surprising happened: People began to acquire a better understanding of their neighbor’s point of view. The structure shifted; the culture changed — just a smidge, true — but the progress is real, even if it’s slow. “There’s an acknowledgement,” Searle says, “that everyone needs to feel a little pain.” □

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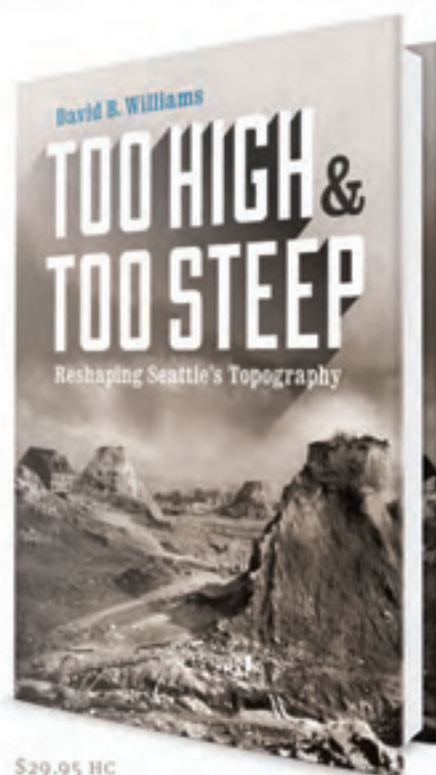
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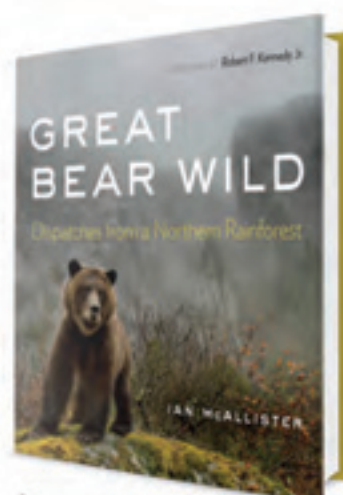
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Vince Anderson and Steve House in the Purcell Wilderness Conservancy, from the documentary *Jumbo Wild*.

CHRISTIAN PONDELLA,  
COURTESY OF PATAGONIA

## Adrenaline junkies get political



OPINION BY  
SARAH JANE  
KELLER

This fall, ski-movie producer Nick Waggoner took the stage in Bozeman, Montana, to tell the audience they were about to see something different. That was no surprise, since Waggoner's Sweetgrass Productions has become known for creative ski flicks. A couple of years ago, his company made an unusually arty film featuring athletes shredding powder in the buff. But there would be no naked people in this film, Waggoner told the audience; this would be a documentary about *land use*.

Called *Jumbo Wild*, its subject was the proposed Jumbo ski resort deep in British Columbia's Purcell Mountains. The Patagonia-backed film ended by asking the audience to sign a petition against the resort. Waggoner told the packed theatre that similar debates are probably happening on nearly every skier's home turf, and he hoped *Jumbo Wild* inspired them to get educated and involved.

It may not seem like a big deal that extreme skiers and environmentalists sat shoulder-to-shoulder to hear that message. But here's why it matters: Adrenaline junkies need to join conservationists in advocating for the lands they love. Fortunately, this is already happening through groups that engage recreationalists in stewardship, groups like the Access Fund, Protect Our Winters, the Surfrider Foundation, and Adventurers and Scientists for Conservation.

Still, the sentiment persists that younger recreationalists, who tend to like things faster and steeper than their elders do, don't care about the land the way their backpacking forebears did. Bozeman-based writer Todd Wilkinson, for example, wrote earlier this year that "Recreation lobbyists are good at getting

young people to demand more trails, but seldom has it resulted in them turning out en masse to reliably defend the integrity of existing wild places."

But there are hopeful signs of a growing conservation movement that should encourage people like Wilkinson. One indicator of this trend within the adventure sports community is the Shift Festival, started in Jackson Hole by *Alpinist Magazine* co-founder Christian Beckwith. Beckwith conceived of Shift to help recreationalists grapple with their impacts on the land and their roles in conservation efforts.

"We're fun hogs, but we almost need an evolution of the tribe," Beckwith said at the festival this fall. "We're coming out of nascency and heading into adulthood, and adulthood is a little bit more responsible."

There was a sense at Shift that recreationalists have a lot of potential to leverage their influence as part of a \$646-billion-a-year industry. They could get more involved in issues such as climate change, the lack of adequate funding for land management agencies, Congress' failure to renew the Land and Water Conservation Fund, destructive efforts to transfer federal lands to state control, and the lack of diversity in the recreation community.

But how do you encourage rugged individualists to feel like they're an integral part of a movement? It turns out that hunters and anglers grappled with this problem 100 years ago.

In the late 1800s, Teddy Roosevelt and his buddies started worrying about the unregulated hunting and trapping that was decimating America's deer, bison, beaver and birds. They devised a credo, the "North American Model for Wildlife Conservation," that continues

to underpin America's uniquely effective wildlife management system. At its heart is the conviction that the public — not wealthy land barons — should own wildlife.

Shift's leaders took inspiration from this model when they recently created a similar set of ground rules for recreationalists called the Principles for Advancing Outdoor Recreation and Conservation. The principles say that while recreationalists need access to well-managed public lands and waters, they also need to take responsibility for the places where they play.

Hunting's history shows that starting with seemingly no-brainer ground rules can lead to huge conservation payoffs. The North American Model provided the philosophical grounding that inspired sportsmen to ask for taxes on hunting and fishing gear, starting in the 1930s. Today, that translates into hundreds of millions of dollars annually for wildlife habitat and management.

The North American Model also continues to shape some hunters' identities as conservation advocates. Last year, hundreds of sportsmen and women assembled on the steps of Montana's State Capitol to tell elected officials that transferring federal lands to state control would be a non-starter. Imagine the impact if even a fraction of the state's mountain bikers, climbers and backcountry skiers had joined them. □

*Former intern Sarah Keller is an adrenaline junkie, hunter and environmental journalist based in Bozeman, Montana.*

Writers on the Range is a syndicated service of High Country News, providing three opinion columns each week to more than 200 media outlets around the West. For more information, contact Betsy Marston, [betsym@hcn.org](mailto:betsym@hcn.org), 970-527-4898.

### WEB EXTRA

To see all the current Writers on the Range columns, and archives, visit HCN's Web site, [hcn.org](http://hcn.org)

## Seven decades of parachuting into wildfires



**Smokejumper: A Memoir by One of America's Most Select Airborne Firefighters**  
Jason A. Ramos and Julian Smith  
233 pages, hardcover: \$24.95.  
William Morrow, 2015.

In *Smokejumper*, veteran firefighter Jason Ramos chronicles the history of the elite group of airborne firefighters who attack blazes in some of the West's most remote and rugged country. Smokejumpers are equipped to handle any situation, in any terrain, at any time, and since 1939, they have battled wildfires from Fairbanks, Alaska, to Silver City, New Mexico. Ramos calls his comrades "the Swiss Army knives of firefighting," justifying that moniker with an array of colorful anecdotes. At the same time, he explains the ecological importance of wildfires, pointing out the natural regenerative role that they play.

Ramos worked his way up the ranks, starting as an adolescent municipal firefighter in California. His knowledge of the firefighting community is impressive, and even after 16 years, he says, "I'm still learning new things all the time."

Smokejumpers have to be tough, and so their rookie training school must be even tougher — comparable to the Navy SEALs program. Despite a serious leg injury, Ramos passed. Ramos' instructor was unsympathetic: "I'm pushing as hard as I can," I said. His answer was brutal in its honesty. "I don't care," he said. "You better pick it up. On a fire it doesn't matter if you're hurt." Ramos eventually parachuted into some of the biggest fires in recent history, including the devastating 2014 Carlton Complex in Washington.

Ramos describes historic fires and



Rookie smokejumpers practice dropping from approximately 35 feet at up to 15 miles per hour on the Let-Down Simulator at the McCall smokejumper base in McCall, Idaho. The system is designed to help smokejumpers learn how to land in rough conditions during fire season.

MATT MILLS MCKNIGHT

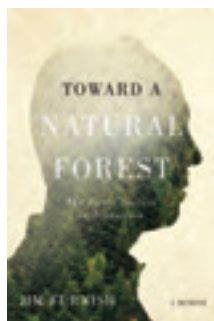
assesses recent beasts, including the 1994 South Canyon Fire, the 2001 Thirtymile Fire, and the 2013 Yarnell Hill Fire, explaining how these turned so deadly and noting the lessons that firefighters learned from them. He jabs at the way bureaucracy often hampers missions; some fire chiefs hesitate to call in jumpers, hoping to save taxpayer dollars. Unfortunately, the problem is larger than local municipalities — Congress doesn't allow the Forest Service to draw on disaster funding outside its normal budget for firefighting, and the agency already spends almost half of its entire budget fighting fires. That takes money away from other

programs, including those that might prevent fires or mitigate their impacts.

While it's clearly an ecological mistake to fight every blaze that erupts, allowing massive fires to burn toward neighborhoods can be deadly. Finding a balance is tricky, and Ramos' narrative will surely spark hearty debate. Even after battling wildfires for nearly two decades, he remains captivated by them: "There's something about fire that touches something deep and hardwired in the human soul. ... There's a reason why the ancients considered fire one of the four elements."

BY BARBARA BASBANES RICHTER

## An agency adrift



**Toward a Natural Forest**  
Jim Furnish  
213 pages, softcover: \$19.95.  
Oregon State University Press, 2015.

Whither the U.S. Forest Service? Jim Furnish, whose 34-year career with the agency culminated in one of the most important public-lands protection measures in the nation's history, has grappled with this question throughout much of his life.

In his engaging new memoir, *Toward a Natural Forest*, Furnish outlines how the Forest Service transitioned from a can-do operation with a clear mission — getting out the cut — to an agency striving, and largely failing, to find new reasons to justify its existence.

He also chronicles his own transformation, from gung-ho young forester to passionate advocate for responsible environmental stewardship.

Furnish portrays an agency that grew increasingly at odds with public sentiment during the 1970s and 1980s, as it outstripped the ecological limits of the land it managed. But those in charge insisted on staying the course. The Forest

Service sold more timber in 1989 — a year racked with litigation and controversy — than in any other year in the agency's history.

Furnish recalls the reaction of Bob Devlin, former director of timber management for the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest region, when he was asked about a statement by Chief Dale Robertson that "clear-cutting is not an appropriate practice in scenic mountainous areas."

"Devlin kind of laughed dismissively," Furnish writes, "as though curing me of my naiveté, and said, 'Those are just policies. They're not really binding.'"

The crash came in 1991, with Judge William Dwyer's decision to protect the northern spotted owl by curtailing logging.

Furnish went on to serve as supervisor of Oregon's Siuslaw National Forest, where he led a transformation from mas-

sive logging to restoration work.

In 1999, then-Forest Service Chief Mike Dombeck made Furnish his deputy chief. Furnish helped implement President Clinton's Roadless Area Conservation Rule, which protected 58 million acres of national forests.

The author, who retired in 2002, implores "my beloved Forest Service" to embrace a new mission, one that allows for modest timber production but recognizes the many other goods, tangible and intangible, provided by national forests.

"We tried the 'timber is king' approach," Furnish concludes, "and it failed." He knows what "primary values" should replace that approach: providing clean water and air, high-quality fish and wildlife habitat and abundant recreation opportunities. That, Furnish says, is a mission that would make the agency proud.

BY MATT RASMUSSEN

# Seward's Fallacy

Call it playing the Alaska card. It's a sure-fire remedy for awkward silences at cocktail parties. Whenever I'm plummeting into a chthonian abyss of social ineptitude, it's my conversational ripcord. Coolly and casually, I mention that I grew up in Alaska.

"You lived in Al-as-ka?"

(My interlocutors invariably lean hard on that second syllable as if to emphasize just how alien "Alaska" feels in one's mouth. Think "Alpha Cen-taur-i" or "Zeta Re-tic-uli." You would never say "Connect-icut" or "Wis-con-sin," would you?)

Alaska is quite possibly the most evocative place-name in the English language. It's the Last Frontier — words emblazoned across the license plates, in case you ever forget. Twice the size of Texas, with a fraction of Texas' pavement, Alaska is the last, vast untamed expanse of ground in the United States. It doesn't hurt the state's image that the world map of choice in most American classrooms is the Mercator projection, which, with its obsessive preservation of right angles and its bias toward the Northern Hemisphere, makes Alaska look bigger than Africa.

Alaska represents romance — the struggle of the individual against the wilderness. It symbolizes the extreme — humans grappling with a hostile environment and deadly wildlife on a daily basis. People desperately want to believe that Alaska, rather than Space, is the Final Frontier. After all, moving to Alaska *is* possible. Getting your hands on your own starship *Enterprise* is another matter. Maybe Frederick Jackson Turner spoke a tad too soon. Maybe the frontier isn't closed just yet; maybe there's still hope.

Too bad it's not true. Not for me, at least. In the urban jungle of downtown Los Angeles, where I misspent my youth, kamikaze motorists and a highly visible and often stentorian homeless population were more conspicuous than any superlatives Mother Nature might serve up.

Yes, Alaska is big. Yes, it's remote. And, yeah, it gets kinda cold sometimes. But the mountains surrounding Denver are just as tall as those encircling Anchorage; Buffalo, New York, gets more snow; and winter temperatures are just as cold in Omaha, Nebraska. And is a three-hour flight from Seattle really that much of an ordeal?

But a little hyperbole — or maybe a lot — is what my listeners yearn for. They want a good story. They want to hear about life on the edge of survival. Above all, they want to believe that life in Alaska — anywhere in Alaska — is fundamentally different from life anywhere else. When people find out I'm from Alaska, I know they have expectations

I can never fulfill. I'm supposed to look like I just walked out of a Jack London novel: battered slouch hat, stained plaid shirt, faded jeans, whiskers so unkempt as to be likely inhabited. I'm supposed to reminisce about the Gold Rush whilst pensively stroking my muttonchops: "Yep, back in the winter of '89, me 'n' ol' Jack McGrew were comin' down the Chilkoot Trail. ..."

So my social triumphs are inevitably short-lived. It won't take you five minutes to realize Jon Krakauer is never going to write a book about anything I've done. The statement "I grew up in Alaska" is literally true when I say it, but it feels like a lie, or at least an exaggeration. It sounds like I'm bragging: "I grew up in the wilderness."

To be honest, I always found the Alaskan wilderness rather, well ... scary.

Take bears, for instance. Many people go to Alaska with the express intent of having an ursine encounter. I'd rather get beamed up by cattle-prod-wielding aliens. Grizzlies accomplish in real life what hook-handed, hockey-masked psychopaths can only pull off with Hollywood special effects. Now that humanity has more or less gotten impaling, flaying and

divers other gory diversions out of its system, a bear-mauling is about the only way a body can manage to get disemboweled alive.

Most people think of the wilderness as a place to see natural wonders, relax and rejuvenate. I find it difficult to relax when I know that big, furry natural wonders might be hungry.

Yet I do love the outdoors. A bike trail runs from downtown Anchorage to the south edge of the city, offering breathtaking views from cliffs rising high above the ocean. Some of my fondest childhood memories are of riding down that trail — exulting in the snowy grandeur of Mount Susitna, the craggy bluffs of Point Campbell and Point Woronzof, the summer sun shimmering on the silvery waters of Cook Inlet. While gulls screeched and sandpipers warbled around me, I'd breathe in the musky fragrance of the devil's club, the pungent scent of Sitka spruce and the bitter brine of the sea.

Go ahead and call it Nature Lite. It worked for me.

And I got to keep my intestines.

*James Thompson lives in southwestern Idaho, in constant terror of mountain lions.*

**Kids deliberate ice cream options from Bob Hickey's Alaskan Polar Bear Ice Cream truck parked at Goose Lake in Anchorage, Alaska.** LOREN HOLMES/ALASKA DISPATCH NEWS





## HEARD AROUND THE WEST | BY BETSY MARSTON

## ARIZONA

**You might say that Paul Armand Rater, 53,** showed extraordinary faith in his 5-year-old granddaughter when he left her alone, sitting under a tree in the desert near Phoenix with only a loaded pistol in her hand. Meanwhile, he “went for a few drinks and a cheeseburger,” reports *The Guardian*. “She was given the gun and told to shoot any bad guys,” said Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio. “I don’t know how a 5-year-old can tell a good guy from a bad guy, but that’s what she was told.” Over four hours later, after the child was reported missing, she was found by her mother and an off-duty firefighter, still holding the loaded and cocked .45-caliber handgun. Grandpa Rater, charged with felony child abuse and child endangerment, appeared to think he had a perfectly good explanation for his bizarre behavior. He told the court that he left the little girl behind because his pickup had broken down “and she was complaining she could not walk any more.”

## THE NATION

**Capturing perfectly the jargon** of that venerable institution the U.S. Forest Service, the satirical publication *The Onion* recently wrote about a faux study that called for setting controlled wildfires in Washington, D.C., because they are “crucial to the restoration of a healthy political environment.” Every federal agency needs a regular clear-cutting, researchers explained, and though urban blazes aren’t entirely safe, without them government would become “dense, overrun and impenetrable, stifling political diversity and inhibiting the germination of new ideas.” Suppression, they added, would only cause permanent damage to the government’s branches.

## ARIZONA

**The Grand Canyon has become** “the largest Venus-flytrap in the world,” says Marjorie “Slim” Woodruff, a longtime educator who works at the bottom of the canyon. That’s because rescuers there answer over 300 calls for help every



UTAH Gate to nowhere ... GREG WOODALL

year — the most search-and-rescue incidents at any national park — at a cost of some \$500,000. Of course, most tourists plucked from danger are enormously grateful when SAR folks arrive to save the day. But a 36-year-old woman from the small town of Ilton, England, turned an hour-long rescue operation in November into a thoroughly unpleasant ordeal. Charmaine Isaacs, who’d had six to eight drinks that night, apparently slid off the side of the Bright Angel Trailhead at 11 p.m., and after finding purchase on a ledge, she began screaming for help. Yet when 15 rescuers arrived — with some rappelling off the rim to find her and hoist her back up — she scrambled away, reports the *Phoenix New Times*. Not only that, she greeted her saviors by cursing, spitting in the face of one and calling another “an ugly lesbian.” “She was uncooperative throughout,” said acting chief ranger Matthew Vandzura, putting it mildly. More specifically, he concluded that Isaacs was “drunk and belligerent.” Charged with public drunkenness and suspicion of disorderly conduct, Isaacs spent the rest of the night in jail.

## NEW MEXICO

**Backcountry skiers fond of skiing on fresh powder** through a forest had the unconscionable gall to secretly chop down more than 1,000 trees in the

Santa Fe National Forest. Somehow, they eluded detection for four years while they felled spruce and fir to create a dozen or more outlaw ski runs, reports the *Albuquerque Tribune*. Mike Gardiner, the forest’s assistant special agent in charge of law enforcement, called the perpetrators “criminals” whose vandalism at 10,000 feet will cause erosion down the watershed, harm wildlife and increase fire risk. “It’s not their property to do what they want to do,” Gardiner said. “It’s public land, and it’s public land for a reason.” The agency did not detect the downed trees; a hiker found the illegal trails in October and reported them to the Forest Service. Whoever is responsible could face six months in jail or fines up to \$6,000. The Forest Service is offering a \$5,000 reward to anyone giving information that leads to an arrest and conviction.

## UTAH

**It’s not looking hunky-dory** for Phil Lyman, the San Juan County commissioner who led a group of gung-ho ATVers — some fresh from the Cliven Bundy standoff in Nevada — on a protest ride into Recapture Canyon last May. Afterward, Lyman told a federal judge that the Bureau of Land Management had no legal right to close the area to protect archaeological treasures. In November, that argument failed in court again, though not until several judges had to recuse themselves. Unless he pulls some kind of rabbit out of his hat, Lyman, who was named “commissioner of the year” by the Utah Association of Counties, will be sentenced Dec. 18 on federal misdemeanor charges of conspiracy and driving on lands closed to motorized vehicles. The sentence, reports the *Salt Lake Tribune*, could be a \$100,000 fine and up to a year in prison.

**WEB EXTRA** For more from Heard around the West, see [hcn.org](http://hcn.org).

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write [betsym@hcn.org](mailto:betsym@hcn.org) or tag photos [#heardaroundthewest](https://www.instagram.com/heardaroundthewest) on Instagram.



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“While many officials ... have begun taking bikes into account, other transportation officials **haven’t a clue** what the biking experience is all about.”

Tim Hauserman, in his essay, “Can roads designed for cars be safe for bikes?” from *Writers on the Range*, [hcn.org/wotr](http://hcn.org/wotr)