

High Country News



WHEN MIGRANTS GO MISSING

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Meet the western
bumblebee

Suddenly roadless
in Denali

California's
sponge cities

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A wolf walks on Denali Park Road as the sun begins to set in Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska, in 2017. A landslide shut down a section of the road in 2021, and scientists are studying how the unexpected closure has affected the local ecosystem. **Emily Mesner**

Know the West.

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Risky business

I ONCE WORKED IN A BUILDING that was located next to a former fuel storage site — a boarded-up property encircled by a chain-link fence. My office was on the first floor, and there was underground parking, where walls of poured concrete had wide pipes running along them. In time, I learned that those pipes were part of a ventilation system designed to remove pollutants seeping upward from a plume of toxic material that had traveled underground from the neighboring site. I contacted the state Air Resources Board to learn more and was sent several reports: thick packets containing a lot of very complex information. There were chemical compound illustrations for several pollutants, including benzene, a known carcinogen. I wondered if the building could make me sick.

But I needed the job, so I kept my head down and hoped that the government regulations were stringent enough, and that the Air Resources Board was enforcing them. I sometimes saw people taking samples from test wells along the fence between the two properties. The truth is, we all rely on public officials to keep us safe. And yet, the degree of protection they provide can, and does, shift with the predilections of our elected officials, including the judiciary. I often wonder why the need for clean air, clean water and healthy ecosystems isn't apparent to everyone. And why prioritizing their protection — for humans and other species — isn't a given.

But it isn't. My experience with that workplace is repeated in countless communities on a variety of scales. Which is why I was not totally surprised to learn about the massive, aging and not-terribly earthquake-proof oil storage site that lies within the city limits of Portland, Oregon. Located along a six-mile stretch of the Willamette River, Portland's Critical Energy Infrastructure Hub, where 330 million gallons of petrochemicals are stored in 630 tanks, is the textbook definition of a disaster waiting to happen. In "The big spill" (*page 7*), you'll read about how this site was exempted from meeting the city's updated seismic standards, and how the city continues to increase both the amount and variety of dangerous fuels allowed to be stored there. A few miles downriver, the Willamette flows into the Columbia and then out to sea. A big spill would cause untold damage. Irresponsibly regulated infrastructure shouldn't be the stuff of nightmares — in the West or anywhere else.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief



Pox Young / HCN

When the dams come down, what happens to barge traffic?

Farmers and transportation experts are figuring out how to transport goods if the Lower Snake River dams are removed.



Alessandra Puig-Santana / NPS

Hiking in the heat

A conversation with the head of the Preventative Search and Rescue program in Joshua Tree National Park.



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ON THE COVER

The early morning sun shines through the Sonoran Desert landscape near the U.S.-Mexico border in southern Arizona. According to the International Organization for Migration, the U.S.-Mexico border is the deadliest land route for migrants in the world.

Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN

Earth-moving equipment excavates a pit at the land art installation known as *City*.
© Michael Heizer. Courtesy of Triple Aught Foundation.
Mary Shanahan



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LETTERS

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

MENDING THE NET

Great article (“After the Floods,” August 2024). Community Alliance with Family Farms has been fighting for years to reform the farm safety net as climate disasters intensify and inequities persist. CAFF has had some success, like \$17.9 million preserved last month in the state budget, but there’s still so much work to be done.

@famfarms on X (formerly known as Twitter)

WE’RE THE PROBLEM

Ruxandra Guidi did a nice job of bringing together terms and perspectives of climate change in “After despair comes repair” (August 2024). Personally, my vote is for “Anthropocene,” a well-used term that says it all. It’s us. Definitely. This wouldn’t be happening without us humans and our perpetual capital growth model, which literally encourages population growth to constantly increase the number of customers who spend money on stuff. In just the last century and a half, we’ve managed to overrun our own planet, driven largely by this greed at the corporate level, squeezing out wildlife in the process.

Julie Smith
Golden, Colorado

CHEAPSKATE UTILITIES, DEADBEAT DAMS

Thank you for daylighting the liability reduction tactics of our utilities here in the West (“Electrical utilities don’t want to get burned,” July 2024).

Electric utilities often seek to reduce the financial risk exposure for aging hydropower dams, just as they do for the impacts of wildfires caused by

We need to insist that lawmakers and regulators hold utilities accountable for the risks they have created.

transmission lines.

In California, Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) recently attempted to offload 22 hydropower projects, including 62 powerhouses, 97 reservoirs, 72 diversions, 167 dams and 400 miles of water conveyance systems, on to a nascent subsidiary. These projects carry billions of dollars in estimated deferred maintenance costs and significant liability should a dam or spillway fail. If the conservation community had not raised the alarm, PG&E might have been allowed to transfer responsibil-

ity to an entity with an uncertain ability to fund necessary maintenance — and been rewarded by Wall Street for doing it.

Meanwhile, an increasing amount of cheap solar energy is making small baseload hydroplants less economically viable. As that hydropower infrastructure continues to deteriorate and energy market economics are reshuffled, we find ourselves at a critical point in history where the public can decide that the impacts to our rivers — and the risks to downstream communities — are too great. We need to insist that lawmakers and regulators hold utilities accountable for the risks they have created and not allow the costs of these deadbeat dams to be borne by the rate-paying public.

Clinton Begley
Executive director, American Whitewater

MEETING A GENIUS

I’m mad because I have a bachelor’s in fine arts in photography from the University of New Mexico, and this is the first time I heard about Louis Carlos Bernál, “The Father of Chicano Art Photography” (July 2024). I’ve been cheated. Love his work!

Amanda Page on Instagram

WHY SITES BITES

Theo Whitcomb’s article about Sites Reservoir in Northern California minimized opposition to the dam (“In an era of dam removal, California is building more,” hcn.org, July 12, 2024). Setting aside concerns about threatened species and the inundation of species-specific habitat that every dam creates, Sites is of concern because it is a wide shallow reservoir subject to nontypical evaporative loss. Sites will require a massive diversion of stored water from the Sacramento River for its

initial fill. This requires the construction of *several* enormous dams and two 3,000-foot-long and 23-foot-wide tunnels for water to be pumped into and out of, to the tune of an estimated \$4.4 billion.

Although the reservoir aims to capture large volumes of floodwater from major storms and store it as a buffer against drought, its startup and operations rob the river of water and harm grasslands habitat, salmon fisheries and overall river health. All this while increasing the state’s storage capacity by a mere 3.5%.

There is a reason a broad spectrum of environmentalists, sport fishing, Indigenous tribes and climate advocacy groups oppose Sites.

Roxanne Moger
Sacramento, California

KNOW YOUR HISTORY

I have lived in Olympia, Washington, which borders on the north with Lewis County, for 50 years. I usually look forward to my drive south on I-5 to see what the latest Hamilton Billboard says. It has been a bit boring and repetitive lately. I have even agreed with some past sentiments, such as skepticism about the Patriot Act. There was even the time the billboard proclaimed “Get us Out of Vietnam” for a few hours. Presumably it had read “Get us Out of the UN” the evening before.

I have picked up knowledge of the events of 1919 and the IWW from living next door to this community. “The Tragedy of Centralia” (June 2024) provided a depth of information of events and people in Centralia, past and present, which I found important to know as someone who lives nearby.

Cathy Wiggins
Olympia, Washington



REPORTAGE

The big spill

In Portland, a major earthquake would trigger a catastrophic oil spill. Locals are trying to fix that.

BY ISOBEL WHITCOMB

LINTON, OREGON, is never quiet. Freight trains clank through the outer-Portland neighborhood, past the community center, a bar, a daycare, mobile homes and farmhouses with boarded-up windows. The Willamette River lies north; southward, the streets climb tree-covered hills. Each train is marked with a different number: 1971 is liquefied natural gas; 1202 is diesel; 1999, tar. They carry petroleum products to Portland's Critical Energy Infrastructure (CEI) Hub, a series of tanks and pipelines at the edge of Linnton that stretch six miles up the Willamette toward downtown Portland.

The tanks, which store 90% of Oregon's liquid fuel and all

the jet fuel used by Portland International Airport, were built in the 1950s — well before scientists knew about the magnitude 9 earthquake overdue to hit the Pacific Northwest. By the mid-1990s, the city implemented new seismic standards, but older, less-sound structures, like the tanks at the CEI Hub, were exempted. Scientists at the U.S. Geological Survey predict that the Cascadia Subduction Zone Earthquake has a 37% likelihood of happening in the next 50 years. A 2022 report projects that when that occurs, the CEI Hub could dump up to 193.7 million gallons of oil into the Willamette, a disaster on par with the Deepwater Horizon spill.

"This is in the middle of a town," said Linnton activist Sarah Taylor. "There are no ways to escape. We will be trapped."

Experts say the CEI Hub is the most vulnerable site in a region already woefully underprepared for "the really big one." Despite those risks, the city of Portland has doubled down on expanding fossil fuel infrastructure at the hub. Activists like Taylor are resisting these efforts at expansion — and are advocating for policies to safeguard the river and surrounding communities from what could be the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history.

While the CEI Hub appears to stand on solid ground, that won't be true during a magnitude 9

earthquake, said Yumei Wang, an expert in disaster preparedness and infrastructure at Portland State University. The ground beneath the tanks is a liquefaction zone, meaning the soil tends to liquefy during powerful quakes. The tanks could sink into the ground, tilt or slide into the river. Some tanks are made of metal so flimsy that an earthquake would likely "rip them apart," Wang said. The lids, which float on the surface of the tanks' liquid contents, would rub against the containers, creating sparks and igniting nearby brush.

Wildfires and toxic gas would then spread through Linnton. Oil would float downriver to the Columbia and the Pacific, coating the fur of river otters and the feathers of cormorants. "It would kill the Lower Columbia Estuaries," said Kate Murphy, senior community organizer at the nonprofit Columbia Waterkeeper. "It's unthinkable."

No first responders would be available, either — no Hazmat team, firefighters or medics. "Roads and docks won't be accessible," said Jay Wilson, resilience coordinator for disaster management in Clackamas County, which borders the city of Portland. "That oil spill could actually last longer than the earthquake recovery. And we need to address it."

Engineers and advocates, including Wilson and Wang, have been sounding the alarm on the CEI Hub since 2011, a few years after Wang began work on a report flagging it as the Oregon energy sector's greatest seismic hazard. In the late 2010s, amid increasing concern about earthquake risk and climate change,

Storage tanks in the Critical Energy Infrastructure Hub of Linnton, Oregon, along the Willamette River.
Ken Hawkins / Alamy

the city of Portland passed a resolution opposing the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure. A year later, Multnomah County, which encompasses most of Portland, adopted a similar resolution.

Since then, three other reports authored by Portland State University researchers, a policy research group and a state commission have recommended paying greater attention to seismic risk at the hub. The most recent, released in 2022, categorized it as “a major threat to safety, environment, and recovery” and pointed out that taxpayers would likely have to pay for its recovery.

But around the same time that local and state municipalities committed to phasing out fossil fuel infrastructure, a newcomer arrived on the scene: Zenith Energy, a Texas-based fuel storage company. Locals noticed an uptick in the number of oil trains running through their neighborhoods. In 2021, following years of local activism, Portland denied Zenith the land use compatibility statement it

needed to continue operations, citing the city’s climate objectives. But the next year, after extensive closed-door lobbying from Zenith, the city approved five more years of oil storage. (A city auditor later ruled that Zenith’s lobbying violated city regulations.) And since then, Portland has doubled down on expanding Zenith’s activities, approving three new pipelines.

From the city’s perspective, the pivot to biofuels still satisfies its commitment to phase out fossil fuels. “This decision is a strong signal to industry that Portland will work with partners toward cleaner air and less dependence on fossil fuels,” City Commissioner Dan Ryan told the press in 2022. But activists believe Portland is backpedaling on its previous commitments. Magan Reed, information officer for the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, did not comment on this apparent contradiction but noted that the city is working with various partners to address seismic safety issues. In contrast,

Jan Zuckerman, a member of Extinction Rebellion, sees no difference between the harm caused by biofuels and fossil fuels: Both release carbon into the atmosphere and could potentially pollute the river and surrounding communities. To prevent that outcome, she added, “we have to attack from every angle.”

Change is beginning to take place. In 2022, the Oregon Legislature passed Senate Bill 1567, which requires operators of bulk oils and liquid fuel terminals to commission their own seismic vulnerability assessments and develop risk mitigation plans within the next few years.

Activists are also pressuring the city to do more. Zenith still needs an air-quality permit from Oregon’s Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). Activists have urged the DEQ to deny it and are already mobilizing for the public comment period once the DEQ makes its decision.

But Taylor, who lives in Linnton, sees this focus as too narrow. “There’s all kinds of tanks

down here, not just Zenith,” she said. Taylor wants the state to implement a zoning code ensuring that future development on industrial and residential zones promotes a healthy environment and quality of life. Activists who call themselves “Risky Business” are working with Multnomah County to implement risk bonds, a mechanism that guarantees that companies at the Hub have adequate insurance and mandatory trust funds to compensate the public in the event of a disaster.

Last April, 48 neighborhood associations and 36 environmental and faith-based organizations submitted a letter to public officials, including Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek, D, and the DEQ, urging them to take action. Locals gathered at Augustana Lutheran Church, one of the letter’s signatories, to demand new information campaigns on the dangers posed by the CEI Hub, legislation requiring companies to assume full financial responsibility for accidents, and a new plan for fuel storage. They held signs identifying their neighborhoods: Cully, Woodstock, Lloyd — and Linnton. Speakers expressed their anger and fear, among them Wilson, the Clackamas County disaster coordinator. “The clock continues to tick,” he said. “We cannot stop the earthquake, but we can minimize or prevent catastrophe.” ☀

Isobel Whitcomb is an award-winning journalist based in Portland, Oregon. Their work covering environmental justice and conservation appears in Sierra Magazine, Scientific American, Atmos Magazine and more. @IsobelWhitcomb



At Portland, Oregon's Cathedral Park in 2022, kayakers protest Zenith Energy's oil terminal operations in the CEI Hub. **Alex Milan Tracy**



Phil Rigdon, Corinne Sams and Shannon Wheeler (from left).

Q&A

THERE WAS A time you could catch tons of salmon in a single day at Kettle Falls, a series of pools cascading into each other on the Columbia River in northern Washington. That was before the U.S. government built Grand Coulee Dam in 1942. After 82 years, in June of this year, the Department of Interior published *Historic and Ongoing Impacts of Federal Dams on the Columbia River Basin Tribes*, an analysis that explores how 11 hydropower dams on the mainstem Columbia, Snake and North Fork Clearwater rivers have hurt Indigenous economies, cultures, spiritual practices, environments and health. Those historic and ongoing harms include the destruction of important cultural sites like Kettle, as well as Celilo Falls, another ancient fishery that was also a magnificent internation-

What tribal leaders think about Interior's dams report

The federal government has acknowledged the harms of Columbia River dams. Now what?

BY B. 'TOASTIE' OASTER
ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN CROW

al marketplace. Dams are also famously driving the basin's salmon stocks toward extinction. "Of sixteen once existing salmonid stocks, four have been

extirpated — Mid-Columbia River Coho, Mid-Columbia River Sockeye, Upper Columbia River Coho, and Snake River Coho," the report reads. All but five of

the remaining stocks are now endangered or threatened.

Indigenous people have long known about the damage dams cause, but to hear the federal government admit it is another thing. *HCN* spoke to Shannon Wheeler, chair of the Nez Perce Tribe; Phil Rigdon, superintendent of the Natural Resources Department at the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation; and Corinne Sams, who's on the board of trustees for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and is also chair of the Umatilla Fish and Wildlife Commission and the tribal nation's representative at the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission. Here's what they have to say about Interior's report.

These conversations have been edited for brevity and clarity.

What was tribal involvement in creating the Interior Department's report?

Shannon Wheeler: We are the ones that submitted (it) to them. We had already completed this in the 1990s. We revamped it and gave them the newest version over the past eight months, and that's what they have been working (from).

Corinne Sams: We've always been heavily engaged with the Department of Interior, along with the recent Columbia Basin Restoration Initiative, which is now being called the Resilient Columbia Basin Agreement, with the United States government. That was solidified in January of this year. Over the last three years, Umatilla Tribe and our staff have worked vigorously to ensure that the United States government understands the impacts and the losses that have occurred to salmon and other anadromous fish within the Columbia and Snake Basin. So we've played an enormous role.

Phil Rigdon: The Department of Interior came, and we did a consultation with the federal government on (the report). Our leadership expressed concerns (about) the impacts that the dams have had on our salmon, lamprey, sturgeon and fish species, but also the knowledge of our connection to the Columbia River. Our lives have changed forever, ever since those (dams) were in. But we continue to advocate and go fish and continue to practice our culture and our way of life. This report comes out in a manner that highlights a lot of broken promises to our people, but we continue to push and advocate on behalf of resources that we hope will be returned back to the levels they should be.

Is there anything you think the report gets wrong or leaves out?

SW: No.

CS: No. This is the first time the federal government has ever recognized the true impacts to our people and to our ecosystem in regard to hydro systems, so we're very optimistic and encourage individuals to read the report, to become informed. Because our ultimate goal is to decarbonize and replace the energy sector, which will eventually, hopefully, replace those hydro systems. We recognize that this isn't only about fish. We have several other interests in the basin: transportation, recreation, irrigation. All of those components are important, and we don't want to leave one out. We're really pushing for everybody within the basin to remain whole.

PR: These reports are important. But sometimes (it's) tough to understand the heart of it. Our people are still down (there) fishing right now. Our people continue to carry our way. But the report is an important step into highlighting those things that we consider problematic over the history of the dams.

What kinds of federal actions do you want to see based on this report?

SW: Consideration for breaching of the four Lower Snake River dams.

CS: There's a billion-dollar backlog on infrastructure and hatchery maintenance, and we utilize those hatcheries as mitigation fish, for the loss of the abundant natural runs. But our ultimate goal is to get our natural runs back to healthy and harvestable levels. We've done a

significant amount of work and have been co-managing these resources (with government agencies) for decades, but the tribes have been managing these resources for millennia. This isn't just a tribal effort. This is for all Americans that live within the basin.

PR: There's Bateman Island Causeway down at the mouth of the Yakima (River) that causes the thermal block that causes enormous problems for juvenile and adult fish migration up to the Yakima Basin. The small things really need to be invested in and done now. Some of these things that have been a problem for a long time are critical. And then to look at the big things, like the Lower Snake River dams, and really come up with solutions. But we also believe it can't be like it was for us. We can't leave people behind in the manner that we were left behind, putting the dams in for the energy development. There is a balance here that needs to be achieved through what these reports do, but also what we're trying to do as a people.

Do you think any federal action hinges on Democrats winning the upcoming presidential election?

SW: Tribal nations across the country have all had impacts one way or another regardless of what type of administration is in. But I also believe that this administration understands that there's impacts that the United States has had on its people.

CS: Absolutely. If we see a shift in administration, all of these agreements, all of these reports, become uncertain.

PR: I think it's not important.

Republicans fish, and Democrats fish, too. We need to come together to find solutions. I don't think we should make it all dependent on who wins an election, but we should be thinking about how we solve long-term problems. The polarization that you see is sad, in a lot of ways, because I don't think we're getting to the right conversations. I don't think we want to go political. I have red-state Republicans advocating for our work in the Yakima. That's unique because of our partnerships, but also how we're trying to build trust within our local communities. We're from rural communities, rural America, tribal people. Sometimes we're less concerned about the politics. We're thankful for the Biden administration and the leadership they're showing in doing these studies. I don't want to discount that at all. But we want to make sure it's not dependent upon who gets elected, but that we continue moving forward as a people.

Do you think there's a path here to bringing back Celilo Falls?

CS: When they inundated Celilo Falls, several years after that they did sonograms. And they say the falls are still under there. I think deep in our hearts we always hope to see the return of that fishery, that place. Our ancestors and our old people talk about just the sound alone, the sound of those falls. They miss that sound.

PR: I would love to see that. I don't want to get our hopes up, either. ☀

B. "Toastie" Oaster (Choctaw) is an award-winning Indigenous affairs journalist and a staff writer for High Country News who writes from the Pacific Northwest. @toastie@journahost



REPORTAGE

Immigrant influencers

With xenophobia on the rise, Venezuelans in the West use social media to counter negative stereotypes.

BY ANTHONY J. WALLACE
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
FABIANA MARGARITA MARIN

PATRICIA QUIÑÓNEZ understands persecution.

She was a journalist in Venezuela when dictator Nicolás Maduro rose to power in the 2010s, imprisoning critics and attacking the free press. After she took to the streets to protest, the National Guard raided her apartment building. Her newspaper began to fail after a century of operation. In 2016, Quiñónez, her husband and their infant son fled for Utah and were granted political asylum.

Neither spoke English; they had no car or bed. They needed practical assistance: “How to get medical insurance, what tourist sites to visit, how to get your driver’s license — so many everyday questions and there was no one to answer them,” Quiñónez said in an interview conducted in Spanish. “So we opened Utahzolanos.”

Quiñónez, 47, now runs Utahzolanos, an Instagram account with a quarter-million followers that caters to Utah’s rapidly growing Venezuelan community. Its mission is simply

to help newcomers, but recently, it’s attracted hateful messages, even death threats.

“(In Venezuela) we felt persecuted for our political thoughts,” she said. Now, she feels attacked for her nationality.

Anti-immigration sentiment has risen sharply in the U.S. since 2020. And Venezuelans — whose numbers have more than tripled in the U.S. since 2010, with nearly 40,000 arriving in September 2023 alone — are a particular target. In a tense election year, spurred by negativity-boosting algorithms, Venezuelans are blamed for crime and unchecked migration on social media, in political speeches and in the news. Quiñónez, like other Venezuelan content creators and media figures, now finds herself fighting xenophobia in her new home. On Utahzolanos, she regularly posts local Venezuelans’ achievements — entrepreneurs opening arepa restaurants, teenagers earning college scholarships — but she wonders if it’s enough to balance out the rampant negativity.



"It hurts us a lot every time people say that anything bad that happens in the United States is because of us," she said.

ONE-FIFTH OF Venezuela's population has fled the country in the last decade. Venezuela's political and economic crisis — its GDP has shrunk by 75% — has sparked a mass exodus unprecedented in recent Latin America history. In the Spanish-speaking world, Venezuelans are widely regarded as dangerous and prone to crime — a stereotype exacerbated by an outbreak of violence and crime in the country amid critical food and medicine shortages. Quiñónez is used to getting nasty messages in Spanish, accusing her of encouraging violent Venezuelans to migrate, with most of the negativity coming from the Latino community itself. In Latin America, this xenophobia only pushes Venezuelans to move again, including to the United States.

But data shows that Venezuelans living abroad are significantly underrepresented in prisons and indictments, indicating that the viral Venezuelan crime stories are not representative of the wider population. Utah's migrant population has ballooned since 2021, for example, yet Salt Lake City has seen crime drop. Nonetheless, as the number of Venezuelans in the U.S. approaches 1 million

— with Salt Lake City, Los Angeles and Denver among their top destinations — that dark, erroneous image of Venezuelans is reaching English speakers in Quiñónez's new home.

In February, the highly publicized killing of Laken Riley in Georgia was attributed to — in President Joe Biden's words — "an illegal" from Venezuela. Fox News headlines and Elon Musk's posts warned of "bloodthirsty" and "violent" Venezuelans crossing our border. In March, a Venezuelan TikTokker living in Ohio garnered nearly 4 million views for a video in which he encouraged other migrants to squat in unoccupied homes. After another murder, allegedly by two Venezuelan migrants in Houston in June, Donald Trump said the killers "came across our border, claiming they feared for

their lives in Venezuela," but that crime was actually down in Venezuela because they'd sent their "criminals, drug dealers, and most of the people in their jails" to the United States.

"It's been a tactic of anti-immigrant groups to single out isolated events (and) to portray the entire group as something negative," said Germán Cadenas, who is Venezuelan himself and an associate professor who researches immigrant psychology at Rutgers University.

Xenophobia spreads easily online, according to Steven L. Johnson, who studies social media at the University of Virginia. The major platforms boost "content that people are going to be really excited about, really angry about, really concerned or fearful (over)." So videos of immigrants, whether they're accused of wrongdoing or simply sharing their experience, will get offered to people likely to comment on them, however hatefully.

Few Americans can readily distinguish between a Venezuelan and another person of Latin American descent. Online, however, some connect media horror stories to people like the Venezuelans that Utahzolanos features. On a post profiling Alexander Muñoz, a recent arrival who's taken up skiing and works as a bus driver, one comment in English stated: "Go back to your country. ...

We don't like you here."

Such comments threaten more than Muñoz's feelings: His three kids, still in Venezuela, excitedly watch all his videos, and he worries the rising anti-immigrant sentiment could "close some doors" for them to join him.

In May, after a Venezuelan family went to a rural Montana sheriff's office when the local homeless shelter was full, local Republican officials called for their deportation. If Trump is elected this November, Republicans plan to use military force to "seal" the border and "carry out the largest deportation operation in American history." Recently, the Biden administration toughened its own asylum process and urged Mexico to prevent migrants from reaching America's Southern border. The number of Venezuelans reaching the U.S. and encountering Border Patrol agents in the first six months of 2024 is less than half of what it was during the last six months of 2023.

LAURA CRISTINA DIB, Venezuela program director at the Washington Office on Latin America, said that simple facts can help counter xenophobic tropes. One such fact is that immigrants are extraordinarily entrepreneurial, starting new businesses in the U.S. at twice the rate of naturalized citizens in 2023.

Quiñónez and her husband have built Utahzolanos into their "full-time passion and job," generating enough advertising revenue to buy a home and car. Despite the negativity, she believes passionately in the American Dream.

"This country continues to be the great country of opportunities," she said.

Much like Quiñónez, Yordana Bolaños, a 34-year-old Venezuelan who lived in Mexico before moving to Phoenix in 2022, started her Instagram account, "Venezolanas en Arizona," to share her culture, and celebrate and promote projects started by her community.

Last year, she organized a *Mercadito Venezolano* in Phoenix with 30 Venezuelan vendors — arepas and tequeño vendors, traditional musicians, real estate agents and dentists. She wants to show locals in Arizona that Venezuelans are "people working hard," who "want to support the economy of the state." She hopes they realize: "These people are different from what I had in my mind."

Like Quiñónez, however, Bolaños also gets negative feedback. On a recent post

about classic Venezuelan singers, someone commented in Spanish that she shouldn't compare modern Venezuelans to those of the past; today's migrants, they said, "only come to do evil."

"I don't delete them," she said of the bad comments. "Sometimes I respond. Sometimes I am sarcastic and put a heart on it. It depends. I'm a human, you know. I have feelings, and sometimes they touch your fiber."

WHEN FANNY GRANDE first came to the U.S. as a teenager almost 30 years ago, people found her interesting and "exotic" when she told them she was Venezuelan. But now, there's a hint of suspicion: "People always have a comment to make," she said.

Grande, an actress and movie producer in Los Angeles, is working to "humanize the struggle" of Venezuelans. She wrote and starred in *Homebound*, an English-language film about Venezuelan migrants in Texas that explores "what it means for a woman and a son to have to leave everything behind, come to a strange world and build everything."

Bolaños, Grande and Quiñónez put a lot of pressure on themselves. According to Rigel Salazar, another Venezuelan content creator who's lived in Utah and Nevada, they — and the whole Venezuelan diaspora — "have double responsibilities." They must behave admirably themselves and also change negative perceptions about the rest of their community. Salazar's Instagram account — "Los Buenos Somos Más" or "the good outnumber the bad" — highlights people like Grande who have gone on to do incredible things in their new home.

Grande, who recently launched A+, a streaming platform featuring content in English made by and for the Latino community, wants audiences to understand that many Venezuelans are simply looking for a place they can survive.

"Everything is so political now. But at the end of the day, these are people, human beings, who just need help," she said. 🌻

Anthony J. Wallace is a journalist from Phoenix, Arizona, who has reported on the Venezuelan diaspora across Latin America and the U.S. His writing and audio documentary work has been published by the BBC, NPR, Audible, AP and others. @anthonyjwallace

POEM

About Suffering

By Claire Wahmanholm

Try entering the maze another way. It isn't wrong
to want a different ending. All those women understood;
all those schoolchildren; all those mink trying to get from one place
to a gentler one, or just moving for the sake of it, just getting along.
We don't want to think of horses and see a team of them waiting
to pull a single body into four. We want the drill to be
a drill, we want it to be like playing hide-and-seek, or like skating
for the breeze of it. I want to look at woods and not think of wood
chips or money or dead birds. *Forgotten, forget, forgot:*
I haven't, can't, never, all the disasters I have almost seen. Of course
there have been un-healable things; flinchings that mark each spot
where I have been squeezed, tested like fruit—where the horse
bucked and dragged my child self down the trail beneath tree

after tree. I can remember everything, but choose to fold it away
so I can sleep. So I don't terrify my children. Some may
think that in a war, both sides suffer equally, that both sides cry
out with equal misery. But it's not true. When the sun shone
through the bullet holes in the wall of the maze, I saw no green
through them. Others said it's just the nature of walls to be seen
through in so many places. Its holes are not failures. Beneath this sky,
there can be no failure. How else to sail calmly on?

WEB EXTRA Listen to Claire Wahmanholm read her poem at hcn.org/about-suffering.

Sponge cities

How to engineer flood resilience as climate change exacerbates storms.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

DATA VISUALIZATION BY JENNIFER DI-MAJO

IN EARLY FEBRUARY, meteorologists warned Southern Californians that a supercharged storm was headed their way, potentially bringing catastrophic flash flooding. The predictions came true, and then some: Up to 10 inches of rain fell on parts of Los Angeles over a 24-hour period, shattering all-time precipitation records.

That meant as much as 21 million acre-feet of water — or one and a half times the entire annual volume of the Colorado River — fell on the 36,000-square-mile greater LA metro area.

When trillions of gallons drench a typical concrete-dominated cityscape, the water runs off rooftops and slides onto impermeable concrete driveways and into streets, turning them into virtual rivers. It cascades into stormwater drains and concrete-cased arroyos — picking up dirt, garbage, oil and other substances — before rushing into larger rivers and, ultimately, the sea. When it rains as much as it did in February, the chances of a system failure

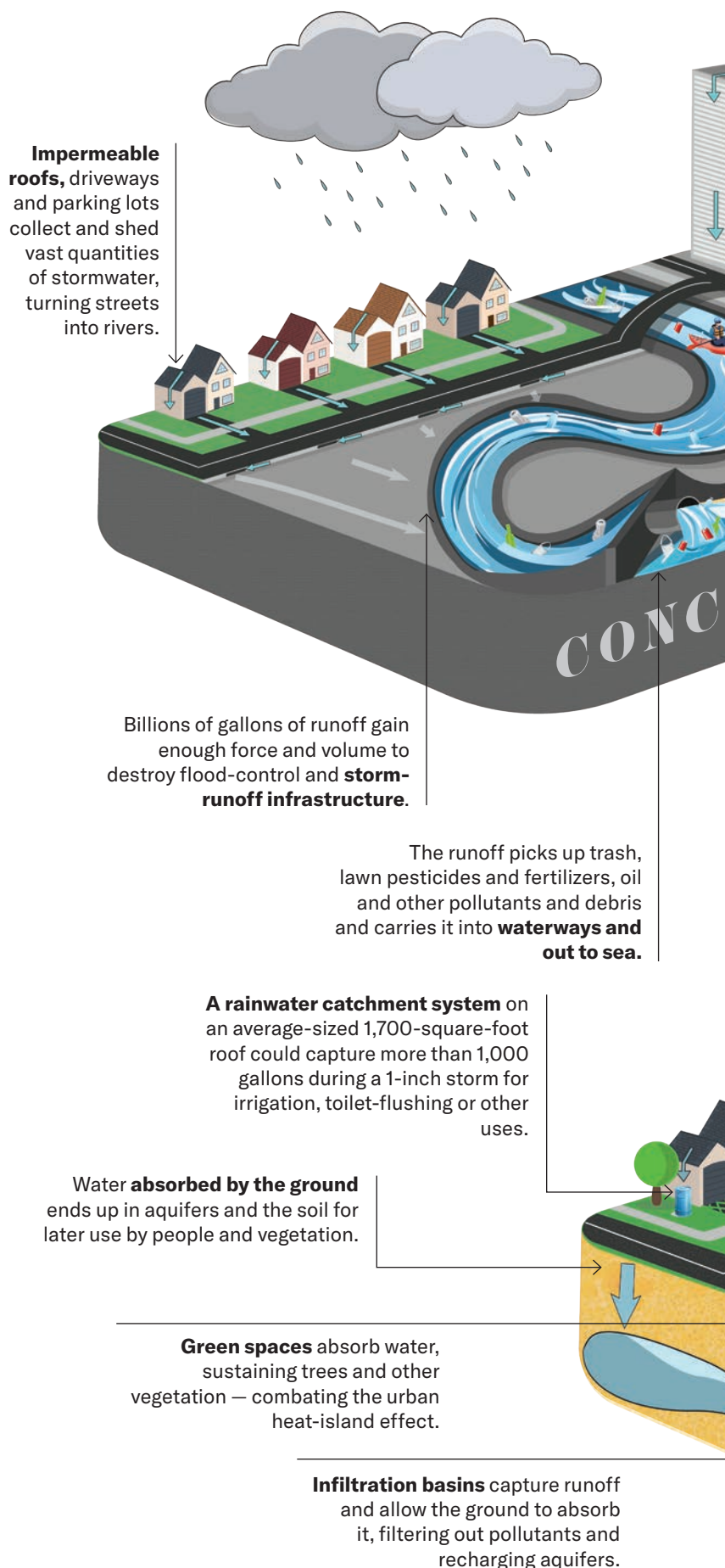
— drains clogging, gutters overflowing, flood-control structures collapsing — rise, setting the stage for an urban flooding catastrophe.

But this time, most of LA's stormwater system held up. Not only that, but instead of sending all that water straight to the sea, the city managed to capture more than 8 billion gallons of it in reservoirs and groundwater aquifers for future use.

That's partly due to stepped-up efforts to make the city a bit more spongelike, by retrofitting impermeable concrete that was designed to repel water and instead transforming it into a more absorbent landscape. That not only takes a load off drainage infrastructure, it also helps keep the water — and the pollutants in it — out of the Pacific Ocean.

These retrofits are neither cheap nor easy, but with human-caused climate change threatening to make both storms and droughts more severe, opportunities abound to make Western cities just a bit more spongelike. ☀

SOURCES: Los Angeles County, Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *The Conversation*, Invisible Structures, *Wired*, *Los Angeles Times*.



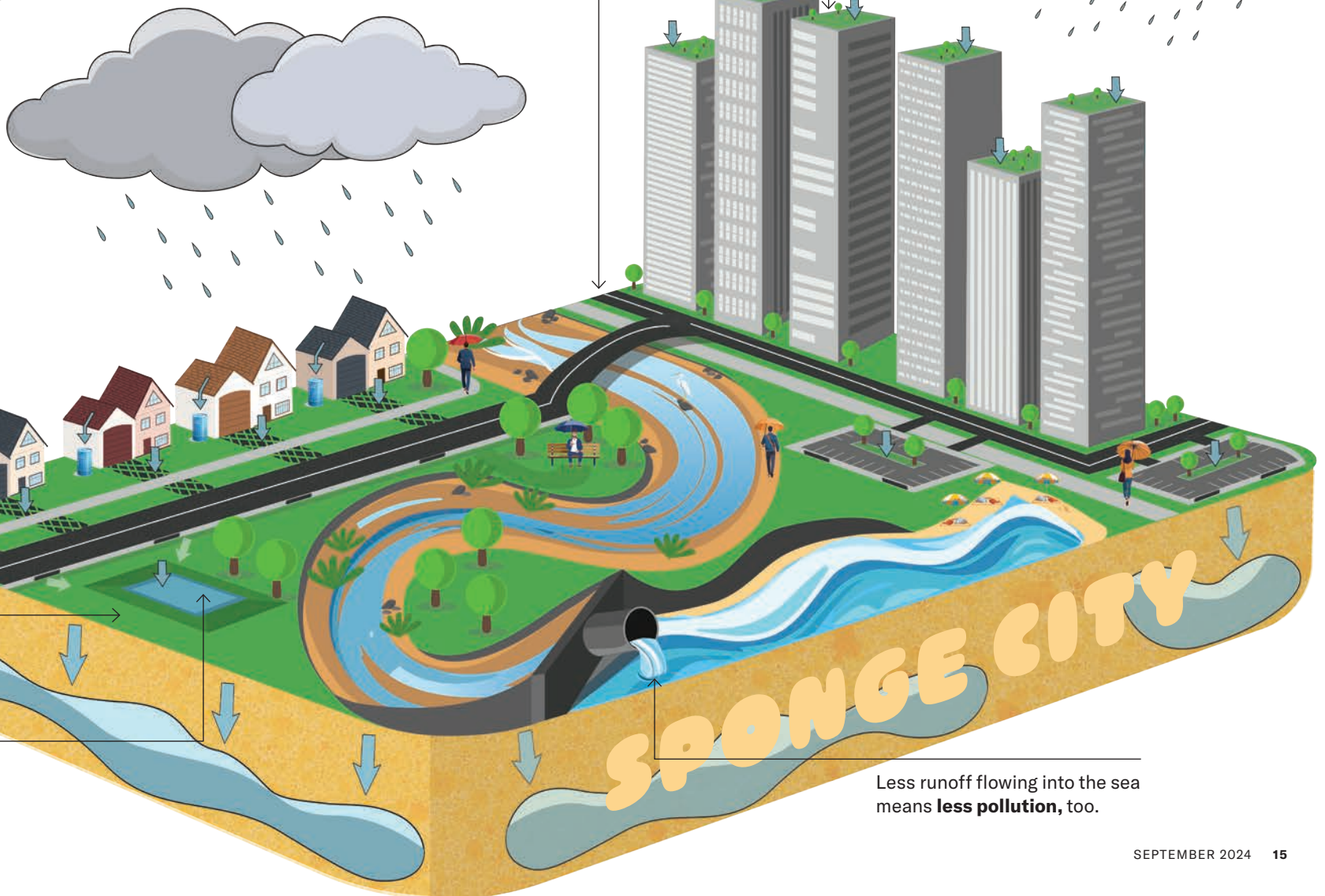


About 136,000 gallons of water run off a typical 5-acre big-box store parking lot during a 1-inch rainstorm.

What happens when a concrete jungle becomes a **sponge city**

Permeable pavement absorbs water, reducing chances that streets become rivers.

Green roofs absorb precipitation, sustaining plants that can provide a green space in the sky and cool the structure, while blue-green roofs capture and retain rainwater for use in the building.



Less runoff flowing into the sea means **less pollution**, too.



REPORTAGE

Road interrupted

A landslide closed much of Denali National Park's iconic road — much to the delight of bears.

BY BEN GOLDFARB

THE GRIZZLY AMBLED down the road toward us, a quarter-mile distant, getting closer with every footfall. We watched warily, still shoveling the snowdrift that engulfed the sole interior road within Alaska's Denali National Park and Preserve. He drew nearer, unhurried, head high. "If he gets to that blind curve, we'll pack it in," said Robina Moyer, program manager at Camp Denali, a private lodge on an inholding within the park. A few minutes later, the bear reached the bend, and we retreated to our van. The bruin, not the humans, owned the road.

Such scenes have become increasingly common along the western half of Denali's

road, which has been closed to virtually all traffic since a landslide severed it from the front country in 2021. Contractors are currently building a bridge over the slide. Meanwhile, the National Park Service has largely ceased maintaining the road beyond it — which is why I found myself with a half-dozen Camp Denali guides, shoveling late-spring snow under ursine eyes.

Two days earlier, I'd squeezed into a Cessna 206 and flown the hundred-odd miles to a gravel air strip — currently the only motorized way to visit the road's western end — to participate in guide training at Camp Denali, which remains open despite the disruption. I went largely to discuss the ways of the beaver, my favorite creature, whose lodges have blossomed along the road since the closure. But I wasn't there merely to appreciate enterprising rodents; I also hoped to observe the experiment the landslide had inadvertently triggered. I wondered how animals had responded when vehicles abandoned one of the West's most iconic protected areas — and how they'll react when traffic does return.

ALMOST SINCE construction began in 1923, Denali's 92-mile road has been a place where divergent management visions compete. Like so many park roads, it was built along precarious slopes and ridgelines to display sublime vistas to motorists. Unlike Yosemite and Yellowstone, however, Denali didn't succumb to auto-mania. Over the decades, the park elected to leave its single main road unpaved, replaced most private cars with public buses and capped annual vehicle trips. Today, it manages traffic to maintain gaps for migrating Dall sheep. In a world obsessed with access, few places have done more to control transportation.

Denali's latest travel restriction, though, wasn't planned. In 2014, a slow-motion landslide at a spot called Pretty Rocks, around 45 miles down the road, began to accelerate. It was likely exacerbated by climate change, which thawed Pretty Rocks' underlying permafrost and left the hillside slumping like melting ice cream. Although the Park Service spent years repairing the buckling track, by August 2021, it surrendered — closing the road and blocking traffic from nearly 50 miles west of the slide. The next phase in the park's tumultuous history had begun.

In May, I spent a couple of days touring this

vacant expanse of gravel with Camp Denali's staff, whose vans are among the only vehicles still cruising the western road. The tundra rolled on forever, a quilt of purple and green, and silver rivers twisted through glacial valleys. The snowclad crown of Denali, the High One, played peekaboo with clouds. We skirted boulders that had tumbled onto the road and occasionally stopped to shove them into ravines. When we got out to wander the tundra, we heard only the laughter of whimbrels.

What the road lacked in people, it made up for in other critters. For centuries, humans have converted animal paths into roads, but in Denali, the opposite was happening: a road was reverting to a trail, scored with grizzly tracks and lumpy with wolf scat. We saw grazing caribou, swimming beavers, and, most often, bears: wandering ridgelines, scrambling up draws, napping amid snowdrifts.

Subtler transformations were also at work: Without roadkill, scavenging magpies and foxes were gone. Vehicles, like natural predators, had induced a trophic cascade; when they disappeared, the ecosystem changed.

But it was presence, not absence, that caught my eye. One morning, we parked near Wonder Lake, the glittering mirror at the road's western terminus, to admire a chaos of waterfowl and wading birds: shovelers, swans, yellowlegs, scoters, countless feathered bodies drifting and flying and squawking. For Jenna Hamm, Camp Denali's owner, the road closure was initially frustrating, but as we beheld this avian riot, it felt like a gift.

"Such an abundance and diversity of waterfowl right along the causeway might have just been coincidental," Hamm said later. "But traffic dust and noise and people certainly would have affected that."

REGARDLESS, IT WON'T last. The bridge over the landslide — a 475-foot-long span slated to cost more than \$200 million — is scheduled to open to the public in 2027. In the meantime, Park Service scientists are taking advantage of the unintentional experiment. One day, we spotted a young male grizzly wearing a satellite collar, among the dozen or so bears that the park is tracking along the road's western end. The Park Service has also collared bears on the eastern side and will compare the two groups' movements and behavior in the years to come — an unprecedented opportunity to isolate traffic's effects on wildlife. The public

might deem the road closure a "natural disaster," Dave Schirokauer, the park's science and resources team leader, told me, "but it's definitely a benefit to science."

How will the agency use the information it gathers? According to Schirokauer, data from road-closure studies may someday inform the park's speed limits, the number of annual vehicles it permits or the spacing of its buses. Maybe it will even nudge Denali's peers, like Yellowstone, to more thoughtfully regulate their own traffic rates. "I would hope that what we do here can inspire some sort of capacity cap in other national parks if it's needed," Schirokauer said.

Denali's dilemma reminded me of the last time major roads were quiet: the spring of 2020. COVID-19 confined humans to their homes and liberated wildlife, a period that scientists dubbed the "Anthropause." Roadkill plummeted, mammals wandered longer distances, and white-crowned sparrows trilled lovelier songs. But once traffic resumed, roadkill exploded, perhaps due to what researchers termed "behavioral lags": Animals that had grown accustomed to roaming empty streets were slow to adjust to cars' return. How will Denali's bears and caribou

cope when humans come roaring back?

The answer is likely to be complicated. Rounding a bend one day, our van practically nudged the rumps of a mother grizzly and her yearling cub, their tufted fur glowing in the sub-Arctic sunlight. This was hardly unusual in Denali, where female grizzlies use the road as a "human shield" that protects their cubs from aggressive males; in the past, I'd watched sows and their offspring lumbering nonchalantly alongside tour buses. But this pair scampered away from the van in alarm, disappearing into the willows. And it occurred to me that the yearling, born after the road closure, had perhaps never before laid eyes on a vehicle. ☀

Ben Goldfarb is a High Country News correspondent and the author of Crossings: How Road Ecology Is Shaping the Future of Our Planet and Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter.

A grizzly sow and her cubs walk along the park road near Sable Pass in 2019 (*opposite*). Denali Park Road remains open east of the landslide as it winds through Igloo Canyon (*below*). **Emily Mesner**



Get to know the western bumblebee

This struggling species may soon be the new face of insect conservation in the West.

BY SARAH TRENT

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RICARDO MACÍA LALINDE

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will soon decide whether to add several bumblebees to the federal endangered species list. Among them is the western bumblebee — *Bombus occidentalis* — a species that, if listed, could become a charismatic spokesbee across its range.

Once ubiquitous from New Mexico to Alaska, western bumblebees are now confined mostly to pockets of the alpine Northwest. Their rapid decline since the '90s is attributed to habitat loss, climate change and a pathogen spread by commercial bees. Without bumbles like westerns, whole ecosystems might falter: They're among the most important pollinators on Earth.

Yet, aside from the monarch butterfly, insects rarely receive protections. Despite precipitous declines worldwide, they comprise just 7% of federally listed animal and plant species. Many states don't even count bugs as wildlife. Listings can be controversial, and the western is no exception: Protecting it could reshape rules for using tools like herbicides and prescribed fire. It could also give a face and a lifeline to myriad other creatures.

Where they remain, western bumblebees — or females, at least — are easy to identify: They're the only bumble in the West with a distinctively fuzzy white rump. **Males and females both forage, but only females collect pollen, packing it onto heavier and heavier saddlebags, called corbiculae, before bee-lining back to the nest.**

Crossing miles of terrain from their nests, western bumblebees forage from early spring through fall. In the Western Cascades, the year's first huckleberry blossoms give way to mounds of pink spirea and lousewort, spindly Cascade aster, then late-season goldenrod.

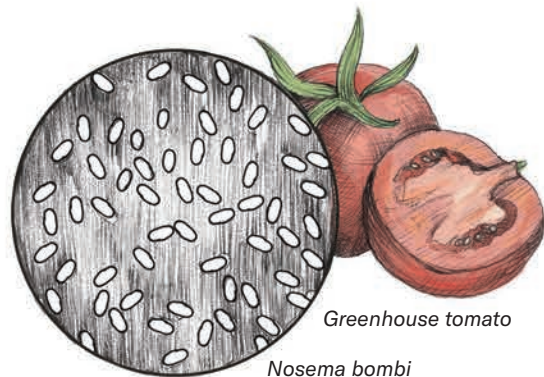
Climate change is shifting the life-cycle timing of bugs and blooms. That may threaten westerns' food sources during a crucial seasonal bottleneck: Bumblebee colonies survive just one season; by winter, the only bees still breathing are next year's queens, called gynes. **The earliest and latest-blooming plants may be especially important for sustenance through those shoulder seasons. After all, a gyne's got to eat.**





Olive-sided flycatcher

Another bumble's future is tethered to the western's: a social parasite called Suckley's cuckoo bumblebee that commandeers western nests, workers and food stores to raise its own young. Fast losing its primary host, the western — the last confirmed sighting was in 2017 — it is also up for listing. This decision may be less controversial: Because far fewer remain, it will have less impact on human land use.



Greenhouse tomato

Nosema bombi



Suckley's cuckoo bumblebee

Bumblebees are essential pollinators. **They fly in colder temperatures than butterflies or honeybees and buzz when they pollinate, releasing more pollen.** Some plants even require this vibration, including several agricultural crops, such as tomatoes. That's why commercial bumblebees (usually *B. impatiens*) are widely used in greenhouses, where they've harbored a deadly fungal pathogen, *Nosema bombi* — the prime suspect in the decline of numerous wild bumble species, including the western.



Black huckleberry

Countless other species, big and small, might benefit from protecting westerns. Other pollinators, like butterflies, would get a boost from policies that aim for more blooms and fewer chemicals. Birds that eat bees and bugs — like the olive-sided flycatcher, another Northwest conservation priority — might have more food. Even mammals like bears, which need berries that require early-season pollination, might gain. Outside their habitat, they'd be influencers of another sort: They're cute, relatable and easily identifiable — ideal tools for garnering human attention and care.



Hydaspe fritillary

Echo azure

Golden-mantled ground squirrel

Like most bumblebees, westerns usually nest underground, often in cavities left by rodents like the golden-mantled ground squirrel. Gynes follow sometimes meters-long tunnels underground, where they build a waxy clump of pots to hold pollen and eggs. **Scientists believe that threats in and around nests — *Nosema*, non-native parasites, human activity and others — may be a greater danger than foraging habitat loss.** Few nests have ever been found, but westerns seem to prefer sites tucked along forest edges, often near early-blooming huckleberries.



A photograph of a herd of bison in a grassy field. Several adult bison and a few calves are visible, some looking towards the camera. The background is a hazy, misty landscape with low-lying vegetation.

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DEAR FRIENDS

We love you all the same

You may have noticed a few changes in *High Country News* recently, including in the pages where we thank the folks who donate to support our journalism. For years, we listed those who made the largest donations first, and then worked our way down. This is a fairly common approach for nonprofits, but it never felt quite right to us.

The fact is that fully 75% of *HCN*'s revenue comes directly from our readers. A portion of it comes via your subscription dues, but the lion's share arrives in the form of donations. A few folks are able to write large checks, and we are truly grateful. But each year, roughly 10,000 others make more humble gifts. And those add up and help keep us going.

It's this remarkable community of supporters that helps *HCN* weather tough economic times, providing a degree of stability that other publications can only dream of. So we decided to make our donor pages a little more democratic, listing those who can make big gifts alongside those who make small ones, and sorting names by state rather than amount.

Speaking of donations, please watch your inboxes and your mailboxes for *HCN*'s fall appeal. This is our biggest fundraising drive of the year, and we really need your support. (You can make a contribution anytime at hcn.org/give-fall-24.)

There's more (news) where this came from

Another change debuts in this issue — a new space in the front of the magazine where we tease a few of the stories on our website, hcn.org.

High Country News has been online for a long time. The story has it that back in 1993 or '94, Sun Microsystems founder Bill Joy was looking for ways to use this newfangled thing called the Internet. One of his

employees — an *HCN* reader — suggested that an *HCN* website would be a good way to give policymakers in Washington, D.C., a window on to what was happening in the West.

And so a pack of *HCN*ers, led by then-Associate Publisher Linda Bacigalupi, trekked over McClure Pass from Paonia to Joy's offices in Aspen, and together, they created one of the earliest news sites on the web.

The latest iteration, launched in February, sees 300,000 visitors in a typical month. It also contains a near-complete archive of the stories that have appeared in these pages since 1970.

And, increasingly, it's a place where you can find stories that don't appear in the print magazine. We publish an average of three original stories

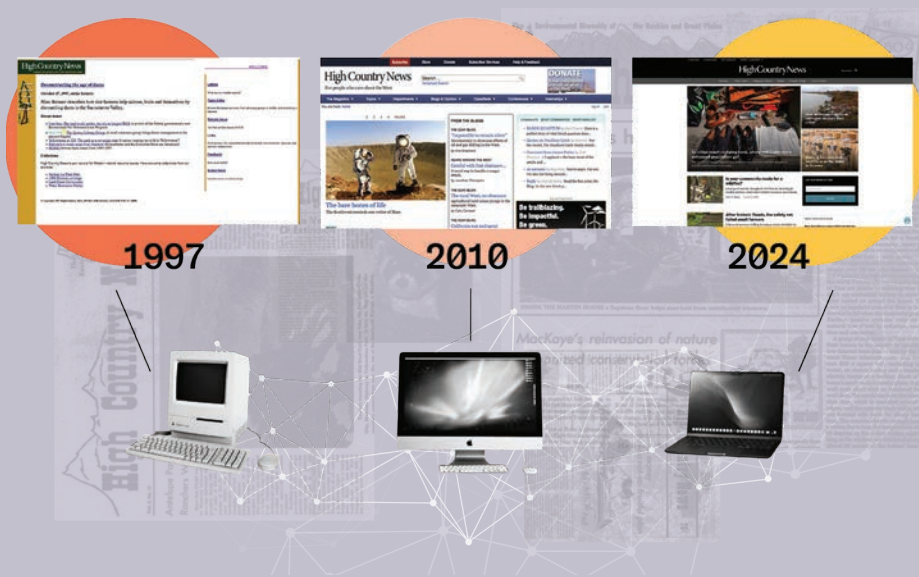
each week online — as many per month as you'll find in each print issue. They're often in response to what's happening now, providing the extra analysis and context you need to stay informed about how current events are shaping our lives in the West.

Recent examples include a piece about the Supreme Court's reversal of the *Chevron* doctrine, and a story about what the conservative Project 2025 could mean for public lands, water and wildlife.

If you aren't already receiving our weekly email newsletters, sign up at hcn.org/newsletters — you'll get all our online exclusives along with highlights from the magazine you might've missed. We also share some of the best reporting on the West from other news organizations.

And while you're on the site, take a minute to check out the features of your subscriber account — part of the major overhaul of our systems launched at the beginning of the year — by visiting hcn.org/tutorials. And if you're not sure how to access your account, don't worry: There's a tutorial for that.

—Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher



HCN website upgrades through the years.
Photo illustration by Marissa Garcia / HCN

Farewell, and thanks, Melissa!

HCN's talented and heroic Books and Culture editor, **Melissa Chadburn**, left us at the end of August to devote more time to her teaching and writing. Melissa joined *HCN* in May 2022, with a charge to expand our culture coverage beyond reviews and essays. She has brought some wonderful new voices into the *HCN* fold and built out our coverage of food, art, theater, film and TV. We look forward to her next novel — be sure to check out her award-winning debut, *A Tiny Upward Shove* — but we are going to miss having her smarts and sensibility on our team.



Migrants' backpacks and other belongings scattered on the ground in the Sonoran Desert near the Tohono O'odham Nation in Arizona.





911 ON THE BORDER

Can the Border Patrol
fulfill its duty to aid
the very migrants it is
tasked with catching
and deporting?

By Tanvi Misra
Photos by
Roberto (Bear) Guerra

THE TWO GUATEMALAN BOYS huddled under a shiny black blanket that reflected the moonlight. It was their first night alone. Their only link to family was a cellphone, so they texted their uncle, Carlos D.L., in California: “*Tío conteste, nos dejaron tirados.*” Uncle, they left us here.

Nine nights earlier, around 3 a.m., the boys had crossed the U.S.-Mexico border in Sonoyta with around 15 others and a smuggler. They trekked across the Sonoran Desert, up and down rugged hills and across dry washes, with garlic rubbed on their shoes to repel snakes. J.G., who was 18 at the time, and his 20-year-old cousin, K.G., carried 50-pound backpacks with jerky, Maruchan cup noodles, energy drinks and the Paris Saint-Germain soccer jerseys they’d purchased in Mexico. The four one-gallon bottles of water tied to J.G.’s bag slammed against his body with every step.

The group rested in the shade of saguaros and mesquites for short stretches, hiding from the U.S. Border Patrol’s surveillance drones. Their dull-colored, dusty clothes offered camouflage, but they couldn’t have hidden from the drones’ infrared cameras. It was October, and temperatures rose above 90 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and dropped to the low 50s at night. They walked

endlessly, resting for as little as an hour at a time, to their destination: a spot near a road where the smuggler’s contact could pick them up. The smuggler gave them stimulant pills to keep going.

By day six, their feet were scratched, raw and bloody with blisters. On day seven, they ran out of water. Some were so thirsty they drank their own urine. That day, as they climbed a mountain, they heard what sounded like animal howls. They scrambled to get away, but the rocks under J.G.’s feet gave way, and he slipped. His hand hit a cactus, and his ankle twisted. He tried to push through the pain, but by the next day, the pills were gone and his body was failing. On the ninth day, J.G. started vomiting. Without sleep and water, he soon collapsed.

The smuggler told the boys to rest. He pointed to a mountain in the distance: *That’s the pick-up point*, he said, and moved on with the others. The image of the mountain became etched in J.G.’s delirious mind. Eventually, the cousins got up, moving slowly, aching, toward the hill. When they found tire tracks, they stopped, confused. Was this their destination? That couldn’t be right; the guide had said it would take another two days. But they set up camp for the night anyway, hoping that whoever left

the tracks would soon return.

Now, whenever drones buzzed overhead, they tried to flag them down. As the cold night set in, they kindled a fire they hoped would be visible from afar. They were no longer trying to hide.

In the early hours of Oct. 18, the boys called their uncle. They later texted a screenshot of their location on Google Maps. It was 8:47 a.m., and their phone battery was at 5%. Carlos urged them to call 911. By the time they did, the battery was at 3%.

The U.S.-Mexico border is the world’s deadliest land route for migrants, according to the International Organization for Migration. Thousands who try to cross it get lost, injured or sick and have to call 911 for help. For over a decade, local authorities in U.S. border towns have redirected calls from lost Spanish-speaking callers to the Border Patrol, the subagency of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) that pursues and arrests border crossers. The agency’s Missing Migrant Program is the federal government’s primary response to the migrant death toll, which has been trending upward for 20 years. Between 2014 and 2023, nearly 60% of the migrant deaths in the Americas occurred in the U.S.-Mexico border region — far surpassing the toll in the waters of the Caribbean and the jungles of the Darien Gap.

The Missing Migrant Program aims to minimize the death toll through, among other things, putting up placards advising migrants to call 911, facilitating rescue attempts and, when necessary, recovering remains. The Border Patrol has touted its progress, and in 2023, Congress expanded the program’s funding with bipartisan support. Money was earmarked for “rescue beacons” — towers fitted with reflectors, blue lights, buckeye motion-sensing cameras and a button for migrants to press to call for help. The agency requested around the same amount for fiscal year 2025, saying the money was needed for more beacons as well as for “training, personal protective equipment, travel and supplies.”

Many local officials and residents believe that the Border Patrol should bear primary responsibility for migrant rescues and recoveries. The agency is part of CBP, which is itself part of the Department of Homeland Security, and its resources dwarf those of local emergency teams and nonprofits. But some aid workers and border researchers



see a conflict of interest between the agency's primary mandate, which is to detain and deport migrants, and the humanitarian goal of saving lives. Both outside critics and Border Patrol agents acknowledge that the two goals are intertwined, but only the former see this as a problem.

Type Investigations and *High Country News* looked into the complicated relationship between the Border Patrol's law enforcement and rescue operations, using internal documents, data logs, congressional reports, migrant accounts and the testimony of agents. These records reveal how the agency's dogged pursuit of migrants can increase the danger for those same migrants, occasionally ending in tragedy. Migrants drown or fall off cliffs; they die in car crashes and from the direct use of force by Border Patrol agents. While the agency does appear to pick up thousands of migrant callers alive, those rescues often end in arrest and deportation. So far, there has been little public accountability for the program's failures, while the data shows that hundreds of migrants who reach out for help fall through the cracks and are never seen again.

J.G. AND HIS COUSIN told the 911 operator that they wanted to talk to someone who spoke Spanish. They were eventually transferred to a Border Patrol agent at the Arizona Air Coordination Center, or A2C2, a control room in the agency's Tucson Sector headquarters and the heart of its Missing Migrant Program. Considered a model for Border Patrol sectors across the Southwest, this high-tech arena costs millions. Dizzying digital maps of southern Arizona are splashed across three walls. On the large one in the center, tiny blinking white dots represent all the border agents in the field. Blue dots indicate air and marine aircraft, and mobile surveillance trucks appear as tiny rectangles. Underneath all these data points swell the Baboquivari Mountains, sacred to the Tohono O'odham people, whose land north of the border spans Pima, Maricopa and Pinal counties.

911 calls redirected from the southern Arizona region are swiftly geolocated on the large digital map, which agents call the "big pipe." Emergency calls are marked as little red phone receivers. The agent on duty sits at a desk facing the maps, fortified by as many as four computer monitors, and logs



Clockwise, from above left: A hat and a child's blanket left on the ground on the U.S. side of the border wall near Sonoyta, Mexico. Medication left behind at a CBP migrant holding camp near the Sonoyta border crossing. A "carpet shoe," worn by migrants to hide their footprints. A water jug with an improvised carrying strap, left behind in the desert near the Tohono O'odham Nation in southern Arizona.

View of the border wall near the Sonoyta border crossing (facing).

the intake. Each call is categorized based on how bad the caller's condition appears to the agent: "routine enforcement," the lowest priority; "uncertain"; "alert" and "distress."

The boys were questioned — how many people were there, was anyone injured or sick — J.G. said, and then the line went silent. Eventually, the agent told them to wait: Someone would come for them in half an hour. Just 10 minutes later, the boys saw a car in the distance, a green-and-white vehicle with a logo they recognized in the warming



A Missing Migrant Program rescue beacon in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument near the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona.

daylight as that of Border Patrol. The driver's window was down. They dropped everything and ran after the car, waving, but it didn't stop. Frustrated, they threw stones at it. One hit it, but the car drove on.

Carlos had lost contact with his nephews after they texted him that morning. He called his immigration lawyer and was connected to the Guatemalan Consulate and Mario Agundez, an Arizona Border Patrol agent who was central to the agency's rescue operations. Having these direct lines of communication left Carlos in much better shape than most migrant families with missing or injured loved ones.

During his 20-plus years as a Border Patrol agent, Agundez, who retired at the end of 2023, had often received frantic calls from the families of missing migrants. Privacy and security issues generally prevent agents from providing direct information on rescue operations to civilians, agents say, so they advise families to talk to their consulates. But Carlos and his wife were not getting much clarity from the consulate. "It was a mess, so I told the family, 'Just stay with me, let me help you put this thing together,'" Agundez said. He passed on the location information he received from the family and checked with his colleagues for updates.

Migrant deaths hit close to home for Agundez, even before he became an agent. In 1998, his then-wife's cousin died crossing the border. Agundez, who left Mexico at 17, joined the U.S. Border Patrol's newly formed search, trauma and rescue team (BORSTAR) — a subset of agents with specialized emergency-response skills — two years later. Agundez, who feels his own immigrant background helps him understand why migrants risk their lives to cross, designed the Missing Migrant Program in 2017, making it the latest iteration of the rescue program that started in 1998. "Why are they taking that risk? A lot of people want the American dream," he said. "I'm trying to strive for *my* American Dream," he added, "by waking others from their worst nightmare" through his rescue initiative.

It started in 2004 in southern Arizona, when his boss handed him a cellphone and told him he'd be taking 911 calls from surrounding counties, a job that earned him the nickname "Mr. 911" in the local news. In 2015, Agundez shifted the responsibility of working the phones to a small team of border

officials and began designing the training curriculum and protocols for the Missing Migrant Program. It wasn't easy getting other agents on board. Many of his colleagues, he said, "were like, 'Well, if you're not dying, why are you calling 911? Just another quitter — overcrowding the 911 service.'"

Through the Missing Migrant Program, Agundez sought to centralize the rescue operations and improve the flow of information down the chain of command. He persuaded reluctant colleagues by pointing out that a systematic rescue program could yield law enforcement benefits: Rescued migrants could provide firsthand information on

"We're known as the boogeyman. We have this lore that follows us, for better or worse."

smugglers, for example, which could be used to capture and prosecute the cartels behind the operation. The "quicker we can respond and address that border *safety* issue by saving lives, the quicker we can get back to border *security*," Agundez said.

Law enforcement goals have been embedded in the CBP rescue system from the beginning. Today, the program does not exist as an independent department with permanent, dedicated staff, but rather as a system manned by a rotating set of agents that distills information from 911 calls, family members, consulates and volunteer groups and gets it out to the local stations. The main challenge — apart from the rugged terrain, unpredictable weather and spotty phone signal — is that the smugglers are deliberately making use of trails in desolate, mountainous areas in order "to avoid detection and interception," according to an agency fact sheet. That's where the high-tech maps and surveillance tools at A2C2 come in handy. "All these resources? Their main job is border security,"

said John Mennell, an agency spokesperson. "But 4,000-plus agents — our air and marine and other assets can turn on a dime to pull someone off the Baboquivari Mountain."

When a call comes in, agents first check the CBP arrest and detention databases in case the missing migrant is already in custody. When migrants themselves call, they're often afraid to give their real names and descriptions out of fear of the Border Patrol. "We're known as the boogeyman," agent Daniel Hernandez said. "We have this lore that follows us, for better or for worse."

If the database doesn't yield a hit, the agents detailed to the A2C2 code the request's urgency and forward the details to the local CBP station. If station officials dispatch someone, it is usually an agent already in the field. Specially trained BORSTAR agents, who in agency press videos are often seen treating migrants with IVs in the field or dropping from helicopters to rescue people, are called in a small subset of cases, according to internal CBP records from 2021.

A database of A2C2 911 calls from October 2021 to September 2022, obtained through a public records request, provides a never-before-seen window into how the agency handles distress calls in its Tucson sector. Out of around 3,000 calls that came in that year, over 80% were initially categorized as "routine enforcement," meaning that agents determined that the callers would not deteriorate or require lifesaving help within 24 hours. (Calls remain active on the map for 24 hours.) A similar proportion — about 87% of cases were labeled as "give ups" owing to the eventual outcome; like "quitters," it's a term used for exhausted migrants who cannot keep going. These migrants are, according to Mennell, "looking for that 911-Uber ride" to the processing cell. But around 5% of calls were placed into the high-priority "distress" or "alert" categories by A2C2 agents, meaning the caller might have deteriorated rapidly or even died without help.

Agundez admits Border Patrol agents are not trained as medical dispatchers and so could be "downplaying the nature" of some of the calls. Still, he thinks these numbers show the program's success. "The more 'give ups', the less true emergencies, less hospitalizations, shows that the 911 call system of communication works for us — works for the migrants," he said. The fact that rescues and

arrests coincide is not a bug, but a feature of the system to agents. “Yes, we *do* chase after our own patients,” Agundez said. “Hopefully, we get to them alive.”

Out of 3,000 emergency calls in 2022, 38 (1.2%) were categorized as medical emergencies and only six appeared to have triggered a search and rescue expedition. Another 299 Tucson-region callers who were rerouted to the A2C2 that year were never found; 180 of these were initially deemed “routine” or low-priority. In at least a third of these cases, the agency had somewhat precise coordinates for the caller.

To Parker Deighan, a longtime volunteer with No More Deaths, the fact that 300 missing migrants — almost twice the number of migrant deaths recorded in Arizona that year — were not found after calling 911 “really shows Border Patrol’s complete failure to treat these calls as true emergencies.” People who choose to cross have urgent reasons, Deighan said, and don’t “give up” unless they’re compelled to do so out of genuine fear for their lives. “It shows how the dehumanization inherent in enforcing the border really makes it impossible for Border Patrol to be effective rescuers,” she added.

The way these 911 calls are funneled to enforcement agents may also violate the international standards laid out in the U.N. Refugee Agency’s *Emergency Handbook*, which requires that humanitarian actors not be “subject to control, subordination, or influence by political, economic, military or other non-humanitarian objectives.” The Border Patrol’s law enforcement mandate targets the same group it purports to rescue, “so in the name of security, a lot of human rights get shoved aside,” said Ieva Jusionyte, an anthropologist at Brown University and a former emergency responder who researches emergency services and violence along the border. “One of those rights is to receive medical care ... and the right to that care not being contingent on also being detained and arrested and deported.”

The rescue machinery affords substantial discretion to an agency that human rights groups have criticized as having a culture of contempt for migrants. A *Huffington Post* investigation recently found that agents used anti-immigrant slurs, including one, “tonk,” supposedly named after the sound a flashlight makes when slammed against someone’s



head. Some even joked about killing migrant children. In the past, the agency has failed to hold people accountable when abuses come to light, according to a 2021 report released by the House Committee on Oversight and Reform.

All this, combined with the Border Patrol’s history and the way it has historically operated in the Southwest, should disqualify it from doing humanitarian searches, said attorney Angelo Guisado of the Center for Constitutional Rights, who represents No

More Deaths in litigation seeking CBP’s internal records on its emergency operations. “If they think everything looks like a nail, they’re going to use a hammer, right?”

ON OCT. 18, Carlos and his wife, Claudia L., drove to Arizona themselves, accompanied by three family friends. “I had the location, and I was not going to leave one of my family members dying out there in the desert,” Carlos said.

After they arrived, the consulate informed them that the boys had not been found at the location they'd sent. Claudia and the friends drove out to look for themselves, while Carlos stayed behind at the hotel to monitor updates.

Agundez said that the boys' 911 call was not prioritized as urgent and that it lacked very precise coordinates. The agents checked the general area they'd called from twice in the following 18 hours but did not see them. Agundez thought the boys had just moved on from their original location.

"So that's what agents do: They show up to the area and go look around a little bit here and there to see if there's any signs, and they are like, 'They're gone,'" Agundez said. "There's so many variables. Could agents have deployed the whole station? Does it sound operational — reasonable?" Agents have to make rescue decisions considering their "first and foremost priority" is border security, especially given limited resources, he added.

The Border Patrol saw its budget increase tenfold between 1993 and 2021, as the agency formalized a "prevention through deterrence" strategy. This policy surged personnel numbers along traditional smuggling routes so that "illegal traffic will be deterred, or forced over more hostile terrain," the agency's 1994 strategic plan explained. The greater the likelihood of mortal danger and the higher the odds of getting caught, the more quickly the number of crossings would decrease, the logic went.

This deterrence policy is costly: Customs and Border Protection tends to spend more money per year than any other federal law enforcement agency — constantly beefing up its barriers, manpower and behemoth surveillance apparatus.

Decades after the plan was implemented, however, border crossings remain high, despite periodic fluctuations corresponding with seasonal trends, policy shifts and new administrations. Even hard-line policies, such as President Donald Trump's 2020 pandemic border ban, end up being counterproductive. Trump's policy of not allowing migrants to request asylum at ports of entry incentivized repeated crossing attempts through remote and dangerous regions.

According to Agundez, increases in personnel, technology, military patrols, concertina wire and walls will not stop



Gloria Zazueta shows where she found the two Guatemalan boys who became lost while crossing through the expansive Tohono O'odham Nation (top). The text message she received late on Oct. 19, 2022, asking her to help find them and the family members who had gotten lost searching for them (bottom). Unlike CBP officers who have advanced technology at their disposal, Zazueta typically uses only a large laminated map of the area and her cellphone to locate lost migrants.

Art Garcia and Gloria Zazueta (facing) have been helping find lost migrants on the reservation for nearly 15 years.

smugglers. The only way to stop crossings, he said, and, by extension, migrant deaths, is to toughen the consequences — by having Immigration and Customs Enforcement round up and deport families.

Deterrence has underpinned policies implemented by both Democrats and Republicans in Washington. President Joe Biden, who campaigned on the promise of a more humane approach to the border, has in many cases kept and even expanded his predecessor's policies. In June, he signed his own version of an asylum ban. The migrant death toll hit a record high in 2022, with several deaths reported as a result of pursuit by border agents. According to the Border Patrol's own records, 171 migrants died after encounters with agents in 2022 — either because they were already in physical distress when they were found or because they got lost, sick or injured while being chased or arrested. Of these, 28 migrants died directly as a result of pursuit, often in car crashes or due to excessive use of force.

Meanwhile, a patchwork of volunteer groups has emerged, doing water drops and search expeditions and helping migrant families obtain closure by identifying remains. At least a couple of these groups say they have a good working relationship with the Border Patrol. Some see a certain amount of cooperation as necessary, a means to an end — the only way to leverage access and resources. Others, like No More Deaths, have been explicitly critical of the Border Patrol's role in the humanitarian arena. This constellation of groups — comprising college students, veterans, contractors and other civilians — tries to fill the gaps in the demand for humanitarian aid in the Borderlands, helping those who could not, or did not, reach out to the Border Patrol, as well as those who did but did not find the help they needed.

FOR NEARLY 15 YEARS, Gloria Zazueta's family has opened its home on the Tohono O'odham Reservation to the families of lost migrants and to local or out-of-state volunteers. They have cooked for makeshift search parties and sheltered them with family on the reservation. When they find dead bodies, they bless them according to Tohono traditions, smudging with sage to guide their spirits.

Zazueta and her daughter were at the dining room table on Oct. 19, decompressing

after a long day at work, when her phone pinged: A woman and two companions were lost in the desert, an aid worker told her. It was Claudia, the missing boys' aunt, and her friends. They had driven as close as they could to the boys' Google map location and then set out to search on foot. For nine hours, they scoured the desert. When they passed the remains of a horse, Claudia realized they were out of their depth. By nightfall, they called 911.

When Zazueta, who had already set out with flashlights and water, learned that the little group was in tribal police custody, she called and offered to host them so they could stay on the reservation without official permission. "This is what we do," she told the baffled officers. "That's someone's family out there, and we can help."

Zazueta gets emotional when she remembers the first case she took on: a young woman from Guatemala named Doraine. Her family encountered Doraine's elder relatives while they were putting up missing person fliers in Sells, on the reservation. After hearing about Doraine's young children, they agreed to help. From July 6 until the end of the year, Zazueta's family — including her now 83-year-old mother — accompanied their guests on all-day search expeditions. Some weekends, Doraine's relatives would return to California, crowdsource more gas money, and return. The search yielded the remains of five people, but Doraine was not among them. "That was hard, because we couldn't help give them that closure," Zazueta said. After that year, word spread. Aid groups and migrant families abroad contacted her directly, sending coordinates, photos, prayers and screenshots.

Zazueta and her husband, Arthur Garcia, are skeptical of border agents' commitment to finding lost migrants. "It's that mentality of 'I'll just let the next shift pick it up,'" she said. She'd seen tire tracks leading away from bodies, she said. "It's just more paperwork for them to have to sit and do."

Garcia recently served as a tribal monitor for the surveillance towers CBP erected on the reservation — around 10 of them in a 75-mile radius. He and his wife don't see why agents can't stop and process the migrants earlier — at the border wall — given all their expensive surveillance technology, instead of letting them get so deep in the desert and chasing

them onto Tohono land.

The Border Patrol's presence has often caused tension on the reservation. Garcia said agents plow through pastures on their vehicles, injure cattle, cut through fences and disrupt hunting. Recently, after agents shot a tribal member on the steps of his own home, the Justice Department declined to press charges against the officers involved. (The family of the slain man filed a lawsuit in 2024.) Several of Zazueta's relatives have had at least one run-in with agents who entered their garden and scared the kids or confiscated a car to check the fuel tank. Garcia, who is his tribal

Zazueta had seen tire tracks leading away from bodies, she said. "It's just more paperwork for them to have to sit and do."

district's cattle roundup leader, has several similar stories. Once, he said, he was charged for getting into a verbal altercation with an agent, though the case was dismissed after he completed a pretrial diversion program. Another time, he was handcuffed and pepper-sprayed in front of his then-young daughter and her entire school bus. The family filed a formal complaint with CBP from tribal police. They even pursued a legal claim, but the case fell apart.

Relationships were particularly strained under the Trump administration, when members of the humanitarian group No More Deaths were prosecuted on charges related to their humanitarian work. The most high-profile case involved Scott Warren, a volunteer who was arrested shortly after No More Deaths released videos showing border agents knocking over water containers aid workers had set out. Warren was charged with harboring undocumented immigrants and tried twice but ultimately acquitted.

In 2019, following several reports criticizing earlier incidents involving the Border

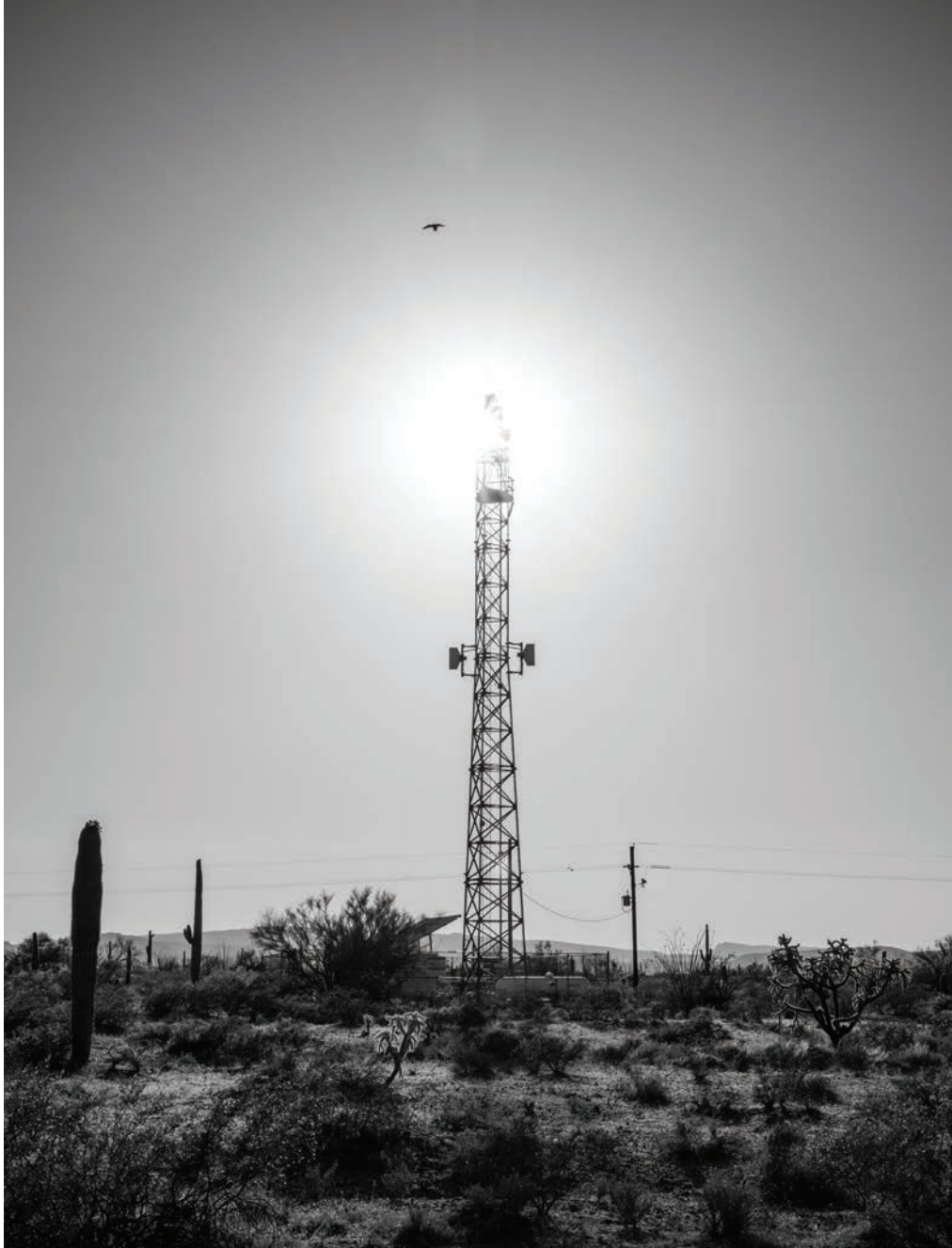
Patrol's rescue program, No More Deaths filed a public records request seeking documents on the agency's emergency response policies and practices. The hundreds of documents shared with *HCN* and *Type* include incident reports and internal communications about rescues from across the Borderlands, detailing how migrants got into trouble or went missing after fleeing border agents. In 2017, for example, agents in Arizona "jumped two groups" and apprehended two people. One of them escaped and fled up a mountain. "It was determined that the risk of sending agents up the mountain at night outweighed the reward of potentially re-apprehending the suspected IA (illegal alien)," the report noted. In another incident, from 2019, a BORSTAR unit was called in to help retrieve a migrant who "had absconded" and then "become unconscious/unresponsive" on a mountaintop in southern Arizona.

THE NIGHT OF OCT. 19, Gloria Zazueta put Claudia and her group up at her mother's house, around six miles from the border on the San Miguel Road. This lonely thoroughfare connects Sells, an unincorporated town that is the capital of the Tohono Nation, to a special gate on the U.S.-Mexico border where tribal members can cross to see relatives and visit sacred sites. (The 1853 Gadsden Purchase split the Tohono O'odham territory between the U.S. and Mexico. Zazueta's mother, who now lives in Sells, was born on the other side of the border in Mexico.)

The group showered and tried to rest. In the morning, they pored over a large laminated map of the Tohono O'odham Reservation, comparing the terrain in the location screenshot the boys sent with the topography on the map. When Zazueta's brother Juan arrived to pick them up, they pointed to the hills they thought might be a match.

Juan had assisted his sister in helping lost migrants since 2015 with his "quad" — an all-terrain four-wheeler. His life experience came in handy: When he was younger, he worked as a mule, smuggling marijuana between the U.S. and Mexico, crimes for which he served almost 10 years in prison. Unlike many of the border agents recruited from elsewhere, he knew the land intimately; it was his backyard. (In 2023, he began serving a new sentence for a 2020 charge of transporting a migrant.)

He took the group down a dirt road that



A Customs and Border Patrol surveillance tower in Arizona. According to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, as of July 15, 2024, there were 479 surveillance towers along the entire U.S.-Mexico border.

led to a peak he thought he recognized on the map. They were almost there when Claudia glimpsed some movement. “Stop, stop, stop,” she told Juan. J.G., pale but alive, stumbled out from under a mesquite. The location seemed to match the screenshot the boys had originally sent out.

Juan Zazueta called the tribal police, who notified the Border Patrol, which was waiting for them back in a nearby village. J.G. was disoriented and dizzy, so the agents checked him out and rehydrated him before they took him away. When his cousin, who had left J.G. to seek help, returned to that very spot later that day, he saw the fresh tire tracks and started following them. When he finally saw a Border Patrol vehicle, he threw himself at it.

HIS COUSIN WAS PROCESSED and deported to Mexico within hours, while J.G. himself was transported to St. Mary’s Hospital in Tucson.

The field agents who picked up J.G. did not tell his aunt and uncle where they were taking him, so the family turned again to the Guatemalan Consulate and to Agundez. On Oct. 21, Agundez texted them, telling them where J.G. was being treated. Carlos later thanked the agent for allowing his wife to drop off some money and a change of clothes for her nephew. “Finally, we got one thing right,” Agundez texted back.

At the hospital, J.G. was diagnosed with metabolic acidosis likely caused by severe dehydration. After he was discharged on Oct. 22, he was wheeled out by a friendly agent, who asked J.G. what he wanted to study. Criminology, J.G. said. Once they got to the processing center, the officer handed J.G. off to a colleague. There was nothing more he could do, the officer said. It was at that moment J.G. realized he would not be able to stay in the U.S.

The agent who took over J.G.’s case presented a grim choice: J.G. could leave for Mexico immediately, or he could spend a month in an ICE facility, waiting for a flight to Guatemala. J.G. chose the first option.

It was the inevitable outcome of calling 911 — the option he and his cousin had desperately hoped to avoid. That call “was really our last resort to survive,” he said. “But they didn’t help us. It was my aunt and uncle who moved heaven and earth to find us.”

J.G. boarded a bus with other migrants who were being dropped off in Mexico that day. His shirt and shoes had been taken away for the duration of the ride across the border. He felt like he was being taken to prison. ☀

Tanvi Misra covers migration and justice issues. Her work has appeared in The Nation, The New Republic, Politico, The Baffler, The Atlantic and The Guardian, among others. @Tanvim

Roberto (Bear) Guerra is a photographer and HCN’s visuals editor. Originally from San Antonio, Texas, he lives in Tucson, Arizona.

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What Is Permanence?

Land art in the age of LandBack.

By Savanna Strott

IN THE LONG AFTERNOON

of last year's summer solstice, Ernest Edwin Higbee Jr. pulled a white Chevrolet Tahoe off the main road of Alamo, Nevada, driving past spindly creosote bush and stalky Nevada ephemera and onto the lonely highway where the Mojave Desert meets the Great Basin.

"People live out here because you are pretty much on your own," Higbee, who is 70 and goes by Ed, told his six passengers. "And where we're going, you'll really know we're on our own."

The destination — still more than an hour away — was *City*, a mile-and-a-half long, half-mile-wide concrete-and-rock sculpture. The artist, Michael Heizer, opened his magnum opus to visitors in September 2022 after more than 50 years of construction.

Heizer, who is self-taught,

was one of the first 20th century American artists to imprint the earth and call it art. His work helped define the land art movement of the 1960s and '70s. Although land art is found all over the world, it's most often associated with the Western U.S., in works like *Spiral Jetty* in the Great Salt Lake and *The Lighting Field* in New Mexico.

According to Hikmet Loe, an art historian who has studied land art for nearly three decades, the movement arose from the radically changing social and cultural constructs of the 1960s and the art world's minimalism and conceptual styles. It freed art from rigid galleries and released it into the unruly outdoors.

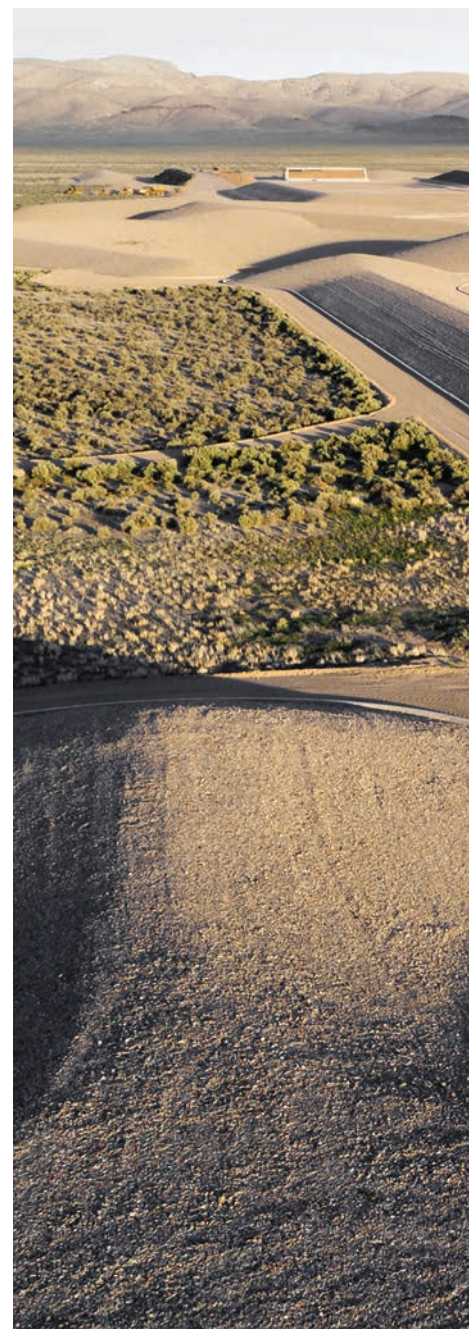
Most of these 20th century artists, who were generally white and from the East Coast, Loe explained, viewed deserts in the West as a vast nothingness,

waiting to be made useful and important.

"There's this misconception then of blank space we can do what we want to," Loe said. "That's left over from Manifest Destiny, from those ideas that it was literally a God-given right."

When construction of *City* began in 1970, few Americans had a problem with building a monument in the middle of Nevada. But 50 years later, *City* opened into a different world, one in which a greater understanding of Indigenous genocide and colonialism's ongoing impacts stoked criticism of the work's sociopolitical context and questions about its own message concerning the land.

To Alicia Harris, a Native art history professor at the University of Oklahoma and a member of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux tribes, these conversations about



art and its impact on land echo those Indigenous people have had for centuries.

"My definition of land art is a little bit more expansive in thinking about the ways that people make place and make relationships with the land directly," Harris said. "We've been doing that for a much longer time than the sort of few decades that the 'land artists' were doing that."

Four-thousand-year-old petroglyphs survive less than 30 miles from *City*. Native tribes in



City, 1970 – 2022 © Michael Heizer. Courtesy of Triple Aught Foundation. **Eric Piasecki**

southern Ohio created what's commonly called "Serpent Mound," a 1,348-foot-long, 3-foot-high mound in the shape of a snake with a curled tail. These works straddle the blurry line between art and cultural expression, which Harris called an inherited paradigm of Native land art. She pointed to the Assiniboine Tribe's Sun Dance, a dayslong religious ceremony that includes building lodges, as an example of cultural expression that is "artful" but not designed

to be consumed by outsiders as "art."

At the same time Western artists began carving the earth in the name of art, the American Indian Movement crystallized centuries-old demands to return unceded land. Indigenous nations organized, arranging a 19-month occupation on Alcatraz Island and satirically offering the federal government glass beads and red cloth worth \$24 in exchange for it. The 1972 "Trail

of Broken Treaties" march on Washington, D.C., demanded the return of 110 million acres.

"America's favorite pastime is amnesia," Harris said. "That's maybe nowhere more evident than in these land art works, when we're asked to just presume that there wasn't anything here."

But for many contemporary Native artists and art historians, like Harris, place-based art has less to do with the land art movement and more to do with the LandBack one.

HIGBEE TURNED off the highway and onto a dirt road that winds tightly around rock formations before entering Garden Valley, the remote valley where Heizer built *City*. Heizer's ranch, where he lives part-time, is lined with vibrant cottonwood trees that stand out in the landscape of soft blues, browns and greens. The trees are 50 years old, just like *City*.

In contrast to the ranch, *City* was distinguishable from this distance only by its lack of

vegetation: a simple gray line with a few pillars poking up.

Heizer has said that he chose the area because land was cheap and available. “I’d have built this thing in New Jersey if it had been possible,” he told *New York Times* reporter Michael Kimmelman, in 1999. Kimmelman later denied that Heizer thought the land was insignificant. *City*, he said in 2022, was a “love letter to this part of the world.”

“This land is in my blood,” Heizer told Kimmelman.

Heizer declined to be interviewed. But his wife, Kara Vander Weg, who has managed his work at Gagosian Gallery for almost a decade, said Heizer considers himself a Nevadan. His grandfather moved here in the late 1800s, and Heizer often visited his Nevada family while growing up in Berkeley, California, where his father was an archaeology professor.

Rift One in 1968 was the first of Heizer’s 12 pieces of Nevada land art, part of what he called his “Nine Nevada Depressions,” which were constructed by digging into the floors of dry lake beds. Two years later, he moved to Garden Valley and gave *City* most of his attention for the next five decades.

Now nearing 80, Heizer appears as a figure in boots, jeans and a cowboy hat. Heizer’s friend Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), said his gruff Western persona gives outsiders an incomplete picture of the artist.

On one of Govan’s first visits to *City*, he noted, Heizer received a special package from New York City — espresso ordered from Balducci, an upscale Italian grocery store on Broadway.

That image fits better with the grand scale and tone of *City*, which has gained international attention both within and beyond

the art world. The sprawling monument, which cost roughly \$40 million to build, was funded by donations and Heizer’s own funds and labor. The \$1.3 million a year it takes to maintain *City* comes from the support of several museums, including LACMA and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Access is limited; six \$150 tickets are available three days a week, six months a year. (Admission is free to residents of Lincoln, Nye and White Pine counties as well as to Nevada students and educators.) Visitors must arrive in Alamo at a specific time to be driven to *City*. No photos are allowed.

At least some of these restrictions are meant to protect the experience of the piece, which depends on seclusion for a large part of its allure. Thousands applied when visitor requests first opened; slots for the 2024 season were filled within the first month submissions were accepted.

Alex Bybee, one of the six passengers in Higbee’s Tahoe, first learned about *City* from the Sunday *New York Times* when the artwork opened in 2022. He was surprised that an art story — especially one involving Nevada — was on the front page. Rural Nevada rarely receives that kind of attention.

“Part of the experience and journey is coming to a rural part of Nevada,” said Bybee, a Las Vegas who owns a strategy and advocacy consulting firm. “*City* is this internationally known and recognized piece of art, and people travel to Alamo, Nevada, to see this incredible feat.”

Out-of-state visitors fly into Las Vegas, a town known for entertainment, not art. Then they set off on a two-hour drive that numbs their minds with mile after mile of sagebrush and desert dust, while mountains

keep watch from an indecipherable 10 or 100 miles away. The only break in the desert is Alamo, population 1,019, elevation 3,450 feet and “the social and business center of the rich Pahrnagat Valley.” From there, visitors are driven by Higbee or his cousin to one of the largest pieces of art in the world.

BACK ON THE ROAD, Higbee and his visitors entered Garden Valley. They passed over two cattle guards, and *City* came into clearer view. It looked like a ridge in the vast flat landscape. The objects sticking out of the ground were slightly more prominent. There was some kind of structure at either end of the ridge — rocks, a visitor might think if they didn’t know better — and lots of dirt and rounded mounds.

Higbee stopped the car to open a rusted metal gate with a “No Trespassing” sign. The group had now entered Heizer’s private island in a 704,000-acre ocean of federal land — the Basin and Range National Monument.

City was key to the monument’s creation in 2015, much to the ire of Heizer’s ranching neighbors. Years earlier, Heizer and Govan connected with the late Sen. Harry Reid, D, over their shared interest in blocking a proposed railroad that would have carried nuclear waste past *City* and to Yucca Mountain.

The Yucca Mountain plan was vastly unpopular in Nevada, and failure to stop it would have cost Reid politically. For Heizer and Govan, a noisy railroad would ruin the aesthetic of isolation that *City* relies on. In 2006, Heizer even threatened to dynamite *City* if the railroad plan went through. But it didn’t.

City’s value as an artwork helped fortify Reid’s public arguments for preserving the desert. President Barack Obama formally

designated the national monument on July 10, 2015. At the ceremony, Reid called *City* one of “the most important, significant works of art in the last 100 years in America.”

Higbee drove by Heizer’s cottonwoods, their lush green tops — once a speck — now looming over the car, before turning onto another dirt road: the final leg to *City*.

FIVE YEARS AGO, artist Fawn Douglas drove about 70 miles northeast of her home in Las Vegas to see Heizer’s *Double Negative* sculpture. Heizer made the mirroring 50-foot-deep trenches on Mormon Mesa by blasting 240,000 tons of rock from land that once belonged to Douglas’ Southern Paiute ancestors.

Douglas, an enrolled member of the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe, liked how the earth was reclaiming the land at *Double Negative*. The once clean-cut walls of the 1969 piece have become more textured as the vegetation has regrown.

But then Douglas remembered how beautiful the land was before Heizer made his mark. She compared the artwork to someone stabbing the earth and leaving a scar.

Like *Double Negative*, many pieces of land art have started to fade as the land recovers. *Rift One*, one of Heizer’s nine depressions, is no longer visible. His *Circular Surface Planar Displacement Drawing* (four circles made from motorcycle tire tracks in Jean Dry Lake) has also vanished.

But *City* is different. *City* is meant to last forever. An empire of concrete, *City* is guarded and maintained and will be indefinitely.

To Douglas, who has not yet seen *City*, its intended permanence is a message of conquest:



Heizer took the land, and it will be his forever. As with other land-art pieces, it's tainted with destruction, patriarchy, Manifest Destiny and colonialism.

The high desert surrounding *City* is the ancestral home of the Southern Paiutes and Western Shoshone.

The Southern Paiutes lived nomadically across parts of California, Nevada, Arizona and Utah until Western expansion in the 1800s. The construction of the transcontinental railroad and traders crossing the Old Spanish Trail between California and New Mexico forced Southern Paiutes to settle where they were. The U.S. officially took control of Southern Paiute land when it received Mexico's territories in 1848 after the Mexican-American War.

Two decades before Heizer's grandfather came to Nevada, the United States signed a treaty with the Western Shoshone, certifying that the tribe owned its ancestral lands in what is now eastern Nevada while allowing U.S. settlers headed west to pass through. But the U.S. began taking control of the land, piece by piece. In 1962, almost a century after the treaty was signed, the government offered the tribe \$26 million in exchange for the land and an end to the tribe's legal claims against the U.S. In response, the Western Shoshone called for the land to be returned.

In 2021, Fawn Douglas and Rose B. Simpson, an artist from the Santa Clara Pueblo, responded to the land art movement by making *Transformance*. In the filmed performance, Simpson, Douglas, their daughters and three other Southern Paiute women demonstrated how Indigenous people relate to the land, not by physically marking it but by creating and maintaining a relationship with it.

Amid the bustling traffic of one of Vegas' busiest thoroughfares, the artists walked to a public park, which the city had closed three years ago for "maintenance and improvement" after unhoused people began congregating there. When the procession reached the park's edge, Douglas used a knife to cut through the plastic orange fence guarding the area.

As they walked, Douglas said they felt the different textures of the land through their moccasins — dirt, concrete, grass and asphalt. Their handmade regalia acted as a kind of armor as they walked in pairs to protect each other. Douglas said the performance allowed them to slow their heartbeats and create a shared pulse as they showed how they connected to the earth, respecting the land and themselves and taking a stand in their community.

A crowd quietly followed them, unintentionally becoming part of the performance. Their own pensive movements made the piece feel almost ceremonial to Douglas.

"It's really a metaphor for how people have been following and looking toward Indigenous people and voices to hear how we feel about what is happening to our lands," Douglas said. "They're stopping, pausing and listening and making sure to elevate the Native voices."

Against the rapidly changing metropolis, the women appeared as "living ghosts," said Ben-Alex Dupris, the director and editor of *Transformance* and an enrolled member of the Colville Confederated Tribes in eastern Washington. The women were a reminder that we all live on unceded Indigenous land.

Transformance began and ended at Nuwu Art Gallery and Community Center, just two miles from the 30 acres the Las

Michael Heizer's *Circular Surface Planar Displacement Drawing*, Jean Dry Lake, Nevada, 1970 (top). Photograph by Gianfranco Gorgoni © Maya Gorgoni

Double Negative, 1969, Mormon Mesa, Overton, Nevada © Michael Heizer. Courtesy of the artist and Gagolian. Michael Heizer



“America’s favorite pastime is amnesia. That’s maybe nowhere more evident than in these land art works, when we’re asked to just presume that there wasn’t anything here.”

Performance of Rose B. Simpson’s *Transformance*, presented by the Nevada Museum of Art, 2021 Art + Environment Season, South Maryland Parkway, Las Vegas, Nov. 13, 2021. **Mikayla Whitmore**

Vegas Paiute Tribe now owns near downtown. Douglas bought the building a year earlier and has since transformed it into a vibrant community watering hole and the heart of Las Vegas’ Native art scene.

“When we think about land art, we think about the notions of LandBack and what that means for Native peoples,” Douglas said. “So that’s why this space was also chosen, because this is the first Native American-owned gallery space in southern Nevada, and this is our taking back of space. This is our LandBack.”

HIGBEE FINALLY PARKED the car at the edge of a berm at *City*’s border.

To the south rose the berm and two towering rock mounds. A dirt path between them led into *City*. To the north was a sea of sagebrush and desert paintbrush that peppered the area with red. Mountains reigned from the

edges of the windblown valley.

The visitors had been discussing the context surrounding *City*: its part in America’s colonial history, the rights of the people native to the land it sits on, and if any of this would be different if it had been built by someone other than a white man. But once they entered the artwork, the conversation ceased, and the experience took focus.

Standing at *City*’s central plaza, the visitors saw a deep pit and a hint of cement shapes to the west.

A look to the east revealed one of the rock mounds at the entrance, even larger than it seemed at first. This mound and its sisters in the distance corresponded perfectly with the surrounding rugged mountains. But instead of colliding tectonic plates, Heizer’s mountains were made using attentive human hands and smooth, uniform rocks.

There was only one swatch of color: an oasis of valley flora cradled by clean concrete perimeters between the sculpture’s muted grays and browns — “Central Park,” one visitor called it.

City is a perfection that has to be maintained to prevent innate faults from intruding. Workers regularly pull weeds and drag equipment to smooth dirt paths and remove tracks. The Triple Aught Foundation collaborated with LACMA on a conservation study to plan for the repair and replacement of aging concrete and adjust for new rainfall patterns and flooding from climate change. Vander Weg said a GPS system has recorded exact placements of forms to show whether anything has shifted.

According to Higbee, the Triple Aught Foundation tries to keep the work looking “like you’re the first to ever been here.” He gave the visitors what he calls his “ominous final instructions”:

polite reminders of time limits and restroom locations. While the group toured *City*, Higbee walked around and listened to a true crime podcast.

The six visitors split up. Brent Holmes, a Las Vegas artist, headed east with Scott Dickensheets, a freelance culture writer. Leaving the plaza, they saw only *City*'s most immediate layers of berms, hills and paths.

Almost immediately, Holmes felt a physical reaction in his stomach.

"One of the important parts of land art to me is how it makes the body move," Holmes said. "What always fascinates me is how these angles make me stoop and crouch and tilt my head in ways so that I can better understand the structures and the lines and forms that I'm looking at.

"It's super cool, man," Holmes said. "I mean, this is fucking rad."

Dickensheets was struck by the realization that there was no meaning or narrative to the piece; any narrative applied to it would be mangled.

"Math, engineering, formal qualities like line of sight, shadow, all that stuff," Dickensheets said, "is the toolkit (Heizer's) using to access the psychological effects and the perceptual effects he wants you to."

There is solitude but not isolation in *City*. With six people, you're rarely so alone you can't see anyone.

On the way to the anchoring structure at the east end, Dickensheets and Holmes separated. Dickensheets took a path near *City*'s edge, while Holmes chose the middle route a quarter of a mile away.

"It's important the way that you can see me, and I can see you!" Holmes yelled, his voice carrying in the quiet.

Dickensheets climbed a path at the top of a steep berm.

It looked as if it was made of compacted soil, but the bumpy, airy texture on the sides was closer to a popcorn ceiling. It was actually concrete.

Against this berm and its mirror a half-mile away lay large slabs of concrete that resembled pillars on the drive here. They were crooked and jagged, like pieces of wood tossed aside when a tornado shatters a house. Some rose as high as six feet above Dickensheets' path and cast slanted shadows on the walkway.

The two berms on *City*'s margins accentuated the structure between them known as "Complex One." From *City*'s central plaza, it resembled a movie screen or a painting. Within a gray frame, there was a tilted brown background and an upside-down black "T." But something seemed off, like a distorted image your brain couldn't quite make sense of.

As you got closer, the frame started coming apart. It was actually made of individual, noncontiguous pieces of concrete, and the black lines were shadows from a concrete "T" hovering parallel to the ground. It recalled Heizer's *Levitated Mass*, in which two small wedges balance a 340-ton boulder above visitors at LACMA.

Dickensheets, in the shade of Complex One's trapezoidal backbone, recognized the deceptive structure as a type of optical illusion. Although he considered optical illusions the "lowest form of trickery," he said, it felt elevated in Heizer's *City*.

Holmes sat on a concrete

ledge and passed out figs and dried apricots. Most of his own artwork examines himself and his body in the desert. He found many of the sensations of his long hikes in *City*: the remoteness, the wind whipping past his ears, the sound of his boots crunching rocks beneath him. But visually, *City* was another planet.

"It's like he's taken the outside inside, but it's still outside. And that's pretty compelling," Holmes said. "He's rendered nature into human confinement in a way that doesn't feel insulting or like it struggles, which is pretty difficult."

Asked about the context surrounding *City*, Holmes said he's trying to focus on enjoying the piece and temporarily silencing all of the vital conversations around it.

VANDER WEG, the Gagosian director and Heizer's wife, said that the Triple Aught Foundation researched Garden Valley and found that the land was a hunting ground for the Southern Paiutes and Western Shoshone.

City has its own version of the increasingly popular land

acknowledgment for the Western Shoshone and Southern Paiutes at the bottom of its website. Douglas calls this "the bare minimum."

"What is the relationship beyond that?" Douglas said. "How can *City* actually transform from being just like, 'Here's this land art piece,' to merging with the way Indigenous people approach land art?"

Vander Weg, Govan and the Triple Aught Foundation have defended Heizer against criticism that *City* disrespects the land or its original inhabitants. They pointed to the solar panels that power his ranch, his long-standing concerns about climate change and how *City* helped prevent nuclear waste from being transported across the valley. A Triple Aught Foundation spokesperson said *City*, which is made of materials from its surrounding environment, honors the land through an "intensified experience of place, and the unity of the sculpture with its environment."

Heizer, for his part, has been mute on these criticisms as well as on *City*'s inspirations and meanings. He calls it "democratic

Repellent Fence – 2015.
Land art installation and community engagement (Earth, cinder block, para-cord, PVC spheres, helium). Installation view, U.S.-Mexico border, Douglas, Arizona / Agua Prieta, Sonora. Courtesy of Postcommodity.

Mike Lundgren



art, art for the ages.”

“I am not here to tell people what it all means,” he told the *Times* in 2022. “You can figure it out for yourself.”

In 2005, he defended his silence, explaining that acknowledging his inspirations for *City*’s designs — the ancient mounds built by Mississippian cultures, for example — did not mean they were copies or that he was “ripping off” those shapes. An earlier comment, where he said he derived some of *City*’s shapes from Chichén Itzá, the sacred Mayan city in Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula, has followed him, “as if that’s the whole meaning behind it.” Despite Heizer’s evasions, non-Native journalists often mention the likely influence of Heizer’s trips to ancient earthworks around the globe with his archaeologist father.

For Harris, the Native art history professor, land artists who take inspiration from cultures and people from other lands demonstrate a misunderstanding of their main medium. She described it as a “dispossession of place.”

Harris pointed to Nancy Holt’s concrete *Sun Tunnels*,

which align with the sunrise and sunset of the solstices. Holt included a Navajo poem in a piece she wrote about the tunnels, located nine miles from the Nevada border in northern Utah. But the Navajo never lived there. The Goshute, Western Shoshone and Paiutes did.

In contrast, Harris said, Native land art is invested in the local community.

In *Repellent Fence*, the art collective Postcommodity created a 2-mile stretch of balloons across the U.S.-Mexican border. The balloons, up for four days in October 2015, were meant to show the connection between the land, its history and the Native communities separated by an abstract divide.

Repellent Fence showcased another distinctive quality of contemporary Native land art: It’s temporary.

For Douglas, art that permanently alters the earth is unethical. In one of her own pieces of land art, she painted and stitched fabric across a 93-foot-long, 1-foot-wide canvas. She then delicately stretched it across desert shrubberies and stones at the University of

Nevada, Las Vegas, careful not to damage even an ant hill. When she finished displaying the piece, she rolled the fabric up and left the land as it was. She preserved the experience through photos and videos.

Douglas said that the art was meant to remind people that the land used to belong to the Southern Paiutes. And for a moment, she said, the piece took that land back.

It also showed people — some of who stepped on the art — that it was possible to live on the land without harming it, Douglas said. It showed what land art could be.

“I didn’t make a mark and just destroy this area to where it is not in use, or disturb the insects, the flora, the fauna,” Douglas said. “That’s the difference between the way an Indigenous person like myself would approach land art versus a destructive way.”

Dupris, the *Transformance* filmmaker, said there are differing opinions on land art across Indigenous cultures.

Dupris, whose father was an enrolled member of the Mnicoujou Lakota Sioux Tribe, pointed to two stories of land art in South Dakota: Mount Rushmore, which he said was often seen as a desecration of the sacred Black Hills, and the Crazy Horse Memorial, a carving of the Lakota leader in those same peaks. It’s a gray area in Native land art, Dupris said, that shows how two similar pieces can have different reactions depending on who’s behind them.

Chief Henry Standing Bear oversaw the creation of the Crazy Horse Memorial, inviting a Polish American sculptor, Korczak Ziolkowski, to carve it starting in 1948, 20 years after construction on Mount Rushmore began. (*Times* reporter Kimmelman wrote in 2005 that Mount

Rushmore was one of the only pieces of American art Heizer “now volunteers to praise.”) Standing Bear argued that the spiritual significance of the Black Hills to the Lakota people made it the appropriate site for the memorial.

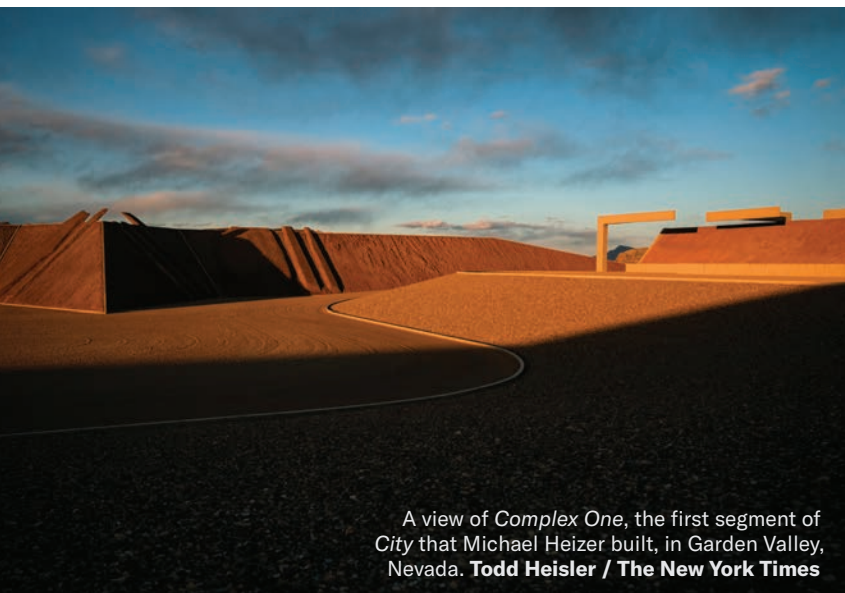
For Dupris, the energy directed at land art could be focused on more critical matters, like removing the dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers that damage ecosystems and impede salmon migration. While land art like *City* can be impressive, Dupris said, it feels “plastic” compared to the natural resources that should be prioritized.

IT WAS A LONG TRUDGE to the west end of *City*, where the other main structure sits.

Dickensheets and Holmes separated once more, taking paths of varying altitudes. Without the constant stimulus of cellphones and urban life, the walk forced Dickensheets’ mind to settle and notice *City*’s details: the subtle shades in the color palette, the spectacularly straight concrete borders, the balance of hills and hollows.

Heizer’s second anchoring structure came into view around the plaza. It looked like a series of pillars in an overall rectangular formation, like the Lincoln Memorial. But as the visitor drew closer to the structure, called 45°, 90°, 180°, it resolved into a series of concrete triangles lined in rows ahead of a rectangular backdrop.

Against the backdrop lay three rectangles. Like scattered children’s blocks, one was tilted against the back wall, another stood parallel and the last lay flat on the ground. While the rest of *City* reveled in openness, these blocks created the few hiding spots in the monument.



A view of *Complex One*, the first segment of *City* that Michael Heizer built, in Garden Valley, Nevada. **Todd Heisler / The New York Times**



Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels*, Great Basin Desert, Utah, 1973-1976. Concrete, steel, and earth. 110 1/2 x 822 x 636 inches. Art © Estate of Nancy Holt/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy of the Estate of Nancy Holt. **Unknown**

The tall concrete background of 45°, 90°, 180° provided rare shade at *City* on the cloudless June day, and its concrete floor offered the best place to sit. Benches were a noticeable omission.

Dickensheets and Holmes returned from their respective paths and sat at the base of one of the rectangles. Dickensheets passed trail mix around, and Holmes fumbled some, picking raisins and M&Ms off Heizer's pristine floor.

It was a humbling human act that felt comforting in a place devoid of humanity. And it was also one of the few hints you had that Heizer's *City* was not invincible.

In small moments, evidence of reality appeared within the sterile, alien world Heizer has created.

Sticks had blown onto the berms. The workers had missed some weeds. Birds had made a nest on one of the rectangles of 45°, 90°, 180°.

"Such an interesting choice, all that bird shit," Dickensheets said.

The solstice washed *City* in gold for the tour group's final minutes, warming its cool shades as the visitors met Higbee at the car after the 3-hour encounter. There was a consensus: Everyone wished the time was longer.

City stayed with Dickensheets and Holmes for days afterward. For both, the word that came closest to describing it was *sublime*.

"There are so many problematic layers to the work, its placement and why it's there," said Holmes, who has since been hired at the Triple Aught Foundation. "In the same: Is it

bad work? No, *City* is great for exactly what it is."

For Harris, *City* is a monumental example of the national narrative of land in the U.S. The entire country is Indigenous land, and its possession inherently contradicts Indigenous relationships with it. Harris thinks it's worth questioning *City*, land art or any other usage of land.

"All of those land artworks were the same," Harris said. "I would say the same thing about any one of them — that we should be questioning what the actual land itself remembers and what the land itself wants and who belongs to that land everywhere."

Douglas plans to see *City* one day. She believes it would help her understand her complex feelings about it. But she's unsure if she could ever separate the art from its heavy sociopolitical context.

After seeing nature reclaim *Double Negative*, she thinks about how she would like to reclaim *City*.

She imagines having a powwow with various tribes across Nevada. They would have campsites across the structure and a southern drum from the powwow circle to create what Douglas called a "moment of reclamation."

"That would be amazing," Douglas said. "But at the same time, it would just be a moment. This thing is meant to be something that's going to be there forever." ☀

Savanna Strott is a journalist in Las Vegas.

This project is a collaboration between HCN and the Nevada Independent. Additional reporting by Joey Lovato.

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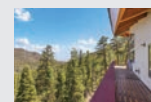
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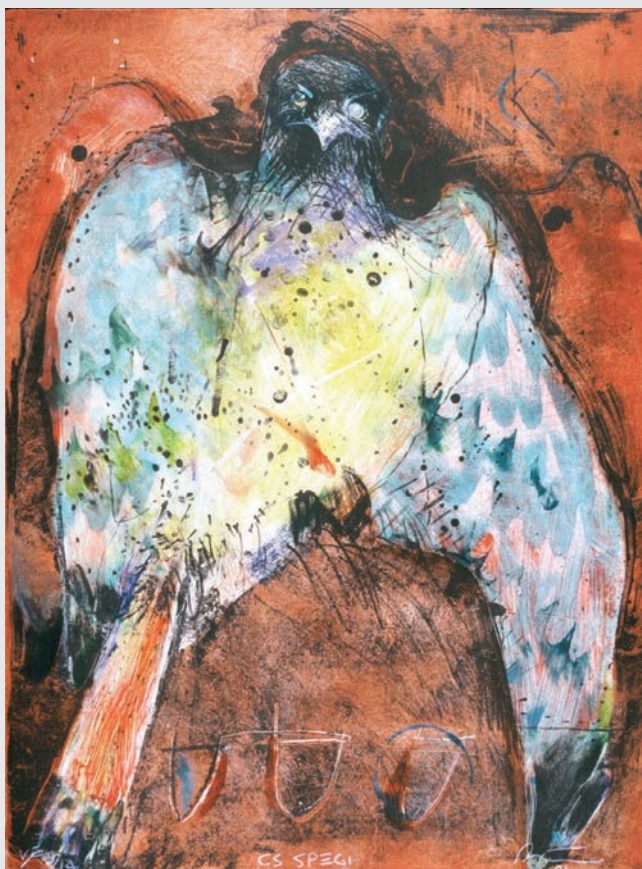
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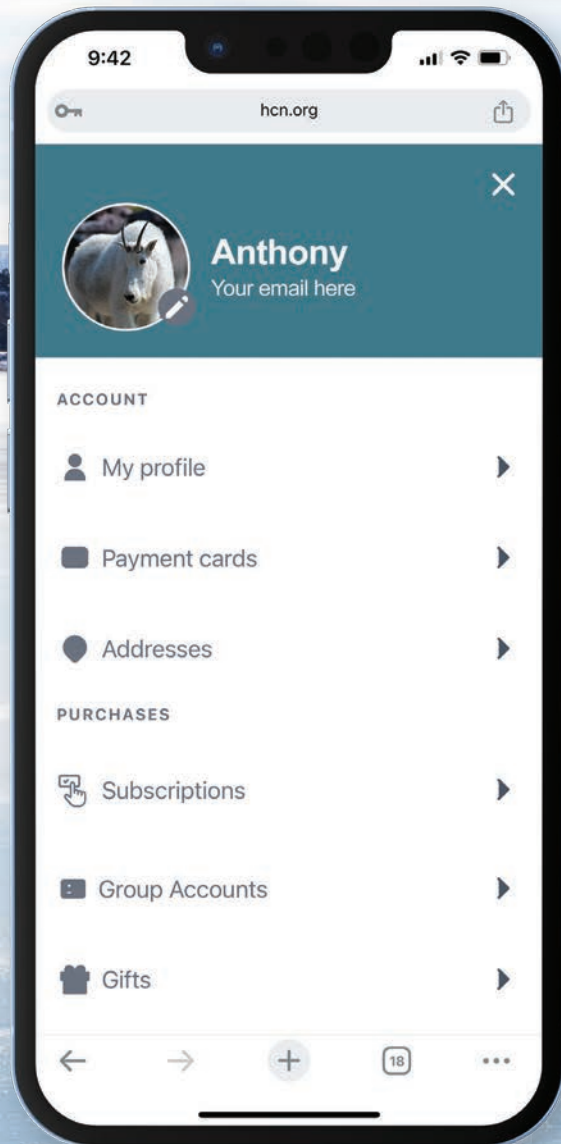
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South Los Angeles, California.

ESSAY

The scrappy store that gave me everything when I had nothing

Before its demise, the 99 Cents Only chain fed generations of families across four states.

BY TINA VASQUEZ
PHOTOS BY NOÉ MONTES

IT'S A FUNNY thing to earn more money than anyone in your family, but to still be out of money all of the time. At 39, I'm still figuring out how to make my money stretch across multiple households in different states — and sometimes even into Mexico. There are times when it makes me feel proud that my paycheck goes so far. Mostly it just stresses me out.

I feel this worry most acutely during Christmastime, when my fiancé, Ben, and I fly from North Carolina to California to spend two weeks with my dad. Like many people, I'm always strapped for cash during the holidays. And as the person in my family with the most financial stability, the responsibility for making Christmas happen falls directly on my shoulders.

Inevitably, this means that at some point during the two-week period in December when I'm back in my childhood home, I find myself shopping for groceries at the very place I once promised myself I'd

never return to if given the choice: The 99 Cents Only store.

Last year, when my reserves were running dangerously low but the need for groceries and other odds and ends was only growing, Ben and I drove to the 99 Cents Only store on Telegraph Road in the working-class Latino community of Santa Fe Springs, located in Southeast Los Angeles.

Hello, old friend.

I hit the deli case first, as usual. Almond milk, eggs, soyrizo, queso fresco. The refrigerated aisle led directly to the produce section, an embarrassment of riches. I threw fresh fruit and vegetables into the cart with abandon: poblanos, broccoli, mixed greens, bananas, jalapeños, cilantro, plantains, bell peppers, sweet potatoes, berries, kumquats. I restocked my dad's spice cabinet and then moved straight into canned goods and pantry items for black beans and Tapatio hot sauce, grabbing whole wheat tortillas on the way.

It's a wildly different experience

shopping at the 99 Cents Only store when you have a regular paycheck, versus when you haven't a clue as to when you'll see your next dollar. But this December when I return home — and my checking account shrinks to a number I find distressing — there will be no 99 Cents Only store to serve as my saving grace — not the one on Telegraph nor any of the others that once dotted the Southeast LA landscape where I was born and raised. In April, the chain announced that all 371 of its locations across California, Nevada, Arizona and Texas were closing because of “significant and lasting challenges in the retail environment.” Shortly after, news broke that Dollar General was taking over the chain, obtaining its intellectual property in North America and the rights to 170 stores, including my old store in Santa Fe Springs.

As the *Los Angeles Times*' Gustavo Arellano wrote, for generations, 99 Cents Only Stores gave “millions of us — immigrants, long-timers, working-class folks, or people who just want a good deal” — a “fair shake.”

And oh, boy, did my family need a fair shake.

I grew up poor and spent the first 30 years of my life living below the poverty line. As a child, I hated the 99 Cents Only store, especially each fall when it came time to buy new school supplies. I wanted the plentitude of my classmates' lives: Lisa Frank folders, erasers that smelled like vanilla cake and *real* Crayola

crayons — not the off-brand shit my parents bought from the 99 Cents Only store. It all felt so sad and poorly constructed, the crayons snapping in your sweaty little hand if you pressed down too hard.

I only really began to appreciate the 99 Cents Only store as an adult, when I moved back in with my family and became responsible for all of our groceries and meals. I was a 23-year-old freelance journalist who made about \$16,000 a year. This was in 2008, when most things at the 99 Cents Only store actually cost 99 cents. I had so little money then, I often counted my items as they went down the checkout conveyor belt, pulling food aside as the bill crept uncomfortably close to the total amount I had in my checking account.

None of this was fun, of course. But when I think back to that time in my life, it reminds me of something my dad often says about growing up in a very rural area of Michoacán, Mexico: “Everyone was poor, but everyone had everything.” The grandparents who helped raise him knew how to live off the land. When my dad came to the U.S. and eventually started a family, he carried those lessons with him. The skills didn't translate exactly — we didn't grow up eating chapulines as a source of protein, for example — but my dad knew how to make the most of what he had, often spinning delicious magic out of thin air.

California's Mexican markets like Northgate González allowed families like

mine to eat so well that I didn't initially realize we were poor. As far as food was concerned, this was basically true across the board. I grew up in Downey, California, or “Mexican Beverly Hills.” It certainly never felt that way to us, but even now, you could never convince me that the \$20 “family packs” from the local 'hood burger joints that my mom patronized on payday weren't just as delicious as any of the overpriced fare you'd find near Rodeo Drive.

When I was a 20-something newly interested in cooking and responsible for every meal my family ate, the 99 Cents Only store didn't exactly speak to the abundance I wanted to cultivate through food. I dreamt of going to farmers markets and buying seasonal produce. But over time, I learned to treat my shopping at the 99 Cents Only store as a kind of cooking challenge that forced me to be strategic and inventive. Instead of operating around the seasons, I learned to structure my meals around the supply chain.

Every time you walked into that store, it was a total crapshoot. There was no telling what you'd find. This is how I learned to cook. If I found yeast, I bought flour and olive oil and learned how to bake focaccia. If there was gelatin, I bought heavy cream and learned how to make panna cotta.

The most reliable part of the chain was the produce, likely because of California's role as the nation's most productive agricultural



state. You never knew exactly what you'd find, but you knew it would be high-quality *and* cheap. Perusing the 99 Cents Only store's produce aisle, I almost felt like I was getting away with something illicit. The chain's giant boxes of mixed greens, which often included expensive varieties like escarole, taught me to love fussy salads. The fat asparagus spears I found for a while inspired me to learn how to make hollandaise.

But none of this exists anymore, and neither does the person who learned to cook with less. As I've gotten older and gradually made more money, I've become too comfortable with the idea that I'll always have a paycheck — despite already surviving two layoffs in the journalism industry. It's often at the grocery store when Ben and I fight. Growing up with nothing, I like nice things. He grew up with not much at all, and he likes practical things. I want the \$8 heirloom tomatoes, the \$10 bag of artisanal pasta, the local goat cheese, price be damned. I want it all — and I hate when he reminds me that what I have may not last forever.

Perhaps I've become so removed from the circumstances I grew up in — and so confident in my ability to hustle to take care of my family — that I no longer properly fear the poverty I spent a majority of my adult life fighting. When Ben issues his periodic reminder that nothing good lasts forever, I always respond in the same way: "I grew up

poor and I can be poor again." But can I? Can I *really*? It's a very refined set of skills that allows you to navigate poverty, muscles I've not worked for almost a decade.

There is a significant difference between being broke and being poor — something I admittedly have to remind myself of when I feel like I'm just scraping by. The night before payday, I often can't sleep. I'm running calculations in my head of how much of my paycheck will go out the door before I pay a single bill of my own. My dad's \$500 car insurance deductible, on top of the money I already send him each month so that he can eat after paying the mortgage. The \$100 my niece needs for dance classes. It's all possible because another paycheck will come. Unless one day it doesn't.

In July, I returned to the site of the 99 Cents Only store on Telegraph Road. It's located inside the Santa Fe Springs Promenade, which sounds far fancier than the strip mall actually is. I stood outside and watched as workers readied the storefront to become a Dollar General. I can't say exactly why I felt compelled to say goodbye. I guess I just wanted to look at the store one last time and thank the scrappy chain for giving me everything when I had nothing. ☀

Tina Vasquez is a journalist based in North Carolina who covers immigration, reproductive injustice, food, labor and Latinx culture.

*I often counted
my items as they
went down the
conveyor belt,
pulling food aside
as the bill crept
uncomfortably close
to the amount I
had in my checking
account.*

(Facing page, left to right) Inglewood, California. Santa Fe Springs, California.
(This page, left to right) Mid-Wilshire store, Los Angeles, California. East Hollywood store, Los Angeles, California.



CONFETTI WESTERNS

Exploring the queer natural and cultural histories of the American Southwest.



The butterfly effect

What a 9,000-mile painted lady migration taught me about queer survival.

BY MILES W. GRIFFIS
ART BY ANTONIO PULGARÍN

THE SPLATTERS ON MY WINDSHIELD

were electric yellow. Against the blue of the desert sky, they looked like daytime fireworks that had frozen at their climax. Each collision cut deeper into my soul, causing me to drop well below the speed limit on the sidwinding road leading out of California's Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. At a slower pace, my butterfly body count plunged; one female even managed to hitchhike on my car like a bejeweled hood ornament.

I now understand why writer Sara Dykman followed the monarch butterfly migration over 10,000 miles by bicycle: She could pedal at speeds similar to the fiery insects and thereby avoid turning them into clarified butter. At Anza-Borrego, I wasn't traveling among monarchs, but rather their smaller cousins *Vanessa cardui* — the "painted ladies," who always reminded me of drag queens and the rows of colorful houses in San Francisco.

Catalyzed by a wet winter in 2019, nearly a billion ladies started their 9,000-mile migration near the Mexico border, later riding the curve of California into the Pacific Northwest. But they were taking their sweet time; a "superbloom" in the desert justified a little procrastination. At their speediest, the butterflies travel at 25 miles per hour. Ecologist Arthur Shapiro once described experiencing their migration as "like being in a hail of bullets." Their miles-wide front spanned the desert to the coast, attaining an elevation of 22,000 feet. In six generations, the painted ladies travel as far as Alaska and back. Eggs hatch into caterpillars; caterpillars shed tight skins and construct cocoons, where they sprout wings and transform into butterflies. By the time they return to Mexico in the late fall, they land where their great-, great-, great-, great-, great-grandparents first appeared as mere eggs. In Africa, the same species crosses the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea before making a U-turn at the Arctic Circle.

After returning to Los Angeles, I lived in a fever dream, thinking of proboscises covered with blazing star nectar as the butterflies mated in kinky spirals. According to a review in the *Journal of Insect Science*, at least 25 species of butterflies exhibit same-sex sexual interactions, and nearly a third of male monarchs partake in homosexual courtships, curling and conjoining their abdomens

together. Others exhibit gynandromorphism, with a male wing on one side and a female on the other: a stunning kaleidoscope of colors and patterns, blending genders.

Randy Conner, who was part of the countercultural Radical Faerie movement, wrote a guide to LGBTQ+ myths and lore in which he probed connections between butterflies and queerness. He noted the Greek poet Sappho, herself a gay icon, depicted the god Eros with butterfly wings. Spanish poet Federico García Lorca once imagined Walt Whitman as a "lovely old man" with a "beard full of butterflies." Writer Brooks Peters describes the "butterfly effect" in literature and notes, writ-

*I drank in the
phenomenon, watching
the river of winged bugs
for hours — translucent
orange, white and black
wing scales in the late
afternoon sun.*

ing "as if by some bizarre literary alchemy," any book with the word butterfly in its title in the 20th century has some hidden gay theme.

I sank into Rigoberto González's memoir *Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa* shortly after witnessing the ladies in the desert. Born in the Mexican state of Michoacán, where monarchs winter before their long migration, González connects the orange wanderers with both place and family. "We'd walk around wearing butterflies like appliqué on our clothing," he wrote of his childhood in the town of Zacapu. "When I see a monarch pictured in a magazine or television screen I'm swept back into the strange but comforting intimacy of their winking paradise."

The monarch also became a symbol of González's migrations between México and California's Coachella Valley, where he picked grapes as a child and had early

sexual experiences with closeted farm workers. His connection to the monarchs only grew stronger as he matured, embracing the homophobic Spanish slur he'd been called his whole life. "In México the homosexual has many names ... and my favorite *mariposa*, butterfly, (is) an allusion to the feminine fluttering of eyelashes."

As the butterflies flew northwest from Borrego, I realized their path would take them across my home in LA. I waited anxiously for them that week, buying bouquets of irresistible asters from the farmer's market. The day they arrived, I placed the flowers on my windowsill next to a colorful sign that read "Welcome, ladies!"

I drank in the phenomenon from a knoll in Griffith Park, lying next to aromatic sagebrush, watching the river of winged bugs flow above me for hours — translucent orange, white and black wing scales in the late afternoon sun. Most were expected to cross over into the Mojave Desert and cruise the deep trench of Owens Valley like bowling balls down slick lanes, seeking refuge and host plants to lay the next generation.

The dazzling group of migrants overhead reminded me of González and the extraordinary migrations other queer people make. LGBTQ+ asylum seekers traverse impossible landscapes for the possibility of better human rights. There are transgender people fleeing states because of bigoted anti-LGBTQ+ laws, and the constant flow of queer people from rural towns to cities rich with queer culture and life — like my own flight to LA from Colorado nearly a decade ago. Still, there is the urge to return home to my roots like a painted lady, and indeed, queer people are now migrating in reverse, too: from Colorado's Tenacious Unicorn Ranch to California's Solar Punk Farm, we've been establishing a new queer, rural West.

Through generations of family and chosen family, queer people have swept over entire landscapes, the fierce legacy of our ancestors within us. We leave home in search of something better, seeking refuge and battling the elements in hope the next generation won't have to. We might not touch down in the Arctic Circle ourselves, but we each go as far as our speckled wings will take us. ☀

Miles W. Griffis is a writer and journalist based in Southern California.

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

Stay on the boardwalks; don't pet the buffalo; don't drive off road and into any of the thermal features — there are just too many rules to remember these days. Outsideonline.com reported that “five visitors to Yellowstone National Park found themselves in hot water — literally — when their SUV ended up in a geyser” — the Semi-Centennial Geyser, which is within spitting distance, or, in this case, plunging distance, of the popular Grand Loop Road. Fortunately, all five escaped the 105-degree thermal pool without life-threatening injuries, though their vehicle was not as lucky. The next day, workers closed the road, and recovery specialists hauled the SUV out of 9 feet of very hot water. “Semi-Centennial” got its name in honor of the one and only time it's known to have erupted, shooting water 300 feet into the air. That day — Aug. 14, 1922 — happened to coincide with Yellowstone National Park's 50th, or semi-centennial, anniversary. If a Yellowstone geyser is only going to blow once, that's pretty good timing. Unlike Old Faithful, it's been quiet ever since.

However, there's been plenty of other hydrothermal “activity” at Yellowstone this summer — which isn't surprising, considering the park sprawls atop a giant volcano. Dailymontan.com reported that on the morning of July 23, Black Diamond Pool in Biscuit Basin, located about 2.1 miles northwest of Old Faithful, exploded, resulting in flying debris and a damaged boardwalk. Luckily, no one was hurt. Some of the video footage from the aftermath shows park visitors lingering after the blast, apparently in no hurry to vacate the freshly blown-up area. Perhaps we're getting a little too used to living on the edge, just waiting for the next epic disaster to blow up in our face.

WASHINGTON

What's a nice exotic animal like you doing in a place like this? Koin.com reported that a kinkajou, native to South American tropical rainforests, was spotted at the Selah Creek rest stop in Yakima, Washington, which is about as un-tropical a place as you're likely to find. The kinkajou is a funny-looking critter that's related to raccoons, though it actually resembles Nosferatu the Vampire, which is slightly unsettling. But what's it doing in the middle of Washington state? Well, the Fish and Wildlife Department people who rescued it said they weren't sure whether it escaped from somewhere else

or was abandoned there. For the time being, it's being looked after by Tacoma's Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium. The zoo said that “despite their cuteness,” kinkajous don't make good pets. Everyone said that about Nosferatu, too.

ARIZONA

If you're traveling to the Grand Canyon this summer and looking for a rest stop not populated by kinkajous, you might enjoy Poozeum, an unusual roadside attraction in Williams, Arizona, that is a museum dedicated to doo-doo — or, more specifically, to coprolites, i.e., *fossilized feces*, particularly ancient dinosaur

poop. Poozeum's founder and driving force, George Frandsen, told Azcentral.com that when he was 18, he saw a coprolite for the first time in a rock shop in Moab, Utah, and it “sparked his curiosity.” Frandsen thought the “peculiar time capsules” offered an incredible way to study the diets, behavior and environment of prehistoric creatures. The Poozeum and Frandsen hold two Guinness World Records, one for the world's largest coprolite collection and the second for the largest sample from a carnivore. A review posted on the Poozeum's Facebook page by a 9-year-old visitor named William summed it up: “This combines my two favorite things — dinosaurs and inappropriate jokes.”

UTAH/CALIFORNIA

If fossilized dino dung doesn't float your boat, and we rather hope you don't have to find out if it does, then maybe a green-boned dinosaur named “Gnatalie” is more your thing. ABC7.com reported that a new species of sauropod similar to *Diplodocus*, was excavated in the Utah Badlands in 2007. It's older than *Tyrannosaurus rex*, but what really got paleontologists excited was that Gnatalie's bones are green. What's Gnatalie — named for the gnats that swarmed throughout the excavation — got to be green about, anyway? The skeleton acquired its olive green color from the mineral celadonite during the fossilization process. Most celadonite forms in the kind of volatile conditions, such as volcanic or hydrothermal environments, that tend to destroy bones. In Gnatalie's case, the celadonite entered her remains when conditions were optimal, and now she reigns at the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles in all her green and glamorous glory. ✨



Heard Around the West

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

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY ARMANDO VEVE

A large flock of birds, possibly terns, is captured in mid-flight over a lush, green wetland landscape. In the background, a calm river reflects the sky, and distant industrial structures, including tall chimneys, are visible against a hazy horizon. The overall scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of late afternoon or early morning.

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#IAM THE WEST

DOC WILSON
Founder of Peace Peloton
Seattle, Washington

We started in June of 2020, after the murder of George Floyd. Some cyclist friends and I wanted to bring people together in a way that expressed connection and community. So we organized a bike ride from Seattle's Alki Beach to the Northwest African American Museum, and then organized a few more rides, and we kept going from there. I think the thing that helps bring people out to our bike rides is that it's all levels. It's not like you got to go super-fast; you can ride 10 miles an hour, you can ride a road bike, you can ride a beach cruiser. But the thing about Peace Peloton is that we're not a cycling group. We're an economic development organization. We help cultivate and grow Black-owned businesses and Black entrepreneurs. The bike program is one of the ways we raise money to support entrepreneurs.

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