

High Country News



**LATINO
VOTE
2024**



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Organizing Director Gina Mendez at the Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA) office in North Phoenix, Arizona, in early May. **Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN**

Know the West.

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Democracy on high

I'M IN THE HIGH COUNTRY, above treeline, walking through a rock garden. Undulating slabs smoothed by glaciers are dotted with smaller boulders, stones and pebbles that broke off from bigger formations. It is a riot of color: Deep reds fading to red-orange, crystalline white cutting through a light gray substrate, bluish-green facets so polished they resemble jade. I've spent the week exploring a "research natural area" where no overnight camping is allowed. The flora here is stunning: Late-season yellow-and-red groundcover and swaying grasses. The patterns and symmetries evidenced in the rocks and vegetation seem holy to me somehow.

It's election season, but I've been beyond the range of texts and emails and the nightly news — a blessing. From one of these long, rolling rock slabs decorated with erratics, I decide to establish my own platform with the following tenets: I believe that ecological systems are wise beyond our recognition. I also believe that there are tipping points beyond which there can be rapid and catastrophic collapse of those systems accompanied by an equally catastrophic loss of species.

I believe that future generations have a right to a planet with clean water and a habitable climate, with mountains to climb and deserts to roam. I believe in justice and equity for all peoples and beings, even the inanimate ones, which, for all we know, might well be animate. I believe in the right of all citizens to vote in fair and free elections. And I believe in the democratic process by which we vote for local officials, congressional representatives and presidents who will represent our beliefs and values as they carry out their jobs. My campaign slogan is: *Be kind to one another. And: The only way out is through.*

In this issue of *High Country News*, we bring you election coverage you're not likely to find anywhere else. Roberto (Bear) Guerra and Bernardo Ruiz hit the road with organizers in Arizona and Nevada, reporting on efforts to get Latino voters to the polls in the West's two swing states. And in central Washington, Natalia Mesa explores how Latino power is rising after a redistricting effort that diluted the Latino vote was challenged in court. B. "Toastie" Oaster explains why some Indigenous voters feel conflicted about voting in U.S. elections, while Jonathan Thompson rounds up some of the West's more interesting ballot measures and legislation.

The practice of democracy is precious; some might say it's as holy as a high-altitude rock garden. Yet it requires a well-informed populace to function properly. Thank you for choosing *HCN* as one of your sources of information.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief



Ray Bloxham / Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance

Why Utah is suing the U.S. for control of public land

The state asked the U.S. Supreme Court to weigh in on the future of federal lands.

By Brooke Larsen



Philip Pacheco / Bloomberg via Getty Images

The California Forever debate moves underground

A billionaire-backed real estate company will continue to try to gain local support, while residents weigh their options.

By Erin X. Wong



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ON THE COVER

Latinos active in the 2024 elections. Pictured from left, top row: Elizabeth Rentería, Culinary Union shop steward and guest-room attendant, Las Vegas, Nevada; Jonathan Soto Robles, deputy director of grassroots, The LIBRE Initiative, Phoenix, Arizona; ELLA founder Maria Fernandez, Sunnyside, Washington; Victor Rodriguez, potential voter, Phoenix. Middle row: Ismael Luna, potential voter, Phoenix; Audrey Peral, Chispa Nevada program director, Las Vegas; Maria Barquin, Forge Radio Network program director, Radio Campesina, Phoenix. Bottom row: Alejandra Gomez, executive director of Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA), Phoenix; Bryan Hurtado, Make the Road Action Nevada volunteer, Las Vegas; Osvaldo Franco, producer and radio host, Radio Campesina, Phoenix; Chelsea Dimas, Washington state representative candidate, Sunnyside, Washington. **Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN**

Tribal land in the Jocko Valley on the Flathead Reservation in western Montana, where the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes are working to build resilience against the larger and more frequent wildfires associated with climate change. **Tailyr Irvine / HCN**



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LETTERS

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

WHAT ELSE WAS LOST?

I found Savanna Strott's piece on *City* and other land art interesting ("What is Permanence?" September 2024), but one thing bothered me: almost no mention of *City*'s intrusion on — even destruction of — its environment. It's not only Indigenous peoples that lived there. The article does mention that the area had been a Native hunting ground. This indicates the presence of game — that is, fauna and flora. It's hard to believe a concrete construction a mile and a half long by a half-mile wide in the desert has little impact, to say nothing of any protective fencing. I kept waiting for any mention of this and was disappointed.

Rick Ross
Sweet Home, Oregon

I'm distressed by the latest depiction of "land art." It's an artist's imposition on a land that was beautifully undisturbed before and disrespects the former

Indigenous occupants who lived so lightly in these areas. Whether permanent or not, the affected land is disrupted. Nature, absent such disturbance, usually is better.

Artists' egos and energy devoted to this kind of land art would be better directed solving more critical planetary problems!
Catherine Hancock
Reno, Nevada

COPPING OUT ON COPROLITES

We've been thoroughly entertained by Heard Around the West under Tiffany Midge's leadership, but we couldn't help noticing a glaring omission in September's column. After reading about the Poozeum, we were left wondering — just how massive was that carnivore's "shartifact"? After some digging, we discovered it's only 67.5 centimeters by 15.7 centimeters (2 feet 2 inches by 6 inches). Honestly, we were expecting a more colossal fossil. I guess she didn't spec-

ify the size so readers wouldn't poo-poo the story.

**Michael Rowley and
Preston Lopez**
Oakland, California

WHAT ABOUT WATER?

I applaud the Eagle Mountain Nature and Wildlife Alliance for its efforts to help mule deer ("A deer corridor through sprawl," August 2024). I can't help but wonder where the water is going to come from for those 150,000 people projected for 2060. Shouldn't Utah be controlling urban sprawl for this reason as well?

Katherine Brown
Cochise, Arizona

THE RIGHT WORD MATTERS

It was disappointing to see the language used by the letter in the September issue arguing in support of "Anthropocene" to describe the current era of environmental destruction. While the term has resonance and is here to stay, it ought to come with a qualification that it is "not all humans" who are causing the climate crisis. Rather, it is a small subset of the captains of industry that are to blame for climate change, not whoever implied as "overrunning" the planet. This nuance is built into other words, such as "Capitalocene." It is important to guard against the kind of language that can lead to dangerous ecofascist ideologies at worst, and is misleading at best.

Eli Simmer
Moab, Utah

RESTORING LALIÍK

Sincere thanks for making the public aware of the radioactive waste legacy in the West. Articles like "Laliik" (August 2024) continue to put pressure on our government to remediate hundreds of closed mine and mill sites. Those sites on Indigenous land (Church Rock and Cove on the

Navajo Nation, White Mesa on the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation, etc.) are more dangerous to tribal residents because the areas are economically challenged and receive limited resources and financial support due to their small voice in the political machine. Tribal efforts to publicize clean-up needs are important. Keep shining a light on this problem.

David Palmer
Farmington, New Mexico

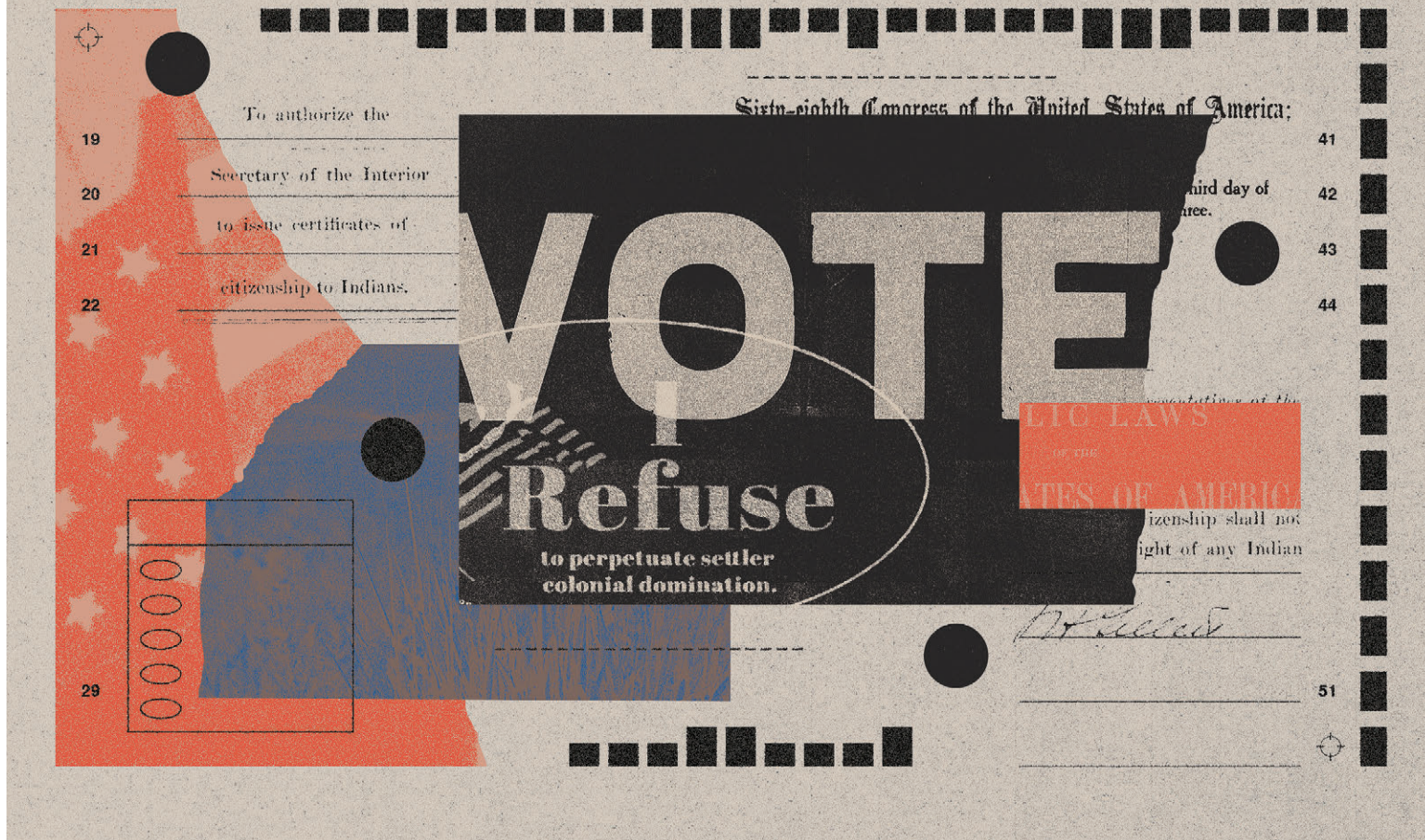
"Laliik" raises an intriguing possibility — possible "co-management" or "co-stewardship" of the area at Hanford known to the English-speaking world as Rattlesnake Mountain. People who haven't visited it often don't appreciate its scale. It is an area of approximately 75,000 acres that served only as a security buffer for Hanford. No industrial or waste management areas were ever developed there. In 1967, this portion of Hanford was designated an ecological reserve, and it has retained that status ever since. The only Hanford buildings built there were a meteorological/astronomical/security facility on the crest of the mountain, and a small cluster of office and laboratories farther down the slope, where I worked for a few years. In the last quarter century, nearly all these buildings have been removed.

As things stand now, the old "reserve" is closed to the public and administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, along with a strip of land adjacent to the Columbia River, comprising the "Hanford Reach National Monument." Why not honor the land's more ancient heritage and return it to at least the custodial care of the Native Americans who have a centuries-long knowledge of, and respect for, this sacred mountain?

Maurice Warner
Seattle, Washington

CORRECTIONS

Our credit for the photo of Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* in September's "What is Permanence" was incomplete. It should have read: Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels*, 1973–76. Great Basin Desert, Utah. Dia Art Foundation with support from Holt/Smithson Foundation. © Holt/Smithson Foundation and Dia Art Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: ZCZ Films/James Fox, courtesy Holt/Smithson Foundation. Additionally, the Heard around the West illustration should have been credited to Daniel González. And, in August's Heard Around the West, we misspelled Chief Arvol Looking Horse's name. Special thanks to the sharp-eyed reader who sent us a postcard to let us know. We regret the errors.



REPORTAGE

Is voting sacred?

Every election year, Indigenous people grapple with whether and how to engage in electoral politics.

BY B. 'TOASTIE' OASTER
ILLUSTRATION BY J.D. REEVES

IN INDIAN COUNTRY, major election years bring a deluge of messaging that “voting is sacred,” as then-Congresswoman and current Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said during the 2020 Democratic National Convention. The push to get out the Native vote is strong; it’s sometimes credited for swinging the 2020 election for Joe Biden.

Every election cycle, Native communities and individuals grapple with a web of

dilemmas: Are polling stations accessible? Are any of the candidates not directly hostile to Indigenous interests? Is voting in American elections compatible with Native cultural value systems? And, ultimately, is it even worth doing?

This year marks the centennial of the Indian Citizenship Act, which theoretically gave Native people the right to vote in U.S. elections — though it was several decades before all 50 states actually honored it. But U.S. citizenship and the right to vote in U.S. elections are not universally celebrated by Native people.

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy rejected imposed U.S. citizenship as treasonous, and even now considers it a violation of international law. As citizens of the Six Nations, they do not necessarily seek dual citizenship. Indigenous history shows that citizenship and voting rights can actually be a defeat instead of a victory: they assimilate Natives, and face them with candidates who are unlikely to support Indigenous liberation. Given this reality, not all Natives embrace participation in American electoral political theater or see it as wholesome and constructive.

Among those who eventually rejected the right to vote in U.S. elections was the late Diné writer, activist and hard-core musician Klee Benally. In his 2023 book *No Spiritual Surrender: Indigenous Anarchy in Defense of the Sacred*, he argued that voting is simply “maintaining our own oppression.” The Native vote, he said, is an assimilationist tool for solving the “Indian Problem,” employed only when the U.S. military “couldn’t fulfill its genocidal programs.”

Blackfire, the band Benally formed with his siblings, played at get-out-the-vote rallies in the aughts and was even in a short documentary called “Rez Rock the Vote.” Benally later explained that his politics back then were influenced by writers like Henry David Thoreau. But he grew disillusioned by what he saw as the Democratic Party’s “rampant co-optation, tokenization, victimization, and outright political exploitation.” Benally’s interest in Thoreau gave way to more radical influences, like Malcolm X and Industrial-era anarchist Lucy Parsons.

During the fraught 2020 election year, Benally published a zine called *Voting is not Harm Reduction*, which appeared as a chapter

in his 2023 book. In online conversations, he ruffled feathers but also drew in others who shared his sentiments. Benally passed away just after his book was published. It quickly sold out, as the 2024 election year began.

Benally rejected voting entirely. He grounded his position in historical context, tracing the Native vote back to the Doctrine of Discovery, through boarding schools and allotment programs and into assimilationist policies. Native voting, he said, produces Native politicians, who he compared to “Indian scouts” — Natives enlisted “to aid the enemy military.”

“Liberation cannot be found in the occupier’s ballot box,” Benally wrote. “No matter who you vote for,” he concluded, “settler colonialism wins.”

MEANWHILE, Indigenous people who want to participate in U.S. elections still face rampant voter suppression. Jacqueline De León (Isleta Pueblo), staff attorney at the Native American Rights Fund, co-authored the 2020 report *Obstacles at Every Turn*, which outlines barriers to Native voting. These include long distances to polling stations, which may be off-reservation, or requiring proof of a home address in areas where legislators know some rural Natives would not have it — a strategy De León compares to Jim Crow “literacy tests.”

“Government gets its legitimacy, under some theories, through the consent of the governed,” De León explained, nodding to language in the Declaration of Independence. “And you express your consent through participation, even though you’re born into a system that’s largely outside of your control.” She understands why some regard voting as a form of consent, as Benally did: “I can respect that perspective.”

But that’s not the only way to think about it, she said. “America is both this colonizing impulse, designed to protect a few in power and retain its systems of power. And it’s a system that is designed to allow folks to engage and obtain power for themselves. It does both of those things simultaneously,” De León said. That’s not true of all colonizing governments, she noted. In its ideal form, American democracy “provides an opportunity for power, if you exercise it and have a fair chance to exercise it.”

For her, having that fair chance is essen-

tial before people can decide whether they want to engage. Owing to voter suppression, “we haven’t received a full and free and fair invitation to participate in the American system to begin with,” she said. “Until that happens, I just don’t think that question is ripe.”

Both De León and Nick Tilsen (Oglala Lakota), president and CEO of NDN Collective, pointed out that voting can create better conditions under which to organize. “We can be building towards the nationhood of tribal communities while at the same time voting in our (local elections) so that our sacred sites don’t get destroyed,” Tilsen said. In America’s flawed, inequitable and corporation-infiltrated version of democracy, he sees voting as a tactic. “We can be doing multiple different tactics.” In fact, Tilsen was doing that the day I spoke to him — organizing protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, in solidarity with those demanding a ceasefire in Gaza. He was there with NDN Collective’s director of policy and advocacy, Janene Yazzie (Diné). They’d protested at the Republican National Convention the previous month.

“Our strategies don’t begin and end at the ballot box, and don’t begin and end with this two-party system,” said Yazzie. Partisan discourse, she said, is just smoke and mirrors: “The two parties are actually very much in alignment on many policy positions that have a detrimental impact on Indian country.” As an example, she cited U.S.-Mexico border control policies which criminalize the migration of transboundary Native communities that predate the border.

In his book, Benally points out that “resource colonialism was and continues to be a bipartisan effort.” In this context, the two parties are “nearly indistinguishable,” both being “allegiant managers of settler authority.”

Even if a Native casts tactical votes in state and local elections, what are they to do when faced with the kind of devil’s bargain federal elections present? Pressure to vote is noticeably high this year, awhirl with online rhetoric about voting as “harm reduction,” or the need to “vote blue no matter who” to “save democracy.”

“Our people don’t deserve that messaging,” Yazzie said. “When has this ‘democracy’ worked for us?” she laughed. “We have a responsibility to honor our lived experiences, to honor our ancestral memory, our histories of resistance.”

Benally wrote that pressuring non-voters is paternalistic and reflects the fragility of American democracy. “Policing civic engagement through shame and victim-blaming is a debasing tactic,” he wrote. He called voting-as-harm-reduction “the government issued blanket of the Democratic Party.” To heal, he said, we have to end the harm, not lessen it, and “restore healthy and just relations with Mother Earth and all her beings.”

RADICAL LANGUAGE can sometimes fracture communities and families. But De León, Yazzie, Tilsen and Benally himself seem to agree that the whole point of asking these questions is to find a healing path toward unity and freedom. “We all have to acknowledge that we’re starting from a position of pain,” De León said. “Here I am, advocating for America in some sense, and at the same time I’m fighting, day in and day out, hostile state and county governments that are denying basic civil rights.” It takes work to reconcile these contradictions, she added.

Benally expressed weariness at fighting for inclusion in settler society. “Why not fight to end the entirety of their violent global project? Why not fight for liberation?”

According to Yazzie, focusing too narrowly on voting-versus-not-voting is missing the bigger picture. “I don’t think voting is sacred — I think our resistance is sacred,” she said. She called Native resistance both a gift from our ancestors and a prayer for the next seven generations. To heal community division, Yazzie suggests individuals re-root themselves in the prayer or vision they hold. “What are we fighting for? What is that vision we have for our families and our communities?” she said. “That’s where our real unity comes up — not whether we all decide to vote or not, but what we decide we are working towards.”

The blueprint of American democracy, she noted, is “a poorly copied interpretation” of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy’s — one that’s abandoned Indigenous principles like matrilineality, matriarchy and responsibility to the land and to others. “We’re fighting for that right to restore those lifeways, to restore those practices,” she said. ☀

B. “Toastie” Oaster (they/them) is an award-winning journalist and staff writer for High Country News who writes from the Pacific Northwest.

The legacy of Bunkerville

Ten years after the historic standoff, the concept of white oppression popularized by the Bundys has become a mainstream political mindset.

BY LEAH SOTTILE

TEN YEARS AGO, hundreds of people gathered in a dusty wash underneath a freeway overpass 80 miles east of Las Vegas, near the town of Bunkerville, Nevada. They arrived at the behest of a reedy-voiced 68-year-old man in a cowboy hat — Cliven Bundy, who owned a 160-acre farm there but grazed his cattle illegally on the federal land around it.

In April 2014, Bundy urged people to support him in his fight against the federal government. “Now it’s time to get on our boots and I guess make our stand,” Cliven said on a phone call to a right-wing YouTube show. At the time, Bundy, who owed the Bureau of Land Management more than \$1 million in unpaid grazing fees, had already defied several court orders demanding he remove his cattle from public land. That spring, the BLM decided to impound them as payment.

Overnight, one man’s private battle erupted into a war of many. People from Idaho, Arizona, Washington — even New Hampshire — brought their horses and flags and long guns to the desert. On April 12, 2014, the federal officers tasked with rounding up the cattle found themselves in the crosshairs of snipers strategically positioned on the overpass. They retreated empty-handed.

“The West has now been won!” declared Bundy’s eldest son, Ryan, to enthusiastic cheers. Court proceedings over the standoff resulted in a mistrial, and a federal judge permanently tossed the case. Today,

the status of Cliven Bundy’s unpaid bills remains unclear: BLM officials in southern Nevada declined *High Country News’* request for comment and a subsequent Freedom of Information Act request regarding the total amount Bundy owes had not been returned by the time we went to press.

When the Bundys declared victory, it was hailed as a win for their vision of the American West, a place where white ranchers are heroes and yet also an oppressed minority. But their triumph went beyond Bunkerville: It was a victory for the entire far-right anti-government militia movement and paved the way for ultra-conservative ideas to dominate the Republican Party’s agenda. All this foreshadowed a nationwide political storm — one that would divide lifelong neighbors, polarize the nation and help lay the groundwork for the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection. Ten years after Bunkerville, the people and ideas that shaped the standoff are key to understanding American politics as the country faces its next presidential election.

IN 2014, Cliven Bundy became the most notorious holdout of the Sagebrush Rebellion, a 1980s movement in which some Western ranchers pushed unsuccessfully for the transfer of land ownership from federal control to state hands. Ironically, Bundy’s own ability to ranch depended on federal lands; the 160 acres he owned wasn’t nearly enough to sustain a herd of livestock,

especially in the Nevada desert.

But when Bundy called into the YouTube show, he talked about having to pay the government to use those federal lands, calling it government tyranny. His brewing standoff in Bunkerville, he said, had “the potential to be the next Waco or Ruby Ridge.” The 11-day standoff at Ruby Ridge in 1992 left two civilians and a U.S. marshal dead in a conflict that started over illegal guns, while 86 people died during the 1993 Waco Siege, which also started over guns as well as allegations of child abuse. Experts on far-right extremism in the United States tend to view both tragedies as fueled by anti-government ideologies; the people who hold those ideologies, on the other hand, regard them as harrowing examples of federal tyranny.

Bundy’s mention of these incidents lit a fire under the modern militia movement. Since the early 1990s, this movement, according to the Anti-Defamation League, has particularly focused on gun control and “deadly standoffs between civilians and federal agents,” catalyzed by the belief “that the federal government is collaborating with a



Eric Parker from central Idaho aims his weapon from a bridge as protesters gather by the Bureau of Land Management’s base camp near Bunkerville, Nevada, in April 2014.
Jim Urquhart / Reuters / Redux

Portrayals of Bundy as a martyr “demonstrated to some of these far-right ultra-libertarian types that there’s a form of their message that can get public support.”

shadowy conspiracy (the so-called New World Order) to strip Americans of their rights.”

Militias were not alone in their support for the Bundys: Conservative members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, sovereign citizens, constitutional sheriffs, lawmakers and extremists from across the West all raced toward Bunkerville, where “very odd ideological bedfellows” found common cause in their rage against the government, said Benjamin Park, associate professor of history at Sam Houston State University and author of *American Zion: A New History of Mormonism*.

Their worldview found a platform when major media outlets like CNN and Fox News broadcast live from the standoff.

“A lot of the rhetoric coming from the Fox News talking heads at the time was, ‘Bundy’s got a lot of good points. Maybe this is government overreach,’” said Sam Jackson, an assistant professor at the University at Albany’s College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security and Cybersecurity and the author of *Oath Keepers*. “Mainstream media outlets have enormous powers to set agendas to shape how their audiences think about issues.”

Portrayals of Bundy as a martyr “demonstrated to some of these far-right ultra-libertarian types that there’s a form of their message that can get public support,” Amy Cooter of the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, said. “Such a public mouthpiece for those ideas definitely normalized them and legitimized them in the public sphere.”

People who saw Bundy as a victim of government overreach began to see merit in some of his other, lesser-known views. For

instance, Cliven Bundy — a devout Mormon — interpreted LDS scripture in a way that many Church members consider eccentric. In his writings, Bundy professed a reverence for ultra-conservative LDS Church President Ezra Taft Benson and the belief that Mormons will save the U.S. Constitution from ruin.

But Cooter said the Bundys’ unconventional religious views were generally downplayed. “Ten years later, people may forget some of the eccentricities of the Bundys,” she said.

Scholars have long studied the particular flavor of conservatism that has thrived among the Mormon subcultures of the Mountain West — “the Mormon Corridor.” In 2003, John-Charles Duffy, now a professor at Miami University, wrote in *Sunstone Magazine* that some members of the LDS Church resisted the changes in the 20th century that were aimed at making the faith more palatable to a wide audience: “The older, hardline tradition of constitutionalism, coupled with accusations of government tyranny, has survived in an LDS subculture devoted to ultraconservative politics.” In the 1990s, LDS leadership responded with mass excommunications, hoping to push out the ultra-conservative constitutionalists and survivalists. But the beliefs continued to flourish, if quietly.

As the standoff played out, Park recognized Bundy’s rhetoric. “There’s always been these people who see the government as a threat and represent this vision of ‘we are going to save the Constitution when it’s hanging by a thread, even if that means taking on the recognized government authorities,’” he said.

And in publicly proclaiming their beliefs

and tying their ideology to the standoff, the Bundys moved “the boundaries of what’s expected Mormon political discourse,” Park said. He pointed to the Utah Legislature. “You see a lot of far-right Mormon conservative voices,” Park said, “who don’t go fully Bundy, but they’re willing to go half Bundy. They’re willing to take advantage of this anxiety.”

In 2022, the *Deseret News* — a newspaper owned by the LDS Church — reported on “an emerging pattern” of public protest driven by conspiracy theories that had recently emerged in the Utah Legislature. “A deep distrust in the federal government and also a broad agreement with deep-state conspiracies,” Park said, became the norm.

Beyond the Bundy family, other believers, who initially established themselves as anti-tyranny warriors at Bunkerville, fanned out across America to spread — and enforce — their ideology. In June 2014, a conspiratorial couple who had spoken to cable news reporters at the standoff murdered two Las Vegas police officers and a civilian in what they said were the first shots of a “revolution.” (One of the suspects was killed in an ensuing police shootout, and the other died by suicide.)

Still, lawmakers from around the region declared their support for the Bundys. Several of them remain in office today, including Arizona Rep. Paul Gosar and Idaho state Rep. Heather Scott. President Donald Trump unlawfully appointed William Perry Pendley — a vocal Bundy sympathizer — deputy director of the BLM. (He served for over a year, despite never being confirmed by the Senate.) More recently, Pendley authored a 22-page section of *Mandate for Leadership*, the 922-page manifesto of Project 2025, a vision for the country drawn up by a far-right think tank. Pendley lays out how the Department of the Interior would function during a second Trump administration, seeking “American energy dominance” through oil and gas leases and a complete reinstatement of Trump-era Interior policies.

Former Graham County, Arizona, Sheriff Richard Mack saw his star rise, too. A Mormon, Mack founded the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association (CSPOA) in 2011, espousing the belief that county sheriffs are the nation’s highest law enforcement power. Before Bunkerville, the group drew

little notice. But afterward, both CSPOA and Mack were more widely embraced. CSPOA instructs county sheriffs to “protect their citizens from the overreach of an out-of-control federal government” by refusing to enforce any laws they deemed unconstitutional or “unjust.”

“What I think the Bundy standoff allowed Richard Mack to do was to start to cast the constitutional sheriff movement as sort of in the grand tradition of civil rights,” said journalist Jessica Pishko, author of *The Highest Law in the Land: How the Unchecked Power of Sheriffs Threatens Democracy*. Mack pushed the idea that white American Westerners are “losing status that needs to be protected.” A series published by the Arizona Center for Investigative Reporting found that, by 2023, the constitutional sheriff ideology had spread to at least 30 states, having surged during COVID-19 as people pushed back on lockdown orders.

The Oath Keepers paramilitary organization, which supported the Bunkerville standoff, “weaponized patriotism in an effort to subvert American democracy,” Jackson told NPR in 2022. And they didn’t stop at Bundy Ranch: Stewart Rhodes, founder of the Oath Keepers, played an instrumental role in the storming of the United States Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. He is currently serving 18 years in prison for seditious conspiracy.

Ultimately, Bundy Ranch was “a really powerful and important example of domestic extremism, and how circumstances can align in ways that lead to broad support,” Jackson told *High Country News*. There weren’t thousands of people at the Bunkerville standoff. But seven years later, on Jan. 6, thousands arrived in Washington, D.C.

THE ANTI-GOVERNMENT and ultra-conservative Mormon beliefs that were so key to the Bundy standoff are deeply rooted in Western identity. The Bundy story appealed to a shared “rural mentality,” Cooter said, that is prized by militia groups.

“Even if they live in cities, even if they live

in suburbs, this idea of rurality means a lot to them, in no small part because it’s sort of an extension of our imagining of the frontier (and) what real men and real Americans are supposed to be,” she said. “It’s almost like they’re trying to make up for the fact that they’re not living in that rural environment where they have to prove themselves in a very stereotypically masculine way.”

An old white man in a cowboy hat complaining about government overreach was, essentially, an ideal story for them — a narrative that reinforced “that frontier piece of masculinity,” Cooter said.

“That’s an aspiration for a lot of Americans,” Sam Jackson said. “They want to also see themselves as being these independent, self-sufficient folks who are pushing back against tyrannical government.”

Days after the standoff, Cliven Bundy famously made racist comments about Black Americans: “I’ve often wondered, are they better off as slaves, picking cotton and having a family life and doing things, or are they better off under government subsidy?”

The comments revealed the underlying false sense of oppression and victimhood held by Bundy and his supporters: “They see themselves as an imperiled minority,” said Pishko.

After the standoff, local Indigenous

leaders pushed back on Bundy’s claims of ownership. The land around his ranch doesn’t belong to him, they said: “If anybody’s got a right, it would be the Moapa Band of Paiutes,” Vernon Lee, a former tribal councilman, told NPR in 2016.

Park, the historian, saw the Bundys’ refusal to acknowledge Indigenous land rights when they talked about Western land ownership as another nod to that conservative brand of Mormonism. “That Manifest Destiny ideology, of course, is widespread in America,” he said. “But it had a particularly Mormon flavor, because they believed this is a land that God has prepared for us.”

Political leaders like former President Trump have advanced a worldview in which white rural Americans are an oppressed class. But Cooter said that this idea gets at something much, much deeper in the American psyche.

“That starting line realistically goes back to the founding of our country,” Cooter said. It “is really baked into this idea of the American mythology that’s going to be very difficult for us to ever move away from.” ☀

Leah Sottile is a High Country News correspondent, author of When the Moon Turns to Blood and host of the podcasts Bundyville, Two Minutes Past Nine, Hush and Burn Wild.



Protesters placed a sign on a bridge near Bunkerville, Nevada, in 2014. **Jim Urquhart / Reuters / Redux**

Downballot

What issues are drawing Western voters to the polls in 2024?

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

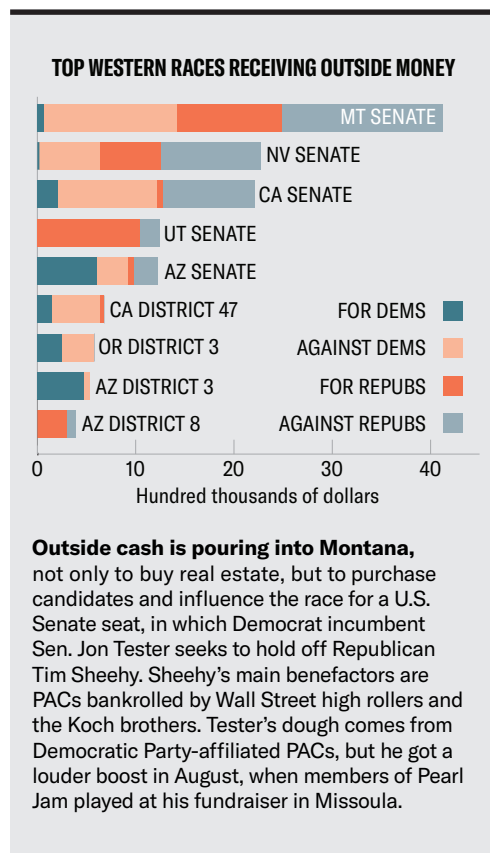
THIS NOVEMBER, most of the nation will be transfixed by the presidential contest between Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump. But there's also plenty to see downballot in the West.

SHIFTING AFFILIATIONS

Arizona has long been home to old-fashioned Barry Goldwater-style conservatives. But MAGA hijacked the state Republican Party, alienating its more moderate members. Republican John Giles, for example, the mayor of Mesa, endorsed Kamala Harris. The shift gives Rep. Ruben Gallego, a progressive-turned-moderate Democrat, an edge over election-denying Trump acolyte Kari Lake, R, in the race to replace Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, who veered from left to right politically before finally dropping her "D" in 2022. Democrats might even win control of the state Legislature for the first time in decades.

■ **It's a long shot, but Utah could get its first Democratic governor since 1985, largely because of GOP infighting.** Incumbent Gov. Spencer Cox, a Republican who purports to champion civility, won his party's primary by nearly 40,000 votes. But his MAGA opponent, Utah state Rep. Phil Lyman, challenged the results in court, and, when that failed, launched a write-in candidacy. Lyman — who has blasted Cox for being insufficiently right-wing — could draw enough Republican votes to give Utah House Minority Leader Brian King, a Mormon bishop, a fighting chance. And Cox's flip-flopping on Trump might damage him: He refused to vote for him in 2016 and 2020 but recanted after the attempt on Trump's life, saying that the former president was saved to unify the nation.

■ In-migration and demographic shifts are nudging some red Western states toward purple and blue. But Wyoming's incomers are **turning that GOP stronghold an even**



deeper shade of MAGA-red. In the August Republican primaries, the "Freedom Caucus" continued to infiltrate the state Legislature. These new right-wing lawmakers gained notoriety for outright climate-change denial and for slamming Republican Gov. Mark Gordon for championing carbon capture to help preserve the state's still-dominant but ailing coal industry, despite Gordon's numerous lawsuits against the Biden administration over fossil fuel and public-land regulations.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE AT THE POLLS

Incumbent Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola is taking on Republicans Nick Begich and Trump-endorsed Lt. Gov. Nancy Dahlstrom

to represent Alaska. But **Big Oil is poised to win no matter what.** Since becoming the first Alaska Native in Congress in 2022, Peltola has taken a pro-drilling stance at odds with President Joe Biden's energy policies. She successfully pushed the administration to approve ConocoPhillips' massive Willow drilling project, and the oil corporation and its employees gratefully donated \$16,400 to her campaign and another \$300,000 to the Center Forward Committee PAC, which in turn contributed the same amount.

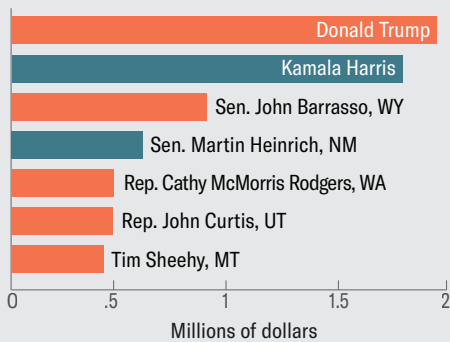
■ **Montana's first congressional district will see a rematch** between incumbent Rep. Ryan Zinke, a MAGA Republican and Trump's former Interior secretary, and Democrat Monica Tranel, an attorney who has worked in the energy and utility sectors. The candidates diverge on almost every issue, but one of the biggest involves climate change and energy: It's Zinke's drill your way to "energy dominance" versus Tranel's all-in on the renewable energy transition.

■ In New Mexico, the nation's second-largest oil-producing state, the race for the U.S. Senate **pits the Democratic incumbent, clean energy booster Sen. Martin Heinrich, against Republican Nella Domenici, daughter of the late Sen. Pete Domenici,** a decidedly old-school fossil fuel enthusiast. Heinrich supported tighter regulations on public-lands drilling and methane emissions, but he alienated some of his base with a bipartisan bill to streamline permitting for renewable energy and transmission projects while expediting oil and gas drilling and liquefied natural gas exports.

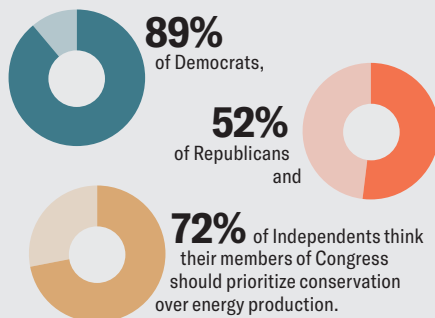
■ **In Utah, two climate champions — of different degrees — are vying to replace retiring Republican Sen. Mitt Romney.** Republican Rep. John Curtis launched the Conservative Climate Caucus, acknowledges human-caused climate change, supports clean energy and was endorsed by environmental group EDF Action — yet received only a 6% score from the League of Conservation Voters (LCV), perhaps because he's reluctant to regulate fossil fuels. He's heavily favored to defeat Democrat Caroline Gleich, an environmental advocate and ski mountaineer, who's been endorsed by the LCV and Protect Our Winters Action Fund.

■ **The clean energy transition goes head-to-head with the fossil-fuel status quo in**

TOP ENERGY/NATURAL RESOURCE SECTOR DONATIONS



PRIORITIZING CONSERVATION



CONSERVATION

88% of those surveyed believe that loss of habitat for fish and wildlife is an extremely or very serious problem.

78% think more emphasis should be placed on conserving wildlife migration routes, providing wildlife crossings and limiting development.

20% think more emphasis should be placed on making these lands more economically productive, through new development, roads, ranching, or oil and gas production.

ENERGY ON PUBLIC LANDS

73% think the impact of oil and gas drilling on public lands is either extremely serious or a totally serious problem.

71% strongly or totally oppose removing protections on existing public lands, particularly national monuments, to allow more drilling, mining and other development.

Montana and Arizona in the battle for several seats on those states' obscure but influential utility regulatory commissions.

■ **In Washington, fossil fuel fans sparked two initiatives aimed at stifling the energy transition.** One would repeal the 2021 climate law and carbon auctions that have so far raised more than \$2 billion to fund climate-related projects, while another bans local and state governments from restricting natural gas hookups or appliance sales. **California is asking voters to approve a \$10-billion bond** to fund parks, environmental protection and water and energy projects, while two **southern Oregon coastal counties will inquire whether voters support or oppose offshore wind development.**

A REFERENDUM ON WESTERN LANDS

If you thought nuclear weapons testing and uranium mining ended when the Cold War did, think again: A slew of long-idled mines on the Colorado Plateau are slated to reopen. And now, Project 2025, the right wing's "playbook" for a second Trump administration, looks to return nuclear weapons testing to Nevada — perhaps creating a whole new generation of "downwinders" sickened by exposure to nuclear fallout, even as U.S. House Republicans terminate RECA, the program that compensates them.

■ All this could play an indirect role in elections in downwinder states like Nevada, Utah, Idaho and Arizona. **And it's a major issue in Utah's House District 69,** home to dozens of mines and Energy Fuels' White Mesa Mill, the nation's only active uranium processing center, which processes ore from the corporation's Pinyon Plain Mine near the Grand Canyon. Davina Smith — who favors tougher environmental and public lands protections — hopes to become the first Diné woman to serve in the Utah Legislature. Her opponent, Blanding Mayor Logan Monson, supports the industry.

■ Arizona's 2nd Congressional District, home to 12 tribal nations and the Pinyon Plain Mine, may also feel some fallout from the nuclear renaissance. **Former Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez, a Democrat who has condemned the uranium industry's lethal**

legacy, is challenging incumbent Republican Rep. Eli Crane to represent the district.

■ **When incumbent Rep. Lauren Boebert, the gun-slinging MAGA Republican, abandoned the race for Colorado's 3rd Congressional District late last year to run in a redder district,** it turned one of the nation's most closely watched races into a run-of-the-mill contest where it's hard to distinguish between Democrat Adam Frisch and Republican Jeff Hurd, two moderates. Frisch, who narrowly lost to Boebert in 2022, is a self-proclaimed pragmatist who has taken progressive stances on abortion, social issues and labor but veers to the right on public lands. Like Hurd, he opposes national monument designation for the Lower Dolores River and claims Biden administration policies are hampering oil and gas drilling. And Frisch echoed Utah Republicans when he slammed the new public-lands rule, which puts conservation on a par with other uses, saying it would "seriously harm western Colorado's economy and way of life."

OTHER BALLOT INITIATIVES

Nevada, Montana, Colorado and Arizona all have ballot initiatives that would **make abortion a constitutional right.** Colorado's would also repeal a constitutional provision banning the use of public funds for abortion. Coloradans will vote on whether to **ban trophy hunting of mountain lions, bobcats and lynx.** A separate initiative would **levy an excise tax on firearm and ammunition sales** to fund crime victim, education and mental health programs.

■ A ballot measure would **give Oregon residents a "rebate," or basic income, of \$1,600 per year,** and an Arizona initiative tackles homelessness by allowing property owners to **apply for property tax refunds if local government doesn't crack down on unhoused people** via camping and panhandling rules.

■ A Wyoming ballot initiative creates a specific residential property tax category that opens the way to **lowering property taxes for owner-occupied primary residences — and charging higher ones for unoccupied second or third homes.** ☀

SOURCES: OpenSecrets, Federal Election Commission, Ballotpedia, *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel*, *Colorado Newsline*, *Arizona Agenda*, *Utah News Dispatch*, KJZZ, *Politico*. Data for the charts was collected by Colorado College State of the Rockies Project 2024 from Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.





Dead trees line the forest floor around Basin Creek Reservoir in Butte, Montana.

REPORTAGE

Consider the source

How officials are preparing for wildfires that could devastate Butte's water supply.

BY KYLIE MOHR | PHOTOS BY WILL WARASILA

IN 2020, Tim Lahey became district ranger of the 3.39 million-acre Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. The two reservoirs tucked up in one of its mountain basins provide nearly 60% of Butte, Montana's water supply, and Lahey knew his new job would not be easy: Those reservoirs were under threat, and had been for decades.

In the early 2000s, mountain pine beetles swarmed the basin, munching through and killing thousands of lodgepole pines. Nationwide, the insects have killed trees on nearly 8 million acres. Today, roughly half of the trees around the Basin Creek Reservoir are dead. Some are still standing, just waiting to fall; others are piled on the forest floor in a messy maze. If a fire started in the forested hills surrounding the Basin Creek Reservoir, it would likely burn hot and fast. It would not only be difficult and dangerous for fire-fighters to navigate the downed timber; the fire would also likely kill some of the remaining trees, destabilize the soil, and send sediment, pine needles and ash into the reservoirs and creek below. And that would be devastating for the city's primary source of drinking water.

Lahey began meeting with Jim Keenan, then the chief operator of the water treatment plant downstream. That facility was

designed to treat pristine alpine flow, not post-wildfire slurry. The 300-micron strainers it uses to clean out sediment have tiny holes the size of the "o" on a penny's "In God We Trust." "It wouldn't take too much to clog it up," Keenan said.

Butte's predicament is shared with towns and cities across the West where the water supply flows from fire-prone forests. Wildfires often force municipalities to rely on a patchwork of alternate water sources in the short term, and to spend more money over the long term to decontaminate their polluted sources. In 2014, for example, rains after a wildfire sent 300,000 tons of sludge into the Rubicon River, polluting drinking water in Auburn, California, that became twice as expensive to treat for several years. In 2020, wildfires dirtied all four watersheds that Greeley, Colorado, uses for its drinking water. The city had to pull water from its reservoirs instead of its usual river and make water swaps with agricultural users to meet demand. Cleaning up the affected watersheds is costing \$30 million or more.

With wildfires becoming larger, more frequent and more widespread, more forests are burning — and that could affect many communities' drinking water. According to the U.S.

Geological Survey, 80% of the freshwater resources in the country originate on forested lands. Risk varies widely by location, but roughly 3,400 public drinking-water systems — including Butte's — are located in watersheds within national forests. That's why local, state and federal agencies are racing to thin thousands of acres in Butte's watershed over the next few years.

BARBED WIRE and a sign stating "closed to public access due to wildfire risk" greeted us as our

From left: Piles of dead trees wait to be burned during the cooler winter months.

Upper Basin Creek Reservoir in Butte, Montana.

truck pulled up to the entrance of the Basin Creek Reservoir property in mid-July. A handful of fires start nearby every year, underlining the urgency of thinning the deadfall. "We've been fortunate to catch them so far," Lahey said, at the wheel. Keenan, now the treatment plant's superintendent, sat in the back as we wound around the rutted and bumpy roads up to the reservoir.

Both men have given tours of this area and its predicament several times, including one high-profile visit by Gov. Greg Gianforte, R, and Forest Service Chief Randy Moore in June 2023. "I think we're already living on borrowed time," Moore told Montana Public Radio. Six weeks later, the Beaverhead-Deerlodge

forest supervisor and Lahey requested what's called an "emergency situation determination" from agency leaders to jumpstart the removal of flammable vegetation. Moore approved, and the following week, a crew began cutting dead trees.

Executing a large-scale project like this requires collaboration. Silver Bow County, home to Butte, owns only a narrow strip of land encircling the reservoir, 975 feet at its widest. For buffers and fuel breaks to work, the Forest Service, which manages the rest of the land, needed to get involved, too. More than 450 acres of county and federal land will be thinned of flammable vegetation, with the piles neatly stacked and left to be burned this winter.

Removing some flammable vegetation isn't a guarantee against fire; no such assurance is possible. Rather, managers believe that reduced vegetation will slow a flame front and reduce the height of the flames, improving firefighters' chances of safely containing it. Whether this works is up for debate: Research from scientists at the University of Colorado, Boulder published in 2015 found that mountain pine beetle outbreaks don't necessarily increase wildfire risk, despite leaving so many dead trees in their wake. Another study, published in 2011, found that pine beetle outbreaks may actually reduce, not increase, the potential for crown fires in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem. But while



a handful of comments received during the environmental assessment process questioned the value of thinning to lessen wildfire risk, the Forest Service says its modeling shows that the project will work, shortening flame lengths on the hot, dry summer days that cause the most concern.

RECOVERY FROM a wildfire's impact on Butte's drinking water could take a decade and cost over \$30 million, Keenan estimates. That includes dealing with all the sandy sediment, no longer bound to the hillside by roots, that would need to be dredged out of the reservoir before it could return to full capacity. A study published in 2017 predicts wildfires' increase in frequency

and magnitude will more than double the amount of sediment that makes its way into one-third of the watersheds in the West, reducing how much water the reservoirs can hold.

Wildfires can pose other threats to water supplies far downstream of reservoirs. Testing has revealed carcinogens in drinking-water systems after urban fires in California, Colorado, Oregon and Maui. There are ways to proactively mitigate this, such as switching from plastic pipes, which can leach chemicals into the water, to metal ones, or installing back-flow prevention devices to keep contaminated water out of the general water supply, and ultimately, homes and businesses. But these changes require planning from states, utilities and federal agencies. "We're still in a very reactive phase," said Andrew Whelton, an engineering professor at Purdue University who focuses on restoring safe drinking water post-fire.

Yet proactive work is already beginning at the source, in the tangled forest outside Butte. As we drove around the Basin Creek Reservoir in mid-July, the Montana sky was starting to fill with smoke from a rapidly growing wildfire to the north, outside Helena. The acrid haze served as a reminder of the threat of wildfire, never too far off throughout the summer and fall. "If we can buy ourselves a year or two, I'll feel a lot better," Keenan said. In the basin's race against the clock, chainsaws would begin whirring the following week. ☀

Kylie Mohr is a correspondent for High Country News, writing about wildfire, wildlife and wild places from Montana. Her work also appears in National Geographic, The Atlantic, Vox, Grist, Outside and more. @thatsMohrlikeit

POEM

Adoption

By Lee Herrick

Adoption is a wildfire, glass lake, steep mountain.
Adopt, adapt, adaptation, adoption, adopted, adoptee,
adulation, adoration, adult, adept, adopter, adoptive,
adopt-a-pet, adopt a textbook, readopt, Hollywood
adoption distortion Iron Man, Spider-Man, Superman,
Annie, The Jerk, Punky Brewster, and Margo, Edith,
and Agnes from *Despicable Me*, meme, memory, magi-
cally, mystery, we who miss, we who magic, we who
breathe so deep like this. To *re-member* is to become
wholly functional action, to join the group again, to
re-body, to mem-oir, to re-create, to re-verse, to re-col-
lect, to re-mind, to re-sist, to re-habilitate, re-cover,
re-establish, re-form. To write is to form again, estab-
lish again, to exist again. Adoption is to mind again,
verse again, to build, store, create, and live again.

WEB EXTRA Listen to Lee Herrick read his poem at hcn.org/adoption.



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ARIZONA

Eric Coons | Mesa
Mike & Cynthia Davis | Flagstaff

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Stephen Buckhout | San Jose
William Hearst | San Francisco
Harvey Kelsey & Susan Cashman | Bayside
Peter Rutledge Koch | Berkeley
Joel Michaelson | Santa Barbara
New-Land Foundation, Inc. | San Francisco
Daren Prouty | San Jose
Susan Rishik | Santa Monica
Rosenthal Family Foundation | Los Angeles
James Walseth | San Francisco
Sunny Shine | Davis
Douglas Steeples & Patricia Botting | Redlands
John & Linda Taylor | Burlingame
Chuck Twichell & Mary K. Stroh-Twichell |
Santa Rosa

COLORADO

In memory of W.R. Stevens | Divide

Charles Abele | Littleton
Roger Boraas | Centennial
Rodney Branstetter | Hayden
Mary Burdick | Lakewood
Pamela Coonrod | Grand Lake
Anne & Mike Crowley | Gunnison
Dick Cullor | Fort Collins
Greg Parsons & Dorothy Johnson | Denver
Tracy & Michael Ehlers | Boulder
Environment Foundation | Aspen
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Gates Family Foundation | Denver
Johnson Family Foundation | Telluride
Douglas Kane | Salida
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"Thanks for reminding me to renew my online subscription to HCN, which I look forward to each week. Am so impressed with your journalists, who inform us of the many human/humane activities happening throughout the West that mean a lot to many of us who've been involved through the years — from the Great Depression to the nuclear era — in the building of this giant called the American West. I've been reading Joshua Frank's Atomic Days, have brothers who helped build the Hanford Site and was so impressed with the recent story of the Native peoples working to heal the river and the Hanford mess. My son Dan is researching the giant role aviation and airports in the West played in the development of air travel, a real people story."

— Donna Bubb, Henderson, Nevada



*“A huge thank-you for the vitally important reporting
— your work is key to bringing more attention to
our imminently imperiled natural world, the
destruction of which is breaking our hearts.”*

— Kelly Fleming, Patagonia, Arizona

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Katherine Martinez | Greenwood Village, CO
Marilyn McCord | Bayfield, CO
LouAnn McCune | Riggins, ID
John McEldowney | Susanville, CA
Errol Meidinger | Clinton, MT
Richard Middleton | Salt Lake City, UT
Chris Miller | Napa, CA
William Molini | Reno, NV
Tom Moran | Mountain View, CA
Judith Munro | Brighton, CO
Michael Murphy | San Francisco, CA
Lynn Nebus | Bend, OR
Kiyoshi Nishikawa | Carson City, NV
John Oltman | Wheaton, IL
Jim Parys | Dulles, VA
Lewis Patterson | Fruita, CO
Barbara Pedersen | Arvada, CO
Chris & Betsy Pope | Friday Harbor, WA
Carolyn Prinster | Glenwood Springs, CO
Melinda Roalstad | Cedaredge, CO
Joan Roberts | Phoenix, AZ
Ed Rothfuss | Kalispell, MT
P.B. Schechter | Denver, CO

Gordon & Janis Shackelford | El Cajon, CA
Joseph Shaffer | Prescott, AZ
Karen Smith | Grand Junction, CO
Larry & Margie Smith | Johnstown, CO
Douglas Spencer | Evergreen, CO
Judee & Chuck Stanley | Idaho Falls, ID
Darby Stapp | Richland, WA
Douglas Steeples | Redlands, CA
Donald Sullivan | Denver, CO
Sue Trevathan | Vashon, WA
Virgil Tucker | Boulder, CO
Pete & Janis VanWyhe | Brush Prairie, WA
John & Anita Varley | Bozeman, MT
Louellen Verellen | Chelan, WA
Eve Vogel | Amherst, MA
Ken Vogler | Boulder, CO
Kath Weston | Charlottesville, VA
John Whitmer | Bellingham, WA
Becky & Larry Williams | Columbia Falls, MT
Cobun Zweifel-Keegan | Riverdale, MD

Honest talk about conservation

On a Saturday evening in September, close to 100 people filed into the Blue Sage Center for the Arts in Paonia, Colorado, *HCN*'s longtime hometown. Our new director of philanthropy, **Eric Lane**, compared it to a family reunion.

With the election looming large in everyone's mind, longtime Contributing Editor **Michelle Nijhuis** led a conversation about how Westerners can come together to create conservation solutions able to endure the changing winds of Washington, D.C. The talk grew out of the work that Michelle is currently spearheading in the magazine and on the website, which you can find at hcn.org/conservation-beyond-boundaries.

Panelists included **Hannah Stevens**, executive director of the Western Slope Conservation Center, **Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk**, a member of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe of Towaoc, and regenerative cattle rancher **Jason Wrich**.

Wrich recalled his grandfather, who had a sheep ranch in the San Luis Valley, telling him that the land and the wildlife would tell him what they needed. "Pay attention, *mi hijito*," he said. It's a lesson that inspired Wrich to build a business that is both profitable and humane, he said. "Our cattle have only one bad day — the day they go to slaughter."

Stevens recalled moving to the North Fork Valley as a teenager and watching as the Wake Fire, which lightning started on July 4, 1994, roared across the juniper-studded mesa. Four *HCN* staffers narrowly escaped losing their homes. Others were not so lucky. Now, 30 years later, Stevens' organization has applied for state funding to do a watershed-scale analysis of future wildfire risks.

Lopez-Whiteskunk, who has been active in the creation and planning of Bears Ears National Monument, reminded the audience that "co-management" — a buzzword currently in vogue to describe



From left: Michelle Nijhuis, Jason Wrich, Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk and Hannah Stevens at Beyond 2024 in Paonia, Colorado. **Luna Anna Archey** photos; photo illustration by Marissa Garcia / *HCN*

partnerships with Indigenous people — is not a new idea. "This is how life happened with our elders and ancestors," she said, with different groups of people making use of land and resources during different seasons.

Our partners in the event included KVNF Mountain Grown Community Radio (which recorded the session and will make it available online) and a statewide media collaboration called Above the Noise, which seeks to bring people together for civil conversations in a divisive time. *HCN* friend and reader **Emily Sinclair** hosted a reception afterward at Paonia Books, her bookshop/coffeehouse/gathering space, where her husband, **Jay Kenney**, generously poured out glasses of his Clear Fork Cider.

The event, supported by the Western Colorado Community Foundation, was a wonderful way to reinforce our deep connections with a community that has nurtured *HCN* for many decades. It was also an example of the type of gathering we're currently hosting around the region, working with local organizations to bring people together for conversation, camaraderie — and perhaps a few pints as well.

If you'd like to team up with us on an event in your community or have suggestions for local organizations we should talk to, please drop us a line at dearfriends@hcn.org.

—Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher

New faces in the office



Paonia has always attracted an eclectic cast of characters, and we've been lucky to add a couple of them to our staff recently.

James Norris-Weyers joined us in July as our new customer service manager. He and his wife fell in love with the place when they moved here during the pandemic to be close to her parents. An attorney by training (and a Scot by birth), James has spent years working for nonprofits, including several international education organizations. When he's not at the office or wrangling his two young kids, James volunteers for a few other local nonprofits.

The daughter of anthropologists, **Tanya Henderson** is a Westerner to the core. Born in Flagstaff, Arizona, she graduated from high school in Elko, Nevada, and college in Walla Walla, Washington. She did graduate research at Canyon de Chelly National Monument and has managed conservation-oriented nonprofits in California and Colorado. We are lucky to have her as our new customer service specialist.



Living United for Change
in Arizona (LUCHA)
Organizing Director Gina
Mendez and canvasser
Isaiah Leal go door-to-door
in late May in a Phoenix,
Arizona, neighborhood
to educate voters and
encourage participation in
this year's local, state and
federal elections.

THE LATINO SWING VOTE

ON THE ROAD WITH ORGANIZERS IN ARIZONA AND NEVADA.

Photos by Roberto (Bear) Guerra | Text by Bernardo Ruiz

“IS THIS ABOUT POLITICS?” I’m tired of it.”

In a majority-Latino neighborhood on Las Vegas, Nevada’s east side, a man, looking worn out from a day’s work, stepped out of his pickup and pleaded, “Please get out of here.”

It was hard to tell if he was speaking to the group of organizers standing in his driveway from Make the Road Action, which seeks to build long-term political power in working-class Latino communities in five states, including Nevada, or to our documentary crew, which was trailing them with cameras and a boom pole. The organizers, who were door-knocking for Democratic candidates, moved on to another house, and we followed.

This was months before President Joe Biden made way for Kamala Harris, and the mood among the group was grim. “Folks were just not excited to vote for Joe Biden,” Chuck Rocha, a Democratic strategist who was an architect of the 2020 Bernie Sanders presidential campaign and who co-hosts a podcast on the Latino vote, explained.

It was a far cry from the palpable excitement that our documentary crew captured four years earlier, when Sanders won the Nevada caucuses, propelled by record turnout among Latino voters in the state. “It was the biggest mobilization that I had ever been a part of in an election year,” LaLo Montoya, civic engagement director for Make the Road Action Nevada, said. “It was citizenship for all, and it was health care for all. ... We had already lived through what a Trump presidency was like and how we could not afford another term.”

This spring, when we documented Make the Road Action Nevada and other organizers around the region working to mobilize voters ahead of the Democratic primaries, we saw the enthusiasm gap among younger Latino voters. That changed dramatically on July 21, when Kamala Harris announced her candidacy for the presidency. “The moment that Kamala Harris went on the ticket,” María Teresa Kumar, CEO of Voto Latino, a national organization that seeks to register young

Latino voters, explained during the Democratic National Convention, “we went from registering 60 to 100 voters a day to, that first week, registering 8,000 voters a day.”

This November, a projected 17.5 million Latino voters are expected to cast a ballot in the presidential election, according to one estimate. In Nevada, a battleground state, Latinos comprise 1 in 5 registered voters, making them a much sought-after commodity. In early August, the powerful Culinary Union, which represents 60,000 hospital-ity workers in Las Vegas and Reno, more than half of them Latino, endorsed Harris. And in its first-ever general election presidential endorsement, Make the Road Action endorsed Harris for president.

For many of the organizers we interviewed, though, the endorsement is complicated. Latinos make up nearly a third of residents in swing states like Nevada and Arizona and have the potential to wield tremendous power, but organizers say both parties’ policies often fall short of meeting the community’s needs. While former President Donald Trump’s pledge to carry out “the largest deportation operation in American history” strikes fear among many, actions such as Biden’s executive order restricting asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border have prompted feelings of betrayal. But, Montoya said, “we are in the long game here.” Organizers and community members are committed to going out and talking to people, to making sure that they know how much their vote matters. “There is no shortcut to building power in our state.” ✨

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

Bernardo Ruiz is a three-time Emmy®-nominated documentary filmmaker and a 2024 documentary film fellow at Harvard’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy.



From top: People gather at Make the Road Action Nevada's office for a training event before early canvassing on the east side of Las Vegas in March.

Robert Garcia, lead organizer at Make the Road Action Nevada, leads a training session for canvassers in March.





From top: Deputy Director of Grassroots Jonathan Soto Robles describes James Madison's role in drafting the U.S. Constitution during a presentation to English as a second language learners at The LIBRE Institute's office in Phoenix, Arizona.

English-language students listen to a talk organized by The LIBRE Institute in Phoenix in late May. The organization seeks to “empower Latinos to achieve the American Dream” through its “belief in the principles of limited government, property rights, rule of law, sound money supply and free enterprise.”



“Our community is very disillusioned because this administration has left so much on the table. But we are in the long game here. There is no shortcut to building power in our state. So members of our community have committed to making sure that people really care about their vote.”

*—LaLo Montoya,
civic engagement director,
Make the Road Nevada*

From top: Organizing Director Gina Mendez (center) discusses an upcoming event with staff and volunteers at the Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA) office in North Phoenix in early May.

Make the Road Action Nevada participants get pumped up before leaving to canvass in primarily Latino neighborhoods on Las Vegas's east side this past spring.



“Our community feels really disenfranchised from the way, every two to four years, organizations and political parties come in to the community, telling them how they should vote — like we’re just kind of a pawn in this big political game.”

*—Monet Flores Bacs,
strategic director,
The LIBRE Initiative*





From top: Former state Rep. Athena Salman, the director of Arizona Campaigns for Reproductive Freedom for All, addresses the press and supporters after the Arizona Senate repealed the state's 1864 abortion ban in May. Access to abortion is one of the key issues in the state election.

A volunteer with the Arizona Center for Empowerment registers young voters in line for a concert by popular Mexican-American singer-songwriter Xavi, in downtown Phoenix in May.

This story was produced in partnership with Quiet Pictures. Voces: Latino Vote 2024 streams on pbs.org beginning Oct. 2, followed by a national PBS broadcast on Oct. 22.

LATINO POWER

IN CENTRAL WASHINGTON, LATINO ORGANIZERS ARE GETTING OUT THE VOTE AND ELECTING THEIR OWN.

By Natalia Mesa | Photos by Roberto (Bear) Guerra

ON A WARM EVENING in late July, Maria Beltran walked down a quiet, tree-lined street in Yakima, Washington. Beltran, who is running for state Senate, was canvassing her childhood neighborhood. If elected, she would be the first Latina senator to represent Legislative District 14, which, after a contentious redistricting, is majority Latino for the first time. Beltran pointed to a low building with an intricate red graffiti mural a block away — the Mercado de Yakima. “We would buy our groceries at this store,” she said. “Now, I get to walk the streets as a candidate.”

Yakima is the largest city in Yakima County, which stretches over 2.75 million acres of rolling hills and fertile valleys in south-central Washington. Yakima County includes the Yakima Valley, known as the nation’s fruit basket, where Latinos have settled in large numbers since the 1930s. The Latino population has grown more than fivefold since 1980, making it the largest Latino-majority county in the Pacific Northwest. As of 2022, 51.2% of its residents identified as Hispanic, compared to just 14% in Washington in general.

For decades, legislative maps have split Latino hubs between districts, limiting their voting strength. But last year, in response to a 2022 lawsuit filed by a coalition of local

Latino voters, a federal judge ruled that Washington’s 2021 legislative map diluted Latino power, thereby violating the Voting Rights Act. The judge ordered the state to redraw the boundaries of Legislative District 15, which encompassed the eastern part of the city of Yakima and parts of four other counties. Although the district was majority Latino, the old map had lumped in east Yakima, where Latino voters turn out in high numbers, with areas that historically had low Latino voter turnout, while also separating it from several communities where Latinos are more politically active. The power of east Yakima’s Latino voters was further diluted because District 15, as an odd-numbered district, does not hold state-level elections in presidential election years, when Latino turnout is higher. The newest legislative map unites east Yakima with several other Latino-majority communities along the Yakima River to create an even-numbered Latino-majority district, Legislative District 14.

That decision is the latest of several recent court cases consolidating Latino electoral power in the Yakima Valley region. Meanwhile, community organizers have been hard at work building coalitions and educating voters. In the past decade, voters

have elected historic numbers of Latinos to positions across Yakima County. But those victories have also revealed the political divides in the Latino community, as conservative Latino voters and lawmakers confront the often-progressive slate of new lawmakers.

This year will test the strength of the organizers’ wins — and also show whether the community’s divisions can be overcome. Beltran will face Republican incumbent Curtis King for District 14’s state Senate seat. Two other Latina Democrats are also running for state representative in the district: Ana Ruiz Kennedy, a Mexican immigrant and the business liaison for a community development financial institution, is facing Republican Deb Manjarrez, while Chelsea Dimas will battle another Latina, Republican Gloria Mendoza, for the district’s other state congressional seat.

WHEN BELTRAN was a child, her parents, both farmworkers, rose early to pick fruit. They couldn’t afford child care, so she went with them. Among her earliest memories is “waking up and being confused why I couldn’t sleep in and watch cartoons,” she recalled. Even when her father took on a second job, working night shift at a warehouse, the family still had to rely on affordable housing and food



The daughter of Mexican immigrant farmworkers, Maria Beltran is one of several Latina candidates running for political office in the Yakima Valley's local and state elections.



“The Latino community isn’t a homogenous group. They just don’t vote one way. It’s very diverse. But at the end of the day, your vote is your voice, and you should express that.”

—Mark Figueroa,
Washington state
program coordinator,
Poder Latinx

support. “That level of poverty didn’t make sense for how hard they worked,” Beltran said.

Her experience is not uncommon: Latinos in the Yakima Valley are more likely to experience poverty, police violence, and, in some cases, worse health outcomes than white people. Discrimination and voter exclusion have long disenfranchised Latinos, and people with Spanish surnames vote at far lower rates than members of other groups. “As soon as one barrier topples, another emerges in its place,” said Josué Estrada, an associate professor at Central Washington University who studies Latino civic rights.

For years after the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965, voters in Washington had to take a literacy test to vote. Bilingual voting materials weren’t available in Yakima until 2002. Organizers and Yakima residents say that voting information is still difficult to obtain, particularly in the rural Lower Valley,

and voter education remains a challenge.

Last year’s redistricting decision is the latest in a series of wins. In 2015, after a lawsuit from the American Civil Liberties Union, a judge ordered Yakima to change its electoral system, ruling that its city-wide election system suppressed Latino votes. That fall, Latino city council members were elected for the first time.

But a series of setbacks followed. The Latino council members elected in 2015, particularly the two progressives, often clashed with the conservatives on the council. The wins brought a backlash, too: After 2019, all the Latino candidates either lost their districts or decided not to run.

Now, Danny Herrera is the sole Latino representative on the Yakima city council. “Now we only have representation in one district. That’s scary,” said Cristina González, with the nonprofit Latino Community Fund. González has been an activist in the area for more than 25 years.

But with these losses has come resolve. “They haven’t taken the fight out of us.”

Below: Washington State District 14 state representative candidate Chelsea Dimas visits with a potential voter after a candidate forum in Sunnyside, Washington, in July.

Facing: Felicitas Rodriguez, ELLA’s board secretary, ELLA founder Maria Fernandez and City Councilmember Vicky Frausto in a Sunnyside, Washington, park (pictured from left).

SUNNYSIDE, A CITY in Yakima County 35 miles south of Yakima, has one of the highest concentrations of Latinos in Washington — 86.1% — and organizers there have begun



transforming its politics to reflect this. Although 70% of the city's Latino population speaks Spanish, city council meetings were held in English. That changed this year, after voters elected three Latinos to the Sunnyside city council — the most in the city's history. Vicky Frausto, a Sunnyside native and former diversity, equity, and inclusion specialist, was one of them. On her arm is a tattoo of a logo for ELLA, the organization she credits with convincing her to run.

Community organizer Maria Fernandez founded ELLA to help Latino women navigate social services and advocate for themselves in the workplace. In 2023, she developed an emerging leaders' course, hoping to prepare Latinos like Frausto to run for office.

That same year, ELLA joined forces with other progressive Latino organizations to form the Lower Yakima Valley Latinx Coalition to boost voter turnout. Together, they ramped up voter engagement and education efforts in Sunnyside, knocking on doors and hosting ballot parties and community listening sessions, often in Spanish. "The energy was through the roof," Frausto said. "It was just different. It's so different."

The coalition's approach didn't work for everyone. After they hosted a community meeting primarily in Spanish, some residents,

mostly white, accused ELLA of divisiveness, Frausto said. On social media, commenters called the candidates criminals, referring to them as a "cartel" or a "gang." And some Latino residents withdrew their support, Fernandez said, over the coalition's partnership with Raíces, a queer-led organization. "Our area is very conservative, and I'm talking about our Latino community," Fernandez said.

In the end, the Latino voter turnout in Sunnyside was 20%, still slightly lower than the average local turnout, but nine percentage points higher than previously. Frausto and two other candidates became the first Latinas ever elected to represent their districts.

This year, Fernandez incorporated a second nonprofit, ELLA Adelante, as a 501(c)(4) organization, which can legally do more political advocacy. Now, she hopes to keep the momentum going while avoiding what happened in Yakima, where representation was won and then lost. She is focused on District 14, where Beltran is running for state Senate, working to get out the vote and educate the community about how to hold its representatives accountable.

All of this organizing has a long-term purpose. "The hope is that it becomes the model," Fernandez said.

STILL, THE RACE for state representative showcases the divides ELLA mentioned. Both candidates are Latina, and both have roots in the valley's farmworker community: The parents of Democratic candidate Chelsea Dimas, the founder of Raíces, were immigrant farmworkers, and Republican Gloria Mendoza, formerly mayor of Grandview, about 38 miles southeast of Yakima, worked in the valley's orchards and farms before launching her political career.

The two candidates share some priorities — affordability, public safety and education — but promise different approaches to addressing the community's needs. Among Mendoza's top goals are lowering taxes and deregulating industry, whereas Dimas seeks to expand the social safety net and other government programs.

Mendoza doesn't believe that the 2023 legislative district maps boost Latino representation. "The people behind the redistricting are not interested in electing Hispanics, they want to elect Democrats," she wrote in a statement to *High Country News*. She points out that the redistricting moved Nikki Torres, the region's first Latino state senator and a Republican, out of her old district, Legislative District 15, and into District 16, which is not majority-Latino. She'll retain her seat for the next two years but won't be able to run again in District 15, unless she relocates.

Mendoza adds that people of all races need to be encouraged to vote. "Washington state has made it very easy for people to vote," she wrote. Washington has been a vote-by-mail state since 2011. "People who want to vote can easily do so. We need to make sure everyone knows that and is encouraged to exercise this important right."

Dimas believes that fully mobilizing the Latino vote will take work, well beyond this election cycle. "Our people have been oppressed for a long time," she said. Redistricting gives Latinos in the Yakima Valley "a historic opportunity for us to really elect more legislators that really understand our community, that are from our community, that look like us." 🌸



Natalia Mesa is an editorial fellow for High Country News reporting on science and environmental and social justice.





States own
2 million acres of
trust lands within
tribal reservations
nationwide.
To use them, tribes
have to pay.

By Anna V. Smith and
Maria Parazo Rose

Photos by Tailyr Irvine

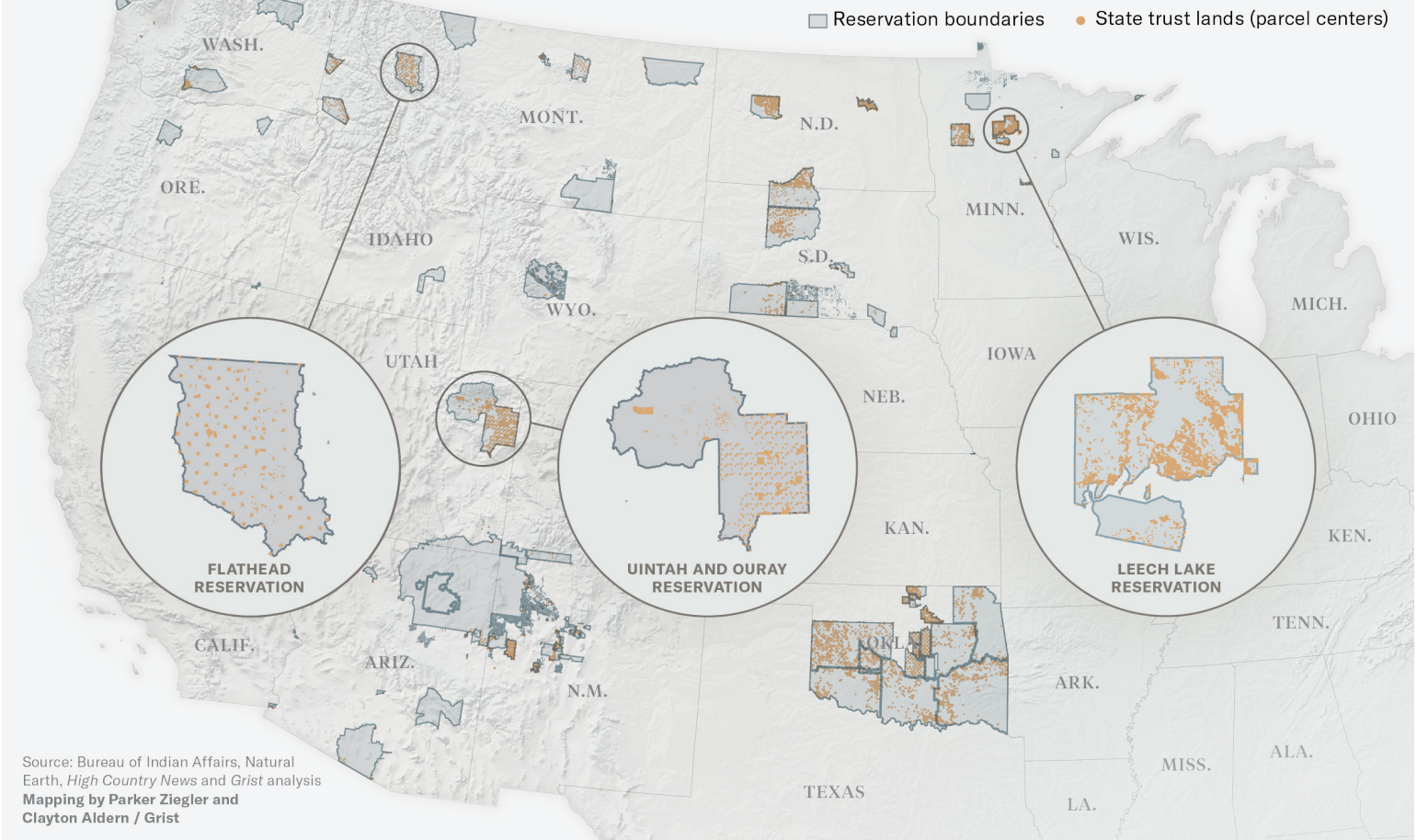
ON A WET SPRING DAY IN JUNE, fog shrouded the Mission Mountains on the Flathead Indian Reservation in northwest Montana. Silver beads of rain clung to blades of grass and purple lupine. On a ridge overlooking St. Mary's Lake in the southeastern corner of the reservation, the land had been mostly cleared of trees after state-managed logging operations. Some trees remained, mainly firs and pines, spindly things that once grew in close quarters but now looked exposed without their neighbors.

Viewed from the sky, the logged parcel was strikingly square despite the mountainous terrain. It stood in contrast to the adjacent, tribally managed forest, where timber operations followed the topographic contours of watersheds and ridgelines or imitated fire scars from lightning strikes. "It's not that they're mismanaging everything, but their

State and tribal forestry management practices stand in contrast in Montana, where a recently logged state trust land parcel abuts land managed by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. **Aerial support provided by LightHawk**

State trust lands on reservations

2 million acres of state-owned lands fall within tribal nations' reservation boundaries.



management philosophy and scheme do not align with ours,” said Tony Incashola Jr., the director of tribal resources for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, or CSKT, as he looked out the window of his Jeep at the landscape. “Their tactics sometimes don’t align with ours, which in turn affects our capability of managing our land.”

This nearly clear-cut 640-acre parcel is state trust land. It’s just a small part of the 108,886 state-owned acres, above- and below-ground, scattered across the reservation — this despite the tribal nation’s sovereign status.

The Douglas fir and ponderosa pine trees that remained in the square would thrive on the occasional fire and controlled burn after logging operations, benefiting the next generation of trees. Instead, the area was unburned, and shrubs crowded the ground. “I see this stand right here looking the exact same in 20 years,” said Incashola. It’s the first time he’s been on this land — despite spending his life on the reservation — because it’s state land,

and the gate has always been locked.

State trust lands, on and off Indian reservations, make up millions of acres across the Western United States and generate revenue for public schools, universities, jails, hospitals and other public institutions by leasing them for oil and gas extraction, grazing, rights of way, timber and more. The state of Montana, for example, manages 5.2 million surface acres and 6.2 million subsurface acres, a term pertaining to oil, gas, minerals and other underground resources, which distributed \$62 million to public institutions in 2023. The majority of that money went to K-12 schools — institutions serving primarily non-Indigenous people.

States received many of these trust lands upon achieving statehood, but more were taken from tribal nations during the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the federal policy of allotment, in which reservations were forcibly cut up into small parcels in an effort to make Indigenous people farmers

and landowners. The policy allowed about 90 million acres of reservation lands nationwide to move to non-Indigenous ownership. On the Flathead Reservation, allotment dispossessed the CSKT of a million acres, more than 60,000 of which were taken to fund schools.

But the Flathead Reservation is just one reservation checkerboarded by state trust lands.

To understand how land and resources taken from Indigenous peoples and nations continue to enrich non-Indigenous citizens, *High Country News* and *Grist* used publicly available data to identify which reservations have been impacted by state trust land laws and policies; researched the state institutions benefiting from these lands; and compiled data on many of the companies and individuals leasing the land on those reservations. Altogether, we located more than 2 million surface and subsurface acres of land on 79 reservations in 15 states that are used to support public institutions and reduce the financial burden on taxpayers. In at least four



states, five tribal nations themselves are the lessees — paying the state for access to, collectively, more than 57,700 acres of land *within* their own reservation borders.

However, due to instances of outdated and inconsistent data from federal, state and tribal cartographic sources, our analysis may include lands that do not neatly align with some borders and ownership claims. As a result, our analysis may be off by a few hundred acres. In consultation with tribal and state officials, we have filtered, clipped, expanded and otherwise standardized multiple datasets with the recognition that in many cases, more accurate land surveying is necessary.

The state trust lands that came from the sanctioned land grabs of the early 20th century helped bolster state economies and continue to underwrite non-Indian institutions while infringing on tribal sovereignty. “The justification for them is very old. It goes back to, really, the founding of the U.S.,” said Miriam Jorgensen, research director for the

*“Their tactics
sometimes don’t
align with ours,
which in turn affects
our capability of
managing our land.”*

A clear line divides forest managed by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and recently harvested state-owned land.

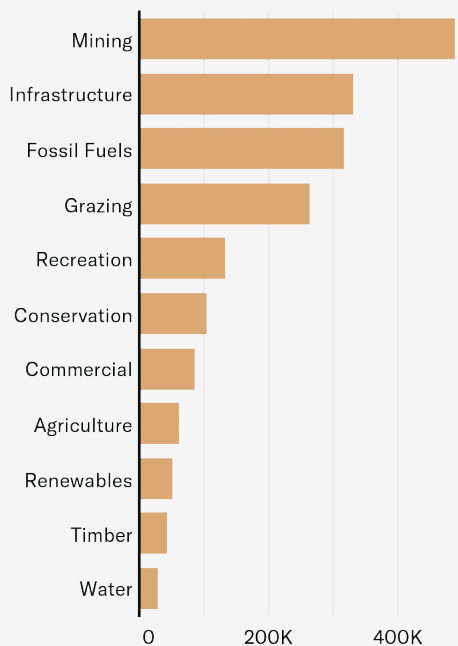
Harvard Project on Indigenous Governance and Development. The goal, she said, was to help settlers and their families gain a firmer foothold in the Western U.S. by funding schools and hospitals for them. “There’s definitely a colonial imperative in the existence of those lands.”

Although tribal citizens are part of the public those institutions are supposed to serve, their services often fall short. On the Flathead Reservation, for example, Indigenous youth attend public schools funded in part by state trust lands inside the nation’s boundaries. However, the state is currently being sued by the CSKT, as well as five other tribes, over the state’s decades-long failure to adequately teach Indigenous curriculum, despite a state mandate.

Since 2022, the CSKT and the state of Montana have been negotiating a land exchange in which the tribe will see some 29,200 acres of state trust lands on the reservation returned, which could include the

Active acreage

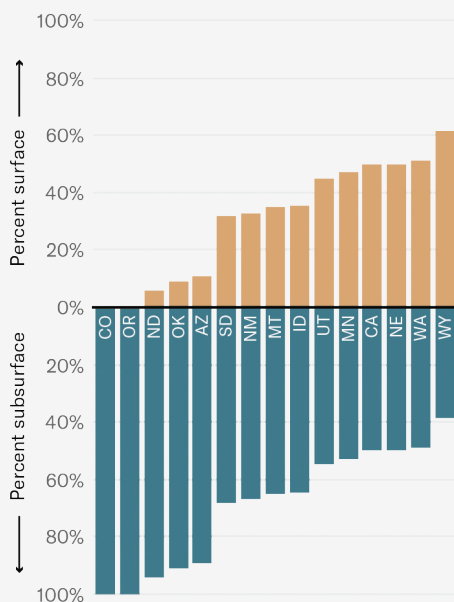
Known uses of state trust lands on reservations, in acres



Parcels may have multiple land uses. Not all uses are known.

As above, so below

Surface versus subsurface proportion of on-reservation state trust land rights



Source: High Country News and Grist analysis
Graphics by Clayton Aldern / Grist

logged 640-acre parcel near St. Mary's Lake. In the trade, Montana will receive federal lands from the Department of Interior and the Department of Agriculture, or potentially both, elsewhere in the state. Such a return has been "the want of our ancestors and the want of our tribal leaders since they were taken," Incashola said. "It's not a want for ownership, it's a want for protection of resources, for making us whole again to manage our forests again the way we want to manage them."

Tribal nations and states have struggled with state and federal governments over jurisdiction and land since the inception of the United States, says Alex Pearl, who is Chickasaw and a professor of law at the University of Oklahoma. But the potential return of state trust lands represents an opportunity for LandBack on a broad scale: an actionable step toward reckoning with the ongoing dispossession of territories meant to be reserved for tribes. "The LandBack movement that started as protests has become a viable policy, legally," Pearl said.

THE UINTAH AND OURAY Indian Reservation is one of the largest reservations in the U.S., stretching 4.5 million acres across the northeastern corner of Utah. But on closer look, the reservation is checkerboarded, thanks to allotment, with multiple land claims on the reservation by individuals, corporations and the state of Utah. Altogether, the Ute Tribe oversees about a quarter of its reservation.

The state of Utah owns more than 511,000 surface and subsurface acres of trust lands within the reservation's borders. And of those acres, the Ute Tribe is leasing 47,000 — nearly 20% of all surface trust land acreage on the reservation — for grazing purposes, paying the state to use land well within its own territorial boundaries. According to Utah's Trust Lands Administration, the agency responsible for managing state trust lands, a grazing permit for a 640-acre plot runs around \$300. In the last year alone, the Utes have paid the state more than \$25,000 to graze on trust lands on their reservation.

Of all the Indigenous nations in the U.S. that pay states to utilize their own lands, the Ute Tribe leases back the highest number of acres. And while not all states have publicly accessible lessee information with land-use records, of the ones that did, *High Country News* and *Grist* found that at least four other tribes also lease nearly 11,000 acres, combined,

on their own reservations: the Southern Ute Tribe, Navajo Nation, Pueblo of Laguna and Zuni Tribe. According to state records, almost all of these tribally leased lands — 99.5% — are used for agriculture and grazing.

The Pueblo of Laguna, Zuni, part of the Navajo Reservation and Ramah Navajo, a chapter of the Navajo Nation, are located in the state of New Mexico, which owns nearly 143,000 surface and subsurface acres of state trust lands across a total of 13 reservations. The Navajo Nation leases all 218 acres of New Mexico state trust lands on its reservation, while the Ramah Navajo leases 17% of the 24,600 surface state trust land acres within its reservation's borders. The Pueblo of Laguna leases more than half of the 11,200 surface trust land acres in its territory, while the Zuni Tribe leases 37 of the 60 surface trust land acres located on its reservation. The nations did not comment by press time.

Cris Stainbrook, president of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation, said that for tribes, the cost of leasing state trust lands on their reservations for grazing and agriculture is likely lower than what it would cost to fight for ownership of those lands. But, he added, those lands never should have been taken from tribal ownership in the first place.

"Is it wrong? Is it fundamentally wrong to have to lease what should be your own land? Yes," said Stainbrook. "But the reality of the situation is, the chances of having the federal or state governments return it is low."

In theory, tribal nations share access to public resources funded by state trust lands, but that isn't always the case. For example, Native students tend to fare worse in U.S. public schools, and some don't attend state-run schools at all. Instead, they enroll in Bureau of Indian Education schools, a system of nearly 200 institutions on 64 reservations that receive funding from the federal government, not state trust lands.

Beneficiaries, including public schools, get revenue generated from a variety of activities, including leases for roads and infrastructure, solar panel installations and commercial projects. Fossil fuel infrastructure or activity is present on roughly a sixth of on-reservation trust lands nationwide.

While state agencies can exchange trust lands on reservations for federal lands off-reservation, the process is complicated by the states' legal obligation to produce as much



From top: Recently harvested timber on a parcel of state-owned land west of the town of Hot Springs, Montana, on the Flathead Reservation. In 2023, the state of Montana made almost \$162 million from activity on state trust lands.

Tony Incashola Jr., director of Tribal Resource Management for CSKT, looks out at state-owned parcels from an airplane this August.

money as possible from trust lands for its beneficiaries. Still, some states are attempting to create statewide systematic processes for returning trust lands.

At the forefront are Washington, which is currently implementing legislation to return lands, and North Dakota, which is moving new legislation through Congress for the same purpose. But because of the lands' value and the states' financial obligations, it's difficult to transfer complete jurisdiction back to Indigenous nations. Trust lands must be swapped for land of equal or greater





value, which tends to mean that a transfer is only possible if the land in question doesn't produce much revenue.

That's the case with Washington's Trust Land Transfer program, which facilitates exchanges of land that the state's Department of Natural Resources, or DNR, deems unproductive. Those lands are designated as "unproductive" because they might not generate enough revenue to cover maintenance costs, have limited or unsustainable resource extraction, or have resources that are physically inaccessible. A 540-acre plot of land that was transferred to the state Department of Fish and Wildlife in a 2022 pilot program was considered financially unproductive because "the parcel is too sparsely forested for timber harvest, its soils and topography are not suitable for agriculture, it offers low potential for grazing revenue, it is too small for industrial-scale solar power generation, and it is located too close to the 20,000-acre Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge for wind power generation."

Currently, Washington's Constitution does not allow for the exchange of subsurface acreage; the DNR retains mineral rights to state trust lands even after exchange. Transfers are funded by the state, with the Legislature paying the DNR the value of the land to be exchanged so the agency can then purchase new land. The value of all the lands that can be exchanged is capped at \$30 million every two years.

Even that money isn't guaranteed: The Legislature isn't obligated to approve the funding for transfers. Additionally, the program is not focused solely on exchanges with Indigenous nations; any public entity can apply for a land transfer. Through the pilot program in 2022, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Natural Resources and Kitsap County received a total of 4,425 acres of federal land valued at more than \$17 million in exchange for unproductive trust lands. All three entities proposed using the land to establish fish and wildlife habitat, natural areas, and open space and recreation. None of the proposed projects in the pilot program had tribes listed as receiving agencies for land transfer. However, six of the eight proposals up for funding between 2025 and 2027 would be transferred to tribal nations.

In North Dakota, the Trust Lands Completion Act would allow the state to exchange surface state trust lands on

"It's going to have to take the general public to get up in arms over it and say, 'This is just morally wrong.'"

Details from the Jocko Prairie on the Flathead Reservation, part of a project the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes have undertaken to build resilience against the larger and more frequent wildfires associated with climate change. The CSKT forest management plan aims to mimic natural disturbances in its removal of timber by combining traditional ecological knowledge with Western science.

reservations for more accessible federal land or mineral rights elsewhere. The legislation made it through committee in the U.S. Senate last year and, this fall, state officials hope to couple it with bigger land-use bills to pass through the Senate and then the House.

But one of the legislation's main caveats is that it, like Washington, excludes subsurface acres: North Dakota's Constitution also prohibits ceding mineral rights. North Dakota currently owns 31,000 surface and 200,000 subsurface acres of trust lands on reservations. State Commissioner of University and School Lands Joe Heringer said that returning state trust lands with mineral development would be complicated because of existing development projects and financial agreements.

Right now, the only mineral development happening on reservation-bound state trust lands is on the Fort Berthold Reservation in the state's northwestern corner, with the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, also known as the Three Affiliated Tribes.

Initial oil and gas leases are about five years, but they can stay in place for decades if they start producing within that time. "There's already all sorts of leases and contracts in place that could get really, really messy," Heringer said.

By design, subsurface rights are superior to surface rights. If land ownership is split — if a tribe, for instance, owns the surface rights while an oil company owns the subsurface rights — the subsurface owner can access the property's resources, even though the process might be complicated, regardless of what the surface owner wants.

"It's not worthless, but it's close to it," Stainbrook said of returning surface rights without subsurface rights.

Still, Stainbrook acknowledges that programs to return state trust lands are meaningful because they consolidate surface ownership and jurisdiction and allow tribes to decide surface land use. Plus, he said, there's a lot of land without any subsurface resources to extract, meaning it would be left intact anyway. But split ownership, with tribes owning surface rights and non-tribal entities holding subsurface rights, prevents tribes from fully making their own choices about resource use and management on their lands. And states are not required to consult with tribes on how those lands are used.

"In the sense of tribal sovereignty, it has



The sun shines through trees on the tribally managed Jocko Prairie on the Flathead Reservation in Montana. The Self-Determination Act of 1976 allowed the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes to develop their own forest management plan, which included resuming previously banned prescribed burns.

not increased tribal sovereignty,” Stainbrook said. “In fact, I mean, it’s pretty much the status quo.”

Since 2011, the tribal governments of 49 of the 79 reservations that have state trust lands within their boundaries have received federal Tribal Climate Resilience Awards. These awards are designed to fund and assist tribes in creating adaptation plans and conducting vulnerability and risk assessments as climate change increasingly threatens their homes. But the existence of state trust lands inside reservation boundaries, coupled with state-driven resource extraction, means that many tribes face hard limits when trying to enact climate mitigation policies — regardless of how much money the federal government puts toward the problem.

IN 2023, A WILDFIRE swept the Flathead Reservation, just west of Flathead Lake. Afterward, the CSKT and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, which manages the state’s trust lands, discussed salvage timber operations — in which marketable logs are taken from wildfire-burned forests — on two affected state trust land parcels inside the reservation. The tribe approved a road permit for the state to access and salvage logs on one parcel, but not the other, since it wasn’t as impacted by the fire. Later, the tribe found out that the state had gone ahead with salvage operations

on the second parcel, bypassing the need for a tribal road permit by accessing it through an adjacent private property.

That lack of communication and difference in management strategies is evident on other state trust lands on the reservation: One logged state parcel is next to a sensitive elk calving ground, while another parcel, logged in 2020, sits atop a ridgeline and impacts multiple streams with bull trout and west-slope cutthroat trout. The uniformity and scale of the state logging — and the prioritization of profit and yield — do not align with the tribe’s forestry plans, which are tied to cultural values and use of land, Incashola said. “Sometimes the placement of (trust lands) affects cultural practices, or precludes cultural practices from happening on those tracts,” he said. “We can’t do anything about it, because they have the right to manage their land.” Montana’s Department of Natural Resources and Conservation did not make anyone available to interview for this story, but answered some questions by email, saying in a statement that the department “has worked with our Tribal Nations to ensure these lands are stewarded to provide the trust land beneficiaries the full market value for use as required by the State of Montana’s Constitution and the enabling legislation from Congress that created these trust lands.”

Since the 1930s, the CSKT has prioritized reclaiming land, buying private and state

trust lands back at market value. Today, the tribe owns more than 60% of its reservation.

While logging used to be the tribe’s main income source, it has diversified its income streams since the 1990s. Now, the tribe’s long-term goal is for its forests to return to pre-settler conditions and to build climate resiliency by actively managing them with fire. The 2020 Montana Climate Solutions Plan acknowledged the CSKT as a leader on climate and recommended that the state support tribal nations in climate resilience adaptation. However, that suggestion remains at odds with the state’s management of, and profit from, reservation lands. The 640-acre parcel near the Mission Mountains that Incashola had never been able to visit because of the locked gate, for example, abuts tribal wilderness and is considered a sensitive area. Since 2015, the state has made \$775,387.82 from logging that area.

The legislation that included the Montana-CSKT land exchange passed in 2020, but progress has been slow. The exchange doesn’t include all the state trust land on the reservation, which means the selection process of those acres is ongoing. The lands within the tribally protected areas, as well as those near the Mission Mountain Wilderness, are a high priority for the CSKT. There are some state lands that are ineligible, such as those that do not border tribal land. But the state has also interpreted the legislation to exclude subsurface acres that could be used for mining or other extractive activities. The tribe is resolute that subsurface acres are included in the legislation. The impasse has complicated negotiations.

“IT’S OUT-AND-OUT land theft,” said Minnesota State Sen. Mary Kunesch of state trust lands on reservations. Kunesch, a descendant of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, has authored two bills that returned state land to tribes, each with a decade or more of advocacy behind it.

On the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe’s

reservation in Minnesota, for example, the tribe owns only about 5% of the reservation, although federal legislation recently returned more than 11,000 acres of illegally taken national forest. Meanwhile, the state owns about 17%. That ownership has an impact. Tribes in Minnesota do not receive revenue from state trust lands on their reservations, nor do tribal schools, Kunesh says. “Hundreds of thousands of millions of dollars that could have perhaps been used to educate, to create housing, to create economic opportunity have been lost to the tribes,” Kunesh said. Still, “It’s not that the tribes want money. They want the land.”

Land return is contentious, but Kunesh has seen support for it from people of all backgrounds while working to pass legislation. “We do need our non-Native communities to stand up and speak the truth as they see it when it comes to returning the lands, and any kind of compensation, back to the tribes.”

But those land returns will also require political support from senators and representatives at both the state and federal level. “Ultimately, it is up to Congress to work with

States and other affected interests to find solutions to these land management issues,” the National Association of State Trust Lands’ executive committee said in an email.

In some states, legislators have indicated strong resistance. Utah lawmakers passed a law this year that allows the state’s Trust Land Administration to avoid advertising state land sales. The law gives Utah’s Department of Natural Resources the ability to buy trust land at fair market value, ultimately avoiding possible bidding wars with other entities, like tribes. The legislation came after the Ute Indian Tribe outbid the Department of Natural Resources when trying to buy back almost 30,000 acres of state trust land on their reservation.

“It’s going to have to take the general public to get up in arms over it and say, ‘This is just morally wrong,’” said Stainbrook of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation. “We haven’t gotten to that point where enough people are standing up and saying that.”

NEAR THE SOUTHEAST EDGE of the Flathead Reservation is a place called Jocko

Prairie — though it hasn’t looked like a prairie for some time — with stands of large ponderosa pines and other trees crowding in, a result of federal fire-suppression practices on tribal lands. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes have worked to restore the prairie by keeping out cattle, removing smaller trees and reintroducing fire. Land that was once crowded with thickets of brush is now opening up, and as more sunlight reaches the ground, grasses and flowers have come back.

This year in early June, a sea of blue-purple camas spread out on the ground under the trees, reactivated by fire after decades of lying dormant. It was a return. ☀

Anna V. Smith is an associate editor at High Country News. She writes and edits stories on tribal sovereignty and environmental justice for the Indigenous Affairs desk from Colorado.

Maria Parazo Rose is a 2024 Nova Media Fellow, reporting on tribal climate relocation. Before this, she worked on Grist’s Indigenous Affairs desk.

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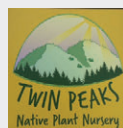


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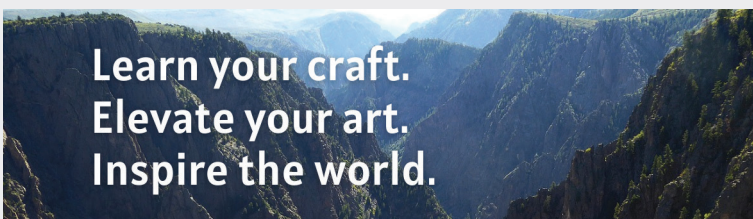


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Colleen McElroy and the Black Northwesterners who loved her

Remembering the vital life and work of one of the most decorated poets of the past quarter century.

BY ROBERT LASHLEY

ILLUSTRATION BY MARIAH QUINTANILLA

IN 1985, *Queen of the Ebony Isles* won the American Book Award and made Colleen McElroy one of the most celebrated figures in late 20th century poetry. In my grandma and auntie's women's book clubs in the historically diverse neighborhood of Hilltop in Tacoma, Washington, it made her a heroine, the most beloved local writer of those sisters trying to survive gang violence and the knotted cruelty of Northern racism. The women who came to Mrs. Eulalah's on 27th and I Street, and to Mrs. Virginia's on 41st and McKinley Avenue, were poor to working-class, either from the South or from families who came from the South, who needed mall-salon hairdos for their jobs and couldn't afford mall-salon prices. Like so many of these DIY Black institutions, their primary mode of entertainment was literature and the discussion of it, with almost half a century's worth of *Essence* Book Club pics and magazines that ranged from the present-day to Black college magazines from the 1930s. When the neighborhood wasn't safe, I would run errands for them and walk them from their cars and back again. In return for my work, I gained a wealth of knowledge about Black literary history.

More than anything, I learned that few Black poets had the grasp of history that McElroy did, and those Black women loved her more than any other living writer. In her pages, she was their fighter: a single mother with two kids and real problems, trying to process heartbreak and perform cost-benefit analyses of what she needed to do to survive as a Black woman in America. Like them, she also loved her aunts and uncles, cried deeply when her heart was broken, and was

dishy, hilarious and fun with her homegirls. Yes, she was a genuine trailblazer and one of the most skilled and gifted poets in American literature, but that didn't matter as much as her success in telling them that their lives were worth something at a time when everything else in Black and outside media was telling them something different. Where the media and pop-culture figures like Bill Cosby were telling them that their lives, their single motherhood and their blues were the reason that the race was failing, McElroy was showing the world that they were worthy of high culture.

ESTABLISHING DEEP ROOTS and bringing her vast knowledge of Black poetic composition to the Pacific Northwest, Colleen McElroy was the literary North Star for a community that called itself Up South, a community of Black people — like my family — who made the migration to serve the country during World War II. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, McElroy traveled to various places in the U.S. and absorbed every poetic tradition she encountered. She made her name as a poet's poet with 1976's *Music from Home*, a street-and-schooled coming-of-age collection that brought a new wit and energy to the Post-Black Arts Movement, a group of Black writers who added more interiority and more sophisticated gender dynamics to the Black protest poetry popularized by Amiri Baraka. Add to this her cultural trailblazing as the first Black woman to be granted tenure in the history of the University of Washington, and you have a life that exhausts superlatives.

After working around the country as an

academic, young poet and teacher, McElroy found her feet teaching speech therapy at Western Washington University in Seattle. Under the tutelage of Denise Levertov and Richard Hugo, she caught fire as a poet. Like Gwendolyn Brooks, she took years to master her craft, and by the time *Music* came out, she was remarkably gifted at Midwest formalism, Detroit free verse and New York organic jazz composition brought together in a tight, distinctive package. Together, they fire up the pan that heats the good cultural grease in these poems, with their fine rhythms, lyrics and ideas bursting off the page and making good trouble on race, gender and culture.

Winters Without Snow, her follow-up in 1978, deserved more than the tepid response it received. She may have been too close to the source material — her own divorce — but that kind of thing has never stopped critics from praising confessional poets with half her talent. What she pulls out as she processes the end of her youth and her experience with racism and sexism is often powerful, heart-breaking and beautiful, as these four lines are in the opening of her poem "Liberation":

*I breathe and sunlight hurts. It expects
a Dry Gulch, fines instead of field of weeds
and wet Moss, my chest the fungus bearer,
my tears draining into its sewage.*

She hid a good deal of the vulnerability she revealed in *Snow* in the otherworldly powerful persona she created in the second book that followed it, *Queen of The Ebony Isles*. If *Home* established herself in her own vast, idiosyncratic Black world, *Isles* showed her taking her



voice everywhere she wanted to go, without watering down a damn bit of who she was. *Isles* was where she fused her gift of poetic, polyrhythmic social realism with a Rolodex-like understanding of the canon. It was also as 'hood as a 72-deuce coupe blasting Kool and The Gang from its speakers.

When she played these contrasting strengths off each other, her highbrow mythological voice and her foot-stomping, soaring street realism, the results were a gorgeous mosaic of the Canon and the Block. In these poems, St. Louis could be the beginning of *The Odyssey*, African funeral rituals could be found in her mother's sleeping, and the biblical Ruth could be found in a Northern blackbird. On one page, you could hear a sermonizing beat to schoolyard handclaps in the grass and then flip to another that equated criminal street runners to Judas turning away from God. *Isles* is a majestic flag of a collection that showed the complexity of Black life and history that goes as far as Black people have settled.

I LEFT THE NEIGHBORHOOD when I was 14, and my mother had enough money to make a down payment on a house in the suburbs. Ten years later, I came back to it to be mentored by my grandfather, a position whose tasks included running errands for the remaining salon members. At the time, I was a burgeoning poet, hungry to learn as much as possible. Once they realized that, the living members of those DIY salons turned me from their quiet errand boy into their student, and the discussions about literature that I quietly sat in on became lessons where I learned my craft. I started as a student in my mid-20s, coming back from a troubled period, and their recommendations were genial and part of their natural conversation. When my self-published chapbook showed I had literary potential, those book clubs became training camps, with me having to read two books that week "or else I shouldn't bring my ass in the room."

During those 15 years, starting from when I came back to the book clubs to when their members began dying off in 2017, I learned the history of Black poetics with McElroy as a base. I studied the specifics of her influences: how the Chicago school's use of lyric form was different from the Detroit school's use of lyric blank verse — which was different from

the organic breath-influenced free verse of Black New York poets, which was different from the biblical-style oral free verse of poets from the South. As I grew as a writer, I learned how organic breath mattered in her form and in the forms of Claude McKay and Margaret Walker, specifically the pauses of conversations to break lines, making them readable orally and on the page. Later, I would learn how Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes alchemized the Old and New Testaments on

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those men and passed
over McElroy, an NEA,
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source of great pain and
consternation.*

the page in 2/3 and 2/4 accents, and how they would use those accents on passive and active verbs to indicate mood.

As I worked to write poetry that was up to their standards, I began to understand that they worked me hard because they wanted me to be their fighter. They saw that I had raw talent, yet they also saw that I wrote about our neighborhood, the people we saw, and our reference language — that I had enough of a grasp on it to turn it into poetry. They had enough of slam poets, nationalist poets and "respectable activists" writing message poems to white people, and they saw that I was someone who listened to them. Thus, they trained me to be the poet they wanted to read, with the result being *The Homeboy Songs*, my first full-length collection, which was published in 2014. (That *Homeboy Songs* went to #8 in

the small press distribution bestseller list in June of that year was just icing on the cake.)

I also know they put in so much work with me partly to take their minds off the heartbreak they felt at the way McElroy was treated by the Northwest later in her life. The *Seattle Times* had given a glowing profile of the men who came to see Shahrazad Ali read from her controversial book *The Blackman's Guide To Understanding the Blackwoman*, in which she states that black women deserve to be slapped in the mouth. That they praised those men and passed over McElroy, an NEA, Fulbright and Rockefeller Foundation fellow, was a source of great pain and consternation. After 2,800 men showed up at The Paramount to see Ali and the demand for Black women writers shifted from the rich and rewarding aesthetics of McElroy to the violent ideal those aggrieved men wanted, the book club women felt deservedly angry. In the '80s, McElroy was popular enough to write fine screenplays and fiction, yet by the time *The Homeboy Songs* came out, she was either ignored, derided or cast aside by a Black literary Seattle that obsessively fixated on men.

With the noble and notable exception of Paul Nelson and the Cascadia Poetics Lab, McElroy died without receiving any of the flowers she deserved in the Pacific Northwest, ignored by the writers' spinoff groups of Seattle's Black upper class, who tried to redraw the culture center without including her in it. Yet there was no self-pity in her, no slovenly, cliché-ridden journey to the right or to the dark web, nothing that compromised her vast, humanistic vision. To the very end, McElroy kept her dignity, street sense and low tolerance for bullshit. I urge you to read her work and its mixture of academic and block sense — work that is a testament to one of the mightiest races a poet has run in Black history. You will see someone who helped her people have courage, someone who had a genuine impact, someone who mattered. Colleen McElroy mattered in this world, and she will continue to matter in any world that chooses to find her. ☀

Robert Lashley was a 2016 Artist Trust Fellow, Jack Straw Fellow and nominee for a Stranger Genius Award. In 2019, Entropy Magazine called The Homeboy Songs (his first collection of poems) one of the 25 most important books to come out of the Seattle area.

How do you describe a sacred site without describing it?

Western journalism puts Indigenous reporters in a tricky position where values don't always align.

BY B. 'TOASTIE' OASTER

I'M STANDING AT an Indigenous sacred site, looking at something I'm not supposed to see. Signs of ceremony are all around: little animal skulls, ribbons, a stump of freshly burnt sage stems in ashes, tied together with red yarn. It looks like a ceremony happened in the last week.

I'm here with a source who wants their story told — who wants to expose the harm that the public and private sectors are inflicting on tribal cultures in pursuit of renewable energy development. But the source also wants to protect these cultural sites from public exposure. So I don't take any photos. I don't record it in my notes. I walk away and do not publish what I see.

Another month, in another part of the Pacific Northwest, I'm at a tribal community event, not reporting, exactly, but relationship building — an important component of establishing trust in Indigenous journalism. I overhear an elder talking about a ceremonial rite of passage that takes place at a location where I have been reporting, a location sited for renewable energy development. The public isn't supposed to know about this ceremony, which means I'm not supposed to know either. So I pretend I didn't hear.

I'm engaged in a yearlong investigation, a partnership between two newsrooms, documenting how proposed developments are threatening sacred lands and Indigenous cultural resources. I usually write for an Indigenous editor, but none of my editors are Native right now on this story. I return to the virtual newsroom, and they're eager to hear about what makes these sites sacred; we need to be able to communicate this to readers, they say, particularly when we dig into the legal and

political mechanisms threatening the sites.

I want the public to understand the importance of these places, and part of me wants to tell my editors everything. But if I do, and the information escapes, it will be on me. I'm Native, too, and I have to handle this information responsibly, without selling out my kin. In the Native world, we tend to view each other — and all living things — as relatives. At the same time, my tribe is not from here, and I'm still learning about the cultures I'm reporting on. Language that would bring the location vibrantly to life is right there in my mind, but I don't feel right about using it. The most I seem to be able to tell my editors — speaking accurately and honestly while respecting cultural concerns — is that tribal leaders won't share that information with me.

I mention some rock features. My editors ask what the features are used for. A variety of purposes, I say, thinking carefully — hunting, storage, cooking. I'm leaving information out, but everything I say is true. Even mentioning the archaeological features could endanger them, putting them in the crosshairs of looters and vandals. Write one too-specific article, and tribal historic preservation officers might find themselves fighting off new age gatherings of non-Natives appropriating Indigenous worship. Or worse: Western scientists destroying ancestral remains for anthropological "research."

During our discussion, my editors seem to believe that sharing as much information as possible is a public good. It's a value assumption of investigative journalism — a very American value, and one I sometimes share. Transparency is what empowers the watchdog press. And of course we aren't with-

holding information that's critical to the investigation. But tribal cultures don't necessarily put such a premium on transparency. In many Indigenous cultures, information is carefully guarded by storytellers, shared orally and only with select people or at certain times, if at all.

During my reporting, a tribal government sends me, at my request, a set of guidelines about cultural information it doesn't want published, like the names or pictures of the first foods that grow where I'm reporting. On the one hand, I don't work for tribal governments, so I don't have to do what they say. And I've worked with neighboring tribes who publicly identify some of the very same plants, which are threatened by renewable energy development. Yet I know I'd be responsible to the community if that information got out.

My own tribal citizenship impacts the reporting process, too. "Toastie, where are you from originally?" began a conversation I recently had with a Chickasaw legal expert. "You're Choctaw. We're kind of cousins." I'm still taken aback sometimes when I hear a question like this from another professional. Normally, I wouldn't feel obligated to talk about my family history at work. But this part of our conversation is how we recognize each other and orient ourselves in relational space. My conduct as a reporter will reflect on my community. So we talk like Natives a bit before settling into our official roles.

I sit down at my laptop to write, thinking again about words. How do I write about plants and sites and ceremonies I can't write about? And then one of my editors forwards me a note from another, paraphrasing a third editor: "Readers may say: They are only roots. How do we get them to think beyond that?"

I leave my desk, play some guitar, go for a walk, trying to shake off frustration. I know my editors are speaking for a readership we can't assume is educated about Native issues like food sovereignty — the ability of a people to govern its own food sourcing. But I have to walk a narrow line between educating and oversharing. I find myself wishing everyone in America, myself included, had learned more about Native issues in school. Then we could avoid situations like this.

The problem haunts me over the dinner stove. "Root gathering," a phrase I've heard Natives use, might be the simplest language to choose. But it sounds primitive, like some-

thing hunter-gatherers do; “civilized” people “harvest vegetables.” I pace around my apartment, searching for wording that might clarify what’s at stake. Indignation flashes through my mind as I reflect on how terms like “heirloom” are applied almost exclusively to European foods — Italian tomatoes, say, even though tomatoes were originally engineered by Indigenous scientists in South America.

What would these Indigenous roots be called if they were in rustic-looking display crates at Whole Foods? Finally, I think I’ve found a solution: I write “endemic, heirloom, organic root vegetable harvests.” True, it’s a word salad, but the plants themselves remain anonymous, and non-Native readers could better understand why they’re valuable.

I Slack the phrase to one of my editors. She laughs, understanding the jab at bourgeois vernacular. Few of those modifiers will make it past top edits; what remains in the final draft is simply a “root vegetable harvest.” Not as obvious, but at least we avoided “root gathering.”

It’s difficult to write for Native and non-Natives at the same time. If a non-Native editor puts the term “first foods” in quotes, that could alienate Native readers. But a non-Native reader may never have encountered the term, and the quotes might help explain that it’s a common phrase.

It’s even more difficult when terms mean different things to different audiences, like the word “sacred.” Natives use it a lot, but I’ve seen it spark scorn in some non-Natives. (“Sacred land? It’s 2024!” reads a social media comment on one of our most recent stories.) Others seem to use it with a shallow understanding.

Handling information amid these tensions, created by different value systems, is the challenge and responsibility of a journalist. Of course, we can’t get into all this in the draft itself. So the challenge remains: How do you write about a sacred site without saying why it’s sacred, in a way that will help non-Natives care? There’s no clear dividing line between too much information and not enough. It’s the liminal space in which a lot of Indigenous affairs reporting takes place. ☼

B. “Toastie” Oaster (they/them) is an award-winning journalist and staff writer for High Country News who writes from the Pacific Northwest.



Prelude to the Stars 08; Photopolymer print, aquatint and screenprint on paper. Monty Little

TOWNSHIP AND RANGE

Exploring the intersection of race and family in the interior rural West.



Origin stories

Explaining invasive species to a toddler.

BY NINA MCCONIGLEY
ILLUSTRATION BY TARA ANAND

"THEY DIE. They not good guys," my daughter Marigold says solemnly.

I nod.

"We put them in the soap," I tell her and her sister, Juniper.

Marigold is 2, and at times her speech is hard to decipher. She forgets verbs. When she wants to be picked up, she shouts, "Carry you!" And when I ask her to do anything, she almost always replies with a resounding "WHY?" — as she does now.

"They eat our plants, Gogo!" exclaims Juniper, nimbly picking up a shiny beetle and plopping it into her bucket.

All summer and into autumn, our evenings had a kind of order. The girls ate dinner, and afterward, we had popsicles on the deck. While they ate their sticky treats, I filled two small beach buckets with dish soap and water. I handed them their buckets, and they would each take an end of our shrubby cinquefoil, picking off Japanese beetles and dropping them into the bubbles. They moved from plant to plant, and I always hoped the activity would stretch the time between dinner and bed.

Juniper, at 4, is intrepid: She picks beetles off leaves with gusto. Marigold points them out and asks me to put them in her pail. In the sun, the beetles are a metallic coppery green. They are easy to catch. I begin to feel badly about the murderous task I have given them, then I look at the wheel-shaped yellow cinquefoil flowers — like lace now, a skeleton of former leaves and petals.

We pick them off by the dozens.

"But why we kill them?" Marigold asks. She points to a daddy longlegs resting on a nearby planter. "We get him?"

"No, Gogo, we leave Mr. Skinnylegs alone," Juniper says. "He's a good guy!"

I point out the honeybees and swallow-tails on the sunset hyssop and coneflowers, the ladybugs on our penstemon and golden-rod — the other good guys.

"The Japanese beetles aren't native." I say. "They kill our plants!"

"But *why*?" Marigold asks.

"They're not from here. They don't belong here. They moved here from. ..."

"We move Colorado!" was her reply.

WHEN I FIRST SAW a bumper sticker that proudly read WYOMING NATIVE, I asked

my mother if I was one, too. I was 11 and reasoned that I had taken my first steps as a baby in Wyoming. I thought of a 20-mph wind as a breeze, knew jackalopes weren't real, and understood that out West, distance isn't measured in miles but hours. I called a Coke a "pop."

"No, no, native means you were born there," she explained.

I thought of Singapore, the land of my birth, a place full of orchids and warm air. A place I knew nothing about. That night, I looked it up in the large atlas on our coffee table. A small island in the South China Sea.

Soon after, I began to hang *National Geographic* maps around my room. I loved lying in bed and looking up at other worlds, imagining being a child somewhere far away from Wyoming. On a map of ancient Egypt, I traced my finger over the Nile and, later that year, my parents took me to see the Ramses II exhibit at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. I asked my mother if I could get a trinket from the gift shop, a necklace with a small scarab on it. She said no, and instead, I bought a postcard of a scarab. Later, I read that the ancient Egyptians considered scarabs — or "fancy beetles," as I called them — to be a divine manifestation of the morning sun. They signified rebirth and transformation, and people wore them for good luck and protection.

I wasn't a kid who grew up visiting my parent's homeland. My dad was a petroleum geologist, and we spent most of my childhood in an oil bust, counting pennies, occasionally venturing to Denver for a long weekend at a hotel with a pool. I was 23 when I took my first trip to India. That first morning, as I stood on the sidewalk, I saw a woman making Kolam designs outside her house. I saw a rickshaw driver sleeping in the seat of his auto. And people walking to work, to school. It was all the stuff of life. I realized it was the first time in my life that I was not in the minority. That morning, on a street in India, was the first time I could remember being surrounded by people who looked like me. The first time I didn't feel othered.

But my elation was short-lived. A Wyoming girl through and through, I was startled by the sound of car horns and a mosque blaring a call to prayer. The noise and crowds

sent me running back into my aunt's house. I needed silence and emptiness. I realized that I was more comfortable in a bar in Medicine Bow, Wyoming, than on that street in India. I was accustomed to quiet and open space. I may not be a Wyoming native, but I didn't know what to do with a city.

OF COURSE, the Japanese beetle isn't a pest in its native Japan. There, it has natural predators. It traveled to America by boat on an iris bulb around 1912. The insects spread rapidly, partly because they have no natural enemies (my two toddlers being an exception). When you look at the list of invasive terrestrial invertebrates from the National Invasive Species Information Center, so many of them are *exotic*: Africanized honeybee, Asian citrus psyllid, Asian jumping worm, Asian long-horned beetle, Asian tiger mosquito, Mexican fruit fly, and our new bedtime ritual, the Japanese beetle. All of them othered by their names. All decidedly *not from here*.

But how do you explain invasive species to a toddler? That they are not welcome here? This country — and our own family, with its Irish and Indian roots — is about being able to pull up the stakes and move for a better life. Only Indigenous peoples are truly native. For everybody else, that bumper sticker, the word "native," seems factually incorrect. The rest of us are all from somewhere else. Some came by wagon, others by ship or planes — and some by clinging to the roots of an iris.

Some evenings, I reach for a beetle to knock into the bucket, and it flies away. Instead of falling into the bubbles, it escapes.

"He fly!" Marigold exclaims with glee.

I respect that beetle. I still don't want it to eat my plants, but I begrudgingly admire something with a thick skin that can adapt to difficult circumstances, thriving though no one wants you.

We are all invasive, all visitors, on this Earth, I tell Marigold. We are all doing our best to survive. Maybe there are no good guys or bad guys. Maybe there's just a great big branching family tree of species, all clinging to what is beautiful, always adapting and living the best way we know how. ☀

Nina McConigley is a writer and professor at Colorado State University and the author of Cowboys and East Indians.

COLORADO

When Mindy Williford returned from a hike near Mount Blue Sky in Colorado, she was more than a little surprised to find out that mountain goats had done a number on her car — a dance number, to be precise, according to the footage (or rather “hoofage”) that Colorado photographer Michael Ryno caught with his phone. “I pulled over and started photographing, particularly the babies — this time of the year the young ones are running around and frolicking on the rocks,” Ryno told 11 News. “I was taking photographs, and all of a sudden a couple of adults started climbing up on the car.” Ryno’s video captured the mountain goats prancing atop the Subaru’s roof and roof rack as if they were dancing at Chappell Roan’s “Pink Pony Club.” Ryno posted the video to Instagram, where it soon racked up more than a million views. An alert viewer noticed the license plate reading “GLAMP” on the car, and Ryno was able to connect with Williford. Williford had filmed her own evidence of the damage caused by the goats — “Dude, those are *hoofprints* on my car,” she is heard saying on camera — but had missed the actual performance. Luckily, the damage wasn’t too *baaaaaad*. And what’s next for *Oreamnos americanus*? Obviously, time as dance contestants on *America’s Goat Talent!* Remember, you herd it here first.

UTAH

A popular rock formation called “Double Arch” — no, not the one in Arches National Park, but its geological cousin in Utah’s Glen Canyon National Recreation Area — collapsed Aug. 8. Its fall-out “serves as a reminder that even stone is impermanent,” the *Salt Lake Tribune* reported. Karen Garthwait, a spokesperson for Arches and Canyonlands

national parks, said that Arches alone has over 2,000 arches, but that many are not visible or visited by park goers. And similar arches do collapse, more frequently than people realize. While such breakdowns might be alarming — best not to camp underneath one — they are generally accepted “and even appreciated” by park personnel. “Arches National Park doesn’t protect arches. It preserves the natural processes that both make arches and eventually unmake arches,” Garthwait said, adding that the park’s mission “isn’t to stop time.” Just as well. Double Arch, also known as “Hole in the Roof,” “Crescent Pool” or, less poetically, “Toilet Bowl,” dates

from the late Triassic or early Jurassic period, according to the National Park Service. After 190 million years, you’d collapse, too.

OREGON

Speaking of stopping time, tortoises can live upwards of 150 years. Then again, if you’re a tortoise, you’ll need the extra time if you plan to take up hiking. A tortoise named Bowser was spotted by police officers Aug. 1, ambulating his merry way down a path near Portland’s Southeast Flavel Street, KGW.com reported. The officers took stock of the situation and quickly realized that someone’s pet was on the lam. They “picked up and secured the tortoise” and

contacted Multnomah County Animal Control. The tortoise had been reported missing two days earlier; Bowser’s owner, Jasmine Sprague, said he’d escaped their fenced-in yard through a gate that was left open. She scoured the neighborhood for days looking for the runaway reptile: “We know he likes blackberries and dandelions, and so we were searching yards and bushes.” Bowser traveled about a half mile before he was apprehended. It remains unclear where exactly he was moseying and meandering to, or why he was on the run, but his humans are happy he’s safely home after his 880-yard adventure.

COLORADO

Lately, it seems like bears have been showing up unannounced and without a formal invitation in a lot of unexpected places: visiting elementary school classrooms; stealing Oreos out of family homes; hanging out at a Lake Tahoe golf tournament — one determined bruin walked a thousand miles back to its favorite campground after authorities relocated it — but crashing a Renaissance fair? That’s a new one, but also not surprising, considering that, well, bears will be bears. Smoky, an 80-pound black bear, found a cozy nook underneath one building and didn’t want to leave. “Ironically, it was under a building that sold honeycombs,” said the Douglas County Sheriff’s Office. Deputies were called to the scene at the Colorado Renaissance Festival in Larkspur, kdvr.com reported. Fair maidens, noble knights and other merry revelers were steered away from the area while officials from Colorado Parks and Wildlife diplomatically helped escort Smoky off the property — ideally to someplace a whole lot less people-y — before anything truly medieval went down. ✨



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 DANIEL GONZÁLEZ

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and gloves, stands in a field of tall yellow grass. In the background, there are several black and brown cows grazing, and a large mountain range under a clear blue sky.

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#IAM THE WEST

**KIMBERLY MORALES JOHNSON (SHE/HER)
(GABRIELENO/TONGVA SAN GABRIEL BAND
OF MISSION INDIANS)**

**Educator, tribal secretary, co-founder of Tongva
Taraxat Paxaavxa Conservancy
Los Angeles, California**

Speaking your truth is difficult. In grad school, my cohort and I were known as the “combative cohort.” Recently, I had a situation where someone mentioned that I responded in a combative way. Sometimes, as Native American women, our passion — our saying “no” — is seen as hostile or combative. Why can’t we view someone saying “no” as a boundary? Why can’t people honor our passion? When I shared my recent experience with a friend who was in my cohort, she quickly replied, “I would rather be combative than complicit.” I believe, as Native women, when we’re wearing earrings or a scarf or regalia, it is in a way a shield — a shield to protect us against harm. I chose to wear this because it makes me feel protected and reminds me that my ancestors are first and foremost in my thoughts and work.

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

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