

High Country News

THE
WEST'S
MOST
WANTED

Worker safety in
the wind power
industry

A failed cannabis
operation on
Native land

When a beloved
saguaro gives up
the ghost



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Workers at Wild Horse Wind Farm in central Washington. **Kyle Johnson**

Know the West.

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A more beautiful world

I WAS RAISED TO BELIEVE that you should leave places better than you found them. Pick up trash, plant flowers, repair something broken, leave a few pieces of firewood at a campsite for the next folks. Practice “leave no trace” in the backcountry, so that others can have the same exhilarating experience you did without having to stumble on a disconcerting wad of toilet paper at the base of an unsuspecting shrub. Some hikers will even turn a Ziploc bag inside out and retrieve those repulsive wads. My dad would always finish a hike with a pocket full of other people’s cigarette butts.

If everybody behaved like this, it would be a better world. But if everybody does the opposite — takes more than they give, compromises the integrity of places with no thought for others — then our world is destined to become increasingly despoiled. As has been the case (see: Superfund sites, the 6th mass extinction, 420 parts per million CO2 in the atmosphere). In today’s dominant culture, it seems the takers outnumber the givers. This means the givers have to work extra hard to slow the unraveling of our communities and the ecosystems we all depend on.

In this first issue of *High Country News* of 2025, you’ll read about a cannabis operation on the Fort McDermitt Reservation that went bust, leaving behind defunct greenhouses, abandoned facilities and a pittance of the anticipated profits. The non-Native entrepreneurs responsible for the debacle left the tribe to pick up the pieces. Elsewhere in this issue, Nina McConigley charts a course for the year ahead, deciding that this will be the year she doubles down on working to make things better in her community in order to counter the despair she feels about an incoming presidential administration that is set on dialing back environmental protections and increasing intimidation, fear and hate of immigrants.

Ultimately, it’s up to each of us to decide which side of the balance our efforts will fall on. Have we given back? Have we volunteered, planted, honored, protected, donated, cared for, safeguarded, stewarded and restored more than we destroyed, denuded, consumed, abandoned or passively disregarded? The beginning of a new year is an excellent time to take stock, make a course correction or decide to double down in the year ahead. If we all leave the place better than we found it, it will be a more beautiful world.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief

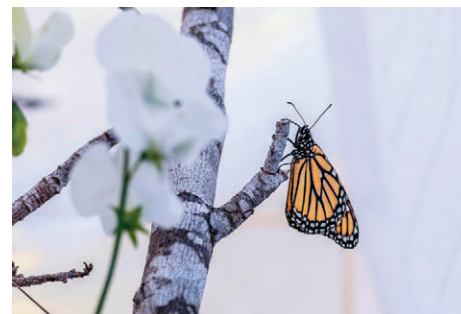


Sharon Chischilly

How did Native people vote this election cycle?

Accurate data is hard to come by, but one poll suggests many supported progressive priorities and liberal candidates.

By Anna V. Smith



Jennifer Ferber / Alamy

Western monarch butterflies favor private land.

A new analysis of the butterflies’ migration routes shows the need for collaborative conservation.

By Kylie Mohr



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ON THE COVER

Prairie dogs emerge from their burrow in a colony on American Prairie in Montana. Prairie dogs, once one of the most abundant animals on the prairie, now occupy 2% of their historic range.

Louise Johns / HCN

A Smithsonian Institution researcher inspects a prairie dog her team trapped at American Prairie, a nature reserve in north-central Montana.

Louise Johns / 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.

HCN LIGHTS THE WAY

Just received and read the December issue. Once again: Incredible! I, like so many of us, have been in quite a state of being since the election. I'm looking for wisdom and trying to find the light in these times. The editor's note was well done. I thought "Unsteady Ground" was an amazing piece and why I respect *HCN* so deeply with complex issues. I love the various perspectives on how to move forward on such tricky territory!

HCN is relevant for families on the East Coast; it's not a West-only magazine. You are the canaries in the coal mines for us with weather, fires. Plus, you all are so ahead of us when dealing with issues such as reparations, LandBack, eliminating dams.

All to say, *HCN* keeps our spirits strong in these times.

Ricky Baruch
Orange, Massachusetts

UNTANGLING THIS MESS WON'T BE EASY

Thank you for trying to provide a thoughtful, come-together message ("Dear Friends: Finding common ground in divisive times," December 2024). I don't see it that way, though — 70% of Westerners say they want a clean environment, wildlife habitat protection, etc., but they don't do it. Sure, pockets of people are actually on the ground improving habitat and reducing resource consumption, but the F-150 is the most popular vehicle and a third bigger than 30 years ago. Energy use for transportation has doubled in 50 years; homes are 30% bigger than when I was a kid. In general, resource consumption has been on an escalating trend since forever. That isn't stewardship. The expected dismantling of resource-management agencies, the push to develop wildlife habitat — our neighbors voted for that, or didn't vote to stop it. I'm going to have a hard time find-

ing common ground. I just hope folks who do actually respect the land and understand the responsibilities of stewardship don't become shrinking violets.

A society that worships a growing GDP that excludes the value of healthy ecosystems and rewards the hoarders of that economic substance; a public seduced by a constant stream of shiny new things, convenient and addictive non-food consumables and futuristic individual transportation is one in need of a serious health check-up/intervention. The symptoms of an ill society are going to get worse if we don't face reality. Finding common threads to mend into something useful is going to be about as easy as untangling my fishing line when I was 10. Only back then, I could just cut my losses when patience wore thin.

Steve Moore
Captain Cook, Hawai'i

DAMN THE DAM SIRENS

The problems faced by Carnation, Washington, and the Tolt River Dam are not unique ("The dam that cried wolf," November 2024). Many communities in the West are located immediately downstream of large dams. The "cry wolf" issue regarding false alarms is a major reason there aren't more sirens in use for flood emergency management below dams. However, an early warning system that monitors reservoir levels, downstream discharge and other information could provide information to alert authorities of a pending dam-related emergency. Once an emergency is verified, methods in use now can rapidly alert the public. A phone call can be more effective than a siren because it can provide very specific information — such as where to go to get out of the flood zone — and can convey an evacuation order's

urgency. Ensuring public trust is important to dam-operating agencies, and for this reason, maybe sirens should be avoided.

Bruce Feinberg
Boulder, Colorado
Retired federal dam safety engineer (USBR)

STORIES ON THE WEST, PLEASE!

I am a longtime subscriber and support your efforts to expand the notion of what qualifies as "news of the West" to include a wider range of social issues. However, I don't understand how Afton Montgomery's "How to write about abortion" (November 2024) remotely qualifies. While the book she reviews — Pam Houston's *Without Exception: Reclaiming Abortion, Personhood, and Freedom* — references places in the West, her piece is not really about the West. It is about abortion and abortion rights, which I can read about elsewhere. There are many more stories that no one else but *HCN* covers that I would prefer to read in *High Country News*.

Don't get me wrong: I am a strong supporter of abortion rights and bodily autonomy for all. I wouldn't vote Republican for dog-catcher.

Jeff Sussmann
Santa Fe, New Mexico

MORE THAN ONE HAZARD LOOMING

Thank you for "The big spill" (September 2024), about a potential catastrophic oil spill into the Willamette and Columbia rivers. It is worth noting that there could also be a catastrophic spill of millions of gallons of radioactive waste into the Columbia River from Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington. Our unchecked corporate and military-industrial complex is a growing threat to us all.

Marc Norton
San Francisco, California

CORRECTION

Our chart showing New Mexico's wind-electricity production in "How climate change affects your energy bill" (Facts & Figures, November 2024) failed to indicate that the 2024 figure reflected January through June, not the entire year. We regret the error.

REPORTAGE

The perils of wind energy work

In a growing industry, workers are organizing to keep one another safe.

BY BROOKE LARSEN

ON A CLOUDY FALL DAY IN 2023, Alfred Pebria and his fellow construction workers were installing a wind turbine in Solano County, California. They were trying to hoist a nacelle — a several-hundred-thousand-pound structure the size of a single-wide trailer that holds a turbine's generator — to the top of a 344-foot tower. But part way up, the crane froze. "Can't come down, can't come up," Pebria recalled. "Only thing that is coming up is the winds."

The wind started whipping at the nacelle. Pebria made sure the taglines — long ropes used

to stabilize a load — were taut so it wouldn't take out the crane. Meanwhile, workers stood inside the tower, which gyrated in the wind. "It just so happened that day we had pizza for lunch," Pebria said. "So there was pizza all over the (inside) of that tower — regurgitated pizza."

After 45 minutes, the crew repaired the crane and successfully raised the nacelle. That project, owned by the Sacramento Municipal Utility District, is one of about 10 wind-energy jobs that Pebria, a member of the Ironworkers Local 378 in Northern California, has worked.

Fortunately, lunch was the only casualty that day. But it felt like a close call. "There's nothing safe about that job," Pebria said. "You don't manage safety. You manage the risk." Workers need to watch out for equipment malfunctions, falls, electrical hazards and more. Companies may demand that they rack up 14-hour days to finish projects quickly, but the work requires focus and alertness

Workers at Wild Horse Wind Farm in central Washington in 2017. The distance from the ground to the top of the turbine blade is 351 feet.

Kyle Johnson





to stay safe. In addition, job sites are often in remote locations, far from emergency services.

Despite the safety issues, Pebria, like other wind-energy workers who spoke with *High Country News*, loves the job. The wind workforce is growing rapidly; in 2023, wind had the second-highest employment numbers of any electricity generation sector — 131,327 jobs, over twice as many as coal. (Solar led with nearly three times as many.) People are drawn to the work for some of the same reasons that make it risky: the chance to visit remote places, travel, enjoy expansive views from the top of the tower. “You just feel that adrenaline just coming through your gums,” Pebria said.

When safety issues do arise, though, Pebria has something

that most workers in the industry lack: union training and protection. Union members go through extensive on-the-job learning in registered apprenticeships, and, thanks to protections like project labor agreements, they can flag any safety concerns without fear of losing their jobs. “They can identify something that doesn’t look right to them, and they speak up with a collective voice instead of an individual voice,” said Chris Hannan, president of the State Building and Construction Trades Council of California, which includes the Ironworkers Local.

The Department of Energy, in a 2024 energy and employment report, found that 12% of workers in the wind industry were represented by a union, a rate that is lower than coal (16%)

and natural gas (17%) electricity generation, but slightly higher than solar (11%).

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) could help increase safety and unionization rates; it boosts tax credits for renewable energy projects that hire qualified apprentices, often through a union, and pay prevailing wages, meaning the average wage in a particular geographic area. The IRA also incentivizes project labor agreements, which are negotiated between construction unions and contractors and often include provisions for safety and workers’ rights.

But the future of the tax credits is uncertain. President-elect Trump has threatened to rescind all unspent IRA money, and the Treasury Department could reopen and rewrite the

tax credit rules. Without federal funds and leadership, unionization rates in the wind industry will likely continue to vary across states. Going forward, Mijin Cha, who studies just transition at the University of California, Santa Cruz, said that new labor standards, as opposed to market incentives, would more effectively guarantee good jobs.

IN THE ABSENCE of unions, workers have found other ways to reduce risks. The Green Workers Alliance, which organizes people for safe and well-paid renewable energy jobs, is working with the Utility Workers Union of America to push for stronger standards for wind workers through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA.

OSHA and state offices are

Andrea Nesbitt at the top of a turbine. Nesbitt and her team run tower inspections, climbing as many as four turbines a day. **Kyle Johnson**

responsible for inspecting job sites and enforcing safety rules. But Matthew Mayers, director of the Green Workers Alliance, said the group's members rarely, if ever, see inspections. In practice, workers' safety depends on company procedures, or on the knowledge and empowerment of workers themselves. And companies can vary, from the owner of the wind farm to equipment manufacturers like General Electric and subcontractors like WindCom. "We work with OSHA as much as possible," Mayers said, "but we also understand that it's really up to workers building their own power to enforce better conditions."

Wind tech Patrick Foeday discovered the Green Workers Alliance on Facebook in 2020 and has since organized and educated his fellow techs. Beyond the paycheck, Foeday is passionate about green energy: "That's one of the main reasons that wakes me up every morning — to get into renewables," he said. But he's also witnessed the worst parts of the job. He saw one coworker fall at least 10 feet. Another got heat stroke while working inside a mounted turbine blade, and Foeday had to use his first aid training while they waited about half an hour for an ambulance to arrive. "Every single day, there's a fear," he said.

For the past few months, the Green Workers Alliance has been surveying wind-energy workers about workplace safety. The survey is ongoing, but the group shared preliminary results with *High Country News* in early November, after 51 people had completed it. More than half said that they'd felt pressure to work

beyond their safe capacity due to long hours or lack of rest days. Still more said they'd had to work alongside colleagues who were not properly trained.

Foeday would like to see stricter training requirements and more hands-on training. Wind techs typically work in at least pairs and rely on one another for their safety, so when someone isn't adequately trained, it's dangerous for everyone. "Now you have to pay attention to (the new tech), because if anything happened up in the air, he has to rescue you, or you have to rescue him," Foeday said.

As the industry grows, increased unionization, stronger OSHA standards, pro-labor laws and better training may all help boost job safety. In the meantime, though, the Green Workers Alliance is taking a mutual aid approach to improving conditions. In coming months, it will release a mobile-optimized website where workers can enter details about work sites, including pay, lodging, food and working conditions, as well as learn about workers' rights.

Currently, Foeday and about 100 wind techs have a group chat where they share concerns and offer advice. "It's been a very, very useful tool for us," he said. Due to the remote and mobile nature of the wind industry, such tools are providing new pathways for worker solidarity. 🌻

This report was made possible in part by the Fund for Environmental Journalism of the Society of Environmental Journalists.

Brooke Larsen is a correspondent for High Country News and a freelance journalist writing from Salt Lake City, Utah. Formerly, Brooke was the Virginia Spencer Davis Fellow for HCN.

POEM

Interpretation of Signs

By C. Dale Young

The ability to judge distance is not the only confusion the desert has to offer. Here, the rugged mountains seem fairly close,

but it is a trick of perspective, a trick of light and shadow. You need not meditate to find a sense of euphoria here. You need

only let the heat do what it does. What is selfishness in the desert? What is generosity? Do such abstractions stand up

to the cactus? The desert wind is always threatening to erase everything, even the soul. I came out to the desert to think, which is

another way of me saying I needed to feel again. I needed to remember. Some find solace in the snow-covered plains of the Sierras.

Others find it on a beach where clouds reveal their hieroglyphics. I come to a place like this. I needed to remember. I needed to find myself.

As my dead grandmother said to me in a dream where she was knitting me a sweater: "Please child, remember what you are, remember who you are."

WEB EXTRA Listen to C. Dale Young read his poem at hcn.org/interpretation-signs

How the West was won

A breakdown of voter trends in the region.

BY ERIN X. WONG
DATA VISUALIZATION
BY JENNIFER DI-MAJO

THIS MONTH, hundreds of political electees are settling into agencies and statehouses across the country, eager to wield their fresh power and influence. Their approach to the economy, national security and the environment will determine the quality of life for Americans for years to come. As they take office, it's important for Westerners to understand their base to gauge how well they are meeting their constituents' demands.

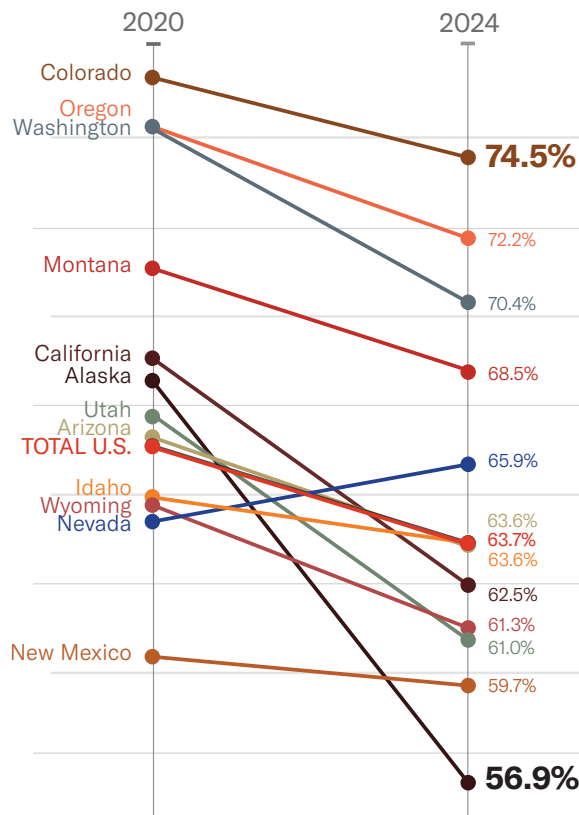
Here in the West, Republicans performed better than expected among voters of color, while Democrats made inroads among some white voters. Independents were eager to put the Biden years behind them, while young voters, especially in Western swing states, were enthusiastic about the "underdog," Vice President Kamala Harris. Ultimately, President-elect Donald Trump's hardline stance on the economy and immigration attracted a much broader coalition than the one that narrowly elected him eight years ago.

As the incoming administration takes office, November's election data offers a rare opportunity to examine the West's politically engaged populace. Increasingly polarized neighborhoods, a growing number of independents and the prominence of new American citizens each offer a window into the region's changing electorate. ✨

SOURCES: AP News and NORC at the University of Chicago, Ballotpedia, Brookings Institution, Edison Research, Public Policy Institute of California, *The Arizona Republic*, *The Nevada Independent*, *The New York Times*, University of Florida Election Lab, U.S. Immigration Policy Center at the University of California San Diego.

Voter turnout by state

General election voter turnout, 2020 to 2024, as of Nov. 15, 2024.



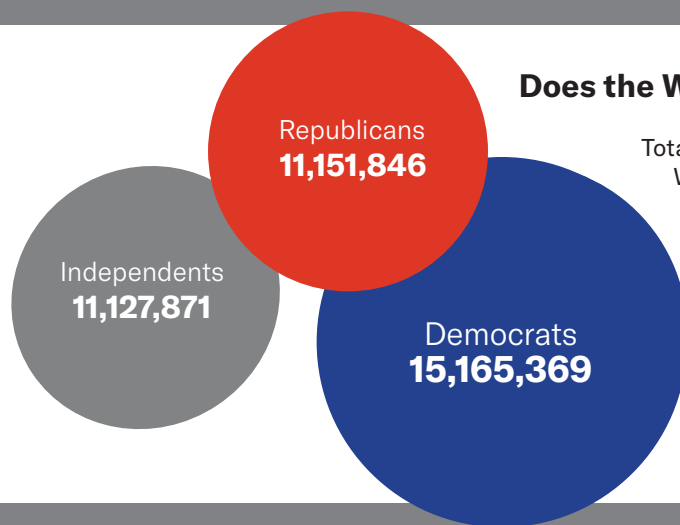
Colorado has consistently had the highest voter turnout among Western states.

Californians, including hundreds of thousands of Democrats, voted in much lower numbers than in 2020.

Nevada is the only state that saw increased turnout in 2024.

Voter turnout dipped by 11% in **Alaska**.

Does the West lean left or right?

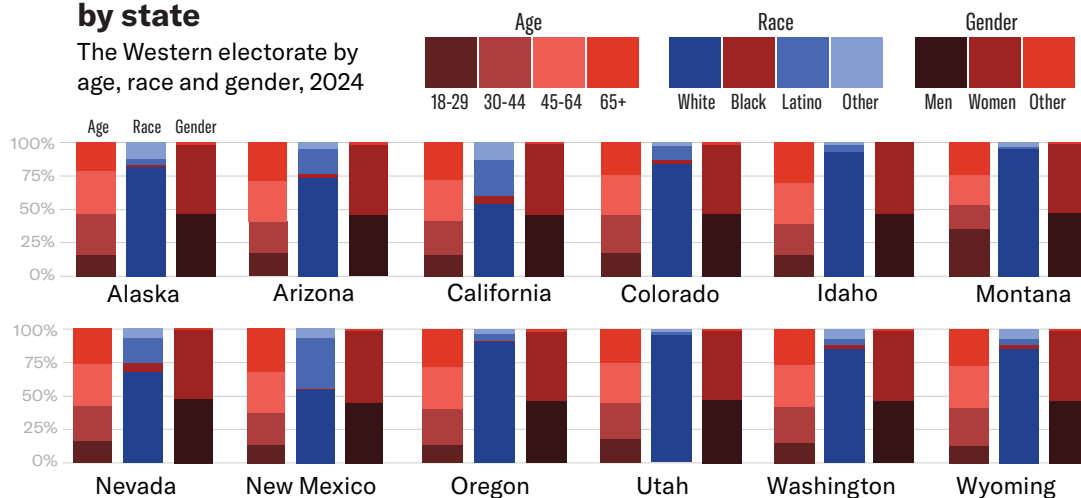


Total voter registration across the West as of March 2024, minus Washington and Montana, which do not publish data by party affiliation.

Dozens of districts shifted to the right, with as many as 17% more voters per county supporting the Republican Party.

Voter demographics by state

The Western electorate by age, race and gender, 2024



Anatomy of a swing state

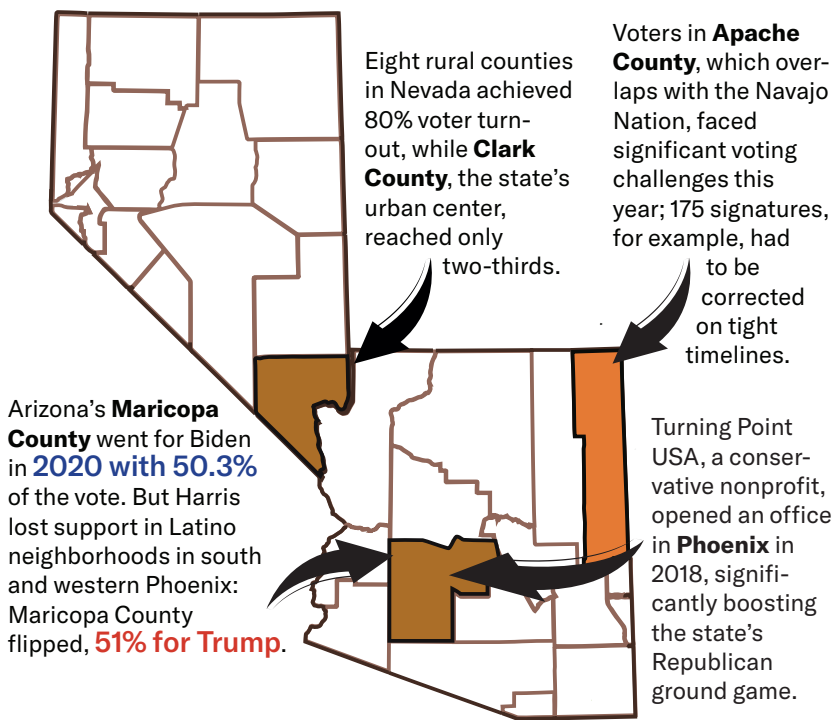
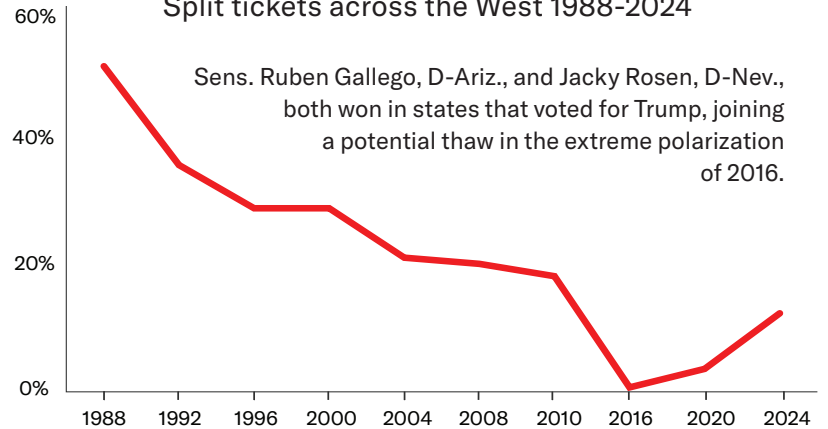
Over the past decade, the electorate in **Arizona** and **Nevada** changed rapidly to include Gen Z voters, newly naturalized citizens and recent arrivals from out of state. In both states, the economy was cited as voters' top priority: Nevada's businesses were hit hard early in the pandemic, while Arizonans saw the cost of living soar.

Both Nevada and Arizona have seen **thousands of Republican newcomers** since 2016, including many relocating from California.

Naturalized citizens constitute 14% of eligible voters in Nevada and 9% in Arizona. More than 62,000 Arizonans and 41,000 Nevadans have been **naturalized since 2020**.

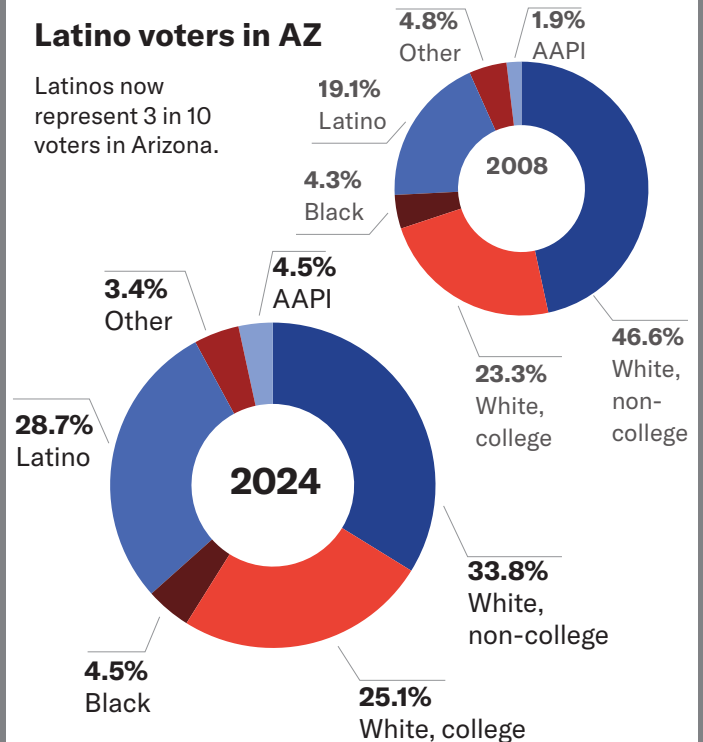
Latino and Asian American and Pacific Islander voters comprise 30% of Nevada's electorate combined. This year, a surprising proportion of both blocs went for Trump.

Is polarization easing? Split tickets across the West 1988-2024

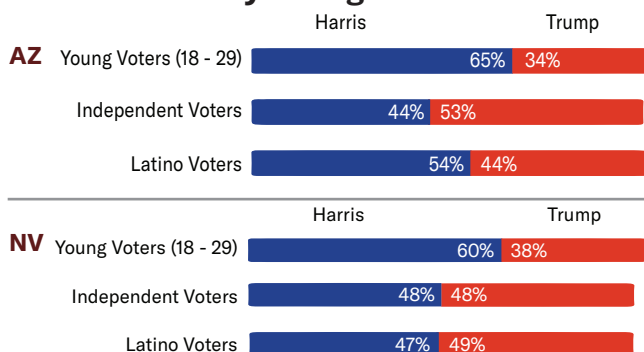


Latino voters in AZ

Latinos now represent 3 in 10 voters in Arizona.

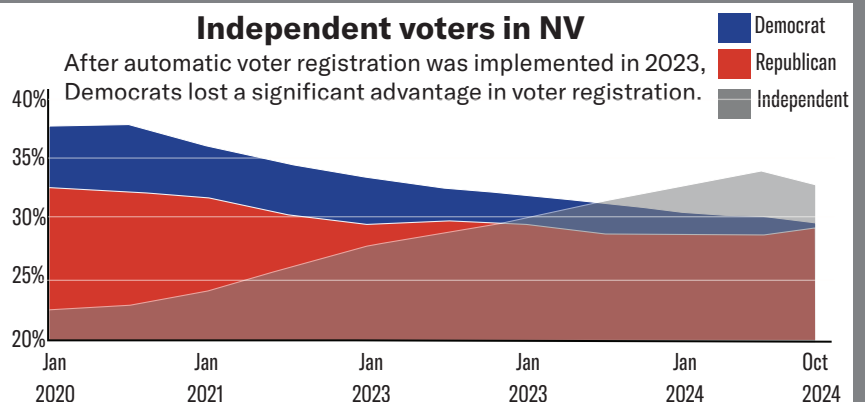


Key voting blocs



Independent voters in NV

After automatic voter registration was implemented in 2023, Democrats lost a significant advantage in voter registration.





REPORTAGE

Fire crews do more than fight fires

Resource advisors protect habitats and cultural resources from smoke and flames.

BY CAMERON WALKER

IN SEPTEMBER 2020, as crews outside Yosemite National Park worked to contain the oncoming Creek Fire and evacuate those in its path, archaeologist Jennie Leonard was racing to protect something that couldn't leave: the giant sequoias in the Mariposa Grove.

Leonard and her fellow resource advisors — who protect species, cultural items and other resources from wildfire and fire-suppression activities — covered the bases

of the ancient trees with structure wrap, a fire-resistant aluminum fabric. Each tree, Leonard recalled, “looked like a baked potato.”

Resource advisors like Leonard have served on wildfires since the 1970s. The National Park Service has deployed them since the start of this century, and their work has become increasingly critical, said Cedar Drake, a Park Service ecologist who coordinates the agency's resource-advisor training course.

With climate change bringing larger, more frequent and more destructive fires, resource advisors are needed to guide firefighters in areas where large wildfires have been uncommon, including California's Redwood National Park and the western reaches of North Cascades National Park in Washington.

“The biggest challenge that I'd say we're facing is just the scope and scale of fires we're seeing,” Drake said. “Resource advising is one way that we can adapt to climate change (and) be proactive ... having folks on the ground that are providing input to the fire managers and the firefighters so that we can be more sustainable in how we manage these fires in the future.”

BETWEEN 2019 AND 2022, enrollment in the Park Service's 35-hour resource-advisor training course increased 125% compared to the previous four years; more than 2,600 students from federal, state, tribal and local agencies have been certified since 2020. The free course went online in 2021 and now routinely reaches its 700-person capacity and sometimes requires a waitlist. Resource

At Sequoia National Park in California, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees cover trees in structure wrap to protect them from fires in late September, 2021. **Gary Kazanjian / AP Photo**

advisors, or READs, are based at incident command centers, while advisors called REAFs can work on firelines without an escort.

Many ecologists, biologists and archaeologists take the READ course. “Nobody’s a resource advisor as your job,” said David Campbell, a biologist and resource advisor at Yosemite National Park and elsewhere. “We’re all just doing this as an extra duty.”

In big parks like Yosemite, local experts can identify critical resources and advise fire crews during both prescribed burns and wildfires. “In an ideal world,” Campbell said, “we are pulling local folks from the local unit as much as possible to represent the resources they know best.”

But in remote or less well-funded areas, resource advisors are sometimes borrowed from other regions, quickly familiarizing themselves with the landscape so they can advise fire crews on protecting plants, animals and sacred sites.

At Grand Canyon National Park, advisors have access to analog and digital maps showing resources. During fire season, Diné fire archaeologist Jason Nez keeps his communications radio on; when a call comes in, he uses those maps to locate resources in the fire’s path. “Decision-making can happen fast,” said Nez, a member of the Navajo Nation who trains new resource advisors.

Advisors offer suggestions, not commands, but they learn to quickly identify how to protect resources in a variety of circumstances. On one fire, they might help position a fire crew campsite so that firefighters won’t haul gear through invasive weeds and accidentally spread seeds. On another, they might indicate where a bulldozer can safely construct a fireline to prevent erosion into a salmon-rich stream.

In parks that lack the extensive maps and planning abilities of Grand Canyon or Yosemite, the Park Service is developing local unit guides that identify natural and cultural resources, infrastructure and designated lands and arrange protection measures and communication systems long before fires occur, Drake said. “We need to start being

more proactive in terms of knowing where these sites are and having plans ahead of time in terms of how we’ll respond.”

Drake and his team are also developing a template that agencies and communities outside the parks can use to protect resources and thereby avoid “scrambling to try to gather that information while the fire’s burning,” he said.

ONCE RESOURCE ADVISORS have the information they need, they’re faced with the challenge of communicating it during an emergency. “Oftentimes, they don’t have experience working with fire crews and firefighting techniques,” said Nez. “That can add a level of stress for inexperienced resource advisors.”

Trainees need to learn how firelines work as well as how to advocate for resources without disrupting operations, so Nez and other instructors take them on smaller local fires to see how crews operate.

Sometimes there’s an us-versus-them mentality between resource advisors and firefighters, but “I’ve never worked with a crew that has intentionally wanted to damage a resource,” Leonard said. “They just don’t know it’s there. Fire folks don’t get the chance to come into our world, and then we launch ourselves into theirs.”

Resource advisors also learn to work with tribes and tribal communities. Dirk Charley, a retired tribal relations program manager for the U.S. Forest Service in California and a member of the Dunlap Band of Mono Indians, said that communication among tribes, resource advisors and federal and state agencies helped protect a sacred area during the 2021 KNP Complex Fire in Sequoia and Kings Canyon.

For tribes, identifying such areas may require “sharing a tribal map that’s very near and dear to them,” said Charley, a former wildland firefighter who now trains resource advisors and occasionally serves as a tribal liaison for the Forest Service during California fires. Recently, he showed a class of fire archaeologists how to protect pictographs from smoke and heat damage on the Sierra National Forest by creating defensible spaces before wildfires start.

Communication is important long after the smoke clears. “Everybody goes home after the fire,” Charley said. “But the forest, or the park, has a mess. And the tribes, they

have a mess.”

Resource advisors are often asked to help with post-fire cleanup. In 2022, Leonard worked with a crew in California that was removing hazardous standing trees. Where cultural artifacts had been exposed by the fire, they used downed trees to create barriers along the road, making the area less accessible to curious visitors.

THE RESOURCE-ADVISOR model isn’t limited to fires; the Forest Service also uses resource advisors before, during and after catastrophic events like floods and hurricanes, which could become more frequent in a changing climate.

It also employs them for special events, including unauthorized ones like the annual Rainbow Gathering, said Hilary Markin, a public information officer for the agency’s National Incident Management Team. Large groups can cause soil compaction, water quality and sanitation problems, and disturb sensitive species and archaeological sites, she said — and they may be more resistant to suggestions than a fire crew.

In Yosemite, two years after resource advisors wrapped sequoias at the Creek Fire, the Mariposa Grove was threatened by the fast-moving Washburn Fire. Campbell, who was the lead advisor, worked with a team of sawyers to remove dead and downed wood around the sequoias and pull out flammable duff.

Once again, the sequoias survived, but in recent years, more than 14,000 giant sequoias in similar groves have been lost to wildfires — close to 20% of the entire species. “We’re on a trajectory to lose giant sequoias for all of time,” said Campbell. Tree by tree, resource advisors work to stem that loss, now and for years to come. 🌲

The next Interagency Wildland Fire Resource Advisor Course will be offered this spring. For more information, visit tinyurl.com/resourceadvisors

This story is part of High Country News’ Conservation Beyond Boundaries project, which is supported by the BAND Foundation.

Cameron Walker is the author of three books, most recently the short story collection How to Capture Carbon. @applepieandink

What a second Trump term could mean for tribes

From a reading of Project 2025, resource extraction and loss of protection for sacred places are key concerns.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

AS PRESIDENT-ELECT DONALD Trump prepares to take office, Native communities are bracing for another pivot in federal policy and direction. Trump's previous term, combined with the far-right political playbook Project 2025, offer a glimpse of what to expect: increasing oil and gas and mineral extraction on tribal and public lands and a reversal of the Biden administration's work on climate change and protection of culturally significant places.

Neither Trump nor the Republican Party has put forward any policy regarding tribes or Native communities. But Project 2025's *Mandate for Leadership*, a blueprint for Trump's coming presidency, increases the power of the executive branch and presents an extreme vision for the nation's future and the return of Trump-era policies on extraction, climate and public land management.

"At this point, our main obstacle to practicing our belief systems is climate change, is energy extraction and is the selling off of public lands," all of which would be made worse by the plans laid out in Project 2025, said Judith LeBlanc (Caddo Nation), executive director of the Native Organizers Alliance and the NOA Action Fund. "Under Project 2025 and a

Trump administration, we will go backwards."

Issues critical to Indigenous communities are absent from the *Mandate*: There's nothing about addressing the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People, for example, or tribal co-stewardship of public lands and the protection of cultural sites, extending investigations into boarding schools or improving the Indian Health Service.

Trump has repeatedly tried to distance himself from Project 2025, but his early Cabinet nominees included people who were credited as contributors. At least 140 former Trump administration officials played a role in the 922-page *Mandate for Leadership*, according to CNN. The section on the Department of the Interior, including the Bureau of Indian Affairs, was written by William Perry Pendley, Trump's former acting head of the Bureau of Land Management, with some assistance from John Tahsuda (Kiowa), his former principal deputy assistant secretary of Indian Affairs. Pendley, an attorney who spent years running the Mountain States Legal Foundation, regularly opposed tribal efforts to protect cultural sites and, according to *The Intercept*, has openly shared racist views on blood quantum. He previously warned about "the willingness of federal land

managers to close public land because it is sacred to American Indians." More recently, he represented the energy company Solenex LLC in a long-running conflict over oil and gas leasing on the Badger-Two Medicine, which is culturally important to the Blackfeet Nation and now permanently protected. Just how closely the incoming Cabinet picks will follow Project 2025 remains to be seen — Trump's chosen Interior secretary, Doug Burgum, is governor of North Dakota, the nation's third-largest oil-producing state, though he has a good working relationship with tribal nations there.

An extractive future for tribal and public lands

The *Mandate's* section on the Bureau of Indian Affairs has one overarching focus: more coal, oil and gas and mineral extraction. It echoes other sections about the Interior Department that suggest restarting leases in areas that many tribes have long fought to protect from energy development.

During Trump's previous administration, Interior tightened limits on the length of National Environmental Policy Act documents as well as on public and tribal consultation timelines — a key way for Indigenous communities and tribal governments to weigh in on projects that might impact them. The potential return of such limits, combined with more extraction, is concerning to some tribal nations, said Gussie Lord, managing attorney of the tribal partnerships program at Earthjustice and citizen of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. Tribes are already constrained in what they can do to protect off-reservation sites, and restricting an already-limited consultation process could further affect their ability

to protect sacred sites. "Project 2025 shows a preference for extractive practices, as opposed to the preference that I hear from my clients, which is more of a stewardship angle," said Lord.

An end to national monuments

Pendley calls for a full repeal of the 1906 Antiquities Act — the law which enables presidents to create national monuments. Such land designations have become an important way for tribes to obtain landscape-level protection for off-reservation sites. During President Joe Biden's term, at least two campaigns led by or involving tribes successfully sought national monument protections in Arizona and Nevada. Biden also undid Trump's cuts to Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments.

Bears Ears — the first to be championed by tribes — is co-managed by federal agencies and five tribal nations. In November, the *New York Times* reported that Trump's transition team was preparing to shrink the monument's size again so extraction can occur. Nazune Menka, assistant professor and faculty director of the Center for Indian Law and Policy at Seattle University, says that's a broader indication of what's to come. "I think that we're definitely going to see less focus on co-management," said Menka (Denaakk'e and Lumbee). "The bigger picture is that co-management is a threat to development for this administration, right? They view Native nations as wanting to protect things for cultural reasons, and that, in their mind, is not the highest use or the best use of the land."

With the political pendulum swinging from Democratic to Republican, Menka believes that a Trump administration will seek to reopen many areas for extraction

that Biden had protected. “Certain Native nations might want extraction to occur for economic reasons, and therefore might support some of those initiatives,” Menka said. But extractive policies need to ensure that “(Native nations) are allowed to protect sacred sites. And it doesn’t seem that the Trump administration will support that.”

What else Project 2025 says about Native communities

Outside the section on the Interior Department, substantive policy on Indian Country is slim. The section on the Department of Justice makes no mention of the long-standing crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples, despite “renewing” a

“focus on violent crime.” During Trump’s previous term, though, he signed an executive order creating Operation Lady Justice, a federal task force focused on shaping the agency’s response to the crisis. Meanwhile, the section that includes the Indian Health Service acknowledges that “reforms are needed,” but lacks any detail concerning reforms or information on how the government will fulfill its responsibility to provide tribes health care. Given Project 2025’s overall focus on reversing the Biden administration’s climate initiatives, it’s all but certain that tribes will not receive continued support for climate resilience efforts.

The *Mandate for Leadership* also repeatedly suggests

silencing tribal interests by moving programs for tribes to the Bureau of Indian Education or Interior Department. The section on the Environmental Protection Agency similarly suggests creating a separate office within the agency specifically for tribes. But the entire agency needs to understand tribal sovereignty and its responsibility to tribes, Lord said. “You can’t just shunt it over to one place and say, ‘Indian stuff over here,’” Lord said. “That’s a mistake in any agency; it needs to be incorporated throughout.”

LeBlanc warns that Project 2025’s failure to address Indigenous interests is a miscalculation that shows how thoroughly its creators disregard Indigenous sovereignty

and tribes’ legal rights. “Project 2025 is so out of step with reality,” LeBlanc said, “the reality in Indian Country and the political reality in this country.” ✨

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

Donald Medart, a Fort Yuma Quechan tribal councilman, at a rally last April in Washington, D.C., urged the Biden administration to expand national monuments. Project 2025 wants to repeal the Antiquities Act, which empowers presidents to designate monuments.

Paul Morigi / Getty Images for Monumental Call for Action



Community-Centered Journalism



Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN



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Luna Anna Archey / HCN

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"I do believe that HCN is one of the best publications today. Y'all are doing a great job. ... Keep up the good work. The earth not only needs good lawyers, it needs open and honest reporting on what is going on. Thank you."

— Beverly Kolkman, Austin, Colorado (represented by her furry friends, Ziva and Lucy)



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DEAR FRIENDS



Photo illustration by Marissa Garcia / HCN

Can we find common ground? Readers respond

In the days after the November election, I sent out a raft of emails to friends and family and readers across the country. It was my way of making sense of what had just happened and trying to sort out *HCN*'s role in the coming year. Some of my thoughts appeared in this column in December.

And responses have poured in — from places like Grove, California; Monticello, Utah; Eugene, Oregon; Austin, Colorado; Pocatello, Idaho; Albuquerque, New Mexico and Jackson, Wyoming, to Seattle, Los Angeles, New York City and many points in between.

To be sure, many shared my lack of surprise over the election results. One friend quipped, “The whole country just became Wyoming.” Many also expressed their anxiety about the months and years ahead. “You know (President-elect Trump) wants to sell it all (the public lands) off to the highest bidders,” a reader from Colorado wrote. “It’s going to be a long 4 years of chaos and upheaval.”

The concerns ran deeper than just politics. A retired archaeologist reflected on his youth in rural Texas and a career spent in remote parts of the Western U.S. “I know how to communicate with good old boys or even potentially dangerous strangers, but at this point ... I simply don’t want to fool with meeting strangers and going through orienting theirs vs my political perspective.”

A conservationist friend in Wyoming, dismayed by the rightward political shift, wrote to say that he was registering for a concealed carry permit, adding, “And I am fine with that.”

So what do readers want from *HCN* right now? “I know the new government will start building their walls between the U.S. and Mexico again,” wrote an Idaho reader whose father carried her across the Rio Grande into the U.S. when she was a child. “I would like *HCN* to focus on getting the message out about the damage that their walls will do to wildlife migrations.”

Several readers commented that *HCN* could do more to shine a light on working-class communities in the rural West. “Enough people who live on the silent edges of our collective USA society are freaked out sufficiently by the ‘culture war’ that it contributed significantly to Trump’s victory,” wrote a friend in New Mexico. “Maybe *HCN* could begin to talk with the people that are seen by many of our ilk as ‘the enemy.’”

And while some readers thought I was being a little Pollyanna-ish, my call for us all to start “seeing each other again” seemed to strike a chord with many. “That’s exactly it,” replied a friend in New York. “There may ... always be a need to call out the 10% who, regardless of political affiliation, may ‘see’ but still choose to act with cruelty. Yet it’s hard to be cruel to a neighbor — and at the core, we’re really all neighbors.

“Keep up the great work of helping us all see each other, even when (especially when) we think we disagree.”

Where have you landed, after a couple of months to contemplate the results of the election? And what are you hoping to see in *HCN* in the coming year? Send your thoughts to dearfriends@hcn.org.

Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher



Sam



Russell



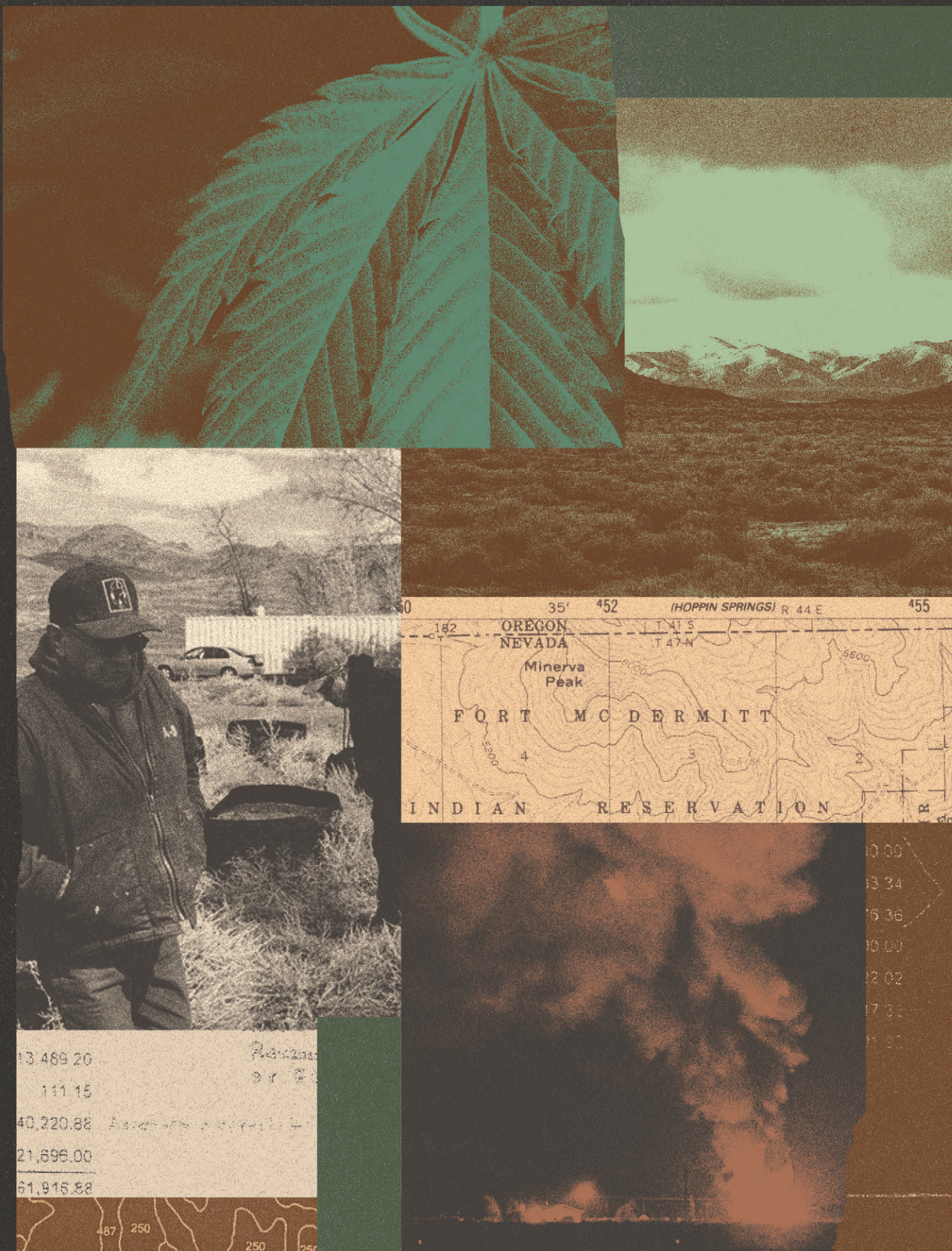
Lehto

Meet the Influencers

More and more, people are getting their information from social media “influencers” rather than traditional news outlets. What does this trend mean for journalism and public discourse? How are organizations like *High Country News* adapting to the changing media ecosystem? And who are these people, anyway?

Find out on Feb. 5 at an event co-hosted by *HCN* and the Journalism and Public Interest Communication program at the University of Washington. *HCN* board member and UW teaching professor **Andrea Otáñez** will facilitate a conversation with **Birdie Sam** (@showme_YourMask), **Kelsey Russell** (@Kelscruss) and **Teal Lehto** (@WesternWaterGirl).

Folks in the Seattle area can participate in person at 5 p.m. in the Walker Ames Room, in Kane Hall at the University of Washington. Everyone else can tune in via livestream. Find out the details at hcn.org/news-influencers-uw



Tribal elders and landscape (Aaron Nesheim); cannabis leaf (Roberto (Bear) Guerra); travel plaza fire (Jerry Tom); maps (USGS and Flickr); documents from author's research.

UP IN SMOKE

How a non-Native endeavor to grow cannabis on tribal lands fell apart.

By Judith Matloff | Illustrations by J.D. Reeves

IT WAS A SEPTEMBER NIGHT in 2020 when the fire torched the Red Mountain Travel Plaza. Residents of the Fort McDermitt Paiute and Shoshone Nation watched as the only gas station and grocery store for miles around vanished amid towering orange flames and acrid smoke.

The convenience store was where the community's approximately 250 residents went to buy snacks, tobacco and essentials. Without it, they would have to drive more than an hour for major provisions. What's more, a safe stashed in the back room of the store, which tribal officials said held nearly \$19,000 in cash, allegedly burned up. This represented a portion of the profits from a failing cannabis farm down the road — 20 acres of land that was the subject of much anger and anxiety on the reservation — and the tribe was counting on it.

One tribal official alleged that law enforcement from outside the tribe suspected arson, but no one was charged. Many people in the community suspected that someone had set

fire to the gas station so they could make off with the cash. That was never proved. For most at Fort McDermitt, the damage was emblematic of something more troubling: a mismanaged venture that never realized its promise.

"We need to recover what we lost here," said Jerry Tom, an elder of the tribe, whose relentless search for answers came to a head this year. "Nothing good has come of the cannabis business."

THE NORTHERN PAIUTE-Shoshone-Bannock people from Fort McDermitt call themselves Atsakudokwa Tuviwa ga yu, or People of the Red Mountain. Their territory, which straddles Nevada and Oregon, lies among wide expanses of sagebrush, with the nearest town, Winnemucca, Nevada, 74 miles away.

Driving up Route 95 from Reno, a person can go for hours without seeing another car. The road passes several landmarks important to the tribe, including a peak that served as a lookout when they were fighting Army

cavalry in the 1860s. Bitterness still burns about the exploitation of lands once governed by Indigenous people.

Tucked away in the high desert, the reservation offers little in the way of work. The lucky few have ranches, or work at the Say When Casino down the road, the tribal government or the school. Many trek three hours to Boise, Idaho — or even farther — to work in the mines.

Over the past decade, public attitudes and state laws around cannabis have relaxed, creating a booming legal weed market worth an estimated \$35 billion nationally. In theory, the United States' 574 federally recognized tribes have much to gain from it. In total, they retain about 56 million acres of land in federal trust on which to grow it, in addition to reservation lands. Being sovereign nations, they can largely use the land however they want, unimpeded by federal prohibitions on growing and selling marijuana. For Fort McDermitt in particular, profits from weed could translate into badly needed jobs and money for schooling and infrastructure.

But cannabis is a risky business. Bad weather can ruin crops. It can take years to turn a profit. Due to the federal ban on weed, national agencies do not regulate Indigenous marijuana enterprises as they would casinos, leaving supervision to the Native nations, which often face limited resources and restrictions on jurisdiction. (Fort McDermitt, for instance, does not have its own police force, so it must rely on the county sheriff and Bureau of Indian Affairs officers stationed an hour or more away.) Tribes generally can't get bank loans from big banks for the ventures and aren't familiar with cannabis cultivation, so they have to bring in outside experts and investors.

This and the cash-based nature of the business can make Indian Country vulnerable to deals that go wrong.

That's exactly what happened when three white men from Oregon — Kevin Clock, Eli Parris and Darian Stanford — and their Native collaborators sought to make money from Indigenous land. By the time they cleared out, seven years later, more than a gas station had gone up in smoke.

IT WAS 2015, and the private investor Kevin Clock was looking for a win.

He and his friend Joe DeLaRosa had recently visited Vancouver, Washington, to

check out a popular weed dispensary, and he'd had his eye on cannabis ever since. "We realized it was a moneymaker," said Clock, whose background was in "development and land use and things." (He agreed to an initial interview but has since declined to answer further questions about the operation.)

That got him thinking about Nevada, where an initiative to legalize recreational weed was to be voted on the following year, and about Native nations, where he thought cannabis retail stores and farms could succeed. Clock, a boisterous character with a knack for working a crowd, believed he could connect with Indigenous communities because he had attended high school with Siletz people in Oregon and married a Native Hawaiian. "It's a similar culture," he said.

To help oversee future operations, Clock roped in Eli Parris, a quiet outdoorsman from Oregon with a background in real estate and finance who grew weed privately. To facilitate Indigenous outreach, Clock counted on DeLaRosa, then-tribal chair of the Burns Paiute of Oregon. DeLaRosa, who had previously worked as the financial manager in a car dealership, couldn't convince his own community to open a weed operation, but the team thought he could persuade sister tribes to create a "Paiute pipeline," whereby some nations would grow cannabis and others would sell it.

In January 2016, the group contacted the leaders of the Fort McDermitt Tribal Council,

which governs the reservation, to propose developing a marijuana farm on tribal lands.

Clock and his associates promised to bring in the necessary funding to get the operation off the ground. They said the farm would be 100% owned by the tribe and that the venture could create much-needed jobs and generate money to improve roads, housing, education and health for years to come. The project could also serve as an anchor for other businesses in this remote area.

Hearings were held on the reservation to present the proposal to the community. Cars filled the parking lot and people crowded into the building. Several tribal members who were present recalled promises that the farm would enrich the tribe. Some interpreted that to mean that they would each get a per capita share of the profits, one way that revenues from tribal casinos are distributed.

But some community members had concerns about whether it was legal to lease land to the cannabis operation. Many of the older residents feared that introducing a marijuana business would worsen the substance abuse problems already plaguing the community. Others found Clock pushy.

"They came in and painted a pretty picture and promised the tribe this and that," said Arlo Crutcher, a local rancher who attended the public meetings. (Crutcher became tribal council chair a few years later.) "I said, 'This doesn't sound too good.'"

He felt the men dodged questions about operational matters and didn't allow time for tribal officials to seriously consider the offer.

Crutcher thought others in the community were too trusting of the men's pitch. He noted that his tribe lacked the business savvy of richer nations with long-standing businesses. Fort McDermitt had never had an enterprise of this scale. "The investors knew they were dealing with gullible persons, and they took advantage of that."

Still, representatives from Fort McDermitt reached an agreement with Clock's team in November 2016, heavily pushed by Tildon Smart, who soon became the tribal council chair. They established a 10-year partnership that would first pay Clock's company back any investments and then give it 50% of revenue, an unusually large cut for businessmen not from the tribe. Like other tribal nations in Nevada, Fort McDermitt was to collect a cannabis sales tax to fund essential services in the

**By the time the
three white men
had cleared out,
more than a gas
station had gone
up in smoke.**



Greenhouse (Aaron Nesheim); cash (Roberto (Bear) Guerra); map (Flickr); documents from author's research.

community. The outsiders would take care of all the financing and operations.

Soon after, Clock brought in Darian Stanford, a litigator who had worked as a deputy district attorney prosecuting gang violence and major felonies in Oregon, to help with legal matters. Attorneys from a law firm where Stanford eventually worked were retained at \$400 an hour, and a five-member cannabis commission was set up by the tribal council and tasked with oversight of the operation to ensure things remained above board. The commission was supposed to be accountable to the nation's ultimate authority: the tribal council. In an unusual move, Parris, an outsider, as well as two members from the tribal council, were on the cannabis commission, placing them in the position of supervising their own efforts.

According to Mary Jane Oatman of the Nez Perce Tribe, who helms the Indigenous Cannabis Industry Association, that should

have raised a red flag immediately. "There was no system of checks and balances," said Oatman, whose advocacy group guides tribes navigating the legal weed realm. "They have members of the tribal council taking off their hats and then putting on the hat of the cannabis commission. They should have had an accountability system." (Smart and Stanford defended the practice, saying it allowed for the easy flow of information between the council and commission.) Stanford also became the tribe's judge a couple of years later, putting him at the center of legal disputes in the community, though he recused himself from matters related to the business.

Around 2018, the newly created joint venture — Quinn River Farms, named for the ribbon of water that flows through Fort McDermitt — was hard at work, purchasing soil and farm equipment, leveling land, installing greenhouses and readying a building for

storing and processing the harvest. Although Clock and his associates never became fixtures in the community, Parris frequently checked on the site. They brought in a foreman and hired dozens of tribal members who learned how to cultivate plants, cut buds and make pre-rolls. They were often paid in cash, a common industry practice but one that makes it hard to keep track of costs.

This was the vision: an emerald sea of towering marijuana plants that would change lives, with goods sold to another Paiute tribe and to businesses in Las Vegas, where new weed lounges and dispensaries were expected to open. Over the course of its operation, investors would pour in millions, in the hope that it would be so successful that it could set a standard across Nevada and for other tribes.

THE OUTSIDERS MOVED QUICKLY to realize that vision. The deal stipulated that

a new LLC set up by Clock and his partners would act as general manager and contract with consultants on behalf of Quinn River Farms, always in coordination with the tribe.

To that end, Clock's LLC brought in Ranson Shepherd, a jiu-jitsu instructor originally from Hawai'i who had been a part of other successful cannabis enterprises. He took over management and sales for the operation.

But Billy Bell, a member of the tribe's cannabis commission, said in a memo that he later wrote to the tribe's lawyer that he was concerned about incomplete paperwork. (Bell declined to comment for this story.) He said he had seen one version of the agreement with Shepherd, where the signatory line for the tribe, oddly, bore the name of Parris, the only outsider on the commission.

The tribe was supposed to be an equal partner in the venture. Bell, however, felt it had been sidelined completely.

Clock's LLC and Shepherd "left the Tribe out of important and crucial business decision-making decisions over the cannabis project," Bell said in his memo.

Tildon Smart, the tribal chair and a cannabis commission member, was perturbed as well. Promises of additional equipment were going unmet, he added.

"(Clock) promised us greenhouses within so many months, and that never happened," he said. (Clock did not respond to requests for comment about this and other allegations.)

In a memo after one of the first harvests, Smart emailed Clock and Shepherd's teams to share his frustrations that "everyone was doing their own thing," and that the tribe was being "ignored" and "no longer considered partners in this project."

Elders in the community also grew suspicious, Jerry Tom among them. After being away for years working in gold mines, Tom had recently returned home to Fort McDermitt. He was disturbed to see that while the farm had started to grow cannabis, he and other members of the tribe knew little about exactly how much money the operation made or spent. He wondered when, if ever, they could expect to see per capita payments from the venture.

"Nothing was disclosed to the tribal members," Tom said. "No one knows anything about it."

Crutcher, the rancher, concurred: "We

had no clue how they were operating."

Unease over the project intensified when the 2019 harvest went poorly. The project's leaders blamed a hard freeze for hurting crops, and therefore sales. The tribe received about \$100,000 from the 2018 harvest, and at least \$25,000 from 2019, but didn't know if it was owed more. Bell said he feared the operation was generating more debts than revenue.

Tribal members wondered about the box trucks that were leaving the farm at night and where they were going. Fort McDermitt residents saw half a dozen shipping out at a time.

All transactions were done in cash, due to the difficulty of banking in the cannabis industry. Crutcher said he had seen members of the cannabis commission, investors and tribal council members bring piles of money into an administration building on the reservation to be counted.

Concerns about the cannabis operation cost Smart, the tribal chair, his re-election in November 2019. His successor was also eventually replaced, this time by Crutcher.

During this time, Clock referred tribal members' many questions to Shepherd, who did not produce detailed financial statements or invoices, according to Bell's memo.

Then, in September 2020, the travel plaza burned down with the alleged \$19,000 in profits inside. An internal investigation handled by Smart, now a tribal administrator, never produced definitive answers.

In an interview, Smart said he had moved the cash from the tribal administration building to the gas station before the fire to keep it out of the hands of incoming tribal council members. He denied accusations by some tribal members that he took the money for himself and said it had burned in the blaze.

WITH THE TRAVEL PLAZA left in ruins, relations between the outsiders and the community went from bad to worse.

In October 2021, looking to boost the business, Clock and the team brought in more investors and signed a deal to cultivate more acres. According to documents shared with Bell, the existing investors had run up more than \$5 million in expenses, including \$63,258.85 in flights as well as interest on loans from other companies, equipment, salaries and shipping. Under this latest agreement, the new investors — a joint venture involving Shepherd and a company called Cannabis Life Sciences

(CLS) — would pour another \$6 million into Quinn River. Shepherd had also teamed up with CLS to produce pre-rolls projected to bring in \$600,000 in monthly revenue.

Tribal officials were concerned that these partnerships were moving too quickly and that deals were being negotiated without their input. Each new investor represented a hit to the tribe's overall revenue share, steadily decreasing what the tribe expected to earn.

Then jobs for local residents on the farm began to disappear, even though Clock's group had told the tribal council that harvests had rebounded. The number of Native employees dropped, and workers from outside the reservation began to appear.

Even less cannabis was planted in 2022 than the year before, according to Bell's memo. When he visited the fields that summer, a few plots lay empty. The foreman later told him that the plants eventually put in the ground might not flower due to a late start.

Sales sank, and workers began dismantling equipment and hauling it out. "They just packed up and left," Crutcher said.

The only public information about Quinn River's finances, beyond what Bell and other tribal administrators could gather, is in SEC filings by CLS. One shows a loss of more than \$100,000 from the business for the year ending May 21, 2022. That was the last time Quinn River sold any cannabis. CLS reported even greater losses for the year ending in May 2023 and pulled out of the deal, saying the venture Shepherd was involved with had defaulted on its \$3 million contribution. The remaining workers were laid off.

CLS declined several requests for comment. In an interview, Shepherd denied that he had defaulted, adding that his venture didn't owe \$3 million, as he had already invested in the necessary infrastructure. "Why would you invest into something that you already built?"

Fed up, the tribe enlisted its lawyer to contact Clock and Parris. "The Tribe needs detailed financial reports of the expenses and income to the business, not simply summaries," the lawyer wrote. "The tribe needs to know when the expenses incurred have been paid off so that the profits can be determined."

Clock's original group of investors — himself, Parris, Stanford and DeLaRosa — weren't able to produce the requested documents. Parris said they repeatedly — and

unsuccessfully — asked Shepherd for sales records, bank statements and profit and loss statements. “We never saw any paperwork.” Shepherd disagreed, saying he had handed over all the necessary documents. “We provided all documentation,” he said.

Crutcher said the lawyer advised the nation to walk away from the project. “It’s expensive to go after them. So we called it quits.” (The lawyer declined to comment.)

Stanford confirmed that Clock’s group had agreed to terminate the contract and blamed Ranson Shepherd for the lack of financial reporting. “I 1,000% fault Ranson for not providing the financial documents that were requested,” he said. “But I think it’s sloppy, not malicious.”

The original investors’ fault lay “in not ensuring that Ranson did whatever Ranson was supposed to do,” Stanford said.

In the final tally, the cash Clock’s group handed to Fort McDermitt, from 2018 harvest revenues through to April 2022, totaled \$564,450, according to a statement Bell provided to the commission. Current and recent tribal leaders don’t know how this sum was calculated, what percentage of profits it entailed or whether they were owed more. Whatever the sum, it was far less than they had expected to earn. Under Fort McDermitt law, 4% of the profits from the cannabis business were destined for per capita payments. While the amount per person would have been minimal, Fort McDermitt citizens said they have received nothing at all.

Stanford said the nation received quarterly payments and that his and Clock’s company hadn’t made any money. “If you ask me today how much money was made at McDermitt, I have no idea. I never saw a penny.”

Parris concurred, saying any money the outsiders were entitled to was given to the tribe. The project generated cash to buy a fire truck and bury elders, he said. “They could have made a lot more and they should have made a lot more, but they made money,” he said. “We left the place better in McDermitt than when we got there. I can 100% sleep on that for the rest of my life.”

DeLaRosa characterized the project as “successful.” He said that members of the group invested “thousands of dollars of their personal funds” to get the project up and running and never made “a single dollar.”

Shepherd also maintains that the tribe

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was properly compensated despite the fact that he was in the red himself. He is facing a lawsuit by an investor named Ting He, who alleged that he failed to pay back the \$3 million she loaned him in May 2021. According to the lawsuit, Shepherd said the money would be used to build greenhouses and water wells and help cultivate the cannabis fields at Fort McDermitt. In return, she would also get a cut of the harvest’s profits.

The lawsuit alleges fraud and the misappropriation of funds, among other charges, and claims that Shepherd provided He with a list of bogus “expenses” incurred by a company he controls. A Nevada district court lists the suit as active, as He’s legal team has been unable to serve Shepherd with a summons and complaint, arguing that he was “no longer responding” to calls or texts or answering the door — even with cars parked in his driveway. No one in Clock’s original group was named in the suit. Asked for comment, Shepherd said: “I can’t speak on that until it’s complete.”

Parris said the group thoroughly vetted Shepherd ahead of time. When asked if he and the others could have provided oversight, he said: “If somebody signs up to do something and they just don’t do it, what can you do outside of sue them, right?”

JERRY TOM WON’T let the matter rest, not with so many loose ends. He served on the tribal council in 2019, and from then on collected whatever documents he could related to Quinn River Farms — photos, texts, Facebook messages, videos, contracts,

memos, minutes of meetings, legal correspondence and more. The foot-high dossier includes overlapping agreements, some with no signatures. Cash-flow statements lack invoices or balance sheets to back them up. An item listing leases for \$17,000 doesn’t say who was leasing what. Two promissory notes of \$600,000 were written to companies some tribal officials were unfamiliar with.

“We have no idea if loans were paid on time or even at all, or who approved them,” Tom said. Without proper invoices, the tribe lacks a clear or complete picture of the project’s finances.

Tom said that the tribal council and the cannabis commission failed to oversee the project and share information with the community. Their meetings regarding the project were largely closed to the public, and minutes were unavailable.

Tom serves on the elders committee, entrusted with protecting the cultural integrity of the tribe. In March 2024, he and other elders summoned the community to a gathering to discuss the cannabis debacle. Outside the meeting hall, a red-painted sign declared: “KEEP YOUR ABORIGINAL RIGHTS!!”

About 50 people filed in for a potluck supper before getting down to business. The older women chatted in Numu Yadooana, the Northern Paiute language, as they ate rabbit stew and beans. Tom served his signature pear and pumpkin pies.

The five members of the committee, seated at a long table up front, called the gathering to order.

“We didn’t see any documents, it was a hush-hush deal,” said Larina Bell, the incoming tribal chair.

“They shared nothing with me,” said Valerie Barr, the tribe’s finance director. “I asked for an audit. The tribe has been left out, completely.”

Speaker after speaker expressed anger, a feeling of being tricked, preyed upon by the outsiders. “Where is the money?” people repeatedly asked. They wanted to know why the tribe had made so little on the venture, and the status of per capita payments.

The session continued for hours. Afterwards, as people stacked chairs and cleared paper plates, Tom called the meeting a “catharsis” — the first time the community had come together to process what had happened. “It was a trauma for our people.



Travel plaza sign, former Tribal Council Chair Arlo Crutcher in front of an empty greenhouse, grow bags in a fallow field (Aaron Nesheim); cannabis plant (Roberto (Bear) Guerra).

happened. “It was a trauma for our people. We have to get to the bottom of it.”

THE CONTROVERSIES kept piling up. Unbeknownst to the people of Fort McDermitt, Clock’s group was working with four other Nevada tribes on cannabis ventures through a constellation of LLCs around the same time Quinn River took in its first harvest. Tribal representatives and Indigenous leaders who did business with them described the men’s process as cultivating a relationship with someone prominent in the tribe and keeping other officials at arm’s length. Between 2019 and 2023, nearly all of these ventures faced controversy.

The Las Vegas Paiute left the partnership, according to the tribe’s general counsel. The partnership’s dissolution was hashed out privately, according to industry sources. The

Pyramid Lake Paiute shut down their grow in 2019 after just a few months and pursued the outsiders in tribal court, according to minutes of the tribal council. A construction contractor filed a \$2.3 million mechanics lien against Clock’s group for alleged nonpayment.

Controversy still swirls around the Neue dispensary, opened in 2020 with the Elko, one of the four bands of the Te-Moak of the Western Shoshone. Felix Ike, a former Elko tribal chair, complained of a lack of transparency around the decision to open the dispensary and a lack of proper law enforcement, according to reporting in the *Elko Daily*. He and others tried, unsuccessfully, to get it shut down.

Clock denied there had been issues with these tribes. He said that the business model was to go in, get a project up and running and then hand over management to the tribe. That never happened at Fort McDermitt.

As for Pyramid Lake, Stanford called the nation’s decision to shut down the grow “terrible” and costly.

He blamed many of the setbacks, including Fort McDermitt’s problems, on changes in tribal leadership. “The biggest challenge in this entire industry is turnaround in tribal leadership,” he said. “There’s no institutional memory sometimes.”

DeLaRosa, the tribal liaison for the investors, said Fort McDermitt’s “desolate” location made it hard to attract contractors and created other challenges. He added that divisions within Native nations could complicate doing business. “Sometimes it’s just the dynamics of the community.”

Still, Clock, Parris and Stanford kept moving. In 2021, they submitted a proposal to work with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina — a comparatively

wealthy nation that owns a successful casino, Harrah's, in the Great Smoky Mountains.

This operation got off the ground: a glitzy 10,000-square-foot dispensary, state-of-the-art processing equipment and a 22-acre grow. The tribe financed the joint venture with more than \$30 million of its own money, rather than relying solely on external investors as Fort McDermitt had done.

At the launch, Clock and the others seemed to be running the show. Clock darted about, slapping people on the back, while Stanford directed people on where to stand for photos. Parris and DeLaRosa also attended, mostly keeping to the sidelines.

Morale seemed high among the 100 employees. But this project, too, faced concerns about transparency. The previous year, the then-principal chief, Richard Sneed, vetoed allocating an additional \$64 million until the joint venture accounted for the \$30 million invested by the tribe thus far. He worried about potential cost overruns and the possible use of casino revenues, which could endanger federal grants. He wanted to see a proper audit.

Sneed said in an interview that he hadn't been able to get answers from the venture's board or the tribal member they hired as the general manager. "I asked some basic questions. 'Do you have agendas for your meetings? No. Are you keeping minutes? No.'"

He said they had also failed to provide him a fiscal management policy and quarterly reports.

Stanford, however, said an independent audit had showed everything was "100% kosher." The venture's general manager confirmed the audit had been done.

Sneed lost his re-election in September 2023, and the project moved ahead with a portion of the \$64 million the tribe had planned to invest.

More tribes may soon face a choice about getting into the weed business, after the U.S. Department of Justice proposed regulatory changes to allow the use of cannabis for medicinal, although not recreational, purposes under federal law.

However, the troubles at Fort McDermitt and elsewhere concern Oatman, of the Indigenous Cannabis Industry Association.

"The bigger systemic issue for tribal communities is that everything is so covert and underground, without the insurance and banking that allow entrepreneurs to do

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due diligence," she said. "Finding a trusted partner becomes a chicken-and-egg problem because it's a new industry. Many tribes lack the resources for the foundational work that needs to be done in terms of licensing."

She encourages tribes to exercise extreme caution when vetting partners and contractors, and not to promise away big consulting fees and equity shares.

At least one tribe has steered clear after hearing what Fort McDermitt and the other tribes went through. Bobbi Shongutsie of the Wind River Reservation is looking into opening a cannabis operation on behalf of her tribe in Wyoming. She toured the dispensary at Elko, set up by Clock. She didn't like the "minimal" security or that other tribal ventures involving the group had shut down. "That was a red flag," she said. Her tribe decided to pass on doing business with them.

A separate group of tribes in Nevada took another path entirely and set up their own self-regulated industry that doesn't rely on outsiders. Oatman said this network, which includes Shoshone and Paiute nations, could serve as a model.

BACK AT FORT MCDERMITT, the travel plaza still hasn't been rebuilt. Cables jut out of the cement between ruined gas pumps like metal cobras. The cannabis fields down the road lie fallow. Torn tarps from greenhouses flap in the wind.

Around Christmas 2023, thieves broke into the building that had served as the cannabis processing facility and made off with unsold

products that tribal officials believed were not fit for consumption. Surveillance cameras didn't work because of unpaid electricity bills. After the burglary, minors as young as fifth graders were seen with cannabis on school property. Tribal officials believe the drugs had come from the work site.

About a month after the theft, officials burned 525 pounds of cannabis buds and trim and nearly 5,000 pre-rolls, and boarded up the building.

During a visit in March, Tom milled about with other elders and former employees who had lost their jobs when the operation shut down. Tom suffers from an old leg injury, and he limped slowly with a brace among the decayed plots. Crutcher, by then the outgoing tribal chair, joined, too. He pondered what to do with an abandoned storage shed, trailer and the skeletons of the greenhouses.

"They promised we would make money, and then, nothing," said Janice Sam, who used to work at the grow.

Her former coworker, Wacey Dick, was more direct: "They lied to us."

The group walked to the storage shed. It held about 20 plastic containers stacked 9 feet high and filled with leftover product that hadn't been torched, at least not yet. Loose piles spilled on the floor, rotting in the moisture.

Crutcher kicked the warped door. "We've got to put a plan together, otherwise we're going to continue to have people coming in and pulling wool over our eyes again."

As the end of the year drew close, tribal officials said the time for cannabis cultivation had passed. Another group of outsiders had presented a proposal to revive the farm several months earlier. The tribe refused to hear them out. ☀

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The Prairie Dog Conundrum

Endearing and ingenious, these furry creatures are both keystone species and among the most despised animals in the West.

By Christine Peterson
Photos by Louise Johns





Jesse Boulerice, research ecologist with the Smithsonian Institution, inspects a prairie dog his team trapped at American Prairie in Montana. The researchers aim to better understand prairie dog movements.



T

HE PRAIRIE DOG CAUGHT IN TRAP 69 was angry. And who could blame her? After waking up in her burrow on a mid-September morning, she'd waddled innocently outside for a breakfast of mini marshmallows and carrots, only to find herself stuck in a wire cage and carried across the prairie. Then a pair of human hands had gripped her like a burrito while two more hands put a black rubber tracking collar around her neck.

The situation was worse than she realized: Prairie dogs are among the most maligned and persecuted animal species in the Western U.S. So maligned, in fact, that a 2020 survey in northern Montana found that well over half the area's landowners believed prairie dogs should not live on public land.

To make matters even grimmer, this particular prairie dog had fleas. And those fleas could have been carrying the bacteria that causes plague — the Black Death. "It's not great," commented researcher Jesse Boulerville as he adjusted his gentle grip around her midsection.

The rodent responded by biting into Boulerville's leather glove, hanging on with her two front teeth while researchers swiped a black streak of Clairol's Nice'n Easy hair dye down her back.

Though black-tailed prairie dogs have a long-standing reputation as pests, their ingenious tunnel systems and industrious

prairie pruning make them one of the West's primary ecosystem engineers. Some researchers call them the "chicken nuggets of the prairie"; if a prairie species eats meat, it almost certainly eats prairie dogs. Without prairie dogs, black-footed ferrets would never survive outside zoos and breeding facilities, and we would have far fewer mountain plovers, burrowing owls, swift foxes, and ferruginous hawks.

Before 1800, an estimated 5 billion prairie dogs lived from Canada to Mexico, covering the West with underground apartment complexes that shifted over the centuries like sand dunes. The Lakota, Dakota and other Indigenous peoples of the prairie shaped and depended on the

ecosystems prairie dogs created. Some relied on prairie dogs for nourishment during thin times, or used them as a ceremonial food.

But European settlers were remarkably effective at shooting and poisoning prairie dogs and plowing up their burrows. Today, the five prairie dog species occupy just 2% of their historic range, and some occupy even less.

Prairie dogs still survive in many of their historic territories: Black-tailed prairie dogs, known for their especially large, dense colonies, persist in isolated pockets of the prairie east of the Rocky Mountains from Canada to Mexico. White-tailed prairie dogs live in parts of Montana, Wyoming, Utah and Colorado. Gunnison's prairie dogs eke out an existence in southern Colorado, and Utah prairie dogs live in, well, Utah. Mexican prairie dogs still hang on in small slices of northern Mexico. But many of these populations are too small to serve their ecosystems as they once did.

Within this familiar story of colonization and species decline, however, are more hopeful stories of creativity and adaptation: Researchers are using pedometer-like devices to map prairie dogs' underground tunnels, remote-controlled badgers to understand prairie dog alarm calls and Kitchen-Aid mixers to craft solutions to deadly disease. After decades of restoration work by tribal wildlife managers, prairie dogs, black-footed ferrets, swift foxes and bison are once again roaming the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in north-central Montana, one of the few places in the world where all four species coexist. Some private landowners, meanwhile, are finding ways to tolerate the rodents. Together, these researchers, managers

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Facing page: A prairie dog is collared by Smithsonian Institution scientists at American Prairie.

and landowners are striving to conserve the West's remaining prairie dogs and the prairie that depends on them.

ONCE THE COLLARED prairie dog was returned to her Tru Catch wire cage to await release, Boulerville reached into the next trap in line.

Boulerville is part of a Smithsonian Institution team that is collaring and tracking prairie dogs at American Prairie — formerly the American Prairie Reserve — in central Montana. Each collar measures the animal's acceleration and angle; by triangulating with locations picked up by sensors posted on poles throughout the colony, researchers can determine where and how far the prairie dogs travel both above and below ground. The Clairol dye patterns provide one more way to tell who's who in a colony of look-alikes.

Though other researchers have studied prairie dogs' aboveground lives, no one really knows what they do underground. Satellite imagery can be used to track Arctic terns over Alaska or grizzly bears deep in the wilderness, but it can't penetrate the Earth. Decades ago, researchers laboriously excavated a white-tailed prairie dog burrow in southern Montana, revealing features like “sleeping quarters,” hibernacula, and a “maternity area” — but such work is invasive and yields little data on the animals' movements.

At American Prairie in September, the Smithsonian team was joined by researchers from Swansea University in Wales who had developed the tracking collars Boulerville used. The collars were originally designed to study penguins underwater, an environment similarly resistant to conventional satellite tracking.

Prairie dogs aren't the only

occupants of prairie dog burrows. The mazes of tunnels and rooms also provide shelter for black-footed ferrets, swift foxes and untold numbers of insects. Burrowing owls shimmy their puffball bodies into the tunnels, where they raise their chicks on the plentiful bugs. Prairie rattlesnakes, tiger salamanders, horned lizards and badgers use them, too.

And as climate extremes become more common aboveground, these burrows may become even more important.

“By creating tunnels, they're also creating a thermal refuge,” said Hila Shamon, the director of the Smithsonian's Great Plains Science Program and principal investigator of the colony-mapping project. “The prairie can be so hot in the summer or brutally, brutally cold in the winter. You don't have any shade or place to hide from the cold ... and conditions in the tunnel systems are consistent.”

Prairie dogs spend much of the day and all night in their burrows, living in family coterie composed of one male, three or four females and the year's young. Their tunnel systems, which can extend across an area larger than a football field, are like bustling apartment complexes where every family has its separate unit. Residents periodically pop out of doors to grab food, gossip about the neighbors and scan for danger.

“In the prairie,” Shamon said, “there's a whole world that's happening beneath the ground that we can't see. But it exists, and it's very deep, and it's important.”

Aboveground, the effect of prairie dogs on the landscape is more obvious. “Prairie dogs create an entirely novel habitat type,” said Andy Boyce, a Smithsonian research ecologist. “They graze intensely. They increase the forbs and flowering

plants, and they clip woody vegetation. They will eat and nibble on a new woody plant until it tips over and dies.”

The landscape created by prairie dogs may look barren, but the reality is more nuanced. A healthy prairie isn’t an uninterrupted sea of grass; it’s made up of grass and shrubs, wetlands and wildflowers and even large patches of bare dirt that allow prairie dogs — and other species — to spot approaching predators.

Bison like to wallow in the dirt exposed by prairie dogs, and graze on the nutritious grass and plants that resprout after a prairie dog pruning. Mountain plovers and thick-billed longspurs frequently nest on the grazed surface of prairie dog towns. (Both birds have declined along with prairie dogs; the mountain plover has been proposed for protection under the Endangered Species Act.)

Prairie dog colonies may also provide other species with a home-alarm system. “You have 1,000 little pairs of eyeballs constantly searching for predators all around you and then vocalizing loudly when they see them,” Boyce said. To test this hypothesis, Boyce’s Ph.D. student Andrew Dreelin attached a taxidermied badger to a remote-controlled car and drove it near long-billed curlew nests in Montana prairie dog colonies. He then measured how nesting curlews responded to the badger with and without a warning from the prairie dogs.

Results are pending, said Dreelin, but he’s certain that “we’ve only just started to scratch the surface on the multifaceted ways that prairie dogs could shape the lives of birds on the prairie.”

IN EARLY OCTOBER, about 500 miles south of American

Randy Matchett said that when he tells his Montana neighbors that only 2% of prairie dogs remain, a common attitude is: “What the hell’s the holdup getting rid of that last 2%?”

Facing page, from top: Smithsonian Institution ecologist Jesse Boulter holds one of the tracking collars used to study prairie dogs at American Prairie.

A collared prairie dog waits to be released.

A collared prairie dog is released through a tube that researchers use to check that the sensors on the collars are working properly.

Prairie, Colten Salyer also donned thick leather gloves to protect himself from an angry mammal’s teeth. Then he opened a cat carrier filled with paper shavings and a member of a species once considered extinct.

The young black-footed ferret inside bared its long white canines. Bred at the National Black-Footed Ferret Conservation Center in northern Colorado, she was one of 20 about to be reintroduced to southcentral Wyoming’s Shirley Basin.

The black-footed ferret is North America’s only native ferret and one of only three ferret species in the world. And if there’s one thing black-footed ferrets need, it’s prairie dogs. They eat them almost exclusively, and they use their tunnels to live, hunt and reproduce, slipping in and out of burrows as they move like water across the landscape.

In 1980, black-footed ferrets were declared extinct, most likely extinguished by disease, development and endless prairie dog poisoning campaigns. But in 1981, a northern Wyoming ranch dog proudly presented his owners with his most recent treasure: a dead ferret. A local taxidermist confirmed that it was, in fact, a black-footed ferret, a member of a tiny remnant population.

The newly discovered ferrets lived in the wild until 1985, when biologists discovered that disease had killed all but 18. At that point, they scooped up the remaining ferrets and took them to captive breeding facilities. Only seven successfully reproduced, but those seven now have more than 11,000 descendants. In 2020, researchers used DNA from a wild-caught ferret with no surviving offspring to produce the first cloned ferret. Since then, they have created two more cloned individuals, and this past November, the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service announced that one had given birth to healthy kits.

Captive-bred ferrets have now been released across the West. But to survive long-term, they need prairie dog colonies. And prairie dogs aren’t popular with their human neighbors.

Because they eat the same grass cows do. And they make holes.

“I was running to rope a yearling once, and I stood up in the saddle and was about to open my hand — and all of a sudden the horse’s front end disappeared,” said Salyer, a ranch manager in Shirley Basin who volunteered to help with the releases. His horse had sunk a hoof into a prairie dog hole, a misstep that sent Salyer tumbling to the ground.

Both Salyer and his horse were fine, and he shrugged after telling the story. But most ranchers have, or have heard, similar stories, many of which end with a valued horse breaking a leg. There’s no way to know how frequently horses injure themselves in burrows, but the stories spread as fast as a prairie fire.

What’s certain is that prairie dogs eat grass. Quite a bit of grass: A single prairie dog can devour up to 2 pounds of green grass and non-woody plants every week, according to Montana State University. For ranchers who use that vegetation to feed their cows, prairie dogs look like competition. Researchers, however, say the effects of prairie dogs on livestock forage are mixed. Black-tailed prairie dogs’ propensity to clip and mow, for instance, results in plants with higher fat and protein and lower fiber. “Across years, enhanced forage quality may help to offset reductions in forage quantity for agricultural producers,” a study published in 2019 by *Rangeland Ecology and Management* reported.



This uncertainty has led to some bureaucratic contradictions. The Wyoming Department of Agriculture labels prairie dogs as pest species and offers training in properly using pesticides to kill them; at the same time, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department lists the black-tailed prairie dog as a species of greatest conservation need.

Until the 1990s, said Randy Matchett, a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist in central Montana, prairie dogs were so despised in places like Phillips County, Montana, that the Bureau of Land Management produced maps of their colonies designed for sport shooters. Attitudes haven't changed much: In 2020, 27 years after an initial survey of attitudes toward black-tailed prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets in Montana, researchers found that feelings about them had barely budged.

Matchett said that when he tells his Montana neighbors that only 2% of prairie dogs remain, a common attitude is: "What the hell's the holdup getting rid of that last 2%?"

Chamois Andersen, a Defenders of Wildlife senior field representative, has spent decades working with landowners in prairie dog-rich places, and she's persuaded some to allow researchers to survey their land for black-footed ferrets in exchange for funds for noxious weed removal. She speculates that younger generations of ranchers are more open to prairie dog conservation and to partnerships with public agencies and wildlife groups.

Matchett is less optimistic. Even the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service, which together manage one of the largest black-footed ferret colonies in the world in South Dakota's Conata Basin, poison some

prairie dogs on federal land to prevent the population from moving onto private property.

Not all prairie dogs are equally reviled. White-tailed prairie dogs like those in Shirley Basin live at lower densities and tend to clip plants farther up the stems, making them less obvious to the casual observer. Landowners, as a result, are often more tolerant of them than their black-tailed cousins, said Andrew Gygli, a small-carnivore biologist for Wyoming Game and Fish.

Bob Heward, whose family started ranching in Shirley Basin more than a century ago, understands that a disliked species can also be useful.

He invites recreational shooters to target prairie dogs on his land, but he won't use poison to kill the rodents because he knows they provide food for other species. Prairie dogs are a "nuisance," he said, but they're also as inevitable as the wind: "We've learned to live with them. They've been here longer than I have."

THE MALE SWIFT FOX at the end of the trap line was chunky, at least by swift fox standards: Though he weighed only about 5 pounds, his belly was round beneath his fluffy fur. His black eyes carefully followed Smithsonian researcher Hila Shamon as she loaded him into the backseat of her four-door pickup, covering the trap with a blanket as she prepared to transport him from this ranch north of Laramie, Wyoming, to a new home on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana.

Unlike black-footed ferrets, swift foxes can survive without prairie dogs, but when prairie dogs are scarce they suffer from the loss of food, Shamon said, and are deprived of the shelter they find in prairie dog burrows.



So they, too, declined as prairie dogs were exterminated and prairie habitat was converted into cropland. By the early 1900s, they had disappeared from Canada, Montana, North Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma.

But swift foxes still live in parts of the West — and in some places, their populations are being restored. For the last five years, Shamon and her team have trapped swift foxes in Wyoming and Colorado and trucked them to Fort Belknap. This rectangle of grassland, buttes and prairie breaks near the Canadian

border is home to the Nakoda (Assiniboine) and A'aninin (Gros Ventre), both Great Plains peoples. Today, it is one of the only places in the world where prairie dogs, swift foxes, black-footed ferrets and bison co-exist.

Montana State Sen. Mike Fox (Gros Ventre), D, who served as Fort Belknap's director of Fish and Wildlife from 1991 to 2001, oversaw early efforts to restore buffalo, swift foxes and black-footed ferrets to the reservation. The goal was to "create a steady, healthy population of native animals that were driven to

extinction because of the different uses of the land," he said. "Like when they started poisoning the prairie dogs off in the '30s and '40s and wiped out the ferrets that were native here, and the same with the swift fox. We want to make as complete an ecosystem as we can, along with the buffalo."

The tribes worked with the Fish and Wildlife Service to reintroduce black-footed ferrets, and, with researchers at the Smithsonian, World Wildlife Fund and other organizations, to bring back the swift fox. The collaborators spent two years

planning the swift fox capture and translocation, Shamon said, considering factors like habitat quality, community attitudes and the overall risk to a re-established population.

Swift foxes had already been reintroduced in parts of Alberta and Saskatchewan and on the Blackfeet and Fort Peck reservations. The reintroduction at Fort Belknap continued the tribes' restoration efforts and added a possible point of connectivity for other populations.

Tribal members living on and near the Fort Belknap



because it's attractive to wildlife and domestic cattle, and they do their part. When it starts looking like a moonscape is when we get people noticing the most."

He tells people that the little grass-eating rodents are necessary, and notes that the "moonscapes" aren't as widespread as they may seem. But like non-Native ranchers across the West, some tribal members equate abundant prairie dogs with fewer cows. Fox doesn't believe the council will allow widespread prairie dog poisoning on tribal lands — especially since the reservation now hosts black-footed ferrets — but he does worry that opposition could intensify.

Bronc Speak Thunder (Assiniboine), director of the Fort Belknap Buffalo Program, has also heard people complain about prairie dogs, though he added that "people complain about a lot of stuff."

The tribes aren't actively restoring prairie dogs, he said; they're simply refraining from poisoning and shooting them. He sees that prairie dogs benefit tribal land by creating more habitat for ground-nesting birds and serving as food for swift foxes, coyotes, hawks and eagles. They also encourage the growth of nutritious grass for bison. "Like life, it's a big circle, and that's where it fits," he said. "They're part of the ecosystem that exists, and if you take something out, it throws everything off."

WHEN I MET Randy Matchett, the Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, he sported a cowboy hat and graying horseshoe mustache and carried a handful of Smurf-blue flea-control pellets, each slightly smaller than a marble. The pellets, which Matchett produced in his workshop at the Charles M. Russell National

*Prairie dogs
are "part of
the ecosystem
that exists,
and if you take
something
out, it throws
everything off."*

Wildlife Refuge headquarters in Lewistown, Montana, are his latest attempt to protect prairie dogs from a fatal disease.

The pellets contain Fipronil, an insecticide used in treatments like Frontline to keep fleas and ticks away from household pets, and are flavored with peanut butter and molasses to increase their chances of ending up in prairie dog bellies. Matchett dyes them blue because research shows prairie dogs are attracted to the color, and because the dye stains their feces, making it easy to estimate how many animals have consumed the pellets. Once ingested, Matchett hopes, his "FipBits" will kill the fleas that land on and bite prairie dogs, including the fleas carrying the bacteria that causes plague.

Yes, that plague. The bacteria *Yersinia pestis* causes bubonic plague, which became known as the Black Death after it killed at least 25 million Europeans during the 14th century.

In 1900, the disease arrived in North America via San Francisco, carried by rats stowed away on ships. During the following decades, the development of antibiotics controlled the disease in humans, but plague continued to spread among rodent species, affecting black-footed ferrets, rabbits and squirrels. First detected in prairie dogs in 1936, it devastated populations already hit hard by the conversion of the prairie to agriculture — and it remains a major threat to prairie dogs.

"Once colonies have plague, they can disappear in two weeks," said Shamon. "There will be thousands of acres chirping with thousands or tens of thousands of animals and in two weeks, you will go map it, and they're gone."

A plague vaccine does exist, and is used to protect highly endangered species like

Jessica Alexander, wildlife biologist with the Smithsonian Institution, releases a swift fox into the wild on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation.

Reservation have largely supported the reintroduction of native prairie species, especially after prairie dog numbers were diminished by an outbreak of disease in the late '90s, Fox said. Now that the population is recovering and has started to clear larger areas of grass, however, some tribal members who raise cattle have begun expressing frustration to the tribal council.

"Wildlife and cattle will graze prairie dog colonies because of the new growth coming back throughout the year," said Fox. "It makes it look even worse

black-footed ferrets. But it's simply not possible to jab every prairie dog in the West. Matchett, who as a Fish and Wildlife biologist is responsible for conserving endangered species, got involved in plague prevention in the early 1990s, initially dusting prairie dog colonies for fleas. In 2013, he began testing oral vaccines in Montana colonies, working in parallel with researchers in seven other states. The first-generation vaccines were red, peanut-butter flavored cubes with a biomarker that tinted prairie dog whiskers pink. Matchett and his colleagues in Colorado also developed vaccine pellets that they mass-produced using a Lithuanian carp bait-making machine. Matchett helped craft a pellet shooter that could be bolted to the front of a four-wheeler.

With the new vaccines primed to launch, Matchett felt hopeful. The World Wildlife Fund, which helped fund some of the work, felt hopeful, too. But in 2018, after years of trials with thousands of prairie dogs, he and other researchers concluded that even when a colony was given oral vaccinations, the number of prairie dogs that survived a plague outbreak was too small to support a black-footed ferret population.

So Matchett pivoted. If he couldn't inoculate prairie dogs against plague, maybe he could kill the fleas that carried the bacteria. What if he could persuade prairie dogs to eat Fipronil?

He made a new set of pellets with the same bait machine, this time using his wife's grandmother's Kitchen-Aid mixer to blend various types of flour, vital wheat gluten, peanut butter, molasses and other food-grade ingredients with a soupçon of flea killer. Early results have been promising: While adult

fleas aren't affected until they bite a prairie dog that's ingested a pellet, not every flea needs to be killed; studies have shown that in general, fleas don't trigger plague outbreaks until they reach a critical mass. And flea larvae appear to die when they crawl into or consume treated prairie dog poop, suggesting that the pellets could tamp down flea reproduction as well as kill the adult insects.

FipBits aren't the only way to reduce the toll plague takes on prairie dogs, but Matchett believes they're the most likely to work. In his office, perched on stacks of files, are the remnants of another of his many assaults on the problem: dozens of vials of alcohol, each containing bits of

prairie dog ears. In 2007 and 2008, Matchett and his colleagues collected the snippets from prairie dogs that had survived plague outbreaks, hoping genetic analysis would explain their fortitude. The material has yet to be analyzed owing to a "combination of lack of funding, interest, time and capability," Matchett said, but he hopes new funding will allow him and his collaborators to return to the project.

Despite the setbacks, Matchett believes researchers can find a way to control plague in prairie dogs. Human intolerance, as he sees it, is a more stubborn problem. Places like Fort Belknap and the Conata Basin of South Dakota — where

prairie dogs are, at least for now, allowed to flourish — remain few and far between.

DRIVE SOUTH from Fort Belknap down Highway 191, head east on a straight gravel road, and you'll find one more place where prairie dogs are left in peace.

American Prairie began in 2001 as an effort to protect and restore Montana's grasslands. The nonprofit now manages more than 527,000 acres of private land and federal and state leases. Its ultimate goal is to connect 3.2 million acres of prairie, providing habitat for an array of species from bison to mountain plovers to black-footed ferrets. To the casual observer, American Prairie's lands may already look like intact prairie, though ecologists like Daniel Kinka can't help noticing the nonnative crested wheatgrass and the hundreds of miles of fencing.

"This is kind of like the *Field of Dreams* model: If you build it, they will come," said Kinka, American Prairie's director of rewilding. "A better habitat houses more wildlife, and the wildlife that are here are perfectly capable of restoring themselves."

American Prairie prohibits the poisoning and shooting of prairie dogs on its land, and it regularly hosts research projects such as the Smithsonian's burrow mapping — which may help explain how plague spreads within colonies — and Matchett's tests of plague-mitigation tools. Prairie dogs, said Kinka, are the "unsung heroes of a prairie ecosystem," important to all the other species American Prairie is trying to foster. And as researchers have found, the woody plants that prairie dogs chew down to clear their line of sight tend to be replaced by nutritious grasses and wildflowers, suggesting that even cattle may benefit from their presence.





The possibility that prairie dogs could be good for cattle, or at least not as bad as generally believed, is met with skepticism by American Prairie's neighbors, many of whom see the nonprofit as a threat to ranching. Signs posted along highways in Phillips County, Montana, read "Save the American Cowboy. Stop American Prairie Reserve." For now, Kinka isn't trying to convince anyone to like or even appreciate prairie dogs, aiming instead for tolerance.

The black-tailed prairie dog complex studied by the Smithsonian team at American Prairie is a noisy place, filled with the barks and trills of hundreds of creatures. As I stood beside researcher Jesse Boulерice, listening, it was easy to imagine

Above: Prairie dogs emerge from their burrows at American Prairie.

Facing page, from top: At his shop in Lewistown, Montana, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Randy Matchett holds the flea-control pellets he hopes will help reduce the toll plague takes on prairie dogs.

Matchett tests the pellet shooter he helped create.

that the rodents were doing just fine. But they're not. Will they ever be allowed to exist in numbers like this throughout their historic range?

Boulерice surveyed the surface of the colony, which was covered with dried plant nubs and bare mounds of dirt, and said he wasn't sure.

Then he released a collared prairie dog who wagged her chubby butt in the air as she scurried into a nearby hole. She promptly popped back up, chirping out a message we'll never understand. Perhaps she was warning her colony-mates to watch out for those marshmallows and carrots; they hide a nasty trap.

Or maybe she was scolding us — telling us exactly what she

thought of our species before she disappeared into her burrow, leaving us to decide the future of hers. ☼

This story is part of High Country News' Conservation Beyond Boundaries project, which is supported by the BAND Foundation. hcn.org/cbb

Christine Peterson lives in Laramie, Wyoming, and has covered science, the environment and outdoor recreation for more than a decade.

Louise Johns is a freelance photographer based in Bozeman, Montana, whose work examines the relationships between people, place and animals in the American West.

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Roberto (Bear) Guerra

Prayer and persistence

After years of negotiation, over 200 cultural items have been returned to the Northern Arapaho Tribe.

BY JORDAN DRESSER | PHOTO BY CARL COTE



AROUND 1 in the afternoon at the peak of the sun, a vehicle procession led by tribal military veterans turned onto the road to St. Michael's Episcopal Mission and began a slow approach toward a circle of buildings.

I felt a warm grip as Melissa "Millie" Friday locked her hand into mine. Near the end of the line of vehicles, a truck was hauling a white trailer that contained priceless tribal cultural items. I could feel her anticipation, and she could feel mine.

A crowd of over 100 community members, including tribal elders, Wyoming Indian Middle School and High School students stood watching as the procession completed a circle.

The items were finally home.

On that mid-October day last year, the Episcopal Church in Wyoming returned close to 200 cultural items to the Northern Arapaho Tribe. For over 80 years, the church was the steward of the collection, which included rawhide bags, dresses and children's toys, all made by tribal members during the mid-1900s.

It was a moment I had waited for and prayed about. And so had others.

"This is very historical for us," said Marion Scott, a tribal elder. In July, Scott accompanied a delegation of tribal members from Our Father's Church (the Episcopal church on the reservation) and the Northern Arapaho Tribal Historic Preservation Office to the Episcopal Church headquarters in Casper, Wyoming, where the items were stored. Over two days, the group unboxed the

objects and carefully took note of each one, doing so with great care and the guidance of elders like Scott. They then prepared the items for the two-hour journey home.

The objects are infinitely more than historical items: "They're alive," said Crystal C'bearing, director of the Northern Arapaho Tribal Historic Preservation Office. "We still use them in our daily lives. It's not from the past, they're still here."

The trip home was quick. But the journey to get the sacred items returned was not. During her remarks to the crowd, Friday, who belongs to a committee at Our Father's House, spoke about how every time the church selected a new bishop, she met with them to express the wishes of the tribal members who gathered at church every Sunday.

"I would say, 'We want our artifacts back,'" she recalled.

Friday, who has spent her life working with Indigenous youth, has witnessed the difference that culture and tradition can make in a person's life. For her, sacred items like these are the link, and she has often wondered what it would take to get them back.

"We need to make a change," she said. "And how are we going to do that? Prayer. We are here today because of prayer. And all praying for the same thing."

St. Michael's Episcopal Mission is also a site of prayer, located at the heart of the Wind River Indian Reservation, which is home to the Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone Tribes.

During the late 1800s, the Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches began establishing churches on the reservation. St. Michael's Episcopal Mission was started in 1910. Its buildings, which are arranged in a circle, include Our Father's House and the former site of a post

Tribal Elder William C'Hair gives a prayer and history about the cultural items and the church. "Our people are connected to our artifacts," said C'Hair.

office and a boarding school. East of the circle, next to a playground, stands a building that once served as the St. Michael's Museum.

The items in question had previously belonged to Edith May Adams, a church deacon who, over the years, amassed a large collection of items that were sold to her by tribal members. In 1946, they were deeded to the church and served as the basis for the collection displayed at the museum. The museum was closed after a flood, however, and the collection was relocated to the church's headquarters.

I FIRST BECAME familiar with the collection back in 2012, when I was working as public relations officer for the Wind River Hotel and Casino. Together with tribal members Lisa Yawakia and the late Irene Lawson, I was tasked with creating a cultural room that told the story of the Arapaho people.

We had no clue as to what we were doing. None of us had museum experience or the technical expertise to construct an adequate space to display anything. So we reached out to the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming, and started gathering information about what it would take to make museum-quality cabinets, lighting and room. During the room's construction, I learned about the Episcopal Church's collection and its history. These items, I thought, were just what we needed to make our cultural room complete. But getting hold of them proved harder than expected.

The first time we asked, we were told no. Church leaders had issues with the cultural room being attached to the casino and doubted our ability to care for the collection. And

yes, it was true that we lacked the technical knowledge or museum expertise. But we did have a lifetime of Arapaho knowledge to draw on.

We refused to give up. We continued to work on the room. We made sure that the lighting was at the correct setting. The cases were custom-made to make sure that they didn't release gases that would harm the collection. Our collection forms and policies were based on other museums' practices, and we installed security cameras to guarantee the items' safety.

Finally, in 2013, the then-bishop of Wyoming, John Sheridan Smylie, held a meeting with us and the tribal members who belonged to Our Father's House. We told the group what we wanted, and Melissa Friday voiced her support. The elders spoke together in Arapaho and finally announced their own decision: They also wanted the items returned.

The Episcopal Diocese of Wyoming responded with its own proposal, offering to loan us 20 items and renew the loan every year. I was happy, but deep down I still felt dissatisfied. Why were the objects just being loaned to us? After all, these items were ours.

This story was captured and told by Mat Hames in the documentary *What Was Ours*, which aired on PBS in 2017 and sparked a larger conversation over who owns the material culture of Indigenous communities. It also motivated me to pursue a master's degree in museum studies at the University of San Francisco. It was there that I learned about the Native American Graves Protection Repatriation Act, a federal law passed in 1990 that helps tribes reclaim their ancestors and their sacred items from institutions

Someone once told me that you give a little of your life to help our ancestors get home.

that receive federal funds.

This led me to work for the tribe's preservation office, where I learned from some of the greats — people like Yufna Soldier Wolf, who embarked on a battle with the U.S. military to reclaim and rebury the children who died at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. In 2017, the Northern Arapaho Tribe became the first to bring our children back from Carlisle, and now tribes across the nation carry on that tradition every year.

As chairman of the tribe in 2020 for two years, I continued to support and assist the preservation office whenever I could. Under the guidance of Crystal C'bearing, the tribe has carried out successful repatriations from the Chicago Field Museum, Harvard University and other major institutions.

Last year, Secretary of Interior Deb Haaland helped make significant changes to NAGPRA that will help tribes reclaim their ancestors and sacred items. It has been a long and difficult road. But someone once told me that you give a little of your life to help our ancestors get home. The ancestors themselves choose you for the task.

And it isn't easy: I have dealt with so many museums that stubbornly insisted that our sacred items were theirs that I have come to accept the long journey it takes to bring them back home. So when I was told

early last year that the Episcopal Church was returning the entire collection — and not just loaning it to the tribe — I didn't believe it. It felt like a dream, too good to be true.

But dreams do come true. And as Millie Friday noted, it all started with a prayer.

"We're a real prayerful people," she said. "We're the Blue Sky people. We pray all the time."

Once a month, I volunteer with members of the Episcopal Church and tribal members from Our Father's House. Under the guidance of Eastern Shoshone Tribal Member Roxanne Friday, who was ordained as the first female Native American Episcopal priest in Wyoming, we meet and discuss the future of the collection and St. Michael's circle. The plan is to revitalize the circle and reopen the museum. It will become a place of healing that acknowledges the hard truths of colonization.

As the afternoon wound down, Roxanne Friday closed the event with a prayer before a meal was served.

"Just stretch your arms," she said. "Just get some movement going in your body. Take a deep breath. Exhale." ☀

Jordan Dresser is a member of the Northern Arapaho Tribe on the Wind River Indian Reservation. He holds a bachelor's in journalism and master's in museum studies. He is a former tribal chairman and filmmaker.

ENCOUNTERS

An exploration of life and landscape during the climate crisis.



Older than you

What we learn from an ancient desert species.

BY RUXANDRA GUIDI
PHOTOS BY ROBERTO (BEAR) GUERRA

WE CALLED him Grandpa.

We figured that he was at least 100 years old. Saguaros can grow as tall as 16 feet in a century, and Grandpa was easily four times my size, with about a dozen arms that reached straight up into the sky, defying gravity.

Grandpa lived in Catalina State Park in Tucson's outskirts. He stood in a clearing along one of the park's most traveled paths, overlooking a wash that typically ran dry. Whenever it rained and the wash temporarily filled up and flowed again, Grandpa's core swelled up as he sucked up the water, widening so much that the long vertical creases lined by his spines stretched out like the folds of an accordion. Whenever we saw him like this, my family joked about it; Grandpa, we said, must have had too much to eat (and drink); the pants he wore were clearly a few sizes too small. But we knew the swelling was good for him: It meant he was storing water for the long dry months ahead.

It was good for him, until it wasn't. Two summers ago, after an especially heavy monsoon rain, Grandpa died. Yes, he was old, but he'd probably taken in more water than he could handle. And, top-heavy, he came crashing down. There he was, all over the local news, all 32 feet of him splayed out on the ground, leaving a stump the size of a third-grader.

"Thankfully, this giant has fallen off the trail and will stay where it landed, providing habitat and food for many creatures as it decomposes," a spokesperson for Arizona State Parks said.

We visited him the following weekend. His beautiful sage color still held, and his once-chubby core had shrunk back to its regular size, pre-monsoon season. Months later, we returned to find him still lying there, surrounded by much smaller saguaros — suddenly noticeable. His arms looked leathery and ashen, already becoming habitat for other creatures; beneath the fallen core, a group of packrats had found the perfect spot for a nest, weaving together twigs and small pieces of plastic trash and scrub.

The last time we visited was after this summer's rains. By then, we could see his cactus skeleton, the structural support that allows saguaros to grow as tall as he had, equipping them to withstand strong winds and store as much as 200 gallons — 1,668 pounds — of water. Grandpa's ribs were visible now, looking eerily similar to a human's skeleton, white and porous and strong.

Saguaros are known for growing slowly, only about a quarter of an inch during their first two years. By the time he was 70, Grandpa was likely 6 feet tall and producing flowers and fruit. By his first century, he could have been 16 feet tall.

Park officials measured Grandpa's growth rings and examined his scars, and they determined that he was 200 years old — ancient for a saguaro, who have an average lifespan of around a century and a half. This means he would have been alive in the early 1800s, more than 150 years before the establishment of Catalina State Park, back when Tucson was part of the Northern Mexico state of Sonora, with a population of no more than 1,000 people. This was an era of Indigenous displacement and dispossession, of Spanish missions and Catholic proselytization. Grandpa would have seen all of this and more. He would have been one of millions of his kind; the urban sprawl that has diminished the saguaro's Sonoran Desert range was still another century away.

And here, in his immediate surroundings, Grandpa sheltered other beings, providing

habitat and food and shade for countless desert species. Saguaros are a keystone species that play a critical role in their ecological communities by helping nurture other living creatures. Most of the insects and other Sonoran Desert animals — a great variety of birds, tortoises, javelinas, bats, coyotes and many others — feed on the saguaros' fleshy red fruit, which grows from the very tips of their arms and falls to the ground when ripe. Woodpeckers carve holes in the cactus' trunks and arms, making nests for other birds, including the now-rare pygmy owl.

The Tohono O'odham see saguaros as people; in 2021, the Tohono O'odham Nation passed a resolution that granted saguaros legal personhood. "There is abundant historic documentation that the Tohono O'odham (Desert People) and their sister tribes of O'odham, regard Ha:san, (Saguaros) as one of their kin with human heritage," it read.

After Grandpa died, we learned that it would have taken him 50 to 75 years to grow his first arm, an ingenious water storage device that functioned much like his great trunk. He had so many of them. The skeletons of those arms are now splayed out from the base of the old stump but look as if they're pointing to a few tiny saguaritos popping up nearby. ☀

Ruxandra Guidi is a correspondent for High Country News. She writes from Tucson, Arizona.

Web extra: This story is available in Spanish at hcn.org/grandpa-saguaro



The "Grandpa" saguaro at Catalina State Park in Tucson, Arizona, in 2019 (*facing*) and 2022 (*right*).

TOWNSHIP AND RANGE

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



Cowboy up

The new year is what we make it.

BY NINA MCCONIGLEY
ILLUSTRATION BY TARA ANAND

MANY YEARS AGO, I did away with New Year's resolutions. I used to make them religiously. By December, there would be a long list of goals that I would look at incredulously. They ranged from the big — *finish writing your novel! Run a 10K!* — to the small — *get rid of boxes in the garage, learn how to make pavlova!* For some reason, learning how to make pavlova had been on my list for over five years. I have never learned how to make it. I blame this on high altitude. I pretty much blame all my baking missteps on high altitude. I have learned to increase the baking temperature slightly, decrease the baking powder and increase the liquid ingredients. Baking in the mountains feels like gambling: When the timer goes off, you're never sure what you'll see.

In recent years, in lieu of making resolutions, I have tried instead to embrace a word that I want to have shape my year. The year I started a new writing project, that word was DISCIPLINE. Another year it was NO, as I was trapped in always saying yes to things I didn't want to do. One year, I chose WORK, as I felt I needed to keep my head down and put my job above all things. Every year, toward the end of the year, I spend weeks trying to think of the perfect word to shape the year ahead. I feel pressured to pick something that will keep me on course and help me be productive.

I am not sure when I started to think of the new year with such a sense of purpose. When I was a kid, the new year was an afterthought. Christmas was the main event. New Year's was the holiday right before you had to go back to school, back to diagramming sentences and eating sloppy joes at lunch in the cafeteria. Above everything, January marked a month of harsh snow and relentless wind.

Welcoming the new year in Wyoming and in rural places across the West is quiet. There is no ball drop, few celebrations in the street. When I looked at fashion magazines and they showed party outfits, I wondered where those people were going. (I went to prom with someone who bought new jeans to wear with a borrowed sportscoat.) And yet at my parent's home in Casper, we always observed the new year.

Ever since they moved to Wyoming in 1976, I think my parents have done what immigrants in new places have always done

— found others like them. One thing I love about being an immigrant in a rural space is that you almost accept that you may never meet someone from your own country. But in turn, any new arrival is your family. It's almost uncanny how everyone who is an "other" finds one another. And in the most unlikely places. To be honest, it mostly happens in box stores. You see others buying big bags of rice, mangos and, back in the day, phone cards to call home. My mom would march up to anyone who looked out of place and start a conversation.

Wyoming is not diverse in terms of race, but our home was a virtual United Nations in the middle of the prairie. Around our table were people from Germany, Poland, India, China, Venezuela, Sweden, Vietnam, the U.K. and France. I remember, as a kid, realizing that no one sitting around our very full Thanksgiving table was born in the U.S. And yet, we all celebrated and ate our turkey, stuffing, rolls and beans. We all were grateful for being at that table — thankful to be here, in America. We were a mishmash, and yet here we were, in rural Wyoming, together.

One of our closest family friends grew up in Peru. Before midnight on New Year's Eve, she doles out 12 grapes for each of us to eat as the clock strikes midnight. This brings you good luck and prosperity. After that, she has us all run around the block with a suitcase to encourage travel in the coming year. Many years, I have slipped in the ice and snow, but kept running, determined to travel. I have eaten black-eyed peas, worn polka dots, smashed pomegranates and cooked lentils, all with the idea of having better luck in the new year.

But LUCK, strangely, is a word I have never picked. Instead, my words have always veered toward a more cowboy ethic — the notion that I need to work hard or to toil a bit in order to enjoy life. I wonder if that's the Western way: To cowboy up, follow the Code of the West.

DESPAIR would be an easy pick this year. I jokingly told my husband it was a good word for our times. I think of politics, our climate, how angry people seem to be on social media. I go to bed anxiously reading the news and feeling reams of despair.

And yet, there is a coyote that hangs around the back of our house. I see him very

infrequently. But every so often he pops up, and I see the black tip of his tail between the trees. I have watched him for years, moving about the world with purpose. I've seen him with a cottontail in his mouth, and wandering down the ditch, sniffing the air. I see his scat when I walk our dog. There is something about the way he lives, ruled by instinct, that I admire. He doesn't spend time making lists or searching for words to guide him. He goes about each day living the way a wild creature is supposed to.

I know we can't live like coyotes. We live as humans, with intention and a little grace. As 2024 drew to a close, I spent weeks thinking about what word to choose. For a while, I thought HOPE or WISH would be good. Certainly, I hope and wish for a better world. But then I thought, no, that's not me, and that's not the Code of the West. That code is deeply engrained in me. I have been told since I was a kid to "cowboy up" and be tough — to have grit in the face of frustration, disappointment and fear. Still, I worry that to cowboy up can mean to endure things unduly.

So my word for 2025 is MAKE. Maybe it is because I see my two small girls that I feel, more than ever, that every one of us must make something of ourselves and our time here. Something, anything, better than before. I think back to my mother walking around the supermarket, making friends and connecting. Of immigrants making luck on the windswept High Plains. And I think about the coyote, making his little urban habitat. Each of us a little out of place and making a life the best way we know how. We must make connections. We must make our communities better. Our homes better. Our environment better. Our workplaces better. We mustn't let things deteriorate on our watch. I do not want despair to turn into doing nothing, into just tolerating. We need to be active and engaged.

I'm feeling more positive just by choosing the word. I think again about pavlova. Maybe this will be the year I actually make it. ☀

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

CALIFORNIA

If you're planning on scamming your auto insurance by claiming that furry-ocious bruins went full-throttle *Cocaine Bear* on several very expensive cars, it's probably not a good idea to leave the bear suit you wore for the occasion — complete with meat shredders for claws — lying around your apartment. Four suspects were arrested and charged with conspiracy and insurance fraud for staging and filming bear break-ins involving two different Mercedes-Benz vehicles and a Rolls Royce. The scammers' videos were submitted to the insurance companies with claims for \$142,000, the *Los Angeles Times* reported. Unfortunately for the felonious furies, sharp-eyed investigators at the California Department of Insurance's Fraud Division swiftly determined "that there was something fishy going on" — the kind of fishy that, unlike with real bears, did not involve going after salmon. A biologist from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife concurred, concluding that the video was "clearly a human in a bear suit," perhaps a budget remake of the classic James Dean film *Rebel Without Any Claws*. Besides, everyone knows that bears prefer Furraris to Bearcedes.

WASHINGTON

Talk about having bats in your belfry! Imagine buying your dream house, only to discover that it's already occupied by bats. And not just one or two, but thousands of them, accompanied by the vast amounts of guano they produce, according to fox13seattle.com. Guano — the "accumulated excrement of seabirds or bats" — makes great fertilizer; you can buy bags of it at most retail outlets. Despite its usefulness, however, guano was not what Tom Riecken



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

and Mackenzie Powell had hoped to find when they bought their Whidbey Island home. "It was December of last year and instead of wrapping Christmas presents, we were unwrapping our walls, and instead of glitter and sugar plum fairies, it was bat poop," Riecken said. Solving a problem this complex is guano be expensive — various roofers, restoration companies and "bat exclusionists" wanted up to \$200,000 for the job — so the homeowners took matters into their own hands, literally, and tore down the walls and drywall themselves. The couple's son, who was just 6 months old when they bought the house, is now almost 2. Guess

what one of his first words was? No, not "shit"; it was "bat."

NEVADA

Multiple coyotes have commandeered a wall along a flood wash and made a den inside it, coming and going through holes and using the Las Vegas Valley neighborhood as their personal hunting grounds, fox5vegas.com reported. Residents are not pleased, with some complaining that small pets have gone missing. "They" — the coyotes, not the residents — "have no fear. They'll come out, they'll stand 10 yards away while I'm working out here. I'll throw rocks at them; they come closer," Doug Swift said. The wall,

he said, is a "perfect den for them," because it's well protected in the wash, "which is a 'superhighway' through the whole city." A county spokesman said that the wall is on private property, so the property owners or homeowners association are responsible for fixing the holes, but the HOA said the outer wall — there appear to be two, a few feet apart — is county property, according to the county assessor's website. Residents asked the Nevada Department of Wildlife to relocate the coyotes, but that's never an option unless someone gets attacked — and in that case, the coyote gets euthanized, according to the agency. So, what's the next step toward a solution? Where's the Warner Bros. Road Runner when you need him? Maybe volunteers dressed as apex predators could patrol the neighborhood. California's Insurance Fraud Division might even have some slightly used bear costumes for sale. ...

OREGON

Gary Kristensen of Happy Valley, Oregon, holds the Guinness World Record for "longest journey by pumpkin boat (paddling)," *The Columbian* reported. Kristensen, who grew the giant pumpkin himself, launched his vegetable vessel at the Hamilton Island Boat Ramp on the Washington side of the Columbia River near Bonneville Dam. Paddling a nearly thousand-pound hollowed-out pumpkin in 35 mph winds proved a challenge, especially after the wires for the lighting on his support boat caught fire, leaving Kristensen in near-darkness. Still, the paddling pumpkineer persevered, completing the 46-mile journey in 34 hours and 35 minutes, at an average 1 mile per hour. It's a feat well worth celebrating with a rousing chorus: *For he's a jolly gourd fellow, which nobody can deny!* ✨

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#IAM THE WEST

RENEE HAWLEY (SHE/HER/REZBIAN)
AANIHH NATION (GROS VENTRE)
Grass dancer, Mr. Montana Two-Spirit
Hays, Montana, Fort Belknap Reservation

In 2025, during the 61st annual Milk River Indian Days, I'm going to be the women's head flag bearer — and to me, that is major, because in my 57 years, I've never seen a woman in men's regalia in charge of a big powwow like that. I started to grass dance when I was just a little girl. My parents even made me a couple of outfits. And then puberty set in, and my breasts started showing, so adults said, "You don't belong here. What are you doing?" I would get bullied by other kids. So, at age 12, I couldn't do it anymore. Instead of feeling like I belonged in the circle, I felt ostracized — I felt anxiety, I felt fear, I felt shame. It's just recently I went back to the circle in full grass dance regalia.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
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