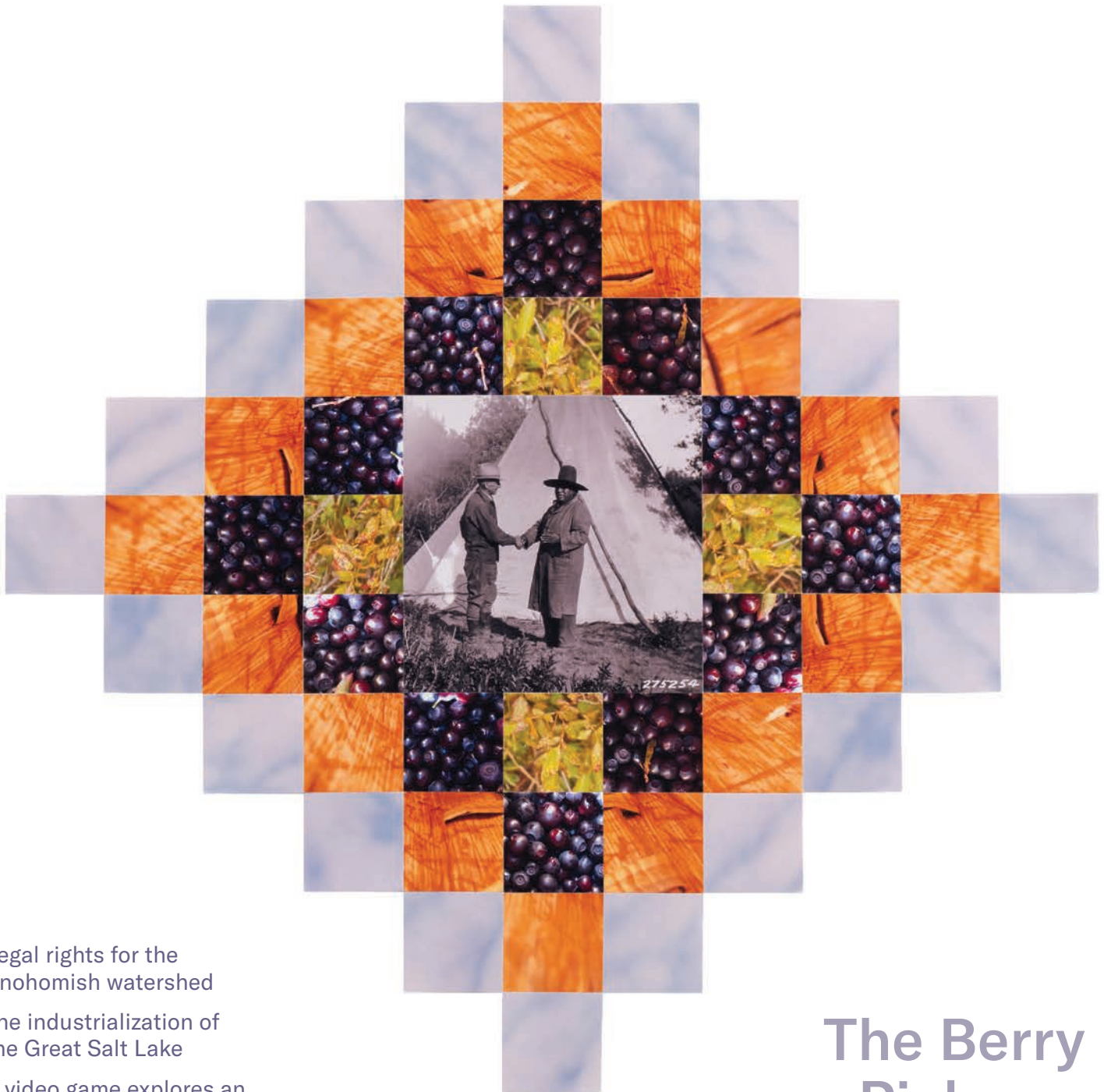


# High Country News



Legal rights for the  
Snohomish watershed

The industrialization of  
the Great Salt Lake

A video game explores an  
alternate Los Angeles

## The Berry Pickers

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Still frame from *The Alluvials*, a speculative fiction video game and film about a future LA.

**Courtesy of Alice Bucknell**

# Know the West.

**High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization** that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See [hcn.org](http://hcn.org) for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$45 a year, \$47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, [hcn.org](http://hcn.org). For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or [editor@hcn.org](mailto:editor@hcn.org), or call 970-527-4898. For correspondence addressed to High Country News, HCN or to the editors, permission to publish will be considered implicit unless specifically stated otherwise.



## Love fiercely

**LATELY, IT FEELS** as if it's getting harder to find joy. We wake each day to the news of sweeping cuts to government programs that serve anyone other than the rich and powerful while our communities are torn apart by disdain, hate and the threat of harassment and deportation and our environment suffers as already insufficient laws and programs are thrown wholesale on the bonfire of the vanities. Yet finding joy is still possible and, I would argue, essential.

We cannot let the hate eat away at our hearts. We cannot let it consume us. We must protect that part of us that loves fiercely from the part that aches at the tidal wave of injustice sweeping outward from the nation's capital.

This issue's two feature stories are all too emblematic of the world in which they are being published. In one, private interests are profiting from a quasi-governmental body that is pushing development around the very endangered ecosystem of the Great Salt Lake — with limited accountability. And in the Pacific Northwest, the ever-shrinking habitat for huckleberries, a Native food resource that has been cherished and relied upon for millennia, is managed not by those who hold treaty rights to those berries but by a poorly funded and misguided federal agency that has welcomed commercial interests to pick in the dwindling fields.

If you're reading this magazine, you probably care deeply about your community and about the land and about justice for all people and creatures. Most of those who go into civil service do so because they care about communities, too. What we are seeing from this presidency, though, is the opposite of caring. It is vengeful, spiteful, shameful, callous, reckless and uninformed. We are in the midst of a constitutional crisis, and caring deeply is more necessary than ever. To stop caring is to give in and give up.

It is good to feel outrage, to see something happening and know in your gut that it is wrong. How many people have already died because of the politicization of science? How many more will suffer? How many more ecosystems will be ravaged? Yet the experience of picking a just-ripe berry — the way it separates from the stem with a gentle tug, the licking of berry juice from one's fingers after feasting — well, that's joy. Walking on the beach after the winter rains finally arrive and seeing the pink sunset reflected in the tidepools is joy. In the midst of this constitutional crisis, find one joyful thing each day, and let it calm your nerves and soothe your aching heart.

**Jennifer Sahn**, editor-in-chief



Christina House / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

### EPA workers stand firm despite Trump chaos

'They'll have to drag me out before I go.'

By Shi En Kim



Josh Edelson / AFP via Getty Images

### Urban wildfires shouldn't surprise us

Southern California is jolted into a new reality.

By Ruxandra Guidi



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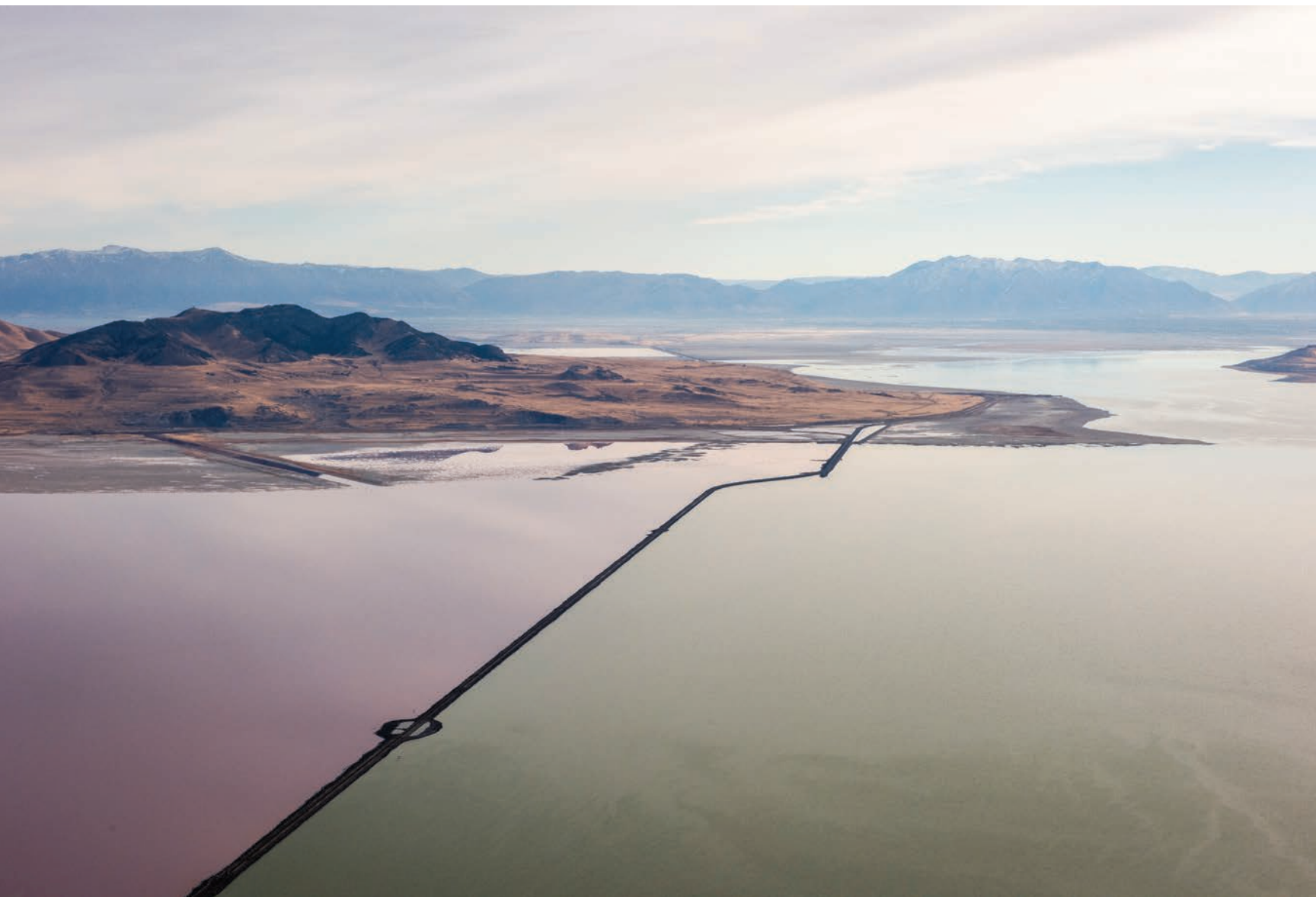
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*A Handshake Basket*,  
2025. Archival pigment  
print photo collage,  
14 x 14 inches. Images  
used: Elaine Harvey,  
Epiphany Couch,  
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National Forest Archive.

**Epiphany Couch /  
HCN**

The Union Pacific Railroad Causeway,  
seen here looking eastward toward  
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**Russel Albert Daniels / 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](mailto:editor@hcn.org).**

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### SAVING LANDSCAPES AND LIVES

Brilliant. A must read. Thank you. ("A Fight We Can Win," February 2025.)

**Cooper Hamilton**  
**Via Bluesky**

### DEFINE YOUR TERMS

I always learn from Jonathan Thompson's work in *HCN*. But in his recent "The climate fight endures," (February 2025), I must call out one half-sentence about Idaho that rankles: "much of its power comes from relatively clean hydroelectric dams."

Idaho Power Company, Idaho's largest electric utility, owns a system of dams that generate non-carbon power. But they and their electricity are not "clean." The notion that these dams are relatively clean pits the deep, many-layered damage they do to Shoshone-Paiute, Shoshone-Bannock and other tribal people, against their non-carbon generation.

Tribal people seasonally relied on salmon returning to the mid-Snake River and its tributaries. Idaho Power's dams eradicated them without tribal permission or consultation. This is not just a regrettable wrong from the past; it recurs every year when no salmon

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*"If we're going to kill trees that are in fact CO2 sinks, can we at least be sensible about it?"*

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return. This is why the Upper Snake River Tribes are working hard against daunting odds to somehow get salmon back.

When I was active in energy advocacy 20 or more years ago, we argued for a proper definition of "clean," in public use and in regulation, as non-carbon, non-destructive of salmon and non-damaging to poor and First People. That still seems right to me, in fact, in law and morality. There is some hydroelectricity in the Northwest that deserves the word "clean." But not much.

**Pat Ford**  
**Boise, Idaho**

### ONWARD

Great rundown of how states and cities in the U.S. West are fighting the climate crisis, despite Trump ("The climate fight endures," February 2025).

**Nick Engelfried**  
**Via Bluesky**

### NECESSARY BURNING

Thanks for Kylie Mohr's great read ("Lit up," February 2025). You paint a great picture of a new burner! I always see things from the truck window wondering how it can burn or thinking about what areas really need it. It will also spoil your hikes as well.

**Kyle Lapham**  
**Washington Department of Natural Resources, Certified Prescribed Burn Manager Course**  
**Spokane, Washington**

### ONE FINE FIRE REPORTER

Great synthesized article on wildfire smoke ("What we learned about wildfire smoke in 2024," Dec. 27, 2024). Kylie Mohr has done her research and inspired me to resubscribe to *HCN*.

**Randi Jandt**  
**Alaska Fire Science Consortium**  
**Fairbanks, Alaska**

### PACIFIC BRANT'S PERILS

As another possible threat, you could have also mentioned the planned road through Alaska's Izembek National Wildlife Refuge ("Get to know the Pacific brant," December 2024).

**Karen Sjogren**  
**Salem, Oregon**

### DON'T WASTE THAT WOOD!

I was shocked to see the caption for the photo of dead trees that were cut down to reduce wildfire risk ("Consider the source," October 2024). While I get the

theory behind the practice, I can't begin to imagine why the wood would be burned in place when there are likely plenty of homes with wood-burning stoves in the area that would love to have that wood. Doesn't the Forest Service understand that all that wood will add the same carbon dioxide to the air as the wood that homeowners will burn anyway? What a waste! If we're going to kill trees that are in fact CO2 sinks, can we at least be sensible about it?

**Julie Smith**  
**Breckenridge, Colorado**

### INCHES AND ACRE-FEET

Reading "Sponge cities" (September 2024), it struck me that one reason why illiteracy about water use and conservation is so widespread in this country is the variety of units that appear. Inches of rain result in millions of acre-feet of runoff; even a single roof can contribute many gallons. The only unit missing in the article is that uniquely American unit, the Olympic swimming pool!

I'm a retired international water engineer, and even I find it hard. In Utah, where I now live, very few people would be able to tell you how much water would be used if they turned on their sprinklers. Even fewer would be able to say what that would cost them, at the summer rate of dollars per 100 cubic feet.

Of course, using the metric system would make everything far easier, but so far the U.S. stands staunchly with Liberia and Myanmar in resisting this change. What should be done to make the situation more easily comprehensible, so that public support can be built for the significant changes that climate change is forcing upon us?

**Richard Middleton**  
**Salt Lake City, Utah**

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REPORTAGE

# Utah's coal mines can't find enough workers

A mine reopened, but no one seems to want these jobs.

BY BROOKE LARSEN  
PHOTOS BY LUNA ANNA ARCHY

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**IN SEPTEMBER, A COAL MINE** reopened in Utah's Coal Country. But the mine's owner, Wolverine Fuels, can't find enough people to fill the estimated 350 jobs needed to staff it.

"The workforce is just not out there," said Carson Pollastro, Wolverine's chief executive officer, during a panel at Utah State University Eastern in Carbon County last September.

Pollastro and panel moderator Brian Somers, president of the Utah Mining Association, attributed the industry's challenges to federal regulations, including the Bureau of Land Management's leasing processes and Environmental Protection Agency rules.

This is a common explanation for the industry's struggles in Utah: Federal regulations and Democratic policies. "I don't want to see coal go away, and my deep feeling down inside is that it all depends on who we have for administrations in Washington," Lynn Sitterud, until recently an Emery County commissioner, told *High Country News*.

The reality on the ground is more complicated. In Emery County, for example, Wolverine's Fossil Rock Mine reopened in September — but the local workforce doesn't seem that eager to go underground.

Since the late 1800s, coal has been central to Carbon and Emery counties' economy and culture. Most locals, if they're not active or retired miners themselves, have a relative or ancestor who worked in the mines. Sculptures of heroic miners rise in the center of most of the towns. "This whole area was raised on coal mining," said Jared Simms, a fourth-generation miner who has worked underground for 18 years.

But the industry has changed a lot in re-

cent years. By 2020, Carbon County had no active coal mines, and only four, including Fossil Rock, continue to operate in Emery, just south of Carbon County. Carbon and Emery are often described as Utah's Coal Country, though other counties are also home to a couple of mines. Coal jobs in Utah fell by half from the early 1980s to the 1990s. Some mines shuttered, while those that survived needed fewer workers as technology advanced. In 1981, one miner produced close to two tons per hour; by 1997, that amount exceeded seven tons. Mines continued to churn out more and more coal using fewer and fewer people, until production began declining in the early 2000s as natural gas and renewable energy became cheaper.

"We're all a dying breed," said Simms, who works at Skyline, another Wolverine-owned mine.

Simms has seen a lot of mines close over the years. And all the easy-to-mine coal seams are gone, he said. The Utah Geological Survey, in a 2016 report, said, "Utah coal mines face steady reserve depletion and difficult mining conditions."

More mines will likely shutter when PacifiCorp, a utility company, retires Hunter and Huntington, the region's major coal-fired power plants. But the phase-out date keeps changing: Last year, PacifiCorp set Huntington's retirement at 2036 and Hunter's at 2042, but the company's draft 2025 Integrated Resource Plan lists no end date for either plant over the next two decades. Some companies, including Wolverine, export to Japan, but that will become harder when a ban on shipping coal out of Richmond, California,

Exterior infrastructure of Gentry Mountain Mine in Emery County, Utah.

in San Francisco Bay, goes into effect Jan. 1, 2027. Carbon and Emery county leaders are exploring processing carbon fiber from coal. But that prospect is uncertain: Carbon fiber is typically produced using synthetic resins, and it's unclear whether it could ever replace power plants' coal demand.

There's a more fundamental challenge, though: It's much harder now to convince young people to go underground. The local economy is diversifying. Mining still generally pays the highest wages in the region — Wolverine Fuels hires entry-level miners at \$26 per hour — but according to data from Headwaters Economics, earnings in the industry peaked in the early 1980s and have steadily declined since.

"You can get that (pay) a lot of places, and you don't have to go like a mouse under the little Earth and worry about stuff falling on your head," said Mike Dalpiaz, leader of the United Mine Workers of America's Western U.S. district, which is headquartered in Carbon County.

In 2015, Price, the area's largest city at around 8,300 people, erected a memorial to miners who have died in Carbon County from mining accidents, explosions or cave-ins, or slower deaths from black lung disease. Nearly 1,400 bronze-lettered names cover the black plaques.

George Deeter, Simms' brother-in-law, worked underground briefly but left after the "old-time miners" warned him, "It



wasn't if you would be injured on the job, it's just when and how bad."

**ACCORDING TO THE NATIONAL** Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, coal-mining injuries have steadily declined since the 1980s; fatal disasters have also declined significantly since the early 20th century. Problems persist, though: The Mine Safety and Health Administration found 23 violations at Gentry Mine, owned by Gentry Mountain Mining, near the Huntington plant last year, including dangerous accumulations of combustible materials and electrocution hazards.

Some miners insist the industry is safe, though, and some young people hope it survives. "I think there's a bright future in it," said Dillion Grimmer, a 31-year-old miner who works at Gentry.

Grimmer's family has mined coal in the region for 150 years, ever since his ancestors emigrated from Italy seeking economic opportunity. "The coal mines are full of dreamers," he said.

Going underground wasn't always his dream, though. "I just had my heart set on never mining coal," he told *High Country News*. He received college scholarships but ultimately left to work in oil and gas. But that had its downsides, too.

"Just travel, travel, travel," he said, "Always working. Never got to see your family."

When older relatives died and Grimmer realized he'd missed his last chance to celebrate holidays with them, he decided to

return home and become a miner. Now he works a 10-minute drive from home. "That's why I like the coal mines," he said. "If you want to see your family, you can see your family." He's "obsessed," he said, with mining's competitive aspects.

Industry leaders hope more young people will be like Grimmer. "It's much more exciting to go and be able to operate an autonomous haul truck, for example, in a mining operation than it is to be tinkering around in a cubicle somewhere in Lehi," Brian Somers, president of the Utah Mining Association, said on the university panel. (Lehi, a fast-growing suburb south of Salt Lake City, is the epicenter of the region the state has dubbed "Silicon Slopes," hoping to attract tech companies.)

Utah State University Eastern in Price still has mining education courses. "When students come into my office looking for the location of the mining program, I don't say, 'That's a bad idea,'" Doug Miller, campus senior associate vice president, told *High Country News*.

But Miller acknowledged that mining may not be a lifetime career for young people. "They're going to come in and work at a mine that the long-term viability is simply not going to resonate the same way that it does for those folks that have been working in a mine for 25 years."

Longtime miner Simms estimates that 70% of his co-workers at the Skyline Mine are "blue hats" — miners with less than a

year's experience. His young crew members, he said, still expect to work in the mines 10 years from now.

"I hate to tell you this," Simms tells them, "but I'm 49 years old, almost 50, and I don't think I'm going to be able to retire a coal miner."

**SIMMS THINKS HE'LL QUIT** mining this year. He's paid off his house and sees other work options; Intermountain Electronics, a major manufacturing business in Carbon County, for example, which started out building equipment for the coal industry, now manufactures equipment for renewables, oil and gas, data centers and more.

Simms is also worn out, in need of knee and shoulder replacements. Recently, he took six weeks off to get injections in his knees so he'd be able to keep walking his usual 12 to 16 miles per shift. Simms, a fire boss, inspects things like conveyor belt lines and haulage equipment and records whether mining operations are safe. Wolverine paid him short-term disability, but only 60% of his usual salary, though just a few years ago, he said, its short-term disability offered full pay. "(The benefits) are nothing like they used to be," he said.

Previously, he belonged to the United Mine Workers of America. In union mines, Simms said, health care was fully covered, and pensions were guaranteed. Non-union mines like Skyline used to compete with union mines for workers, but all of Utah's union mines have shuttered. "Now there's no competition," Simms said, "so they can drop (disability insurance) down to 60% and no one cares."

Some former union mines may eventually reopen, but it will be with new names, new owners and no union contracts. Mijin Cha, a just-transition researcher at the University of California, Santa Cruz, said that this was common in the U.S. Wolverine's Fossil Rock Mine — previously a union mine operated by PacifiCorp's Energy West Mining Company — closed in 2001, and Fossil Rock Resources, a subsidiary of Wolverine, acquired it in 2015. When it reopened this year, its workforce was no longer unionized.

Even though Utah no longer has any union mines, the UMWA for the Western region is still headquartered in Carbon County, where a vibrant labor movement once existed.

"My phone rings off the hook," said Dalpiaz, who mined throughout the 1970s be-



fore he began working for the union. Companies call him to find workers, and miners call when employers cut vacation or pay or change medical plans. But Dalpiaz cannot help them without a union contract.

The UMWA began organizing miners here in the early 1900s, but companies refused to recognize the union until Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act in 1935. Miners faced harsh working conditions, from racism and wage theft to safety and health issues. Once they had a union, however, they could bargain for stronger safety standards, better pay and health insurance and pensions. Non-union mines had to improve working conditions to compete, and mining became a well-paying job that could support a family.

“We set the standard of living for the entire United States of America and the world,” Dalpiaz told *High Country News*.

Twenty-five years ago, Dalpiaz saw the coal industry going down a “slippery slope,” as mines closed and the unions eroded.

Then politics began to shift. “When I was growing up, you could not get a Republican elected in this entire area,” Simms said. “If somebody threw a Democrat color on their sign, guess what? They won the election. Now it’s just the opposite.”

In 1960, 67% of Carbon County voted Democratic — the highest percentage of any county in Utah. But once Democratic leaders began regulating coal emissions to mitigate climate change, miners came to regard the party as anti-coal and a threat to their livelihood. By 2008, voters had flipped, and in 2012 the county went 67% for Mitt Romney. While Romney has Utah ties, the rightward shift has continued, with 71% of the county voting for Donald Trump in 2024.

Meanwhile, Wolverine and other mines continue to host job fairs and advertise on Facebook seeking miners.

And Simms is adamant that his own children won’t go into the mines. “There’s not a future,” he said. His family’s mining legacy ends with him. ☀

*Brooke Larsen is a correspondent for High Country News and a freelance journalist writing from Salt Lake City, Utah.*

*Reporting for this project was supported by the MIT Environmental Solutions Initiative Journalism Fellowship.*



*“Coal mines are full of dreamers.”*

Dillion Grimm, a coal miner who works at Gentry Mountain Mine in Emery County, Utah, sits in the mine’s main office entryway (above). The shift board at Gentry Mine (facing).

# ‘Rights of nature’ laws take root in the West

Thanks to voters in Everett, Washington, the Snohomish River watershed now has legal standing.

BY ANNA V. SMITH



**LAST FALL, EVERETT,** Washington, became the first city in the Western United States to pass a ballot measure recognizing the rights of a river’s watershed — that of the Snohomish River, which curves north and east around the city before emptying into Puget Sound. The municipal law protects the river’s “rights to exist, regenerate and flourish” and is designed to be a tool for residents seeking to prevent or repair harm to the river’s watershed.

“These ecosystems have inherent rights. We are just acknowledging them by giving them legal standing in a court of law,” said Abi Ludwig, co-founder of Standing for Washington, a political action committee that supported the initiative.

The law is the latest attempt in two decades of concerted efforts at the tribal, city and international level to codify a different legal relationship between people and their environment — one in which water, wildlife and land are not just resources to be used and abused by humans. In the U.S., several similar “rights of nature” laws have failed legal challenges, and Everett’s law could meet the same fate: In late January, a group of local developers and business owners filed suit against it. But according to Ludwig, the campaign learned from past experience, and the new ordinance is designed to survive. “Even though it’s this emergent strategy,” she added, “I think people are ready to embrace something new, and to try something new.”

In our current legal system, in order

to sue over harm to a river or a species, a plaintiff must prove that they have “standing” — that they’ve been personally injured by the decline of that river or species. Rights of nature laws eliminate this requirement by giving legal standing to nonhuman entities. The strategy is relatively new, but the concept of reciprocity between ecosystems and human beings is much older and found in Indigenous knowledge, said Britt Gondolfi, rights of nature project coordinator with the nonprofit network Bioneers and a descendant of the Houma Nation.

In the U.S., tribal nations including the Yurok Tribe and White Earth Nation have used their sovereignty to adopt resolutions or amend their constitutions to enact rights of nature laws. In 2021, two town councils in Colorado passed non-binding resolutions recognizing the rights of local rivers. Other initiatives have met with more pushback; a ballot measure passed in Toledo, Ohio, that recognized the legal rights of Lake Erie was struck down in 2020 by a federal court, and in 2024, the Utah Legislature preemptively banned similar laws after author Terry Tempest Williams made a public case for the legal personhood of the Great Salt Lake.

In Everett, organizers deliberately restricted the law’s reach to city limits, since the potential for conflicts of jurisdiction doomed Toledo’s attempt to protect Lake Erie. The Snohomish River has long suffered from industrial pollution and agricultural runoff,

and Everett residents’ interest in restoring the watershed helped the measure pass with 57% of the vote.

The Tulalip Tribes, whose reservation is just north of Everett, did not endorse the initiative, but Tribal Chairwoman Teri Gobin said in a statement that the tribe looks forward to seeing it translated into action: “We see value in using all tools available in the pursuit of sustainability and co-existence for the people, plants, animals, lands, and waters of our world.”

Under the new law, any Everett resident can bring a case, and any money from successful lawsuits will fund the city’s watershed restoration efforts. “We now think of it as a community stewardship model,” Ludwig said. Despite the opposition, “we have to try,” Gondolfi said. “We have to try every legal argument available to us for the preservation of what little natural world is left, in comparison to what we’ve destroyed.” ☀

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

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

The Snohomish River’s estuary, near Everett, Washington. **Wolfgang Kaehler / Alamy**

# Tailpipe dreams

A low-carbon diesel plant promises to reduce greenhouse gases, but is it a solution?

BY AMAL AHMED | PHOTOS BY KRISTINA BARKER

**IN THE RAINY MONTHS,** when Tracy Prescott-MacGregor stomps on the ground in her produce garden, you can hear the water, just inches below the soil, slosh and ripple. “The water table is so high that if you dig about six inches, you’ll hit water,” she said. That’s what makes the soils here, on the Columbia River’s floodplain, so rich and productive.

Prescott-MacGregor and her husband retired to their farm in Clatskanie, Oregon, about an hour northwest of Portland, almost two decades ago. They

raise goats and grow enough food to be nearly self-sufficient. “It’s really just a farmer’s dream come true,” she said.

This stretch of the river is also crucial habitat for migrating salmon, which hold great significance for tribal nations. But now, local advocates worry that all this could be lost when a Houston-based renewable diesel company moves in. Next Renewable Fuels has proposed building a plant at Port Westward, a small industrial park with deep-water access on the Columbia River, just a

stone’s throw from Prescott-MacGregor’s farm. By 2028, Next could produce more than 1.5 million gallons a day of what it calls low-carbon fuel for jets and diesel trucks, using waste products like animal fat and used cooking oils.

The plant is part of a renewable fuel boom, with producers promising to replace fossil fuels in difficult-to-decarbonize transportation sectors, like air travel and trucking. There are 37 sustainable aviation fuel projects under development

across the United States, many supported by the Biden administration’s Inflation Reduction Act and other federal subsidies. In 2023, the U.S. produced 2.5 billion gallons of renewable diesel, a 70% increase from 2022. Subsidies for crop-based biofuels typically enjoy bipartisan support, said Corey Stewart, a researcher at the clean energy think-tank RMI (formerly Rocky Mountain Institute), though the Trump administration’s stance on the industry is uncertain.

Renewable diesel and petroleum-based fuels are nearly identical chemically, so switching them is relatively simple. “Renewable diesel on the market gives companies an option to reduce carbon emissions without electrifying the fleet all at once,” Stewart said. “We can’t really wait for (technologies like) airplane electrification and hydrogen to come online in the mid-2040s.”

Next estimates that its \$3 billion facility would bring 240



Scott MacGregor and Tracy Prescott-MacGregor pick carrots at their Oregon farm (left). A view through a nearby barn looking toward Port Westward (above).

jobs to Columbia County, plus \$45 million in state and local tax revenues annually. Labor unions along with the county, port and school district all support the project. “We feel good about the state’s (environmental) oversight,” said Sean Clark, executive director of the Port of Columbia County, which oversees Port Westward. “And having a good tenant that wants to have a green footprint as much as possible.”

**IN ADDITION TO THEIR** concerns about local ecosystems, however, critics of the project say that the hype around biofuels amounts to little more than greenwashing once the carbon costs are fully accounted for. The industry has a mixed track

*“Every single  
Columbia  
Basin fish will  
have to swim  
by that site.”*

Port Westward on the  
Columbia River in Oregon.

record: Used cooking oil alone cannot satisfy the demand for ingredients, and if producers turn to corn and soybeans, that drastically escalates the resulting fuel’s carbon intensity.

A 2024 report from the Environmental Integrity Project, a watchdog nonprofit, shows that biofuel plants emit particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, formaldehyde and other carcinogens, and often rely on fossil fuels to power the refining process. “These companies have made big claims about their environmental benefits, and I think they’re just that: claims,” said Kira Dunham, the report’s lead author. For example, the company behind one proposed renewable diesel facility in

Louisiana, which planned to turn wood into sustainable aviation fuel, based its emissions models on an hourlong test of a single gram of wood, the report found. “There are other places we can invest federal funds to reduce emissions,” Dunham said.

Next bills itself as a clean fuel producer, but its refining process could produce up to 1 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions annually, according to its permit applications — about the same as burning 98 million gallons of petroleum diesel. “It’s really just the antithesis of the sort of climate progress that our state is working towards,” said Audrey Leonard, a staff attorney at Columbia Riverkeeper, an environmental nonprofit that is challenging



Next's permits in court.

Next's facility is one of a handful of heavy industry proposals on the Columbia River in recent years, from oil transportation through pipelines and railcars to natural gas power plants. It's particularly worrisome that the plant would be in the Cascadia Subduction Zone, said Theodora Tsongas, an environmental health scientist and volunteer with Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility. Scientists expect that sometime in the coming decades, an earthquake strong enough to liquify soil will hit the area, making a massive fuel spill inevitable.

And a project this size could impact almost every fish up and down the Columbia River, undoing decades of work that tribes have undertaken to restore salmon populations, said Jeremy FiveCrows, a member of the Nez Perce Tribe and the communications director for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, or CRITFC. The commission, which works to maintain the health of the region's salmon, is composed of the Nez Perce Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon and the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation. Collectively, they co-manage fisheries along the river. "The system is so interconnected that even if something is theoretically acceptable at one location, it's a pinch point," FiveCrows said. "Every single Columbia Basin fish will have to swim by that site."

To build the facility, Next would fill in just over 100 acres of sensitive wetlands and pave 76 acres in flood-prone sloughs. It would be the state's largest authorized loss of wetlands in 10 years, according to a 2021

Army Corps of Engineers memo. Oregon regulations require rebuilding destroyed wetlands, but that in itself will alter the landscape drastically, said Elijah Cetas, an attorney and energy policy specialist with CRITFC. "The idea that you can just mitigate by taking one acre here and putting it elsewhere doesn't take into consideration the comprehensive context of the river that salmon need throughout their lifecycle."

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality has approved Next's air and water quality permits, while the state's land use board has approved a rail line that would connect the plant to fossil fuel storage hubs in other parts of the state. (Next and the DEQ did not respond to requests for comment.) The plant still needs a few more state and federal permits, as well as the Army Corps' environmental impact statement. That could offer opponents more opportunities to challenge the project.

Today, the industrial park at Port Westward is mostly a minor nuisance for its neighbors. Sometimes, odd rotten-egg smells emanate from an existing ethanol plant's flare stacks, and the sound of train horns reverberates through the otherwise tranquil, forested hills. When a large ship passes Clatskanie, Prescott-MacGregor can feel her house shake as the water underneath the soil undulates. "These farmlands are all connected by the waterways — that's what makes it so wonderful," she said. "What gets into any of the waterways will get into the food. There's no way around that." ❀

*Amal Ahmed is a freelance journalist based in southwest Washington. She's previously covered environmental and climate policy from Texas.*

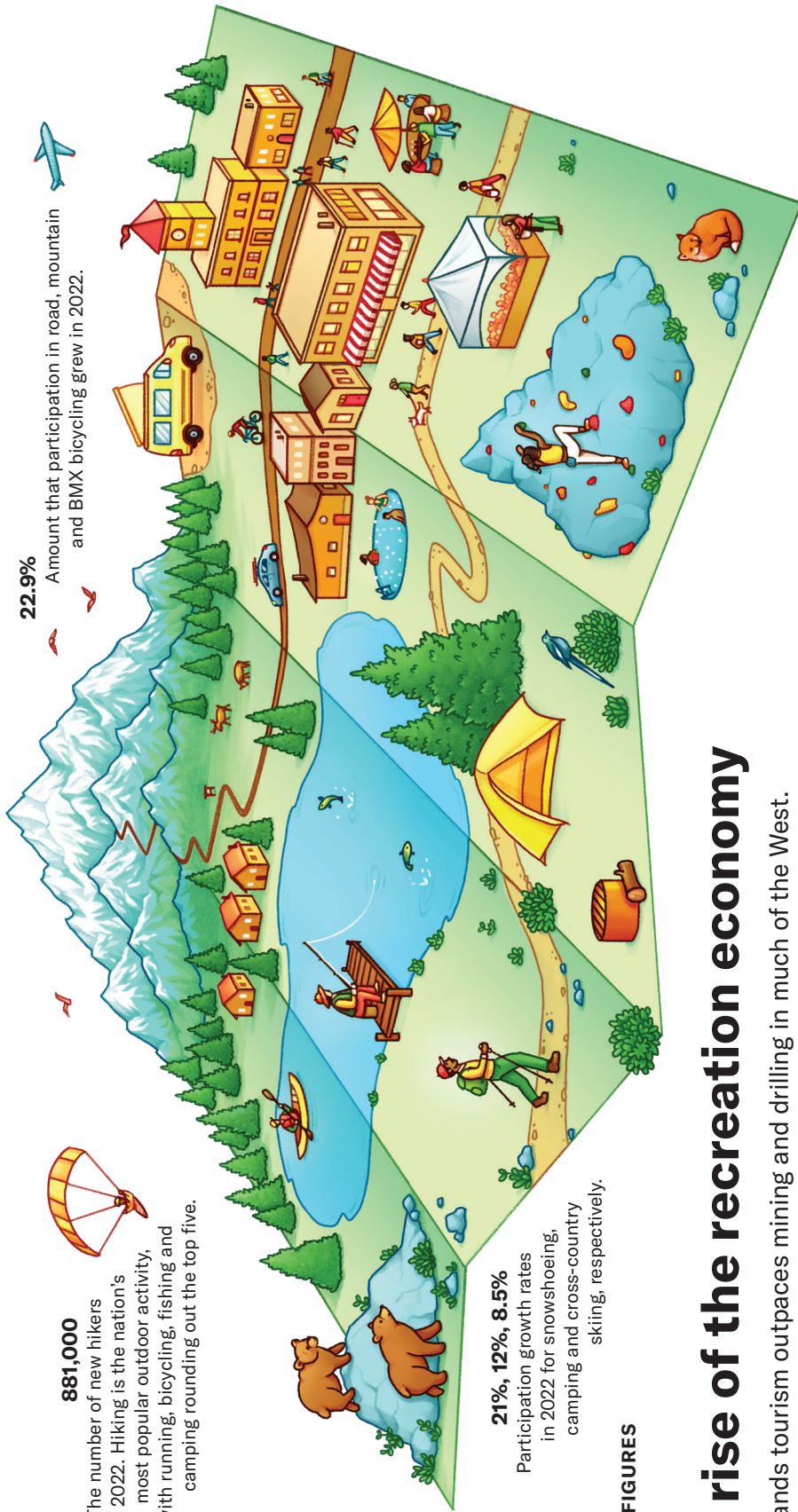
## POEM

### Sunday Morning in Woh Hei Yuen 和喜园

By Jenny Qi

Beneath the stone arch, graying women dance  
in unison—they sway their hips, step right, flutter  
arms outward like butterfly wings, hands cupped  
skyward as if to receive a benediction. The woman  
in the center—the tall one—wears a red sweater,  
white cropped pants, butter yellow visor tied  
with a ribbon over short permed curls. Above her,  
carved in stone: 和喜园—*peace joy garden*.  
For a moment, I am winded. Back turned, she looks—  
they look—like an idea I once had of my mother.  
She wears something like this in a photo from long ago,  
in another city by another sea that wouldn't be  
home. In the photo, she is younger than me, still  
new to this country—I am nowhere, stardust yet  
to settle. In the photo, she sits on a pier, right leg crossed  
over the other—she smiles wide, left  
of the camera, eyes crinkled behind plastic sunglasses.  
In the photo, her world is cracked open  
like an oyster shell—this woman might one day live  
by the sea, slurp an oyster's sweet brine,  
watch the sun rise over ocean waves like a golden  
pearl, watch her child grow up, grow old.  
In the photo, the future lives next to the modal verb  
*might*. In the future, imagination exists  
in the perfect tense—I imagine she will have lived  
in peace and joy. In a perfect future, I imagine  
her present, continuous, picking ripe loquats  
in a garden, dancing beneath a stone arch.

**WEB EXTRA** Listen to Jenny Qi read her poem  
at [hcn.org/woh-hei](https://hcn.org/woh-hei)



881,000

The number of new hikers in 2022. Hiking is the nation's most popular outdoor activity, with running, bicycling, fishing and camping rounding out the top five.

22.9%

Amount that participation in road, mountain and BMX bicycling grew in 2022.

21%, 12%, 8.5%

Participation growth rates in 2022 for snowshoeing, camping and cross-country skiing, respectively.

#### FACTS & FIGURES

## The rise of the recreation economy

Public-lands tourism outpaces mining and drilling in much of the West.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON | DATA VISUALIZATION BY HANNAH AGOSTA & MARISSA GARCIA

**IN THE MONTHS** before the Navajo Generating Station closed, many observers prognosticated economic doom for nearby Page, Arizona, population 7,500 or so. The plant employed 463 full-time, high-wage workers, contributed about \$51 million a year to Page's economy and paid the school district some \$2.7 million in property taxes.

In December 2019, the plant burned its last coal and shut down, threatening to erase Page as quickly as the town had been

founded to house Glen Canyon Dam's builders in the 1950s. Some people left to find new jobs, and school enrollment declined. The population dipped slightly for a while, and per capita income fell.

Yet Page is not only still economically viable; by some measures, it is thriving. Overall, sales tax collection has remained steady, and in some sectors has increased. Employment rebounded post-COVID, new restaurants and hotels opened, and median home prices are nearly twice what they were in 2018. A modular home manufacturer sprouted on the old power plant site, and a \$700 million resort is planned for Navajo

Nation lands just outside town.

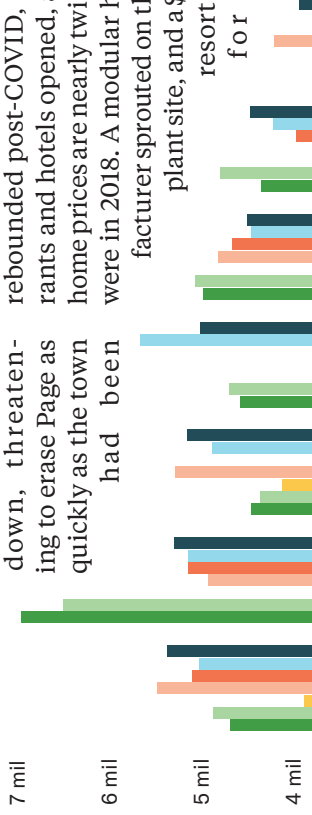
Page's survival can be credited partly to its location near spectacular public lands, national monuments, parks and Lake Powell and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. Like many gateway communities, Page has managed to leverage its natural amenities to buoy its economy, even when the old extractive industries dried up and scurried away.

In 2024, more than 4.6 million people visited Glen Canyon, for example, spending an estimated \$540 million locally. Together, the National Park Service and Aramark, the recreation area's main concessionaire, employed some 1,300 people — about 17% of the population. The city-owned

parking lot at Horseshoe Bend in Glen Canyon generated nearly \$20.5 million since it opened in 2019, clocking more than 770,000 visitors last year.

Amenities economies don't offer the same perks as extractive industries — many jobs are seasonal and relatively low-paying, without pensions, unions or other benefits, and they can spawn housing shortages, overcrowding and gentrification. Nevertheless, they're a force to be reckoned with, as places like Moab, Bend, Durango, Sedona, Springdale and Jackson demonstrate. ✨

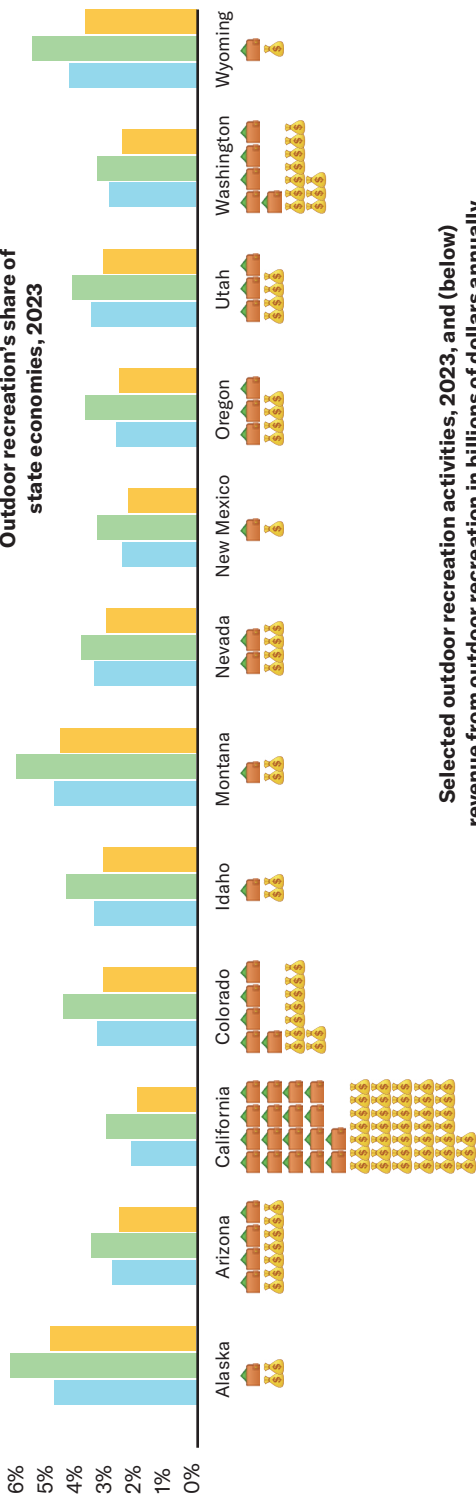
SOURCES: National Park Service, City of Page, Page Unified School District, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Headwaters Economics, Outdoor Industry Association.



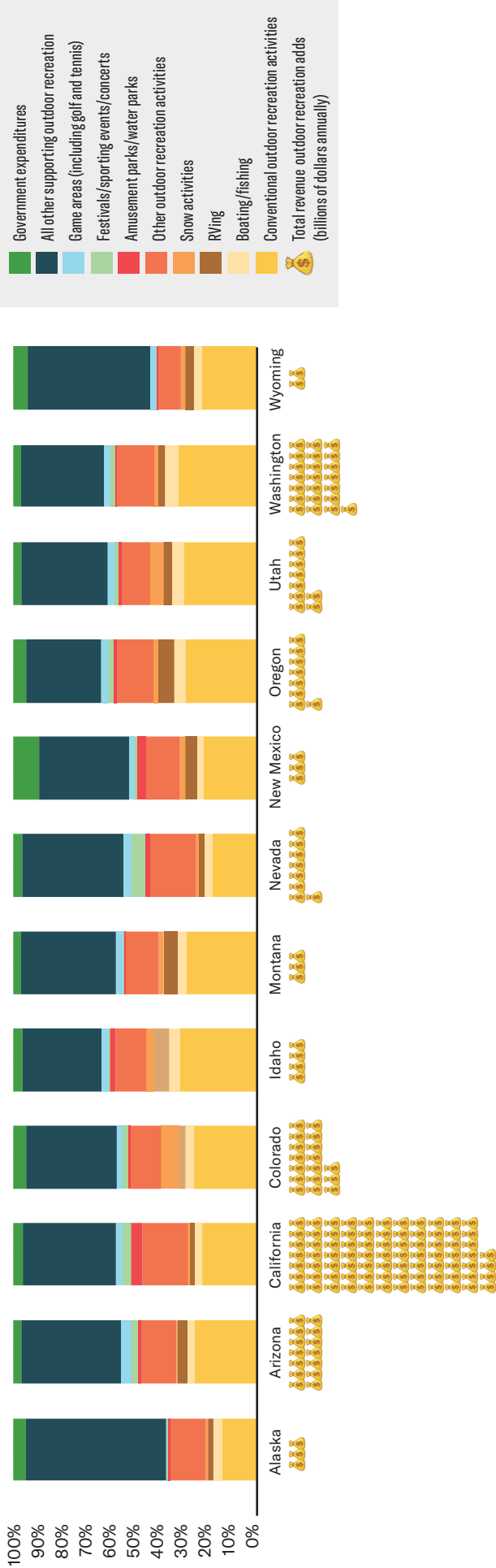
NPS park visitation (top) and annual visitor spending and jobs by park (below)



Outdoor recreation's share of state economies, 2023



Selected outdoor recreation activities, 2023, and (below) revenue from outdoor recreation in billions of dollars annually





Chuck Sams is sworn as National Park Service director by Interior Secretary Deb Haaland in 2021. DOI photo

## REPORTAGE

# The Indian education of Charles Sams

How generations of boarding schools and Indigenous teachings helped shape the first Native director of the National Park Service.

BY B. 'TOASTIE' OASTER

**"GRANDSON, I'M GOING TO ASK** you questions about this rock," said Charles Sams I, pulling a stone from the clear waters of Iskuulpa Creek where it wound between grassy lomatium-covered hills and the shaded curves of pine-stippled ones. He sat on the riverbank with his young grandson, pondering the stone in his hand, which mid-Columbia River tributaries had tumbled smooth on its journey through the high desert.

"How do you think this rock was formed?" the elder Sams patiently inquired, meting out his words. "How does a rock move in the water?" He asked how it might have rolled down from the mountain and who could have swum past or stepped on it,

noting a periwinkle attached to its side. "Do you think the rock has been in a dry place before?"

Charles' grandson, Charles "Chuck" Sams III, listened attentively. Through these experiences, Sams III recalled, "I was learning math, I was learning science, I was learning history." An Indian education, he explained, is different from a Western one. A Western education starts with a general understanding of the world, encompassing math, science, literature, then becomes hyper-specialized in higher education. "The Native way of understanding is, I'm going to give you something very specific, and then I'm going to teach you the broader world so that you understand where your place is in that

broader world, and the connections you must have," he said.

The elder Sams had experienced both types of education. As a child, he attended a Catholic boarding school on the Umatilla Indian Reservation. When he became a teenager in the late 1930s, his parents took him into town, bought him some new clothes, and sent him over 200 miles west by train to Chemawa Indian School in Salem. Sams remembers his grandfather saying, "I was one of those that was sent by my parents. I wasn't taken by an Indian agent." Nevertheless, Sams noted, his grandfather saw firsthand the destruction of his language and witnessed the beatings of children there.

Sams' relatives survived such schools not only in Oregon, but also in Montana, Arizona, New Mexico, California and Minnesota, as well as the notorious Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Indian boarding schools dismantled millennia of Indigenous education and understanding about how to interact with the world, he said, forcing conformity to the dominant culture instead. "It definitely was a cultural genocide." His parents and grandparents occasionally talked about the schools, but were more concerned with ensuring that the family, not the government, charted the next generation's education. Sams, his siblings and his cousins went to public schools instead.

After graduating high school in Pendleton, Sams served four years as a Navy intelligence officer with top-secret clearance. He received an undergraduate

degree in business administration from Concordia University in Portland and a master's in Indian law from the University of Oklahoma. It was a formal education in the American system, but he said he considers his grandparents' teachings a formal education, too.

**WHEN THE ELDER SAMS** was a teenager, he decided to escape from Chemawa, and he hatched a plan to spring some of the younger boys along with him.

"Because his older brother had worked on Union Pacific, he was able to smuggle them onto trains, bring them back to the Umatilla Indian Reservation and take them up a place called Iskuulpa Creek," his grandson explained. There, on the banks of the same creek where he would later teach his grandson, the elder Sams killed a deer, told the younger boys to eat on it for a few days and hide from the Indian agent so they could go back to their parents. Then he turned himself in — "knowing full well that he'd probably get beat and sent back to Chemawa," said Sams. The boys were grateful: "Those men, some of them are still alive today and talk about when my grandfather did that for them."

Back at Chemawa, a new student appeared — Ruby Whitright, a Yankton Sioux teen whom the Bureau of Indian Affairs had kidnapped in retaliation for her father's community activism over a government dam-building project in Wolf Point, Montana.

At Chemawa, Whitright had three square meals a day, a warm place to sleep, and she was learning new things. While she missed her home, the Depression Era conditions on the reservation weren't exactly luxurious. Besides, it was at Chemawa where she met Sams' grandfather — the grandfather of her future grandchildren.

**IN DECEMBER 2021**, Sams III stood with Interior Secretary Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) before the marble columns of Washington, D.C.'s larger-than-life monument to Indian killer Abraham Lincoln. Haaland guided Sams through his oath of office as he became the first-ever Indigenous director of the National Park Service. "Secretary Haaland told me: *We must be fierce in our storytelling*," he said, and to go find those stories yet untold.

Sams, whose last day leading the agency was Jan. 20, focused largely on education during his tenure. "We have the largest outside classrooms in the United States," he told *HCN* in 2022. As Haaland traveled the country with Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Bryan Newland (citizen of the Bay Mills Indian Community), listening to the stories of boarding school survivors for her historic report on the subject, Sams made it his mission to educate park visitors about Chinese immigrant and Chinese-American contributions to Yosemite, the tiny handprints of enslaved Black children in the walls of Fort Pulaski and the other side of the Whitman Mission "massacre" — his own tribal history — which explains Whitman's killing from an Indigenous perspective. "We've been raising those voices, and that's been very exciting to me," he said.

When the Biden administration sought to designate a new national monument, Sams collaborated with Haaland to bring boarding school stories into the park system. After the release of the *Federal Indian Boarding School Report*, they considered which of the schools tribal communities might recognize as seminal to boarding school injustices.

They visited the boarding

schools in Phoenix and Santa Fe his mother had attended, Albuquerque and St. Paul, and looked at Chemawa as well. "We looked across the country," Sams said. "But all of those off-reservation boarding schools really have a direct tie back to the Carlisle barracks." After Haaland and Newland canvassed Indian Country for stories of boarding school horrors, Haaland wanted Sams to use the National Park System to help tell those stories. So all three met with the Army and discussed Carlisle founder Capt. Richard Henry Pratt's famous directive to "kill the Indian in him, and save the man." Everyone agreed that Carlisle's horrific past had caused great cultural, social, and, in many cases, educational damage to Native people, Sams said.

On Dec. 9, 2024, President Joe Biden designated the Carlisle Indian Industrial School — a place synonymous in Indian Country with torture and suffering — as the newest national monument.

Sams' grandmother, Ruby, and grandfather, Chuck, on the Umatilla Indian Reservation in the winter of 1944 (below). Ruby, left, and Chuck, middle in white short-sleeved shirt, with six of their nine children, around 1958 (right). **Courtesy of Charles "Chuck" Sams III**



"This addition to the national park system that recognizes the troubled history of U.S. and Tribal relations is among the giant steps taken in recent years to honor Tribal sovereignty and recognize the ongoing needs of Native communities, repair past damage and make progress toward healing," Sams said in a press release at the time.

Education and storytelling were not Sams' only focus as he helmed the Park Service. In March 2022 Sams met with Congress and Native leaders to promote the expansion of co-management and co-stewardship between the federal government and the tribal nations that call the parks home. That fall, Interior released its first *Annual Tribal Co-Stewardship Report*; by the end of Sams' tenure, the number of parks co-stewarded by tribal nations increased from about 80 to 109, with another 56 parks with co-stewardship activities outside of a formal agreement.

**AFTER ATTENDING** Chemawa, Ruby Whitright went to live among the elder Sams' people, the Cayuse and Walla Walla. They raised their children and grandchildren there, in Umatilla country, near Iskuulpa Creek. While the couple wouldn't live to see their grandson usher in Carlisle as a new national monument, Sams still carries their stories — including his grandpa's words about the river rock. Today, he keeps that stone in his medicine pouch. He joked that it raises eyebrows with TSA agents when he travels for work. "I tell them it is a religious token of mine, and they've been very respectful." While he values his Western education, he said, "the one I value more is the one that taught me a much broader aspect of what it means to be a human being among flora and fauna, among the land, the water and the air." 🌻

*B. 'Toastie' Oaster is a staffwriter for High Country News.*



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Paul Frank | Moab  
David Hanscom | Park City  
Spent Hansen | Eureka  
Monica Hilding | Salt Lake City  
Karl Hodges | Salt Lake City  
Jones Family Foundation | Ogden  
Robert Lattanzi | Park City  
Michael Martin | Salt Lake City  
Daniel McCool & Jan Winniford | Ogden  
Andy McCrady | Ogden  
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Clayton Parr | Draper  
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Roberto (Bear) Guerra



Clockwise from top: Cindy Wehling with Paul Larmer and Greg Hanscom celebrating a redesign (2003); Cindy today; staff (2001); with photographer Adriel Heisey (2004); during a mine tour with fellow HCNers (1997); with fellow designer Ron Reason (2013).

Photo illustrations by Marissa Garcia / HCN

## DEAR FRIENDS

# After 35 years, farewell to an indefatigable art director

Cindy Wehling leaves an unmatched legacy of art and design, writ large across hundreds of issues of *High Country News*.

In the past three and a half decades, a lot of names have appeared on the *High Country News* masthead: three publishers, five or six chief editors, a few dozen assistant editors and staff writers and something like 200 interns and fellows. But in all that time, *HCN* has had only one art director. (Her original title was production manager, but the job has remained largely the same — overseeing the design and production of every issue of *HCN*, plus our branding and website design, and the fundraising materials, too.)

She hasn't had much time in the spotlight — she has never asked for it. Most readers likely don't even know who she is, though you might have met her at an *HCN* party or potluck, or if you dropped by the office in Paonia, Colorado, where she used to sit smiling behind a tower of outsized computer monitors. Her name is **Cindy Wehling**, and she's retiring next month after a remarkable run with *HCN*.

Longtime colleagues describe Cindy as “stalwart,” “resilient,” “self-reliant” and “indefatigable.” While the rest of us have flowed through *HCN* like mountain water, she has been a polished stone, solid and steady and deeply committed to the work.

Cindy's arrival was pure serendipity. She and her husband, Don Olsen, met in the newsroom at the *Longmont Times Call*, where he

was the magazine editor and she was a reporter. Don's family had deep roots in the Colorado news business. Cindy got into journalism as a high school student in Niwot, outside of Boulder, later earning a degree in magazine journalism from the storied University of Missouri J School. They tried journalism on the East Coast, “but we missed the West,” Cindy said, so they moved to Colorado's Western Slope, where Don's parents had a ranch.

They were both doing freelance writing, and Cindy was looking for additional work as a waitress when the job at *HCN* opened up. It was 1990, and the hot new thing in the news business was desktop publishing. (Previously, our newspaper production involved manually pasting up galleys of type, photos and headlines, rolling them tightly onto flats — and keeping your fingers crossed something didn't fall off en route to the printer, many miles away. The newfangled publishing software took a huge amount of hassle out of the process.) “We were probably the only two people in the county who knew what desktop



publishing was,” Cindy said.

They both applied. Cindy still gets a gleam in her eye when she remembers beating Don out for the job — she credits her darkroom skills — although it wasn’t exactly glamorous. The cramped office was in a remodeled Seventh Day Adventist church on Paonia’s main drag, with the production room tacked onto the barely insulated back porch.

“That was kind of primitive and hard,” remembered Betsy Marston, the editor who hired Cindy. Betsy and her husband, Ed, the publisher, had moved *HCN* to Paonia from its birthplace in Lander, Wyoming, seven years earlier and were still building the business, which wasn’t exactly rolling in dough, or subscribers.

In the years that followed, *HCN* moved into a much more hospitable office across the street. Cindy set up shop in a side room that was as hallowed and quiet as a library. “Those days are near and dear to my heart,” she said, “when *HCN* was a scrappy little newspaper, everybody working together toward a common goal, Ed Marston sweeping up trash in the common room, everybody helping to get mail bags (full of the most recent issue) into the truck.”

Over the decades, Cindy brought the work of hundreds of photographers and artists into the pages of *HCN*. She saw the organization through many iterations of computer software and hardware, the transformation of the black-and-white tabloid into a full-color magazine, and the launch (and several relaunches) of our website. At each stage, she was a voice for modest, measured change, and for making good use of every penny that *HCN*’s readers provided.

She understood that our readers care about the West and the issues we cover, not flashy graphics; images aren’t just for decoration, they are windows into the stories themselves. “Because she was a journalist, it gave her the ability to talk at the editorial meetings about the stories themselves,” recalled one former publisher, Paul Larmer. “She had an editorial eye. That served *HCN* well.”

Every two weeks for 30 years (we only shifted to our current monthly schedule in 2020), Cindy wrangled stories from *HCN*’s editors and images from across the West and sent another issue off to the printer. In all that time, she recalls only once missing the deadline: A computer glitch erased a feature story, and she worked all weekend to get the pieces back in place. The issue went out just a few days late. Readers never knew what happened.

In the spring of 2020, as the staff scattered during the early days of COVID, Cindy was one of the last people in the office, getting yet another issue off to the printer. “I remember packing up and thinking, jeez, what if I never come back here?” It was just a fleeting thought, she said, but it was prescient. The editorial staff had dispersed across the region a few years earlier, embracing new tools for working remotely. The rest of the staff followed suit, at first out of necessity and later because of the flexibility afforded by working from home.

Today, our customer service team fills the space that once served as Cindy’s quiet kingdom in downtown Paonia. It’s all the office space we need.

If all goes as planned, the May issue will be the last that Cindy oversees. By her count, it will be number 750.

“She can go through almost the entire archive of *High Country News* and say, ‘I had a hand in this issue,’” said Paul, marveling. She also had a hand in winning enough art and design awards to blanket a wall, and training our talented visuals team, which now includes two

full-time staffers and a contract designer, plus a vast constellation of freelance photographers and illustrators.

What’s next for Cindy? She and Don built a house out on the family property some years ago. The architecture is inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright and the rooms are finished with honey-colored softwood and awash with sunlight. They’ve had an addition in the works for 15 years now that might finally get finished. There’s the garden that’s been wanting more of her attention. (Paonia staffers salivate at the memory of the cherry tomatoes she brought to the office.) She might get back to writing, and there are things (besides *HCN*) to read, places they’ve been longing to see. And a life, after all these years, free of deadlines.

We wish her the very best.

— Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher

*Think you might be the one to fill Cindy’s shoes, or know someone who might be right for the job? Find more information at [hcn.org/design-director](https://hcn.org/design-director)*

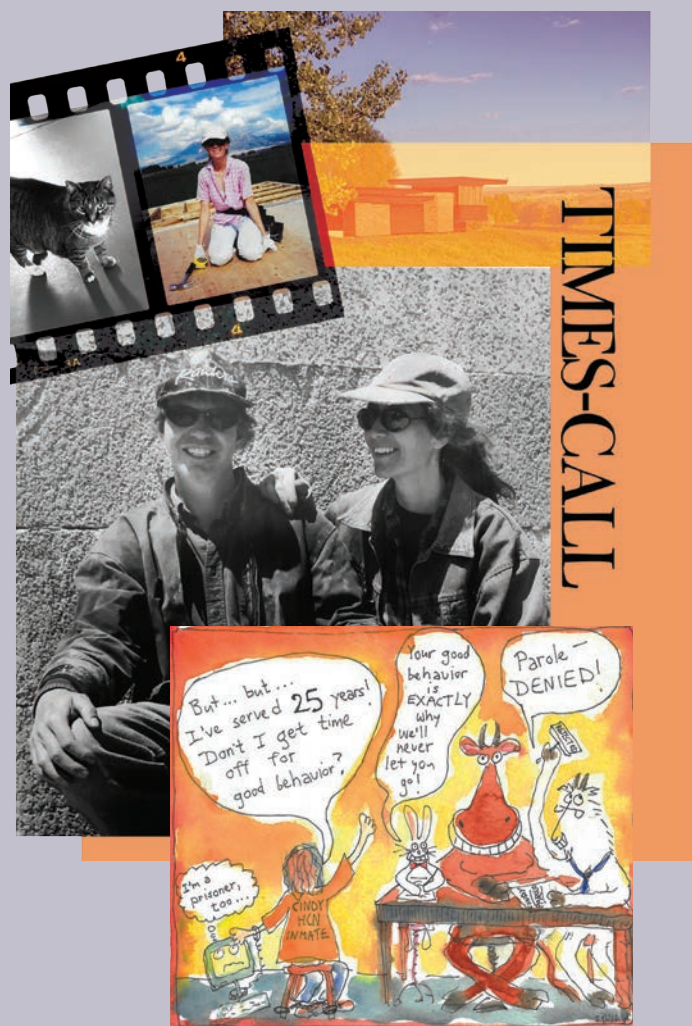


Illustration by Diane Sylvain / HCN

Cindy says working with photographers and illustrators from across the West and designing *HCN* covers has been one of the highlights of her job. At left, covers from across the decades, starting in the 1990s, when *HCN* was a black-and-white tabloid newspaper, to an award-winning cover from 2023. Above, Cindy and Don building their Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired Rastra-block house, the house, Cindy working as a roofer, Grayson the cat and a 25th anniversary card created by Diane Sylvain (another *HCN* veteran) c. 2015.





Wetlands and farmland in and adjacent to an area where the Utah Inland Port Authority is boosting development in West Weber, Utah.

# Industrial Revolution

A quasi-governmental agency is pushing development around the already at-risk Great Salt Lake.

By Brooke Larsen | Photos by Russel Albert Daniels

**BRENT DAVIS THINKS HE GROWS** the tastiest tomatoes. For four generations, his family has farmed and ranched near the eastern shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake, 45 minutes north of Salt Lake City. He claims his tomatoes are chock-full of minerals thanks to their proximity to the inland sea: "My wife says they're already salted."

Davis and his brothers raise cattle, and Davis also runs a meat shop. In addition, Davis grows watermelons, squash and thousands of tomatoes that he sells at a farmers market in Evanston, Wyoming.

West Weber, in Weber County, where Davis lives, still feels rural. The smell of manure wafts in the air and thousands of acres of green irrigated fields stretch to the horizon. But it's changing: Over the last half-century, farms have sold and canneries shut down, while suburban sprawl and outside industry have crept in. Meanwhile, the Great Salt Lake is disappearing. Once-verdant wetlands of dense cattails and open water that nourished waterfowl, insects and other creatures are now depleted or built over. In 1986, the lake swelled and flooded nearby communities; now, on windy days, arsenic-laden dust blows

from patches of dried-up lakebed.

Davis remembers when a mineral evaporation operation began in Ogden Bay, west of his farm, in the late 1960s. A decade later, Western Zirconium started manufacturing materials for nuclear fuel rods nearby. Maybe six cars a day passed his house when he was a kid, Davis estimates; now, he thinks it's closer to a thousand.

So when the Utah Inland Port Authority created a 9,000-acre industrial area near his family's property last May, Davis wasn't surprised. "They're taking away the natural environment for their concrete jungles," he said. "Some people really love concrete jungles. I don't."

The West Weber Project Area is one of the larger, more controversial development zones overseen by the Utah Inland Port Authority, or UIPA. A quasi-governmental agency charged with making Utah a leader in global trade and economic growth, the Port Authority's primary tool is financing. UIPA offers incentives to businesses and pays for water, sewer and other public infrastructure with state funds and property taxes.

Its board decides when and where to promote development, though cities or

counties retain zoning authority and must welcome UIPA before it can come in. Utah's governor, House speaker and Senate president appoint voting board members, who include government and business leaders. Because they're appointed and the House speaker and Senate president don't represent everyone impacted by UIPA, environmental and public health watchdogs say the board is not directly accountable to local communities.

And many communities are impacted by UIPA, which is driving a massive, coordinated influx of industry across the state. In 2018, the Utah Legislature created UIPA, giving it jurisdiction over a 16,000-acre area in Salt Lake County, near the airport. Then, in 2023, UIPA started establishing satellite ports, called project areas, to create a statewide manufacturing and shipping network. Over about 18 months, UIPA ballooned from one to a dozen project areas.

Utah's state motto is "Industry," and the Great Salt Lake's shores and wetlands have seen it all: Landfills, refineries, salt mines, smelters, bombing ranges and now, inland ports. Five of UIPA's newer project areas, as well as its original Salt Lake County one, are in the Great Salt Lake Basin.

But today, the Great Salt Lake is dying. It reached a record low in 2022, due to climate change-induced drought and farms, municipalities and industry taking too much water. In a 2023 report, scientists from several universities, community groups and others said that the ecosystem could collapse as soon as 2028. News feeds warned of a toxic dust-bowl future, and Utahns, who once viewed the funky-smelling, salty lake with indifference or disdain, launched organizations to save it.

Residents fear that more industrial development will dry up the inland sea and destroy its wetlands, boost air pollution and traffic and smother rural life.

They're worried about accountability, too. Even though most public comments opposed those five project areas, the UIPA board approved each one — along with every other project area it publicly considered. UIPA has lacked public transparency, according to state audits, but emails *High Country News* obtained through record requests show that UIPA has communicated closely with developers and local officials eager for rapid growth.

Recently, UIPA has made some changes;

a new wetland policy, for example, sets aside financing for mitigation and limits where developers can build to receive incentives. Still, as the Great Salt Lake continues to wither, community members wonder whether boosting industrial development is the best way to build the future they'd like to see for the lake — and for themselves.

#### WEARING A WHITE BUTTON-UP SHIRT

under a black suit, Ben Hart, UIPA's executive director, stood next to farmland not far from Davis' home in West Weber. It was a cloudy May morning, and shallow patches of standing water covered the land. California gulls *yeowed* overhead while American avocets dipped their long beaks into the pools.

A pin of UIPA's logo — a "U" composed of green quadrangles — stood out on Hart's lapel. He was hired as UIPA's director in September 2022, two months before the lake reached its record low. His job is to promote and generate development. But he aims to be environmentally minded, even as UIPA's expansion occurs under his watch. Since Hart took over, UIPA's branding has gone from blue and gray to shades of green. Its website now has images of a songbird perched on a branch and a kid holding a cardboard cutout of Earth.

"We're not going to try and hide any of the wetlands today," he told me and other reporters on a media tour that day. A few hours later, the

UIPA Board would designate the spot where we stood as part of the West Weber Project Area.

As the Great Salt Lake recedes, wetlands disappear and invasive species encroach. The majority of Utah's remaining wetlands surround the Great Salt Lake. They sequester carbon, filter pollution from agricultural runoff, prevent floods by absorbing storm surges and provide food and habitat for millions of migrating birds. "Fringe wetlands are no longer hydrologically connected in most places because the lake has gone down so much," Karin Kettenring, a wetland ecologist at Utah State University, said. If UIPA encourages building here, developers might pave over the last patches of this complex ecosystem.

Last year, Utah legislators acknowledged industry's role in the crisis, increasing regulations on mineral extraction from the lake including lithium and potash evaporation ponds. But the state doesn't proactively consider the cumulative consequences of piecemeal development within the lake's watershed, including inland port activity. Even building close to wetlands can harm them, for example, as impervious surfaces boost stormwater runoff. "One of our failures as humans is being unable to visualize what the bigger impacts might be," Kettenring said. It's "death by a thousand cuts."

Environmental activists and community members with a group called Stop the Polluting Ports Coalition have consistently criticized UIPA, regularly protesting as it expanded around the lake in 2023. They want to halt "state-subsidized industrial development" on and near the lake's wetlands.

After months of criticism about UIPA's growth, Hart sought to change the public's perception through a new wetland policy. "We have to do a better job protecting the wetlands here in the state of Utah, and if we don't, shame on us," he said on the media tour. He then dove into the details of UIPA's plans.

UIPA's project areas host a mixture of distribution warehouses, manufacturing businesses and shipping facilities that move freight between trucks, trains and planes. Plans typically outline broad possibilities, from data centers and renewable energy development to aerospace and defense activities. UIPA has deals with businesses ranging from weapons manufacturer Northrop Grumman to steel producer Nucor.

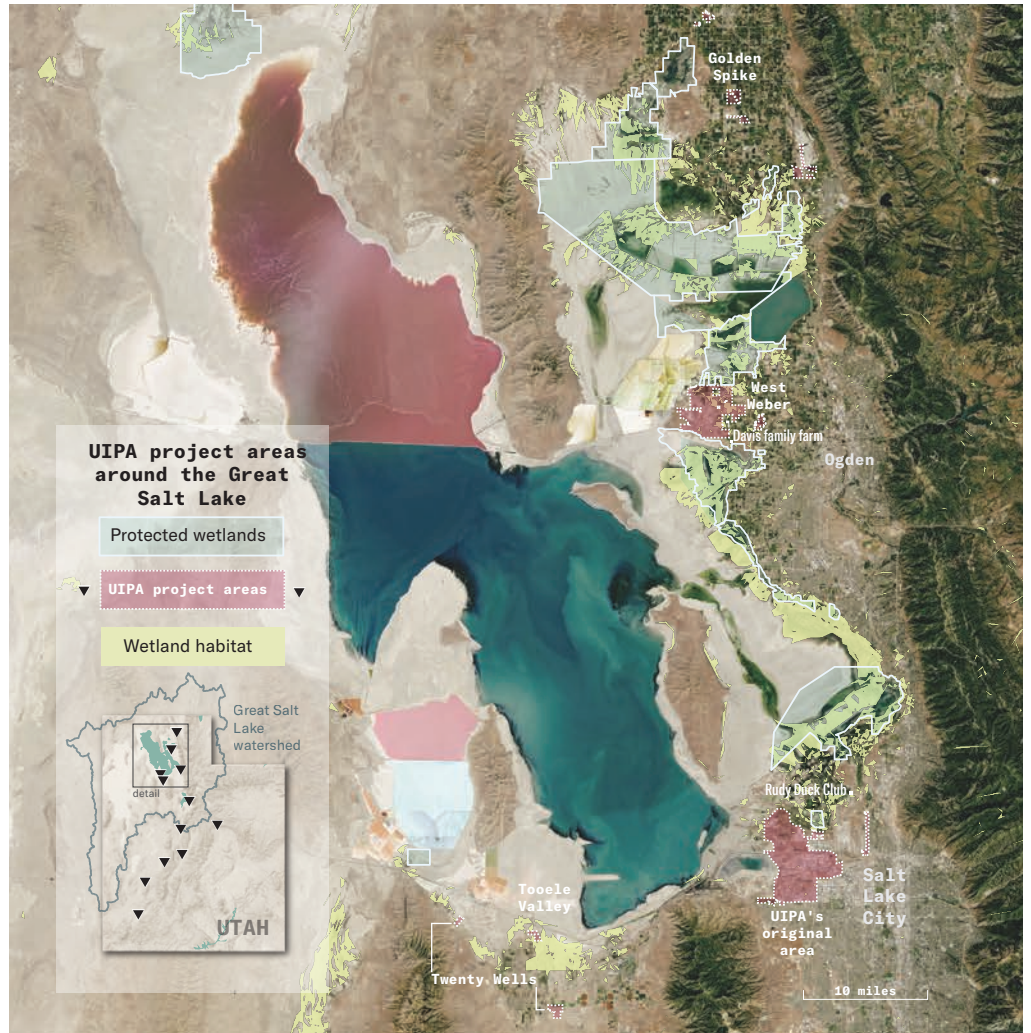
When UIPA establishes a project area, the

A UPS sorting facility (center, shaped like the head of a fork) in UIPA's original jurisdictional area in Salt Lake County (left). Ben Hart, executive director of UIPA, inside the Utah State Capitol after a board meeting in November (facing).





*“We have to do a better job protecting the wetlands, and if we don’t, shame on us.”*



county or town and all relevant taxing entities, including school and fire districts, forfeit a percentage of newly generated property taxes — up to 75% — to the Port Authority for 25 years. UIPA returns that tax money to businesses and public infrastructure in the project area, though in some cases, a percentage goes to environmental protection or community programs like affordable housing.

Now, a percentage also goes to wetlands. In November 2023, UIPA’s board released a policy dedicating at least 1% of the taxes it receives from projects in the Great Salt Lake Basin to wetland mitigation and protection. In West Weber, that figure is 3%.

And while UIPA cannot regulate where private landowners can build, it can restrict the money it hands out. For example, it won’t give money to developers that build on wetlands in West Weber. Still, most parcels in project areas have already been zoned for industry by a local government, so UIPA aims to influence what it sees as inevitable development. “When the

port comes in, we can actually help identify and create potential revenue streams to protect these natural areas,” Hart told me.

To help shape what that will look like, UIPA brought in Joel Ferry, director of Utah’s Department of Natural Resources and an influential leader on Great Salt Lake issues, as a non-voting board member in March 2024. Ferry wanted to ensure UIPA didn’t transform wetlands into acres of pavement, particularly near two state waterfowl management areas in West Weber. This relationship helped spur UIPA to donate \$2.5 million to the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources late last fall for wetland protection on the lake’s southeast shore. Hart believes such efforts show that development and environmental protection can coexist.

Community advocates have also informed UIPA’s actions. Jack Ray, president of the Utah Waterfowl Association and member of the Rudy Duck Club, fell in love with the Great Salt Lake while duck hunting as a teenager. He and his friends would linger

in the marshes until sunset, when the sky burst into a vivid orange. When he saw UIPA expanding around the lake, he took Hart to wetlands near the Port Authority’s original area. “I think he immediately understood what was at stake,” Ray said.

UIPA’s grant to the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources will help the agency and Salt Lake City purchase and protect several hundred acres of uplands near wetlands managed by the Rudy Duck Club. Thanks to both Ray and Ferry’s influence, UIPA has mandated other protections, such as a 600-foot buffer of no development around the waterfowl management areas in West Weber. A buffer, Ray said, helps contain sprawl.

“It basically creates a line in the mud,” he told me.

Still, if any projects harm wetlands as defined by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, federal law requires developers to restore or create new wetlands to compensate.

But scientists have found that



constructed wetlands rarely function as well as natural ones. Ben Abbott, ecologist at Brigham Young University and lead author of the 2023 report that warned about the lake's impending destruction, said that wetland mitigation is the "highest-cost, least-value" strategy to protect an ecosystem. The least-cost, highest-value approach? Conservation: "leaving wetlands as they are, where they are."

Abbott said UIPA's approach is "better than nothing." But it looks "more like green-washing than a substantive protection for the environment."

Many agree it's better not to build in sensitive zones in the first place. "We know development is going to happen," Brad Parry, vice chairman of the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation, said. "It's just, did you really pick the best area?"

*"We know development  
is going to happen.  
It's just, did you really  
pick the best area?"*

Historically, the Northwestern Shoshone lived along the lake's bountiful wetlands, with plentiful waterfowl for food, clean drinking water and willows and cattails for shelters and cradleboards.

Over the past 150 years, however, colonization and settlers' subsequent industrial and residential development have destroyed much of the wetlands important to the Northwestern Shoshone. Today, the tribe's headquarters is roughly 7 miles east of the West Weber Project Area, and while UIPA has asked the tribe about cultural resources, it has not consulted it about wetlands.

And wetland destruction is the tribe's main concern when it comes to UIPA. It's a field in which Parry has expertise: He previously worked for the Bureau of Reclamation overseeing several wetland mitigation

projects across the Colorado River Basin. Only about a quarter of the projects, he told me, “mirrored what they had lost.”

**THE DAY AFTER UIPA’S MEDIA TOUR,** Rhonda Lauritzen, a Weber County resident, drove me to the Ogden Bay Waterfowl Management Area, a marsh at the south edge of the project area, passing Davis’ meat-cutting business along the way.

She parked at a gate and got out of the car, pointing out a hawk flying overhead. The sun-warmed air smelled fresh and earthy. “This is my happy place,” she said. Lauritzen frequently walks the paths through the wetland, spotting snakes, rabbits, coyotes, muskrats and mallards.

Lauritzen opposes the West Weber Project Area, worried it will harm wildlife and the landscape. But she’s not flat-out anti-industry; her family has made a living from the Great Salt Lake. Their business, Mineral Resources International, extracts minerals from evaporation ponds for supplements and electrolyte powders, taking about 125 acre-feet of water from the lake per year. (By comparison, Compass Minerals, the lake’s biggest operator, used 111,700 acre-feet on average annually between 2017 and 2021.)

Lauritzen believes wetlands improve the quality of the minerals her family extracts. “One of the things we say is that the wetlands are the water filter,” she said.

We got back in the car and drove to our next stop: the same standing water that Hart had stood by the day before. The few clouds in the bright blue sky reflected in the water. “You can hear the meadowlarks,” she said as she stepped out of her car. “Doo, doo, do, do, do, doo.” While Lauritzen talked less about tax incentives than Hart did, she noted UIPA’s new wetland policies. “I’d like to think that some of the pushback moved the needle,” she told me.

Lauritzen and Davis are among the many Weber County residents who have shared concerns about development with UIPA and local officials. Before a project area goes to UIPA’s board, local elected leaders must approve it. On Jan. 2, 2024, the Weber County Commission considered a resolution supporting the 9,000-acre West Weber Project Area. The public notice for the meeting was posted on Dec. 29. Despite short notice over a holiday, 19 people, including Davis, showed up to speak. Only one clearly supported it. The



Downtown Salt Lake City as seen from Farmington Bay wetlands near the Rudy Duck Club (*facing*). Brad Parry, vice chairman of the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation, at the Weber River (*top*). Rhonda Lauritzen, a resident of West Weber, at the Ogden Bay Waterfowl Management Area (*above*).

commission passed the resolution anyway.

“They pretty well do what they want, whether we like it or not,” Davis said.

For Weber County officials, UIPA provides a way to finance development it has been planning and promoting for decades. “The inland port is a partner at the table,” Stephanie Russell, Weber County’s economic development director and government relations liaison, said. “They’re not driving the train.”

Most of the West Weber Project Area has been zoned for industry since 1958, long before the Port Authority existed. Yet it’s still mostly undeveloped. “Anytime we try and get someone to bite, there’s not enough sewer, there’s not enough water, and it’s too far away from the freeway,” Charlie Ewert, Weber County principal planner, said.

Port opponents question whether development would actually occur without UIPA’s help, since it hasn’t for the past 70 years. Perhaps, but it would likely happen more slowly.

UIPA provides a more expeditious process than another government tool: community reinvestment areas, which, like UIPA, use newly generated property taxes from a designated zone to spur growth. But while reinvestment areas need approval from every taxing entity — there are more than a dozen in West Weber — UIPA needed support from just one group there: the county commission.

After Weber County leaders voted for a UIPA project area, county residents continued to email commissioners their concerns, as shown by correspondence *High Country News* obtained through a public records request. But commissioners often forwarded emails to Russell, an unelected county employee, apparently for her to handle. (Commissioner Gage Froerer explained that they often “refer a question to the person that has the right answers” to respond to queries.)

Rob Vanderwood, mayor of West Haven, about 6 miles south of the West Weber Project Area, viewed this as the commission bucking accountability. When Russell responded to concerns Vanderwood sent to commissioners, Vanderwood replied that his email was directed to “the right people (the commissioners) that actually vote for this approval.”

Residents asked to meet with commissioners a month before the proposed West Weber project went to the UIPA board. Instead, four days before UIPA’s board meeting, the county held a public question-and-answer

session. Russell moderated, while Hart, a local developer, a regional economic development leader and Ewert spoke as panelists.

The county commissioners, Lauritzen said, “didn’t even show their faces.”

**IN ONE INSTANCE, LOCAL OFFICIALS** and UIPA even neglected to consult homeowners within project area boundaries. Eighty miles south of the West Weber Project Area, on the other side of the Great Salt Lake, sagebrush-covered peaks punctuate the otherwise flat expanse of Tooele County’s Basin and Range landscape. Here, next to beige fields where horses and cows graze, UIPA approved two project areas in December 2023.

Chris Eddington and his neighbor Macayla Anderson learned their properties were included in one, the Tooele Valley Project Area, during the UIPA board meeting to finalize it. “We’ve got a problem,” Eddington told board members before they voted. “My properties are on these (maps).” They told Eddington they’d talk to him after the meeting. Every public comment except one opposed the projects. But it didn’t matter; the board approved them anyway.

*High Country News* reviewed all written comments to UIPA from September 2022 to January 2025. Only four supported development in the Great Salt Lake Basin, while 273 opposed it. The majority of in-person comments regarding projects around the lake

were also opposed.

Emails *HCN* obtained through a public record request confirm that by the time a proposal reaches UIPA’s board, it is essentially a done deal. “When the public sees it, it’s usually something that’s pretty well vetted” with local officials, Hart told me. Before the board approved the Golden Spike Project Area near the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, just north of Weber County, UIPA sent invites to local leaders that said, “Join the Utah Inland Port Authority and its partners as they create the Golden Spike Inland Port Project Area.” A few days before the meeting, the line for Golden Spike on a “hot sheet” of projects UIPA was considering said, “To be created in Brigham City on 8/21/23 at 2 pm.”

In West Weber, it appears that UIPA staff and a developer assumed the board would approve the project. Staffers began working on a development agreement with the BlackPine Group months before the board created the project area.

While UIPA and local officials have rejected residents’ pleas to halt projects, records show they frequently communicated with another group of local landowners: developers.

Emails show that real estate developers asked county and city government officials to swiftly advance the two project areas in Tooele County.

Zenith Bolinder LLC, a partnership between Zenith Development and Bolinder Resources, owns most of the land in the Tooele Valley Project Area. Zenith’s managing director, Charles Akerlow, was once head of the Utah Republican Party, and in 1990 was sentenced to a year in prison for failure to file and pay federal excise taxes. Zenith Bolinder is also on Tooele County’s 2024 property tax delinquency list.

Public records show Akerlow communicated with Tooele County officials for over a year about creating an industrial area. In early 2023, he told a council member that UIPA was interested in creating a project area around his company’s property. Not long after, Akerlow wrote to the county’s community development director: “We have much to do and the sooner we can start the better.”



Brent Davis, a farmer and rancher, in front of his home in West Weber near the eastern shore of the Great Salt Lake (left). A worker levels a former cattle pasture near Davis’ property (facing).

Meanwhile, Thane Smith of the Romney Group (founded by Mitt Romney’s son Josh Romney) was pushing the town of Grantsville to establish another project area in Tooele County. Smith drafted a resolution for the city council, which voted to support a UIPA project area just over a week later.

When the soil warmed up last spring, excavators began preparing land for building near Eddington’s and Anderson’s homes. As of late January, UIPA said no specific business was planning to move in, but emails between UIPA and Akerlow show that they have discussed companies that manufacture plastics, metals and prefabricated houses.

UIPA eventually removed Eddington’s and Anderson’s properties from the project area at their request. But after months of semi trucks kicking up dust around their homes, both families sold to an infrastructure district associated with Zenith Bolinder, closing in late December.

“If you want the more rural lifestyle,” Eddington said, “it’s getting harder and harder in Utah.”

**IN SEPTEMBER**, the Center for Biological Diversity and Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment sued UIPA, Utah Gov. Spencer Cox, R, and legislative leaders. The suit argues that UIPA’s governance structure is illegal under the separation of powers principle and limits the public’s ability to hold state officials accountable. (A bill introduced in the 2025 legislative session would change that structure and could impact the case.) Eddington and Anderson initially participated in the lawsuit, but stopped after negotiations with Akerlow. “The game is on,” Akerlow emailed the Tooele County manager about his deal with the two families.

The lawsuit proceeds, however, and if it’s successful, all inland port projects approved in northern Utah since 2022 could become void.

Meanwhile, concerned residents continue to meet. On a hot July evening last year, Weber County locals and organizers with the Stop the Polluting Ports Coalition gathered. Thick smog from wildfires blurred the outline of nearby mountains. Despite the smoky air, 75 people filled long metal picnic tables under a shaded park pavilion. Weber County’s Stephanie Russell and two members of UIPA’s staff also showed up and sat at the back.

Rhonda Lauritzen facilitated. “This is our meeting,” she said. “This is our agenda.”



People introduced themselves. A few had driven an hour from Salt Lake City, but almost everyone lived in Weber County.

When Davis had the mic, he gestured to 12th Street, 400 feet north of the pavilion. “This road here, when I was a boy, we played on it,” he said. “There was no traffic. Now, it’s hard to get across.” Davis, whose property spans both sides of the street, finds it difficult to drive his tractor from one field to another. He and many others worry about the dangers, air pollution and commotion more traffic will bring to their historically rural area.

After Davis spoke, people listed off more concerns, ranging from disappearing wetlands to dying farms. Then the conversation turned to what the community wants from UIPA, including a health impact study and local input in decisions. When the meeting wrapped up, as a peach-colored sunset filled the hazy sky, Lauritzen and others collected contact information to continue organizing the community, hoping to shape their local leaders’ vision for the county’s future.

**“OUR INSATIABLE APPETITE** for growth is not sustainable,” Lauritzen told me as we drove out of the West Weber Project Area last May. “Can we as humans evolve to recognize what is enough? It’s a tough question.”

Despite UIPA’s new wetland policies, the Stop the Polluting Ports Coalition still sees it as the greatest threat to Great Salt Lake wetlands.

But for local government officials like Ewert, Weber County’s planner, UIPA provides a path to help shape what he sees as inevitable. Growth, Ewert said, “is not good or bad. It just is.”

For communities that want to stop development, rezoning could help. Land use “is where you could probably really make the most significant difference in terms of protection,” Hart told me. But that comes with caveats: Current landowners would likely be entitled to develop according to the existing zoning, and any down-zoning could lower property values. In West Weber, many of Davis’ neighbors are aging, and their children want to sell the farm to the highest bidder. “I can

almost guarantee there would be no political appetite to rezone any of that to something else,” Ewert said.

Meanwhile, Davis continues to hold onto his rural way of life. A few years ago, when the county widened 12th Street, he planted a sign that said “Not For Sale” in bold red letters in front of his farm. His feelings haven’t changed. “I’ve got a lot of sweat and tears in it,” Davis said. “I’m gonna stay here.” ☀

*Brooke Larsen is a correspondent for High Country News and a freelance journalist writing from Salt Lake City, Utah.*

*Russel Albert Daniels is a documentary photographer based in Salt Lake City. His work illuminates overlooked histories of the American West, with a focus on Indigenous communities and their contemporary experiences.*

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*The Mountains Remember the People*, 2025. Archival pigment print photo collage, glass beads, beading felt and nylon thread, 6 x 9 inches. Pictured is Cynthia Espirito with her great-grandson, Jayven Killsfirst. Images used: Elaine Harvey, Gifford Pinchot National Forest Archive.



# The Berry Fields

The *Íamíłpa* Band of the Yakama Nation has been harvesting huckleberries for millennia, despite Forest Service mismanagement and commercial picking.

By Josephine Woolington  
Collages by Epiphany Couch

**SUSAN JIM HELD** each dark purple berry with the tips of her fingers. One by one, she picked off oval-shaped leaves stuck to some of the small fruits, as she sorted them into large silver bowls. Unwanted stems, sticks and bugs tossed in one bowl, clean berries in another. Time was measured by the deepening magenta of her fingers, how sticky they became from the berries' sweet juices. These were the summer season's first huckleberries, to be honored and thanked at a ceremonial feast that Sunday afternoon.

"We were taught to be quiet when we picked," Jim, who is 60 and a member of the *Íamíłpa* Band of the Yakama Nation, said as she cleaned the berries that had been gathered the day before. Her family carries themselves reverently in the mountains where huckleberries grow. They have to pick in a good way, she explained, so the food won't catch bad feelings and pass them along.

Campfire smoke drifted through the warm early-August mountain air at Cold Springs campground in the Sawtooth Berry Fields in southwestern Washington's Gifford Pinchot National Forest. Jim's family knows these places as Kps Waanayt and Psawaswaakwuł in Wahúupam, a dialect of Ichishkíin, the mid-Columbia River language.

For several hours, Jim cleaned berries, called *wíwnu*, at a picnic table under towering cottonwood

trees. Sunbeams shone through the branches and onto Jim, who wore sunglasses and a purple wing dress. Woven baskets decorated with geometric designs were filled with freshly picked berries ready for cleaning. Women in colorful patterned dresses cut potatoes and carrots and prepared dozens of plates, bowls, cups, forks and spoons for the meal. Kids ran through the campground; their parents occasionally yelled to them to come help.

The annual huckleberry feast at Cold Springs commences berry-picking season, in late July or early August, enabling tribal members to gather the last of their traditional foods for the year. The feast is always held on a Sunday when tribal members don't harvest any berries or other food. It's a law that they follow year-round, no matter how busy their lives become, said Jim's brother, Kámíłpa Chief Bronsco Jim Jr. Long before the Bible arrived on this continent, his people followed their own count of the days. "You don't break the branches or fir boughs of the living trees or the grasses" on the last day, he said. "You don't hunt the deer, or fish, or dig roots. Anything alive is respected."

The night before, 41-year-old Jim Jr. swept dirt away from the temporary longhouse that he and other tribal members put up each year for the feast. Every summer, for as long as berries have grown here, the family has traveled from their homes along the Nch'i-Wána (Columbia River) to the berry fields west of Pátu (Mount Adams). Villages surrounded the Big River, in canyons carved by smaller rivers, from the mouth of the Umatilla west to the mouth of the Deschutes — home to Wahúupam-speaking people, the River People. They named the rocky peaks and clear shallow lakes in and around the huckleberry fields. Lalukušwaakwuł. Łmáma Pšwá. Watám Watám. The mountains remember the people when they return every summer, Jim Jr. said. "The land understands our language."

The Jims' grandmother, atway Lasáyat Louise Billy, followed the berries as they ripened, camping with her family for weeks. She'd start at low elevations near Carson, then head to Trout Lake before ending the season in the high-elevation fields in and around Sawtooth — places and harvesting rights that the U.S. government promised to preserve in its 1855 treaty with the Yakama Nation.

But over the decades, the River People watched the landscape change. Under U.S. Forest Service management, berries vanished. Once-open fields became dense forests that have continued to grow since the agency banned tribal burns in the early 1900s. The mountains in and around Sawtooth became a source of profit when the agency allowed a burgeoning commercial industry to turn the treaty-protected huckleberries into commodities.

Now, the Jims find commercial pickers in their family's gathering sites every summer. A gallon of the berries sells for up to \$200. Gifford Pinchot is the only national forest with a large-scale commercial huckleberry program, but the Jim family and other Kámíłpa members want that to end. "The way we were taught and raised is when you go gather, you gotta give back," Susan Jim said. "You gotta give back for what you're taking. To them, it's just dollar signs."

"But people are not all raised the same."

**NOT LONG AFTER THE GLACIERS** released Washington's Southern Cascades from their icy blue grip some 11,000 years ago, huckleberries appeared. Every spring, the hardy shrubs emerge from a



*Usual and Accustomed Places*, 2025. Archival pigment print photo collage weaving, 7.5 x 8.5 inches. Images used: Elaine Harvey, Gifford Pinchot National Forest Archive.

blanket of winter snow with new growth. Light-green ovate leaves decorate shrubs that can grow up to 5 feet tall. Flowers bloom and dangle from their thin branches like tiny blush-colored bells. Small fruits like blueberries develop, red at first, until they mature under the July sun into shiny, nearly black berries. Western scientists say that huckleberries belong to the same genus as blueberries. Lewis and Clark referred to the plants growing near the Columbia in 1806 as



and maintained huckleberry fields. Fire nourished the acidic soil and cleared out trees so that the shrubs had enough water and sunlight to blossom and produce berries. Bronsco Jim Jr.'s father said that he could still see signs of those regular burns in his childhood, when the Sawtooth fields resembled the hillsides around Mount St. Helens after the 1980 eruption. "It was open, big open areas," Jim Jr. said. "You could see a long ways."

Mount Adams was always visible, its rounded, glaciated 12,276-foot summit watching over from the east, just 14 miles away. To the west, Mount St. Helens stood a few miles farther, at 9,677 feet before its eruption. Thousands of acres of huckleberry shrubs grew in the volcanic landscape, from Twin Buttes, south 12 miles to Red Mountain in the River Area, where the River People harvested. As the berries ripened, the hillsides and meadows grew so colorful with chartreuse grasses, purple lupines and white beargrass blooms that Western scientists called the ecosystem a subalpine "parkland," insinuating that it was a purposefully landscaped place, which it was — managed by tribal people.

Before huckleberry season, the River People followed different edible roots and sucker fish as they appeared within the Columbia River's tributaries in early spring. Come April, roots grew higher up, on nearby plateaus and ridgelines. Then, the people would cross the Big River on horses, and headed south to the Blue Mountains for summertime currants, serviceberries and chokecherries ripening along the John Day River. Eels came up the river, too. After, they headed north again to fish for summer salmon. Huckleberries, the final food of the season, grew in the mountains to the west, late summer until fall.

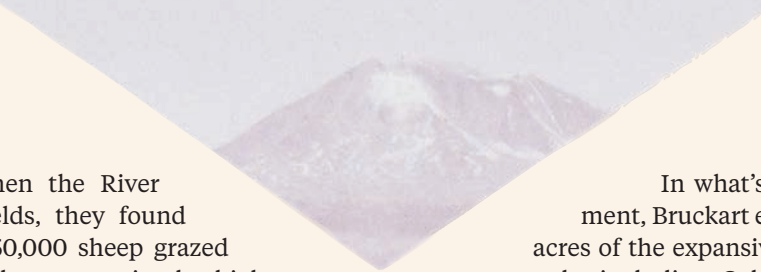
All of these food-gathering sites were supposed to be protected under the 1855 treaty, fulfilling the U.S. government's trust responsibility toward tribal nations to conserve off-reservation resources — the lands and rivers where fish, deer, roots and berries live. But in the decades that followed, through land theft, removals, allotments and boarding schools, the treaty was seen by the federal government as one step in its efforts to eradicate Indigenous peoples and cultures. Assimilation would negate the treaties, the government assumed, and those promises to protect tribal sovereignty would eventually become irrelevant.

Hunting, fishing and gathering sites were soon fenced off as private land. By the 1890s, some were declared federal forest reserves, later called national forests. Part of what became Gifford Pinchot was set aside in 1897, and several years later, in 1905, Congress established the Forest Service under the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The new federal agency claimed these lands as "public," owned by all Americans. Treaty-protected huckleberries became "special forest products" that the public could harvest. Forest Service roads cut through berry fields. Hiking trails traversed cultural sites. "The land, as well as what grows upon it, must be used for the purpose for which it is most valuable," Gifford Pinchot, the first U.S. Forest Service chief, wrote in 1907. "On it may be built stores, hotels, residences, power plants, mills, and many other things."

The Forest Service implemented an aggressive fire-suppression policy to preserve trees for logging and protect mountain towns where white settlers now lived. Tribally set burns that maintained the huckleberry fields became illegal. Hemlock and fir trees began to grow.

huckleberries, possibly confusing them with the huckleberries that grow on the East Coast and belong to a different genus.

For decades, Western scientists have tried to cultivate huckleberries, starting as early as 1897, but the plants won't grow on farms. They're found only in the mountains. The Jims prefer it that way. Huckleberries rely on winter snow and proliferate from regular fires set by the River People and other Indigenous peoples who also created



Around the early 1900s, when the River People returned to the berry fields, they found more than trees: An estimated 150,000 sheep grazed the national forest, thriving on the grasses in the high-country huckleberry fields. The animals' stench emanated from the mountains, Bronsco Jim Jr.'s family said. Tribal leaders complained; Forest Service officials dismissed them. Berries were plentiful in other parts of the forest, they said.

Then the white pickers arrived. During the Great Depression, more than 6,000 people flooded the Sawtooth fields. They set up a commercial store in a nearby campground. They hogged the roads and stole berries from tribal women. "Now today the white men are commercializing our berries," Tommy Thompson, a tribal leader from Celilo, said at a council with Forest Service officials in 1929. "It is our patch and the same as a wheat field or corn field or a herd of horses or cattle. I wouldn't come into your place and take your crops or your stock and sell them."

In 1931 alone, pickers sold more than 60,000 gallons of berries from Gifford Pinchot National Forest, worth about \$6 million today. The commercial huckleberry industry exploded in other national forests in Idaho and Montana. Pickers used rakes and beaters to harvest berries quickly, up to 50 gallons a day. Businessmen wanted to squeeze every penny they could from the mountains. The berries were free for the taking, no regulations. One forester wondered whether land managers should prioritize "the growing of timber or if huckleberries may be the more profitable crop."

Tribal leaders complained. Berry fields packed with sheep and non-Native pickers violated the treaty, they said. They demanded exclusive picking rights. But Forest Service officials said the white pickers had equal rights to the fields. "Someday Indians won't come anymore," assistant regional forester F.V. Horton wrote in a 1931 Forest Service memo, discussing tribal complaints. "The area will grow up to timber (and) there will be no more berries. Should not agree to an Indian monopoly of berry grounds."

The next summer, in 1932, Kámiŋpa Chief atway William Yallup asked to meet with Forest Supervisor J.R. Bruckart at Watám Watám (Surprise Lakes) near Cold Springs. "Now in the last two years whites as thick as the needles on the firs have driven our (women) from the berry fields," Yallup told Bruckart, as quoted in a 1997 *Western Historical Quarterly* article. "Yet our treaty, signed in 1855, gives us the right to hunt, fish and gather berries for all time in our usual and accustomed places. So let the white man leave. This is our land."

"I myself was placed here by the Great White Father to see that all people enjoyed the forest equally," Bruckart replied. "I cannot exclude the White Man from the berry fields or I would also have to exclude the Indians."

In what's known as the Handshake Agreement, Bruckart eventually agreed to set aside 2,800 acres of the expansive Sawtooth fields and four campgrounds, including Cold Springs, for the River People's exclusive use during huckleberry season. While the agreement lacked legal teeth, Forest Service officials and tribal leaders met regularly to reaffirm its terms. In 1990, it was officially added to the forest's cultural resource management plan. The agreement prohibits non-Native pickers from gathering berries east of Forest Road 24, which cuts through the Sawtooth fields. Several signs throughout the area advise visitors: "Huckleberries on this side of the road reserved for Indians."

**A RAVEN CALLED** above the firs as bees buzzed down below. Huckleberry leaves, now spotted red from the September sun, gently rustled as Susan Jim and her aunt, Lumkyheet Penny Jim, moved through the bushes. Berries thumped softly as they rhythmically hit the bottom of the women's cedar baskets.

"It's just really soothing, isn't it?" 64-year-old Penny Jim said of the sound, looking down as she maneuvered through shrubs nearly as tall as her own 5-foot frame. She drew the thin stems toward her and plucked the deep-purple berries. Huckleberries don't commonly grow in bunches; just one or two grow on each stem. They take time to pick. These plants, known as big or mountain huckleberries, grow only at mid to high elevations. They're a different species than evergreen huckleberries, which grow in low-elevation forests and have been cultivated for gardens and yards.

But evergreen huckleberry fruit is less desirable. The berries' skin is tougher, and their juices less flavorful.

By early September, the berry season was starting to wane. Maple leaves in the forest below began their golden transformation. Penny Jim took off her black hooded sweatshirt, tied a floral purple scarf around her forehead and fanned herself with a beige bucket hat. The low clouds and wildfire smoke made the mountain air feel like the inside of an oven. She sighed, put her hat back on, then started picking.

"We should have been here at 6 in the morning, huh, Auntie," Susan Jim said.

The increasingly warm summers of the last few decades have created softer berries whose juices stain pickers' fingers purple. Susan Jim's father, atway Bronsco Jim Sr., started picking when the sun came up. He finished with hardly any pigment on his fingers, a sign of proper picking.

"My dad would say, 'You should have been there earlier when it's colder, and they'll fall off,'" Susan Jim said of the berries, which harden overnight. "Our dad was no slouch."

*"It is our patch and the same as a wheat field or corn field or a herd of horses or cattle. I wouldn't come into your place and take your crops or your stock and sell them."*

“Don’t look at my hands,” Penny Jim said, laughing.

The two women picked quietly for about six hours in the northwestern part of Gifford Pinchot, outside of Randle. They pick together every year, driving two to four hours from their homes in the Yakima Valley, east of the Cascades. They gather berries to preserve in cans for ceremonies throughout the year. They stay in the picking mindset, as Susan Jim described. It’s an act of endearment. “You need to remember that these foods are gonna help somebody,” she said. “If they’re lonely, they’re sick, or whatever it may be, it’s gonna help them.”

But it’s hard to find time to head to the mountains, with 8-to-5 Monday-through-Friday jobs. Penny Jim is also earning a Ph.D. in Indigenous studies, on top of her full-time job. “I should be writing now,” she said. “But it’s berry season. My professor knows.”

Good, secluded berry patches are also becoming harder to find. Many tribal members can pick only on Saturdays in August and early September, since they don’t harvest food on Sundays. By the time they arrive at their preferred patch, it might already be picked over by commercial pickers, who camp in the forest for weeks during the season, picking every day. “I always tell Auntie, we just gotta find places, more places that people overlook,” Susan Jim said.

As children in the 1970s, Susan Jim and her sisters picked with their mother, father, grandmothers and cousins, all day until dusk. They tried to keep up with their mother as she maneuvered through the bushes. If they lagged too far behind, the shrubs slapped them in the face. They’d set up camp and pick all week, leaving only to refuel on gas and food at nearby mountain towns. Their grandmothers, as Susan Jim’s older sister, Tina Jim, described, were “go-go-go, pick-pick-pick.” At night, they’d start cleaning the berries, preparing them for canning.

Each family member had their preferred camp spot: Louise Billy and her younger sister camped on the southwest side of Surprise Lake, while another grandmother stayed on the north side. Their uncle favored a roadside pullout with his wife, just the two of them. Later, when Bronsco Jim Sr. began commercial fishing on the Columbia in the summer, he needed more help from his family, and their trips to the berry fields became less frequent. But the River People haven’t always had to choose between berries and salmon. “My dad said when our people would be at the berry fields, there were places they would go to, to get salmon,” Jim Jr. said, of nearby rivers, like the Lewis. But the fish can’t get there anymore, blocked by dams.

The Jim siblings and their cousins had to behave and be quiet in the fields. They weren’t allowed to swim in the numerous lakes. “Our grandparents did not know that area (as a place) to go camping, leisurely, and play,” Jim Jr. said. “They were really respected. There are things that we don’t talk about to the public, the powers of these places that our people know of.”

Legend-stories pass on the lessons about how to hold yourself in the high country. It’s not like today, with people on dirt bikes, ATVs, paddleboards, snowmobiles and skis, cruising over cultural sites. Floaties on a lake, bass drum booming. “The new people view it as playing,” Jim Jr. said.

**DECADES PASSED** without fire. Huckleberry shrubs still grew in the understory, but as trees closed the canopy,

they robbed the bushes of the sunlight and water they needed to produce fruits. “At this rate it will not be long until berry picking in this area will be no more,” a former Forest Service employee wrote in 1952, estimating that the fields dwindled to less than one-third of their previous size.

By the 1950s and 1960s, the commercial huckleberry picking fueled by the Depression faded as the economy improved and the timber industry expanded in the post-World War II housing boom. But some pickers persisted, and the berries still fetched a high price. As part of a Forest Service study on managing huckleberry fields, the agency removed trees from about 190 acres of the Sawtooth fields but barely curtailed the encroaching vegetation. A huckleberry management plan was developed in 1968 but never implemented.

A 1972 Forest Service report urged land managers to restore the fields in both Oregon and Washington — not for their cultural importance, but for their economic value. They were worth an estimated \$300 per acre, or about \$11,200 based on the price of berries today. Work to bring them back “should begin at once,” the report said.

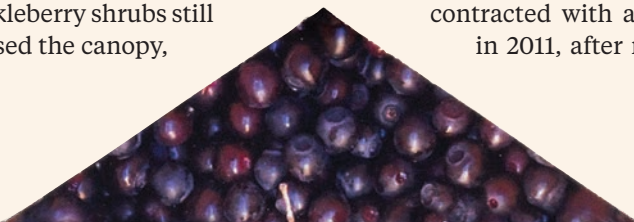
More than a decade later, in 1983, Yakama Nation leaders met with agency officials to discuss managing the Sawtooth fields and returning fire to the landscape. The 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens buried huckleberry fields under hot ash and killed bees that pollinated the shrubs, leaving tribal people with even fewer places to pick.

In 1984, Congress established the 20,782-acre Indian Heaven Wilderness. The area encompassed the berry fields where the River People picked, places Louise Billy took her family. In a designated “wilderness,” the trees that have invaded those fields cannot be cut.

As the berry fields diminished, demand increased. Huckleberry products became souvenirs for tourists visiting small mountain towns in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana, garnering fans for their flavor but also local allure. They represented nostalgic relics of the mountain West, with consumers willing to pay a lot for a taste.

By 1994, still lacking fire and a long-term management plan, the Sawtooth fields had shrunk from 12,000 acres to 4,000 acres. The 2,800 acres originally protected by the Handshake Agreement within the Sawtooth fields decreased to about 700 acres. At the time, Gifford Pinchot archaeologist Cheryl Mack brought Yakama elders to Indian Heaven, including Louise Billy and two of her sisters. Mack asked them if they recalled camping at particular sites as children. But the elders couldn’t remember. They didn’t recognize the landscape anymore. Colonization shaded their memory, hiding treaty obligations under a thickening canopy of firs.

The Forest Service attempted a few small-scale tree removal projects with the Yakama Nation in the 1980s and ’90s, 20 acres here and there, but the tree growth outpaced the agency’s effort. In a 2008 report, the agency said the Sawtooth fields were “rapidly declining.” The fields were estimated to be 1,500 acres, but of that, only 182 acres were still considered open berry fields. Around that time, the agency thinned about 1,100 acres using hand tools and contracted with a timber company to remove trees. And in 2011, after more than a century, the Forest Service,



in collaboration with the Yakama Nation, burned 90 acres. A few smaller burns took place several years later. No other fields have burned since.

These projects over the decades are “the reason all of the Sawtooth huckleberry fields haven’t disappeared,” Jessica Hudec, a forest ecologist for Gifford Pinchot who has worked on huckleberry restoration projects, said. The agency plans to thin 500 acres of the Sawtooth fields this summer. In the last few years, it has also worked with the Cowlitz Indian Tribe on projects to reduce tree cover on a berry site in the northern part of the forest where both Cowlitz and Yakama members pick. The field is closed to commercial picking at the Yakama Nation’s request.

“I wish we could do more (restoration) work that was just targeted at that,” Hudec said, speaking of huckleberries. “Unfortunately, we have fallen short over the years in securing funds beyond the agency’s timber management program.”

For years, Forest Service officials have told the Yakama Nation that the agency cannot burn the fields because of drought. As the climate warms, huckleberry habitat is predicted to shrink by up to 41% by the end of the century.

**A CAR TAILED** Louise Billy and her daughter, Cynthia Espirito, as they drove through the berry fields sometime in the 1980s. At first, they wondered why someone would follow them into the mountains. Then they realized it was commercial pickers. “They were following us so they could learn where we’re going, where the berries are,” Espirito, now 66, said.

Tina Jim, 61, remembered seeing commercial pickers in the Mount St. Helens area sometime in the early 2000s. Pickers poured red unripe berries into white plastic containers near a 12-passenger van. A few years later, a picker tried to block Jim’s way as she drove up a narrow forest road to a berry field. She’s seen a dozen pickers in the fields, standing in a line, stripping the shrubs clean.

Some commercial pickers strap rifles to their backs. One had a machete. They try to intimidate elders with dogs, blocking roads and picking from the same bush. In addition to bear spray, the Jims now carry Mace and a knife.

“One day, someone’s gonna get hurt,” said Anna Wahtomy, a 65-year-old Kámiłpa member and great-granddaughter of Chief Yal-lup, who established the Handshake Agreement. Twenty-some years ago, not far from where that handshake took place, two white boys fired a gun toward Wahtomy as she picked, missing her. Soon after, she attended meetings with the Forest Service. “It feels like we’re talking to you on deaf ear, like you don’t listen,” she told a group of federal officials recently. “We’re just moving our mouth, and you’re just there and shaking your head.”

Most of the productive and accessible huckleberry habitat in

Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana is on Forest Service-owned lands where commercial harvest is prohibited. But enforcement is scant, and illegal harvest is common.

At Gifford Pinchot, the only national forest with a large-scale commercial huckleberry program, commercial pickers pay either \$60 for a two-week permit with a 40-gallon limit, or \$105 for a seasonal permit with a 70-gallon limit. Pickers who don’t sell berries also need a personal use permit that allows them to harvest up to three gallons a year for free. The Forest Service doesn’t require commercial pickers to show proof of insurance, including general liability, worker’s compensation or vehicle insurance. In contrast, the Idaho Department of Lands issues commercial huckleberry permits for state-owned lands for \$500 with proof of insurance.

Gifford Pinchot sold 928 permits last season, for a total of \$83,445. Revenue from permits has grown steadily since the early 1990s, when the Forest Service started its commercial program, from \$625 in 1993 to a high of \$105,807 in 2022.

Come mid-August, cream-colored canvas tents pop up near gas station parking lots on a short stretch of Highway 12 in Randle, just outside the forest’s northern boundary. Commercial huckleberry buyers set up temporary shops, with cash registers, scales, strainers and large freezers, to buy fresh berries from pickers. For weeks, buyers camp in RVs in the small town, purchasing berries everyday until the season subsides. Some also buy wild mushrooms, like chanterelles.

Pickers set up tents in Randle, too, camping near the Cowlitz River, while others camp in the woods, closer to the berry fields. Most descend from Vietnamese and

Cambodian families who came to the U.S. in the 1970s and found work picking huckleberries. In the last few years, more people from Mexico and Central America have begun picking, too.

Pickers drive to the mountains in the morning and return to the canvas tents in the evening, selling buckets of berries to buyers, who are also typically southeast Asian or Latino. Buyers are often small business owners or work as contractors for wild food companies, like Mikuni Wild Harvest, a Canadian corporation with a distribution center in Tacoma. Those companies then sell to private customers, chefs, wineries and other companies that create huckleberry products. This season, buyers typically paid pickers \$5.50 per pound of huckleberries, or \$27.50 a gallon, about \$13.75 an hour for eight hours of work if a picker sells four gallons, the average amount. “That barely covers gas and a beer,” one picker said after selling two gallons.

A buyer who did not want to be identified said that he was paid on commission, earning 50 cents a pound for the berries that he bought, about \$250 for several weeks of work. The company typically purchases 500 pounds over the season, likely earning around \$12,500 from those berries.

*“It feels like we’re talking to you on deaf ear, like you don’t listen. We’re just moving our mouth, and you’re just there and shaking your head.”*



*For All Time*, 2025. Archival pigment print photo collage, cedar, 8 x 8 inches. Images used: Elaine Harvey, Epiphany Couch, 1912 Gifford Pinchot National Forest Map, University of Washington Libraries.

Pickers delivered 250 to 300 gallons daily during the season to the Trout Lake Grocery, a store near the southern part of the forest that sold berries for \$67 a gallon.

Tina Jim will close her eyes as she passes the tents on Highway 12. She'll look at her phone, or fiddle with the music. "I'm sick and tired of this," Jim said. "Look at what they're doing."

In a large white freezer perched on a trailer, another buyer stacked white buckets on top of each other — 780 pounds of huckleberries, worth about \$20,000. "There's a lot of money in the mountains," he said. "A lot."

**MIKUNI WILD HARVEST** sells frozen huckleberries for about \$30 a pound, or \$150 a gallon. Fresh & Wild, a Vancouver-based company, sells the berries for about \$40 a pound, or \$200 a gallon. Northwest Wild Foods charges about \$20 a pound, or \$100 a gallon. According to a 2007 Washington State Department of Natural Resources report, Northwest Wild Foods, a Burlington, Washington-based corporation, grossed \$750,000 in 2006 from selling frozen berries, though that included other varieties such as elderberries and lingonberries. The company also sells huckleberry pies for \$50, using berries harvested near Mount St. Helens, which is

located within Gifford Pinchot, although berry-picking is prohibited in the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument. Northwest Wild Foods also sells Idaho huckleberries, describing them on its website as “typically growing naturally on US forest service land they are 100% spray free.” The company says that the “majority of Idaho huckleberries come from the Priest Lake area,” though harvesting is prohibited if it takes place in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

In an email, Northwest Wild Foods owner Tom LaMonte said that he hadn’t heard about the issues raised by the Yakama Nation. “The tribes have their own designated picking territory in the National Forest that is protected for them only,” he wrote. “I have never once heard of intimidation or other issues regarding the tribal land so that is completely new news to me. The only thing I have ever really heard is that none of the tribe members actually pick on their designated territory.”

Huckleberry soap, lotion, lip balm, candles, jam, pancake mix, caramels, taffy, jelly beans, honey, tea, vinaigrette and soda pack the shelves of small-town stores and online retailers. The Oregon-based Tillamook Creamery and Umpqua Dairy sell huckleberry ice cream. A Washington-based cannabis company named Wyld sells huckleberry CBD gummies. Wild Roots, an Oregon-based company, makes huckleberry-infused vodka. A cafe in Trout Lake sells huckleberry mimosas and margaritas. Wineries in Oregon and Washington make huckleberry wine.

“We get offended when we go out and we see huckleberry products,” Kámiłpa member and food-gatherer Trina Sherwood, 60, said.

“It just shows how much they pick and pick off of our bushes,” Sherwood’s 18-year-old daughter, Tamisa Sherwood, said.

It’s unclear where some companies, including Tillamook, Umpqua, Fresh & Wild and Cascade Organic, get their berries, as none of them responded to multiple interview requests. A Forest

Service official said that he was told that Tillamook buys berries picked in Gifford Pinchot.

Sherwood and other Jim family members regularly see commercial pickers harvesting from bushes in the Sawtooth fields exclusively reserved for Native use, as well as in other areas of the forest where commercial harvest is banned. Pickers are out before the commercial season even starts on the second Monday in August, a regulation the Yakama Nation pushed the Forest Service to adopt in 2005 so that tribal members could have enough berries for their huckleberry feast. “Who’s to say pickers aren’t just getting (free) personal-use permits and then selling the berries?” one commercial buyer who didn’t want to be identified said.

Gifford Pinchot employs one to four temporary officers to patrol the berry fields. Last season, the Forest Service issued 13 citations to people who lacked permits but claimed they were harvesting for personal use. Forest Service law enforcement officers declined an interview request.

Washington’s commercial huckleberry industry was unregulated for decades until 2008, when the Yakama Nation successfully lobbied state legislators to pass a law. Buyers are now required to obtain permit information from pickers and keep track of how many berries they buy. While Forest Service law enforcement officers can check buyers’ information, the law is enforced by county sheriffs. A conviction can lead to fines and time served in the county jail.

But no one has ever been charged in Lewis County, where Randle is located, according to the Lewis County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office. In Klickitat County, one person was charged with buying 990 pounds of berries before the commercial season opened in August 2017, but the case was ultimately dismissed, according to a report released by the Klickitat County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office in response to a public records request.

“It’s great to have a law, but if no one is getting in trouble for breaking that law, do you really have a law?” Phil Rigdon (Yakama



*How to Hold Yourself in the High Country*, 2025. Archival pigment print photo collage, glass beads, beading felt and nylon thread, 10.5 x 8 inches (original). Pictured from left: Maggie Jim, Juanita George, Mrs. Oscar Billy, Louise Billy, Agnes Billy. Images used: Epiphany Couch, 1912 Gifford Pinchot National Forest map, University of Washington Libraries, John W. Thompson photographs, 1953-1955, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections.

Nation), superintendent of Yakama Nation's Department of Natural Resources, said.

"When you start having such a big economy tied into this, it's changing the nature of what we as Yakamas wanted and think it should be," he said.

Cynthia Espirito's daughter Elaine Harvey, a 48-year-old Kámiŋpa member and food gatherer who is also related to the Jim family, has worked for years to protect cultural resources. The commercialization of all cultural plants, including huckleberries, should be phased out, she said. "We've got treaty rights, tribal rights, that supersede and preempt the development of states, counties and national forests."

Harvey is a part of a volunteer federal committee that has developed amendments to the Northwest Forest Plan, which guides management of 17 national forests from Northern California to Southeast Alaska, including Gifford Pinchot. When the initial Forest Plan was adopted by the Forest Service in 1994, the process lacked input from the 82 tribes within the region. Many of the proposed amendments center on cultural resource management. One amendment reads: "Commercial collection of special forest products shall not be permitted if the relevant Tribal governing body identified it would result in limiting Tribal member access to treaty, reserved, or retained resources."

"We're tired of being put on the back burner," Harvey told the committee at a meeting in December. "We're the ones dealing with the loss of our food."

"Most tribes would not give permission to exploit our foods," she said. "That's what's happening here. Our First Foods are being exploited, our medicines, our basket weaving material. These are all being exploited without rightful tribal consultation."

Harvey and other tribal leaders, including Phil Rigdon and Bronsco Jim Jr., meet with Forest Service officials annually to discuss the huckleberry season, among other things. Each year, they complain to officials about commercial pickers and the lack of fire in the fields. But turnover in the agency is high. Harvey and Jim Jr. have to constantly teach new employees about their relationship to the landscape and treaty rights. "We're the same people talking, saying the same thing, and there's a number of different people that have no clue (about) what these mountains mean," Jim Jr. said. "We have to explain, spill our heart out, and then they move onto another place, or they move up on the corporate ladder."

Gifford Pinchot Forest Supervisor Johanna Kovarik, who was hired in 2023, said the agency was open to considering a ban on the commercial program. At a meeting in late September in Stevenson, Washington, Jacque Buchanan, the Forest Service's regional for-  
ester for the Pacific Northwest Region, said that the agency would

conduct a review and decide whether to further restrict commercial picking in Gifford Pinchot before the upcoming huckleberry season.

**EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE**, Bronsco Jim Jr. assured his 10-year-old nephew, AJ Martin, that they were almost there. Jim Jr. led a group of his family — AJ and his mother, Velene Antone; Jim Jr.'s two sisters, Tina Jim and Lorna Jim; and retired Forest Service archaeologist Rick McClure — on a Sunday hike to Kalamát (Indian Racetrack) in Indian Heaven Wilderness. Huckleberries' scarlet leaves brightened the understory. The ground was crisp, hardened by late September air almost cold enough to show clouds of breath.

The family's ancestors raced horses and played games on Sunday afternoons at Kalamát. They gathered there before concluding the huckleberry season and their summer in the mountains. While the salmon still run in the fall and the deer still graze in the forests, huckleberries are considered the last of the seasonal foods, the final word, as Jim described. The "finale of the finale."

Three miles into the hike, Jim Jr. passed a small meadow and lake. "Čikwáš," he told AJ. The area used to be open, not crowded with trees, he said. AJ nodded and looked around. They kept walking.

In another small meadow covered with dry yellow grasses, Jim Jr. pointed out the still-visible race-tracks on the ground — a straight, slight indent that holds the memory of generations of hooves pounding and people enjoying themselves while gathering berries.

Farther up the trail, on top of Lutsá Puštáy (Red Mountain), Jim Jr. pointed to the surrounding buttes and mountains. Áyunaaš. Tuksaywáakuł. He told AJ stories about why they have to pick berries quietly.

They held a small ceremony in the meadow at Kalamát, a final acknowledgment and thanks to the mountains, and to the huckleberries.

"These mountains, meadows remember us," Jim Jr. said. "They know what we're saying. They understand us." 🌸

*Josephine Woolington is a writer and musician in her hometown, Portland, Oregon. She is the author of Where We Call Home: Lands, Seas, and Skies of the Pacific Northwest, which won a 2024 Oregon Book Award for Nonfiction.*

*Epiphany Couch, a spuyaləpabš (Puyallup)/Yakama descendant, is an interdisciplinary artist exploring generational knowledge, storytelling, and the natural and spiritual worlds. Couch is from Tacoma, Washington, and now lives in Portland, Oregon.*

*Reporting for this article was supported by an award from the Institute for Journalism & Natural Resources.*

*"Most tribes would not give permission to exploit our foods. That's what's happening here. Our First Foods are being exploited, our medicines, our basket weaving material."*

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# Filipinos that strike

An oral history archive gathers some of the voices behind the recent LA teacher strikes.

BY LAUREL FLORES FANTAUZZO  
ILLUSTRATION BY REJOY ARMAMENTO

**TO BE OF THE PHILIPPINES** in the United States — to have crossed the Pacific yourself, or to have been born from ancestors who brought you here — is to carry the archipelago's violent, feudal history in your soul, an intergenerational weight. For some Filipino, Filipina and Filipinx workers, that weight can translate into an understandable silence, into coping with the conditions employers set, into an anticipatory obedience to avoid the mortal danger we fear, in our bones, we risk by speaking and acting for what we deserve. Because to gather as a collective with fellow workers in the Philippines is to challenge an entrenched feudal structure designed to crush us and keep us silent. To go on strike is to risk your life; the classist elitism will threaten to crush you and your body even as you lay it down before the machines, both real and metaphorical. Labor leaders under every administration, from Ferdinand Marcos Sr., in the 1970s and 1980s, to Ferdinand Marcos Jr. today, are routinely threatened, arrested and imprisoned on false charges — and sometimes murdered.

That fear of protesting was something Jennifer Suzara-Cheng knew well. When she was an 8-year-old child in the Philippines, soldiers burst into her home, destroyed the family's belongings, and arrested her father, Antonio Suzara, for criticizing Marcos Sr. It was her first lesson in the terror of speaking out. But it was a fear she and her family chose

to face; upon his release, after torture and deprivation in a prison camp, Antonio Suzara became a union organizer.

As a teenager, Suzara-Cheng became a student leader at her own provincial university, Ateneo de Naga. The group — Justice for Aquino, Justice for All — was named for a political leader, Benigno Aquino, Jr., who was assassinated on the tarmac upon his return to the Philippines to challenge dictator Marcos Sr. “When we go out to strike,” Suzara-Cheng said, recalling that time in the 1980s, “we are scared for our lives.”

Suzara-Cheng immigrated to the U.S. in 2004 to give her children a better future than what she saw for them in the Philippines. In Concord, California, she had the opportunity to strike again, this time for better working conditions at the high school where she was a science teacher. She wanted to join the labor action, but felt the same fear she'd known back home: that by striking for a better life, she could be risking her life. She asked her union president to sit beside her, and stay with her, for protection. He reassured her: “Jennifer, nothing will happen to you here.”

Twenty years later, on Oct. 21, 2024, Suzara-Cheng spoke into a wireless microphone, addressing her fellow educators. She said her union's name: UTLA, United Teachers Los Angeles. The Los Angeles Unified School District's scope is massive: over 900 school sites across 725 square miles. UTLA's membership includes 35,000 educators.

“UTLA gave me the freedom to speak, the freedom to fight,” she said.

The event was called “Filipinos That Strike,” and Suzara-Cheng's outspoken voice was one of many. The dinner, presentation and open mic celebrated the people of the Philippines' role in the recent, historic LA teachers' strikes. Educators, researchers, academics, labor organizers and their children were festive and proud, celebrating with food and music, a DJ included. They were there to honor the work of Jollene Levid, an oral historian, labor organizer and researcher who gathered the stories of Filipino, Filipina and Filipinx striking educators — people like Suzara-Cheng — into a permanent archive.

**FIRST, THERE'S THE** hard work of organizing a strike: assembling, convincing and negotiating with people. Then, together, you take direct action to get workers what they

deserve. But there is an equal need to reflect and preserve the stories of strikers: Each voice a potential education, a catalyst for future labor leaders and strikers.

These acts of reflection and preservation are essential, as Levid knows well. A lifetime Filipina American labor organizer, Levid was a UTLA co-coordinator during the monumental Los Angeles teachers' strikes in 2019 and 2023, successful protests that secured better working conditions for teachers and improved classroom conditions for students. The University of California Los Angeles Labor Studies program invited Levid to be its inaugural Labor Movement Fellow: an initiative to give union leaders time and space to reflect, study and record important elements of their place in the labor movement.

At *Filipinos That Strike*, Levid presented her oral history project in a speech to fellow UTLA members. Here, there was no fear; the overwhelming feeling was one of happiness — a combination solidarity party, academic celebration and Philippine-style feast. Attendees piled plates high with Filipino American food: coconut milk adobo, white rice, fish and bibingka cornbread. Johneric Concordia, proprietor of The Park's Finest, the local Historic Filipinotown restaurant that was feeding the crowd, was himself a product of LAUSD schools. “We're an example of the long play,” he said, a nod of appreciation to the patient teachers who helped raise him into the adult community leader he is today.

Levid opened her speech with a reminder that children were not to be excluded from workers' events. “Children are welcome,” she said. When children cry, they express a need, and members of the audience should feel free to help the caretakers in meeting those needs.

One of the bracing anecdotes Levid shared was of her younger brother, when he was a high school student in 2001. He called her in distress after his social studies teacher told him, “I feel bad for Filipinos. You have no history.”

It was one incident of many that drove Levid to use her weekends and vacation days to collect the oral histories of Filipino community members involved in the strikes — to break both the silence within Filipinos and Filipino Americans in the U.S. and the silence imposed on them.

“You deserve libraries' worth of books written about you, about striking educators. So this archive is the beginning of that,” Levid said.

In 2002, Levid was herself inspired by a singular oral history: *Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farmworkers Movement*, the testimony of the elected leader of the United Farm Workers who remained with his union through a grueling, monumental five-year strike. Levid drew a direct line between the history of Filipinos in the agricultural movement and the Filipina strikers now leading battles for better working conditions in schools, hotels and hospitals.

In a joyful call-and-response, to cheers and celebratory tears, Levid praised several of her fellow UTLA leaders: Grace Regullano, for example, who was the UTLA Research and Data Analytics Director through the 2019 strike. “Remember how UTLA found \$1.5 billion in reserves and said LAUSD could fund smaller class sizes?” Levid said. “That wasn’t magic — that was Grace’s leadership.”

Then Levid turned the microphone over to the audience, prompting them to share their own memories of the strikes, and their feelings about joining the oral history archive at UCLA. Teachers and organizers rose and spoke, among them Grace Regullano. “The vibes were pristine,” she said of the strikes, to applause.

Elementary school teacher Emily Reyes rose and took the mic. She spent years organizing her school colleagues to go on strike. “It was a tough go,” she said. When the March 2023 strike finally happened, the first day brought rain. “We danced in the rain,” Reyes said. “It was very joyful. We knew we were doing the right thing.”

English teacher Christine Gonzalez, still wearing her school ID and classroom keys around her neck well into the evening hours, stood. “We have the power to create the environments we deserve to teach in and that our students deserve to learn in,” she said. The crowd whooped and clapped in agreement.

At the end of the evening’s open mic, Levid led a unity clap. In labor history, she explained, fieldworkers speaking many languages would put down their tools when they heard clapping. Later, Filipino activists added a phrase: “*isang bagsak*.” (One down.) If one falls, goes the phrase, everyone falls. But together, no one need fall.

The crowd clapped together, banishing all present and historical silences. “*Isang bagsak!*” Levid called out, and a single, final clap resounded in perfect unity. Then

cheers and smiles and more fellowship and feasting, as the celebration of Filipino strikers continued. ✨



*Laurel Flores Fantauzzo is the author of the young adult novel My Heart Underwater and the nonfiction book The First Impulse.*

ESSAY

# Welcome to Next LA

A speculative fiction film and video game tap the city's lost history to render a different kind of future.

BY ERIN X. WONG





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**NEARLY A HUNDRED** years ago, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Harland Bartholomew designed a master plan for the city of Los Angeles, drawing a ring around the river at its heart. The plan addressed their concern about the rapid urbanization of cities in the West, which was frequently pushing nature to the outskirts. By centering the river and allowing it to move freely amid fields and wetlands, the planners envisioned a public greenspace where distant neighborhoods could come together as one.

But the plan was quickly dismissed as out of step with the industrialist vision of the 1920s and '30s. Then, in 1938, after a devastating flood, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began to build concrete channels that separated the river from its ecosystem and continue to confine it today. Copies of the original plan still exist, one of which sits in the Los Angeles Public Library, where it fell into the hands of the artist and video game designer Alice Bucknell.

For Bucknell, the plan served as an essential bridge to the past, and it laid the groundwork for their visionary project, *The Alluvials*, a computer-generated, speculative fiction world, accessible through both a film and a video game. *The Alluvials*, which reimagines LA through the lens of water and the natural world, brings the lost dream of the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan to life — remixed as a private development known as Next LA, where the river has been transformed into a teeming wetland filled with iridescent beams of light. A series of ethereal voices guide the audience through a climate-stricken Western water system, from the dried-up basin of the Hoover Dam to the fire-torn Malibu coast.

Like the plan that inspired it, *The Alluvials* issues a warning about where society is heading. In the midst of its eco-surrealist imagery, Bucknell offers a stark picture of the future: a deserted downtown, near-total drought and corporate control over the remaining water resources. But by infusing this dystopian landscape with alternative histories, from the Olmsted-Bartholomew report to an Indigenous sacred site, Bucknell offers a compelling vision of what Los Angeles might have been and what it could still be.

The film version of *The Alluvials* is divided into seven chapters, and the video game contains interactive versions of four of

them. The film opens with aerial shots peering down into the city, which has become half desert, then cuts rhythmically through the region's aquatic ecosystems, each rendered in the digital universe with a neon tech-noir aesthetic. Along the way, viewers meet a cast of familiar characters: the celebrity mountain lion P-22; the Lassen pack of gray wolves from Northern California; and El Aliso, a sycamore tree that once served as a meeting place for leaders of the Kizh-Gabrieleño Tribe, the original occupants of the LA River Basin.

Bucknell was walking the streets of downtown LA, a few blocks from the design school SCI-Arc, where they teach, when they stumbled upon the plaque for El Aliso. The memorial was created by members of the tribe in 2015 to honor the tree, which had long served as a place of worship and gathering. Set into concrete by Highway 101, however, the story all but disappears — making it precisely the kind of the history that Bucknell felt was important to center in their work.

In *The Alluvials* game, El Aliso grows tall in the reforested earth of Next LA. The sycamore tells its own story to players: how it lived for more than 400 years, witnessing waves of colonization and shading lush wineries before it was felled to make way for commercial development. In front of the tree, the memorial plaque hangs, embossed as an enormous hologram, like a curator's introduction to the work of a venerated artist. In this fictional world scarred by climate disaster, El Aliso appears like an oasis, a momentary glimpse into what a worthy burial might have looked like, and a reminder of the many stories that 400-year-old trees can still tell. Bucknell amplifies the power of El Aliso's story by bringing this non-human being back to vivid life.

The artist also celebrates the long history of the yucca moth, which is often outshone by its iconic companion, the Joshua tree. In the dried-out upper basin of Hoover Dam, *The Alluvials* recounts the symbiotic relationship between the yucca moth and the Joshua tree, describing it as an entrancing love story that dates back more than 40 million years. The depiction is not only uplifting, as it casts a flurry of white moths like snow against red rock; it is also a reminder of how complex relationships can be sustained throughout many ages of the Earth.

*The Alluvials* universe is at its most

powerful when viewers are completely immersed in the ambiguity of time. Racing along the lush LA River, you cannot tell if you are deep in the future, experiencing the artificial paradise of Next LA, or deep in the past, exploring the imagination of Olmsted and Bartholomew. By the same token, the spell is broken when the script too closely resembles the modern day. In a later chapter of the film, for instance, viewers learn that Next LA's private water developer puts mood stabilizers in bottled water to combat chronic anxiety over constant wildfires. It's a satire that hits too close to home. Zooming out, however, Bucknell's signature cyberpunk — from the beating electronic score to fluorescent animal silhouettes — largely erases time altogether.

Staring up at the dense galaxy of animated stars, I almost wished I didn't find it so beautiful. Born in the mid-1990s, I remember the precise years when my peers began to diverge into those who spent more time offline, lacing up boots and heading outdoors, and those who found greater fulfillment in the community and self-expression found in cyberspace. Both worlds offer their own comfort and sense of control, and sometimes I don't know which I find more breathtaking — the natural cathedrals of mountains and oceans, or the technological systems made possible by generations of human hands and minds.

Throughout *The Alluvials*, particularly on the banks of the river, I felt grateful to live in this age of the Earth, when one person can so completely render their imagination into an immersive experience that others can enjoy. Whatever the limitations of the human world, whether bureaucracy or debate, artists can overcome them and create wonders that never made it into reality. This work goes hand-in-hand with advocacy; in the development of their game, Bucknell worked closely with the nonprofit Friends of the LA River, which for decades has worked to build more connected greenspace along the river.

Some critics may be quick to dismiss *The Alluvials* for its style or poetic flourishes, but they cannot deny its broad appeal to a growing audience. The film and game have been featured at over a dozen exhibitions and festivals, from Los Angeles to Madrid, and Bucknell continues to offer access to both by request via their website.

Computer-generated worlds are steadily eclipsing traditional storytelling formats like books and magazines. In this context, Bucknell's work stands as a compelling contribution to California's climate fiction, echoing the legacy of the speculative fiction of Octavia Butler, who first offered scenes of a fire-torn California to the popular imagination back in the 1990s. But times have changed; Bucknell and other artists of the 21st century no longer have to imagine what that future might look like. Their task is much harder: They remind us that, to paraphrase Butler, looking into the future is still, as much as it was before, an act of hope. ☀

*Erin X. Wong is a reporter and researcher based in Oakland. Their work examines the role of technology in environmental issues and solutions.*





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*I felt grateful to live in  
an age when one person  
can so completely render  
their imagination into  
an immersive experience  
that others can enjoy.*

Still frames from *The Alluvials* film (this  
spread) and video game (previous spread).  
**Courtesy of Alice Bucknell**



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## CONFETTI WESTERNS

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



# Mojave makeup tutorial

Wherein a roadrunner inspires our columnist to adorn himself with earthly pigments and serve a look.

BY MILES W. GRIFFIS | ILLUSTRATION BY ERIN FOX

**IT WAS EARLY JANUARY**, and the toyon sapling I'd planted the week before wasn't nearly old enough to produce fruit. So I asked a friend if I could collect a handful of berries from a plant on their property in the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains. The mature, mammoth shrub swayed in the transmontane chaparral and held thousands, each as round and red as a phainopepla's eye.

Back at our cabin on the edge of the Mojave Desert, I mashed a small handful into a red paste and added a splash of water. The concoction smelled fresh and earthy, and I was tempted to taste it, but I resisted: Toyon berries can be toxic if they're not properly cooked. Plus, I'd prepared the substance for a higher purpose: roadrunner-inspired eyeshadow.

The month before, a greater roadrunner hopped our fence and speared an unsuspecting packrat. It turned its head, displaying a dusky sunset of blue and red over its piercing eyes, the *Neotoma* limp between its beak. I was transfixed by the roadrunner's beautiful mug, but it was its fierceness that had me gagging. This *haute couture* creature didn't belong in my garden, I thought. It was meant to snatch wigs on runways, like America's next drag superstar.

The roadrunner's striking features moved me to try emulating the legendary desert bird. I've rarely worn makeup in my life; instead, I often camouflage myself in public, blending into my environment with a simple wardrobe of beiges, sands and sages. Once I became disabled with long COVID, I hid myself even more, masking in public to protect myself from the ever-circulating virus. But now it was time to serve a look — even if it was just for me.

Male roadrunners' colors become accentuated during mating season. In fact, in many bird species, males are the showiest, sporting iridescent, delectable colors, blooming tail feathers, and, in the case of greater sage grouse, even inflatable air sacs on their chests. Environmental activist Pattie Gonia calls birds "drag queens in the sky."

The rock ptarmigan uses makeup for survival, muddying itself to camouflage its white plumage as the snow melts. Greater flamingos eat small crustaceans that make their plumage even more vivid, yassifying their campy pink feathers. Scientists have identified 13 avian families that exhibit this type of behavior. Perhaps this is why drag

queens have dressed as birds for decades; they, too, appreciate the power of transformation.

As I was making my toyon berry eyeshadow, the Santa Ana gales slingshot a small bird into the side of our cabin with a violent *thud*. I put on gloves, slipped outside and placed the stunned bird inside a box next to a space heater. A wildlife app identified it as a hepatic tanager, but I was skeptical. It looked like a male house finch, though instead of the usual blushy face and breast, it was electric clementine. Could it, too, be made up? I covered the box with a cardboard top dotted with airholes, set a timer for 30 minutes and returned to my own makeup adventure.

My first layer was foundation. I stripped to my skivvies in a dusty section in my backyard to mimic the iconic dust bath of the Gambel's quail. Bustling coveys waggle into our yard most mornings, shimmying dirt all

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## *Pattie Gonia calls birds "drag queens in the sky."*

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over their bodies to preen their feathers of oil and mites. Their bobbing head plumes form the shape of a question mark, putting the "Q" in "LGBTQ+." I dropped to the ground and dipped, tossed and shook until I was caked in sun-warmed dirt, a salve to the windchill.

Next, I mixed my freshly extracted toyon berry dye with white watercolor paint, turning it the vermillion of cinnabar crystals. I made another dye by swirling the white paint with juniper berry mash from our yard. The resulting blue was weaker than a roadrunner's cerulean, but it would do. With a watercolor brush, I painted on a white underlayer, then the dusky blue on my eyelids. I accented it with the toyon berry paint.

*BUZZ!* My alarm went off. I peeked into the cardboard box and was relieved to find that the stunned bird was improving, though he appeared to still be gathering himself. As I waited for my eyeshadow to dry, I compared the injured bird to the finches in our yard and confirmed that it was, indeed, a house

finch. An article on Cornell University's site suggested that some males can have a rare orange variation while molting, likely due to a diet low in carotenoids, the molecules that give fruits and vegetables their reds, oranges and yellows. The finch perched on the towel with closed eyes, looking cozy but traumatized. Did he even know he was the color of a small sun? I set the timer for another hour to leave him more time to recuperate, and I finished my mug.

Last fall, a Mojave desert tortoise went viral for its prickly pear lipstick, a byproduct of munching on the cactus fruit. Zooming in on the photo posted by the Department of the Interior, I noticed the application was minimalist and simple. No need to overthink it.

Since it was winter and our cactuses were not bearing fruit, I took the white cloudy cochineal on the pads of our prickly pear and extracted it to make another dye. Mixing it with white paint turned it the color of dragonfruit. It went on my chapped lips like an oil stain on pine.

When I looked in the mirror, I realized my makeup was less *Meep! Meep!* editorial and more Bobo the Clown. But what mattered was that I *felt* like the roadrunner — and maybe a little bit like the tortoise and the quail, too. Years ago, when I tried drag for the first time, all the girls I got ready with looked beautiful, their personas exuding sass and freedom. I never felt kinship with trying to dress up like a Las Vegas showgirl; I felt like Yucca Man trapped in a coral romper.

But with this look, I finally felt liberated, like the final number in *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, when the film's stars, a flamboyant trio, dress as emus. I didn't feel feminine or masculine. I was just a living embodiment of the desert, connected to the toyons, junipers, prickly pears, tortoises, quails and roadrunners all around me.

When I took the top off the orange finch's box, he peered up at my chaotic face. He remained calmly perched, but his frantic birdness was returning with each passing second. I admired his unique coloring as his movements grew quicker, and he took off with a loud *cheep*, rising over our fence into an afternoon sun filtered by the sharp tips of a Mojave yucca. ☀

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

## THE WEST

One doesn't expect century-old government agencies to send out hilarious dispatches. But that's what makes the National Park Service's social media posts such a treat, including one Instagram post that urges wild turkey aficionados to treat the big birds with respect. "Your chances of being hunted by a turkey are low, but never zero," it begins, followed by a closeup view of a turkey looking remarkably like a velociraptor, and then a third image with an even closer and frankly terrifying image of the turkey's eye, glaring at you. The accompanying text reads, "Gobble, gobble. Be careful out there. Did you know turkeys can run at speeds up to 25 miles per hour. Can you? They can also fly as fast as 55 miles per hour (in short bursts). When they need to, turkeys can even swim by tucking their wings, spreading their tails, and kicking. So basically, be alert for any fowl play whether you're on land or water." Check out the National Park Service's Instagram for more — and be careful out there.

## CALIFORNIA/LOS ANGELES

Amid the devastation of the Los Angeles wildfires, bright stories emerge, showing humans — and animals — at their best. Witness Tiptoe, an African sulcata tortoise. When the fires reached her Pacific Palisades neighborhood, Tiptoe's human, Caitlin Doran, knew she had to act. She lured Tiptoe from his hutch with bell peppers, covered him with a blanket and, with the help of family members, hoisted all 175 pounds of the tortoise — which is a lot of tortoise — into the back of an SUV. Tiptoe was a neighborhood celebrity, enjoying regular "romps," assuming tortoises romp, along nearby streets, where he liked to stop and not just smell, but eagerly snack on the roses.



## Heard Around the West

Tips about Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write [heard@hcn.org](mailto:heard@hcn.org).

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL GONZÁLEZ

Tiptoe was also a popular guest star at local festivals and daycare centers. "People will grow vegetables for him. They grow flowers for him. When the grandkids are in town, they'll come over and check Tiptoe out," Doran told NPR. Their very popular Instagram account, [caitlinandtiptoe](https://www.instagram.com/caitlinandtiptoe), shows Tiptoe hanging out, munching on fruit and leafy greens or modeling unusual headgear. Doran believes Tiptoe, who is happily adjusting to his new home in Marina del Rey, has valuable lessons to impart in these insecure times: "Tiptoe has everything he needs on his back, including his home. And for so many of us in the Palisades, that's kind of the same boat we're rocking in."

**BEFORE ALTADENA'S** legendary Bunny Museum and its 46,000-plus bunny objects and memorabilia were destroyed by the Eaton Fire, it was a certified Guinness World Record holder for the world's biggest bunny collection, the *LA Times* reported. The quirky museum, dubbed "the hoppiest place on earth," was founded in 1998 by lagomorph-loving husband and wife Steve Lubanski and Candace Frazee. Over the years, as their collection grew, it moved from an appointment-only venue in their Pasadena home to a 7,000-square-foot building on Lake Avenue. Frazee has promised to rebuild at the same location, and bunny boosters are welcome to hop on

over to the museum's GoFundMe page and lend a paw.

**NOT LONG BEFORE** the LA fires broke out, Sam Arbid bought a home in Altadena. He was checking out the property when he peeked into the crawl space, only to find that it was already occupied: A 525-pound black bear had taken up residence and was snug as a bug in a rug, convinced he'd found the ideal AirBearNBear to hibernate in. As Arbid told ABC7, "I couldn't believe it," when his Ring camera revealed the unexpected tenant. He was still trying to figure out how to evict him when the Eaton Fire forced him and his family to evacuate. Luckily, their home survived. When the utility company came to restore power, however, its employees found "Beary" still in residence. Not surprisingly, they declined to work, saying, in what may have been an understatement, that they felt "discomfort about working around a 525-pound bear." Tranquilizing a bear that large and heavy and then dragging him out of a crawl space wasn't an option, so a wildlife expert from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife finally lured Beary out from under the house and into a box-shaped trap, using tins of sardines, peanut butter and a rotisserie chicken. (No eggs, however; they're too pricey, even for a bruin-size budget.) Beary was loaded onto a truck and taken to Angeles National Forest, where he was safely released. ☼

*Tiffany Midge, a citizen of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation, was raised by wolves in the Pacific Northwest. Her books include The Dreamcatcher in the Wry, and Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese's, both published by Bison Books. She resides in Idaho near the Columbia River Plateau, homeland of the Nimiipuu.*

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# #IAM THE WEST

**LAURIE FISHER (SHE/HER)**  
**CEO and Founder of PHNX Development**  
**San Diego, California**

I was called to Santa Rosa, California, in 2018 to help fire survivors rebuild their homes after the Tubbs Fire, and that was an eye-opening experience. It was a very difficult process and a long one; these folks didn't want to build a new home, they just wanted their home back. After that, I was determined to solve this problem, and that was when I founded PHNX Development. I have experience working with victims of violent crime, and so I'm trained in trauma-informed care and crisis intervention. We retooled the design process to make it streamlined and easier to navigate. We are the first organization to build a single-family, net-zero energy home using Type 1A construction, the highest rating of noncombustible construction, without wood, making homes climate-resilient and wildfire-resistant. We are empowering local, small-to-medium contractors and businesses to build back a stronger community, a safer community.

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