

High Country News

A woman with dark hair, looking slightly to the left, is the central figure. She wears a brown quilted jacket adorned with several colorful patches, including a large multi-colored starburst on the left chest and a blue flower on the right sleeve. She holds a bouquet of crumpled plastic bags in shades of orange, blue, and purple. The background is a vast, arid landscape under a sky filled with soft, white clouds.

A MONUMENTAL
RECKONING

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Inside the world of
wild horse training

Alaska Native youth are
going all in on climate

Will the West see a
nuclear renaissance?

HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

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Guests at Interfaith Sanctuary in Boise, Idaho, watch the Mel Brooks classic *Spaceballs*.
Murphy Woodhouse / HCN

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Another form of love

ON A RECENT TRIP TO JOSHUA TREE, I had the opportunity to attend a protest of the Trump administration's depraved cuts to public-lands managers and park employees. Crowds of people held signs saying "Parks Not Oligarchs," "Rangers Rock," "Defund DOGE." There were tambourines, a coronet, a woman dressed as a monarch butterfly and a man carrying our state flag, with its image of one of the last California grizzlies roaming a green meadow above the words "California Republic." What I felt most strongly, being among that crowd of people, was this: Defending what we love is another form of love.

I was especially heartened to see so many American flags, some upside-down, signaling distress, others right side up, waving on small sticks held by young children. An older man wore a larger flag as a cape. I remember how, during the Iraq War, the flag was co-opted by supporters of that war, which was being waged under false pretenses. Now the flag is a symbol of our love for the land. After all, national parks are an American invention. But, like our country, a flawed one. All public land is land that was formerly occupied and stewarded by Indigenous people. The establishment of many parks involved the forced removal of Indigenous communities, perhaps most notably in Yosemite. We might call it "our" public land, but it was someone else's prior to colonization. At a protest near Cap Rock, inside Joshua Tree National Park, a LandBack sign was held high next to someone waving an upside-down flag.

Earlier in the day, near the corner of Park Boulevard and Highway 62 in the town of Joshua Tree, we encountered some men who were brandishing flags and some hardcore motorcycle regalia. My friend wondered if they were counter-protesters, there to support the president's sweeping cuts to programs that benefit the vulnerable, to defend the havoc DOGE has unleashed on the federal workforce, in favor of slashing funding for scientific research. Instead, they gave a thumbs-up to a protester's sign.

There was much honking of horns in support, from passenger cars, tractor trailers — even Teslas. There was also opposition from drivers-by, middle fingers thrust out windows, the shouting of expletives, though such responses were in the radical minority. One had to wonder what their point of view was: Do they not like national parks? Are they happy that more than a thousand rangers, trail workers and other public-lands personnel unjustly lost their jobs, jobs they had held, in some cases, for decades? Or are they simply in lockstep with an administration that, sooner or later, will come for them and their families, too?

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief



Gregory Nickerson / Wyoming Migration Initiative

Cutting 'boots-on-the-ground, getting-it-done stuff' could harm the West's fish and wildlife for decades

The research co-ops that have been funded by Congress every year since 1960 provide substantial returns for taxpayers.

By Christine Peterson



Helen H. Richardson / The Denver Post via Getty

The Trump administration is trying to fire the 'backbone' of wildland firefighting

Last month's terminations cut employees who serve critical support roles on fires.

By Kylie Mohr



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A trainer leads her mustang during the Mounted Division at the Mustang Yearlings Washington Youth (MYWY) Mustang Madness competition in Enumclaw, Washington. Horse trainers in the program receive a wild mustang from the Bureau of Land Management's Wild Horse and Burro Program and get to show off the results of their training at the competition in August. **M. Scott Brauer / HCN**

ON THE COVER

Historical researcher and former journalist Nancy Ukai stands for a portrait on the site of the Topaz Relocation Center in Millard County, Utah, during events marking the 80th anniversary of the killing of Topaz prisoner James Wakasa. **Kori Suzuki / 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.

WORSHIPPING FALSE PROFITS

Brooke Larsen's article "Utah's coal mines can't find enough workers" (March 2025) is the ammunition we need for a fight we currently face in South-central Alaska. Our public utility, the Matanuska Electric Association, has been hearing the pandering of Terra, a "clean coal" firm, proposing a multibillion-dollar project.

In Larsen's article, I was struck by some of the stories of hard-working miners. It is frustrating that yet again, labor and "jobs" are at the forefront of the messaging for these unsustainable, destructive and, frankly, 20th century power plants. Alaska is vital in the fight for actual carbon capture and storage. Must we give up public lands and public utilities for private profits yet again?

**Andy Paul
Palmer, Alaska**

I'm always nonplussed when I read about companies that can't get a "workforce." We live in a capitalist economy. If you can't get what you need, up your offer

until you get it, or do without. Were coal mines to offer \$50 an hour instead of \$26, they'd likely find more qualified miners than they need. But then upper management couldn't make their yacht, mansion and Bentley payments, so that's never going to happen.

**Rusty Austin
Rancho Mirage, California**

"If we want to restore the natural world our lives depend on ... we'll need to put an army to work for the rest of the century."

LOVING – AND RENEWING – FIERCELY!

At 85-plus years old, I was considering downsizing by not renewing. Then, in the March edition, I read Jennifer Sahn's editor's note, "Love fiercely," and knew that I had to support HCN and the many concerns that it voices.

**Katherine Kelly
Pinedale, Wyoming**

AN ARMY FOR THE EARTH

"A Fight We Can Win" (February 2025) by Alexander Lemons was just what I needed to refresh my spirit. His story about his work along the Jordan River was a wonderful anecdote about the power of restoration in rejuvenating his mental and physical state. Please continue these positive stories, as it is easy to fall into despair and hopelessness in today's turmoil.

**Cheryl Chipman
Bishop, California**

I enjoyed reading Alexander Lemons' piece about his journey from a life in the military to one in ecosystem restoration. One line stood out to me, "If we want to restore the natural world our lives depend on ... we'll need to put an army to work for the rest of the century." By relaunching the Civilian Conservation Corps, we

have such an opportunity to work on twin crises in our country: climate change and the dearth of meaningful work available to our youth. Though it seems like a long shot in the present moment, let's hope Lemons' call to return people from endless military activity overseas and put them to work restoring our environment does not fall on deaf ears forever.

**Jake Hanft
San Francisco, California**

NATIVE FIRE CULTURE IS HOT

I just read "Lit up," (February 2025) and wanted to thank you. I was on a Forest Service wildland crew for a handful of years, and

you did a lovely job describing what the work is like and the way it is in equal parts incredibly challenging and incredibly rewarding (and fun).

I also really appreciated your incorporation of Indigenous fire culture and management. One of the most impactful experiences of my life was working on a large wildfire complex on Karuk land in Northern California, where the tribe was meaningfully incorporated into the incident command structure. It is awesome to see Indigenous fire managers given the space to lead these efforts, as they have since time immemorial.

**Delaney Rudy
Paonia, Colorado
Western Watersheds Project**

FINDING THE REAL FRAUD

I was wondering why there were suddenly so many postings on Facebook by park rangers, Fish and Wildlife researchers and Forest Service employees about getting fired. They seem to follow a theme of having good job reviews, then being told they weren't any good and being fired. Your article ("People brace for impacts on land, water and wildlife after feds fire thousands over holiday weekend," Feb. 17, 2025) explains why I'm suddenly seeing all those posts.

Thanks for documenting the bumbling efforts of this administration's amateurs, made up of Elon Musk's software interns turned expert government auditors. They feel that shouting the word "fraud" is justification enough, and the public is so stupid it won't even ask what kind of fraud, or why a fraud investigation that should take weeks or even months was accomplished in a matter of minutes. The reason is, of course, that it's not true.

**Alton Marsh,
Frederick, Maryland**

CORRECTION

In "The rise of the recreation economy" (Facts & Figures, March 2025) the key to the National Park Service visitor spending graph was incorrect. The graph showed visitor spending in hundreds of millions of dollars, not tens of millions. We regret the error.



Student members of the Green Initiative climate club meet in a Park High School classroom in Livingston, Montana, in March.

REPORTAGE

Checking in with Montana's youth climate activists

They won in court but have no interest in stopping there.

BY NICK MOTT
PHOTOS BY LOUISE JOHNS

RIPLEY CUNNINGHAM took the microphone and looked out at an audience of about 350 people in the echoey, ornate rotunda of Montana's state Capitol, her favorite thrift-store flower pendant around her neck. It was January, the start of the legislative session, and the high school senior, a speech and debate star, was emceeing a statewide climate gathering. "I am comforted in knowing that we have an interconnected community of people fighting for the future of our home," she said. Cunningham, who'd just turned 18, added that she'd not yet been able to vote in an election, but "being here today helps me realize the power that my voice carries and the change that it can create."

Cunningham and five other members of Green Initiative, a student climate club

at Park High School, a public school in Livingston, Montana, had driven hours along icy, wind-drifted roads to get here. Just weeks earlier, Montana's Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling in favor of a group of young people who sued the state over its climate inaction in *Held v. Montana*. Now, state lawmakers had to implement that decision. As Cunningham spoke, the Green Initiative members who were in the audience hoisted a massive sign: "PROTECT OUR HOME."

Livingston, population about 9,000, is located in a fossil fuel-driven, Republican-led state whose leaders are working to quash any action to slow climate change. But Park High's Green Initiative is an incubator for climate action, and these students aim to show those in power that there's still a

groundswell of resistance.

Nearly 50 students have come through Green Initiative since the program began in 2017. Former science teacher Alecia Jongeward — who still sponsors the club, though she's left teaching — started it by sorting through the school's trash for recyclables with students. They won a small grant to get recycling bins at the school. Then they won more grants and awards, including one for a feasibility study from the state for solar panels on the school that led to the installation of the panels themselves. Members have performed climate-related monologues and held "trash-ion" shows to highlight sustainable clothing. They've served on a state-appointed committee to help Montana review its environmental policies and organized and attended protests. The inaugural statewide climate summit they hosted drew dozens of students from across Montana. Last year, they even won a \$400,000 grant from the federal government for electric school buses.

Perhaps most visibly, a Green Initiative participant was one of the 16 plaintiffs in *Held* who alleged that, through its fossil fuel-centric policies, the state was violating their constitutionally enshrined right to "a clean and healthful environment." In particular, they challenged a rule related to the Montana Environmental Policy Act, or MEPA, that excluded the impacts of greenhouse gas emissions from environmental reviews.

In summer 2023, the case went to trial. Over the course of a week, young people and climate experts took the stand. Homeschooled Green Initiative participant Eva Lighthiser recalled recent climate-related catastrophes that affected Livingston: a parasite outbreak on the Yellowstone River, a historic flood, and oppressive, depressing smoke from wildfires summer after summer. "I felt like I needed to take action, and this felt like a way to do it," she testified.

In August 2023, the judge ruled against the state, which appealed to the Montana Supreme Court. When the court affirmed the ruling in December, *Held* became the first case in the country in which youth sued the government over climate change — and won.

“IT GAVE ME a lot of hope that we are going to be able to make independent change within our community and, hopefully, within the state,” said Jorja McCormick, a Green Initiative member who loves hiking and embroiders her own shoes. But the pushback came fast. U.S. Sen. Steve Daines and Gov. Greg Gianforte, both Republicans, released statements saying the Supreme Court decision would hurt Montana’s economy and lead to endless litigation.

Now, lawmakers have to figure out how to incorporate the decision into the state’s environmental reviews. Republican legislators introduced a suite of bills to reshape such reviews in this year’s legislative session. Proposed laws would exclude whole categories of projects from MEPA, remove language that requires reviews to analyze long-term impacts, strike a sentence that connects MEPA to protecting Montanans’ right to a clean and healthful environment, and prevent the state from implementing air quality standards stricter than the federal government’s. Another bill tackled the *Held* decision head-on, mandating that environmental reviews consider only “proximate” impacts. Imagine, say, a coal project on state land: The environmental analysis could include only emissions associated with the mining project itself, not the transport or burning of that coal.

At the time of writing, the MEPA bills

have strong Republican support and seem likely to pass. Asked about the bills at a press conference in February, Gianforte said, “I’m looking forward to getting them on my desk.” Montana Republicans also put forth dozens of bills designed to check what they describe as judicial overreach, in part inspired by the *Held* decision. In press conferences and podcasts, lawmakers dismissed the students behind the case as “activists” and “a bunch of little Greta Thunbergs.”

The rhetoric and legislation in Montana echo the current federal approach to climate change. But *Held* paved the way for even larger, nationwide action: Our Children’s Trust, the nonprofit law firm that represented the *Held* plaintiffs, has active youth climate cases in Alaska, Hawai’i, Utah, Florida and Virginia, with the *Held* decision providing precedent that these cases can make it to trial, and win. And late last year, the young people pursuing *Juliana v. United States* appealed directly to the U.S. Supreme Court to hear their claims against the federal government.

The *Held* case, Jongeward said, fueled the Green Initiative students’ commitment to local environmental action. One member, Oliver Zeman, is an avid kayaker focused on cleaning up local rivers. Home-schooler Anders Harrison is planning an upcoming community hiking trip. Cunningham, the speech and debate standout, is helping students across the state learn how to get

involved in the legislative process. Green Initiative alumni have been valedictorians and received full-ride scholarships to college. “They’re amazing,” Jongeward told me. “It’s incredible to see the drive that young people can have if you just give them the platform.”

At a recent meeting, Jongeward started things off with some tough news. The federal grant they’d been awarded for electric school buses was facing some school board opposition. The students, though, were ready to fight.

“I’ll go speak. I’ll go chew ’em out, Ms. J.,” Cunningham said.

The group was overflowing with ideas: They could write a letter, maybe submit it to the local newspaper, and compile air quality data on what the diesel emissions from the current buses mean for the area outside the school. The battle was far from over. (In fact, just before this story went to print, the school board approved the grant.)

McCormick reflected on the *Held* decision and the kids behind it. “I can get electric buses in our school system; that’s easy, compared to what they did,” she said. “(The case) set the bar, and now we just have to reach it.” ☀

Nick Mott is an award-winning journalist and podcast producer who focuses mostly on climate, public land and the environment. He’s based in Livingston, Montana.

Students in Park High School’s Green Initiative club walk around the campus in March looking for the best place to plant a tree.





Clockwise from top center:
Malia Towne, Mackenzie
Englishoe, Sophie Swope and
Jazmyn Lee Vent.

REPORTAGE

Young with heart

Alaska Native youth are paving the way on climate advocacy and conservation in the northernmost state.

BY LYNDSEY BROLLINI AND
MEGHAN SULLIVAN
ILLUSTRATION BY MER YOUNG

ALASKA NATIVE YOUTH are living through a pivotal time, bearing witness to the dramatic impacts of climate change that have occurred during their lifetimes: rapidly melting permafrost, warming oceans and declining salmon runs. Subsistence living,

which is critical to Alaska Native culture and rural food security, has suffered in turn, whether it involves Iñupiaq whale hunts, Gwich'in caribou harvest or Tlingit salmon fishing. The threat to a shared way of life is uniting many Indigenous people across the state, calling them to protect Alaska Native homelands and cultural continuity.

In light of this, many Alaska Native youth are dedicating their careers to protecting the environment and bringing Indigenous knowledge into mainstream spaces, including environmental science, policy work, increased tribal co-management and conservation initiatives. *High Country News* talked to four young Alaska Native women from different parts of the state who are working in climate advocacy, from community organizing to fishery sciences.

JAZMYN LEE VENT

Siqiniq Jazmyn Lee Vent (Koyukon Athabascan and Iñupiaq) has attended Ambler Road meetings for half her life. Vent, who is 24, went to her first meeting at 12 years old. At that time, the Ambler Road project — which would build a 211-mile-long highway to a mining project through sensitive habitat

— was in the beginning stages, and different road maps were still being considered.

“I remember that, in our hall, a bunch of our elders (were) sitting in the meeting, and even though they might have not known exactly what was going on in those early stages of the proposed development, they knew that it was really important to show up and speak out against it,” Vent said. “So I really try to carry that with me.”

Vent co-founded No Ambler Road in 2023 to amplify the voices that oppose the proposed road, which could harm caribou migration patterns and habitat along with salmon spawning streams. For Vent and many others working on No Ambler Road, the project is much too risky, given that caribou populations are declining in Alaska and across the Arctic, and people can't fish in the Yukon River.

Projects like these are often at the whims of the current administration. Last year, the Biden administration rejected the Ambler Road project, citing the harmful impacts it could have on the environment. But the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers never fully revoked the project's permit, and Alaska's congressional delegation and Gov. Michael Dunleavy

support building the road, while President Donald Trump has long been enthusiastic about resource extraction in Alaska.

Vent wants the federal government to uphold the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) and its obligation to sustain subsistence hunting and fishing. Most of all, though, Vent wants Alaska Native people to be centered in these decisions and for companies, politicians and governments to leave their homeland alone.

"People might think this is crazy," Vent said, "but I really envision a future where Alaska Native people have title to our land and are able to engage in these decision-making processes that directly impact our livelihoods."

SOPHIE SWOPE

Anaan'arar Sophie Swope (Yup'ik) founded the Mother Kuskokwim nonprofit three years ago at 24 in her hometown of Bethel, Alaska.

Previously, she was the self-governance director for Orutsararmiut Traditional Native Council, which was in consultation with federal agencies about the Donlin Gold Mine project. If built, it would be one of the largest open-pit gold mines in the world — and it would be located dangerously close to salmon spawning tributaries in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta (Y-K Delta).

"I noticed the energy was low," Swope said. "I kind of stood up and was like, 'Hey guys, this stuff is really important, and we have to really fight to take care of all of our natural resources. Because it's all that we have, and it creates who we are.'"

It was a key experience that inspired her to found Mother Kuskokwim. Swope now works full-time on fighting the Donlin Gold Mine, a project that is supported by her own Native corporation, Calista Corporation, despite its potential impact on salmon populations.

She helped organize a lawsuit against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, arguing that its environmental impact statement was insufficient — a lawsuit the group recently won.

If chemicals from the mine get into rivers and food, it would be devastating for people in the Y-K Delta, who already suffer from extremely low salmon runs. And Swope doesn't want future generations to have to worry about toxicity in their food or having a

large tailings dam nearby.

"One day, I will have children, and hopefully I'll have grandchildren, too," Swope said. "I want them to have the same access to these resources that our DNA was literally created to thrive off of."

Her elders taught her how to find her own voice. Now she wants younger generations to realize that they can and should use their voices when their way of life is threatened — and that they, too, have an obligation to take care of this place for future generations.

*"We were gifted all
of the things that we
have by our ancestors,
and we're only
borrowing this space
on earth from the
future generations."*

"Our time here on this Earth is very short," Swope said. "We were gifted all of the things that we have by our ancestors, and we're only borrowing this space on earth from the future generations."

MALIA TOWNE

Malia Towne, who is Haida and Tlingit, grew up subsistence fishing every summer on her family's traditional lands near Ketchikan, Alaska. As the years went by, they watched as the salmon population that their community had relied on for centuries began to fluctuate and decline. "It made me realize that something needed to be done," said Towne.

Towne's Tlingit values drove her to work in fishing sustainability.

"Everything is circular within traditional values," she said. "What I do today affects tomorrow. It's the whole reason I got into this work, because I want to be able to continue practicing what my ancestors practiced and want future generations to be able to do the same."

Now a senior at Northern Arizona University, Towne, who is 20, studies environmental science, hoping to help ensure healthy fishing populations within Alaska. Last summer, she worked at the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association, a nonprofit that promotes sustainable fishing practices and flourishing coastal communities. Her goal is to protect subsistence salmon harvesting and create more access for subsistence fishers, many of whom are Alaska Native.

"My mom says it's genetic," joked Towne. Her grandfather worked in fishing sustainability, and her sister does as well. "It's in our blood."

Towne aims to create policies that prevent environmental damage from happening in the first place, as opposed to laws that merely slap Band-Aids on serious injuries that have already occurred. These policies would incorporate an Indigenous approach to conservation, protecting the environment while still allowing for sustainable harvesting and resource use.

Towne cited the recent movement to list the king salmon as endangered. "It's something that needs to be protected, but you shouldn't cut off all access, because that hurts more people," she said. "It's incredibly detrimental to subsistence fishers."

After graduating, Towne plans to return to Alaska and continue working on fishing sustainability, ideally in tribal co-management. She hopes that the policies she works on today will help salmon populations thrive for generations to come.

"What we do now is important, whether or not it's recognized or appreciated today," she said. "It will be appreciated eventually. Eventually, we'll be thankful for it."

MACKENZIE ENGLISHOE

Mackenzie Englishoe's great-grandparents taught her to live off the land, using Gwich'ya Gwich'in knowledge that had been passed down for centuries. Englishoe's great-grandparents, who experienced the dramatic changes caused by colonization, dedicated

their lives to ensuring that her generation would be able to continue living the Gwich'in way of life.

"Our relationship to the land, it's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual," said Englishoe, who was raised between the remote Chandalar Lake in the Brooks Range, and Gwichyaa Zhee (Fort Yukon), a village of roughly 500 people on the Yukon River. "When I think about the future, I cannot — I will not — live in a future that does not have that, or where I'm not able to provide that for my family."

Englishoe, 21, is living during another time of change. Using the traditional knowledge her great-grandparents taught her, she works on climate crisis issues that impact villages in Interior Alaska: fostering healthy caribou and moose populations, protecting Indigenous land rights and water and improving wildfire management. She's been particularly involved in efforts to combat king salmon's decline in the Yukon River, advocating for closing salmon fishing in Area M near the Aleutian Islands and ending bottom trawling.

"Seeing the king salmon decline over time has really broken me," she said. "And then seeing people who do not have this connection to the salmon, people who are not from these lands, making decisions about it, and a lack of action from them. ... It's just broken me."

Last March, Englishoe was elected the emerging leaders chair for the Tanana Chiefs Conference, representing 42 Alaska Native communities in the Interior Region through her role as youth advisor. She wants young Alaska Natives to know that they're capable of making change and that they deserve to have a seat at the table.

"Indigenous people, we do this work out of a place of love. For our community, for future generations, but also for people who are not Native," she said. Everything is connected, she explained, from the salmon to the bears to entire food systems beyond Alaska. "So we're trying to protect everybody, out of love." ❀

Lyndsey Brollini, Haida, is a freelance storyteller and reporter from Anchorage, Alaska.

Meghan Sullivan, Koyukon Athabaskan, is an investigative journalist from Alaska.

POEM

There are no sidewalks here

By Sarah Kruse

Go to the places we never go.
Bicycle shipped 3000 miles in pieces
to this rural place. Dad insists
on reassembling
front wheel so tight it won't move.

I loosen it. Spin freely. Hot
asphalt and late July.
Early August and no rain.
Necessity of motion and nowhere

to go. The flattest streets
are also the poorest, in the
flood plain, the wide mouth
of the river in winter.

Fly by the American Behavioral
Health Systems building, blowing
stop signs on Washington
because there is no traffic. Top

floor someone in the window
on the ledge, body against frosted glass
where windows only open a fraction,

opaque. A body looks out,
I look up, wonder, and imagine
my brother's conversations
at 4am when no one is listening,
Autism's echoes in the dark, turn

the corner. On a different street,
2nd and William a bean-thin
girl runs, three houses down
the block faster than I can peddle.
Screen door slams, without
looking, she runs from
the house, back yard
filled with car parts, rusty

camper, broken bed, strange
resemblance to the disorder we left
on the other side of the mountains—

Turn the corner. Maybe
that other house has a yard,
maybe it has more space.

Small railroad houses
McFadden off 9th containing
the likeness of home, un-mown yard
broken shutters. I find a small

girl sitting alone at the side
of the road in gravel, no curb,
no sidewalk, Northwest streets.
She's wearing buffalo plaid and no

parents in sight. Watches me
slide by, expression already
hard. She's maybe all of four.

WEB EXTRA Listen to Sarah Kruse read her poem at hcn.org/no-sidewalks

Bird flu finds its way into Western wildlife

The deaths of two Washington cougars suggest the virus is more widespread than thought.

BY KYLIE MOHR

LAST FALL, a Clallam County, Washington, resident spotted a young male cougar walking slowly through a field on the northern edge of the Olympic Peninsula. It was the middle of the day — a clear sign that something was off — and he was also skinny and weak, dragging his matted tail in the mud.

The resident called a Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) game warden and Mark Elbroch, puma director of Panthera, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting wild cats globally. (Cougars are also called mountain lions or pumas.) Elbroch and the warden approached the cougar, yelling and clapping to gauge the animal's alertness. But even when they were less than 20 feet away, the cougar didn't respond. "The cat was on its last legs," Elbroch said. "He literally couldn't even get out from this pasture."

The cougar was euthanized, and his tissue samples, which were tested for a number of diseases, revealed the presence of the H5N1 strain of avian influenza, or bird flu. Less than two weeks later, another infected cougar was found dead in Clallam County.

Mild forms of bird flu are common in wild and domestic birds, but sometimes a strain circulating on a poultry or waterfowl farm mutates into a more dangerous form and spills over into wild birds. The H5N1 strain, which was initially identified in domestic geese in China in the 1990s, had infected wild birds by 2002 and reached North America in 2021.

Since then, the virus has caused the deaths of tens of millions of domestic chickens, geese, ducks and turkeys in the U.S., contributing to the rise in egg prices. As of early March,

it had killed at least 50,000 wild birds, according to estimates by the U.S. Geological Survey, and been detected in nearly 400 individual wild mammals, including felines, raccoons, rodents, seals and skunks. Globally, H5N1 has killed thousands of mammals in mass mortality events, including sea lions in Peru and Chile and elephant seals in Argentina.

Over the past three years, more cases of H5N1 in wild mammals have been reported in Washington than in any other Western state except Colorado and New Mexico. Before H5N1 was identified in the two Olympic Peninsula cougars, sick animals had typically lived near wild bird populations infected with the virus. The 15 harbor seals that died in 2023, for example, frequented the same beach as a flock of infected Caspian terns. "The assumption was they were scavenging carcasses or even catching and eating sick birds," said Katherine Haman, a WDFW veterinarian.

But the two cougars weren't living near any known outbreaks in wild birds or other prey species, according to the agency. Their deaths illustrate how little we know about how the disease spreads in wildlife, and how far it may have already reached.

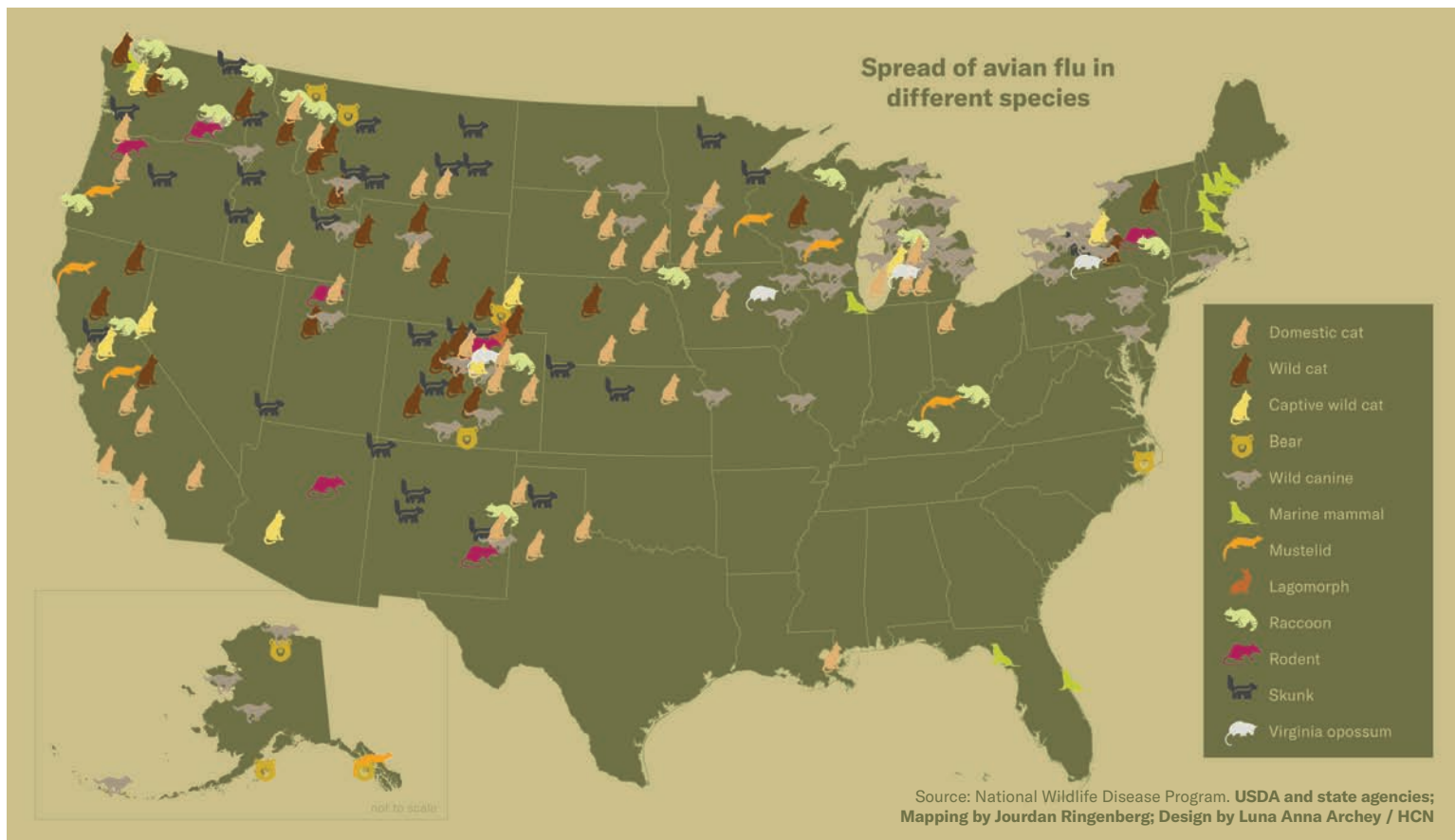
UNLIKE THE COUGAR in the cow pasture, Clallam County's second victim showed no obvious signs of disease. He had been fitted with a GPS collar as part of Panthera's Olympic Cougar Project, and Elbroch said that he looked to be "in perfect health." Later analysis of movement data, though, revealed the cougar had started to behave differently, traveling shorter distances than previously.

Virus-carrying prey can also appear healthy. "We don't really know which animals are carrying and which ones have been exposed and recovering," Elbroch said.

While there were no documented H5N1 outbreaks in the area, the cougars may have eaten infected birds along the Pacific Flyway, a major north-south migration route that runs along the West Coast from Alaska to Mexico. Or they may have consumed a mammal — a raccoon, river otter, seal or sea lion — that had eaten an infected bird. Regardless of the cause, the two deaths in



A cougar infected with the H5N1 strain of avian influenza crosses a field in Clallam County, Washington, last fall. It was later euthanized.
Courtesy of Mark Elbroch / Panthera



the same general area during the same short timespan suggest that bird flu is circulating undetected in the apex predators' prey. "That just really highlights, to me, that this virus may be more widespread on our landscape than we know or think it is," said Haman.

Although 70 H5N1 cases have been confirmed in humans — mostly poultry and dairy farmworkers — in the U.S., public health officials say the virus still poses a low health risk: It has not yet spread between people, and its symptoms are usually mild. But the further it spreads among other mammals, the more opportunities it will have to mutate into a form easily contracted by humans. If the virus acquires the ability to be more readily transmitted between mammals or between humans, Haman said, "we have a potential brewing pandemic."

In December, the wildlife agency announced that the state was seeing an uptick in cases in both wild birds and mammals. So far this winter, it's been detected in a long-tailed weasel, raccoon, harbor seal and bobcat.

If H5N1 continues to proliferate among

wild birds and mammals, isolated or small populations — including threatened and endangered species, such as ferrets and California condors — will be particularly vulnerable. "Flu is ... rarely considered a wildlife conservation issue," said Justin Brown, a wildlife veterinarian and professor at Pennsylvania State University. "But with this virus, now that it causes disease in (other) wildlife, there are some conservation concerns."

FULLY UNDERSTANDING any wildlife disease isn't easy, due to the lack of monitoring and surveillance. "There's just so much about this virus and the epidemiology and disease ecology of it that we don't understand, especially in wild mammals right now," Haman said. State wildlife agencies, which are chronically short of funding, primarily rely on the public to report sick and dead wildlife, meaning the numbers could be far greater than recorded.

Regular monitoring and sampling would help researchers better understand H5N1 and its spread. "We could get ahead of avian flu right now with the right resources," Elbroch said. After cases among dairy cows and

farmworkers rose in California last fall, Gov. Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency to free up resources for monitoring; as of February, it's the only state to do so. Though the federal government laid out a \$1 billion plan to curb bird flu in domestic poultry in late February, the Trump administration is considering cutting funding for the development of a bird flu vaccine for people.

Brown, who is partnering with Washington wildlife officials to continue studying the disease, plans to test blood samples collected from living wild animals for H5N1 antibodies, an indication of recovery from infection. "I think that this is a disease that will be here for the foreseeable future," Brown said. "The challenge then is: How do we tweak our research, our surveillance and our management to now deal with this new normal?" ❁

Kylie Mohr is a correspondent for High Country News who writes from Montana.

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



REPORTAGE

No helping hand here

How a Boise neighborhood association used zoning laws to try to halt a homeless shelter's expansion.

BY NATALIA MESA
PHOTOS BY MURPHY WOODHOUSE

GERRI-LYNN GRAVES has lived in Boise, Idaho, nearly all of her life. But after progressive back pain and a botched surgery caused a series of medical issues, walking became excruciating, and she lost her job. Bills mounted and she could not pay rent. With a small suitcase in hand, in November of 2021, she went to the Interfaith Sanctuary, a homeless shelter in downtown Boise.

Surrounded by a busy highway, businesses and warehouses, the low tan-and-blue

brick building is the only “low-barrier” shelter in Ada County, where Boise lies. Unlike other shelters in town, Interfaith does not require sobriety, employment or ID to enter. For a year and a half, Graves stayed at the shelter, leaving each morning per the shelter’s rules. Sometimes, the shelter lacked enough beds for everyone, even on bitterly cold winter days.

Jodi Peterson-Stigers, the shelter’s executive director, longs for the day she can offer more. “You’re giving them a safe place to sleep, but knowing that every night they’re going to come back after trying to navigate the world outside all day long is heartbreaking,” she said.

Since 2021, Interfaith has sought to relocate and expand. The new site, at a former Salvation Army thrift store and warehouse in Boise’s Veterans Park neighborhood, would be able to house roughly 200 people, 24 hours a day. It would include areas for daytime use, a playground, a medical dorm and hospice rooms, along with classrooms for mental health and addiction recovery programs.

But a recent Idaho Supreme Court decision may complicate matters. On Jan. 22, 2025, the court ruled in favor of the Veterans Park Neighborhood Association (VPNA), a community group that sued to oppose the shelter’s move to their neighborhood. Over

the past four years, it has repeatedly tried to block construction, citing concerns that the shelter would bring crime, lower property values and dilute public resources in a low-income neighborhood.

Local opposition to emergency shelters and affordable housing is nothing new. But “it is getting worse,” said Eric Tars, an attorney at the National Homelessness Law Center. In almost every Western state, local neighborhoods have exploited housing codes to oppose the construction of homeless shelters. In the last decade, neighborhood opposition has blocked or significantly delayed homeless shelters in San Francisco, Denver, Portland and dozens of other cities. This opposition comes even as the shortage of shelters across the U.S. grows. Between 2023 and 2024, the number of community housing and homeless shelters rose by just 2.2%, while the homeless population increased 18%. And given the recent funding cuts to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, more shelters could shutter.

Lawsuits like VPNA’s are making it even harder for places like Interfaith to serve this growing population. “We haven’t been big enough for so long,” Peterson said. “Every night, we have a waitlist.”

IN 2021, VPNA PRESIDENT Katy Decker submitted a 170-page report to the Boise Planning and Zoning Commission, the body in charge of issuing the conditional use permit for Interfaith. The shelter would have too many negative impacts, bringing crime and noise and straining emergency services, the VPNA wrote. Decker told *High Country News* that the shelter should either stay downtown or move to another neighborhood — arguments similar to those used by neighborhood groups in other Western cities.

VPNA members also testified at public hearings of the Planning and Zoning Commission, which denied Interfaith's permit. Interfaith then appealed to the Boise City Council, which reversed the commission's decision. The neighborhood group then sued the city of Boise, and the case went to the state Supreme Court, which overturned the City Council's decision, effectively rescinding Interfaith's permit in January.

Decker said building a shelter in an already overburdened neighborhood is the wrong solution: "Why should this small and poor neighborhood bear the brunt of all of those negative externalities and substantial impacts?" She pointed to studies showing that concentrating poverty can worsen outcomes and prevent upward mobility for the neighborhood's children. While the group describes Veterans Park as a low-income neighborhood, it is growing wealthier: Family median incomes have increased 25% between 2020 and 2023, according to census data.

The Veterans Park group has also cited data showing that after similar shelters were erected in residential Salt Lake City neighborhoods, the number of 911 calls within half a mile of them increased significantly.

Advocates — and even critics like Decker — agree that shelters play an important role in solving the housing crisis. But on a local scale, the relationship between crime and emergency housing is complicated, Tars said, and the issue is still under study. For instance, the Salt Lake City shelters VPNA referenced opened shortly before the pandemic, when crime was trending upward not only in those neighborhoods but across all of Salt Lake City, as well as nationwide. And while one academic study found that property crime and vandalism rates are higher within a half-mile radius of a homeless shelter, another found that low-barrier shelters have no correlation with crime in residential

neighborhoods. The impact of homeless shelters on property values is similarly unclear, with reports showing mixed results.

The data doesn't change the disconnect between the need for more shelters and local opposition to building them. "You can bring people the facts about all of this and people will say, 'Yes, I agree with you on all of those things. Just do it somewhere else,'" Tars said.

Due to the ongoing permit battle, Peterson-Stigers declined to comment on the shelter's next steps, but despite the Idaho court's decision, construction at Interfaith's new site started in April 2024 and is ongoing. Peterson-Stigers is hopeful that it will open this October as planned. Interfaith's case may make it easier to secure shelter permits in the face of future opposition, too: the Boise City Council is considering a rule change to give the council more power over appeals to overturn the Planning & Zoning Commission's decisions.

There are policies cities can adopt so that neighborhood opposition doesn't impact shelters, Tars said. Shelters are typically required to obtain a zoning permit, but a 2008 California law requires municipalities to remove that requirement in designated areas, making it easier to build shelters in some cities, though that hasn't stopped neighborhood opposition. Cities can also remove conditional use permit requirements for shelter or housing, said Geoffrey Wardle, Interfaith's attorney in the VPNA lawsuit, something that other cities in Idaho, like Nampa and Caldwell, are already doing.

Graves recently moved into permanent housing with her son, who has treatment-resistant epilepsy. She survives on \$150 per month, which she gets from writing for and distributing a newspaper that Interfaith publishes. With the help of the staff at Interfaith, she is working on obtaining Social Security. She said that the shelter changed her outlook on life.

"We're just a bunch of people coming from all walks of life that suddenly find ourselves in unfortunate circumstances. We're no less deserving of your empathy and your understanding than your next-door neighbor," Graves said. ☀

Natalia Mesa is a freelance journalist who covers environmental science, climate change and social justice. She is based in Brooklyn, New York. Previously, she was a High Country News editorial fellow.

A guest walks between the rows of bunk beds in one of Interfaith Sanctuary's dormitories (left). In her free time, Gerri-Lynn Graves — a former long-term Interfaith guest — hand-stitches silk lampshades at her new home (below). Jodi Peterson-Stigers, Interfaith's executive director, embraces one of the shelter's guests (bottom).



FACTS & FIGURES

Is a nuclear renaissance coming?

Data center power demand is sparking interest in new reactors.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

ILLUSTRATION BY HANNAH AGOSTA

IN 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower delivered his famous “Atoms for Peace” speech at the United Nations. First, he spoke of the world’s rapidly growing stockpile of atomic warheads and the dangers they presented. Then he pivoted, explaining that the very same atomic reaction that could destroy the world could also save it. Nuclear energy, he said, could be used to “serve the needs rather than the fears of the world — to make the deserts flourish, to warm the cold, to feed the hungry, to alleviate the misery of the world.”

Eisenhower’s vision was partially realized by a fleet of new reactors that ultimately produced about 20% of U.S. electricity. But it was scarred by uranium mining’s toll on landscapes and on human health across the Colorado Plateau, even as disasters and near misses, from Three Mile Island to Chernobyl to Church Rock, soured the public on the technology. Cheaper renewables and natural gas began edging out nuclear generation; the San Onofre nuclear plant near San Diego shut down in 2012, and Diablo Canyon near

San Luis Obispo was slated for retirement this year.

Today, however, Eisenhower’s dream is being dusted off for a new age. Only this time it’s tech giants like Amazon and Switch that are jazzed about nuclear energy — not to alleviate misery or feed the hungry, but to power their growing army of energy-guzzling data centers.

These gigantic banks of computer processors are the heart — and brains — of the digital age, churning through data that enables movie streaming, credit card transactions and the internet itself. But they require enormous amounts of electricity, with AI and cryptocurrency mining centers being especially energy-hungry, and utilities are scrambling to meet the swiftly growing demand. New solar and wind installations are being built, but California officials have also postponed Diablo Canyon’s closure for at least five more years, while technology firms are rushing to develop an armada of advanced nuclear reactors.

The new reactors are smaller and more limber than the behemoths of old — some can even be transported by truck — and therefore require less upfront capital. Unlike coal and natural gas generators, they don’t emit greenhouse gases or other air pollution. But they still produce radioactive waste — something that still lacks a long-term storage solution — and are vulnerable to accidents and terrorist attacks, and they still require damaging uranium mining, milling and enrichment.

Much as Eisenhower’s atomic dream played out in the West — bringing benefits and leaving lasting scars — so, too, will this new nuclear age, assuming it actually dawns. ☀

ATOMIC HAPPENINGS

ARIZONA

- Arizona utilities have teamed up to develop new small modular or full-scale reactors to boost the Palo Verde nuclear plant near Phoenix.
- The Havasupai Tribe is resisting the Pinon Plain Mine near the Grand Canyon — the nation’s only producing conventional uranium mine — citing fears it could contaminate groundwater and springs.

CALIFORNIA

- Pacific Gas & Electric canceled the scheduled 2025 Diablo Canyon nuclear plant retirement after officials decided to keep it running for at least five more years, citing growing power demand.
- California-based startups Kairos and Oklo have signed up to provide power from small nuclear reactors to Google and Switch, respectively, for data centers.

COLORADO

- Colorado lawmakers seek to classify nuclear power as “clean energy” to expedite replacing retired coal plants with reactors.
- Mining firms hope to revive uranium extraction in western Colorado’s Uravan Mineral Belt.
- Some northwestern counties have proposed hosting a nuclear waste repository to buoy the economy amid coal plant and mine closures.

IDAHO

- The Idaho National Laboratory — home to Experimental Breeder Reactor-I, where nuclear fission was first used to generate and transmit electricity in 1951 — is now a research center for next-generation reactors.

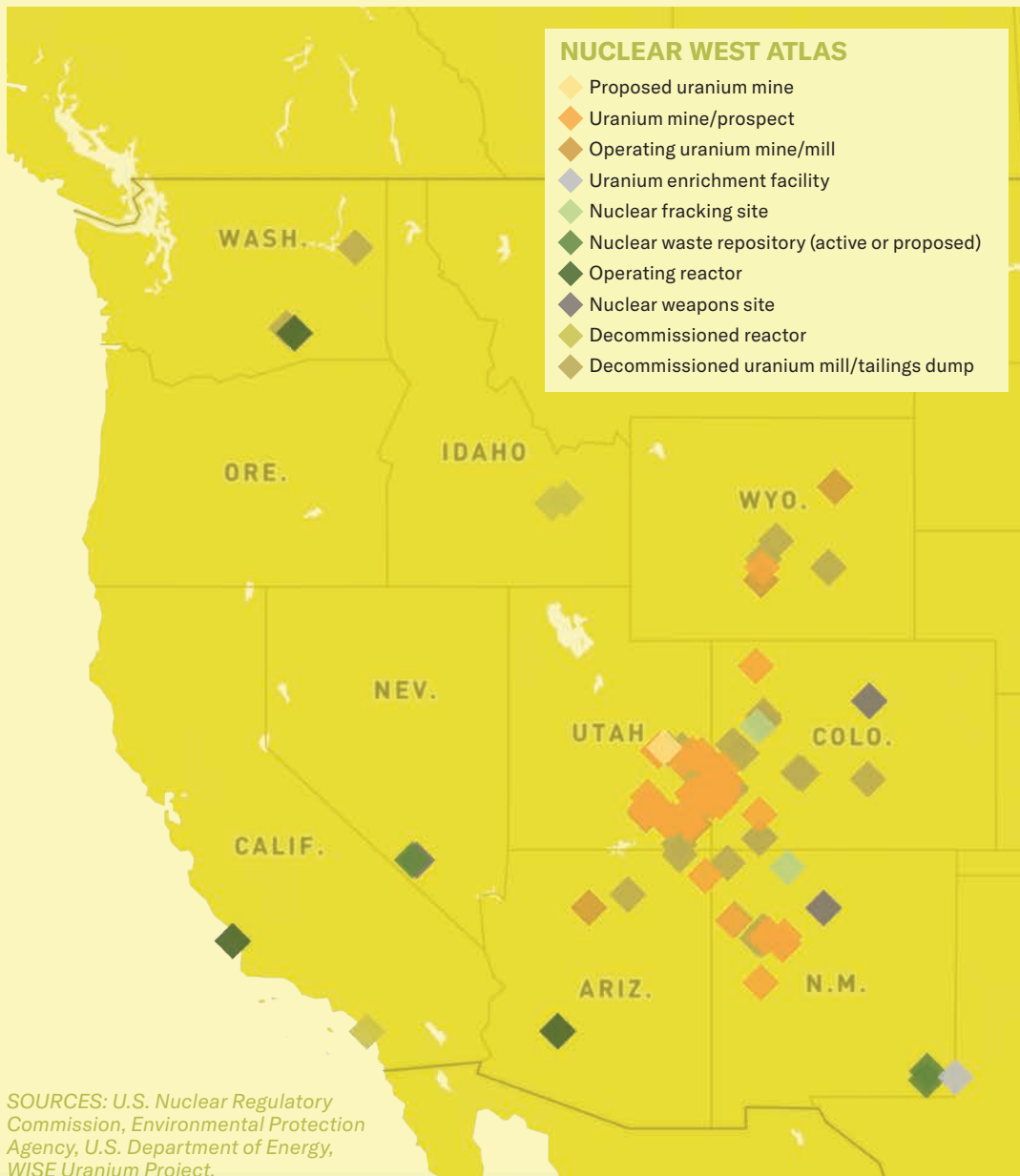
NEVADA

- In 2002, Congress approved the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository as the long-term home of the nation’s nuclear waste, or spent fuel, but in 2011, the project was canceled following intense local opposition. However, the Trump administration hinted at restarting construction.
- Project 2025, the Trump administration’s far-right playbook, wants to resume nuclear warhead testing at the Nevada Test Site.

CONVENTIONAL NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS

usually consist of more than one reactor, each having a generating capacity of 1,000 megawatts or so. The Palo Verde plant in Arizona has a 3,300 MW capacity.





NEW MEXICO

- Los Alamos National Laboratory is gearing up to produce up to 30 plutonium pits — the core of nuclear warheads — annually to upgrade the aging arsenal.
- New uranium mines have been proposed for the Mount Taylor area, which is still contaminated by Cold War-era mines.

OREGON

- Portland-based NuScale is a pioneer in small modular reactors, but its flagship project — building a generating facility in Idaho to power municipal utilities — was canceled over rising costs.
- Lawmakers are looking to weaken a 1980s state law that makes it almost impossible to build new reactors.

UTAH

- Gov. Spencer Cox, R, is pushing nuclear reactor development to help double the state's power production over the next decade.
- Energy Fuels' White Mesa Mill is the nation's only operating uranium-processing plant, but other firms want to reopen the Shootaring Mill west of Lake Powell and construct a new one at Green River.
- The Lisbon Valley south of Moab, which was at the heart of the Colorado Plateau's Cold War uranium boom, is again being targeted by uranium companies.

WASHINGTON

- Amazon and Energy Northwest want to deploy small modular reactors here to power data centers, boosting the existing Columbia nuclear plant.

WYOMING

- Bill Gates-backed TerraPower has begun constructing facilities for an advanced nuclear reactor in Kemmerer.
- A Gillette machinery firm wants to make Wyoming a microreactor-manufacturing hub.
- A company hopes to use up to eight microreactors to power its Green River trona mine.

SMALL MODULAR REACTORS
have a generating capacity ranging
from 20 to 300 megawatts.

MICROREACTORS
have a generating capacity of up to 20 megawatts
and can be used to power industrial
facilities or communities.



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"HCN brings me high quality and a wide breadth of reporting about the West I have lived in my whole life. Seven decades of changes. The birth of the environmental movement, to more stories told from indigenous voices, to the turbulent now.

I read the mag starting from the back cover first. A shout-out to Tiffany Midge — she has really hit her stride reporting in Heard Around the West. Fun to read, well-linked topics, good amusing conclusions.

As 2025 unfolds, I appreciate how HCN editors and journalists immerse themselves in the upheaval. They seem on the lookout for stories that need to be told. There seems to be a plethora to choose from!"

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DEAR FRIENDS

Support *HCN* so we can support you

These are dizzying times. The Trump administration is clear-cutting the agencies that oversee our beloved national parks and forests and rangelands and refuges — the public lands that make up half of the Western U.S. At the same time, it has frozen funds for conservation and restoration work on private and tribal lands, as well as for clean energy and climate adaptation projects.

Some of these moves were blocked, but plenty of serious damage has been done, and Westerners continue to be whipsawed by the shifting orders and confusing directives from the White House and the courts. Adding insult to injury, the administration has ordered public agencies to cancel their subscriptions to news organizations like *HCN*, depriving staffers of information that is often valuable — and sometimes essential — to the work they do.

Say what you will about the federal government, now and in the past, all this runs counter to what Westerners hold dear. As a recent poll out

of Colorado College noted, a resounding majority of Westerners of all political persuasions support conservation and climate action. Many Westerners may have voted for Trump, but, as a friend recently remarked, “This is not what they were sold.”

As we kick off our spring fund drive, if you’re in a position to double down on your support for *HCN*’s journalism, we ask you to consider doing so. Not everyone will be able to write a check this season.

And for those of you who work in the federal agencies, or who have recently lost jobs, we’re happy to offer you access to all of *HCN*’s reporting at no charge online, and we’ll give you a print subscription at cost. Folks interested in taking advantage of a free sub should email support@hcn.org with the subject line “Government Employee Access.” We’re here for you, our community, just as you’ve been here for us for a remarkable 55 years.

— *Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher*

New faces

We’ve been lucky to have **Shaun Griswold** here for the past few months to lead our news coverage while News and Investigations Editor Kate Schimel is on family leave. Shaun brings a decade of print and broadcast news experience, most recently as editor of the nonprofit *Source New Mexico*, where he reported on issues concerning Native Americans in both urban and tribal communities, including education and child welfare. Shaun, who is based in Albuquerque, is a citizen of the Pueblo of Laguna whose ancestry also includes Jemez and Zuni.

He has been working closely with *HCN*’s three new editorial fellows, who joined us in January. Fellows spend most of a year with us, gaining skills and experience and building a body of work that will propel them along their career paths.

Annie Rosenthal, *HCN*’s new Virginia Davis Spencer Fellow, chose to make a bold move, geographically and professionally, right out of high school, leaving her home in the nation’s capital and moving to Homer, Alaska, population 6,000, to work at the local paper. She fell in love with rural reporting and, after college, returned to that beat, this time at *Marfa Public Radio*, where she spent three years covering border issues in West Texas. In her reporting, Annie seeks to dismantle simplistic tropes about rural communities, she said, and shine a light on the complexity of small-town life and “the ways that people show up for each other, even under immense challenges.”

Chad Bradley got their journalism start by writing arts stories for their hometown newspaper in Gallup, New Mexico. Building thoughtful relationships has always been central to their reporting, Chad said, and they get a special thrill from sharing stories with sources: “Like, hey, this is it, thank you so much for talking with me.” Chad comes to *HCN* from Arizona State University’s investigative journalism master’s program, where they spent a year looking into ASU and the Arizona State Museum’s compliance with the Native

American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. Chad, who is Diné, said they plan to keep both connection and impact front of mind in their work with *HCN*’s Indigenous Affairs desk.

Shi En Kim hit the ground running as *HCN*’s new climate and science fellow, interviewing staffers outside the national headquarters of the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, D.C., where she had been working as a freelance journalist. After earning her Ph.D. in engineering from the University

of Chicago, Kim turned to writing about science and climate, joining three friends to found a digital science magazine called *Sequencer*, where she gets to dive down intriguing rabbit holes and entertain her random curiosity. “As a journalist, I love being versatile,” Kim said. Now living in California, she looks forward to covering community-level initiatives that remind us that, despite the chaos in D.C., progress is still possible on the ground.

— *Chad Bradley, Shi En Kim, Annie Rosenthal*



Shaun Griswold, Annie Rosenthal, Chad Bradley and Shi En Kim (from left).
Photo illustration by Marissa Garcia / *HCN*



Marjie Hicks of Roy, Washington, shows off her first mustang's BLM brand as she stands next to Roulette, one of the two wild mustangs she trained this year through the Mustang Yearlings Washington Youth (MYWY) program. The tattoo quotes part of the saying "You may not get the horse you want, but you get the horse you need."



To Train a Horse

In the niche world of mustang training, volunteers sacrifice time, energy and money to help animals find homes. But can they convince enough people that they want to own a wild horse?

By Elizabeth Whitman
Photos by M. Scott Brauer

WOOLLY RUMPS SWAYED in unison as two stock trailers rumbled into the Ellensburg, Washington, rodeo grounds. The passengers took in their surroundings, ears flicking and nostrils flaring in the 39-degree air. After a full day of bumping over local roads from Bureau of Land Management corrals in Oregon, the mustangs had finally arrived.

Marjie Hicks, 64, watched the horses roll in. She and her husband, Richard, 68, had driven two and a half hours from their home in western Washington to this March 2024 event, which was organized by a nonprofit called Mustang Yearlings Washington Youth. (Despite its name, MYWY is open to adults, both human and equine.) Five years earlier, Hicks trained her first mustang through MYWY. She was hooked by the experience and brimmed with anticipation at training two more.

But as she stood in the cold, bundled in a blue down vest and checkered fleece, Hicks had second thoughts: Could she afford this? What if she got hurt? Was she getting too old for this?

The first trailer backed into a chute walled with metal livestock panels. A half-dozen horses burst into the winter sunlight, their hooves sinking into the earth. One balked. “Ch-ch-ch-ch!” a man called. A lanky buckskin popped out of the trailer and sauntered away.

Marjie Hicks displays a leather wither strap that she made, which reads "Badass cowgirl" (below). Hicks feeds two mustangs, Casino (dark) and Roulette, at her home (right).



These horses had never been handled by humans. They darted into pens, frantic at first. But an hour later, as the glow of dusk spread across the sky, two dozen mustangs pushed their noses into piles of fresh hay. Occasional snorts broke the silence.

At 8:30 the next morning, the trainers and their families squeezed into the ticket sales room, snacking on donuts. Marjie and Richard Hicks found seats in the back. An unofficial dress code dominated the largely white and female crowd: boots, jeans, trucker hats. One teen's sweatshirt read: *I can't go to school my horse needs me.*

Susan Clogston, who founded MYWY in 2010, briskly oriented her audience. That day, she said, the trainers would take home mustangs. For five months, they'd care for them and gentle them, meaning they'd accustom them to being handled by humans. "Your greatest asset will be patience," she advised.

Come August, the trainers would be expected, though not required, to compete in MYWY's 2024 mustang challenge, a hybrid competition and adoption event where they would demonstrate their horses' skills in front of potential adopters. "This is all about educating the public and getting these horses home," Clogston reminded them.

Trainers could secure adopters before

the show, place horses in the post-show auction or adopt the mustangs themselves. Ultimately, it was up to them to find the horse a home. Until then, they were responsible for its care, including the expense.

Clogston also announced that MYWY's 2024 budget would be much tighter. For years, a nonprofit called the Mustang Heritage Foundation funded MYWY and similar programs, backed by millions of dollars from the BLM. But the contract had expired in September 2023, and the BLM decided not to renew it. To compensate, MYWY was raising money, scaling back and moving show venues.

Trainers looked on as BLM wranglers began loading horses into personal trailers. The trainers had ranked their preferences, and MYWY paired the horses with humans on a first-come-first-served basis. One woman, Lorian Warner, was eyeing mustangs in a distant pen when a fight broke out. Screams ripped through the air, followed by the thud of hooves on horseflesh. Warner, a MYWY veteran, winced. "I think that's my horse," she murmured.

At 10:30 a.m., Richard backed the Hickses' trailer into the chute. One graham cracker-colored mustang, #8397, and the walnut-hued #8223 cautiously sniffed it. A wrangler flicked a flag, encouraging them to

move. The fillies stepped into the giant metal box, the door slammed and the mustangs headed off to their new home.

TODAY, MORE THAN 83,000 wild horses and burros roam public lands in 10 Western states. No one knows exactly how many more roam tribal reservations, but the Navajo Nation alone estimates that it has 100,000. Horses originally evolved in North America but are believed to have died out on the continent about 10,000 years ago. Today's mustangs are the descendants of animals that were reintroduced by European settlers — beginning with Spanish colonizers in the 16th century — and subsequently bred and used by Indigenous peoples as well as white settlers. The majority of public-lands herds live within BLM jurisdiction and are federally protected by the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, which saddled the agency with one of the West's most bruising controversies.

Wild horses, which some conservationists consider invasive, compete with livestock and native game for limited food and water and sometimes suffer from starvation and dehydration themselves. Their relentless grazing degrades wildlife habitat and damages native plants, paving the way for invasive ones, and they occasionally wander

through towns and across roads, causing car accidents. Absent human intervention or the occasional natural predator, herds can double in four years.

In 2024, 73,520 animals roamed BLM land, roughly three times the number the agency says that land can accommodate. The BLM needs to shrink its herds, but it's prohibited from using federal funds to slaughter horses or euthanize healthy ones, and it has yet to figure out how to administer birth control on a large scale.

So, with few options, it periodically rounds up mustangs, holds them in corrals and attempts to sell or adopt them out. For \$125 — an amount unchanged since 1997 — you can acquire an untrained mustang from the BLM. If you're willing to pay more, you can bring home a gentled or trained animal through programs like MYWY, or from the BLM partner programs in which incarcerated people train wild horses. You can also bid on an animal through the BLM's internet adoption program: Think eBay for equines.

"It's always our goal to place as many animals as we can in private homes," said Paul McGuire, who, when we spoke, was the acting division chief of the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro program. "We use every tool available to us."

Nonetheless, BLM historical data suggests that since 1996, the agency has adopted or sold just 153,000 of the 240,000 horses it has removed from the range. The remaining animals — 66,000 horses altogether, as of September 2024 — were sent permanently to private pastures, owned and operated by BLM-funded contractors. Over the past decade, caring for animals like these has blown through 60% to 70% of the agency's wild horse program budget, hobbling investment in areas like fertility control research.

One of the most elaborate efforts to increase adoptions began two decades ago. Around 2001, the BLM hired the marketing agency FleishmanHillard to promote and increase adoption numbers. Janet Greenlee, a horse lover who worked in the firm's Sacramento office, co-led the project. After the firm did extensive research and spent a year promoting adoptions itself, Greenlee says she realized that horse trainers were key to successful adoptions, and that the BLM should hire a third party to find a creative way to market its mustangs to them.

In 2006, the BLM started a partnership with the Mustang Heritage Foundation, which Greenlee had helped build, signing on in 2003 as a volunteer trustee. "I'd gotten bitten by the bug," she said. "It became a personal interest to see if we could get this to be successful." A woman named Patti Colbert led the young nonprofit. At the time, Colbert's favorite TV show was *Extreme Home Makeover*, in which designers transformed fixer-uppers. To her, the parallel was obvious: In 2007, the Extreme Mustang Makeover was born.

In these buzzy shows, competitors had 100 days to train a raw mustang, then compete with it. Finalists performed flashy freestyle routines complete with music, costumes, props and stunts. Afterward, the mustangs were sold at a public auction.

"Every bit of it was trying to draw attention to the versatility and value of these animals," said Clinton Shultz, current CEO of the Mustang Heritage Foundation.

Under Colbert, the Mustang Heritage Foundation also created the Trainer Incentive Program, or TIP, which paid select trainers \$1,000 for every mustang they gentled and homed. As mustang events garnered attention, TIP "challenges" — competitions similar to makeovers, with somewhat lower and less dramatic expectations — sprang up around the country, in Western states as well as in others like North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Georgia. Organizers obtained horses from the BLM and often received funding from the Mustang Heritage Foundation. Many participants were kids or teenagers, while others were horse-loving adults with day jobs. These events were often wildly successful: At one auction in Oregon in 2024, the average price for a trained mustang was more than \$5,000, with one horse going for \$36,000. But BLM data also suggested that some markets were becoming saturated.

Over 17 years, the BLM paid out more than \$41 million to the Mustang Heritage Foundation. Meanwhile, a devoted community of mustang trainers blossomed through groups like MYWY and others in the foundation's sprawling network. Members of this community sacrificed their time and often their own money to train horses. And they have continued to do so despite recent shake-ups in the training world — not to

mention the daunting magnitude of the problem they're trying to solve.

IN THE MUSTANG WORLD, there is a belief that you haven't earned the right to name a wild horse until you've removed its tag.

A day after returning from Ellensburg in March, Hicks loosened the cord that secured a metal tag under the throat of Mustang #8223. She pulled it free and christened the filly Casino. Mustang #8397, the fine-boned golden dun, would be Roulette. Hicks later explained the names: "It's always a gamble when you're working with wild horses."

She appeared to have gotten lucky this time. But it was a different story in 2020, when she brought home her second MYWY mustang. Every time she grabbed the lead rope, the mare rose up on her hind legs and lashed out with her front. "If you ever had a horse doing that in front of you, it's like, 'I could die,'" Hicks recalled. It took her five weeks to remove the mare's tag. Roulette and Casino, by comparison, were "so stinkin' easy," she said.

Hicks grew up in Tacoma, a half-hour north of Roy, Washington, where she lives today. As a toddler, she said "horse" before she said "mama." By age 5, she had her first pony; at 12, her first "real horse." In her 20s, after she and Richard married, they settled in Roy, where they built a covered arena and installed fences for pastures on their 5-acre plot.

Despite injuries and unpredictable progress — even the possibility of no progress at all — Hicks felt addicted to training mustangs. "They are *smart*," she said. "They learn so much from being in the herd environment, even if it's only for a year or two." Each day over the next couple months, she came home from her job as a library technician at a local middle school, started dinner, then headed outside to work with Casino or Roulette, or ride Samba, her first MYWY mustang, which she'd adopted. Dinner often burned.

"It's the only time I don't worry about anything else," Hicks said.

Each week, she added to Casino and Roulette's curriculum. She taught them to enter the horse trailer on command. She picked up their feet and tapped on them, mimicking a horse-shoer, or farrier. Progress came in fits and starts. When Hicks took them to a clinic to identify the gaps in

her process, Casino resisted the new trainer, rearing so high that she toppled over backwards — four times.

By the time I returned for a third visit in mid-May, Casino and Roulette were used to strangers. Hicks handed me a brush and directed me to Roulette. I began grooming her shoulder, my right hand holding the brush, my left resting on her neck for balance. Hicks pointed out that two months earlier, Roulette would never have tolerated two hands on her; instead, she would have reacted as if I were a predator.

During this visit, Hicks mentioned that she was considering adopting out both mustangs. There was talk of layoffs at her school, and she was worried about her job.

Training mustangs isn't cheap. In 2024, MYWY trainers received a \$200 stipend per horse if they attended the show but were otherwise responsible for the considerable expense of caring for the animals. Hicks estimated that she spent over \$100 a month on hay per horse, even after a donation of 20 bales of alfalfa from a local feedstore. Medications, dewormers and nutritional supplements added another \$50 per month, and the horses' hooves required trimming at \$60 every six weeks. Then there were vet visits, lessons and clinic fees, as well as all the physical labor: daily feedings, scooping manure and scrubbing slime from water tubs. She estimated that if she figured in her time, training a mustang cost her \$1,000 a month.

"You have to be in the right place in your life to be able to afford horses," Hicks said. She recalled a student who once asked how much it cost to own a horse. Hicks considered the labor, the money, the vacations she couldn't take. She told the student, "It costs everything."

LATER THAT DAY, I went to see another mustang-trainer pair at a farm 10 minutes away in Eatonville, Washington. Glory, formerly known as Mustang #7425, tore at thick tufts of grass. Loriann Warner stood nearby, her sun-streaked brown hair drawn into its usual ponytail, jeans tucked into worn leather boots. Glory was her fourth MYWY mustang and one of the two mares that had come to blows during the March pickup.

Since then, Warner had worked with Glory in structured sessions three or four times a week. She methodically tapped and

rubbed Glory all over with different items — a coiled lasso, a noisy tarp, her hands — and asked the horse to walk with her, stop and turn. The fighting spirit she'd witnessed in Ellensburg never resurfaced. By May, Warner was riding Glory on trails and in the lush open field at the back of this 80-acre property, where she exchanged her labor for use of the pasture and barn. She planned to keep Glory, just as she'd kept the MYWY mustang she trained in 2023, a colt named Theo who took months to warm up to her.

Warner trained her first horse at 14. She won her first-ever MYWY competition at 18. Now 32, she worked full-time with horses, training and transporting them, trimming hooves and helping "problem" animals. Although Warner worked with domesticated horses, she loved her connection with mustangs. "The way they ride for you is different, the way they look at you is different," she said.

Mustangs have a romantic appeal: They represent "America's heritage," members of the training community told me. Some described the unique magic of working with wild horses compared to domesticated ones. "When you earn their trust, they're going to be fully committed to doing whatever you want to do," said Sam VanFleet, a professional trainer who has competed in more than a dozen makeovers.

A profound rapport is never guaranteed. But the mere possibility — something the Mustang Heritage Foundation and the BLM's adoption literature leans into, with stunning photos, glowing quotes and minimal caveats — entices veterans and first-timers alike. (The marketing materials are designed in part to fight anti-mustang bias; many in the broader horse world scorn mustangs for having unknown bloodlines or "inferior conformation" — horse-speak for physical shape and structure.)

I saw daily posts in mustang-focused Facebook groups from people looking to re-home "project" mustangs. Reality had punctured their dreams. "I currently don't have the time she deserves," wrote one. Another offered a filly, adopted untrained, who was proving more difficult than expected. They hoped a more knowledgeable trainer could "easily work this out." But even training can't guarantee an adoption will work. I spoke to one woman who returned her mustang to its MYWY trainer in part

because she didn't "connect" with it the way a friend had with her mustang. Adopted horses have also reportedly been dumped on tribal lands, some of which already struggle with feral horse problems of their own.

But many adoptions do work out: Mustangs serve as backyard pleasure horses and as working animals on ranches, and they've excelled in equestrian disciplines like endurance riding and dressage. Still, success with any horse requires time, knowledge, patience, luck and money. And mustangs need extra reserves; they must first be domesticated, their trust earned.

BLM representatives say that training brightens an animal's prospects. "Wild horses and burros often come into the adoption program with little to no human interaction, making them more challenging for the average adopter to handle," Jason Lutterman, a BLM spokesperson, told me via email. "Training significantly increases the adoptability of a wild horse or burro and enhances the chances of a successful, lasting placement."

But some trainers feel troubled by the direction training programs have taken in recent years. "It's kind of detoured," Warner said. Instead of emphasizing bonding with horses, she said, makeovers focused on "how can we showcase them in 100 days?" Competitions force mustangs onto human timelines when it should be the other way around, she thought.

Warner also worried that TIP — now defunct — had turned into a "cash grab." Others agreed. In TIP, horses were only gentled, not saddle-trained. Some trainers would take multiple mustangs, speed through the gentling process in the 10-day minimum and then offload the animals, said VanFleet, who trained three horses through TIP. Those trainers would cash their \$1,000 checks while the adopters often struggled.

"There was a lot of 'get the horse in and out,'" VanFleet said.

Cary Scholtes, who ran TIP for the Mustang Heritage Foundation from 2021 until it ended in September 2023, said she tried to respond to complaints. "We listened and tried to make changes to prevent those scenarios," she said. In 2023, the program began to require trainers to submit videos proving that a horse met TIP gentling requirements. But soon after, the BLM quit funding the program.



THE MUSTANG HERITAGE Foundation's website says that its programs have secured homes for 24,000 wild horses and burros since 2007. The foundation is responsible for nearly 40% of all BLM animals placed into private care, according to remarks from Holle' Waddell, division chief of the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program, at an advisory board meeting in June 2023.

But that's not enough. Over the past 12 years, adoptions recovered from the 2008 financial crisis and began to increase, yet the BLM ended up selling or adopting out just 60,000 of the 95,000 horses and burros it rounded up.

The shortfall inspired a new approach: In 2019, the agency launched a controversial program that offered a \$1,000 incentive for each animal adopted. Adoptions surged in response, including those within Mustang Heritage Foundation programs. The BLM claims that the incentive more than doubled the number of horses it placed into private care from 2019 to 2023, compared to the previous five years. For every horse placed in a

"You have to be in the right place in your life to be able to afford horses. It costs everything."

Loriann Warner, 32, rides her mustang, Glory, up a steep hill during a trail ride training session at Frontier Park in Graham, Washington.

private home, the BLM shifts the costs of its care — an estimated \$15,000 to \$27,500 over a horse's lifetime — to someone else.

But the incentive program also put more horses at risk of slaughter. The BLM defines a successful adoption in simple terms: Someone else receives the horse's title. After that, the agency's legal authority over the animal ends, as does its ability to track it. A 2021 *New York Times* report found that some adopters, motivated by the \$1,000 incentive, "dumped" horses at slaughter auctions once they received their checks. In March 2025, the program was suspended after a federal judge concluded the program violated federal laws, and suggested that the slaughter of wild horses was "fairly traceable" to it.

Lutterman, the BLM spokesperson, said that BLM spending on mustang training programs thus provides intangible value beyond adoption figures. "Programs like the Extreme Mustang Makeover and the Trainer Incentive Program trained thousands of horses," he wrote in an email, "increasing the likelihood of successful, long-term placements." They

also boosted public awareness of wild horse adoptions and built a network of trainers. In the years following the 2008 economic crisis, when overall horse ownership declined, the Mustang Heritage Foundation “likely helped preserve adoption numbers to the greatest extent possible,” he added.

Still, the glut of wild horses is great, the demand limited. Market prices reflect this: A century ago, when horses were tools rather than pets, a mustang might be worth \$300, or more than \$8,700 today. In contrast, a 2019 study from the journal *Sustainability* examined BLM internet adoptions from 2012 to 2014 and found their average price at the time to be \$234. The cost of a domesticated horse, meanwhile, can start at thousands of dollars. While some enthusiasts are willing to pay those prices for wild horses, the majority of potential horse-buyers tend to doubt that mustangs are worth the time, effort and money — if they’re even aware that mustangs are available.

The study also found that while saddle training boosted the sale price by more than half, halter-trained horses — ones that receive a level of training similar to TIP’s — did not command higher prices. And while TIP and Extreme Mustang Makeovers appeared to

boost a horse’s value among mustang enthusiasts, the authors acknowledged that “the effect of these programs on demand for wild horses among the general population is, to our knowledge, unknown.” For all of the BLM’s focus on getting animals adopted, the study noted, little research has been done to understand why people adopt mustangs, why they don’t, or what would convince them to.

The BLM continues to support training programs, but it’s changing tack on how. Shultz attributed the agency’s decision not to renew its contract with the Mustang Heritage Foundation in September 2023 to recent turnover among the nonprofit’s executive directors, saying the instability made the BLM “nervous.” Lutterman refused to comment, saying only that the agency “remains deeply committed to programs that help place wild horses and burros into good homes, including adult and youth regional training programs.”

Local mustang challenges scrambled over the year following the BLM’s announcement. Some groups, like MYWY, fundraised and applied directly to the BLM for grants. Others, like the Wyoming Mustang Association, simply canceled their challenges. In November, however, the BLM announced

that it would distribute up to \$25 million to five training organizations over five years, MYWY among them. Most of the new funding — up to \$16 million — would go to a nonprofit called Forever Branded to “establish a network of equine trainers to train and gentle wild horses and burros for adoption.”

The Mustang Heritage Foundation is now working with the U.S. Forest Service, which manages far fewer wild horses than the BLM. As the nonprofit finalizes its new strategy, it’s still organizing an Extreme Mustang Makeover in 2025, and is working to secure private donations, according to Shultz. “We’re not married to an event or a historic style of doing something,” he said. “The point is, we want to create demand for America’s mustangs.”

MYWY HELD ITS 2024 MUSTANG challenge in August at the King County Expo Center in Enumclaw, Washington. Over the first two days, horses underwent vet checks and performed set routines to demonstrate their training. The morning of the third and final day dawned cool as the trainers prepared their horses for their freestyle routines. Marjie Hicks saddled Roulette and Casino, then shook silver glitter into their manes and tails.

Hicks led Roulette into the arena and through an archway that dangled pool noodles and strips of bubble wrap. She directed the horse onto a low platform, then sent her in figure-eights around two cones. Roulette nudged an exercise ball with her forelegs and fearlessly approached an active bubble dispenser. When Roulette’s routine was over, Hicks changed shirts and grabbed Casino from a friend. Horse and trainer walked into the ring to the opening riffs of *Toy Story*’s “You’ve Got a Friend in Me.” Casino, her dapples brilliant, stepped her front hooves onto a round platform and pivoted 180 degrees. Then Hicks led Casino to a picnic blanket that crinkled like a plastic grocery bag underneath her hooves. The horse remained composed.

Both mustangs performed beautifully. But as she left the arena, Hicks sagged with worry. She hadn’t been laid off, but money was still tight, and she felt pressure to find homes for Casino and Roulette. The day before, she’d put each horse through its tests, demonstrating that the animal could load into a trailer, turn, halt, back up on command





Above, Loriann Warner and her mustang, Glory, display the first-place ribbons they won in their division during the competition. A first-place win comes with a \$2,500 prize, the largest in the competition.

At left, Marjie Hicks leads Casino into the arena to perform in the MYWY mustang challenge in Enumclaw, Washington.

and more. A judge scored every move, and prizes awaited. But the auction, scheduled to begin in five hours, had no registered bidders. Aside from putting up a few posters at local tack stores, MYWY had marketed the challenge only through Facebook. BLM staff were concerned that word had mostly reached people who already knew about the event.

Meanwhile, Warner and Glory awaited their freestyle turn, surrounded by a gaggle of family, including kids. Warner wore a black show shirt, jeweled belt and cowboy

hat, but otherwise both horse and rider were unadorned. Concentration smoothed Warner's face as she entered the arena, tapping Glory's sides with a rustling tarp and then her lasso, as she'd done a thousand times before. She dismounted, pulled the saddle from Glory's back, hopped up bareback, jumped a line of small logs, then urged Glory into a gallop. The crowd roared.

"You did so good!" Warner crowed, rubbing Glory's face.

Around 2 p.m., two dozen trainers lined up in the arena for awards based on the weekend's cumulative scores. Susan Clogston, MYWY's director, presided once again. Hicks took sixth place in her division with Roulette and fifth place with Casino. Warner won the top prize in her division with Glory, earning \$2,500.

The auction was scheduled to follow. Clogston turned to the bleachers and asked anyone who planned to bid to raise a hand. She scanned the crowd, and waited. No hands went up.

"If that's the case. ..."

There would be no auction. Trainers who hadn't already found adopters would have to find homes for their mustangs themselves — 16 horses in total. (MYWY later claimed that BLM-approved bidders were present, just not enough to justify holding an auction.)

Exhausted and discouraged, Hicks packed up and loaded the horses back into her trailer. She had just spent five months preparing Casino and Roulette to live with someone else. Now she felt she had let them down. Still, she would continue feeding them, training them and loving them — and spreading the word that she had two beautiful mustangs, waiting for the right home. ☀

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THE TOPAZ AFFAIR

How the discovery of a long-lost monument shattered trust between a Japanese American community and the museum built to preserve its history.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KORI SUZUKI

VIOLENCE HAD BROUGHT the old man here, and violence would take him away. The blue mountains rose as he walked through the desert in the fading evening light. The powdery soil of an ancient lakebed sank beneath his feet. The man's name was James Wakasa, and he was a prisoner of the United States.

It was April 1943, and the world was at war. Sixteen months earlier, Japanese planes attacked an American naval base in Hawai'i. As a wave of bitter, anti-immigrant fury swept the country, President Franklin Roosevelt responded by ordering the mass removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast. Thousands of people — immigrants and U.S. citizens alike — were forced to leave their homes and taken to 10 remote federal prison camps, mostly in the Western U.S. The president said it was necessary for national security. A congressional commission would later call it an act of "race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership."

Wakasa, a 63-year-old immigrant and a chef in San Francisco, was sent east to Utah. There was a camp there, deep in the Sevier Desert, ringed by mountains and surrounded by barbed wire fences. Armed military guards patrolled the perimeter, sometimes shooting at incarcerated who tried to escape or failed to halt when ordered. The camp was called the Topaz Relocation Center.

That Sunday evening, the old man walked out along the edge of the camp as he often did with his dog in the evenings. Clouds had covered the sky earlier, darkening the desert, but now the sun broke through, dipping low over the mountains.



The setting sun illuminates the site of the Topaz Relocation Center, a federal prison camp in Millard County, Utah, where thousands of Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II.

Across the desert, an American soldier sat in a guard tower overlooking the camp. His name was Gerald Philpott, and a year later, he would go on to serve in Germany and become wounded in combat, earning a Purple Heart. He was not quite 19 years old.

Philpott saw Wakasa walking along the fence. He called out a warning, ordering the old man to move away from the wire — four times, he later said. The young man raised his rifle and fired.

A single bullet flashed through the air as the gunshot rang across the desert. It sliced through Wakasa's chest, tearing his spine apart. The old man dropped to his knees and fell backwards, dead. Blood ran from his body and stained the dusty ground, soaking through layers of antediluvian soil. The sun had not yet set.

SEVENTY-TWO YEARS LATER, Nancy Ukai stood in a quiet room surrounded by oak bookcases at the National

Archives building in Washington, D.C. It was 2015, and Ukai, a historical researcher and former journalist, was there to learn about James Wakasa's life and death.

Ukai was a child when she heard the name for the first time. During the war, her mother and father were sent to Topaz, too. They were there the evening Philpott shot Wakasa, a day before Ukai's half-brother was born. Ukai recalled how her mother, Fumiko, turned an angry red one night at the family dinner table in Berkeley, California. "They didn't have to kill him," Fumiko said.

That memory sat in the back of Ukai's memory for decades. It was there when she moved to Japan, seeking a deeper connection to her family's roots, and worked as a reporter in Tokyo. It was there when she moved home to the Bay Area and joined efforts to preserve the history of Topaz and the other camps. Eventually, it brought her to Washington, D.C., to learn more about Wakasa.

A thick paper folder lay

before her. She opened it.

Federal officials kept detailed records on almost everyone they imprisoned, including Wakasa. They noted how swiftly the military police seized his body and removed it from the camp. The records included a copy of the press release the camp officials published, which accused Wakasa of trying to crawl through the fence and escape, despite federal records showing that the bloodstain left by his body was three to five feet away from the fence. They added that, after the shooting, heavily armed soldiers began patrolling the camp with gas masks and submachine guns.

The file held information on Wakasa's life, too — lists of his belongings, including his chef's hat, an alarm clock and a picture of Abraham Lincoln — along with statements from other incarcerated people who remembered him. One clerk at the camp's legal office said Wakasa was stubborn and spoke out freely. Wakasa had visited the

office regularly to file paperwork, demanding that the state of California pay him the unemployment insurance he said it owed him after he'd faithfully contributed to the fund before incarceration. "He knew what his rights were and would not leave any stone unturned in his efforts to obtain" them, the clerk wrote.

To Ukai, the report read like a poignant eulogy for the old man. "He became more of a person to me when I read that," she said.

Then Ukai uncovered a series of letters between Topaz officials and the Roosevelt administration in D.C. They sounded alarmed: After the shooting, they said, a group of Wakasa's fellow prisoners — landscapers and Issei, first-generation immigrants like Wakasa — raised a monument of concrete and stone at the place where he died.

Ukai searched the file for pictures of the monument but found nothing. The letters grew increasingly worried. Just months earlier, military police had opened fire into a crowd at Manzanar, another detention center in California. They shot 11 people and killed two. D.C. officials feared the Japanese government would use the shootings to justify abusing American prisoners of war.

The Roosevelt administration pressed Topaz officials to destroy the monument. Under pressure from the officials, incarcerated Japanese American community leaders told the workers who built it to tear it down.

Ukai left D.C. and traveled home to California, the new



A road sign in Delta, Utah (*left*), and the bullet-riddled sign that marks the site of the guard tower at the Topaz Relocation Center (*facing*).



information still sinking in. The monument in Topaz felt important. To her, it was a symbol of both the violence that people had experienced there and their refusal to stop fighting for their civil rights. The monument's destruction showed how that resistance had been silenced.

But Ukai had other projects to work on. Among other things, she was preparing to publish an online history project on the incarceration, *50 Objects*. James Wakasa and the demolished memorial slipped to the back of her mind.

Then, in the hot summer of 2020, a Minneapolis police officer murdered George Floyd. Across the American South, nearly 100 monuments to Confederate leaders like Gen. Robert E. Lee were

torn down as protesters rose up to demand racial justice.

As Ukai watched, those events stirred her memories of a Japanese American monument that the government thought was too dangerous to exist. She started writing an article about her research and the story of Wakasa's killing. That September, she published it on the *50 Objects* website. At the top of it, she put a photo illustration of a pile of dust.

ON THE OTHER SIDE of the mountains in rural eastern California, two married archaeologists took notice.

It was a low moment for Mary Farrell and Jeff Burton. The pandemic was at its height, and churning wildfire smoke

choked the skies above their tiny town in the Owens Valley. Burton was also going through chemotherapy, which left him feeling weak and tired.

The two white archaeologists had spent parts of the 1990s roaming the American West together — particularly Burton, who worked for the National Park Service. Farrell, who was then employed by the U.S. Forest Service, often went with him when she could get off work. Their mission was to document what was left of the Japanese American detention centers. The sites were scattered across the Western U.S., and many had been sold or given away by the government after the war. Burton traveled to all 10 of the camps to see what was left. They

recorded what was still standing and the foundations of what had been torn down. Eventually, they wrote a landmark report that recommended designating all 10 camps as historic sites.

After their son Dan was born, those expeditions became family road trips. On the way to the Heart Mountain War Relocation Center in Wyoming, they stopped at Yellowstone. After cataloging remains at Tule Lake Relocation Center, they would visit the fossil parks nearby.

I knew what that felt like — that odd blend of family vacation time and disturbing history. In 2013, I piled into my own family's car along with my grandmother, parents and sister. We drove north from California for hours. When we finally stopped to

stretch our legs, we were standing at Minidoka, the southern Idaho detention center where my grandmother and her family were imprisoned during the war.

"It just felt very American," Farrell said when we first spoke in 2023. "Great beauty and great stories. And also, great tragedy."

That was decades ago, though. In the years since, the two archaeologists had moved to the sleepy town of Lone Pine. Burton was still at the National Park Service, but Farrell had retired from the Forest Service and joined the staff of a small nonprofit.

When they read Ukai's article, they were intrigued — especially by one document. It was a hand-drawn map of the place where Wakasa was killed. Ukai found it at the National Archives and included it in her piece. The sketch showed the fence, the bloodstain and its distance from the guard tower. Burton and Farrell wondered if any fragments of the monument were left. They decided to head to Utah.

"It feels a tiny bit like an Indiana Jones movie," I told Farrell. "Unfortunately, we are not at all like Indiana Jones," she said kindly. "We're much more boring and tedious and bureaucratic."

The drive to Topaz took just over seven hours. By the time they arrived, the sun was tilting lower in the sky. The archaeologists laid out a tape measure and began walking along the desert plain, stepping over thorny sagebrush shrubs.

It didn't take long. There, along the line of their tape measure, was a giant stone, many times larger than anything around it. It was almost entirely buried, with just one face breaking through the dusty soil. A few chunks of concrete were scattered nearby. It was less than 20



feet from the place where James Wakasa was killed.

ALTHOUGH THE ARCHAEOLOGISTS were standing on a historic site, they were also technically on private property. Fifteen miles away sat the organization that owned that property: the Topaz Museum.

The museum is a locally run private nonprofit in Delta, the closest town. Much of the town's main street feels old and lived in, but the museum stands out with its boxy shape and metal-and-glass design. A plaque in the foyer names the museum's founder: Jane Beckwith.

Beckwith and the museum's board of directors trace its history back to 1982. Many in town, they said, knew little about Topaz. Passersby used the small sign that acknowledged the camp for target practice. "I knew all about World War II," said Scott Bassett, a white elementary school teacher who grew up in Delta and serves on

the museum's board. "I could recite the battles and the gates and their generals' names. But I had no clue what had happened right in my own backyard."

Beckwith, a high school journalism teacher and white Delta resident, wanted to change that. In 1982, she and her students began a class project about Topaz. They explored the wartime connections between the town and the prison camp and interviewed Delta residents who had worked there.

At the same time, across the country, thousands of Japanese American survivors, energized by the civil rights and antiwar movements, were demanding that the federal government answer for their incarceration. A federal commission held hearings in dozens of major cities. It found that the mass relocation policy was fueled by racial prejudice and wartime panic. In 1988, Congress passed an official apology and approved financial reparations for the Japanese

American community.

Back in Delta, Beckwith started raising money for a museum. She traveled to San Francisco, to which many Topaz survivors had returned after the war, and worked with them to find grants and private donations. In the following decades, the museum's organizers received over \$1.5 million in grants from the National Park Service and the state of Utah, along with hundreds of thousands in private donations. They started buying up the land where the former camp had stood. In 2007, the Topaz site was declared a national historic landmark — a place essential to understanding American history. Many praised Beckwith's efforts. "People should know about this," she told the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2011. "Topaz still has much to teach us. But it must be protected, or it will disappear."

But others had questions about the museum. In 2014, a small group of Topaz survivors and their descendants were

invited to read the text of some of the exhibits the museum's organizers planned to install. Some camp survivors and descendants worried the panels failed to capture the violence that took place. Nancy Ukai noticed that the text describing Wakasa's killing didn't mention that guards had been shooting at prisoners for months. "The narrative seemed like it skimmed over the horror of what happened," she said. In response, the National Park Service halted the museum's funding and held a series of mediation meetings. The agency also called on historical experts to review the panels, Ukai said.

(Beckwith, reached in person and by phone, declined multiple requests to speak for this story.)

The museum board agreed to rewrite the exhibits. In an interview, Bassett, the board member, said he thought the original version of the exhibit on James Wakasa was just as strong as the revised one. But "because we had federal money from the National Park Service, they required that we go into mediation," he said late last year. "We were forced into that." Still, the board went ahead with the rewrites. When the museum officially opened in 2017, the Utah Legislature celebrated Beckwith, calling Topaz "the crowning jewel" of efforts to remember the incarceration.

Then, in September 2020, Beckwith received an email

from Burton. The two archaeologists, she learned, had visited Topaz and discovered something buried in the ground.

UKAI WAS STUNNED. She knew about Burton and Farrell's work but had no idea they were going out to Topaz. According to her research, the monument had been demolished 80 years ago.

"I was just utterly shocked to think that it had been buried, like buried treasure," Ukai said. "This thing that had been erased was actually still there."

Back in Delta, though, Topaz Museum officials were more concerned about the way the monument had been discovered. Bassett thought the archaeologists should have asked for the board's permission before doing research on the

site. In an email, Burton admitted to taking a piece of concrete from the site, an act some board members saw as a violation of archaeological standards. "We were basically just treated disrespectfully," Bassett said.

Beckwith shared similar worries in emails to state officials, which I obtained through a public records request. "What I am afraid they will do is just come and turn over the rock, film it, and do whatever else they want to do without our permission," she wrote to Roger Roper, a Utah historic preservation officer, in October 2020.

That same month, a group of archaeologists, government officials, descendants and museum board members met to discuss what should happen next.

One of those archaeologists

was Koji Lau-Ozawa, a post-doctoral fellow at the University of California, Los Angeles. Lau-Ozawa had done his own research at a different incarceration camp, Gila River, years earlier. He felt strongly that the descendants and the museum needed to reach a joint decision before taking any further action.

"Archaeology is an irreversible act," he said late last year. "Whatever step is taken, whether it's leaving it in the ground or excavating it, there needs to be sort of a consensus."

The discussions drew on for months. Masako Takahashi, an artist who was born in Topaz, offered to fund a full archaeological excavation, but the board declined.

In the meantime, Burton and Farrell were preparing to publish a series of articles on the discovery on "Discover Nikkei," an online project of the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. They sent drafts to Ukai and also shared them with Beckwith and Bassett, who suggested several changes. In the summer of 2021, the two archaeologists published their series.

Three weeks later, Ukai received an email from Beckwith. It was terse and direct. The subject line read "FW: Rock."

"Just a quick report on this morning," it read. "The rock was much larger than it seemed, but it only took a couple of hours to remove the dirt around it and then pull it out of the hole."

The Topaz Museum had unearthed the monument.

INFORMATION ABOUT the excavation of the Wakasa Monument is limited. Museum board members videotaped the process but declined requests to share the footage. Bassett also refused to answer specific



Historical researcher and former journalist Nancy Ukai (*facing*) stands for a portrait in her backyard in Berkeley, California. Archaeologist Mary Farrell (*right*) at the Peace Plaza in Japantown in San Francisco, California, during a 2023 ceremony marking the 80th anniversary of James Wakasa's killing.

questions about the excavation. Roper, the Utah historic preservation officer, had been present but did not respond to interview requests.

According to Lau-Ozawa, a thorough archaeological excavation of the Wakasa Monument might have looked something like this. Watching from above, a rectangular grid of string would have marked the area where the monument was buried, recording the physical location of the object in space. Slowly, a rectangular hole would appear in the earth around the stone. Researchers would then remove layers of soil with trowels and other hand tools, 10 centimeters at a time, sifting each layer to catch any stray objects and taking pictures — perhaps even using a laser to map out each layer in fine detail. The monument would gradually emerge from the center of the hole.

The actual excavation was far less precise. Photographs taken by Roper, obtained through a public records request, show a ragged hole appearing in the earth around the monument as four workers drove metal shovels into the soil, carving it away. At the center of the hole, the monument emerged: a massive, egg-shaped stone. One picture shows Beckwith reaching out to touch it with a gloved hand.

Eventually, the monument was raised from the earth, held tightly by a yellow strap, like a whale lifted from the ocean. An industrial Bobcat skid-steer dragged it towards the road. In the process, a small piece of the monument broke loose

In an interview this past December, Bassett defended the museum's actions. He acknowledged that none of those involved, including Roper, were professional archaeologists and admitted that they likely failed to grasp the gravity of the moment. Still, he argued that they did understand the importance of the monument. "Of course, this is going to sound like I'm making this all up," he said. "But for me, it was a very emotional experience. It was a very solemn experience. We were very careful."

In separate interviews, however, archaeologists Lau-Ozawa and Farrell said the excavation had destroyed both scientific information and an opportunity for an emotional moment for Topaz survivors and their descendants. Lau-Ozawa called it a "failure of process."

"It was done in a way that did not allow for community input — for people to weigh in on how it should be done," he said. "And, furthermore, it was done in a way that limits the way we can



understand and learn from the object."

Even experts hired by the Topaz Museum would later agree that greater expertise would have made a difference. "The assistance of experienced and knowledgeable professionals, such as an archeologist or a stone professional with significant insight into potential weakness or fragile areas in natural stones, would have been beneficial," Utah masonry specialist John Lambert wrote in his

report on the stone's condition in August 2023.

Back at the excavation site, the group hoisted the monument onto a truck and drove it back to Delta. They placed the vast stone on an uncovered wooden pallet in the back corner of the courtyard behind the museum. Another piece came loose in the process. It started to rain.

UKAI READ BECKWITH'S EMAIL SLOWLY. She was shaking. Tears leaked from her eyes.

She thought about the actions of the federal government back in 1943, in the days after Wakasa's killing — how they seized his body, controlled what the public knew and ultimately, in her view, tried to erase the memory of the killing by pressuring the camp to demolish the monument. In the museum's actions, she saw the same patterns of violence emerging.

"It was really, really traumatic to think that something that was so precious to us was pulled



The Topaz Museum in Delta, Utah, (above) and the monument, which is currently in storage there.

In 2021, workers removed a monument that was created and then torn down by prisoners after the shooting of James Wakasa at the Topaz Relocation Center (left).
Roger Roper via a FOIA request



out without telling us,” she said. “It was really a heritage crime.”

Ukai immediately wrote back to Beckwith. “You appear not to understand that the place where a member of our community was murdered, and where that crime was memorialized by camp inmates, was desecrated at the time,” she wrote, describing the events of 1943. “In a similar way our agency and our ability to be involved has been taken away from us once again.”

Within a day, other furious Topaz descendants began to respond. “Jane, you have robbed us of a precious moment in time,” wrote Satsuki Ina, an organizer with the immigrant rights advocacy group Tsuru for Solidarity. “So much harm has been caused by your sense of entitlement and ownership of my family’s story.”

The backlash was beyond anything the museum board had expected. Two weeks later, Beckwith issued an apology letter from the board. Beckwith

blamed the archaeologists, Burton and Farrell, for sharing the monument’s location in their “Discover Nikkei” articles. She said the board had been afraid that looters or vandals would find it. “We acknowledge that the opportunity to unearth the stone in a publicized healing ceremony attended by members of the Japanese American Community was lost,” Beckwith wrote. “But the disclosure of the stone’s location had increased the risk of vandalism and damage.”

Farrell and Burton were devastated, both at the news of the excavation and the museum’s response. They were horrified to think that their article might have triggered the destructive act. They sent their own emails to Beckwith and Ukai, apologizing profusely. But Farrell said they were also appalled by the board’s actions. They should have known better and been more careful, she said.

“I’m still confused,” she said last year, still agonized. “Why

did they do that? Why did they rip it out, destroying all the archaeological context, destroying the chance for healing that stone had offered?”

TO LAU-OZAWA, the museum’s actions echoed a long and troubled history.

The science of archaeology is about studying the past through physical remains. But many scientists and museums have used the practice to unjustly claim artifacts and excavate cultural sites, Lau-Ozawa said. He pointed to the example of the so-called “Elgin Marbles,” the iconic sculptures from the Parthenon that Greek officials accuse the British of stealing, which are still held in the British Museum. The *Indiana Jones* movies too, he said, were another example — a swashbuckling white archaeologist swooping in to seize sacred objects from Indigenous tribes in the name of protecting them. The way Topaz Museum officials had talked

about safeguarding the monument, Lau-Ozawa felt, resonated with that record.

“The long history of protection, or sort of ‘the museum knows best’ kind of framing,” he said.

In response, Ukai and dozens of other descendants formed the Wakasa Memorial Committee to negotiate with the museum board over the monument’s future. In September, six weeks after the excavation, they sent a letter demanding the release of the excavation videotape and an independent assessment of the excavation site.

The next month, Beckwith responded with a letter of her own. She apologized personally and asked that descendants stop publicly criticizing the board. “I take full responsibility for the decision,” she wrote. “The Topaz Museum Board and I are committed to doing better.” Still, the board refused to release the video. The Wakasa Committee had also asked the board to

consider a community archaeology project that would allow descendants and other volunteers to work alongside trained researchers, as had been done at Manzanar and other former camps. The board declined.

Not all the Topaz descendants were angry, though. Dianne Fukami, a longtime TV journalist in the Bay Area, argued that the board had done far more good over the years. “I am indebted to Jane Beckwith, a former high school teacher born and raised in Delta, who passionately dedicated countless hours for the past 30+ years to make the museum a reality,” Fukami wrote in an opinion piece for *Rafu Shimpō*, the Los Angeles-based Japanese American newspaper.

As the flurry of heated letters continued, the Wakasa Committee and the museum board sought help from the state of Utah. Two officials stepped in: Chris Merritt, a historic preservation officer who had worked closely with Chinese American communities in Utah to unearth the stories of railroad workers, and Jani Iwamoto, one of the few lawmakers of color in the Utah legislature at the time. Over the course of a year, Sen. Iwamoto and Merritt met regularly with the board and committee to discuss the Wakasa stone’s future.

There was one hopeful milestone approaching: That spring would mark 80 years since James Wakasa’s killing, a date that both committee members and museum officials hoped might offer an opportunity for reconciliation. The talks continued as they worked together to plan a memorial in Delta.

THE BUDDHIST TEMPLE in downtown Salt Lake City was packed. It was a cold night in April 2023, on the eve of the 80th

anniversary of Wakasa’s murder. More than 100 people, including dozens of Topaz descendants and other Japanese American community leaders, had traveled from across the country to be there, just two hours north of Delta, for the opening ceremony.

Almost two years had passed since the excavation. Things remained tense between the Museum and the Wakasa Committee. The board still refused to release the video, and the committee continued to sharply criticize museum officials. But the groups worked together to plan the event. Ukai was preparing to give a presentation on the stone, and other members of the Wakasa Committee were there, along with Beckwith, Merritt and Iwamoto. Farrell and Burton had decided not to attend; Farrell said they didn’t want to make things worse.

The crowd picked up their bento dinners and settled into the temple auditorium. Ukai’s voice echoed through the hall as she described her research and her connection to Wakasa. Merritt thanked everyone for being there. Iwamoto, who had just retired from the Legislature, described the ongoing conversations about the monument’s future.

“Everything that has led us to today, including this collaborative effort, has led to a greater understanding of the tragic murder of James Hatsuaki Wakasa,” the former senator said. “It is an honor to have this story shared so broadly, 80 years later — a story we must never forget.”

It was in the middle of audience questions that one Wakasa Committee member spoke up.

Masako Takahashi, the Topaz-born artist who had offered to fund an archaeological excavation, was sitting onstage. She turned toward the

table where Beckwith was sitting and thanked the board for their work in stewarding the museum. Then she asked them to consider accepting outside help from experts at the National Park Service in deciding what to do with the monument.

“I think it was the unintended consequences of the destructive removal of the stone that we are here today, having to talk about a stone that we — some of us — honor and respect,” she said. “And now it’s cracked, broken and a kind of problem.”

Beckwith didn’t respond. But at the back of the audience, someone else stood up. It was Dianne Fukami, the journalist who had written in support of the museum. Fukami said she didn’t think it was the right time to focus on the conflict. But Takahashi cut her off. “Excuse me — this is the time,” Takahashi said. “Because we are here because of two years of work together, collaborating to be able to have a ceremony to work together towards healing.”

The room was silent for a moment. Merritt moved the program forward.

The next morning, everyone met in Delta. Buses carried the visitors out into the desert, where reverends from Utah and California held a solemn funeral service. They cleansed the land with water, fire, evergreen branches and salt. Beneath a cloud-spotted sky, over 100 mourners walked across the desert carrying paper flowers, the powdery soil sinking beneath their feet.

IT’S STILL NOT entirely clear why the Topaz Museum Board decided to unearth the monument the way they did.

Museum officials continue to argue that it needed to be protected and that they had warned the archaeologists not to

publicly share its location. But Wakasa Committee members point out that the archaeologists gave Beckwith and Bassett time to review the articles beforehand. Beckwith requested other changes but left the monument’s location untouched. When asked about this last year, Bassett said he hadn’t noticed it then.

Emails between Beckwith and state officials show that Beckwith appeared to be on edge about something else. In the months leading up to the excavation, Beckwith wrote that Iwamoto and other Utah legislators had been discussing whether to take the Topaz site out of private management and bring it into the state park system, or hand it over to the National Park Service.

Beckwith wrote to Roper, the historic preservation officer, in early 2021. “It seems so wrong they don’t even have a tip of a conversation with us,” she said. Weeks before the excavation, she brought it up again. “We have so many things coming at us, it’s hard to believe,” Beckwith wrote. “The discussion about becoming part of the NPS or the State Parks doesn’t seem to be going away.” (In a statement, the Topaz Museum Board said they had since rejected the senator’s suggestions.)

Still, none of these pieces offer a clear explanation.

It is clear that there were few legal safeguards in place to stop the museum from removing the stone — even though the museum had received hundreds of thousands of dollars in public funds over the years and was operating on land that the federal government has recognized as essential to understanding America’s past. That’s largely because the museum still owns that land, according to Lau-Ozawa. Unless there was state or federal funding involved,



he said, the monument had few legal protections.

There is some evidence that federal funding may have indeed been involved. In a 2021 email made public by the Wakasa Committee, Beckwith said she had planned to use funding from a federal grant to lift the stone. Experts said that should have triggered a more comprehensive legal review, though even then, efforts to seek accountability after the fact can be complicated.

"It really is so case-specific," Jaime Loichinger, who oversees this kind of legal review for the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, said.

The Topaz Museum Board denies that any federal funding was used during the excavation.

Farrell, the archaeologist, had her own theory about why the museum board had unearthed the stone. Like Lau-Ozawa's, it also had something to do with Indiana Jones.

"It was a treasure and a map, and somebody was going to get it. And it was a race to see who can get it first."

People lay paper flowers around the site where James Wakasa was killed and his memorial later was buried during a ceremony marking the 80th anniversary of the killing at the Topaz Relocation Center in Delta, Utah.

When I first began reporting this story in 2022, it was tempting to see it as an adventure movie. There was the hand-drawn map hidden away in the National Archives and the "buried treasure," as Ukai described the monument. Early drafts of this story opened with a scene straight out of the *Indiana Jones* trilogy: A convoy of trucks hurtling into the desert carrying museum officials on the hunt for a long-lost treasure, clouds of dust billowing in their wake.

But when I mentioned this to Farrell back in 2023, she was quiet for a moment. When she spoke, her voice was thoughtful. Real-life archaeologists, she noted, lead lives that are far less dramatic. Still, she wondered whether that technicolor vision of archaeology and its plundering history had actually played a part in what happened to the monument.

"Maybe that explains what the Topaz Museum board did,"

she said quietly. "It was a treasure and a map, and somebody was going to get it. And it was a race to see who can get it first."

LAST SPRING, Ukai stood with a group of descendants and artists in a backyard in Berkeley, California. Between them stood a tall object made of thin wooden canes, woven together to make an oval frame. Together, they began layering thin strips of tissue and washi, traditional Japanese paper.

Slowly, the object took shape. It was a vast lantern, shaped like a tall stone.

"It was a very joyful experience," Ukai told me recently. "This is a liberated monument made with our own hands."

The idea of creating a sculpture, she said, came from a designer at the MASS Design Group, the architectural firm behind projects like the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Alabama and the Gun Violence Memorial Project in



Illinois. When Ukai and the designer met in 2023 at a history conference about the Japanese American incarceration, the designer suggested that the community build a washi replica. Six months later, Ukai said, they did just that. She worked with a Japanese artist, Yoshinori Asai, to develop the design.

The project was also motivated by their drawn-out frustration with the Topaz Museum. Last year, the board backed out of the state-facilitated talks. Bassett told me they felt they had achieved the goal by deciding on short-term plans, such as adding an enclosure to protect the monument from the elements.

However, the long-term future of the monument remains uncertain. Topaz descendants have discussed a range of options, from donating it to the Smithsonian Institution to returning it to the Sevier Desert. In 2024, the Topaz Museum applied for more federal funding to begin a new outreach project asking for community feedback about the future of the stone. Their application was denied. Bassett said

“We’re going through the same history right now with demonizing immigrants and saying, ‘we’re going to round everybody up, put them in camps and deport them.’ This is bigger than them and us.”

Members of the Wakasa Memorial Committee, along with advisors and artists, sit for a portrait with the Wakasa spirit lantern in Berkeley, California, in February.

the board plans to continue with public outreach anyway.

The Topaz Museum has brought on six new Topaz descendants to guide the organization. Among them is Fukami, the Bay Area journalist who spoke up in support of the board during the memorial ceremony in Salt Lake City. Last year, the board held a public event at a conference in LA, seeking feedback about the stone. There, Fukami apologized in person on behalf of the museum board. Some descendants said they were deeply moved by her words.

Other museum officials, though, have only become more bitter about the criticism. In December, Bassett said the conversations about the monument had left him deeply hurt. “I personally feel that they would be very happy if we — all the white people in Delta — walked away,” he said. “We will never satisfy our enemy.”

In an email, Fukami and another Japanese American board member, Ann Tamaki Dion, echoed Bassett. They felt that members of the Wakasa Memo-

rial Committee were villainizing Beckwith because she was white and not Japanese American.

Ukai was troubled by this. She worried that museum officials were losing sight of their original mission — protecting history.

“We’re going through the same history right now with demonizing immigrants and saying, ‘We’re going to round everybody up, put them in camps and deport them,’” she said in December. “This is bigger than them and us.”

But the lantern, Ukai said, has given her and other descendants a new way to focus on that mission. Last year, they took the lantern back to Topaz and let it shine across the desert. This year, they plan to bring it to Manzanar to remember two incarcerated people who were killed there, one year before Wakasa.

The true monument is once again shrouded in darkness. It still sits on a wooden pallet in the back corner of the courtyard behind the museum in Delta, sealed away inside a locked enclosure designed to protect it from any further damage.

Still, in some ways, Ukai feels that the monument is continuing to do what the Issei workers who built it a generation ago intended. Ever since it was unearthed, she feels, it has been carrying on its mission of standing in the way of those who want only to move forward — and instead forcing us to continue to confront the past. ☀

Kori Suzuki is a reporter and visual journalist at KPBS, the NPR station in San Diego, California. His grandparents are survivors of the Minidoka and Jerome incarceration camps in Idaho and Arkansas. Instagram: @koriesuzukiphoto

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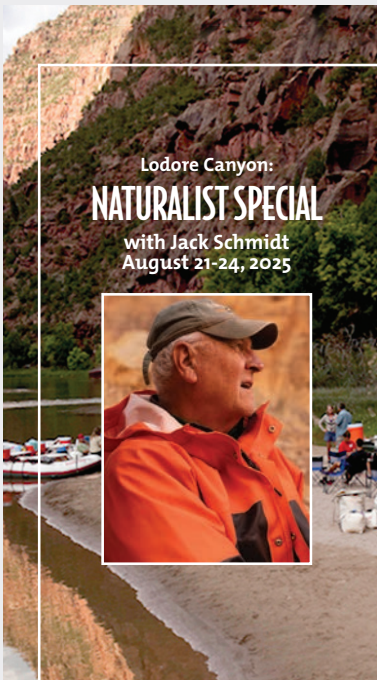
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In 1969, tribal members discovered that the basket was locked away inside the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at UC Berkeley. After the 1990 passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which requires museums that receive federal funds to repatriate ancestors and objects taken from Native American sites, the Rincon Band tried to retrieve it.

They soon learned that the institution was notorious for refusing to return Indigenous items, in open violation of NAGPRA. “The problem with NAGPRA was that it had no teeth,” said Gonzalez. The deadline for UC to return those objects had been set for 1995. But as of 2020, the Hearst Museum still held about 80% of its inventory, according to a California state audit. Shockingly, it had a half-million Native American objects — including some 9,000 human remains. This revelation triggered a public outcry and yet more scrutiny and resulted in some major changes in museum practices.

THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY 9,000 museums and institutions in the West, ranging from roadside attractions like the Cow Canyon Trading Post outside of tiny Bluff, Utah, to cosmopolitan venues like the Museum of Contemporary Art in downtown Los Angeles. Any institution with a depository of Indigenous items that receives federal funds must comply with NAGPRA by notifying a tribe if it has the tribe’s property and obtaining informed consent before exhibiting or studying a tribe’s items. It must also consult with the tribe about repatriating those objects.

But a staggering number of institutions have ignored the

The Indigenous Arts of North America Galleries’ Northwest Coast Collection at the Denver Art Museum. **B.O’Kane / Alamy**

law. While working on a story for *ProPublica*’s Repatriation Project in 2022, I saw repeated NAGPRA violations at some of our nation’s largest institutions. The ongoing lack of Native American curators at these institutions exacerbates the problem. Some museums displayed Indigenous items inappropriately, mislabeled them or used incorrect — even insulting — signage.

Suzan Shown Harjo (Cheyenne and Hodulgee Muscogee), a 2014 recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom and co-founder of the National Museum of the American Indian, said that she believed that the historical lack of Native American, Native Alaskan or Native Hawaiian curators has been deliberate. “A lot of institutions don’t want (Indigenous) experts inside their museums to see what their collections are and what should be repatriated,” she said.

There are other reasons why Indigenous curators are few in number, said Sven Haakanson Jr., (Alutiiq), curator of Native American Anthropology at the Burke Museum in Seattle and chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of Washington. “I’ve been in museum curation for 30 years, and I haven’t seen a growth in indigenous curators,” he said. Indeed, only 1% of the archivists, curators and museum technicians currently employed in the U.S. are Native American, according to 2022 numbers from Data USA.

“It’s a life choice that requires a lot of commitment,” said Haakanson. “Many (Native) people choose to go into better-paying fields.”

CULTURE

The caretakers

Indigenous curators are helping to ensure that museum collections are handled, and expanded, appropriately.

BY KATHLEEN SHARP

FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY, leaders of the Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians in San Diego County, California, yearned to find their missing Dragonfly Basket. Created by an unknown artist, the three-dimensional dragonfly design danced across a large, expertly woven basket

made of deergrass and *Juncus*, or rush grass. The basket’s dragonfly motif was even incorporated into the Rincon tribal seal. But in 1905, the piece was either lost or stolen. No one knows exactly what happened, according to Rincon Tribal Council Member Laurie Gonzalez.

The Burke boasts a collection of more than 16 million artifacts, ranging from the world's largest collection of spread bird wings to the fifth-largest array of Northwest Coast Native art in the U.S. As a Native Alaskan, Haakanson not only complies with NAGPRA, he works to educate donors and museums about their responsibilities to tribes. "When we get a collector who wants to give us something, I'll be honest. I'll tell them that if there is anything that we have to return to a tribe, we will." When appropriate, he'll introduce a prospective donor to a tribal representative, facilitating not only repatriation but a relationship as well. "It's one of the things that we can do for communities that have been traumatized for centuries," he said.

CURATOR TAHNEE AHTONE (Kiowa/Seminole/Mvskoki) spent many frustrating years applying to museums as a curator, despite the fact that she hails from a family of renowned artists. In 1933, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City purchased a cradleboard made by Ahtone's great-grandmother, Tahdo Ahtone. Starting in the 1960s, her grandfather, Jacob Ahtone,

became a close friend of Ralph T. Coe, a collector who championed North American Native art and who became the director of the Nelson-Atkins. Today, paintings by Tahnee's mother, Sharron Ahtone Harjo, are collected by people who lend to museums like the Nelson-Atkins.

"Our inherent knowledge of American Indian art is very valuable to most institutions."

But Tahnee, a bead worker, textile expert and trained curator, couldn't get her foot in the door. She felt stymied by socioeconomic obstacles: "Many of us come from rural communities with low-economic backgrounds, which makes it tough to land curation jobs," she said. Few students can afford to take low-paying internships, pay for city

housing or gain entrée into the kind of philanthropic circles that lead to prestigious jobs. "But our inherent knowledge of American Indian art is very valuable to most institutions," she said. Experts like Ahtone have lived the history of their people and understand the origins and meanings of their people's artistic traditions.

In 2024, the Nelson-Atkins Museum hired Ahtone as its first curator of Native American Art. The wait was worth it, she said, adding that the position gives her greater standing in the art world and a chance to be a "change-maker."

DAKOTA HOSKA (Oglala Lakota), associate curator of Native Arts at the Denver Art Museum, said she is starting to see more Indigenous curators emerge, primarily as a result of mentoring. Museum curators, such as Janet Catherine Berlo and George P. Horse Capture Sr. (Gros Ventre), trained students who are now curators in Native American departments at various museums. Some of those curators are themselves training a new crop of professionals.

"I know a lot of Indigenous curators at museums. I've mentored some of them," said Hoska.

As a result, she added, "I think there will be a lot of Native people coming up soon."

Her institution has avoided scandal in part because of its unique heritage. In 1925, it became one of the first museums in the country to recognize and collect contemporary Native American art. "Donors bought pieces directly from individual artists, or at the (Indian) market," said Hoska.

The museum has a significant collection of contemporary Indigenous art with strong provenance — the record of an object's origin and its owners up to the present day. The museum's works include wall textiles, baskets, jewelry, musical instruments, sculpture, blankets, photography and ceremonial trappings, all labeled by artist, year and any relevant historical details. But it doesn't have many anthropological objects and doesn't acquire them, she explained. The museum and Hoska also partner with regional Native artists, consulting them in nearly every decision the institution makes. "Now we look for pieces that tell a story about a historical event or that the tribes want to talk about," said Hoska.

As this story was going to



From left: Dakota Hoska, a curator at the Denver Art Museum; Sven Haakanson Jr., a curator at the Burke Museum and chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of Washington; Tahnee Ahtone, a curator at the Nelson-Atkins Museum.

Facing page, from top: A cradleboard made by Ahtone's great-grandmother, Tahdo Ahtone, on display at Nelson-Atkins Museum. **William Rockhill Nelson Trust / Nelson Atkins Museum of Art**

The Rincon Tribe's Dragonfly Basket. **Courtesy of Rincon Government Center**

press, Hoska told me that she was leaving the Denver Art Museum to join the staff of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The Lakota curator from Wounded Knee, Pine Ridge, will be the first curator of Native American Art at the National Gallery — and its first Native American curator.

IN 2022, THE HEARST museum finally returned the Dragonfly Basket to the Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians. “It’s monumental for our people,” said Tribal Chairman Bo Mazzetti. “The symbol of our tribe is now where it belongs.”

But the process took decades. On a visit to Berkeley in 1997, Tribal Council Member Gonzalez heard the basket was still in the Hearst Museum. At the time, the tribe lacked the resources to retrieve it. “You need money to be heard,” said Vice Chairman Joe Linton. Tribal leaders opened discussions with museum officials, but they went nowhere. “It was a different time in the 1990s,” Linton explained. “None of the institutions were willing to let go of anything in their collections.”

But in 2020, Gonzalez was at Berkeley again when Thomas Torma, the campus NAGPRA liaison, showed her the basket. “I almost cried,” she said. “I held it like a baby and said, ‘we need to bring this home.’” That same year, California released a report about how UC facilities were hoarding Indigenous objects. State lawmakers passed AB 275, requiring state-funded museums to re-inventory their Native American collections by 2022, and to include tribal liaisons in the process. UC Berkeley Chancellor Carol Christ oversaw a revision of the university’s repatriation policies, including a mandate that half of the campus

NAGPRA advisory committee would consist of tribal members.

“Today, we are helping tribes take home their things,” said Sabrina Agarwal, chair of Berkeley’s Anthropology Department, who also serves on its NAGPRA committee. The goal is to empty the Hearst of Indigenous materials. “It’s been a 180-degree change,” Agarwal said. (According to *ProPublica*, however, UC Berkeley still has the nation’s fourth-largest collection of unrepatriated Native American remains.)

Now, the Rincon Band hopes to repatriate other belongings, not just from the Hearst but from other museums as well. Currently, however, the tribe has a 500-square-foot museum, about the size of a living room. If it’s going to repatriate more objects, it will need a bigger space. UC Berkeley has offered to collaborate with the tribe on creating a new museum. “We are getting students from the schools of engineering, architecture and archaeology to work on designing and building it,” said Agarwal. “It’s a great learning tool for students to be able to work with the tribe.”

The tribe welcomes the expertise. Plans are still preliminary, but the cultural shift is huge. What was once the worst violator of Native American civil rights in the United States has suddenly become one its most enthusiastic repatriators as well as a tribal partner. “It feels very healing,” said Council Member Gonzalez. ✨

Kathleen Sharp is the author of five books, a PEN Literary Journalism finalist and winner of seven awards from the Society of Professional Journalists. She’s written for The Guardian, among others, and is an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation.





Q&A

DURING THE FORCED removal of Muscogee (Creek) people from their ancestral lands in the Southeastern U.S., tribal members carried the embers and ashes of their town fires with them, determined to re-establish the flames in the new communities they planned to build in what's now known as Oklahoma. Those fires still burn today in places on the Muscogee Reservation.

In *By the Fire We Carry*, Cherokee journalist Rebecca Nagle documents the interwoven stories of tribal land dispossession, forced removal, a murder in a small tribal community, her own family history and three recent and consequential Supreme Court decisions about

tribal jurisdiction over lands in Oklahoma. Two of them, *Murphy v. Oklahoma* and *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, centered on crimes on land that the state of Oklahoma argued was no longer part of the Muscogee and Cherokee Nations' respective reservations. In both

The flaws in our democracy

Cherokee journalist Rebecca Nagle puts recent Supreme Court victories for tribes in context.

BY ANNA V. SMITH | ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN CROW

cases, the Supreme Court upheld the tribes' arguments in a historic win for tribal sovereignty. But shortly after came *Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta*, in which the Supreme Court sidestepped a century of federal Indian law and gave states jurisdiction

to prosecute crimes on tribal lands when the perpetrator was non-Native and the victim was Native. The connections Nagle makes span generations and offer insight into our current political turmoil, at a time when a second Trump administration is testing the limits of executive authority and the law.

In a conversation with *High Country News*, Nagle discusses how the U.S. still wields its power of empire, what impact the Trump administration could have on tribal sovereignty, and the enduring weight of history.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

In this book, you don't just focus on the 20-year histories

of these three Supreme Court cases but also tell the stories of the Muscogee and Cherokee nations before the U.S. existed. Why did you decide to take such a long view?

One of the big takeaways that I wanted people to have was how much history informs our present. I also wanted people to get a sense of how history repeats itself, and how things like a lie that tribal land is lawless get used over and over again, or the excuse that, “Oh, *this* is actually what’s best for Native people.” I wanted people to be able to see and identify those patterns.

When I found out about the *McGirt* decision and saw the implications that my tribe’s reservation would be recognized again, it was a really overwhelming emotion of relief, of joy, but there was also a lot of sadness, because I knew how much my ancestors, and Cherokee ancestors in general, had sacrificed to reach this moment. I think that a lot of other tribal citizens felt that the day that we were celebrating the Supreme Court decision. I think we all felt that weight of history. And I wanted the reader to feel that weight of history — to understand this isn’t a simple story of, “Yay, the tribes won!” There’s a lot that’s implicated in that victory and a lot that was lost for that rare legal victory to happen.

In the book you hold multiple difficult truths at once, like how George Jacobs’ death — which caused so much pain for his community — was the origin of the Murphy case and also resulted in a historic win for tribal sovereignty. Similarly, the truth of your ancestor, John Ridge, who signed a treaty that resulted in forced removal of the Cherokee people. It was against their wishes, and also what he thought he had to do to save

his nation. How did you navigate that? It can be so easy to collapse these tensions to make for a simpler narrative.

Absolutely. As a journalist, my North Star is the truth. And I think the truth is complicated. I don’t think we can tell the whole story of the *McGirt* victory without talking about the crimes and the tragedy that it originated in. And I think the same is true for my ancestors. I was sort of raised to think one thing, but I went back through the historical records and really tried to look at it for what it was. There’s a lot that we can learn from the desperation of my ancestors and their decision to sign that treaty. We can learn just how violent U.S. policy was at that time, that they would make a decision like that. There’s a cultural impulse to tell stories where there are clear heroes and clear villains, and victories like *McGirt* come from a good place, and things are clean-cut. I think that history is actually quite messy. I wanted a book that reflected that reality.

In the aftermath of the *McGirt* decision, the state of Oklahoma pushed a narrative of chaos and disruption in the criminal justice system, which some national outlets then repeated without much discernment. Can you talk about the role of the media — including the lack of Indigenous representation in newsrooms — and how that shapes the public’s understanding of things like tribal sovereignty?

I think that it’s a really big hindrance to our rights as Indigenous nations and to our sovereignty. Less than a fraction of a percent of the people staffing newsrooms are Native. Coverage of Indigenous issues very often fails to meet the standards of journalism. It doesn’t have context, or a depth of knowledge

of what’s going on. They send reporters who’ve never been on a reservation to do reporting about criminal justice on tribal land. It creates an environment where you can tell lies about tribes, and people will think that it’s true.

And unfortunately, that’s what happened. In the wake of *McGirt*, (Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt, R) made some very bold and outlandish claims about the number of criminal cases that could be prosecuted moving forward. I did some digging around with a fellow reporter, Allison Herrera, and Oklahoma’s claims fell apart completely. But they were still repeated and cited by prominent outlets like the *Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Oklahoma then cited those articles in their briefs, and some of that inaccurate information was actually in the (*Castro-Huerta*) Supreme Court decision. And so it was this tornado of disinformation that made it all the way up to the Supreme Court. Normally, we think that the *Washington Post* is a check on bad information, but not when it comes to tribes, which should be an embarrassment for them.

We’re in a moment of major law and policy change under a new administration. What are some lessons from your reporting that apply to our current moment?

We talk about it as a problem that originates with Trump, instead of a problem that originates with some of the flaws in our democracy. And I think the treatment of Indigenous nations is a glaring example of that, because we’ve never had any kind of constitutional amendment or reform to change those laws and to change those policies. To dispossess Indigenous people of their land, the U.S. government gave itself a lot of power over people who

are not U.S. citizens. That power of empire is embedded in our Constitution, because our country wanted to take Indigenous land. We still see it manifested in deportation and shutting down asylum and separating families at the border and banning Muslims from entering our country. If we really don’t want these types of policies to be enacted, there are some bigger questions about our democracy that as a society we haven’t even begun to ask.

Given that, do you have any specific concerns about potential attacks on tribal sovereignty under a second Trump administration?

Everything has the capacity to get worse. A lot of tribal programs, whether it’s (the Indian Health Service) or tribal courts, tribal law enforcement, rely on federal dollars. There’s a lot specifically at stake for tribes under Trump. The remaking of the federal judiciary has a profound impact on tribes, because our cases are federal; they don’t go through state court. And, unfortunately, the courts — dating back to before Trump — have not been reliable sources for justice for tribes. Even when the law is clearly on the tribe’s side, courts have a very bad habit of bending and breaking the rules to satisfy the state or non-Native residents. One of the things that’s really shocked me is how often our government institutions ignore the law when it comes to tribes and how hard tribes have to fight for just the law to be followed. Those weaknesses in our democracy have been there for a long time. ☀

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.

TOWNSHIP AND RANGE

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



My house of spirits

Making a home is a journey across time and space.

BY NINA MCCONIGLEY
ILLUSTRATION BY TARA ANAND

AT FIRST, I heard the noises at night — a stairstep creaking, the rattle of a window, soft skittering across the floor. In bed, I would lie awake in the dark, listening to noises until I finally turned the light on. I was sure there was a ghost living in my house.

My house was a raised ranch close to downtown Laramie, Wyoming, built in 1919. I had never thought I would buy a house by myself, but when I was in my 30s, with no husband or kids in sight, my grandmother left me some money. This was years ago, when buying a house, especially in Wyoming, was doable for people of modest means. And, crazily, I didn't set foot in the house until the day I closed on it. When I saw it online, I liked its red door and trees. I was teaching down South that summer, so I sent my parents to go look at it.

The location was the only thing I cared about. This house was walkable to both downtown and the university, where I would soon be starting a new job as an adjunct. And, honestly, there were only a handful of houses for sale. I thought of winters living at 7,200 feet and was happy that I wouldn't have to drive much; I could walk everywhere.

But when I first stepped inside, I burst into tears. The house was too big for one person.

For months, I didn't unpack. I lived among boxes, sleeping on a mattress on the floor. I collected sagebrush on the prairie and dried it, then lit it in my kitchen. Instead of smoking away any spirits, I set off my fire alarm. The whole house felt uncomfortable.

I went to the real estate records office inside the courthouse and asked if I could find out about my house. I wrote down my address on a Post-it. The clerk looked me up and down and asked why I wanted the records. I decided not to mention the ghost.

"I just want to find out if anyone has ... died in the house? Umm ... I am interested in its history."

She pulled up the records, which were in a big book, and then sighed.

"Don't look up who lived there. Your house was built in 1919. Someone will have died in it. People used to die at home." But she let me copy down the names of all the owners — there had only been four families before me. I went home and immediately began researching and found out that the first owner was a train switchman, and that later, a yardmaster had lived there. Which seemed right: So many towns in the West are framed by train tracks.

In addition to my ghost, I heard trains while lying in bed at night, the distant sound of a whistle punctuating my dreams.

WHEN I THINK about the West, a few images immediately come to mind: sagebrush, immense horizons, blue skies, mountains and trains. Along the interstate, the trains are sometimes your only companion, their rectangular boxcars like a dotted line across the prairie. When I first left home for college in the 1990s, I took the train from Laramie to Union Station in Portland, Oregon. I had two suitcases, and I liked the fact that, unlike when traveling by plane, I had plenty of time to say goodbye to Wyoming. The pace was slower and allowed me time to adjust. I've always been a little nervous about transitions.

As the train chugged along I-80, I said goodbye to Wyoming every 100 miles, town after town (they'd been spaced 100 miles apart for the railroad's convenience). I watched the landscape change, and as we drew closer to my destination, I marveled at the Columbia River Gorge. By Christmas break, passenger service across Wyoming would be discontinued, and I would have to fly home. But on that journey westward, along the overland route Amtrak called the *Pioneer*, I told myself I was a grown-up. In Utah, hours into the trip, I started to feel that I was more than a grown-up. I felt like a pioneer going West to Oregon to start a new life.

But soon after I started college, I used a phone card to call my parents, crying. I didn't like all the green and trees of Portland. I missed being able to see for miles. I had a sprig of dried sage I kept on my desk, and whenever I missed home, I crushed a leaf between my fingers. The pungent, peppery smell made me tear up. I was desperately homesick. My mother told me I would learn to be away from home. She reminded me how I had picked out the duvet for my bed, hung pictures on the wall and had framed photos on my desk.

"You'll settle," she told me. And she was right. In a few months, walking by the Willamette River and the currants and dogwoods of the city became as familiar as rabbitbrush.

AT THE LARAMIE courthouse, I spent hours reading census records, looking to learn more about everyone who lived in the house. I learned that the switchman had

been transferred to Colorado. I only found one person who had died in the house: A 93-year-old woman named Minnie. Born in 1893, Minnie had lived in the house with her bachelor son and daughter beginning in the 1960s. She had been a farmer's wife and then a widow. For some reason, I didn't think Minnie was going to menace me. But I did walk around the house talking to her at times — when I got a leak in the sink, when I couldn't open the old single-paned windows. Sometimes, while I cooked, I wondered if Minnie would like the curries I was making, the house rich with the smell of garlic and onions.

When I first left home for college, I didn't know that I would make a home many times before buying that house in Laramie. In dorm rooms, in apartments with no heat, with roommates and alone. I lived in India in a house that flooded every time it rained. It wasn't the stuff or furniture that made a home. It was the people — even the ghosts — that I welcomed and talked with. The people with whom I shared meals and laughs.

Over time, the house that I thought was too big became full. Friends came and stayed; my dining table always had people around it. I planted tomatoes and hollyhocks and set out a bird feeder. Later, a family of raccoons would menace me, and the backyard, stealing my vegetables. I met my husband, I married, got a dog. Both my children would know that house as their first home. I thought about Minnie from time to time. But one day, I felt like she was gone. I still heard the train shout and whistle; its wheels against the tracks. But mostly what I heard at night was the sound of the house settling.

And like the house, I was, too. Like the towns along I-80, I came to see I was connected to something bigger, that I was never truly alone. I have now left that home in Laramie for another in Colorado. Here, there are no spirits that I can sense. Now, the noises I hear at night are my girls, giggling and whispering under their covers, and I assure them that there are no ghosts here, that they are safe. Making a home has taught me that living in the world means figuring out how to take care of your surroundings, to tend to the things you love. ☼

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

CALIFORNIA

The Golden State's official dinosaur is *Augustynolophus morrisoni*, a vegetarian hadrosaur that looks like Jar Jar Binks' head was grafted onto the body of an over-muscled kangaroo; the state's official fabric is, naturally, denim; and its official mollusk is the very banana-like banana slug. But there's no "state cryptid" yet, so Assemblymember Chris Rogers, D-Santa Rosa, introduced Assembly Bill 666 to nominate Bigfoot, as in Sasquatch, for the role. (As far as we know, the "666" is just a coincidence, and Satan has nothing to do with it.) Believers insist that the hairy ape-man of the forest is not mythical but an actual wandering biped of some sort. Just ask Matt MoneyMaker — yes, that's his real name — president of the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization and a Bigfoot expert, according to *SFGate*. MoneyMaker said he's had several personal encounters with the elusive creatures: "I've gotten close to them several times. I had a face-to-face encounter one time. I was absolutely sure they existed because I had one about 20 feet in front of me, growling at me." MoneyMaker initially thought Assembly 666 was a prank, a joke about how states like to name "official" things. But once he learned that it was real, he supported it, noting that it makes sense for California to honor the hirsute beast since the term "Bigfoot" was first popularized in the state. At the moment, the bill is still wandering through the legislative undergrowth; committee members need to clear it, then it needs to pass the Assembly and Senate before the governor can sign it into law. No doubt Willow Creek, California — the Bigfoot capital of the world — is waiting in breathless anticipation. If the legendary creature



Heard Around the West

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

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL GONZÁLEZ

is officially authorized, it's sure to boost tourism for the quirky Humboldt County community — home to Sasquatch museums, Bigfoot-themed restaurants and the annual Bigfoot Daze celebration. Bigfoot could not be reached for comment.

OREGON/WASHINGTON

We thought baby zoo animal mania peaked when Moo Deng, a pygmy hippopotamus born in Thailand last summer, became an internet sensation, her hippo-riffic adorableness celebrated throughout the world. But now, two new arrivals (or should we say rivals?) — a baby elephant and a baby tapir — are competing for America's Next

Top Baby Animal. Our first contestant, Tula-Tu, is an Asian elephant calf born at the Oregon Zoo Feb. 1. Tula's name means "balance" in Sanskrit, a skill that the precious pachyderm was still trying to master in the earliest videos we've seen. Steve Lefave, who oversees the zoo's award-winning Elephant Lands habitat, says the name actually represents "harmony and stability," KOIN reports, rather than gymnastic skill. Both the baby elephant and her mother, Rose-Tu, are doing well, and you can watch Tula playing hide-and-seek, acquainting herself with the marvels of her own little trunk, and exploring the outdoors for the first time on the

zoo's YouTube channel.

Meanwhile, Point Defiance Zoo in Tacoma, Washington, is also celebrating a new arrival: the birth of a rare endangered Malayan tapir on Feb. 2, king5.com reports. Her name, Ume, means "plum blossom" and "apricot" in Japanese, though she currently looks more like a four-legged watermelon, what with her watermelon-y size, shape and distinctive watermelon-like stripes.

CALIFORNIA / LOS ANGELES

If you were Googling in search of a beacon of hope after the LA wildfires, you might not expect to land on a photo of a classic blue-and-white Volkswagen van, c. 1977. But the van's former owner, Preston Martin, clearly regards the vehicle — which survived the flames miraculously unscathed — as just such a beacon. Two days after the Pacific Palisades fires, Associated Press photographer Mark J. Terrill, spied the VW parked serenely along a street in a Malibu neighborhood in amazingly stellar condition, the only colorful object in a bleak gray moonscape that was scarred in every direction by the charred-out remains of buildings and homes, NBC4 reported. Martin had sold the van to his friend and business partner, Megan Krystle Weinraub, the previous summer. In early January, the two friends, who design and make surfboards, used it for a day of surfing and parked it afterward near Weinraub's apartment. But just two days later, the Palisades fire broke out, and Weinraub and her dog evacuated in her other vehicle. When the photograph went viral, Martin told the Associated Press, "There is magic in that van. It makes no sense why this happened. It should have been toasted, but here we are." 🌟

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#IAM THE WEST

J. SHAH (SHE/HER)
Habitat biologist
Yakima, Washington

I'm passionate about the shrub-steppe, because it feels like a forgotten, beautiful, diverse biome that is fragile, but important and resilient. So many individual species have evolved over thousands of years to be able to survive in an arid environment where nothing else can survive. We're the stewards of the earth, so I feel like it's my personal calling in life to be a good steward. Development and human progress are never going to stop, so it's important to find ways to work with the community to make sure that we're meeting needs while also protecting habitat and wildlife. We're fighting an endless battle, one that may not be won in our lifetime. And we're not going to be able to solve every problem, but it's important to try to move the needle as much as we can.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
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