

High Country News



A small Idaho town
fights a land swap

Who should pay
for conservation?

This winter's deadly
avalanche toll

Vol. 53 / April 2021
No. 4 • hcn.org



GREGA ROBINSON
09'

HOLDING
FAST

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR/PUBLISHER

Greg Hanscom

INTERIM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Katherine Lanpher

ART DIRECTOR Cindy Wehling

FEATURES DIRECTOR

McKenna Stayner

MANAGING DIGITAL EDITOR

Gretchen King

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Emily Benson, Paige Blankenbuehler,
Graham Lee Brewer, Maya L. Kapoor

PHOTO EDITOR Roberto (Bear) Guerra

ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR

Luna Anna Archey

ASSISTANT EDITORS

Jessica Kutz, Carl Segerstrom, Anna V. Smith

EDITOR AT LARGE Betsy Marston

COPY EDITOR Diane Sylvain

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Elena Saavedra Buckley,
Ruxandra Guidi, Michelle Nijhuis,
Jonathan Thompson

CORRESPONDENTS

Nick Bowlin, Leah Sottile, Sarah Tory

EDITORIAL FELLOWS

Jessica Douglas, Brandon Yadegari Moreno

EDITORIAL INTERNS

Surya Milner, Wufei Yu

DIRECTOR OF PHILANTHROPY

Alyssa Pinkerton

SENIOR DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

Paul Larmer

CHARITABLE GIVING ADVISOR

Clara Fecht

DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATES

Hannah Stevens, Carol Newman

DIRECTOR OF PRODUCT & MARKETING

Gary Love

MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

Michael Schrantz

EVENTS & BUSINESS PARTNER

COORDINATOR Laura Dixon

IT MANAGER Alan Wells

DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS

Erica Howard

ACCOUNTS ASSISTANT

Mary Zachman

CUSTOMER SERVICE MANAGER

Kathy Martinez

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Karen Howe, Mark Nydell, Pamela Peters,
Tammy York

GRANT WRITER Janet Reasoner

FOUNDER Tom Bell

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Brian Beitner (Colo.), John Belkin, president
(Colo.), Seth Cothrun, treasurer (Ariz.),
Jay Dean (Calif.), Bob Fulkerson (Nev.),
Laura Helmuth, secretary (Md.), Samaria Jaffe
(Calif.), Marla Painter (N.M.), Bryan Pollard
(Ark.), Raynelle Rino (Calif.), Estee Rivera
Murdock, vice president (Colo.),
Andy Wiessner (Colo.), Florence Williams (D.C.)

DIRECTOR EMERITUS Luis Torres (N.M.)



Homes in the Northeast Heights neighborhood of Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1969. Racially restrictive covenants that were in place at the time can still be found in the deeds of many local properties. **Albuquerque Museum**

Know the West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$37 a year, \$47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898.





The importance of being seen

THAT ARRESTING IMAGE ON OUR COVER — *Family*, by Chinook Nation tribal member and artist Greg A. Robinson — is an apt illustration for our story about the Chinook Nation's century-long battle for federal recognition. Anna V. Smith, assistant editor on our Indigenous Affairs desk, delves into a saga that has lasted for generations, during which elders have passed on and children grown up. Without their sovereignty, the Chinook still work to preserve their distinctive culture in the Pacific Northwest. But living without the safety net, health care, education or land held by the 574 recognized tribes isn't easy. It is, said one, a form of "slow-motion genocide."

The desire to be seen for who you are is one of several threads running through this issue. With anti-trans legislation popping up across the country, two spirit and trans activists and advocates are fighting hate legislation in Montana. Intern Surya Milner tells a heartening story of what happens when people step up to own their political agency.

In Albuquerque, a different group of activists is fighting to highlight — and remove — the racist language that lurks in New Mexico property deeds. Intern Wufei Yu reviewed nearly a dozen property records and found that a third of them still barred Asian and African Americans from owning property. Racist restrictions on land ownership still haunt the West today.

Emily Benson, the associate editor for our North Desk, strapped on her snowshoes to get some of the interviews for our second feature story this month. (Yes, I was jealous. Look at the powder in those photos!) In the small resort town of McCall, in west-central Idaho, she met people on all sides of a land-swap dispute that could put tens of thousands of acres into the hands of a single investment firm. What's at stake is bigger than McCall, however: The territory in question, which many locals thought was public land, is actually state-owned "endowment land," which, by law, must be managed to fund schools and other institutions. Such state trust lands are common throughout the West, and, in the case of McCall, the developer is arguing that, paradoxically, the best way to preserve public access to the land is to develop part of it — and thereby fund a park. Whatever happens in McCall could have implications for other Western communities.

I'm circling back to that powerful image on our cover, showing strong arms protecting a family. It expresses how I feel about my time as interim editor-in-chief at *High Country News*: My goal was to preserve and protect the magazine you love until the next caretaker came along. So this is my last note to you, dear readers. I thank you for your patience. May you be seen, may you survive, may you thrive.

Katherine Lanpher, interim editor-in-chief

FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS



Jason Asenap
Albuquerque,
New Mexico
@asenap



Emily Benson
Moscow, Idaho
@erbenison1



Nick Bowlin
Gunnison, Colorado
@npbowlin



Jessica Douglas
Bend, Oregon
@jessicadd29_



Lily Meyer
Cincinnati, Ohio
@lilyjmeyer



Surya Milner
Bozeman, Montana
@suryamilner



Carl Segerstrom
Spokane, Washington
@carlschirps



Anna V. Smith
Portland, Oregon
@annavtoriasmith



Wufei Yu
Albuquerque,
New Mexico
@Wufei_Yu



FEATURES

Growing Pains

28

How a large-scale land swap proposed by a private investment firm ignited a fight over state lands in Idaho. BY EMILY BENSON

Unrecognized

22

The Chinook Indian Nation has been fighting for federal acknowledgment for over a century. Why hasn't the tribe received it?

BY ANNA V. SMITH | ILLUSTRATIONS BY GREG A. ROBINSON

ON THE COVER *Family*, by Greg A. Robinson, a member of the Chinook Indian Nation in Washington and a primarily self-taught artist who works in a variety of mediums. His traditional Chinookan-style images pay tribute to the Columbia River ancestors for whom art, life, stories and culture are strongly interrelated. **Illustration by Greg A. Robinson**

Members of the Payette Endowment Lands Alliance stand together for a portrait in Rotary Park, near downtown McCall, Idaho (above).

Angie Smith / HCN

Max Wheeler, a cable technician with Nez Perce Network Systems, installs broadband cables at a home in Lapwai, Idaho (right). **Pete Caster / HCN**



Access to subscriber-only content:

hcn.org

hcne.ws/digi-5304

Follow us **@highcountrynews**

Bridging the digital divide

7

A new report focuses on internet infrastructure on tribal lands and how tribes can use it to strengthen their sovereignty.

WHAT WORKS BY JESSICA DOUGLAS



Who should pay for conservation? 9

Traditional sources of funding are waning. Should park visitors step up?

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

When the party ends 10

Oil and gas cleanup will cost billions more than many Western states are able to pay.

BY NICK BOWLIN

Who can own land? 12

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, racist housing policies still haunt contemporary property deeds.

BY WUFEI YU

Four critical projects 14

The Biden administration faces important decisions that will impact the forests, lands and waters of tribal nations.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY J.D. REEVES

Catastrophic conditions 16

Avalanches have taken a deadly toll this winter.

FACTS & FIGURES

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

Trans activists push back in Montana 18

Battling anti-trans legislation and building a network.

BY SURYA MILNER

Reversing the damage done 42

The Trump administration dismantled 50 years of conservation. Here's the blueprint for recovery.

PERSPECTIVE BY JONATHAN JARVIS AND GARY MACHLIS

A modern redemption 43

Kirstin Valdez Quade's debut novel depicts everyday Catholic life in a small New Mexico town.

BY LILY MEYER

Honoring Montana's first Black librarian 46

Carrying on the legacy of Alma Smith Jacobs requires representation and education.

Q&A BY SURYA MILNER

A step forward for Indigenous film 48

Lyle Mitchell Corbine Jr.'s *Wild Indian* is a thriller that pushes Indigenous cinema into the realm of genre, but does it go far enough?

REVIEW BY JASON ASENAP

Dakota women keep seeds — and their families — safe 49

Diane Wilson's debut novel explores the connection between food sovereignty and Indigenous resilience.

REVIEW BY ANNA V. SMITH

#iamthewest 52

Alice Qannik Glenn, *Coffee & Quag* podcast creator, Anchorage, Alaska.

BY BRIAN ADAMS / HCN

DEPARTMENTS

3 EDITOR'S NOTE

6 LETTERS

8 THE LATEST

19 50TH ANNIVERSARY

20 DONORS / READER PROFILES

50 HEARD AROUND THE WEST

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.

DID JAMES PLYMELL NEED TO DIE?

Just wanted to commend Leah Sottile and *HCN* for an excellent article, “Did James Plymell Need to Die?” (March 2021). I worked at the County Alcohol and Drug program in Albany, Oregon, years ago, and it seems the same difficulties in service delivery are still at play. Issues of homelessness and chemical dependency are complicated and interactive, and treatment resources are sadly underfunded. From the article, it looks like local government, police and mental health treatment agencies there are at least aware of the shortcomings and prepared to cooperate when they can.

Ken Brown
Portland, Oregon

HIGH AND DRY

As someone who lives in a city that depends on Colorado River water for its residential water supply, I worry about the trends of increasing demand and decreasing supply. I was disappointed, though, to see the article “High and dry” (March 2021) close with a warning that “people need to ditch way more lawns.” To be sure, urban lawns represent a reckless use of water

*“Residential
use accounts
for a relatively
small fraction
of the water
drawn from the
Colorado.”*

in the desert. But residential use accounts for a relatively small fraction of the water drawn from the Colorado. It is misleading to put the onus of responsible water use on residential users when the vast majority of Colorado River water goes to irrigate agricultural fields.

Charlie Kenslea
Tucson, Arizona

THE NEXT MINING BOOM

As a longtime *HCN* subscriber, I’d like to thank you for your excellent reporting in general, and for “The next mining boom” (March 2021), in particular. I was not aware of this mining proposal, but I have

some personal connections to the Thacker Pass area, going back 21 years.

As a trained mining engineer who later switched fields to become a hydrogeologist, I appreciate the technical aspects and water issues in particular. But I’m also a bird conservationist, who has worked as a volunteer surveyor in the habitat that will be impacted. As a born-and-raised farmer, I appreciate the concerns expressed by the rancher in your story. And I’m deeply respectful of the perspective of the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone Tribe.

Joel Geier
Corvallis, Oregon

LIFE AFTER COAL

The excellent February 2021 “End of the Line” issue hit home in several ways today as I read Jessica Kutz’s “Life After Coal.” I was halfway through the article when the outbound (read: filled) Union Pacific coal train from the West Elk Mine, east of Paonia, passed only 160 feet from our home. Nothing new, but certainly ironic while reading this important issue with a photo of a filled coal train on its cover.

The coal trains to and from the West Elk Mine are fewer now and not even on a regular schedule, sometimes one round-trip train a day to no trains for a day or two. The writing is on the longwall — pun intended — for the miners, and we hope their transition to new jobs is successful.

Thank you, *HCN*, for this critical reporting.

Rick Freimuth
Paonia, Colorado

END OF THE LINE

I wanted to thank you for the February issue “End of the Line.” I grew up in Billings, Montana; saw Colstrip more times than a teenager should; read the *Global 200 Report to the President* shortly after it came out; and hiked Canyonlands in the smog from the Four Corners plants. I’ve been a rabid coal-hater for 40 years. My hate

blinded me to the economic and emotional dislocation necessitated by our tragically delayed move away from coal as an energy source. The perspective from all of the pieces in “End of the Line” moved me to tears, and reminded me that we must remember the good people who will need our help to find purpose and livelihoods as we do the right thing for our planet. Thank you, *HCN*. You always open my eyes and heart. Keep it up.

Dean C. Heizer
Morrison, Colorado

TOP-NOTCH PHOTOGRAPHY

The color photographs in the “End of the Line” issue helped me link the stories: the sun shining on the site of a future hospital, bison grazing in the soon-to-be-tribal Bison Range, and alpacas grazing in Colorado ranchland under the eyes of LGBTQ+ herders. Smokestacks of the Navajo Generating Station come tumbling down in a giant dust cloud as tribal members observe the demolition. The portrait of an enduring Diné couple contrasts with the portraits and reflections of coal-plant workers. Harbingers of the energy transition just now underway: wind turbines on a Wyoming ridgeline and solar panels near Kayenta. Top-notch photographic journalism helps us all envision the changing landscape of the West, spurred by social awareness and the impacts of climate change.

Phil and Joyce Nelson
Golden, Colorado

INSURGENCE ANALYSIS

The analysis in the article about Western roots of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol was excellent (“A siege with Western roots and consequences,” February 2021). Resistance to public-land takeovers is now going on in Washington County, Idaho, where three county ordinances that place restrictions on federal lands may be repealed because a new county commissioner was elected.

Wayne P. Fuller
Weiser, Idaho

CORRECTIONS

In our story, “High and dry” (March 2021), we reported that states are renegotiating the Colorado River Compact, which expires in 2026. It’s actually the current version of the legal agreement governing the river that is under discussion. In “The next mining boom” (March 2021), we misrepresented Maxine Redstar’s role on the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone Tribal Council. She is a tribal chairperson, not a councilperson. We regret the errors.



WHAT WORKS

Bridging the digital divide

A new report focuses on internet infrastructure on tribal lands and how tribes can use it to strengthen their sovereignty.

BY JESSICA DOUGLAS

IN THE MANY INDIGENOUS communities where broadband connectivity is scarce, transitioning to virtually held tribal council meetings and medical appointments during the pandemic has been challenging. *Building Indigenous Future Zones: Four Tribal Broadband Case Studies*, a report released on Feb. 3, offers Indigenous communities advice on how best to address their pressing need for new internet infrastructure while at the same time strengthening their tribal sovereignty.

A lack of internet connectivity has long contributed to systemic inequalities in Indian Country. By the end of 2018, approximately half of the tribal lands in the Lower 48 states had high-speed Internet access, according to the Federal Communications Commission. The Institute for Local

Self-Reliance, a national research and advocacy organization, has just issued a report on Indigenous internet infrastructure that has two key features: a case study of four Indigenous nations as they constructed their own internet service providers, and a comprehensive list and map of all the tribally owned broadband projects in Indian Country.

Indian Country has largely been ignored when it comes to internet infrastructure, due in part to the U.S. government's historic failure to ensure infrastructure development for Indigenous nations. But the COVID-19 pandemic has brought this inequality to the forefront.

Tribes do have an opportunity when it comes to solutions, said H. Rose Trostle (Cherokee Nation), author of the report and project manager for the Community

Max Wheeler, a cable technician with Nez Perce Network Systems, installs broadband cables at a home in Lapwai, Idaho. A new report analyzes four tribal broadband projects, including the establishment of Nez Perce Network Systems. **Pete Caster / HCN**

Broadband Network at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. The goal is not just to address the digital divide through the report, they said, but to encourage development and enact tribal sovereignty.

"With network sovereignty and spectrum sovereignty, it really comes down to the ability to decide your fate and ability to make your own choices," Trostle said. By owning and operating essential resources for internal infrastructure, such as the spectrum, or the radio frequencies that wireless signals use to travel, Indigenous communities

have the opportunity to boost local economies and keep their power and data within their own nations, rather than relying on an external provider.

There is a growing movement to regard the spectrum that covers Indian Country as a federal trust responsibility, similar to water or mineral rights. The federal government has historically tried to control such resources rather than recognizing that they fall under the purview of treaties, or acknowledging that the government has an ongoing legal trust responsibility to uphold these resources for the benefit of Indigenous nations.

“This is a problem that has been ignored in a lot of ways,” said Christopher Mitchell, the director of the Community Broadband Networks Initiative at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. “It’s commonly said that the United States had a telephone system that was the envy of the world, and broadband followed that system. But even when our telephone system was at its peak, it often stopped on reservation boundaries — we still have much lower availability of telephone in tribal lands than we do for the population at large. So this is a continuation of a failure to deploy essential infrastructure.”

There are approximately 40 tribally owned networks, according to the study, spreading across the boundaries of 65 Indigenous nations. Another 37 Indigenous

nations are working in partnership with private providers. The institute’s list is the first of its kind, providing tribal nations and communities with a road map for partnerships and areas of high need when they’re developing their own infrastructure projects.

Four tribally owned networks were further analyzed to show how they successfully built their own Internet Service Providers (ISPs). The St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, which created a broadband project that offers service to the tribal community, is one of the very few tribes to offer service off-territory to nearby counties in New York — thereby providing additional revenue to the tribe. But it wasn’t easy: Mohawk Networks, the internet service provider, needed over a decade for planning and fundraising, and it took several years to string the 70 miles of fiber throughout the community.

Many Indigenous nations lack the access to capital that private internet service providers enjoy. Instead, they’re forced to rely on loans through the USDA or grants, which often have time limits or are single-purpose funding opportunities. Trostle said that one of the study’s goals is to prompt the federal government and lending institutions to consider overall systemic changes that would remove similar barriers to network projects, such as creating federal grants that are tailored toward Indigenous

communities for basic planning, digital inclusion and network operation and maintenance.

Currently, the FCC auctions spectrum licenses to different entities based on geographic areas. However, these often go to large communication corporations that seldom prioritize the rural geographic location of many tribal communities. “If we deny the basic tools to tribes that they would use to connect people, we’re asking them to figure out how to solve a problem with one hand tied behind the back, or both hands tied behind their back,” said Mitchell. “It’s very frustrating to me to watch as some companies have an exclusive right to spectrum, and they have no interest in deploying that in Indian Country. And yet no one else can use that spectrum there to make sure people are connected.”

Seeking to address this inequality, the FCC created the Rural Tribal Priority Window in February 2020 for tribes to apply for free 2.5GHz spectrum licenses — the first opportunity of its kind for tribes. Over 400 applications were submitted, showing the tremendous interest in and demand for this type of internet infrastructure. In the next couple of months, as the FCC continues to review applications and new tribal nations embark on their own internet infrastructure projects, this report will be a valuable resource for tribes to consult. 🌟

Wheeler points out neighborhoods around Lapwai that have heavy broadband connectivity. In 2020, the Nez Perce Tribe funded 21 miles of fiber from Spaulding, Idaho, to Clarkston, Washington. **Pete Caster / HCN**



THE LATEST

BLM pauses permit

Backstory

In 2012, Dwight and Steven Hammond, father-and-son ranchers in Oregon, were convicted a second time of setting fire to federal land. Their incarceration helped spark the armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016, which was led by brothers Ammon and Ryan Bundy. In 2018, President Donald Trump pardoned the Hammonds (“The BLM’s blessing,” 5/27/19). Just days before Joe Biden took office, the Bureau of Land Management hastily granted them a 10-year grazing permit in southeastern Oregon on land bordering the refuge.

Followup

In late February, the Hammonds were set to release their cattle on 26,000 acres of public ranchland bordering Malheur. But before they could, a senior official in President Biden’s Interior Department rescinded their grazing permit, citing an insufficient public protest period. The decision came on the heels of four lawsuits brought by environmental groups over the last-minute permitting process. Laura Daniel-Davis, the Interior official who published the memo, advised the BLM to seek public input before proceeding. —Surya Milner



Visitors observe wildlife at Pilgrim Flats in Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming. **Ryan Dorgan**

REPORTAGE

Who should pay for conservation?

Traditional sources of funding are waning. Should park visitors step up?

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

MARCIA BROWNLEE TOOK UP hunting in her 30s after years of hiking and camping on public lands. Stalking prey opened her eyes to the convoluted patchwork of private and public lands that humans and animals navigate in the Western U.S. It also gave her a greater financial stake in wildlife conservation. Brownlee heads the National Wildlife Federation's Artemis Initiative, which encourages women to hunt and fish. These days, she spends a couple hundred dollars a year on license fees.

In 2018, Brownlee found herself at a crossroads of conservation funding during a trip to Montana's Tenderfoot Creek, a tributary to the Smith River east of the Rocky Mountains, about halfway between Yellowstone and Glacier national parks. Access to the land she was hunting on was purchased from private owners with Land and Water

Conservation Fund money from oil and gas royalties. Meanwhile, the money hunters like Brownlee spend on licenses and equipment funded more than half of the annual budgets of state wildlife agencies, according to a 2014-2015 survey.

Conservation funding in the U.S. depends on money from hunting, fishing and fossil fuels to pay for projects like wetland restoration and land purchases that improve public access. Now, however, that funding is becoming unreliable. Oil and gas development faces an uncertain future as the Biden administration halts federal leasing and mulls deeper reforms. Hunting participation has been on a downward slide for decades — a slide that briefly reversed in 2020, with the pandemic boosting hunting license sales and election-year angst turbocharging firearms purchases. The fragility of the current funding model has

Western states and conservationists seeking new revenue sources.

Wildlife biologist and conservationist Arthur Middleton, who studies large mammal migrations in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, is concerned about the future of far-ranging species like elk and mule deer. Once they leave Yellowstone National Park, they run a gantlet of private landowners, whose fences, herds and houses interrupt habitat corridors. To help clear the way for migration, the University of California, Berkeley, professor is searching for innovative ways to fund state and private conservation programs. "Maybe it's just a midlife crisis, but I'm just like, 'Let's get some new ideas up in here,'" Middleton said.

Middleton's search led him to Wyoming rancher and legislator Albert Sommers. In 2018, Sommers introduced a successful state resolution calling on the federal government to charge wildlife conservation fees at Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, to help fund state wildlife agencies and pay private landowners for livestock predation, damage caused by wildlife and projects like fence removal. Yellowstone visitor surveys show that tourists are willing to pay to offset the cost of wolves killing cattle outside of the park. A similar measure proposed in the Montana Legislature this session to share funding from extra fees at Yellowstone and Glacier with the Blackfeet Nation and the state wildlife agencies is currently stalled in committee.

Inspired by Sommers' resolution, Middleton and a group of colleagues wrote a research paper exploring different ways to get park visitors to pay for wildlife conservation outside of national parks. Suggestions range from adding a \$10 fee at park entrances to local sales and lodging taxes. Local taxes may be a more feasible approach because they don't require federal participation. They also wouldn't affect locals in tax-averse states like Wyoming, because they would target the more than 7 million tourists who visit Wyoming national

parks each year.

The federal delisting of gray wolves, which went into effect in January, gives state wildlife agencies greater leeway to manage hunting of the iconic carnivores. In states where wolves recently lost federal protection — like Oregon and Washington — the delisting ups the stakes for non-hunters interested in shaping state wildlife policy. Wildlife watchers could have more sway in decision-making if they helped fund state agencies, Middleton said. "If you want a seat at the table, then you should have some skin in the game."

But increasing funding through national parks may not be entirely feasible: Parks, which have billions of dollars in overdue maintenance projects, are already facing their own financial woes. Margaret Walls, a senior fellow at Resources for the Future, a Washington, D.C., think tank, said relying on park fees for state and private conservation revenue is "a non-starter, politically and practically."

Walls' recent research focuses on another often-proposed — but hard to pass — funding model for conservation: taxing outdoor gear purchases. Unlike park fees, which affect everyone equally and can be a deterrent to low-income visitors, a "backpack tax" means that the people who buy more expensive gear end up contributing more, Walls said. But such fees face a staunch and well-heeled opponent in the outdoor gear industry. The industry trade association argues that it already pays ample taxes and that additional taxes would create barriers to outdoor access.

Increasing the cost to visit parks disproportionately impacts low-income communities and people of color, who already face economic and cultural barriers when visiting parks. As conservation seeks new funding sources, it's important to realize there's a difference between making the choice to buy hunting tags and forcing people to pay more to explore national parks, Brownlee said. "Money cannot and should not be a barrier to accessing public lands." 🌻

When the party ends

Oil and gas cleanup will cost billions more than many Western states are able to pay.

BY NICK BOWLIN

WHEN AN OIL or gas well reaches the end of its lifespan, it must be plugged. If it isn't, the well might leak toxic chemicals into groundwater and spew methane, carbon dioxide and other pollutants into the atmosphere for years on end. But plugging a well is no simple task: Cement must be pumped down into it to block the opening, and the tubes connecting it to tanks or pipelines must be removed, along with all the other onsite equipment. Then the top of the well has to be chopped off near the surface and plugged again, and the area around the rig must be cleaned up.

There are nearly 60,000 unplugged wells in Colorado in need of this treatment — each costing \$140,000 on average, according to the Carbon Tracker, a climate think tank, in a new report that analyzes oil and gas permitting data. Plugging this many wells will cost a lot — more than \$8 billion, the report found.

Companies that drill wells in Colorado are legally required to pay for plugging them. They must also put forward financial assurances in the form of bonds, which the state can call on to pay for the plugging. These bonds are meant to incentivize cleanup and to protect the state, in case a company is unable to pay. But as it stands today, Colorado has only about \$185 million in bonds from industry — just 2% of the estimated cleanup bill, according to the new study. The Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission (COGCC) assumes an average cost of \$82,500 per well — lower than the Carbon Tracker's figure, which factors in issues like well depth. But even using the state's more conservative number, the overall cleanup would cost nearly \$5 billion; the money currently available from energy companies would cover less than 5% of that.

This situation is the product of more than 150 years of energy extraction. Now, with the oil and gas industry looking less robust every year and reeling in the wake of the pandemic, the state of Colorado and its people could be on the hook for

billions in cleanup costs. Meanwhile, unplugged wells persist as environmental hazards. This spring, Colorado will try to tackle the problem: State energy regulators have been tasked with reforming the policies governing well cleanup and financial commitments from industry.

"The system has put the state at risk, and it needs to change," said Josh Joswick, an organizer with the environmental group Earthworks. "Now we have a government that wants to do something about it."

THE FIRST WESTERN oil well broke ground in Colorado in 1860. Drilling has been an important part of the state's economy ever since; as of 2019, Colorado ranked sixth and seventh in the nation for oil and natural gas production, respectively.

When it comes to cleanup, Colorado uses a tiered system known as blanket bonding. Small operators can pay ahead with bonds on single wells. Drillers with more than 100 wells statewide pay a fixed reclamation fee of \$100,000, regardless of the number of wells. A similar system also applies to wells on federal public land in the state. Large companies pay a single \$150,000 bond, which covers unlimited federal public land wells throughout the country. There are about 7,400 public-land wells capable of producing oil or gas in Colorado, according to the Bureau of Land Management.

When a driller walks away or cannot pay for cleanup, the well enters the state's Orphan Well Program, which works to identify and plug these wells. There are about 200 wells in the program right now, according to the state. But a closer look at state data reveals a large number of wells at risk. Nearly half of the state's unplugged wells are stripper wells — low-producing operations with small profit margins that are often at the end of their lifespans. These wells are particularly vulnerable to shifts in oil prices. That means they change hands often. "This

is a common tactic in the oil and gas industry: Spinning off liabilities to progressively weaker companies, until the final owner goes bankrupt and none of the previous owners are on the hook for cleanup," said Clark Williams-Derry, a finance analyst with the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis.

There are also inactive wells: Nearly 10% of the state's wells have not produced oil or gas in at least two years, according to a Carbon Tracker analysis of state permitting data. Unlike some of the neighboring oil states, Colorado requires that companies pay a single bond on each inactive well of this sort. This costs either \$10,000 or \$20,000, depending on the depth of the well. In theory, these payments protect the state, in case the well owner goes bankrupt. But in Colorado, it's still far cheaper for energy companies to pay the cost of that single unused well — and the small annual premium payments on the bond — than to actually plug it. "Colorado clearly makes it cheaper to idle a well than to clean it up," Williams-Derry said.

In Colorado, just two companies are responsible for nearly 70% of the bonds for currently inactive wells. One is Noble Energy Inc., which was purchased by the global oil giant Chevron in October 2020. The other is Kerr-McGee, a subsidiary of Occidental Petroleum. Kerr-McGee was responsible for the 2017 home explosion in Firestone, Colorado, that killed two people. Last year, the COGCC fined the company more than \$18 million for the accident, by far the largest fine in state history. Both companies still own large numbers of wells in the Denver-Julesburg Basin, the prolific oil and gas formation beneath central and eastern Colorado. And the mass desertion of wells is not hypothetical: In fall 2019, a small company called Petroshare Corporation went bankrupt and left about 90 wells for the state to cleanup. That alone will cost Colorado millions of dollars. Last summer, when California's largest oil driller filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, it left billions in debt and more than 17,000 unplugged wells.

The oil and gas industry is already mired in a years-long decline that raises doubts about its ability to meet cleanup costs. In six out of the past seven years, energy has been either the worst- or second-worst-performing sector on the S&P 500. And the economic fallout from COVID-19 has only accelerated the declines. Oil prices hit record lows in 2020. The industry's debt approached record levels, and thousands of oilfield workers lost their jobs, Colorado Public Radio reported. Many companies went bankrupt, including 12 drilling companies and six oilfield service companies in Colorado, according to Haynes and Boone LLP, a law firm that tracks industry trends.



IN 2019, A NEW LAW completely overhauled the state's relationship to oil and gas. This spring, Colorado oil and gas regulators have been tasked with reforming the financial requirements for well plugging. It's a big deal, especially in an oil state like Colorado: The law gives local governments more control over oil and gas development, and it rewrote the mission of the COGCC, the state's energy regulator. The COGCC has subsequently banned the burning off or releasing of natural gas, a routine drilling practice, and instituted a broad range of wildlife and public health protection policies. Recently, it voted for the nation's largest setback rule, which requires oil and gas operations to stay at least 2,000 feet from homes and schools.

The deep divide between the true cost of cleanup and what industry has so far ponied up is not news to Colorado regulators. In a 2017 letter to lawmakers, the COGCC estimated that the average costs of plugging wells and cleaning up drilling sites "exceed available financial assurance by a factor of fourteen." With this new rulemaking process, Colorado has a chance to make up this gap.

How to handle this looming liability

remains an open question, said John Messner, a COGCC Commissioner. The rulemaking process is still in its early stages and will take months. The commission is asking stakeholders of all kinds — industry, local governments, environmental groups and more — to submit suggestions and opinions to the commission. There are several different methods for how best to reform the process, Messner said. That might involve leaving the current structure in place, while increasing the bond amounts, including on individual well bonds. It might mean a revamped tiered system, where more prolific producers pay more, or a different fee structure based on the number of drilled wells. Messner mentioned the option of a bond pool, where companies pay into a communal cleanup fund and, at least in theory, provide industry-wide insurance to guard against companies defaulting on cleanup obligations. Messner stressed that no formal decisions have been made and that the final rule could involve some combination of these and other tools.

I asked Messner about balancing the pressing need to increase cleanup requirements with the possibility of companies walking away from

their wells if the cost to operate in Colorado spikes. "It's a real risk," Messner said. The Colorado Oil and Gas Association expressed a similar concern in an email to HCN.

"When it comes to financial assurance for current or future wells, we need to ensure that the potential solution doesn't create an even bigger problem by raising the cost of doing business in Colorado for small businesses," said COGA President Dan Haley in a statement. "Regulatory changes in the past two years alone are costing oil and gas businesses an extra \$200 million a year. For our state to stay competitive, regulators and lawmakers need to be cognizant of that growing tally and the rising cost of doing business."

But as it stands today, oil and gas companies aren't realistically paying anywhere near the true cost of cleaning up their drilling sites. And with the industry's murky financial future, experts predict more and more sales of risky wells to less-wealthy operators, until the state could end up stuck with the final cost.

"It's like a game of hot potato," Williams-Derry said, "except that when the potato goes off, it's the public who loses." 🌱



An aerial view of the Northeast Heights community in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1969.
Albuquerque Museum

REPORTAGE

Who can own land?

In Albuquerque, racist housing policies still haunt contemporary property deeds.

BY WUFEI YU

FIVE YEARS AGO, Albuquerque, New Mexico-born Lan Sena considered purchasing land at the foothills of the Sandia Mountains. She found a property in the Four Hills area, where elegant houses coexist with cholla cactus on rolling hills. But then she noticed a horrifying clause in its covenant.

“When we pulled up the deed of the property, it had that language in there that Asians and African Americans could not live on the land unless they were slaves,” Sena said. She ultimately didn’t buy the land. As the 31-year-old daughter of two Vietnamese refugees who came to the Southwestern city in 1975 and 1981 through a federal resettlement program, she was deeply offended.

In March 2020, Sena was appointed to the city council, the first Asian American ever to hold the position. “We have always been here,” Sena told me. “So when I got into office, I said this (language) was very unacceptable to me, and I want it out.”

Racist and restrictive covenants like the one Sena encountered are no longer enforceable owing to the 1968 Fair Housing Act. Yet they still appear in the deeds of thousands of households in every part of Albuquerque, according to Stephon L. Scott, senior policy adviser on diversity and inclusion at the National Institutes of Health, whose master’s thesis at the University of New Mexico focused on the city’s racial covenants.

Between 1920 and 1960, the town of 15,000 ballooned to become one of the Southwest’s largest metropolises, with around 200,000 people. But as the city grew, its government and early developers introduced racial covenants to scores of the most desirable neighborhoods in order to exclude Asian American, Black and Hispanic homeowners. These practices, a recent seven-month investigation by local TV station KRQE found, made Albuquerque, like many Western towns, as segregated as the Deep South.

That discriminatory language persists in property deeds today. After 1968, some Albuquerque title companies omitted restrictions

based on race, color or national origin, scrubbing the racist language from their covenants. But many did not. In March, *High Country News* reviewed 10 property deeds in historically white neighborhood closings and found that four of them still included racially offensive language from the city’s segregated past.

At the height of the pandemic, Asian Americans who had experienced housing discrimination in historically white neighborhoods were harassed, with strangers telling them to “go back to your country.” Civil rights advocates and state and local policymakers like Sena are now fighting to eliminate the remaining racist covenants, their efforts given new urgency by the recent surge of verbal abuse and violence against Asian people. They worry that the language in the deeds discourages people of color from owning land in the city, reinforcing the bias that Black and Asian Americans don’t belong in the state.

“For New Mexico, we have a long history of these obvious racist practices,” Sena said. “It’s dangerous when we single out (a community) or continue these systems of oppression and racism.”

AFTER THE CIVIL WAR, African Americans left the South and journeyed to the territory of New Mexico to homestead on small farms. By the 1880s, over 100 formerly enslaved people had settled in what is now east Albuquerque. Later, the railroad brought Chinese and Japanese immigrants to the sparsely populated land in search of economic opportunity. Many were fleeing California and its anti-Asian racism.

By 1920, eight years after statehood, New Mexico was multicultural, home to nearly 6,000 African Americans, about 500

Asian Americans and over 19,000 Indigenous people. Chinese Americans opened laundries, restaurants and grocery stores in downtown Albuquerque, while around 250 Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants became successful farmers in southern New Mexico. But white growers resented their increasingly prosperous Japanese American counterparts, and their hatred fueled the agenda of leaders who hoped to make the state racially exclusive and recognizably white, according to a 2013 paper about racial discrimination in the state by Jamie Bronstein, a professor at New Mexico State University. In 1921, voters adopted an “alien landownership” amendment to the New Mexico Constitution. Known as the Alien Land Law, it barred people of Asian descent from owning and leasing real estate.

This Jim Crow-era provision bolstered anti-immigrant hatred in New Mexico. A “whites only” ideology oozed into real estate covenants in New Mexico in the early 1920s, as segregated cinemas, hotels, restaurants and residential areas sprang up statewide. Soon, Albuquerque’s downtown Chinese enclave had been erased. During World War II, almost every Japanese American in New Mexico was forced into an internment camp.

High Country News spoke to three multigeneration Chinese American families who said that from the 1930s to 1960s, real estate agents and neighborhood associations in white-only subdivisions

rejected development plans for grocery stores and restaurants that were put forward by people of Asian descent and their “Black brothers and sisters.” “If my great-grandpa were allowed to have land, the Tang family and Chinese Americans could have owned downtown Albuquerque,” said Aimee Tang, a fourth-generation Chinese American resident. Finally, in 1968, the Fair Housing Act prohibited discrimination based on race or national origin in real estate sale, rental and financing of housing. But echoes of that racist past lived on.

It wasn’t until 2002 that a measure to repeal the discriminatory anti-immigrant amendment in the state Constitution went before voters. New Mexicans overwhelmingly voted against it, largely in response to the xenophobia stirred up by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. “I want to be proud of New Mexico, and this was an insult,” Dora-Linda Wang, a Chinese American psychiatrist who has called New Mexico home for 23 years, told me.

In 2003, Wang decided to do something about it. She coordinated a group of advocates, primarily Asian Americans working in academia and legislative lobbying, to educate policymakers and the public. Beginning in 2004, Wang invited historians, lawyers and then-State Sen. Cisco McSorley, who sponsored the bill for repealing the “alien landownership” amendment, to appear on her TV talk show, *Duke City Magazine*.

In 2006, voters, by a vast margin, approved the second attempt to remove the Alien Land Law from the state Constitution. “Many of us continue to feel it was the most gratifying thing we’ve done in our lives. It was worth it,” Wang told *High Country News*.

Fifteen years after she helped repeal the Alien Land Law, however, Wang found herself scrolling through threads on Nextdoor, a neighborhood-based social networking service, in between seeing clients remotely. Several posts caught her attention: Her neighbors were posting their property deeds, which included clauses like “no person of African or Oriental descent shall use or occupy any building or lot for residential purposes.” She realized that her work was not yet finished.

IN 2017, Wang moved to a neat one-story house in Huning Castle, a downtown Albuquerque neighborhood. Every summer, verdant canopies of towering cottonwoods shade her home from the scorching desert sun. She enjoys telling Albuquerque newcomers about the Spanish revival mansion two doors down, which became famous in the popular TV series *Breaking Bad* as the residence of Jesse Pinkman, Walter White’s capricious meth-lab partner.

Over 70 years ago, Huning Castle was designated a whites-only neighborhood. Even Wang wasn’t aware of the fact until she read about racially restrictive language in the property deeds shown online. At the closing table, when she purchased her home, the title company removed the racial covenant on her new property. But some of her neighbors weren’t as lucky. One of Wang’s neighbor’s noticed the racist clause, which was still in her deed, and posted about it on Nextdoor, writing, “Leaving

hateful, discriminating, and dehumanizing text in a document — then saying it doesn’t matter because it isn’t relevant anymore — is racist gaslighting.”

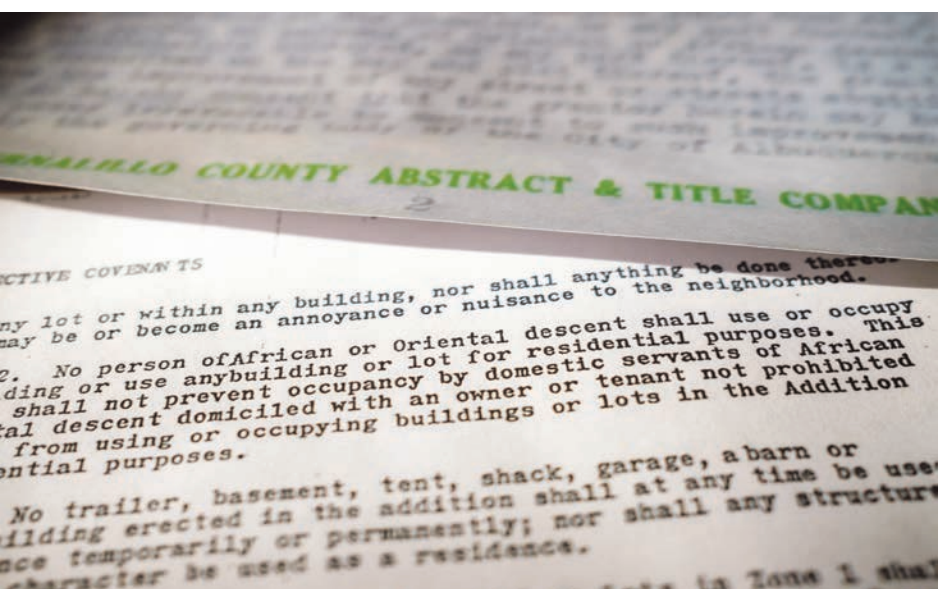
Tired of watching the news, frustrated by the ongoing police brutalities against African Americans and the rise in violence and “microaggressions” toward people who looked like her, Wang complained about the racial covenants to the Huning Castle Neighborhood Association. “We’ve been trying to make amendments to this relationship since 1964. But, you know, the abuse continues,” Wang told me, speaking from her front porch, where a red chili ristra dangled. “It’s no longer in the laws, but the racial abuse continues to be in the deeds and in the daily attitudes of people.”

To Wang, the main obstacle to removing the racist language appeared to be the same thing she’d faced when she fought the Alien Land Law: a lack of awareness. At the most recent monthly meeting of her homeowners’ association, Wang brought up the issue, arguing that for her and people who look like her, the issue is not political. “Words matter,” Wang said. The neighborhood association wrote *High Country News* in an email that it “would support the removal of any and all discriminatory language in property deeds.”

Currently, New Mexico state Sens. Daniel Ivey-Soto and Jerry Ortiz y Pino are drafting a bill that would encourage the removal of all racial covenants. “We need to erase it from who we are,” Ortiz y Pino said. The two senators are reaching out to community leaders like Wang and Sena to learn more about the subject.

“Many call the deeds a dirty little secret. It’s dirty. It’s awful. But for a lot of our Asian Americans, it’s not a secret,” Sena said. “The dangerous language can lead to exactly these policies” — legislation as viciously racist as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. “We’ve learned these lessons in history so that we don’t repeat them.” ☀

Racially restrictive covenants still exist in the deeds of thousands of households throughout Albuquerque.
Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN



Four critical projects

The Biden administration faces important decisions that will impact the forests, lands and waters of tribal nations.

BY ANNA V. SMITH | ILLUSTRATIONS BY J.D. REEVES



TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT

On his first day in office, Biden issued an executive order to revisit the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Trump-era decision to exempt Alaska’s Tongass National Forest from a federal rule protecting 9.3 million acres of it from logging, mining and roadways. The Trump administration raced through the process despite the pandemic. The Tongass — the largest national forest in the U.S. — serves as a massive carbon sink and is of national importance. It also supports the old-growth red cedar, Sitka black-tailed deer and salmon that the Alaska Native tribes of the region rely on. None of the Southeast Alaska Native tribes who participated in the consultation process supported the exemption, and all withdrew in protest.

In addition to reviewing the Tongass protections, the Biden administration also has to decide on a rule proposed by 11 Southeast Alaska Native tribes in July 2020. The Traditional Homelands Conservation Rule would increase the role of Alaska Native tribes in the management of the forest’s trees, wildlife and waters. The tribes proposed the rule after decades of inadequate tribal consultation on the Tongass, their ancestral and current homeland.

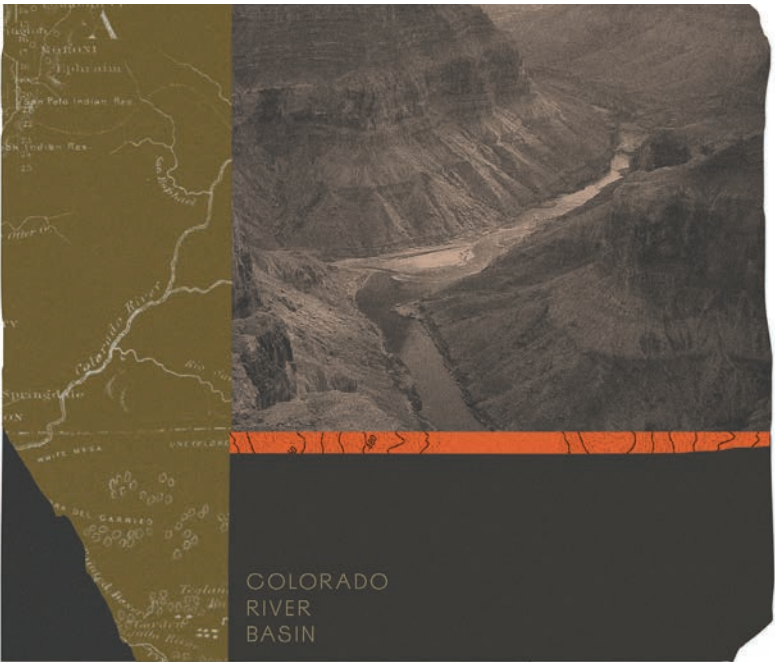
TRIBAL LEADERS see President Joe Biden’s administration as an opportunity to increase tribal consultation regarding issues like water management, oil and gas leasing, and land conservation. Here, we look at four major projects — all of them years in the making — that the new administration is tasked with advancing in the next four years. Most fall under the Department of the Interior, now headed by its first Indigenous secretary, Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo).

COLORADO RIVER BASIN GUIDELINES BY 2026

Negotiations among federal, tribal and state governments on water flows and allocations in the Colorado River Basin began last year and are set to conclude by 2026. At stake is the water supply for 40 million people.

The current set of interim guidelines was created in 2007 by the seven basin states — Colorado, Arizona, Utah, California, Nevada, Wyoming and New Mexico — and the federal government. None of the 29 federally recognized tribes in the Colorado River Basin were consulted, despite having senior water rights that account for 20% of the river’s water.

The negotiations are happening amid some of the most serious drought predictions the region has seen; in January, the river’s drought contingency plan was triggered for the first time. Climate change has brought extreme drought conditions to about 75% of the river’s Upper Basin, and that will no doubt influence the tenor of the negotiations.





KLAMATH RIVER DAM REMOVAL IN 2023

After years of political, social and regulatory barriers, the undamming of the Klamath River is within sight. When — or if — it's completed, it will be the largest dam removal effort in U.S. history, bringing down four out of six dams on the river in southern Oregon and Northern California, including one that's 103 years old. For now, the project is on track to begin in 2023, and by 2024 there could be free-flowing water in the river, opening up some 400 miles of habitat in California for salmon, lamprey and trout. The nonprofit charged with the dam removals, the Klamath River Renewal Corporation, still needs the Federal Energy Regulatory Committee, which is headed by political appointees, to approve its current plan.

Last year's drought created more conflict over water allocations on the Klamath. In August, the Bureau of Reclamation cancelled promised water flows for the Yurok Tribe's Ceremonial Boat Dance. In response, the Yurok Tribe sued the agency. The federal government will need to bring stakeholders together for a large-scale agreement to end this cycle of seasonal litigation, something the Obama administration attempted unsuccessfully to do.

OIL AND GAS LEASING PERMIT PAUSE ON FEDERAL LANDS

In late January, when Joe Biden signed multiple executive orders to address the "climate crisis," he ordered Interior to put a temporary moratorium on new oil and gas leases on public lands and offshore waters. The administration called for a review of the leasing and royalties process, citing climate impacts and their growing cost, and specifically requested a review of leases in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. President Donald Trump's outgoing administration had opened ANWR for sale just weeks before Biden took office.

Biden's executive orders don't impact existing leases, or oil and gas on tribal lands. But much of the tribal opposition involves activities on ancestral territory that is currently public land, sometimes carried out without adequate tribal consultation. The Arctic Refuge and places like New Mexico's Chaco Canyon have been flashpoints of conflict over leasing, and many advocates want Biden to extend the pause as a permanent ban. This was a key sticking point for many Republican senators during Haaland's confirmation hearings, which Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., described as a "proxy fight over the future of fossil fuels." ✨

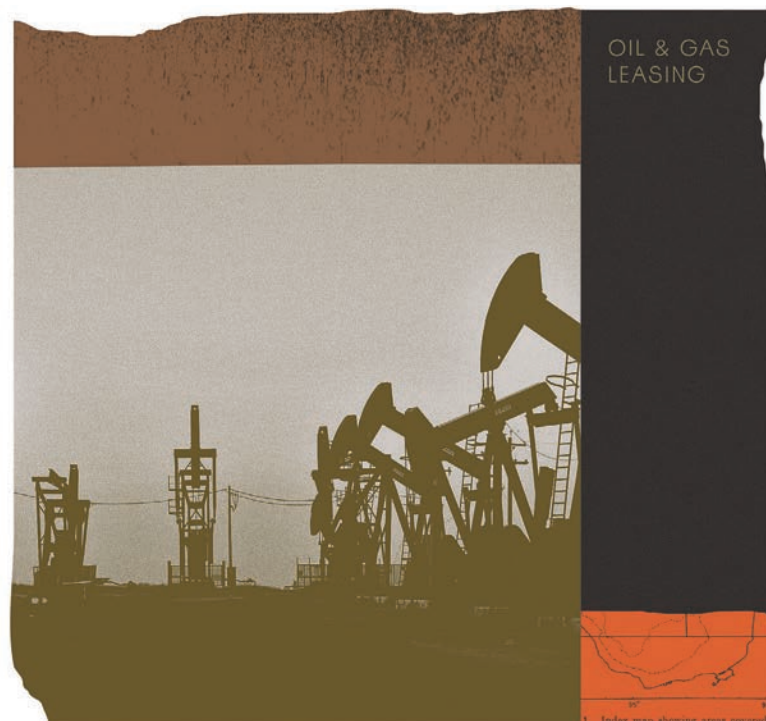
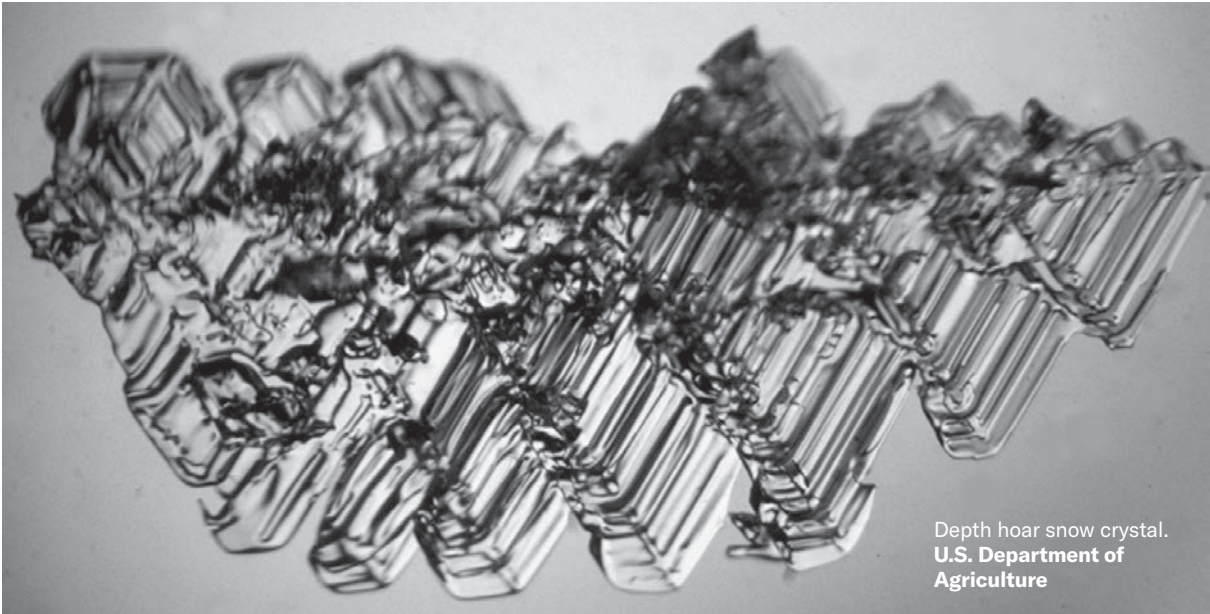


Photo sources: Ben Goodnight/CC via Flickr (Tongass National Forest); USGS/Public Domain (Colorado River Basin); Michael Wier/CalTrout (Klamath River Dams); Bureau of Land Management/Public Domain (Oil and Gas Leasing)



Depth hoar snow crystal.
U.S. Department of
Agriculture

Catastrophic conditions

Avalanches have taken a deadly toll this winter.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

ON THE AFTERNOON of Feb. 1, seven friends set out on skis from the Opus Hut, a backcountry lodge located high in Colorado’s San Juan Mountains. The sky was blue, the temperatures relatively warm, and a recent series of storms had left a sparkling blanket of fresh snow on the alpine slopes, just begging to be etched with fresh ski tracks. After a climb, the crew dropped one by one down a sparsely treed, north-east-facing slope called The Nose. Minutes later, four of them were swept away by an avalanche. Only one would be rescued alive.

That was on a Monday. Before the week was over, avalanches would kill another 10 people in snowslides across the West, including four 20-somethings in a single Utah avalanche, putting this winter on track to be among the deadliest in Colorado and Utah since 1950.

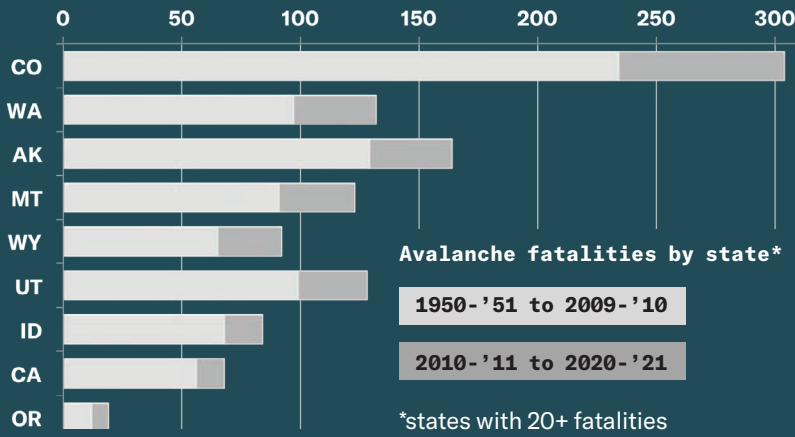
This may seem surprising, given that this winter has been one of the skimpiest, in terms of snowfall, for those same states. And yet it’s this very lack of snowfall, along with its timing and the weather between the storms, that has created an especially dangerous snowpack, according to Andy Gleason, a snow scientist on the NASA SnowEx project and a lecturer on geosciences at Fort Lewis College.

Late last autumn, storms covered the region’s high country in a couple feet of snow, which fell as intricate crystalline flakes that resembled the paper cutouts you made back in grade school. But during the long, cold dry spell that followed, differences in temperature throughout the snow sent vapor coursing through it, whittling the flakes into large faceted grains

that were unable to bond with one another. This is known as depth hoar, which is distinguished by its sugar-like consistency.

While this phenomenon can occur in a variety of conditions, it tends to be exacerbated when the snowpack is shallow, because the temperature gradient is greater. “When this weak layer gets buried by new snow,” Gleason said, “it is easy to trigger an avalanche, because the lattice structure of the depth hoar is so weak compared to well-bonded (new) snow.” Even if the slide is triggered on an upper layer by a skier’s weight, for example, the deeper, weaker layers may cause the weight of the slide itself to “step down” into the depth hoar, entraining, or incorporating, all of the layers, making it that much bigger — and more deadly. ☼

Infographic design:
Luna Anna Archey / HCN
Sources: Colorado Avalanche
Information Center, Natural
Resources Conservation Service



23.1

Average annual
fatalities,
1951-2020

33

Fatalities
this year, as
of March 15

Snow water equivalent at Mill-D North Fork SNOTEL site, Utah*

Maximum snowpack

Median snowpack

Minimum snowpack

As of Dec. 12, 2020, the snowpack statewide was at near-record low levels for the time of year.

New layers of snow fell periodically beginning in mid-December 2020. But another dry spell during the second and third week of January 2021 caused those layers to rot as well.

A weeks-long dry, cold spell created a temperature gradient, causing the base to rot and produce depth hoar.

November storms left the snowpack at just above-average levels.

*SNOTEL or Snowpack Telemetry sites are part of an automated system that measures snow, operated by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. There are more than 730 sites in 11 Western states.

A series of storms moved through the region between Jan. 22 and the beginning of February, adding a new layer of fresh powder to the previous, weaker layers of snow. The Utah accident that killed four people occurred at the tail end of this, on Feb. 6.

Profile of snowpack at scene of fatal accident on The Nose in the San Juan Mountains.

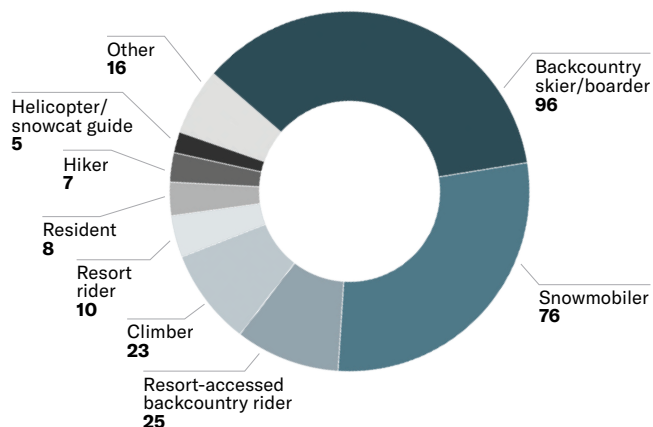
The fresh top layer of snow bonded well and formed "soft slabs." The thickness of the column is an indication of its hardness, or bondability.

The weight of a skier caused this layer, made up of poorly bonded, 2 mm faceted crystals, to fail, resulting in an avalanche.

The weight of the skier-triggered slide then stepped down into and entrained — or incorporated — the weaker lower layers, lending

more snow to the slide. The bottom-most layer is very weak depth hoar, made up of large crystals.

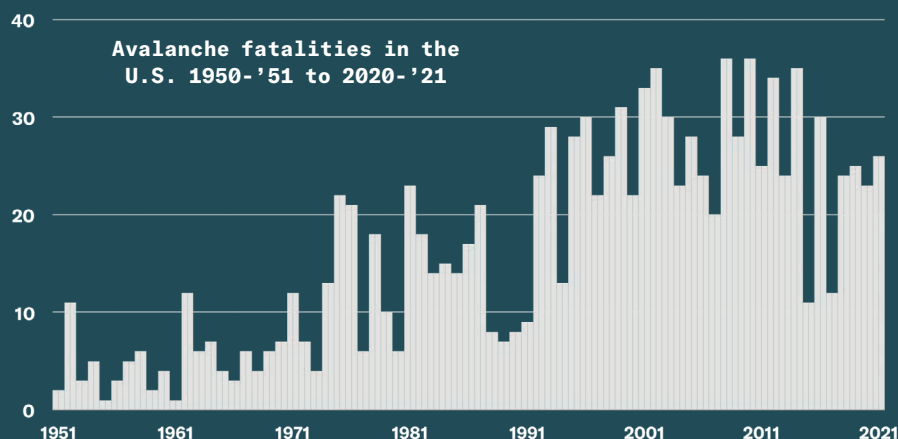
Avalanche fatalities nationwide by activity, 2010-'11 to 2020-'21



11

The number of avalanche-related fatalities in Colorado in 2020-'21, as of Feb. 25. The highest number of annual fatalities since counting began in 1950 was 12.

Avalanche fatalities in the U.S. 1950-'51 to 2020-'21



Trans activists push back in Montana

Battling anti-trans legislation and building a network.

BY SURYA MILNER

TWO YEARS AGO, on a January evening, Steven-Bear Twoteeth sat on the floor of a friend's one-bedroom apartment in Helena, Montana's state capital. Surrounded by fellow advocates, he prepared for the state's upcoming legislative session. "We were like, 'How do you pass a bill?' Or, 'What does HB' — house bill — 'mean?'" he remembers. When he arrived at the Capitol, he testified before a committee, speaking on the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women while wondering how vulnerable and personal his words should be.

Twoteeth is a queer and two spirit man of the Ojibwe, Cree, Blackfeet and Pend d'Oreille tribes. He's part of the broad coalition of transgender and two spirit Montanans who are opposing two bills in the Montana Legislature this session — House Bill 112, which mandates that women's sports teams in public schools accept only athletes who were assigned female at birth, and House Bill 113, which denies trans teens access to gender-affirming health care. These bills aren't unique to Montana: They're popping up across the country, from Mississippi to Utah. But in this increasingly conservative and mostly rural state, they've galvanized a response from a diverse cohort of activists and organizers — people like Twoteeth, who are lobbying for trans, two spirit and Indigenous rights.

In the last few decades, informal support networks for trans and two spirit Montanans have been growing here. In 2017, the state's first trans-specific policy group formed in response to a bill that would have prevented transgender people from using public bathrooms that correspond with their gender identity. The Free and Fair Coalition, which continues to fight anti-trans legislation in Montana, comprises approximately a dozen organizations, including the Montana Human Rights Network,

the Indigenous Organizers Collective and TransVisible Montana. Those groups amplify the voices of trans and two spirit Montanans, who are becoming increasingly visible and outspoken. "(The lack of visibility) was just about who was paying attention," Mija, a two spirit advocate and educator who works with TransVisible MT and the Indigenous Organizers Collective, said.

Though activists have been forced to adapt during the pandemic, community-building remains an essential aspect. Mija helps the trans activist community, which spans urban and rural spaces and a spectrum of racial and age groups, stay informed and connected. In previous years, organizers drove witnesses from rural parts of the state to Helena, and hosted in-person lobbyist trainings and support groups.

Now, organizers and advocates like Paxton McCausland host virtual decompression sessions after long days at the Capitol, where organizers and community members discuss the day's legislation. Building emotional support networks is inextricable from policy work, McCausland, who works with Montana Gender Alliance and TransVisible Montana, said. "To be able to gather with people who are fighting the same fight as I am — who are actively interested in the work that I do and are willing to help — is really uplifting." Still, he added, "it's hard to hear community pain. Those fears are valid. They are fears I've thought about myself."

McCausland's decompression sessions welcome parents of trans kids, health-care professionals, Indigenous rights activists, women's rights activists, social workers and other organizers whose work is not necessarily trans-focused. That's

because organizers like McCausland, Twoteeth and Mija have united activists across issue lines; their activism is intersectional — meaning that it's not limited to one aspect of an individual's identity but considers the interconnected ways in which people experience gender, race or socioeconomic status. "The trans bills are important," Twoteeth said. "But the missing and murdered Indigenous women bills are most important to me. When people ignore those, it feels like they're ignoring LGBTQ+ Indigenous people, because we are the most vulnerable in the state."

In late February, as the snowpack in southwestern Montana began to thaw, Twoteeth donned his best tie and climbed the steps of the Capitol nearly every day. He used to take long breaks after testifying in order to emotionally recover. Now, he has a better game plan and greater confidence, though heavy days still take a toll. "My work has grown by making me respect myself, and wanting Montanans who are just like me, who are queer, who are Indigenous, (to) be comfortable walking into a state Capitol," Twoteeth said.

Despite the uphill fight in Montana — HB 112 passed through the House, and HB 113 died but was reintroduced under a different bill name — activists and advocates are building power and standing firm in both their vulnerabilities and their approach. "I grew up knowing I couldn't talk about my own personal experiences, because there's so much shame," Twoteeth said. "Now, I take a lot of the things that I was raised to be shameful of, and I'm proud of them. I never wanted to tell anyone I was queer, and here I am at the Capitol in my rose tie." ✨



Grand Marshal Steven-Bear Twoteeth at the 2019 Big Sky Pride parade in Helena, Montana. There were over 6,000 people at the parade — the largest turnout in Big Sky Pride's history.
Courtesy of Steven-Bear Twoteeth



50TH ANNIVERSARY

Take us to the top

WE'VE FINALLY REACHED THE TREE LINE on the climb toward our \$10 million 50th Anniversary Campaign goal. The view is great, but we need a final burst of energy to make the summit and bring this homegrown operation into the modern age of news production.

Readers like you have already contributed more than \$6 million in donations and pledges, and we've wasted no time in investing your generous gifts in our \$10 million vision for *HCN's* future. Thank you!

But the job isn't finished. We still need funds to rebuild our website to draw in new readers, to strengthen our team of editorial staff and freelancers, and to keep our business model strong for the decades ahead.

The pandemic has slowed our progress, so we've extended the campaign until June 4, when we'll have a culminating online celebration and paddle-raiser. Please join us! To register: hcne.ws/west-illuminated

PLEASE MAKE A CONTRIBUTION TODAY: HCN.ORG/50MORE
Your investment is solid because *High Country News* is in this for the long haul. For 50 years, we have passionately pursued honest, on-the-ground journalism for the West and all its inhabitants. Today, especially, we serve as a critical antidote to the misinformation that divides our region.

Please join us as we stride toward the pinnacle of our mission. Donate today and invest in independent journalism for the West you love.

OUR VISION FOR HCN'S FUTURE:

1. Deeper and more comprehensive coverage of the West. **STARTED.**

We've hired a features editor and a photo editor. Now we need to attract, hire and retain more of the region's best writers and visual journalists.

2. A larger and broader audience. **STARTED.**

We've hired *HCN's* first bona fide marketing team and begun working to reach a bigger, broader and younger audience.

3. Stabilize and sustain *HCN's* business model. **STARTED.**

We've deepened our financial reserves and hired a charitable giving advisor to secure sustaining gifts.

4. Technology to support a modern news organization. **STARTED.**

We have improved our customer service database, but still need to modernize our website, social media, e-newsletters and cyber protection tools.

5. Establish an endowment for our Intern and Fellow Program. **STARTED.**

We've received more than \$1.3 million toward our \$5 million goal to increase pay and expand the number of participants in the program — starting now.

For more information or to discuss other ways to give, contact Alyssa Pinkerton, Paul Larmer or Clara Fecht at development@hcn.org

Amber Baesler pauses to watch the sunrise along the route to the summit of Challenger Point in the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness near Crestone, Colorado (above). **Jacob Byk**



HCN readers: Funding our work for 50 years

THANK YOU. Readers like you provide more than 75% of HCN's operation costs. You can join our dedicated supporters by donating \$50 or more. Send checks to P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428, call: 800-905-1155 or donate securely online at hcn.org/give2hcn

**INDEPENDENT MEDIA GUARDIAN
(\$25,000-\$49,999)**

Victoria L. Collier Revocable Trust

MEDIA LEADER (\$10,000-\$24,999)

The Kendeda Fund | Livingston, MT

PUBLISHER'S CIRCLE (\$5,000-\$9,999)

In memory of Don & Susan Jacobson
Laurie Davis | Nicasio, CA

PHILANTHROPIST (\$2,500-\$4,999)

Maryanne Mott | Santa Barbara, CA
Andy Wiessner | Snowmass, CO

STEWARD (\$1,000 - \$2,499)

Trace Baker | Boulder, CO
Virginia Darvill | Mount Vernon, WA
Betsy E. de Leiris | North Kingstown, RI
Molly McClure | Oak Creek, CO
Stephanie & Ken Wallace | Helena, MT

GUARANTOR (\$500-\$999)

Anonymous (3)
Elnora L. Cameron | Joseph, OR
Dean Heizer | Morrison, CO
James Kemp | Fresno, CA
Martha Kongsgaard & Peter Goldman,
Seattle Foundation | Seattle, WA
Ann Mahoney | Healdsburg, CA
Beverly Parsons | Hansville, WA
Ryan Family Charitable Fund | Wynnewood, PA
John & Tamera Stone | Polebridge, MT
Peter & Tina Watterberg | Albuquerque, NM

BENEFACTOR (\$250-\$499)

Lloyd A. Davidson | Evanston, IL
Susan Fleming | Salt Lake City, UT
Bob Harrell | Portales, NM
Carol Hayse | Nemo, SD
Shelley Hofmann | Parker, CO
Martin Hudson | Tigard, OR
Elizabeth Kelsey | Garden City, ID
David Moir & Ruth Tatter | Los Alamos, NM
Ann Mullins | Aspen, CO
Rick & Susan Neff | Missoula, MT
Jerry Oyer | Colorado Springs, CO
Richard Pritzlaff | Boulder, CO
John & Carolyn Ramsey | Eagle Point, OR
Max Reese | Salt Lake City, UT
Shelby Robinson & Michael Balogh | Mancos, CO
Harold Singer | South Lake Tahoe, CA
Gary Smith | Sebastopol, CA
Barry Sullivan | Honolulu, HI

Lynda Taylor & Robert Haspel | Dallas, TX
Eleanor Wootten | Gila, NM

SPONSOR (\$150-\$249)

Geoff & Diane Bedell | Kamas, UT
David R. Hackathorn | Marana, AZ
Vicki Huff & Eric Boerwinkle | Houston, TX
Thomas Jefferson | Livermore, CA
Leslie Knuti | Arvada, CO
Dave & Jill Knutson | Paonia, CO
Donn Kuntz & Julie Boyle | Lyons, CO
Patricia Marion Lennberg | Salt Lake City, UT
Robyn Morrison | Casper, WY
Colin Randolph | Twin Falls, ID
Deborah Robertson | Ketchum, ID
Donald & Sally Romig | Santa Fe, NM
Bill Wiese | Los Ranchos, NM

PATRON (\$75-\$149)

Anonymous (7)
In honor of Carl LaFong Research Center
In honor of Abraxas Klippoth
In honor of Sens. Dick Durbin & Tom Udall
In memory of Gregory Durrett |
Glenwood Springs, CO
In memory of Dave Ruiter
Amy Andersen | Lander, WY
Chris Andrae | Troutdale, OR
Charles Aschwanden | Lakewood, CO
Peter Bahls & Jude Rubin | Port Townsend, WA
Pat Bailey | Silver Cliff, CO
Jan Baker | Spokane, WA
Lee Ballard | Virgin, UT
Michael Bartley | Fort Collins, CO
LindaSue Beard & Richard Hereford | Flagstaff, AZ
Bednarski Hamrick Charitable Fund |
Scottsdale, AZ
Doug Bell & Erika Walther | Oakland, CA
Robert & Cynthia Berdais | Post Falls, ID
W. Scott Berry | Santa Cruz, CA
Bob & Judy Blundell | Pueblo, CO
Mara Bohman | Leavenworth, WA
Deborah Bollinger | Joshua Tree, CA
Peter Bonaker | Frisco, CO
Steven C. Bonner | Conifer, CO
John H. Brock | Tempe, AZ
Roy & Debra Brower | Beaverton, OR
Robert Brown | Gypsum, CO
Inger Bull | Colorado Springs, CO
George Burgoyne | Niles, MI
Lynda M. Caine | Bozeman, MT
Marti Callahan | Bluff, UT
Phil Carney | Eagle, ID
Frances Cassirer | Lewiston, ID

Andrew Catford | Fort Collins, CO
Carole Childs | Pahrump, NV
Kent & Priscilla Coe | La Grande, OR
Bonnie Cohn | Hermosa Beach, CA
William Copren | Sattley, CA
Steven C. Corbato | Portland, OR
Linda Dahl | Tucson, AZ
Judith & Phil Davidson | Salem, OR
Robert Davidson | Central Point, OR
Michael DeMarco | Bloomsburg, PA
Nancy Dickenson | Santa Fe, NM
Phil Difani | Hamilton, MT
Pam Doucette | Sun Valley, ID
Randall Douty | Silverthorne, CO
Alice Drogin | Castle Valley, UT
Peter Dunmire | Park City, UT
Zoe Durham | Quilcene, WA
Chris Eastwood | Bend, OR
Lynnnda Ebright | Grand Junction, CO
Richard Eckert | Woodland Park, CO
M.C. Edelman | St. Ignatius, MT
Tracy & Michael Ehlers | Boulder, CO
Mary & John Ellis | Boulder, CO
Ben & Cindi Everitt | Ivins, UT
Ken Fabert | Bainbridge Island, WA
Marianne Finrow | Chehalis, WA
Damian Fleming | Los Altos, CA
Steve & Barbara Frank | Idaho Falls, ID
Peter Friederici & Michele James | Flagstaff, AZ
Sarah Friedman | Los Angeles, CA
Charles M. Fry | Parker, CO
Molly & John Geissman | Albuquerque, NM
Neil Glaser | Brooklyn, NY
Rosemary Gondek | Salt Lake City, UT
Linda Gryczan | Helena, MT
John Guenther | Snowmass, CO
R.J. Guiney | Park City, UT
Karen & Tom Guter | Fort Collins, CO
Holly Hallman | Port Ludlow, WA
John & Linda Harper | Carmel, IN
Lyda Hayes | Gardnerville, NV
John & Hermi Hiatt | Las Vegas, NV
Kathryn L. Hiestand & Neal Miller | Bozeman, MT
Lee Higbie | Portland, OR
Karl Hodges | Salt Lake City, UT
Harold Hushbeck | Eugene, OR
Daryl & Judy Jennings | Dayton, WY
Terry E. Jess | Albany, OR
Dennis Johnson | Idaho Springs, CO
Kathy Jubitz & Steve Hawley | Hood River, OR
Rajan Kapur | Boulder, CO
Kathleen Kershaw | Nevada City, CA
Paul & Judith Kindel | East Lansing, MI
Eduardo Krasilovsky | Santa Fe, NM

Fred Krasner | Ashland, OR
Stanley & Kay Kujawa | Rudyard, MI
David J. Larson | El Cerrito, CA
Jean Larson | Batesville, AR
Kimberly Lau | State College, PA
Joel & Maxine Lautenberg | Stillwater, NY
Carrie Lavine | Portola Valley, CA
Sally Letchworth Bub | Kinnear, WY
Harold Lindmark | Denver, CO
Patricia Litton | Oakland, CA
T. Lyon | Golden, CO
Britton & Megan Mace | Washington, UT
Michael Macklin | Las Vegas, NM
Margaret & David MacPhail | Santa Rosa, CA
Joanne Magalis | Los Lunas, NM
Sandy Mailliard | Yorkville, CA
Dale Martin | Sandy, UT
Kathy Martinez | Greenwood Village, CO
Sara Mattes | Lincoln, MA
Richard Maurer | Castro Valley, CA
Melinda McBride | Shoreline, WA
Matthew McKenna | Bronxville, NY
Lisa McKhann & Pete Krieger | Duluth, MN
Julie Meissner | Stanley, ID
Peter & Jan Meserve | Moscow, ID
Christopher Moench & Jennifer Hahn |
Bellingham, WA
Paulajane Moffitt | Edgewood, NM
Richard Moos | Las Vegas, NV
Judy Muller | Norwood, CO
James Noriega | Carson City, NV
Susan & Ken Norton | Aurora, CO
Kent & Ruth Obee | Colorado Springs, CO
Len Pavelka | Lincoln, NE
Lincoln R. Phillips | Lyons, CO
Jane Poss | El Paso, TX
Peggy Purner | Mesquite, NV
Robert & Pat Raburn | Oakland, CA
Klaus Kummerer | San Luis Obispo, CA
Karen Renne | Missoula, MT
David Rolloff | Sacramento, CA
Robert Ruffridge | Fulshear, TX
Claude Sanders | Cromberg, CA
Sarah Schanz | Colorado Springs, CO
Aaron Schapper | Elkhorn, NE
Sue Schulz | Littleton, CO
Tom Schweich | Golden, CO
Larry Seale | Olympia, WA
John & Betty Sigler | Pocatello, ID
Peter Sinclair | Zephyr Cove, NV
Allan Sindelar | Cerrillos, NM
Linda Speedie | Austin, CO
Bud & Mary Starker | Denver, CO
Collin Thomas | Portland, OR

Joel G. Vignere | Lakeside, MT
Lila Vogt | Anchorage, AK
Mary Weisberg | San Mateo, CA
Arnold Whitridge | Douglas City, CA
Patrick Williams & Patti Merriner | Carson City, NV
Richard Wirtz | Fallbrook, CA
Randi Wise | Prescott, AZ
Doug Zandersmith | Star, ID

FRIEND (\$50-\$74)

Anonymous (15)
In honor of Robert Pack Browning
In honor of compassion & reason
In memory of Karen M. Strom
Ellen Aiken | Boulder, CO
Vernon Andersen | Bynum, MT
Mark Andrews | Montrose, CO
Steve Archer | Tucson, AZ
Vikki & Don Archuleta | Gunnison, CO
Lisa Arkin | Eugene, OR
Carol & Ole Ast | Damariscotta, ME
Margo Axsom | Sun Lakes, AZ
Frederick G. Barnikel | Lincoln, CA
Ian Barringer | Boulder, CO
Karia Basta | Phoenix, AZ
Arlene & Louis Bates | Napa, CA
Jill Baum | Duluth, MN
Susan Bell | Santa Fe, NM
Michael Bennett | Rociada, NM
Vina Sue Bishop | Denver, CO
Harvey Boatright | Buena Vista, CO
Loretta Bober | Bozeman, MT
Ben Bole | Sherwood, OR
Dan Booth | Anaheim, CA
Art Boswell | Tucson, AZ
Judy Brandt | Kenai, AK
Joe Brazie | Eugene, OR
Robert Breen | Bar Harbor, ME
Ross Breyfogle | Denver, CO
Eduardo Rey Brummel | Salida, CO
Peter Burnett | Waterbury, CT
Barbara Burris | Jackson, WY
Marilyn Burwell | Ferndale, WA
Lucas Buxman | San Francisco, CA
Chuck Carpenter | Castle Rock, CO
Chris Carrieri | Santa Rosa, CA
Sally Claassen | Steamboat Springs, CO
Richie Cohen-Smith | Grove City, OH
Marilyn Couch | Portland, OR
Steve & Anne Cox | Tucson, AZ
Chartiers West Craig Family Fund | Denver, CO
Frank Dalrymple | Hillsboro, OR
Kit Darrow | Evergreen, CO
Elaine David | Eureka, CA
Ian Descamps | Arlington, MA
Jim Evans | Philo, IL
Joan Falconer | Iowa City, IA
Ellen Fockler | Reno, NV
Christine Frank | Mankato, MN
Cory Freyer | Evergreen, CO
Gary & Edith Gidley | Goldendale, WA
Jeff Glover | Taylorsville, CA
Robert Grangaard | Hayden, ID
Mako Haggerty | Homer, AK
Mary F. Hanley | Washington, DC
Richard Heermance III | Glendale, CA
Sasha Heinen | Flagstaff, AZ
Catherine Heising | Eugene, OR
Stephanie Hemphill | Duluth, MN
Tom & Consuelo Hester | Silver City, NM
Robert Hiester | Oak Creek, CO
Mark Hinton | Eden Prairie, MN
Katherine K. Hudson | Carbondale, CO
Max Hunt | Woodinville, WA
Steve Katz | Fairfax, CA
Bob Kohut | Ithaca, NY
Susan & Richard Kuehster | Palmer Lake, CO
Dean Kurath | Winthrop, WA
Tony & Claudia Kutz | Littleton, CO
Nina Lakhani | New York, NY
Janet LaVille | Littleton, CO
Shelly Laws | Anchorage, AK
Ellen Leatham | Portland, OR

Chris Leber | Washington, DC
Mel Leibner | Scottsdale, AZ
Jacquelyn Leigh Landscape LLC | McMinnville, OR
Dave Loomis | Missoula, MT
Sydne & Troy Luebe | Mountain View, WY
Bruce A. Luer | Evergreen, CO
Michael Madden | Montara, CA
James Manley & Julie Kley | Flagstaff, AZ
Daniel C. May | Fairfax, CA
Barbara & Robert McFarland | Coeur d'Alene, ID
Pete & Jan Metzmaker | Whitefish, MT
Sim Middleton | Las Cruces, NM
Robert Millette & Maggie Pedersen | New Castle, CO
Robert & Sue Naymik | Medford, OR
Geoff O'Gara | Lander, WY
Gary & Kathy O'Neal | Portland, OR
Martin & Martha Onishuk | Missoula, MT
Martin Page | Portland, OR
Laura Peterhans | Belmont, CA
Laurie Piccolotti | Wrightwood, CA
Rebecca Pierce | Denver, CO
Kimberly Pinter | Coram, MT
Belinda Platta | Dolores, CO
Lizzy Raffin | San Francisco, CA
Boni Randall | Kelso, WA
Gail Rankin | McCall, ID
Robert C. Rudd | Victor, ID
Osman Sanyer | Salt Lake City, UT
Detlev Schneider | Keaau, HI
Kirk Schroeder & Carol Savonen | Philomath, OR
Geoff Sears | Portland, OR
Virginia A. Sell | Estes Park, CO
Joel Shechter | Missoula, MT
Tom & Diana Sheldon | Boulder, CO
Rick Shorten & Alix Foster | Mount Vernon, WA
Leonard R. Silvey | Poway, CA
Jo Ann Siva | Fallbrook, CA
Tom Smith | Huntsville, AL
Robert Smythe | Corvallis, OR
Keith & Carol Spencer | Las Vegas, NV
Delaine & Rick Spilsbury | McGill, NV
Kirk Stapp | Mammoth Lakes, CA
Connie Swanson | Foster city, CA
Tom Syverud | Ashland, WI
Mike Todd | Phoenix, AZ
Andrew Robert Tofe | Denver, CO
Eric Trimble | Kalispell, MT
Les Tumidaj & Kamala Bremer | Portland, OR
Carol Warden | Westminster, CO
Molly Welker | Anchorage, AK
David A. Wight | Berkeley, CA
George Wilbanks | Paso Robles, CA
William Wilson | Boise, ID
Richard Winterbottom & Kathryn Monaco | Albuquerque, NM
Earl Withycombe | Sacramento, CA
Adam Woods & Laurie Kenyon | Turtle Lake, WI
Diana T. Wuenschell | Perry, UT
Kathi Young | Spokane, WA

WELCOME TO THE SUSTAINERS' CLUB

Anonymous (2)
In honor of Travis Cody Kerekes Martin | Tucson, AZ
In memory of my dad, Stephen Dudash,
who taught me to love the West
In memory of Irving Giberson
Lezlie Cox | Seattle, WA
Ian Descamps | Arlington, MA
Laura Dixon & James Baker | Bend, OR
Greg Hanscom & Tara Thomas | Seattle, WA
Scott Henning | San Francisco, CA
Erica Howard | Yafford, Isle Of Wight, UK
Karen Howe | Crawford, CO
Kathy & Dan Huntington | Washougal, WA
Kathy & Bruce Martinez | Paonia, CO
Karen & Douglas Morton | Walla Walla, WA
Alyssa Pinkerton | Fort Collins, CO
Deborah Ruehle | Sandpoint, ID

HCN COMMUNITY

Looking for leaders

HCN IS LOOKING FOR a few new board members to help set our course for the next 50 years. The board has oversight of the organization's governance and finances, and it collaborates with the staff to set our overall direction. We're looking for expertise in strategic planning, digital product development, audience engagement, finance and fundraising.

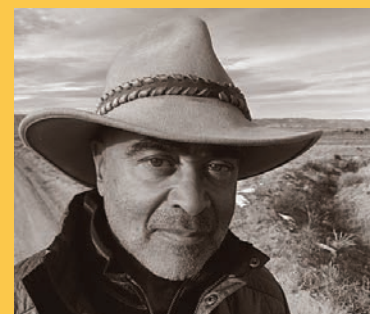
It's a significant commitment — and (fair warning) you won't get paid for it. Board members are expected to attend three meetings per year and to serve on committees working year-round on topics such as fundraising, finance and equity. (Assistance is available for members who cannot afford to pay for travel to in-person meetings.) Terms last three years.

HCN is committed to creating an organization that reflects the diverse and changing West. We welcome candidates from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, including Black, Indigenous and all people of color, women, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ people. For more information, go to **hcn.org/about/jobs**. To nominate yourself or someone you know, email board.jobs@hcn.org.

We want to thank two wonderful people who are retiring from the board. **Nicole Lampe**, of Portland, Oregon, came to *HCN* a decade ago with mad skills in digital marketing and helped jumpstart our social media presence. She also brought a deep commitment to social justice and equity issues, encouraging *HCN* to revamp our internal practices to attract and retain a diverse workforce. Nicole is currently managing director of the Water Hub, which helps activists with communication strategies

to advance water justice and community resilience.

Wayne Hare, who grew up on a farm in New Hampshire, connected to the West while working as a ranger with the Bureau of Land Management in western Colorado. Over the past decade, Wayne has gently cajoled *HCN* into expanding its coverage of race and culture in the West. He not only shepherd-ed in our most diverse slate of new board members, but began writing his own series of essays on race for *HCN*, including a profile of Nicodemus, Kansas, one of the few Black frontier settlements in the West still holding on after 144 years, and a deep dive into Oregon's racist roots, which manifest today in glaring disparities in wealth and homeownership. Wayne recently spun off this series into a nonprofit, "The Civil Conversations Project." Check it out at **thecivilconversationsproject.org**. —*Paul Larmer*



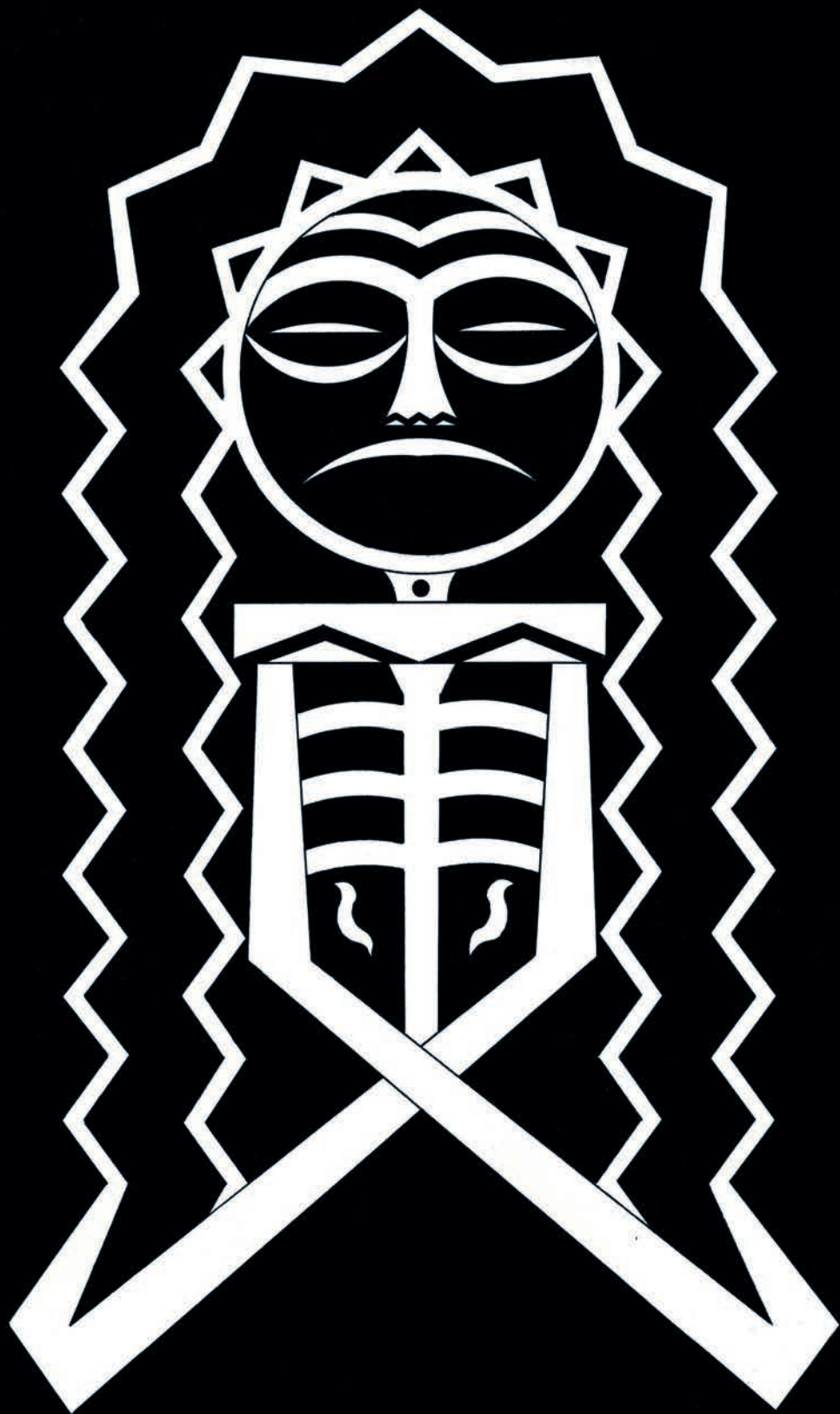
Wayne Hare and Nicole Lampe.
Courtesy photos

UNRECOGNIZED

The Chinook Indian Nation
has been fighting for
federal acknowledgment
for over a century.

Why haven't they gotten it?

By Anna V. Smith
Illustrations by Greg A. Robinson



BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, the cedar plankhouse called Cathlapotle would have been full of stories and fire. Every winter, the Chinook Indian Nation and neighboring tribes hold their annual gathering here, on their ancestral lands on a Columbia River floodplain, where red-winged blackbirds sing from the cattails and yellow-and-orange-eyed sandhill cranes strut on stilted legs. It's not far from the remnants of a village also called Cathlapotle, a major Chinookan trading town established around 1450 that once held as many as 16 plankhouses.

On sunny days when Cathlapotle is in use, the cedar beams glow warmly in the shafts of light streaming through the roof's smoke holes. People gather round the fires at the center, with a row of chairs for elders and children. The air echoes with talk and songs, and the smell of sweetgrass filters in from outside. But this winter, Cathlapotle was silent, nestled in untrod-den green grass and fog, its doors closed.

Like other communities, Chinook tribal members have had to adapt to pandemic-induced isolation. Though scattered throughout the Pacific Northwest, people have recently gathered most Thursdays on Zoom, joined by members of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde and others.

One Thursday afternoon in early March, a group of Chinuk Wawa language teachers, basket-weavers and storytellers called in from their homes on the Grand Ronde Reservation, in Portland, Eugene and Willapa Bay, to share ikanum, or traditional stories. In consonant-heavy Chinuk Wawa, they caught up with each other and read aloud an ikanum translated from the Kathlamet dialect of Chinook. It recalled a time of hunger on the edge of spring, when the salmon people went up the Columbia and met with their aunties, the big and little wapato, and their uncles, the skunk cabbage and the rushroot.

The stories are important for cultural continuity and the way they bring people together. "It really defines the whole way we look at the world," Tony Johnson, chairman of the Chinook Indian Nation, told me outside tribal headquarters in the tiny town of Bay Center, in southwestern Washington. "Every landform here, every creek, every inlet has a connection to these stories. So if you know these stories, you see this place in a very different way."

For over 120 years, the Chinook Indian Nation has been trying to prove its sovereignty to the United States government by seeking formal federal recognition. Official status acknowledges the tribe's sovereignty and the federal government's obligations to it as generally outlined in treaties. With federal recognition comes health

care through the Indian Health Service, education through scholarships, and access to land through creation of a reservation. Today, there are 574 federally recognized tribes. Hundreds of others are unrecognized, though, with varying claims of legitimacy. The process for the Chinook has involved decades of litigation, petitions, congressional legislation and appeals to presidents — yet the tribe is still unrecognized. The impersonal bureaucracy obscures the personal urgency and pain that tribal members feel as time moves on, elders pass and children grow up.

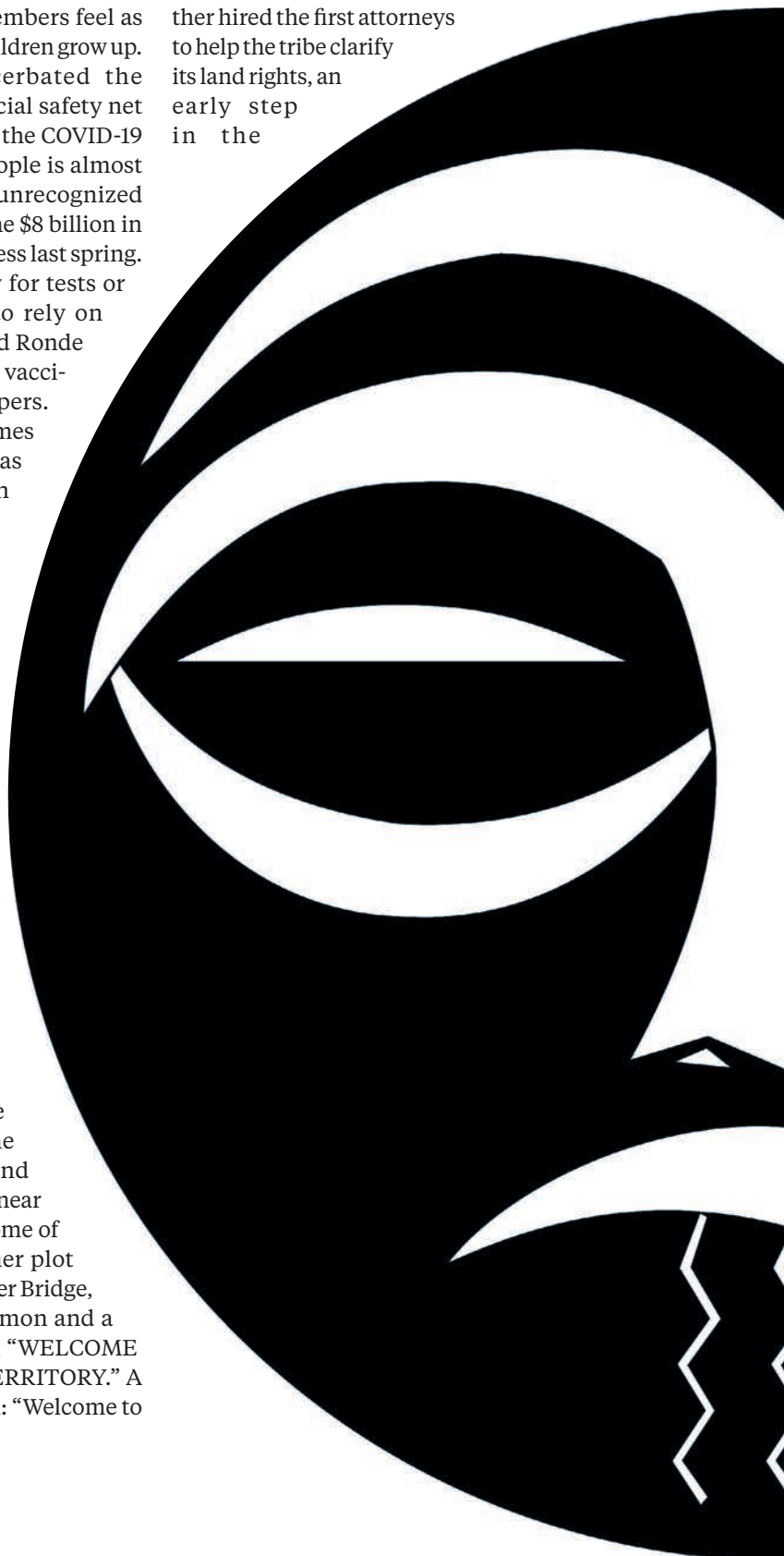
The pandemic has exacerbated the Chinook's lack of the kind of social safety net recognized tribes possess. While the COVID-19 mortality rate of Indigenous people is almost 2.5 times that of white people, unrecognized tribes have not received any of the \$8 billion in government aid passed by Congress last spring. Nor have they received priority for tests or vaccines. Instead, they have to rely on neighboring tribes like the Grand Ronde and the Shoalwater Bay Tribe to vaccinate their elder knowledge-keepers. Chinook tribal members sometimes refer to the lack of recognition as slow-motion genocide. "Explain how it's not genocide," Johnson said to me. "Someone explain to me how it's not."

THE CHINOOK INDIAN

NATION is composed of five different bands: the Lower Chinook, Clatsop, Wahkiam, Kathlamet and Willapa. Their ancestral lands stretch from Willapa Bay in Washington, across the Columbia River, and south through Oregon to Tillamook Head, along the Pacific Coast. Today, however, the nation has no reservation. All five bands signed treaties with the U.S. government in the 1850s that were supposed to establish multiple small reserves. But the Senate never ratified the treaties, so the tribe's landholdings are small and scattered, like the 10 acres of land near Tansy Point, in Oregon, where some of the treaties were signed. Another plot lies just north of the Astoria-Megler Bridge, where a Chinookan flag of a salmon and a face snaps above a sign reading "WELCOME TO UNCEDED CHINOOKAN TERRITORY." A few feet to the left is another sign: "Welcome to Washington."

The tribal office is in Bay Center, surrounded by the nutrient-rich mudflats that have made Willapa Bay's oysters famous; their sun-bleached, discarded shells create mounds the size of compact houses next to the processing warehouses.

Tony Johnson was born 20 minutes from here, in South Bend. Leadership is in his blood: He is descended from a Chinook treaty signer, and in 1899, his great-great-grandfather hired the first attorneys to help the tribe clarify its land rights, an early step in the



battle for recognition. Johnson's father, Gary, was tribal chairman during a period in the early aughts when the Chinook were briefly recognized. Tony Johnson has continued his tribe's campaign to regain that recognition.

Johnson speaks with gravity, but when he talks about recognition, it's with a noticeable edge of impatience. He's clearly had to talk about it a lot. He was first voted onto the tribal council in the 1990s, and has been

tribal chairman since 2013,

all the while working

as a language

and culture

educator

f o r

other federally recognized tribes.

Johnson, who is 50 now, has seen the effects of the tribe's lack of recognition firsthand: Chinookan elder knowledge-keepers get sick with cancer and die without proper treatment because they don't have health care; children are removed from their homes because the Indian Child Welfare Act doesn't protect them; community members with mental health or substance use disorders cannot access the resources available to recognized tribes. The current federal recognition process was originally created in the late 1970s as a way to undo the damage wrought by the Termination Era, a series of policies in the 1950s and '60s that ended the government's political relationship to targeted tribes and took even more land from Indigenous hands. Today's treatment of the Chinook recalls that time, when there was little legal protection from the country's explicitly genocidal and assimilationist policies.

Any petitioning tribe's claims clearly require verification, but the process involved — in which a colonial empire chooses whether to formally acknowledge an Indigenous nation's sovereignty — is as problematic as it sounds. The wait time, which can last up to 40 years, requires evidence from the very people and institutions involved in the history of subjugation. Historical accounts by non-Native newspapers and anthropologists from as far back as 1900 can help prove a tribe's legitimacy but the process doesn't always take into account how U.S. policy contributed to the very same historical erasure that today is seen as a deficiency in a tribe's petition.

Some states also have their own recognition process, in which they treat a tribal nation similarly to how they would other federally recognized tribes. Not in Washington, however. If the Chinook want to repatriate an item, for example, they often have to partner with a federally recognized tribe to receive assistance. And state recognition is no replacement for federal recognition. "We don't need the government to tell us we're Indian," Ray Gardner, a former Chinook chairman, used to say to his fellow council members. "We just need them to honor the treaty our ancestors signed." Gardner died in 2015, after a long battle with lung disease.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT recognized the Chinook Indian Nation once, in 2001. It lasted for just 18 months, from the tail end of President Bill Clinton's administration into the first year of President George W. Bush's. The nation has pursued multiple paths towards recognition, including a petition started in 1981 through what's now known as the Office of Federal Acknowledgment. In late 2000, Chairman Gary Johnson received a call from Kevin Gover, the assistant secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs, inviting Johnson and the tribal council to Washington, D.C. Gover's last act as secretary was to approve Chinook's petition for recognition.

Around a dozen Chinook tribal members attended the ceremony in D.C. in January 2001. Johnson wore a wool vest the colors of a desert sunset, his white hair in braids. Gover beamed as they signed the recognition papers in front of a quilted morning star hanging on the wall. Gover, a citizen of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, apologized to Johnson for the decades it had taken. "For those Chinooks who refused to leave, who refused to assimilate, and who sought to preserve the heritage of their grandmothers and grandfathers, this is their day, too," Gover said.

At home, the news came as a relief. "There was a noticeable tension released from our territory," Tony Johnson said. "It was this massive weight taken off of us." Chinook leadership knew there would be a comment period; a neighboring tribe, the Quinault Indian Nation, had opposed Chinook recognition over territorial rights in the past and might do so again. And that is what happened: Just days before the deadline, the Quinault objected. Eventually, the Bush administration retracted Clinton's acknowledgment. "I don't think we've recovered from the smothering feeling," Johnson says now. "It has been the polar opposite of this collective breath. It brought back a ton of historical trauma in the community and then multiplied it."

A few years later, in 2005, Rachel Cushman, a tribal member who was finishing high school in Portland, Oregon, began applying to colleges and scholarships around the country. She was a finalist for the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholars Program, which would have supported her entire academic career, wherever she went. But ultimately, her Chinook certificate of Indian blood disqualified her: Her nation was not federally recognized. Losing the fellowship changed her life, Cushman says now. "There were times where I was homeless," she told me. "There were times where I had to make the choice: Do I buy my schoolbook and get that grade, or do I have a roof over my head?"

Moon

In 2010, Cushman did graduate, from the University of Oregon. She gave the commencement speech wearing green robes and a woven cedar bark graduation cap, and she introduced herself in Chinuk Wawa, a creolized Chinookan language that once spanned from southern Oregon to Southeast Alaska. Today, she still lives in Eugene, part of the Chinook diaspora, and serves on the tribal council. “Being on the tribal council, you are responsible for representing your people, and you then begin to have a greater understanding of how you’re treated differently than recognized Indians,” she said. “And as a parent, I realized what opportunities my kids would have based on their status.” Cushman’s husband is an enrolled citizen of the Oneida Nation in the Midwest, so her young children have access to more educational opportunities than she did. The kids are already aware of their tribe’s status, and Kanim, her 7-year-old son, has participated in letter-writing campaigns seeking recognition. Although her children deeply identify as Chinook — they attend gatherings, their names are Chinookan, and Kanim was born during a Chinook potlatch — the government considers them solely Oneida.

Federal laws designed to protect Indigenous rights, including the Indian Child Welfare Act, don’t apply to unrecognized tribes. As of 2015, Native children in Washington were put in foster care at a rate nearly four times higher than they are represented in the state’s general population, removed for problems that the tribe struggles to address: homelessness, incarceration and poverty. A decade ago, a research group in Washington found that Native children in the state were five times more likely to be removed from their families than white children. Cushman’s own relatives in Oregon had children removed, though fortunately they were placed with a non-Native family who does keep in touch with the tribe and brings the children to cultural events. That doesn’t always happen to kids who are adopted or fostered out; many never reconnect with their tribe or family. The families still struggle today because of past government policy, Cushman says. The government’s refusal to recognize the tribe did not prevent it from taking Chinook children to settler-colonial boarding schools and subjecting them to federal Indian policy. “It’s cyclical, and it’s all (a) product of not being federally recognized,” she said.

AS A CHILD, TONY JOHNSON often fished with his uncle and went clamming with his family in the waters of Willapa Bay. It’s an expansive, remote place, where gray skies still constitute a beautiful day. Johnson’s family traveled for council meetings or community events and

often visited Bay Center, a sleepy town without a grocery store, school or gas station, where many of Johnson’s elders lived. As a kid, Tony absorbed their stories, peppering them with questions and listening to them speak Indigenous languages like Lower Chehalis and Chinuk Wawa.

He returned to South Bend after college, where he majored in silversmithing and studied anthropology and American Indian studies, but he didn’t stay long. In 1997, he moved to Oregon when he got a job helping the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde build a language program. At that time, only about a dozen people still spoke Chinuk Wawa, which was verging on extinction. Johnson, who is fluent in Wawa, worked on a 500-page dictionary, and in 2002,

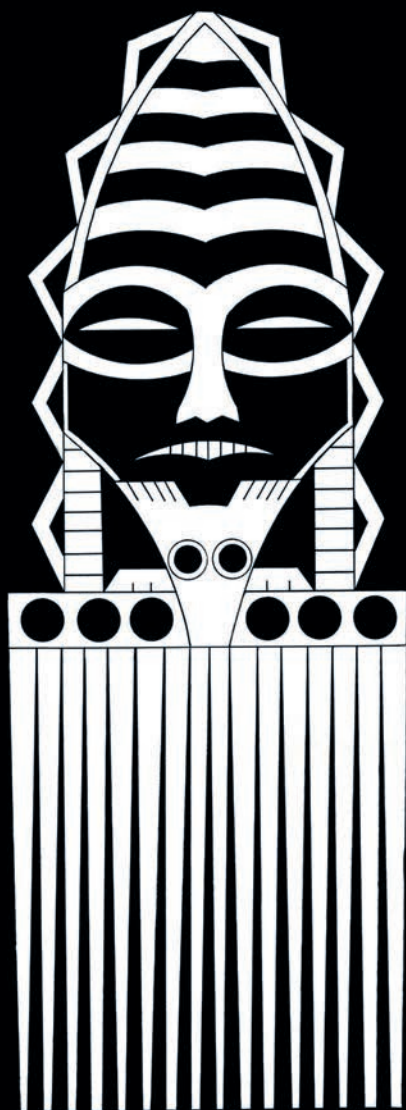
“We don’t need the government to tell us we’re Indian. We just need them to honor the treaty our ancestors signed.”

helped Grand Ronde launch a Chinuk Wawa immersion school. The schooling starts 30 days before a child turns 3, and continues five days a week through preschool and kindergarten. Students are entirely immersed in Chinuk Wawa. Throughout elementary school, a maintenance language program remains part of their regular education, keeping them fluent. The school’s atmosphere is familial: Teachers are referred to as uncle, auntie or grandma, and the curriculum combines the place-based and cultural knowledge of the elders. There’s a whole unit on cedar and another on rushes that blend botany with music and history lessons. The unit on hazel notes that the best time to gather and peel hazel shoots for basket weaving is in spring, when buds are the size of a squirrel’s ear.

In 2005, Johnson married Mechele, a woman he’d known since high school and a Chinook descendant enrolled with the Shoalwater Bay Tribe. Four of their five kids were enrolled in the Grand Ronde program. But the couple were homesick: In late 2010, they relocated to Willapa Bay, to be closer to relatives and work toward tribal recognition. Leaving the school he helped build was difficult for Johnson, whose younger kids would no longer have the same access to language immersion.

Cultural influences run deep. Sam Robinson, vice chairman of the Chinook Indian Nation, has the type of kindness about him that you can sense even from six feet away behind a surgical mask. When Robinson was a kid, his family frequently visited his great-aunts and uncles in Bay Center. In spring and fall, as soon as they turned off the highway and the bay came into view, he could smell the rich scent of fish in smokehouses. When his family went fishing, they didn’t need state licenses; their “blue cards,” issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, recognized Chinook fishing rights. But that changed after a federal court decision in the 1970s, when fishing rights were quantified for recognized tribes in the Pacific Northwest. Unrecognized tribes, like the Chinook, were left out. Fifty years later, Robinson still has his dad’s blue card. He loves to be out on the water in Willapa Bay or the Columbia River, putting in thousands of paddle strokes on canoe journeys from Suquamish to Tulalip. But he doesn’t fish anymore; he refuses to pay the state for a license to do something he believes that Indigenous people like him have the right to do.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2002, 18 months after the Chinook were formally acknowledged by the Clinton administration, Gary Johnson and his wife, Cristy, received an envelope from the Bush White House, addressed in looping script,



Coyote's Comb

inviting them to D.C. to commemorate Lewis and Clark's "Voyage of Discovery." They attended with the other tribes whose ancestors had met Lewis and Clark during the expedition, bringing gifts including a 19th century hand-carved cedar canoe filled with a long string of beautiful beads. In the East Room of the White House, they listened to remarks by President George W. Bush and historians and tribal leaders. Two days later, while they were sight-seeing in D.C., Johnson got a phone call: Neal McCaleb, Bush's assistant secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs, had rescinded Chinook recognition following the Quinault Indian Nation's opposition.

The Quinault had argued that even though Chinookan families existed before 1951, they did not constitute a tribe with a united community and political authority. During a recent House

of Representatives hearing about reforming the petition process, the Quinault objected to proposed changes, specifically citing the Chinook's petition. The Quinault maintain that they do not oppose "the right of any group to seek a political relationship with the federal government." Rather, the tribe is against any federal action that could "jeopardize" its own treaty rights or sovereignty. In 2011, Pearl Capoeman-Baller, who was then the Quinault president, told *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*: "If the Chinook will permanently waive any rights to hunting, fishing, gathering and other treaty rights," she said. "And if (they) will also waive any claims that the Chinook share government authority over the reservation, then the Quinault will withdraw objection to (federal) acknowledgment." (The Quinault Nation did not respond to

questions about how Chinook recognition might jeopardize its treaty rights or sovereignty.)

In the final decision, McCaleb noted one reason for the reversal: "As people who had been closely connected as children and young adults died, the succeeding generations interacted less often and intensely until the community of Chinook descendants became indistinguishable from the rest of the population" — an ironically apt description of the stated purpose of past U.S. policies.

Ripples of shock and anger followed the news. Tony Johnson cut his hair in mourning. One prominent Chinook elder, elated by recognition, was close to death at the time. His family couldn't bring themselves to tell him that the decision had been reversed; they let him go believing the Chinook held their formally recognized status.

Tribal disagreements over recognition are not uncommon, especially given the rise of the gambling industry in the 1990s. States, federally recognized tribes and businesses all have competing interests and rights over land, water and wildlife. That can be compounded by the lack of funding in Indian Country by Congress.

The Quinault have opposed Chinook recognition since the Chinook first formally sought it, in 1981. (The Quinault also fought a petition by the Cowlitz Tribe in the 1990s.) A coastal nation comprising two tribes and descendants from several others, the Quinault live about 100 miles north of Bay Center. Their relationship with the Chinook is complicated; during one treaty negotiation, Chinook leaders made it clear to the U.S. government's representative that they did not want to move north onto the Quinault Reservation, in part because of past conflicts. Despite this, in the 1930s, the courts designated some of the lands on the Quinault Reservation for the Chinook and other tribes.

Today, a number of Chinook have moved north and enrolled as Quinault, and the two tribes share plenty of friends and relatives. In an oral history interview in 2012, though, Gary Johnson said that it was the Quinault government and its attorneys who "knifed us in the back," adding "that will be a hard one for Chinooks to forget." Years later, the opposition still hurts. "Without that (ruling), we would be a totally different community 20 years later, one that is thriving," Johnson said in March. "Knowing all that it has cost our family and our Chinook citizens, we live every day seeing the overall hurt of having that recognition rescinded."

ELIZABETH PICKERNELL, Tony Johnson's great-grandmother, was born when the salmon-
(continued on page 41)



Tom and Edie Welty and Jeff Canfield snowshoe on Payette Lake below Parcel G, one of the endowment land areas that is part of a proposed land swap. The three are part of a local group working to stop the exchange of lands that surround much of the lake in McCall, Idaho.



GROWING PAINS

How a large-scale land swap proposed by a private investment firm ignited a fight over state lands in Idaho.

By Emily Benson | Photos by Angie Smith



T

HAT SIGN IS WRONG,” David Simmonds said as we snowshoed past the warning: “Danger Thin Ice.” Out on the frozen lake, a few hundred feet from shore, a layer of slush had formed between the 3 inches of ice below and the inch or so of fresh snow on top. Whenever Simmonds shifted his snowshoes or dug the basket of his pole into the snow, a puddle — liquid, cold, unnerving — appeared. It was a Friday morning in early January, and we were on Payette Lake in the center of McCall, a resort town in west-central Idaho.

The lake, shaped like an upside-down “v,” is about 10 miles from tip to tip. Earlier that week, Simmonds, president of the nonprofit Big Payette Lake Water Quality Council, had skated 7 miles down the ice with his wife and a friend.

The morning fog lifted as we spoke, revealing the snow-dusted trees and hills that neatly cup the lake’s northeast edge. About 80 feet below us was the end of a pipe, one of the town’s two drinking water intakes. McCall relies entirely on Payette Lake for water; a city report from 2018 estimated that its water system serves the equivalent of over 4,500 households — more than McCall’s resident population of about 3,500 people, due to second homes, hotels and vacation rentals. And demand is likely to nearly double in the next 20 years. Logging, shoreline erosion, wildfires, climate change and development are just some of the factors that can harm water quality. Increasing recreational use can also cause problems.

And new housing brings dangers of its own: Disturbing the soil during construction can wash harmful amounts of nutrients into the water, while population rise will put more pressure on the lake.

All this can cause warmer temperatures, nutrient pollution and noxious algae blooms. Over the past few years, there have been algae blooms in late summer; last year was particularly bad, with bright green water that smelled fishy and felt disconcertingly grainy. If

the blooms get worse, they could set off a self-perpetuating cycle. “We’re kind of poking the hornet’s nest with a stick here,” Simmonds said. “And if we poke it enough times, we’re going to get ourselves in trouble.”

Trouble seems inevitable: Since COVID-19 hit the United States in early 2020, people have been leaving cities and moving into less populated areas. In McCall, that’s sparked a demand for new building. In 2020, 346 lots were sold in the area, more than twice as many as the year before, according to the Idaho Statesman. And now, a new proposal for a land swap involving tens of thousands of acres of state-owned property around Payette Lake has revealed the potential for yet more development — unless the community can find an alternative.

ON JUNE 16, 2020, the five state leaders on the Idaho Land Board held their monthly public meeting to discuss “endowment land,” a special category of state land that

must be managed to maximize long-term profits to fund schools and other public institutions. Despite the pandemic, they gathered at the state Capitol in Boise in a formal auditorium, surrounded by dark wood paneling and heavy red drapes. A handful of people sat in the audience, and more watched online.

Idaho Attorney General Lawrence Wasden, a board member, spoke of a recent meeting with two groups interested in the land around Payette Lake, including a new company called Trident Holdings LLC. A memo, released five days earlier, mentioned a proposal for a 28,000-acre land exchange, later revealed to have been put forth by Trident. It was listed under a specific agenda item: a vote on whether to pause major management decisions in that area until the board adopted a new, detailed strategy for the land's future. Wasden had spoken with Trident representatives, including its founder, Alec Williams, about the swap.

"I felt like it was important that I disclose that prior to any discussion about the matters today," Wasden said, his voice muffled by a blue cloth face mask.

Gov. Brad Little, R, another board member, took off his glasses and twisted them in his hands.

"Board members, I also had a meeting with Trident," he said. "This is a big hairy piece of ground, with all kinds of conflicting issues. ... I have a conflict in that I love McCall. So we want to do this right."

One at a time, the other three members also acknowledged meeting with Trident. "Governor, I did not, but my staff has, just for the record," State Controller Brandon Woolf said, to laughter from his colleagues. "That's it." The board voted to pause new leases, sales or exchanges of the lands around McCall until they approved the new management strategy.

Two days later, the McCall Star-News ran a front-page story on the proposed land exchange. Trident wanted to trade North Idaho timber-

"So many people had that same kind of a gut reaction of, 'Wait a minute, these are lands that we ski on, hike on, we huckleberry pick on ...' "

Looking north toward downtown McCall and Payette Lake from Highway 55. Much of the forest in the background is state endowment land included in a proposed swap (facing).

Retired high school environmental science teacher Deb Fereday, who serves as secretary of the Big Payette Lake Water Quality Council, helped gather signatures from 650 fellow McCall-area citizens for a newspaper ad stating opposition to Trident's proposal (below).



lands for land around Payette Lake, the article explained. Most of the endowment land around the lake is forested and open to the public. It is not, however, protected the way federal public land is: The Land Board is not required to conduct environmental reviews of management decisions. Furthermore, its mandate is to make money, rather than prioritize conservation or recreation.

Most of the land's revenue comes from timber sales. But in the McCall region, some parcels, particularly the desirable land near the lake, were worth much more than they'd been generating. By one state estimate, 5,500 acres of that land should have been producing \$1.9 million more annually than it actually was.

Trident saw this gap as an opportunity: The exchange, it said, would fulfill the Land Board's fiduciary responsibility while allowing Trident to plan responsible development — which would help finance a park over most of the 28,000 acres, keeping it publicly accessible.

Many McCall residents were skeptical, including Deb Fereday, a retired public high school environmental science teacher who has lived in McCall her whole life. She and her husband own the town's main hardware store, as well as a marina on the lake. Fereday has the calm confidence of a teacher and is invariably the person on a video

call who lets you know if you're muted. A couple of weeks after the McCall Star-News' story, Fereday sat down at her kitchen table, opened the paper and saw a full-page ad by Trident promoting the land swap.

The ad was peppered with historic photographs of Alec Williams' relatives, who built a small cabin on the eastern edge of Payette Lake in the 1930s. It warned that the endowment lands were at risk of being chopped up owing to a statute in the Idaho Constitution, which stipulates that the state can't sell an endowment land parcel larger than 320 acres to a single buyer. If the Land Board auctioned off the 28,000 acres piecemeal — something that rising land values could force it to do, it seemed — "private property lines would divvy up the lands we all enjoy, with locked gates, guards, and no trespassing signs everywhere."

But for Fereday, who serves as the secretary of the Big Payette Lake Water Quality Council, the thought of giving one company control over that much land made her feel sick to her stomach. She called her friend, Judy Anderson, another retired teacher, and said, "What if we got a whole bunch of people to sign a full-page ad that said, 'We do not agree with this?'" The two got to work with others collecting signatures, eventually gathering over 650 for an ad that ran two weeks later. Columns of names took up the entire bottom half of the page.

"So many people had that same kind of a gut reaction of, 'Wait a minute, these are lands that we ski on, hike on, we huckleberry pick on, we pick mushrooms, we take our kids to go look at the streams and maybe go up Lick Creek in the springtime when we're so sick of the snow,' " Fereday told me. "All these lands, they're just part of McCall."

THE LAND WHERE MCCALL now sits is the ancestral territory of the Nimípuu (Nez Perce) people, and it remains important to them today: When the Nez Perce ceded

the region to the U.S. government in an 1855 treaty, they explicitly retained the right to fish in their accustomed places, including in and around Payette Lake, and to hunt, pasture livestock, and gather roots and berries. The U.S. later violated the treaty, but the Nez Perce never ceded those rights. “That’s why we still can hunt and fish there, and that’s why our people still do,” Nakia Williamson, a tribal member and the tribe’s cultural resources director, told me, though development and the transformation of the landscape have made that more difficult.

Still, Nez Perce people fish for salmon in nearby streams in the summertime and gather roots and medicines around Payette Lake. But it’s bigger than that, Williamson said: “These are more than just rights, they’re more than just activities,” he told me. “That back-and-forth interaction and relationship (with the land) is what is foundational to our identity as Nez Perce people.”

There are currently more than 3,500 citizens of the Nez Perce Tribe, many of whom live north of Payette Lake. McCall — which is 99% white — was officially founded in 1911. Lumber production was the town’s main industry until a few decades ago, but as early as the 1880s, tourists started coming to the area to camp and enjoy the lake. In recent years, tourism and second homes have proliferated; private houses squeeze next to one another along much of the lake’s shoreline, their docks jutting into the water like the tines of a wide-toothed comb.

Elsewhere, a big chunk of lakeshore is open to the public at Ponderosa State Park, which is 1,500 acres separated into two units. At the North Beach Unit at the top of the lake, visitors can canoe the inlet’s meanders, while the park’s main section, a peninsula that splits the lake nearly in two, is popular with cross-country skiers and snowshoers. On a cold, sun-drenched Saturday in January, the parking lot was full by noon.

The rest of the shoreline is endowment land, extending beyond the lake into the forested hills above, where it meets a vast swath of national forest, creating a contiguous landscape where mountain lions, moose and other wildlife roam.

Endowment land, also called state trust land, is not unique to Idaho, though it is concentrated in the Western U.S. Beginning in 1803, as territories were admitted to the Union, the federal government granted them trust lands — areas in the “public domain” — in order to fund public schools, correctional facilities, hospitals and other institutions. In many cases, that land was illegally taken from Indigenous nations, often under the threat of genocide.

Typically, states turned to timber sales or grazing or mining leases to raise money from the land, but many also sold or exchanged parcels. In Idaho, 2.5 million acres

— 67% of the grant it received upon statehood in 1890 — remains. The state also collects revenue from an endowment fund seeded with the land’s proceeds; as of last year, that fund held \$2.4 billion. Idaho’s public school system, the largest beneficiary, received \$52.5 million in 2020, about 2.5% of what the state spends annually on schools.

The Idaho Land Board has approved large land exchanges before. Most recently, in January, nearly 24,000 acres of state endowment land were exchanged for Bureau of Land Management land. But McCall’s situation is different: It involves a private company, and it includes areas that residents and visitors have long, however incorrectly, considered permanent public recreation lands.

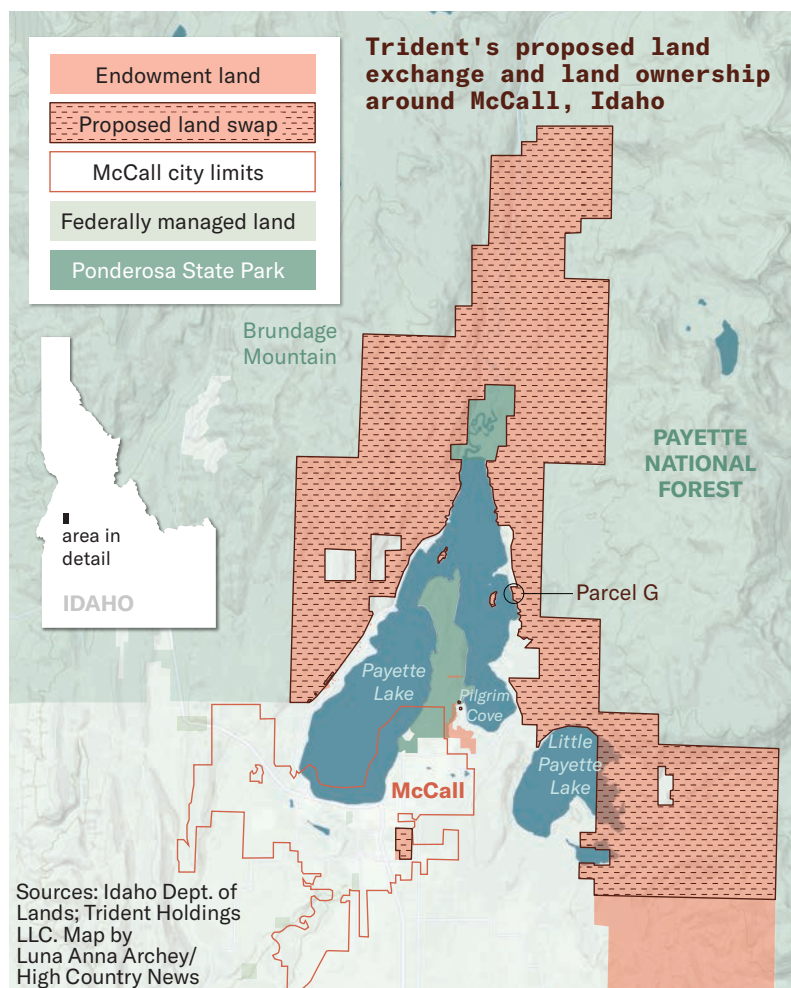
The Land Board makes decisions regarding state trust lands, but their day-to-day management falls to a state agency, the Idaho Department of Lands. The depart-

ment is spearheading the creation of a new plan that would help guide future management decisions for McCall’s endowment lands — such as whether to approve Trident’s land swap. The plan could become a template for how trust lands are managed throughout Idaho. “Anything that the board and the department does on this parcel, we need to think about what the ramifications are in that policy on the entire portfolio,” Gov. Little said at a Land Board meeting.

The department intends to finish the document this spring. The plan is a kind of bellwether: Will the steps the department took in developing it help foster local input when beloved landscapes are at stake, or will its framing usher in a new era of massive private development in Idaho? The answer could resonate across the entire West. Given the shared legal and philosophical underpinnings of the nation’s 46 million acres of endowment lands, what happens in one state could be a guide for others.

AROUND THE SAME TIME that Fereday and other McCall residents put together their anti-Trident newspaper ad, a nurse at the local hospital created an anti-land-exchange Facebook group. In just 10 days, it garnered 1,000 members. Hundreds of people sent public comments opposing the swap to McCall’s City Council. And Jeff Mousseau, a retired engineer, organized a rally where he handed out 50 anti-exchange yard signs, which quickly popped up across town. Soon, about a dozen people were meeting every Friday morning, via Zoom, to talk about the swap. They called themselves the Payette Endowment Lands Alliance, or PELA.

In early January, I met up with seven members of PELA to see some of the areas in question. It had recently snowed, and more than one house I drove by had a pair of skis or a snowboard speared into a snowbank out front. We gathered at a pullout on the east side of





the lake, then walked up the road toward an area known as “Parcel G” — 21 acres, including about half a mile of lakeshore, that a state estimate put at \$9.7 million.

The members were in high spirits; it was the first time some of them had met in person. They broke off into smaller groups, chatting and laughing, happy to be outside. We halted when Fereday, ever the teacher, paused to point out Parcel G: “Stop right here, and let me explain,” she said. It was a pretty, wooded slope, the boughs of the trees bent under inches of snow. Eventually, we trekked down through the grove to reach the lake. The spot was quiet and undeveloped, and many residents were determined to keep it that way: The Land Board had leased it to a private company as a rustic wedding venue in 2019, but rescinded the lease

Looking east near Little Payette Lake toward Nick Peak. Endowment lands lie close to the lake, with Forest Service land beyond.

following public outcry. People not only objected to the noise; they also saw the initial rent as egregiously low: \$4,000 per year.

This area and the other endowment lands around Payette Lake had long been on the radar of a local conservation nonprofit, the Payette Land Trust. (Fereday’s husband, Rick, is on the trust’s board.) The trust’s executive director, Craig Utter, told me that it had started looking into conservation easements on the land over three years ago. Such easements allow someone who acquires rights, such as building rights, to a parcel to retire them to conserve the land. Initially, the idea failed to gain traction, but Trident’s proposal had spurred new interest, and urgency.

In early 2021, the Idaho Department of Lands convened a short-term focus group of stakeholders

— people who own homes in McCall, or have business or other interests in the area — to provide feedback on the agency’s proposed management plan. Utter and one of PELA’s members belonged to the group, as did Simmonds, the Nordic skater with whom I’d snowshoed out onto the frozen lake. None of the participants explicitly represented low-income communities. The group’s purpose, according to the department, was to help find the intersection between the interests and needs of McCall and the Land Board’s constitutional mandate. Its creation, Utter told me, was a major turning point: “IDL’s never reached out to the public like this,” he said.

On the edge of the lake, Fereday asked me to snap a group photograph to record PELA’s first in-person outing. People stood in a loose line in the snow, smiling. To

our left rose the wide, brown facade of the Tamarack Bay Condos; to our right, a couple of church camp cabins dotted the shore at Paradise Point. Fereday looked out over the ice toward Shellworth Island — part of the endowment lands — and the wooded ridge of Ponderosa State Park behind it, then gestured toward the island. “Wouldn’t that be super,” she said, “if that were park land?”

IN EARLY FEBRUARY, Trident formally applied for a land exchange. The company had reduced the area it wanted from 28,000 to nearly 20,000 acres, but

the broad strokes of the plan hadn’t changed.

That same week, in temperatures that hovered around freezing, I drove north along the western side of Payette Lake with Williams. He’s in his mid-30s but has the air of a Boy Scout — he did, in fact, attend Boy Scout camp as a child — sincerely concerned about the people around him and an attentive listener, yet one who radiates a faint sense of righteousness. Before he founded Trident, he worked for a real estate investment firm.

It took me months of reporting to find a single resident of McCall

who was willing to consider the swap, much less openly support it. I asked Williams about the community’s opposition, and he mentioned the Land Board meeting where the news first broke that Trident had approached board members privately. “I’ll eat humble pie,” he said. “We definitely started out on the wrong foot.” He thought the board’s failure to mention that Trident intended to create a park and incorporate community input into its development plans had hurt public perception of the proposal.

The newspaper ad Trident ran in July was supposed to provide more information, but it backfired. People objected to the ad’s tenor, the way Williams seemed to be trading on his family’s connection to McCall, implying that he knew what was best for the town. “Alec Williams insults our maturity and intelligence by taking a condescending, paternal tone,” one McCall resident wrote in a letter to the *Star-News*. Others castigated the proposal as a joke, a back-door theft, a deal full of rotten fish. Both sides raised the specter of the Wilks brothers, a pair of Texas billionaires who bought up thousands of acres in Idaho beginning in 2016 — including in Valley County, where McCall is located — then promptly closed off public access. Locals felt a sense of déjà vu, while Trident maintained it saw the Wilks brothers as a model of exactly what not to do.

“The thing that’s always convinced me to just try to keep at it is, I really believe this is the right thing to do,” Williams told me, his voice muted by his mask. He was frustrated by critics who wanted to protect public lands but dismissed what he saw as an elegant way to do just that. “They’re resistant for reasons that I think don’t necessarily relate to this specific idea, but kind of the frustrations they feel with how McCall has already changed, and will surely keep changing,” he told me.

We stopped at a pullout on the edge of the lake and put on our snowshoes. We headed toward the

ice, but, stymied by the steep downhill slope, decided to stay on top of a dense snowbank taller than the truck.

Williams, in a tan canvas jacket and trim black ski pants, pointed across the frozen lake to North Beach and a strip of unpaved road next to it. He explained that Trident hoped to move the road up the slope and away from the water, thereby improving public access to the shoreline. His words sounded steady and practiced, as if he’d frequently made the pitch before.

When asked about new houses, he didn’t have much to add. “Will there be development on that bluff?” he said, indicating where the rerouted road might go. “I don’t know. The point is, I will not be — and don’t want to be — the one person who dictates where it goes.” This lack of specificity regarding obvious questions — How many houses would be built, and where? How big would they be? What will they sell for? — struck residents as a lack of transparency. Williams, however, insisted he wanted the community to weigh in.

The night before, I’d spoken with a husband and wife who live near Payette Lake. We sat in their garage on metal patio furniture padded with comfortable, rust-orange cushions, a wide table separating us and our faces masked. They’d met with Williams once that summer, something so taboo in McCall that they asked to remain anonymous; one of them holds a public position with the city and worried that meeting with Williams would be viewed as tacit approval of his plan.

They told me that they hadn’t yet decided whether they supported the exchange. They wanted to hear Williams out, however. “My first reaction was, ‘Oh, hell no,’ ” the husband told me. “Last thing I wanted was some out-of-town developer building and taking rights to all of this land.”

Then, he said, he spoke with Williams and listened to his public statements, and he thought about how development was coming



David Simmons, president of the Big Payette Lake Water Quality Council, photographed on the north side of Payette Lake in February (above).



Lea' Albright, a member of the Payette Endowment Lands Alliance, stands on endowment land near Little Payette Lake with a PELA protest sign (right).



whether current residents liked it or not. In the couple's view, the choice was not between the status quo and growth; the question was what you wanted the growth to look like. And Trident's proposal would keep at least some of the land open to the public. "It's a foregone conclusion that development is going to happen," the man said. "I don't think you can say no —"

"It's too late," the woman interjected, her sentence punctuated with a deep laugh.

"If you believe everything Alec says," the man told me, "there's a lot of good in it." Still, they feared that, given the amount of money involved, profits might dictate changes in plans. Williams refused to tell me how much he thinks it will all cost, but recent ballpark estimates from the Idaho Department of Lands put the value of just the 5,500 acres of endowment lands closest to the lake at \$53-\$85 million. Trident's own economic analysis ranges from \$1,300 to \$4,300 per acre, meaning up to \$86 million for 20,000 acres.

THE SAME ECONOMIC forces that have been driving up the

value of the endowment lands have also squeezed housing in McCall. According to a 2018 city report, only 1% of the town's housing units were affordable enough for the bottom 12% of income earners to buy. And housing has become even more expensive: Between 2019 and 2020, the median sale price for homes there rose from \$406,000 to \$455,000, according to the Idaho Statesman. Only 27% of homes are occupied by their owners; the rest are vacation and rental properties. Even so, renting isn't much easier than buying, because most rentals are short-term or seasonal.

Shante Arroyo is the assistant manager at the Rustic Inn, a motel at the south edge of town. She grew up in McCall and still lives there — at the motel, in a basement apartment. "There's not a lot of houses here," she said. "We have employee housing here because we can't find a place to live." Arroyo told me that she hadn't even heard about the proposed land exchange; neither side has done extensive outreach to lower-income communities. If the exchange leads to more housing, however, she thinks that would be a good thing. And it might: Trident's

"The thing that's always convinced me to just try to keep at it is, I really believe this is the right thing to do."

Trident Holdings founder Alec Williams looks out over Payette Lake from Warren Wagon Road, near endowment land that is included in the proposed land exchange.

plans include affordable housing on part of an 80-acre parcel on Deinhard Lane, a partially wooded open lot estimated to be worth \$1.7 million.

A preliminary proposal included another area targeted for housing, 85 acres just south of Ponderosa State Park, next to and within an exclusive neighborhood known as Pilgrim Cove. It's worth an estimated \$27.8 million — substantially more than the Deinhard Lane parcel — and likely would've been developed with more expensive homes. But most of that area was dropped from Trident's official application. "We feel that the existing Deinhard parcel will afford all the necessary space to do a really meaningful housing opportunity for locals," Williams told me.

Pilgrim Cove is a neighborhood of several dozen homes, some of them on lakefront property, reached by a private road emblazoned on with a sign that says "under year around surveillance." It's a mix of homey cabins and modern chalets, all surrounded by towering evergreens. Home values there can top \$2 million.

In January, Bob Looper, the president of the Pilgrim Cove Homeowners Association, met me at the intersection where his neighborhood, Ponderosa State Park and the endowment land all meet. We walked down Pilgrim Cove's well-plowed road with Riggs, Looper's golden retriever, bounding along beside us. Looper, who is also a member of the Idaho Department of Lands' focus group, sported a big smile and a striped hat from Brundage Mountain Ski Resort, a large downhill ski area that, along with the lake, helps anchor McCall's recreation economy.

The HOA, Looper explained, is opposed to the swap. It and a couple other groups hired a lobbyist to fight it last fall. "We've always known that this property will be developed," he said. "We just want to make sure it's developed prudently." To Looper and other homeowners in Pilgrim Cove, "prudently" means with hiking trails and bikeways, in

a manner that matches the current housing density, doesn't strain sewer and other utility systems, and preserves trees. An Idaho Department of Lands document estimates that more than 150 homes could be built in this area; Looper was talking about an additional 25.

Looper is also the president and CEO of Brundage and the head of the local group that bought it from its longtime owners in the fall of 2020. Brundage's ski runs cover about 3,000 acres of Forest Service land, and it owns 388 acres around the base — land acquired in the mid-aughts in a land exchange with the Forest Service. Subsequent plans approved by Adams County, where Brundage is located, allow for up to 1,200 homes, condos or hotel rooms to be built, although, because the development would be on the far side of a ridgeline, it wouldn't be within the Payette Lake watershed. Looper and the other owners intend to start building the first phase — 50-100 units — this year.

Back in Pilgrim Cove, the neighborhood was quiet; the road was narrow, and we passed only

a few other people out walking. "You would hate to have this be a thoroughway for cars and people," Looper said.

SOUTHEAST OF PAYETTE

Lake, around a reservoir called Little Payette Lake, there's another section of endowment land included in Trident's proposal. I visited it with Williams on a Saturday. Vehicles were parked everywhere along the road and in small pullouts, many of them big pickup trucks with empty snowmobile trailers. At the edge of the reservoir, the snow was wet and heavy, the wind cold and humming. The packed pullouts showed the need for infrastructure improvements, Williams said, including more parking lots and trailheads. "In everything — whether it's conservation or access or recreation or all these other different things that people value about this place — it's not just a chance to protect what we like about it," Williams told me earlier, when we finally found a narrow shoulder to park. "It's a chance to make it even better."

For PELA, making it better lies in solutions not tied to private development. I visited the same spot with some of them on a weekday, when there were just a handful of cars in the pullouts. We walked along a creek that was open in places, the rushing water dark against the white of the snow covering its banks. Mousseau, who printed the anti-land-exchange yard signs, told me about a few of PELA's ideas. Conservation easements, for example, would allow the Department of Lands to profit from keeping the land undeveloped, and the agency could still offer timber sales or grazing leases on those parcels. In March, the Payette Land Trust submitted applications for conservation easements on two lakeshore areas.

Other states and communities have found ways to make money from their endowment lands without developing large portions of them. Colorado, for example, amended its Constitution in 1996 to consider not just economic returns, but other public values as well, including "the beauty, natu-

ral values, open space, and wildlife habitat thereof." In Whitefish, Montana, endowment land officials and community members came together in the early aughts to create a collaborative plan aimed at keeping land in timber production or finding ways to conserve it. And in 2006, the Idaho Department of Lands agreed to a land swap with the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management that transferred about 4,500 acres in southern Idaho to the federal agencies. The city of Boise initiated the exchange to keep the Boise foothills from being developed, using proceeds from a voter-approved levy.

It was getting late, so we turned back toward our cars. Mousseau told me about the need for a long-term advisory council, a group of stakeholders who could provide input and support to the Department of Lands regarding the future of the area. Later, in late February, at the agency focus group's final gathering, several members mentioned the need to keep meeting. "I don't think you can make the decisions in a vacuum," Mousseau told me.

In mid-March, the Land Board lifted the moratorium on selling or leasing the endowment land around Payette Lake. Even so, it could take months or years of appraisals and analysis before the Land Board makes a final decision on Trident's application. But the sense of urgency — the local desire to find a permanent way to conserve the landscape — shows no sign of abating. Nor does the influx of newcomers to places like McCall. In the meantime, the town's residents will keep looking for ways to meet the Land Board's mandate, as well as their own.

When we were almost back to our cars, we ran into another member of PELA and her husband; they'd driven out to walk their dogs, two wirehaired pointing griffons. The winter dusk began to gather around us, but the PELA members seemed reluctant to part. Instead, they lingered, shivering and planning and talking about what to do next. ❁



Snowboarders on fresh powder at Little Ski Hill in McCall, Idaho.

ONLINE FESTIVAL / MAY 31 - JUNE 6, 2021



A DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL USING THE POWER OF FILM, ART & IDEAS
TO INSPIRE AUDIENCES TO CREATE A BETTER WORLD

MOUNTAINFILM.ORG



@MOUNTAINFILM

ONLINE PASSES AVAILABLE AT MOUNTAINFILM.ORG
INDIVIDUAL: \$150 | HOUSEHOLD: \$250

Join the *High Country News*
community for an extraordinary
50th Anniversary virtual event

Free and open to the public
FRIDAY, JUNE 4, 2021
6-7 P.M. MT

SPECIAL GUESTS & PERFORMANCES

LIVE & SILENT AUCTIONS
to benefit HCN's 50th Anniversary
Campaign and our Intern Endowment

Register at <http://hcne.ws/west-illuminated>

The West Illuminated:

**Celebrating 50 Years of
Independent Journalism**

HCN

Are you ready to get WILD?

WILD FOR Wilderness ONLINE AUCTION

Outdoor Gear, Adventures, Getaways & More

APRIL 16-25, 2021

Join the fun and score some great items while you support our work to preserve and protect wilderness and wild lands for future generations.

Register
today
and start
browsing!



WWW.GREATOLDBROADS.ORG

<http://bit.ly/2021w4w>

HighCountryNews

SOLAR • WIND • OFF-THE-GRID • AGRICULTURE •
GROW YOUR OWN • COTTAGE INDUSTRY • PUBLICATIONS

GREEN LIVING GUIDE

An advertising marketplace focused on energy, sustainability and renewal.



June 2021 Issue
Reserve by May 15, 2021

hcn.org/advertising/reserve
For more information,
email laurad@hcn.org

Silicon Ranch in Mead, Colorado,
partners with local farms to utilize
solar grazing. **Rebecca Stumpf**



Spread the News, Take Us Higher

Launch HCN into the next 50 years of
independent journalism for the West

hcn.org/50-years

HCN

BOB WICK / BLM

Consider Us –
Be a Partner
in Justice



**NATIVE AMERICAN
DISABILITY LAW CENTER**

www.nativedisabilitylaw.org
a not for profit 501c3

*Celebrating
25 years
of service*

WYOMING PUBLIC MEDIA

PRX

CARBON VALLEY

A PODCAST FOLLOWING THE RACE TO
DEVELOP AN UNLIKELY CLIMATE SOLUTION
CARBONVALLEYPODCAST.ORG

DID YOU KNOW?

Wolves only have one litter of pups annually.



Whatever the size of a wolf pack, typically only the two leaders breed, yielding a single litter in the spring.

Averaging 4-6 pups in a litter, 40-60% of pups die in their first year. Pups like these (pictured above) would be 8-12 weeks old in late June.

The entire pack helps raise the new family members. Some years a pack will have no pups at all, and rarely a second female may have pups.

LEARN MORE on our blog at:

LivingWithW*lves.org*

ENCOURAGING COEXISTENCE



HELP SHAPE THE NEXT 50 YEARS

HCN

High Country News is looking for a few new board members to help set a course for our second half-century!

For more information, visit www.hcn.org/about/jobs

We'd like to hear from you.

You're invited to fill out our latest reader survey. We're looking for feedback that will help us better understand and talk to you: our readers and friends.

Take the survey: hcn.org/survey

HCN

(continued from page 27)

berries were in blossom. She was one of the last people born in a village of Wahkiakum Chinook, on the north side of the Columbia in the Pillar Rock area. Because the treaties signed by Chinook leaders called for a reservation in Willapa Bay, Pickernell's family moved from the banks of the Columbia north to Bay Center, where they lived on Johnson Beach. It's a small, shell-covered beach on the west side of the little peninsula, which looks southwest across the bay toward Leadbetter Point, a hazy blue-gray ombré of hills in the distance. As a child, Pickernell was sent to Chemawa boarding school about 160 miles south in Salem, Oregon. Later, she tried to sign up for Social Security but didn't have a birthdate or certificate. The federal government told her to find witnesses to verify her birth. It was a surreal situation: having to prove something so self-evident. It's the same sensation that unrecognized tribal nations experience when required to go through the recognition process.

In 2009, the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians, then a tribe of around 4,300 based in the area of Great Falls, Montana, received a response to their petition for acknowledgment: 31 years after beginning the process, \$2 million spent, and an amount of paperwork 35 feet high, and the government told them they wouldn't be recognized.

A week after the decision, the Senate Indian Affairs Committee held a hearing on the federal process, with some describing it as "broken." Little Shell President John Sinclair emphasized that during the long petition process, an entire generation of elders had passed, while a generation of children had grown to adulthood. "If we have a tribal recognition process that by and large gives answers after a lot of people are dead, it is not a process that works very well," Committee Chairman Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., said. A decade later, the Little Shell Tribe was finally recognized in Congress through an amendment attached to a must-pass spending bill.

The Chinook have attempted the congressional route themselves, three times since 2008. That year, Rep. Brian Baird, a Washington state Democrat, first introduced legislation in the House. But none of the bills advanced out of the House, nor were any introduced in the Senate. "When you're advocating for one tribe, in one little corner of one state," Baird said, "you're that one guy, unless you can build some national momentum." Sens. Maria Cantwell, D, Patty Murray, D, and Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R, currently represent the tribe, but none have introduced legislation on its behalf. Herrera Beutler says the Chinook deserve to be heard, and she remains open to working with the tribe.

"Unless members of our congressional delegation are an active part and a champion of righting this wrong, then they are to some degree culpable for perpetuating the wrong."

A spokesperson for Murray says she is "monitoring ongoing litigation" and "continues to listen closely to the voices of her constituents on this matter." (Cantwell's office did not return requests for comment.)

"Unless members of our congressional delegation are an active part and a champion of righting this wrong, then they are to some degree culpable for perpetuating the wrong," Baird told me over Zoom from his home in Edmonds, Washington. "We need them to say in this time of social justice — 'them' being the whole Washington state delegation — to say that for moral reasons, for legal reasons, for historical reasons, it's time to reinstate Chinook recognition."

Since the Little Shell's success in 2019, the Chinook have refocused on the congressional route. (Johnson and Little Shell's president confer regularly.) Now they're engaged in

another letter-writing campaign, together with some of their allies, and working on new legislation to possibly introduce in the next Congress, depending on Cantwell, Murray and Herrera Beutler. At the same time, the tribe is pursuing legal action and, in 2020, it won a court case allowing it to re-petition the Office of Federal Acknowledgment.

AT TRIBAL GATHERINGS, whether council meetings or community events at the Cathlapotle plankhouse, there is always a front row of seats for tribal elders. It's a row that changes over time, with the passing years and then decades. When Sam Robinson, the nation's vice-chairman, speaks with elders about the tribe's latest recognition strategy, they'll often reply that they don't know if it will get done in their lifetime. Every time a new bill is introduced, or a petition moves forward, Robinson reassures them that this time it's looking good. But then time passes, and the elders die. Robinson has been on the tribal council for 21 years now, and today he is in his 60s, an elder himself. "You think you're going to be there and it's going to happen," Robinson said. Gary Johnson, who turns 80 this spring, is still on the tribal council, too. He's proud of the fourth generation of Chinookan tribal leaders, including his son Tony.

Tony Johnson also feels the pressure of passing time. "I don't want another front row to pass away without seeing their birthrights acknowledged by a federal government who has reaped all the benefits of taking their family's lands," he told me. "If you know there is a grave injustice and choose to do nothing about it, you're complicit."

He sometimes tells the *ikanum* of Pillar Rock, 22 miles upriver from the mouth of the Columbia, where Pickernell and the Wahkiakum part of his family comes from. In that story — which has many variations — a boy falls in love with a girl. He decides to visit her without a canoe and tries instead to wade across the Columbia River, but is turned to stone to teach him a lesson about adulthood. He formed Pillar Rock, a monolith some 75 to 100 feet tall, depending on the tide. In the 1800s, the rock was blasted with dynamite to serve as a shipping marker; it's now just a small mound of what it once was. "It's a crime, really, that they did that," Johnson said. "These are crimes against a culture and against a people."

"I want to think that if people invested themselves or had respect for these teachings and stories, and actually took a moment to focus on them and learn about them, that maybe they'd treat (us) differently," Johnson said. "And I'm hoping there's a time coming that that's true." 🌿



Comb Ridge in the Shash Jaa unit of Bears Ears National Monument, Utah, which was part of the Trump administration's reduced monument.
Luna Anna Archey

PERSPECTIVE

Reversing the damage done

The Trump administration dismantled 50 years of conservation. Here's the blueprint for recovery.

BY JONATHAN JARVIS AND GARY MACHLIS

RESTORING NATURE is hard work. As career conservationists, we learned that firsthand in our efforts to restore alpine meadows on Mount Rainier, remove dams on the Elwha River in Olympic National Park, and reintroduce wolves in the Greater Yellowstone Area. These achievements required broad coalitions working toward a common goal. Restoration of good governance — laws, regulations, policies, a professional workforce and leadership in confronting climate change and establishing environmental justice — is also hard work. And it too will require an expanded coalition working toward a common goal.

We watched in dismay as the Trump administration systematically dismantled the last 50 years of conservation successes for our national parks and public lands and waters. Focused on grift and privatizing what belongs to all Americans, Donald Trump and his appointed officials took advantage of weak laws, a distracted public, hard-to-follow administrative actions, and

their own deep animus against science and professional land managers to profoundly harm American conservation.

We should all be shocked by how easy it was. In just four years, Trump opened 9 million acres to oil and gas development, made it easier to kill migratory birds without consequence and opened drilling next to Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico. His administration made it legal to shoot female grizzly bears with cubs in their dens, undermined scientific integrity and decimated the professional and scientific workforce. He reduced Utah's Bears Ears National Monument to an inadequate remnant. That is far from a full list of the administration's inventory of harms.

The damage is profound, but now the work of restoration can begin. Ten months before the November 2020 election, the two of us convened and led a volunteer team of diverse environmental leaders with government, nonprofit, private-sector and

academic experience. They were from both coasts and the heartland, the West and the Southeast, rural America and the nation's large cities. Meeting virtually as The Restoration Project, we worked over several months to create a carefully researched and prioritized list of the top 100 actions necessary to restore the nation's environment. The plan was delivered to the Joe Biden-Kamala Harris transition team and is available to the public at <https://rproject.world/>.

For example, the plan recommends replacing a Trump-era regulation that sought to limit public input on most environmental impact statements. It urges the new administration to reverse the Department of Interior's ill-conceived re-organization plan, which placed political appointees directly over national parks, wilderness areas and wildlife refuges. And it suggests restoring the policy that required industries to mitigate their impacts on public lands by funding habitat improvement in other similar locations.

We applaud the actions taken so far by the Biden-Harris team and encourage them to continue. But what can we do to ensure that a Trumpian systemic dismantling of our public wealth and heritage does not happen again? How can citizens who care deeply about our Western public lands — people who use those lands to hike, hunt, fish, camp, roam, bike, snowmobile and reflect — make conservation an indelible part of our shared national values?

We propose three crucial paths forward. The first is to publicly support The Restoration Project's plan and urge the administration to act boldly on the most urgent tasks during its first 100 days. Much can be accomplished by executive order (as President Biden did by re-joining the Paris Climate Agreement

and halting new oil and gas leases on public lands). The second will take longer, because reversing some harms will require using the administrative and technical tools of government — revising regulations, re-hiring scientists and professional managers, and enacting policies that recognize climate change.

The third path — the most arduous and essential — involves finding ways to ensure that public lands remain protected and that environmental stewardship becomes a shared American value. The conservation community must be expanded, and a new, broader and more diverse coalition created to work toward full and bipartisan support for conservation. Laws must be strengthened, regulations reformed, science and professionalism treated as essential, and public support continually reinforced and reinvigorated. There is a well-spring of untapped conservation concern in the rural communities of the West, and these communities can elect a new generation of citizen-politicians from all political parties who will defend the nation's parks and public lands.

The coming together of interests engaged in nature conservation, sport hunting and fishing, historical preservation, environmental justice and civil rights, sustainable agriculture, public health and science is long overdue. As these groups learn to collaborate and gain experience in working together as opposed to competing, they will find their collective "voice" to be powerful, influential and effective.

In such acts of restoration — both of nature and of our experiment in self-government — lies the future of America. It is hard work, and we'd best get to it. ☀

Jonathan Jarvis served 40 years with the National Park Service and was its 18th director. Gary Machlis is a professor of environmental sustainability at Clemson University and former science advisor for the Park Service. They are co-leaders of The Restoration Project.

A modern redemption

Kirstin Valdez Quade's debut novel depicts everyday Catholic life in a small New Mexico town.

BY LILY MEYER

A COMMON but useless question in writing-craft interviews asks how budding fiction writers distinguish between ideas for short stories and those for novels. In the early stages, how can a writer know whether a character needs 8,000 words or 800,000? The answer is that there is no answer. Plenty of novels — and this is not an insult — could be compressed into stories; plenty of stories have the intellectual and emotional heft of novels. Some novels start their lives as stories, then refuse to stop growing.

Kirstin Valdez Quade's excellent debut novel, *The Five Wounds*, belongs to the third category. It emerged from, and shares its title with, one of the best stories in her collection *Night at the Fiestas*. In

it, Amadeo Padilla, an alcoholic, self-hating 33-year-old living with his mother, Yolanda, in Las Penas, New Mexico, plays Jesus in his small town's Holy Week Passion play, which concludes with a dramatic re-enactment of the crucifixion. Amadeo wants to commit completely to the role, but finds his resolve tested when his 14-year-old daughter Angel shows up during Holy Week, eight months pregnant and wanting to live with him. This tense setup could power a whole novel, even a lesser one than this. In *The Five Wounds*, Amadeo's time as Jesus is a prelude to the book's main action, which shifts between his existential struggle, Yolanda's battle with cancer, and Angel's impending motherhood.

Less than 40 pages into the novel, the Passion is over. Amadeo's hopes of attaining "total redemption in one gesture" are dashed.

For Amadeo, redemption is synonymous with personal renovation. He wants to quit drinking; to root himself in both Las Penas and fatherhood; to find work that makes him feel important. After Holy Week, he attempts — and swiftly fails at — all three. Within days, he's back to drinking, sulking, and lashing out at his family. The question that powers the novel, then, is how Amadeo might find the redemption he sought from the Passion play. How, in "the long dull aftermath of crucifixion," can Amadeo learn to, as he puts it, "do it right?"

Redemption may seem like an old-fashioned theme for a novel — more moralistic than is common in our present literary landscape, which tends to skew toward the relative. Quade is old-fashioned the way Marilynne Robinson, her clear literary kin, is old-fashioned. Both writers devote equal effort to lyric prose and deep characterization, and both are intensely invested in writing about religion in a specific social context: mid-century Midwestern Protestantism for Robinson, and 21st century New Mexico Catholicism for Quade. In the 400 years the Padillas have lived in Las Penas, they've seen the town shrink and struggle. Jobs are scarce; heroin, abundant. The *hermandad*, the Catholic lay organization that runs the annual Passion play, is down to nine elderly men, when in "earlier generations, membership rolls ... could be in the hundreds." Amadeo, too, feels shrunken. He is deeply of Las Penas but considers himself inessential, though the town in fact needs him badly; Yolanda's decline seems to mirror that of the *hermandad* and the town. Amadeo, as the youngest hermano, is poised to become a community leader, but is too mired in self-pity to do so. He can hardly imagine feeling otherwise; Angel frightens him because, at 14, she strikes him as "a full contributor to

the world, proud to be a member in good standing."

Amadeo might not be perceptive, but, in this case, he's right: Angel struggles with doubt and fear, but, unlike her dad, she knows her worth. She has deep reserves of courage, which she combines with "considerable dramatic flair" to power herself through life. Amadeo wants salvation to be quick and easy, but Angel's gift lies in her knowledge that quick means dull. Unlike her dad, she accepts that relationships — including our relationships with ourselves — take work. Quade clearly believes that Angel will be an excellent mom, sidestepping any questions about whether a mother that young is capable of being a good one. Her project is not to justify or defend Angel, but to bring her to life. She succeeds so fully that Angel all but steals the show.

Among Angel's most compelling traits is the fact that she feels no need for redemption; the concept seems barely to touch her. Yolanda, as she dies, revisits her regrets; Amadeo can barely see through his. (In a neat metaphor, Quade has him waste time and money on a half-assed effort to launch a windshield repair business, trying to help others see clearly before he can do so himself.) Angel, meanwhile, has the capacity to put aside her regrets by decoupling experience from sin. She works toward the future without seeking redemption, divine or otherwise, from the past. This reframes redemption completely, moving it from the religious sphere to the social one. Slowly, Amadeo learns to emulate his daughter. The more fully he contributes to the world around him, the more redeemed he feels. ✨

The Five Wounds

Kirstin Valdez Quade
432 pages, hardcover: \$27
Norton W.W. & Company, Inc., 2021.



Krystal Quiles / HCN

Notice to our Advertisers —

You can place classified ads with our online classified system. Visit hcn.org/classifieds. April 8 is the deadline to place your print ad in the May 2021 issue. Email laurad@hcn.org for help or information.

Advertising Policy — We accept advertising because it helps pay the costs of publishing a high-quality, full-color magazine, where topics are well-researched and reported in an in-depth manner. The percentage of the magazine's income that is derived from advertising is modest, and the number of advertising pages will not exceed one-third of our printed pages annually

Business Opportunities**Conservationist? Irrigable**

land? Stellar seed-saving NGO is available to serious partner. Package must include financial support. Details: <http://seeds.ojaidigital.net>.

Community**Colorado Wild Public Lands**

Video Contest — 970-366-7436. coloradowildpubliclands@gmail.com. coloradowildpubliclands.org.

Employment & Volunteers**Communications Manager**

San Juan Citizens Alliance is looking for a passionate, dynamic, organized and technology-savvy communications professional to help grow our membership and presence in the Four Corners. <https://www.sanjuancitizens.org/careers>.

PERMACULTURE landscape contractor, 20-plus-year-old company, seeks manager, Park City, Utah. redant@xmission.com.

HCN is looking for leaders!

High Country News, an award-winning media organization covering the communities and environment of the Western United States, seeks new members for its board of directors to help steer the organization through an exciting chapter of innovation and growth.

HCN is committed to creating an organization that reflects the diverse and changing West. We strongly encourage prospective board members from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds including Black, Indigenous, and people of color, women, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ people.

To nominate yourself or someone you know, send a letter, résumé and background information to board.jobs@hcn.org. For full position description, visit: <https://www.hcn.org/about/jobs>.

**High
Country
News**

Merchandise

Western Native Seed — Native plant seeds for the Western U.S. Trees, shrubs, grasses, wildflowers and regional mixes. Call or email for free price list. 719-942-3935. info@westernnativeseed.com or visit us at www.westernnativeseed.com.

Professional Services

Steve Harris, experienced public lands/environmental attorney Comment letters, administrative appeals. Federal and state litigation. FOIA. 719-471-7958. tinyurl.com/y5eu2t6q.

Publications & Books

Copper Stain — Tales from scores of ex-employees unearth the human costs of an economy that runs on copper. <https://www.oupress.com/books/15051942/copper-stain>.

The Land Desk — Western lands and communities — in context — delivered to your inbox 3x/week. From award-winning journalist and HCN contributor Jonathan P. Thompson. \$6/month; \$60/year. landdesk.org.

Taos Horno Adventures: A Multicultural Culinary Memoir Informed by History and Horticulture. Richard and Annette Rubin. At nighthawkpress.com/titles and Amazon.

**One Will: Three Wives — A Murder Mystery by Edith Tarbescu.**

One Will: Three Wives is packed with a large array of interesting suspects, all of whom could be a murderer ... a roller coaster of plot twists ... - Anne Hillerman, *New York Times* best-selling mystery author. Available on Amazon. www.edithtarbescu.com.



Real Estate For Rent

Coming to Tucson? — Popular vacation house, furnished, two-bed, one-bath, yard, dog-friendly. Lee: cloler@cox.net. 520-791-9246.

Real Estate for Sale

Small farm at base of Mount Shasta, Calif. — Certified organic fruit/berry/veggie/flower farm. Small home, two barns (one has an apartment), and more. Approximately two acres just in the city limits. Famously pure air and water. Skiing, mountaineering, bike, hike, fish, boating, more. jardinway@yahoo.com.

Land and cabin on Colorado-Utah line — 18 acres with small solar-ready cabin. Off-grid, no well. Great RV location. Surrounded by state wildlife area and national parks. abajocabin@gmail.com.

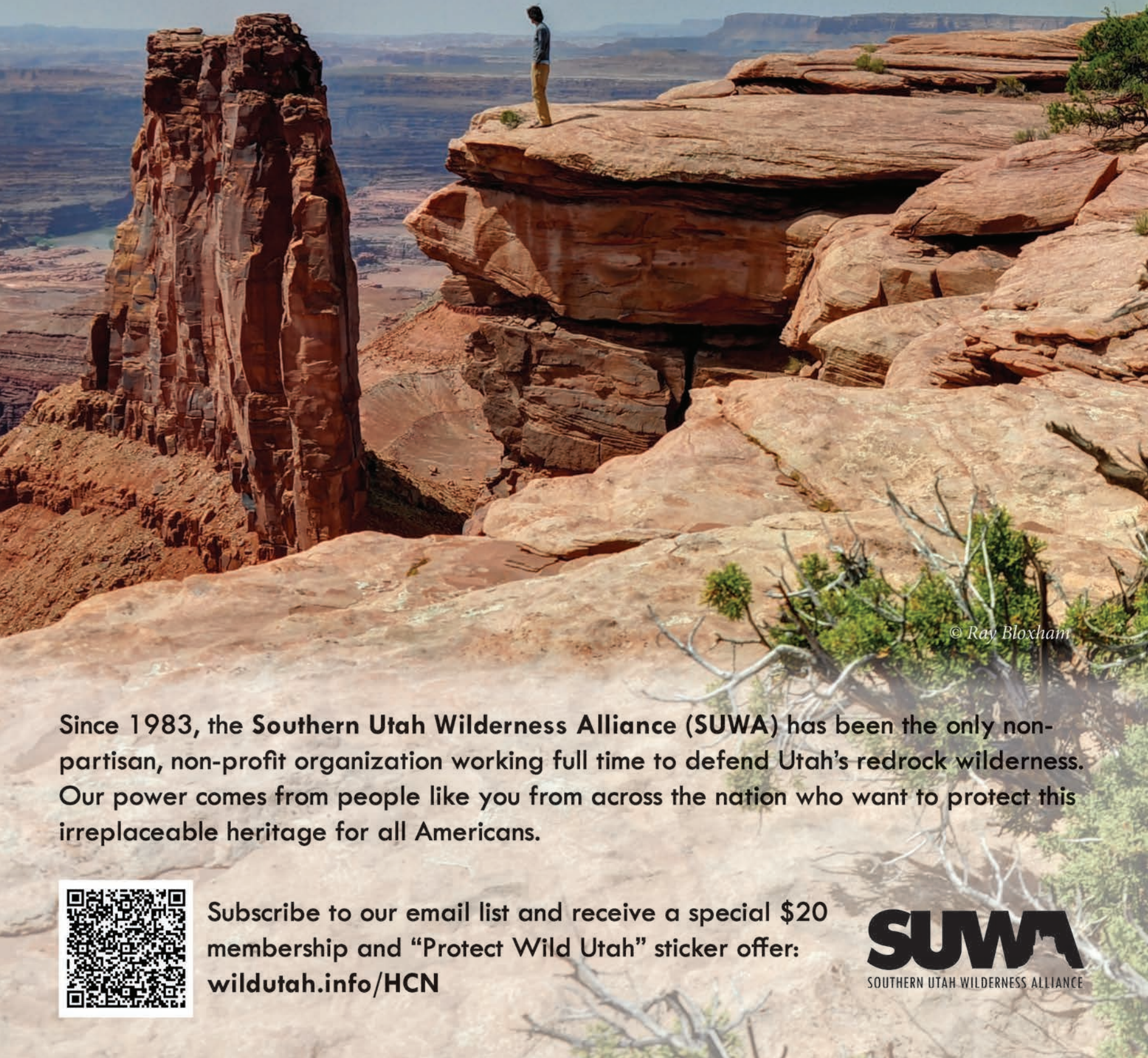
The Crazy Mountain Inn offers 11 guest rooms with restaurant in a town-center building on seven city lots. Contact j.maslanik@murphybusiness.com for more info and virtual tour. Built in 1901, The Crazy Mountain Inn has 11 guest rooms in a town-center building on 7 city lots (.58 acres). The inn and restaurant serve hunters, fisherman and adventure tourists. Charles M. Bair Family Museum is a local attraction. Contact broker for more info and virtual tour. 406-926-1996. j.maslanik@murphybusiness.com. <https://www.crazymountaininn.com/>.



Tours & Travel

Canyonlands Field Institute Field seminars for adults in natural and human history of the Colorado Plateau with lodge, river trip and base camp options. Small groups, guest experts. 435-259-7750. cfimoab.org.

Wilderness Saves Us. Help Us Save Wilderness.



© Ray Bloxham

Since 1983, the **Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA)** has been the only non-partisan, non-profit organization working full time to defend Utah's redrock wilderness. Our power comes from people like you from across the nation who want to protect this irreplaceable heritage for all Americans.



Subscribe to our email list and receive a special \$20 membership and "Protect Wild Utah" sticker offer:
wildutah.info/HCN

SUWA
SOUTHERN UTAH WILDERNESS ALLIANCE



Q&A

A LARGER-THAN-LIFE mural of Alma Smith Jacobs graces the salmon-colored brick walls of the Great Falls Public Library. The mural describes Jacobs as a “community leader” and “civil rights activist.” As head librarian in Great Falls, Montana, during the 1950s and 1960s, Jacobs persuaded the city to fund the construction of the city’s modern library — one of the few spaces where city residents of all ethnic backgrounds were welcome at the time. She also expanded rural

Honoring Montana’s first Black librarian

Carrying on the legacy of Alma Smith Jacobs requires representation and education.

BY SURYA MILNER

communities’ access by circulating the county’s roving bookmobile outside the city. In 1973, Jacobs was named state librarian, a role she served in for eight years.

Now, there’s a movement in Great Falls — Montana’s third-largest city and a former hydroelectric power hub on the banks of the Missouri River — to rename the public library after Jacobs in honor of her legacy. It’s spearheaded by the Alma Smith Jacobs Foundation, a community nonprofit that sprang

Great Falls, Montana, community member Kathy Reed (*opposite, left*) is part of a movement to rename the local library after the state's first Black librarian, Alma Smith Jacobs (*opposite, right*). **Lauren Crow / HCN**

from the city's historically Black Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Kathy Reed, a longtime church member and special education teacher, grew up down the street from Jacobs and is one member of the Black community in Great Falls who hopes to see the library renamed.

High Country News sat down with Reed to discuss the legacy of Jacobs, who died in 1997, how the Civil Rights movement of her day translates to today's movement for racial equality, and the place of symbolism and representation in combating racial prejudice. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

How would you describe Alma Jacobs' legacy?

On a personal level, she was another person who I had an intimate relationship with that was focused on achievement — personal achievement. (She taught me how) taking a personal interest in people can motivate them or mentor them. As a community, it was getting that library. (It) was state-of-the-art when it first opened. That says to the community, "You deserve better. You deserve better, and you need to fight for what's better."

You grew up down the street from Alma Smith Jacobs. What was that like?

She was just another adult in our life. We knew her from the church and we knew her mother. It was a very formal relationship; we always called her "Mrs. Jacobs." But she was somebody we could go to for anything. My mom would say, "Run down the street to Mrs. Jacobs' house. I need an onion, and she's got one."

To me, she was not a person on a pedestal. She was just some-

one who was in my life every day. She was kind of a role model, but it wasn't until I got older that I (realized that) she was really a standout. It was a community neighborhood — you did things for your neighbors and you didn't charge them. You shoveled your neighbor's walk, raked their leaves, and you didn't take money for it. That was what you were supposed to do.

What is the role of the Great Falls Public Library, then and now?

(Jacobs) saw a desperate need for a library that would serve a population that was growing. And their current library wasn't doing that. She just felt it was so important for the development of the community. She had a tenacity about her personality, and so she was not going to let it go. She continued to remind, prod and push the idea of a beautiful library for the community until it got done. When that library opened, it was fancy — it had a spiral staircase and was so open; it made you feel like you were some place important. It was magical. Of course, my parents really valued books — you handled books with care, you didn't throw books, you didn't tear books. Books were precious in our house.

Now, in the morning, for the homeless population, especially during the wintertime — that's the place to go where it's warm.

How does the push to change the library's name part fit into the larger discussion about race, civil rights and representation in Montana?

It demonstrates that there was a level of acceptance there that you might not have known. If you think that what you see is all there ever was, it doesn't really give you a good idea about how the place that you're in came to be, and the people that built it.

I used to tell my students all the time that people don't realize that they make history every single day. History is what you and I do every single day. Alma didn't set out to

"That says to the community, 'You deserve better. You deserve better, and you need to fight for what's better.'"

become famous. She just really believed in the power of books and of education.

There is a level of acceptance in this community that people don't realize. In spite of some prejudice that may have been with community members, it did not stop people from achieving. There's just a lot of people who come to this community and think that because they don't see a large African American community here, that there probably never was one.

This past summer, Black residents and allies in Great Falls led protests against racial injustice in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd. What's the significance of changing the name of the library right now, in the aftermath of those protests?

It's probably important, more so now than ever, but I don't think the moment has anything to do with it. It has to do with the fact that when we celebrate people of achievement in our communities, it's encouraging, motivating and uplifting. When we only celebrate people who achieve that look a certain way, it discounts those who don't.

African American history is American history. And when you discount that, you leave out a chunk of American history. When people see people who have achievements that look like them, it encourages them to reach — and reach at other heights. It dispels myths. There's a myth that a lot of people believe that African Americans only came to Great Falls when the military came. But that's not true. The first constable in the city of Great Falls was of African American descent. But if people don't know that, then that's a part of their history that's lost.

Do you see any potential limits of representation?

There are definitely limits. Because if you don't educate — if you don't explain — it's just another name, and there's no value to it. It comes back to education. ☀

A step forward for Indigenous film

Lyle Mitchell Corbine Jr.'s *Wild Indian* is a thriller that pushes Indigenous cinema into the realm of genre, but does it go far enough?

BY JASON ASENAP



Michael Greyeyes as Makwa. **Courtesy of Wild Indian**

THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY'S latest reckoning with inequality has made it slightly more willing to acknowledge the talents of Indigenous filmmakers and writers. Indigenous people have always made films for Indigenous audiences, but getting their work into the mainstream comes with the expectation they will translate their experiences for white audiences.

In *Wild Indian*, Lyle Mitchell Corbine Jr. (Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Tribe of Chippewa Indians) largely sidesteps this problem with a straightforward, impressive genre film. His main problem lies in his tendency to overexplain his thriller rather than let it speak for itself. What's left is a film that, despite a few stumbles, still leaves you feeling riveted — as well as hopeful for what comes next from this burgeoning filmmaker.

Merely the fact that the Sundance Film Festival listed *Wild Indian* as a thriller represents a big step forward in Indigenous film. Here we have a film that fits itself purely into a genre convention. I just wish Corbine had enough confidence to let the genre speak for itself.

This is Corbine's first feature film. The 31-year-old, who co-edited the film, has a very bright future in directing and editing. His casting choices are superb. His instincts are good.

The film's protagonist, Makwa, has a hard life as a young Native kid on the rez in the '80s, not much different from that of a lot of his Native contemporaries. But Makwa has the added bonus of having frequent black eyes. The film addresses this in a clear-eyed and direct way. Makwa has a terrible dad, who likes to drink and manhandle his son, and an indifferent mother who ignores the abuse.

Eventually, Makwa is pushed into a desperate act that unwittingly ensnares his friend Ted-O and haunts the two young men in lifechanging ways. Ted-O is played by the

incredible Chaske Spencer (Fort Peck Assiniboine & Sioux Tribes), and you're immediately drawn in when he's introduced as an adult in the second act. Michael Greyeyes (Plains Cree) is fine as Makwa, but Spencer simmers as Ted-O. Spencer has starred in a wide range of roles, from the *Twilight* young-adult film series to the lead in the largely overlooked experimental Western, *Winter in the Blood*. Spencer is arguably his generation's Indigenous James Dean, and we absolutely need to see more of him on screen. He has tons of charisma, and the camera loves him. It's a crime that he hasn't had more roles.

There are two big-name actors in this film: Kate Bosworth convincingly plays Makwa's white ex-stripper trophy wife, while Jesse Eisenberg plays the most ancillary role I've seen an important and accomplished actor take in some time, appearing as the flunky assistant to Makwa, who works in a nondescript corporate office with a bad view. It's a bold choice, and Corbine is nothing if not deliberate. He puts the emphasis on his Indigenous characters and trusts us as viewers to buy into it.

The film loses some momentum in the third act as Corbine commits the cardinal sin of filmmaking: Telling rather than showing. Makwa, talking to a bedside victim, overexplains why

he does the problematic things he does, and all I could do was wish that Corbine simply trusted his own screenplay rather than relying on a clunky monologue. While it's interesting to hear Makwa's self-hatred from his own mouth, we can see for ourselves that his is a complicated life without having it spelled out.

The film begins, and nearly ends, with a curious story about an Ojibwa man who is ravaged by disease and near death. One could argue that it represents the long history of colonialism and post-colonial disease. I get that. But then I go back to the question of exactly why Indigenous filmmakers are making these films. Who are they made for? Are they made to teach and heal? If so, who are they supposed to teach? Corbine has made a solid genre film, but he tries to stretch it to conform to the expectations of every audience. It chugs along, stops, starts, and almost gets us there. I anticipate that his next film will push aside the needless exposition and stay true to the crux of the story. The future of Indigenous film is bright, with artists like Corbine moving forward with films that emphasize story above all else. ✨

The 31-year-old, who co-edited the film, has a very bright future in directing and editing. His casting choices are superb. His instincts are good.

Dakota women keep seeds — and their families — safe

Diane Wilson's new novel explores the relationship between seeds and humans, and how our survival and abundance are intertwined.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

IN THE OPENING SCENE of *The Seed Keeper*, Rosalie Iron Wing drives a pickup truck through deep Minnesota snow, intent on reaching a home she can barely remember. She's now in her 30s, and the cabin where her father raised her is a hazy memory, but after her husband's death, she feels drawn back to it. The unmooring of his life shakes loose her own memories and yearnings, the questions from her past she let settle under the sediment of daily routine — raising a son and supporting a farm. What happened to her mother? Where are the rest of her relatives, and why didn't they claim Rosalie after her father's untimely death?

Dakota writer Diane Wilson's first novel explores matrilineal kinship through the act of seed keeping, both metaphorically and literally. Wilson uses seeds to reflect on Indigenous resilience in a colonized world. Her storytelling is direct and beautiful, and she reveals information carefully through narrative structure. While the storyline starts with Rosalie, it eventually multiplies, jumping through time, from one narrator in the 1860s to another in the early 2000s. The world Wilson builds is geographically small, yet the book feels expansive, because of this exploration of time.

This world also bears elements of Wilson's own life — growing up in Minnesota and experiencing anti-Native racism in majority-white towns; discovering the power of seeds in adulthood, and, by extension, reconnecting with her ancestral wealth. In her previous nonfiction, Wilson wrote about her experience with "blood memory," which she describes in her essay "Seeds for Seven Generations" as "a call to remember a relationship with the earth, with plants and animals, that dates back to our earliest ancestors." For Wilson, seeds hold that memory. While working as executive director for Dream of Wild Health, a Minnesota farm that is

reviving native seed varieties, Wilson was deeply involved in community efforts to renew varieties like Mandan corn from the Mandan Tribe in the Great Plains, and Hopi black turtle beans from the desert Southwest. The seeds survived ecocide and genocide only because the people kept them safe, while the people relied equally on the seeds' abundance.

Seeds are kept safe for the future by Marie Blackbird, who sews them into her skirt hem during the U.S.-Dakhóta War, much the way Rosalie preserves the kernels of Dakota cultural knowledge that she inherits from her father in the 1970s.

The Seed Keeper does not shy away from traumatic topics, but Wilson avoids the trap of depicting her characters' troubles — their poverty or addiction — as moral failings. Instead, she clearly depicts how the systemic consequences of settler colonialism have harmed her characters, whether through prisons or boarding schools. In Rosalie's journey to understand her origins, she learns heart-rending truths about her past, shared by an aged great-aunt who grows rare corn varieties in buckets in her third-floor city apartment. Wilson's careful use of time allows readers to draw a throughline from the theft of three Dakota children in 1920 by federal boarding school agents to Rosalie's lonely foster-home childhood two generations later.

The family that Rosalie creates in her tense marriage-by-necessity to a lonely white farmer shows how generations are pulled by different cultural expectations. While she puts her energy into preserving the genetic diversity of her gardens' tomatoes and squash, her husband and son buy into an agricultural corporation, Mangenta, introducing engineered seeds and pesticides to the family farm. Elsewhere, Wilson has compared agrochemical corporations that profit from patents and contracts and lawsuits to a

"genetic Manifest Destiny." Rosalie struggles with her role as a seed keeper in the face of mounting pressure on farming families like hers to make a living from the land, even if that means damaging it irreparably. Eventually, her son — a seed of a future generation in his own right — is faced with two divergent paths centered on a small red cob of corn gifted to him by his great-great-aunt.

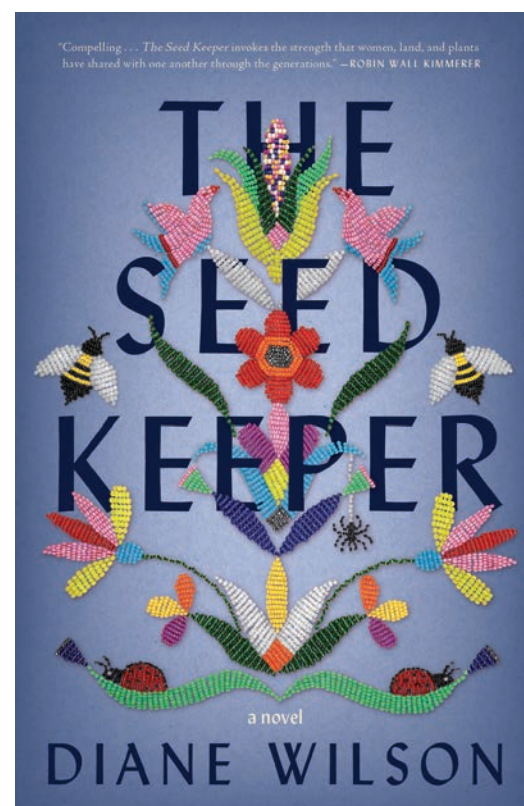
The Seed Keeper isn't subtle — characters frequently interpret the symbolic meaning of scenes as they unfold. When Rosalie leaves the farmhouse for her childhood cabin, she finds she doesn't miss anything from that life (not even her son, really), except for the seeds she kept for gardening. "More than anything, it was the box of seeds, sitting on a shelf, that called to me," she says. "Many years of planting and saving these seeds had formed a deep bond between us. They belonged to this land, just as I did. If I didn't stay, who would care for them?" The storytelling and character development remain strong enough, however, to make the novel a compelling read, despite Wilson's tendency to explain. By the end of *The Seed Keeper*, Rosalie doesn't find the home she remembers in her father's old cabin. Instead, she plants the beginnings of a new one. ✨

The Seed Keeper

Diane Wilson

400 pages, softcover: \$16

Milkweed Editions, 2021.



Heard Around the West

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

BY BETSY MARSTON

UTAH

Cougars have often been spotted by state wildlife officers around Millcreek Canyon near Salt Lake City, but having a big cat punch its way through a plate-glass window was a first for one local homeowner. KUTV reported that wildlife officials think the cougar was attacking its own reflection, but after briefly confronting an even more startled human resident inside the house, it turned around and padded back outside over the shattered glass. “This was a large, thick glass window,” said the homeowner, “so these animals are crazy, impressively strong!” No one has seen the lion since, said wildlife officials, perhaps because it didn’t like the look of the tough cat it saw in the window.



Armando Veve / HCN

encounter ended well, as the hiker said later: “We prayed for help, and the bear stopped chasing us.”

THE WEST

Los Angeles Times writer Sammy Roth isn’t often upbeat, but he’s always pithy. In his newsletter, *Boiling Point*, he recently noted three items worth thinking, or rather worrying, about: Ingesting wild-fire smoke is even more hazardous than previously thought, with new research showing that the smoke carries fungi and bacteria. Meanwhile, last year in Arizona, extreme heat killed at least 494 people, while in California, research indicates that the mysterious cancer killing sea lions is likely caused by the toxic chemicals DDT and PCBs, plus a previously unknown herpes virus.

WYOMING

If you prefer quiet to hosting free-loading animals in your backyard, you probably shouldn’t move to Teton County’s Solitude Subdivision, south of Grand Teton National Park. A homeowner there has become the doyenne of an informal wildlife cafeteria. In 2018, the state’s annual wildlife survey took an aerial photograph of 10 moose on her lawn, while last winter a dozen of the ungulates dropped by for brunch. But this year’s dinner guests took the cake, served in the form of molasses-enriched grain pellets, when celebrity Grizzly 399 showed up with her four cubs. The homeowners’ association filed complaints last year with Wyoming’s Game and Fish agency, and several (human) neighbors have also complained to federal officials. Finally, when Wyoming warden Brian DeBolt and federal

agent Steve Stoinski investigated, they found the bears happily noshing away, while their “very excited” hostess stood outside talking on her cellphone, reports the *Jackson Hole News & Guide*. When the agents warned her not to approach the bears, she replied: “Oh come on! You people are a bunch of (wimps).” She later told officers that she communicated with wildlife through “an aura,” and that even if the bears attacked, she was “OK with being killed.” According to the report, “she does anything the animals ask of her,” including picking ticks off moose and giving them (the moose, not the ticks) massages. Besides, she explained, the food was intended for moose, not bears, so it’s not like she was intentionally feeding them. Surprisingly, this explanation got the woman off the hook, because in Wyoming, feeding

moose is legal, and, according to state attorneys, convicting anyone would be “difficult.” In 2016, Republican lawmakers concerned about private property rights blocked a state law that would have banned wildlife feeding. Under federal law, feeding wildlife could be considered illegal harassment, but no charges were brought in this case, which is why the woman has not been identified. Meanwhile, the presence of so many grizzlies in the neighborhood has become dangerous to both grizzlies and humans. Last summer, Grizzly 802, one of the woman’s frequent visitors, was killed after becoming a nuisance. And last fall, a Solitude Subdivision family had to make “a mad dash” to avoid a grizzly on the trail. The sow became agitated after she was separated from her cub, which had climbed a nearby tree. This

THE WEST

The arrival of COVID-19 vaccines has transformed the formerly grim clinics of the pandemic into “gratitude factories,” reports the *Washington Post*. Christina O’Connell, a clinic director at the University of New Mexico, who has been busily jabbing people’s arms with needles, said, “I don’t think I’ve ever had an experience in my career that has felt so promising and so fulfilling.” And in Denver, the Associated Press described a long-sought, bitter-sweet reunion between Lynda Hartman and her 77-year-old husband, Len, who lives at a care center for dementia. The couple had not been able to hug for close to a year, but thanks to an ingenious plastic “hug tent,” they finally got to embrace. “It really meant a lot to me,” the 75-year-old woman said. “It’s been a long, long time.” ☀

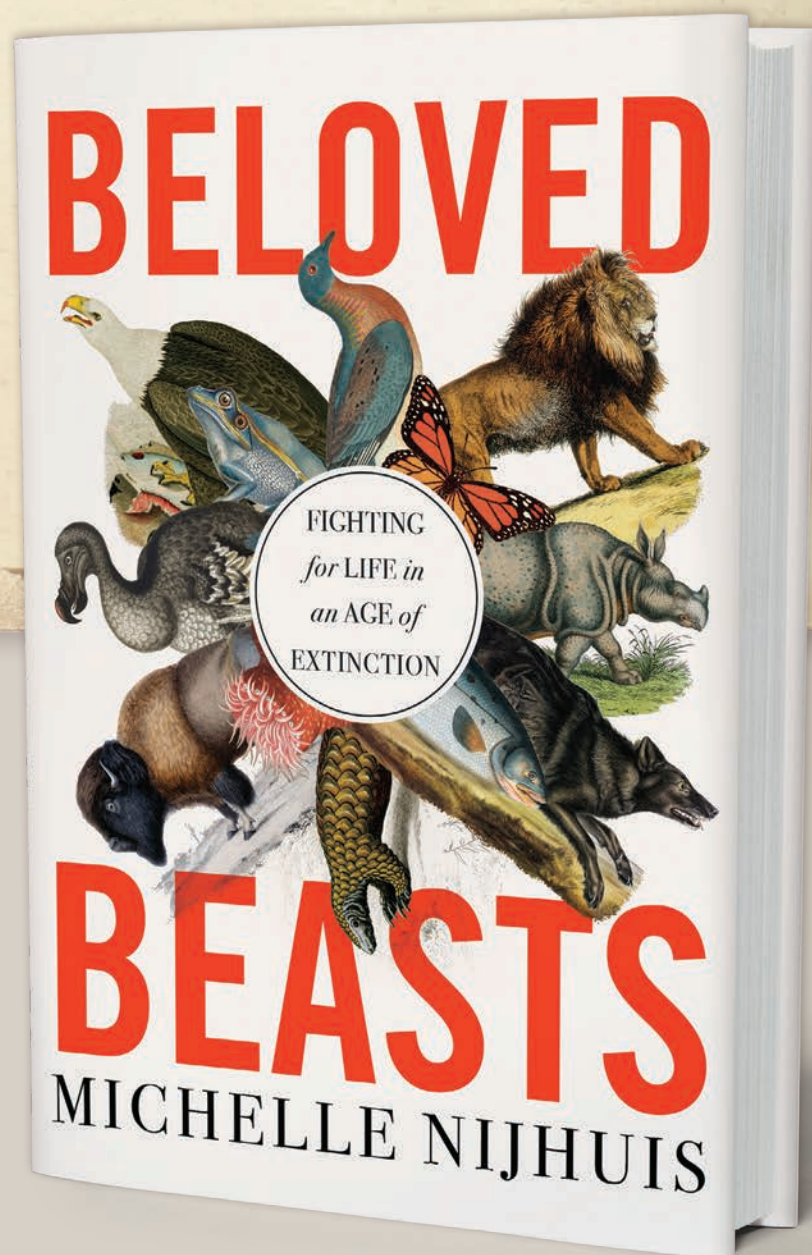
“THE CENTURIES-LONG CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT
OUR FELLOW CREATURES FINALLY HAS THE
LITERARY EPIC IT DESERVES.”

—BEN GOLDFARB

In *Beloved Beasts*, acclaimed science journalist and *HCN* Contributing Editor Michelle Nijhuis traces the modern conservation movement's history, from early battles to save charismatic species such as the American bison and bald eagle to today's global effort to defend life on a larger scale.

“*BELOVED BEASTS* IS AT ONCE
THOUGHTFUL AND THOUGHT-
PROVOKING—A CRUCIAL ADDITION
TO THE LITERATURE OF OUR
TROUBLED TIME.”

—ELIZABETH KOLBERT



AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD.

MICHELLENIJHUIS.COM



W. W. NORTON & COMPANY
Independent Publishers Since 1923

HCN

119 Grand Avenue
PO Box 1090
Paonia, CO 81428

U.S. \$5 | Canada \$6

#IAM THE WEST

ALICE QANNIK GLENN

**Creator of the podcast *Coffee & Quaq*
Anchorage, Alaska**

I work full-time on *Coffee & Quaq*, a podcast that celebrates and explores contemporary Native life in urban and rural Alaska. We cover topics like traditional Inuit tattoos, decolonization, art and cultural appropriation. I also host and produce *Resolve Podcast*, which is about missing and murdered Indigenous women in Alaska, and the Pulitzer-funded project *Alaska Natives on the Front Line*, which examines climate change in the Arctic region. I wanted to start *Coffee & Quaq* because of the absence of Alaska Native representation in media. I was meeting so many Alaska Native people doing cool things in the state. There are so many great thinkers, doers, changers that had cool stories, and I wasn't hearing them. So I thought: If no one else is going to share these stories, I can do it.

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

Follow us [f](#) [@](#) [t](#) @highcountrynews #iamthewest | [hcn.org](#)