High Country News

The 2020 election issue

Trump vs. Biden on public lands

The undercounted and disenfranchised

Democracy's Frayed Western Front

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Tom Baker, a fourth-generation rancher in Nevada's Snake Valley. Rural Nevadans fought a water pipeline to Las Vegas — and won. **Russel Albert Daniels / HCN**

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. Beginning April 1, 2020, 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. 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.

EDITOR'S NOTE

A helluva season

THERE'S NO DOUBT 2020 has been a difficult year. The pandemic, the protests, the wildfires and smoke. And now, a fast-approaching election of the highest stakes. This year, it seems like democracy itself is up for grabs, as disinformation, census undercounts, and voter suppression have all become real threats to pluralism and representation. The Western U.S., for its part, has proven at times a staunch defender of democracy: Thanks in part to mail-in voting or to Voting-Day registrations, Colorado had the second-highest voter turnout in the country in 2018, Oregon the fifth, and Washington the seventh. But the West, too, is a place where the disadvantaged have little say in the decisions that impact them most.

This issue explores the reaches of the West where election season matters most. In our cover story, we report from Grand Junction, Colorado, which now houses the headquarters of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, to learn what's at stake on Western public lands under the presidential candidates. What might another four years of "energy dominance" mean out here? Versus a policy of climate resilience?

In Indian Country, more disturbing questions beleaguer this election season. A botched census for tribal nations not only erodes political representation through inaccurate districting; it also leads to federal underfunding. Meanwhile, rural counties benefit from yet another kind of census chicanery: An archaic rule that counts incarcerated individuals in the counties where they're imprisoned, not their homes, distorting demographics and inflating population figures. Still, the typically disenfranchised are working to make their voices heard. In the Nevada primary, Bernie Sanders' campaign successfully labored to engage Latino voters. Now, in Arizona, energized young canvassers are working to get out the Latino vote.

Also in the issue, we examine political organizing. In Nevada, a decades-old network of unlikely allies celebrates the end of the Las Vegas Pipeline, while in Alaska, 11 tribes are pushing for a better environmental consultation process. In Portland, Black lives demonstrations brought violence and the deployment of federal troops, altering the politics of the city. But the clouds of tear gas were nothing to the masses of acrid smoke now smothering the city, and the West, due to a swiftly changing climate and fire regime. And still a pandemic stalks the nation, as the economy staggers along.

What are we to do amid all this mess, at a time when cynics and cowards hold sway? The answer, I hope, is obvious. Vote. For as stupefying as 2020 has been, an election year offers you a collective, amplified voice. Vote, and speak. Whether those in power want to hear you or not.

Brian Calvert, editor-in-chief

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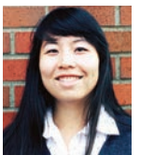

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A mirrored reflection of the Book Cliffs, an area managed by the Bureau of Land Management, on the water of the Government Highline Canal, a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation project that borders Grand Junction, Colorado *(above)*.
Andrew Miller / HCN

A canvasser from the grassroots organization Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA) leaves a flyer encouraging residents in Tucson's primarily Latino Mission Manor neighborhood to vote *(right)*.
Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN

FEATURE | **ELECTION 2020**

Grand Disjunction 38

Public lands are at the center of Trump and Biden's competing energy goals.

BY PAIGE BLANKENBUEHLER

ON THE COVER
A flag flies over Bigfork, Montana.
Lauren Grabelle

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ELECTION 2020

Young and politically empowered 16
In Arizona, Latino canvassers push to get out the vote.
BY JESSICA KUTZ

A turning point in Nevada 18
PHOTOS AND TEXT BY ROBERTO (BEAR) GUERRA

When 'usual residence' is a prison 20
The census rule that distorts rural demographics.
FACTS & FIGURES
BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

The politics of protest 22
November's election will test Portland's new political environment.
BY CARL SEGERSTROM

Federal boots on city streets 23
With Congress gridlocked and courts restrained, the public alone is facing down authoritarian tendencies.
BY CARL SEGERSTROM

A 'second wave' of Indigenous voter suppression 52
A new book explains the barriers to the ballot box.
Q&A BY JESSICA DOUGLAS

#iamthewest 60
Jovan Jackson, Las Vegas
BY EILEEN GUO
AND MIKAYLA WHITMORE

REPORTAGE

Raw data 7
What sewage can tell us about COVID-19.
WHAT WORKS BY JANE C. HU

Undercounted, undermined 9
An inaccurate census has major implications for Indian Country.
BY ANNA V. SMITH

Killing the Vegas pipeline 10
Nevada's changing attitude toward water. BY ERIC SIEGEL

Sage advice 12
The ecological and ethical problems of 'smudging.'
BY TAYLAR DAWN STAGNER

Against 'one way' communication 14
Eleven Alaska tribes are pushing for better environmental consultation.
BY ANNA V. SMITH

REFLECTION & REVIEW

Leaving 'Cancer Alley' 51
On recognizing the violence of environmental racism.
ESSAY BY ADAM MAHONEY

Gentrification comes to rural Montana 54
A new novel explores the fraught history of the Bitterroot Valley.
REVIEW BY GABINO IGLESIAS

Is spiritual growth possible without confronting whiteness? 55
In *White Utopias*, cultural appropriation at festivals like Burning Man goes under the microscope.
REVIEW BY JORDANA ROSENFELD

Lessons from homeschool 56
Don't be terrified. Be ready.
COVID-19
ESSAY BY KHADIJA QUEEN

DEPARTMENTS

3 EDITOR'S NOTE
6 LETTERS
13 THE LATEST
25 50TH ANNIVERSARY
26 DONORS / READER PROFILES
30 BOOKS & AUTHORS MARKETPLACE
58 HEARD AROUND THE WEST

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NARROWING NEPA

One result of the Trump administration's insidious policy changes to weaken the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA, is the Bureau of Land Management's use of so-called "vegetation treatment" programs ("Narrow NEPA," September 2020). These environmentally destructive efforts involve stripping natural lowland forests, shrublands and grasslands using chaining, mowing, masticating, herbiciding and burning. The areas are then seeded with non-native forage grasses, which are favored by cattle and big game. These programs are supported by many ranchers and hunters, because they open up new land for grazing and hunting with little regard for protection of natural ecosystems. In the past, the BLM was required to go through the NEPA process for larger vegetation-removal proposals. This provided an opportunity for input from scientists and the public, which slowed down, modified or stopped some of these landscape-destruction schemes. However, by gutting NEPA, the Trump administration is stopping scientific and public review and enabling the BLM to plunge forward with natural vegetation removal while avoiding the public spotlight.

William Mahoney, Denver

REFUGES UNDER SIEGE

Regarding "A wildlife refuge under siege" (September 2020): Anyone who has read Marc Reisner's book *Cadillac Desert* (1986) knows that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation don't give a damn about environmental impacts or accurate numbers.

Caleb Efta, via social media

A WEST IN FLUX

I'm basically a climate refugee from Texas looking to settle somewhere in rural Washington or Oregon ("A West in flux," September 2020). I recognize that Texas will likely be too hot to inhabit within my lifetime. So these trends are concerning to me because I already cannot afford any kind of reasonable acreage or homesite in all but the most remote places. If I have to compete with people with money moving out of cities, I'm truly gonna be screwed.

Ben Kessler, via social media

This is true for every mountain town that has become a playground to East Coasters and urbanites: The workers serving the upper class cannot afford to live in the towns they work in ("A West in flux," September 2020). Meanwhile, the second- and third-homeowners seem oblivious to how their choices fuel climate change, housing shortages, inflated real estate markets, and economic inequality and injustice in the communities and mountain areas they claim to love.

Erin Sweeney, via social media

A NEW WEST

After reading Alex Carr Johnson's piece ("Now that you've gone West, young man," September 2020), I wonder, "What now?" What does it mean — to Johnson and similarly enlightened people — to understand that you live on land unfairly taken and that you are not entitled to? To me, a Native person, I worry that this translates not into meaningful action to support reconciliation efforts but to only that initial realization.

What we need, in my opinion, are non-Native voices to firmly support tribal rights to help create a fair and just West. Why do tribes with senior rights not have decreed water rights when everyone else on the river does? Why are tribes left out of land-management decisions that affect sacred places and sacred resources? Let's use this moment of insight that Johnson offers to demand justice for tribal people and their homelands.

This, then, leads to a statement Betsy Marston makes in her interview that I take issue with, that the recent coverage of Native issues is taking away from the public-lands coverage and is turning away some *HCN* readers. My response: If they don't like it, let them leave. A New West is the West we need and what we need to see represented in this magazine.

Daniel Cordalis
Arcata, California (but really Durango, Colorado)

RADIATING FROM THE CORE

I appreciate Betsy Marston echoing my concerns ("A little paper with clout," September 2020) about *HCN* as stated in my letter to the editor last month. She encapsulates my feelings by saying: "Sometimes I don't get why we do a story, because I want it to connect to the land and everything that goes on. That's what makes us unique. ... Why wouldn't we keep our base, stay with our core and radiate from the core?" Bravo! I do hope her wisdom, experience and knowledge is heeded.

Lloyd Throne
Medford, Oregon

POLICING THE POLICE

Thank you for your excellent article, "Experts in de-escalation," July 2020, explaining how Eugene, Oregon, has been able to avoid unnecessary policing. This story needs to be sent to every mayor in every city in the country. The program you wrote about, CAHOOTS — Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets — should be a blueprint for every city in our nation, not to take the place of police departments, but to be a separate department to funnel mental health calls to first responders to address disturbances where crimes are not being committed. How many lives could be saved if people who are going through a mental health crisis, drug abuse or homelessness were met by someone who would listen and reflect on what they are going through and assist them in getting genuine help? Maybe it's already too late. I woke this morning thinking about the picture I saw with the news of "Trump's troops" (or whatever they are called) confronting peaceful protesters and carrying guns and banners. Obviously, those people need some kind of mental help. It's hard to make sense of much of anything that's been happening in our country right now.

MaryCarol Nelson
Hailey, Idaho

"If I have to compete with people with money moving out of cities, I'm truly gonna be screwed."

Blake Wiedenheft, associate professor of microbiology and immunology at Montana State University and a member of the university's COVID-19 task force, at the City of Bozeman Water Reclamation Facility. **Mike Greener / HCN**

WHAT WORKS

Raw data

What sewage can tell us about COVID-19.

BY JANE C. HU

THE SEWER IS THE LAST STOP for Bozeman, Montana's waste, but lately, it's the first one for Blake Wiedenheft's work. An associate professor of microbiology and immunology at Montana State University, Wiedenheft has joined other virologists, epidemiologists and immunologists as a member of the university's COVID-19 task force.

Back in March, a colleague mentioned testing wastewater for evidence of COVID-19 in human waste. The next day, Wiedenheft drove down to Bozeman's wastewater treatment plant to see if he could grab a sample. Given how few cases there were in the area at the time, and that 6 million gallons of water flow through the plant daily, he wasn't sure if the virus would be detectable. But Wiedenheft immediately found evidence of it — and it kept appearing in the four samples he analyzed over the next 10 days. Wiedenheft worked with local officials to continue regular testing as Bozeman became one of the first cities in the world to look to sewage for answers. Now, cities across the Western United States are sampling wastewater for evidence of SARS-CoV-2 as a potential "early warning" system for outbreaks. Scientists estimate that up to 45% of people infected with the virus show no symptoms. Given that asymptomatic people are less likely to get tested, many cases may go undetected. With many areas experiencing substantial delays in swab test results, daily wastewater testing can give scientists an idea of community infection nearly immediately, Wiedenheft said.

To capture such a snapshot of community spread, Josh French, the operations foreman at the Bozeman Water Reclamation Facility, and his colleagues take regular samples from the city's wastewater, which flows from showers, laundry machines, greasy sinks and, of course, toilets. All that liquid — a cloudy, hay-colored mixture with only a mild stench — arrives at the wastewater plant, where a machine called an autosampler takes small samples.

The autosampler looks like two mini fridges stacked vertically. The top compartment houses a tube and pump, which hoovers up half-cup samples and deposits them into a plastic jug in the cool bottom compartment. Every 24 hours, a sample from this jug is taken to Wiedenheft's lab for testing. Wiedenheft's lab employs the same methods used to analyze COVID-19 nose swab tests: Researchers take RNA — whether floating in a liter of wastewater or smeared on a swab

— and perform a procedure that amplifies the genetic signature of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. That allows researchers to identify the virus.

The challenge of analyzing wastewater, as opposed to a swab, is that RNA samples are such a tiny part of the overall jug of wastewater. "Imagine you've got a jar full of jelly beans, and you're dipping into the jar to see if you can find a red jelly bean," said Wiedenheft. "If your jar is small, it's more likely you're going to scoop up that red jelly bean, but if your jar is big, it's less likely, and you're going to have to collect more of the sample to find it." The virus is like the red jelly bean: To get an accurate glimpse into how much virus is in a city's water, scientists have to make sure the samples they collect are representative of its overall water flow. That means taking more frequent samples at peak times — in the mornings, when people are starting their routines, or in the evenings, when they are doing chores — as well as less frequent samples when the water flow is lower, as it is very early in the morning. Bozeman's autosampler collects around three dozen samples daily.

The results of Wiedenheft's lab analyses — whether the samples are virus positive or negative — are posted on the county's public health website. In the 26 samples taken between June and mid-August, the coronavirus was detected every time.

French said they are now experimenting with sampling from specific areas of town, including the hospital and Montana State's campus. Engineers have identified their main sewer flow lines and placed mobile samplers just beneath manhole covers, where they collect samples one day a week. As the school year kicks off, MSU's data could track viral spread on campus, while the hospital data could help scientists better understand how their results map on to community spread. "We know how much viral protein (Wiedenheft) is detecting in his lab, but how many individuals is that reflective of?" asked French.

Researchers have yet to arrive at a definitive answer. Converting wastewater data into an estimate of positive cases requires a key metric scientists are still learning about: how much virus a sick person sheds. That depends on the stage of illness the person is in, as well as how severe the illness is. Because those variables are hard to nail down, Wiedenheft has intentionally avoided reporting such estimates. "We don't feel confident enough to make that translation," he said.

But in some cities, officials have released estimates using wastewater data to indicate how many community members are infected. For instance, analyses by Biobot, a wastewater testing startup, estimated that the levels of SARS-CoV-2 found in Moscow, Idaho's sewage corresponded to 1,800 cases. At the time of the estimate, Latah County, where Moscow is located, had only 46 known cases. (Biobot declined to be interviewed, and its hired communications firm did not answer questions about how the company calculates case estimates. A recent study published by Biobot's co-founders and colleagues reported that assumptions about individuals' viral load can massively affect these estimates. According to their calculations, assuming that infected people have a low viral load leads to an estimate that 5% of the population is infected, whereas assuming a high viral load will lower that estimate to 0.1%.)

So far, many local officials have looked to wastewater analyses more as a way to corroborate their knowledge about community viral spread than as a way to estimate case numbers. "We won't know how many people in the community have COVID-19 from the methodology, but this data will tell us if trends are going up or down," says Nicole Rowan, clean water program manager at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, which has launched a statewide wastewater testing effort.

Matt Kelley, health officer at the Gallatin City-County Health Department, said that when his county went through a period of few cases in May, the sewage data gave additional confirmation that spread had slowed. "It was somewhat reassuring to have another backstop indicator of what was happening," he said — and when positive COVID-19 swab tests rose again, so did levels of SARS-CoV-2 in the water. Kelley said that once cases fall again, it will be helpful to track wastewater as an indicator of undetected community spread. "If we're not seeing tests in the traditional medical testing, and also not seeing them in the wastewater, that's a validating factor for us."

As more areas launch wastewater tracking programs, Wiedenheft said that one thing is still needed: a central repository for this data, which could provide a bigger-picture view of viral spread. Over the last few months, Montana has developed several monitoring sites, and some states, like California, Colorado and Wyoming, created their own networks. It's difficult just to compile a list of cities conducting testing, since some key data is private; Biobot said it is working with 400 facilities, but declined to provide additional information, including how many cities that corresponds to. Wiedenheft points to Johns Hopkins' popular coronavirus tracker as an example of a well-organized health surveillance tool. "It would be nice to have a wastewater surveillance website that does the same thing, where you could look at a geographic map and look at what's happening," he said.

In mid-August, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Department of Health and Human Services announced plans for a National Wastewater Surveillance System, a portal to which health departments can submit their wastewater data. After the federal government's changes to a portal tracking hospital data led to widespread reporting delays and data inconsistencies, it's unclear how the database will fare — and whether this new initiative provides funding to areas conducting testing. Wiedenheft's funding goes through August, and he's unsure where the money will come from after that. "If wastewater sampling is important — and I think it is, since there's plenty of evidence to suggest it's really the only real-time indicator in the community — then it seems important to have funding to support this ongoing effort," he said. "That's imperative to be able to manage a pandemic."

City of Bozeman Wastewater Pretreatment Coordinator Mark DeWald, left, and Water Reclamation Facility Lab Foreman Josh French, right, separate the housing unit of an autosampler to collect a wastewater sample jug from a Montana State University sewage line collection site. **Mike Greener / HCN**

REPORTAGE

Undercounted, undermined

An inaccurate census has major implications for Indian Country.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

Selena Rides Horse speaks with Gerald Pease at a drive-thru station set up by Western Native Voice in Lodge Grass, Montana, to help members of the Crow Indian Tribe participate in the U.S. Census. **Matthew Brown / AP Photo**

THE FIRST PLACE the U.S. Census Bureau surveyed for the 2020 census was Tooksook Bay, Alaska, part of the agency's long tradition of conducting early counts in the state's remote villages. In March, with about half of rural Alaska still uncounted, enumerators were pulled out of the field because of COVID-19, as the bureau shifted its schedule to accommodate the barriers the pandemic presented. Then, in August, the Census Bureau quietly released an updated deadline for the census, moving it from Oct. 31 to Sept. 30, eliminating four weeks of critical outreach. September is moose-hunting season in Alaska, so people are generally harder to reach; it's also the beginning of storm season, which means power outages and delays for mail delivery by plane. As a result, despite the early start, Alaskans in general and Native Alaskans in particular are still lagging behind the national average in their response rates.

"In terms of wrapping up the census, there's not a worst time for rural Alaska and Alaska Natives," Nicole Borromeo (McGrath Native Village), executive vice president and general counsel of the Alaska Federation of Natives. This is the first time the census has been available to complete online or by phone in Alaska, a necessary option given the pandemic, but the process has run into issues of internet and phone connectivity. Meanwhile, many Alaska Natives are still waiting for someone to show up at their door, questionnaire in hand, though Borromeo has warned, "A numerator in rural Alaska is not coming. Do not wait a second longer."

The current census hurdles are not only affecting Alaska Natives: The pandemic has severely stymied the 2020 census throughout Indian Country, as many tribes closed reservation borders to nonresidents, including census workers. The U.S. census typically undercounts Indigenous populations, more than any other group in the country. This ultimately limits Indigenous political representation, owing to redistricting, and it also decreases federal funding for things like schools, houses and health care.

Data from the U.S. census provides the primary measurement by which federal funds are directed to tribal governments, putting $675 billion at stake. To distribute funds to tribes for the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act, for example, the federal government relied on the 2010 census. That census had an estimated undercount of 4.9%, so tribes received less than they would have, given an accurate count. This year's count is shaping up to be much lower — something closer to 1990's 12% undercount — meaning tribes will have far fewer resources in the decade ahead to recover from the pandemic and the economic turmoil it has produced. "The communities that are being undercounted are the same ones being hardest hit by COVID-19," said Jaime Gloshay (White Mountain Apache), the founder of Native Women Lead, who has worked on get-out-the-count efforts in New Mexico.

An accurate count is not just about funding, or districting, or representation in government; it also reflects the U.S. government's trust obligations to Indigenous nations. "Today, that trust responsibility is upheld primarily through federal funding formulas, based on census data," Borromeo said. "So if we don't have an accurate and complete count of Native Americans and Alaska Natives, the federal government is breaching its special responsibility to our people."

The Trump administration does not appear to be invested in an accurate count. In July, the White House published a memo excluding undocumented immigrants from the census. In it, President Donald Trump wrote that states that "encourage" undocumented immigrants "should not be rewarded with greater representation in the House of Representatives," and that such exclusion is "more consonant with the principles of representative democracy underpinning our system of Government." Soon after, the U.S. Census Bureau shortened the count.

Tribal nations, meanwhile, have played a large role in pushing for a longer, more accurate count. In early September, a lawsuit to reinstate the longer count was brought by nonprofits, local governments and tribes, including the Navajo Nation, whose census response rate at the time was just 12.8%.

The Native Voice Network, a nationwide coalition of 40 Native-led organizations, also began pushing Congress to restore the original Oct. 31 deadline, reaching out to individual lawmakers and organizing petitions with thousands of signatures to call for an accurate count. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, whose constituency is heavily Indigenous, joined a bipartisan group of 48 members of Congress to call for an extension. "People understand that this is a politically motivated effort to undermine our political clout and to strip us of resources," Chrissie Castro (Navajo), who helps coordinate the network's efforts, said in an interview. "We're already stripped of so many resources, so this is just particularly egregious and very shortsighted."

REPORTAGE

Killing the Vegas Pipeline

Nevada's changing attitude toward water.

BY ERIC SIEGEL

FOR DECADES, the Great Basin Water Network has made a point of strange bedfellowing. Its ranks include ranchers, environmentalists, sportsmen, rural county commissioners, Indigenous leaders, water users from Utah, and rural and urban Nevadans. Over the years, these groups united against a single cause: the Southern Nevada Water Authority's "Groundwater Development Project," a proposal to pump 58 billion gallons of water a year 300 miles to Las Vegas from the remote rural valleys of Nevada and Utah. Nevadans called it the Las Vegas Pipeline; its ardent foes called it a water grab. In May, their three decades of resistance to the pipeline ended in victory: The project was terminated.

"Never give up the ship," Delaine Spilsbury, an Ely Shoshone tribal elder who played a significant role in the Water Network, said in a recent interview. "Never. That's the kind of feeling that I think most of us had. Just do the best we can and let's make something happen, even if it does take forever."

The Vegas Pipeline, had it succeeded, threatened to make a dustbowl of 305 springs, 112 miles of streams, 8,000 acres of wetlands and 191,000 acres of shrubland habitat, almost all of it on public lands. Major utilities in the West rarely fail in getting what they want (witness California's Owens Valley, circa 1913), but the Water Network's multipronged, intergenerational legal battle creates a different precedent, showing that diverse water interests can transcend any single approach or ideology — and win.

UNEXPECTED ALLIANCES like this have their origins in the Cold War. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the Air Force sought to conduct hazardous testing of intercontinental ballistic missiles and supersonic military operations in eastern Nevada. This required deep drilling into newfound aquifers, and tribal nations, rural counties, ranchers and environmentalists became increasingly distrustful of the massive groundwater pumping. They put their differences aside to mobilize public opinion and beat back two federal projects — the Missile Experimental ("MX") and the Electronic Combat Test Capability ("ECTC").

Their single-minded focus on water and ability to tease out a strategy from a broad coalition of people proved an asset in resisting powerful entities. "We beat the federal government," said Abby Johnson, who worked for a statewide environmental group fighting the MX project and later helped form the

Tom Baker, a fourth-generation rancher in the Snake Valley, hosted "water tours" on his ranch to educate the public on the importance of groundwater in Nevada (*left*). Delaine Spilsbury, an Ely Shoshone tribal elder who worked with the Water Network, stands at Swamp Cedars in Spring Valley, a site significant to her and the Western Shoshone that would have been threatened by groundwater pumping (*right*).
Russel Albert Daniels / HCN

Great Basin Water Network. "It never would have happened had there not been such activism against it. The public opposition and outcry across rural Nevada was essential."

This united front endured into 1989, when the Las Vegas Valley Water District filed 146 water right applications with the Nevada state engineer — the state's top water regulator — to pump 800,000 acre-feet of groundwater from eastern Nevada. The former anti-nuclear coalition organized area residents again — this time against their own state, filing protests with the state engineer's office. Great Basin National Park and the Bureau of Land Management, concerned that groundwater withdrawals could affect surface-water resources under their jurisdiction, also filed protests.

The water applications sat dormant for over a decade. But in 2002, in the face of worsening drought and looming supply shortages on the Colorado River, the newly formed Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA) reactivated the water filings. By 2005, the SNWA requested legal hearings. That was "when the project caught steam and really began," said Steve Erickson, an organizer with the Water Network in Utah, who worked closely with residents in Baker, Nevada. "This was a feisty group of people, and they had worked on this stuff before. They knew they could win if they were persistent."

In 2007, the Great Basin Water Network received nonprofit status, formalizing the coalition. It partnered with rural county governments to help pay for expert witnesses and legal representation in court, and established "water tours," in order to teach Nevadans how the region's landscape of springs, seeps and streams sustained a uniquely Nevadan way of life. These efforts helped establish the pipeline in the public imagination as another water grab.

But despite these advances, there was a breakdown in trust, as state and federal agencies greenlit the project, circumventing bedrock environmental laws. A 2004 federal wilderness bill included a rider granting the SNWA a public utilities right-of-way for the project, facilitating its approval. In 2006, the Department of Interior — including the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which failed to consult the tribes it represents — entered a closed-door agreement with the SNWA, dropping all federal protests in exchange for a contentious monitoring and mitigation plan.

A series of legal battles ensued at the state level. The Water Network's initial legal strategy, which focused on due process rather than water law, ultimately prevailed in 2010 at the Nevada Supreme Court, which found that "the state engineer was 'derelict in his duties,' " as Kyle Roerink, the Executive Director of the Water Network, said in a recent interview. The court's decision voided SNWA's water applications, forcing the Water Authority to re-file them with the state engineer, who in turn reopened the protest period.

The Water Network applied pressure from multiple angles, though, and the legal wins continued on other fronts. Activists successfully argued, for example, that the state engineer miscalculated the water levels in the basins where the Southern Nevada Water Authority wanted to pump, allowing for over-allocations. Their efforts convinced a district court to order the state engineer to recalculate.

Beyond its legal strategy, the Water Network built alliances geographically — notably with ranchers, farmers, and county commissioners in western Utah, who followed in lockstep with the Confederated Tribes of the Goshute there and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and public health, citizen science and conservation groups across the state. By 2015, their efforts convinced the Republican governor of Utah, Gary Herbert, to reject a bi-state water agreement that would have allowed the SNWA to pull water from the Snake Valley, in the Nevada-Utah borderlands. "The governor was getting pressure from all sides," Erickson said. "At one time, he had three water lawyers and the director of the Utah Department of Natural Resources telling him to sign the agreement. But he listened to us."

The Southern Nevada Water Authority, meanwhile, undertook

(continued on page 29)

ANALYSIS

Sage advice

The ecological and ethical problems of 'smudging.'

BY TAYLAR DAWN STAGNER

White sage marketed as "sustainably grown" for sale in a Denver, Colorado, metaphysical store.
Luna Anna Archey / HCN

CHANCES ARE YOU KNOW the scent of white sage as well as you know patchouli. The sweet aroma of its dusty, pale green leaves permeates New Age spirituality shops across the Western U.S. The burning of California white sage, especially, has become an accepted form of cultural appropriation. Today, shops that carry sage, whether in mountain tourist towns or on Etsy, rarely consider its Indigenous origins or the current-day implications of its use.

California white sage, or *Salvia apiana*, is a perennial desert shrub that grows several feet high. During April, the plant's flowers, which range in color from white to pale lavender, attract bees, giving it the nickname "bee sage." Indigenous cultures have collected, dried and burned the plant for centuries, using its smoke as medicine and in ceremonies. The scent is unique, an earthy, sweet aroma that curls in rising circles during smudging, clinging to clothes and hair for hours after burning.

It's a beautiful plant with many uses. And that's part of the problem: It's become so popular that it has been commodified to the point of erasure, robbed of its Indigenous roots and cultural importance.

Historically, white sage has had many uses. The Kumeyaay and Cahuilla used it to treat fever, and its leaves were eaten or smoked in sweathouse ceremonies. The smoke was used for fumigation, and the plant crushed to use as a deodorant and to mask the tell-tale odor of hunters. The Chumash also ate the plant, preparing it in various ways.

California white sage still grows abundantly in Southern California, although over-harvesting has kept it from growing in the tall, thick bushes it once did. Indigenous peoples continue a tradition of handling it in environmentally sustainable ways by harvesting only what is needed for ceremony.

There is very little data about where and how the plant is being harvested today for commercial purposes. Without rigorous research into the supply chain that takes a bundle of sage from California to an Etsy shopping cart, consumers simply cannot know if their sage was gathered and sold in a culturally ethical or environmentally responsible way.

United Plant Savers, a nonprofit that advocates for the preservation of medicinal plants, has put California white sage on its list of threatened species. Director Susan Leopold said the lack of understanding about sage's sustainability and cultural importance — coupled with its seeming ubiquity — has led people to acquire and use it irresponsibly.

"There are no commercial permits for selling white sage. You can get written permission from private landowners," Leopold said. "And you can get permits for personal wild-crafting. But also, there's very unspecific guidelines that sellers exploit."

Well-intentioned vendors and patrons alike might believe they are buying sage directly from a private grower, not realizing that it was harvested without permission from public lands, possibly causing significant damage to the landscape.

The Gabrielino-Tongva, a state-recognized tribe in Southern California, have a relationship with white sage that goes back 7,000 years, ever since the tribe has been in the Los Angeles Basin. To the Tongva, sage is not a commodity, but a member of the family. This creates a relationship between medicine and person that is more complex than commerce can account for, a kinship beyond dollars and cents. "I have a firm stance in regards to medicinal plants that they are not to be sold: period," said Weshoyot Alvitre, a Tongva illustrator who advocates for her ancestral land. Growing up, Alvitre was taught that selling such medicine was wrong. "It doesn't matter if the company is Native or non-Native; it is against protocol to sell medicines."

The white sage industry either ignores — or capitalizes on — the plant's importance to the

Indigenous population, she said, and it can be found in "withcraft" and "Native spirituality" kits on Amazon, or purchased for "cleansing rituals" at a local New Age shop. Like dreamcatchers, sage has been degraded for consumption, she said.

Unfortunately, it's not easy to find ethically, responsibly — and legally — sourced white sage.

"If someone says, 'Oh yeah, we got this sage sustainably,' I don't think that means much anymore," said Deborah Small, who writes about contemporary uses for plants important to Indigenous peoples. Buzzwords like "responsibly sourced" mean nothing if you don't know your source or their practices, she said.

Buzzwords like "responsibly sourced" mean nothing if you don't know your source or their practices.

The plant itself may not be endangered, but its habitat is threatened by encroaching development. In early August, intense wildfires destroyed miles of white sage habitat. Global warming impacts the plant in other ways, too, as rising sea levels erode its coastal habitat. Unauthorized, unregulated harvesting of the plant for commercial purposes accelerates the problem.

Meanwhile, even those non-Native store owners who realize that there are gaps in their sourcing appear unmotivated to change their practices. Herbs and Arts, for example, a Denver metaphysical shop, claims that its vendor ethically sources the sage it sells. That vendor is Full Moon Farm in Arizona, which supplies 350 stores across the country. The farm's owner, Wendy Hillyer, is not Indigenous. She started the company, she said, because white sage "creates a feeling of sacredness in everyday life, and I wanted to share that with everyone." Hillyer initially obtained white sage through "friends of friends." Then she found a regular supplier, though she declined to disclose the supplier or information about the harvest because she said she was worried about "poachers." Hillyer acknowledged that she could have purchased sage from Indigenous suppliers, but thought it was too expensive.

The fact that California white sage is not listed as endangered gives people the sense that it's OK to harvest it lavishly and sell it for a profit. The regulations on harvesting are confusing and rarely enforced. Under California law, white sage cannot simply be gathered from the side of the road. In some parts of the state, there are fines for harvesting without proper permitting. It's legal to take for personal use with written permission from the property owner. But who owns the property? Few shops accurately document where and how their sage was collected. In California, it could be the Forest Service, the state Fish and Wildlife Department or the Bureau of Land Management. The Etiwanda Preserve in San Bernardino County, for example, is home to complex underground waterways that help the plant flourish, an irresistible attraction for poachers.

Poachers rarely care about sustainable harvests. White sage should be harvested at the end of the growing season, after it flowers. But poachers cut off the top of the plant before it reaches maturity. In 2018, 400 pounds of illegally harvested California white sage were confiscated by the Rancho Cucamonga Police Department.

Bret Williamson, owner of the Colorado wholesaler Crystal Peddler, has been selling sage for 30 years. His sage is gathered by wild-crafters from Bureau of Land Management land, he said. And though he knows you need a permit to wildcraft on BLM land for personal use, he admits he's never actually seen a permit, or even asked for or received permission to gather. Despite this, Williamson said he believes the sage he sells has been ethically collected. "I know enough people out there," he said.

Deborah Small and her co-author, Rose Ramirez, who is Chumash and Yaqui, said the only solution is to make sure that the "responsibly sourced" label actually means something.

The two women have spoken about California white sage across the state, trying to warn people about poaching and explain how to responsibly harvest and use the plant. But people would rather just learn how to smudge, and they seem to have no interest in the ethical and sustainability issues surrounding the plant. Ramirez has ideas for ways to help curb poaching — creating special certification, for example, and doing more education and outreach. "We are well past the point of not selling it," Ramirez said.

THE LATEST

Prison fire crews

Backstory

Over the past 30 years, some 2,000 prisoners have participated in Arizona's inmate wildfire program. Prisoners often take pride in giving back to society, risking their lives to battle blazes for less than $2 an hour. With the climate crisis and historic fire suppression making fire seasons longer and more destructive, prison crews save Western states tens of millions of dollars yearly. In Arizona, some inmates can join state forestry crews after release, but that's not true for all Western states ("When Arizona catches fire, prisoners step up," 8/5/19).

Followup

Now, some members of inmate crews in California will be able to have their records expunged after prison, making them eligible to work as firefighters. Their professional experience is desperately needed: In March, California responded to COVID-19 cases in prisons by expediting parole for some prisoners and quarantining others, reducing inmate crews by half. Then, in August and September, hundreds of fires blazed across California, including three of the four largest in the state's history, creating a firefighter shortage.

—Maya L. Kapoor

Marina Anderson, Kasaan's tribal administrator, climbs an uprooted tree on Prince of Wales Island, Alaska (*above*). A Haida totem pole in the Organized Village of Kasaan. Totem pole crafting requires old-growth red cedar trees (*right*). Organized Village of Kake tribal members fish for sockeye salmon using a net. Salmon spawn in streams throughout the Tongass National Forest *(top)*. **Bethany Goodrich**

Against 'one way' communication

Eleven Alaska tribes are pushing for better environmental consultation.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

IN THE EARLY FALL of 2018, Marina Anderson sped down the rough road connecting one side of Alaska's Prince of Wales Island to the other. She had only a few hours to get to a public meeting over the potential opening of the Tongass National Forest, her tribe's ancestral land, to logging and mining.

Mail is delivered by floatplane once a week to the Organized Village of Kasaan's tribal office on a rugged island in southeast Alaska. But the mail can be delayed for a week, or even a month, by high winds and rough waters. Anderson, who was then working as a tribal office assistant, had opened an important letter barely in time: The U.S. Department of Agriculture had notified the tribe of a public hearing, to be held that very day, on whether to remove Roadless Rule protections from the Tongass National Forest. "We were blindsided by it," Anderson, who is now Kasaan's tribal administrator, said recently.

In the end, Anderson and the tribal official she went with made it to the meeting and were able to hear directly from the Forest Service and speak with the other tribes present. Still, Anderson's experience exemplifies the federal government's long-running failure to adequately work with tribes. Alaska's petition to the Forest Service to increase logging on the Tongass was the latest move in a two-decade battle, including policy changes, court decisions, appeals and injunctions, over the protection of 9.4 million acres of the world's largest unfragmented temperate rainforest. In response, at the end of July, 11 Southeast Alaska Native tribes, including Kasaan, petitioned the USDA, the agency that oversees the Forest Service, requesting a new rule that would require it to work with tribes to identify and protect parts of the Tongass that hold life-sustaining value for the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian — old-growth red cedar trees, which are used for canoes; salmon watersheds; and lands with traditional fish camps and burial sites.

The July petition to create a "Traditional Homelands Conservation Rule" represents a new strategy in tribal nations' ongoing efforts to hold the federal government to its legal responsibility to consult with them on projects that impact them. If the USDA accepts the petition, it would create a mechanism to involve the 11 tribes in the conservation and management of their ancestral lands — something that's increasingly critical as climate change shifts the wildlife patterns and habitat that so many remote villages, including Kasaan, rely on.

THE TERM "TRIBAL CONSULTATION" oozes bureaucracy, but it is a primary process by which tribal nations can influence projects that will affect them by interacting with the U.S. on a government-to-government basis. The process is a way to acknowledge that tribes retain a relationship with ancestral lands, including those beyond reservation boundaries. "It's an opportunity for an affected government — not just a stakeholder — to have a say in what happens," said Natalie Landreth (Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma), senior staff attorney at Native American Rights Fund. "These are very real rights."

But the United States has not always consulted with tribes in good faith. The construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, the designation (and un-designation) of Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, and the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border wall through Kumeyaay, Tohono O'odham and other tribal lands all represent federal decisions made with little or no tribal input.

Consultation was formalized as a process in 2000, when it became a requirement for federal agencies. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama each reaffirmed and expanded the consultation process. President Donald Trump has not. Trump's approach to Indigenous issues — including his reduction of Bears Ears National Monument, a tribal-led initiative, by 85% — has favored industry over Indigenous nations. But no matter who is president, longstanding problems persist in the way agencies deal with tribes. In a sweeping review of the decision-making process last year by the Government Accountability Office, interviews with 57 tribal leaders and comments from 100 tribes pointed out problems, saying agencies started the process too late and did not consider their input or respect tribal sovereignty. The agencies, meanwhile, said they had difficulties contacting tribes and complained about the lack of adequate consultation resources.

Too often, what constitutes enough consultation is determined by federal agencies, with little recourse for tribes that disagree. In their Traditional Homelands petition, the 11 tribes wrote that the process is currently a "one-way system of communication," where federal agencies use consultation to "issue orders and give updates to the tribes about what will happen."

In the case of the Tongass, six tribes, including Kasaan, had signed on to cooperate with the federal government on a request for development by the state of Alaska. (Some have since withdrawn.) But throughout the two-year process, tribes said the USDA repeatedly ignored their input and requests for in-person meetings; fast-tracked seemingly arbitrary deadlines; and proceeded as usual despite a pandemic that has disproportionally hurt Native communities. None of the tribes recommended a full repeal of the Roadless Rule, and around 95% of public comments opposed complete exemption. So far, however, exemption remains the U.S. Forest Service's clear preference.

"The Forest Service recognizes and supports the sovereignty and self-determination of American Indian and Alaska Native tribal nations through building, maintaining, and enhancing government-to-government relationships with Tribal Governments," said a spokesperson for the USDA, adding that it has received and is reviewing the petition. "We engage inclusively with people in mutual respect, active collaboration, and shared stewardship. We promote meaningful nation-to-nation consultation with tribal nations."

With the petition, the tribes — Kasaan, the Organized Village of Kake, Klawock Cooperative Association, Hoonah Indian Association, Ketchikan Indian Community, Skagway Traditional Council, Organized Village of Saxman, Craig Tribal Association, Wrangell Cooperative Association, Yakutat Tlingit Tribe, and Central Council Tlingit and Haida

(continued on page 29)

Young and politically empowered

In Arizona, Latino canvassers push to get out the vote.

BY JESSICA KUTZ | PHOTOS BY ROBERTO (BEAR) GUERRA

WHEN FHERNANDA ORTIZ was 16, an organizer from the Arizona Center for Empowerment, or ACE, a social justice organization, spoke at her high school. After the talk, Ortiz signed up for a six-week political education course run by ACE in partnership with Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA), its sister organization. There, she learned about the issues impacting her community, including discrimination and anti-immigrant policies; she even attended an Operation Streamline hearing in Tucson, where dozens of shackled, undocumented immigrants appeared before a judge for criminal prosecution.

In Phoenix, where she lives, Ortiz learned how to exercise her political rights. "I didn't know back then that I could go to the state Capitol and listen to a hearing, or watch state representatives," she said in a video call in July. "When Jeff Flake was senator, I didn't know I could go to his office, or write a letter. That was crazy to me."

By the 2018 midterms, Ortiz was volunteering as a canvasser. As the registration deadline neared, which is a month before Election Day in Arizona, she and other teens her age spent summer evenings with clipboards and registration forms in hand, approaching people in the parking lots of supermarkets and gas stations. The gas station "was my best place, actually," Ortiz said. While people filled up their tanks, she had ample time to convince them to register.

Like many U.S. university students, Ortiz, who is now 19, attends classes remotely. In her spare time, though, she leads her own team of young Latinos to register voters. The work looks very different from 2018, when Ortiz herself was a canvasser whose team focused on face-to-face interactions. Now, most of their time is spent at home, running through official lists of eligible voters and making phone calls.

At their weekly video chats, Ortiz and her team discuss strategies for keeping people on the phone, roleplaying how calls might go, and working on alternative ways for reaching potential voters, such as sending out mass texts and using social media messenger services. This virtual canvassing isn't easy. "When you are out there, you can be with someone until they say like the fifth, 'No,' " Ortiz said. "You can follow them to their car and try and convince them in those couple of minutes. It's super easy. Now, people can just hang up. Some of my folks have had really bad conversations."

Organizers like Ortiz are part of a growing cohort of politically engaged young Latinos in Arizona. Many will be eligible to vote for the first time in the upcoming election. They've already secured victories in their state, helping elect Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D, in the midterms, and many are determined, despite the pandemic, to get out the vote for the presidential election.

Fhernanda Ortiz, an organizer with the Arizona Center for Empowerment, is now meeting daily with the team she leads from her home in Phoenix.

THE NUMBER OF potential Latino voters has increased, but so far they haven't fully participated — at least not in past presidential elections. This year could be different, according to Joseph Garcia, executive director of the Chicanos por La Causa Action Fund, a nonprofit advocacy organization focused on Latino voter engagement, among other initiatives. "Latinos are a very young population here in Arizona, and as a result, in past years many Latinos weren't old enough to vote, and their parents (perhaps one, and in some cases both) were ineligible to vote because they weren't U.S. citizens or naturalized," he said.

In Arizona, though, a growing number of Latinos like Ortiz have reached voting age; in fact, 24% of eligible voters in the state are Latino, according to the Pew Research Center. "That has only happened in the past few years — there are enough Latinos to make a difference," Garcia said. Approximately 100,000 young Latinos have become eligible in Arizona since the 2018 elections, he said, and young Latino voters tend to be progressive, making them a possible factor in Bernie Sanders' success in Nevada's primaries. Nationwide, nearly 2 million Latino citizens will have turned 18 and be newly eligible to vote in the November election. Six of the 12 states with the highest number of registered Latino voters are in the Western United States: Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and Washington, according to Unidos U.S., a Latino nonprofit advocacy organization.

Across any demographic, however, getting young people to vote is a challenge. That is why grassroots groups like ACE and LUCHA have been reaching out to young people through their political education initiatives, even before they are eligible to vote. For example, One Arizona, a nonpartisan coalition of organizations that formed in the wake of SB 1070, the controversial "Show Me Your Papers Law" that encouraged racial profiling, has collaborated since 2016 with the Phoenix Union High School District. The group registers high school students through a series of voter education initiatives.

But the pandemic has changed things. After COVID-19 shut down schools early this spring, some of those opportunities vanished. "We've had to pivot," Araceli Villezcas, a program coordinator with One Arizona, said. "We completely missed out on (registering voters at) graduation." Now that they've had a summer to strategize, Villezcas and other organizers are preparing

virtual registration drives through their Youth Power Coalition, communicating with high school classes via videoconference calls.

Using a slide presentation, someone like Villezcas will show teens how to access the state's voter registration site, then walk them through the process in real time. "By the end of the call, the students that are eligible to vote will have registered," Villezcas said. Before Election Day, organizers will circle back to the newly registered students to make sure they have a plan to get their ballots in.

For democracy advocates, this work is essential for turning out the vote, especially given the many barriers facing Latino voters. These include age (the median age of Latinos is just 30 compared to 44 for non-Latino whites, and historically, young people haven't voted in the same numbers as other age groups); poverty (lower-income people who depend on hourly wages can't always take time off from work to go to the polls); and typically lower education levels (according to the U.S. Census Bureau, individuals without a high school diploma were less likely to vote in 2018). These factors may help explain why less than half of eligible Latino voters in Arizona cast a ballot in the 2016 presidential election. The state also has a long history of disenfranchising communities of color at the ballot box. But organizers are optimistic: "If we can get young Latino voters to vote, they are going to vote the rest of their lives," Garcia said.

For Villezcas, the stakes for families and communities are high. She grew up in Phoenix protesting immigration enforcement with her father, and she remembers having a family member deported. So in high school, when a friend asked her if she wanted to register voters, she decided to try it. "I ended up really loving it," Villezcas said. "Even though I couldn't vote, it felt really good, like we were taking our power back." That was nearly 10 years ago, and now getting out the vote is her full-time job. Over the years, Villezcas has grown accustomed to the election question she is most often asked: Is this the year Arizona changes? "We have done so much work, and it is not for nothing," she always replies. "Arizona has already changed so much!"

Araceli Villezcas, a program coordinator for One Arizona, takes a break from work at her home in Phoenix, Arizona *(above left)*. Volunteers for Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA) prepare for an early September canvassing event in Tucson *(above right)*. Shawn Burruel displays one of LUCHA's flyers at a canvassing event in September *(below left)*. LUCHA community organizer Faith Ramon dons a mask before canvassing in Tucson, Arizona, in early September *(below right)*.

Mi Familia Vota canvasser Thomas Vargas registers a man to vote in Northeast Las Vegas in February, before the pandemic hit. The grassroots organization he works for is dedicated to increasing voter participation in states that have large Latino populations, but historically low voter turnout.

PHOTOS | **ELECTION 2020**

A turning point in Nevada

Lessons from the Sanders campaign.

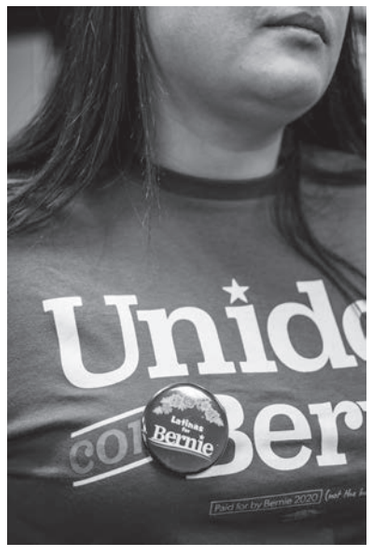
TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ROBERTO (BEAR) GUERRA

FOR THE FIRST TIME in history, Latino voters will comprise the largest non-white voting bloc in the 2020 election. In Nevada, the Democratic caucuses in February were the first major test of candidates' appeal to Latinos, who make up 30% of the state's population. Candidates including Elizabeth Warren, Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg and Bernie Sanders spent a considerable amount of time and resources courting the Latino vote.

Though Sanders would go on to lose the Democratic Party's nomination to Joe Biden, he saw a significant victory in Nevada, winning 51% of the Latino vote, thanks to a sustained effort led by Latinos themselves. His campaign is now being seen as a turning point in mobilizing the Latino vote.

In Nevada, there was an intentional plan, with resources being spent in the Latino community, according to Chuck Rocha, a political consultant and Bernie Sanders' senior campaign advisor. "When you hire your first staffer, you make sure they are from the community. And then you start spending resources over months and months to talk to that demographic about your candidate," he said. "That's the perfect storm for having that amazing win that you saw."

These photos were made in collaboration with the PBS film, Latino Vote: Dispatches from the Battleground, *directed by Bernardo Ruiz, and scheduled to air on local PBS stations beginning Oct. 6.*



Led by Latino campaign workers and advisers, the 2020 Bernie Sanders campaign spent significant resources to reach Latino voters with culturally competent and relevant messaging.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, organizers like Jazmine Villagomez spent much of their time visiting high school classrooms to educate eligible students about the importance of voting and help them register *(above left)*.

Future Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden carries a picket sign during a Culinary Workers Union strike outside of the Palms Casino in Las Vegas in February. With 60,000 members — 54% of them Latino — it is the state's largest and most powerful union, and several of the candidates made appearances at the strike in an effort to woo voters *(above right)*.

Latinos and other non-white voting blocs are often viewed by the establishment as if they all share the same set of values. The reality is far more complex. Despite the fact that the majority of Latinos in the U.S. vote Democratic, Donald Trump won 28% of the Latino vote in 2016 — though this number has been disputed. As of August, however, 24% said they plan to vote him this November *(right)*.

Audrey Peral — seen with her son, Izayah — is a grassroots organizer with Make the Road Action. "Although Bernie did drop out of the race, I am very hopeful that here in Nevada we can continue to motivate Latino voters to stay engaged. We are very hopeful that Biden will come to us as a community, to listen to our needs" *(below)*.

When ‘usual residence’ is a prison

Census method of counting prisoners distorts demographics.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

IF A DEMOGRAPHER WERE TO DRAW UP a profile of eastern Colorado’s Crowley County using the most recent census data, it would appear to be far more diverse and densely populated than neighboring counties. About 6,000 people live in the 800-square-mile county’s four small towns, and about 47 percent of the population is either Latino, Black or Indigenous, considerably higher than the state as a whole.

The numbers are accurate, but they are also distorted by the fact that nearly half of the populace aren’t truly members of the community; they don’t eat at local restaurants, vote in local elections or send their children to school. That’s because at least 45% of the county’s residents are incarcerated, either in the Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility, a state prison, or the Crowley County Correctional Facility, which is operated by private contractor CoreCivic. Owing to the Census Bureau’s “usual residence” rule, however, they are counted as residents of Crowley County, rather than the places they lived prior to incarceration.

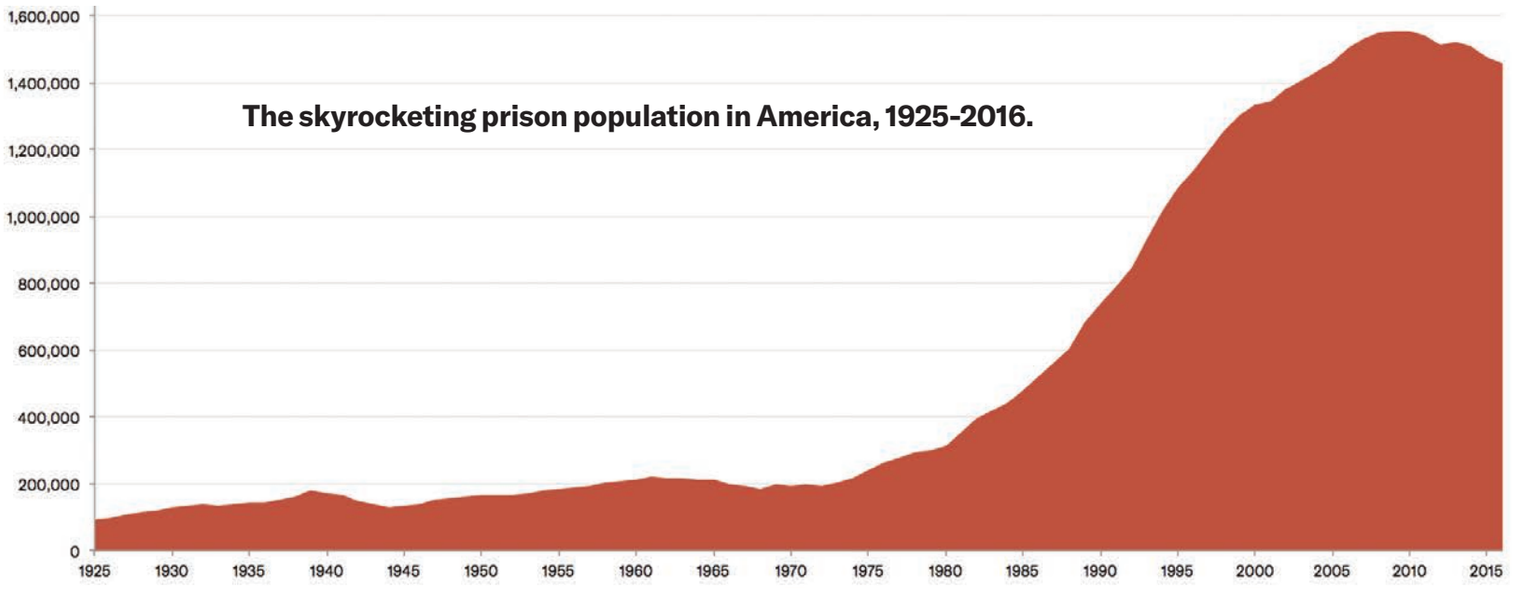
Crowley County is an extreme example of this phenomenon, but it’s far from unique. Across the Western United States, population numbers and demographic statistics are skewed in counties with large numbers of prisoners, giving rural counties outsized political power and creating a false picture of communities for policymakers.

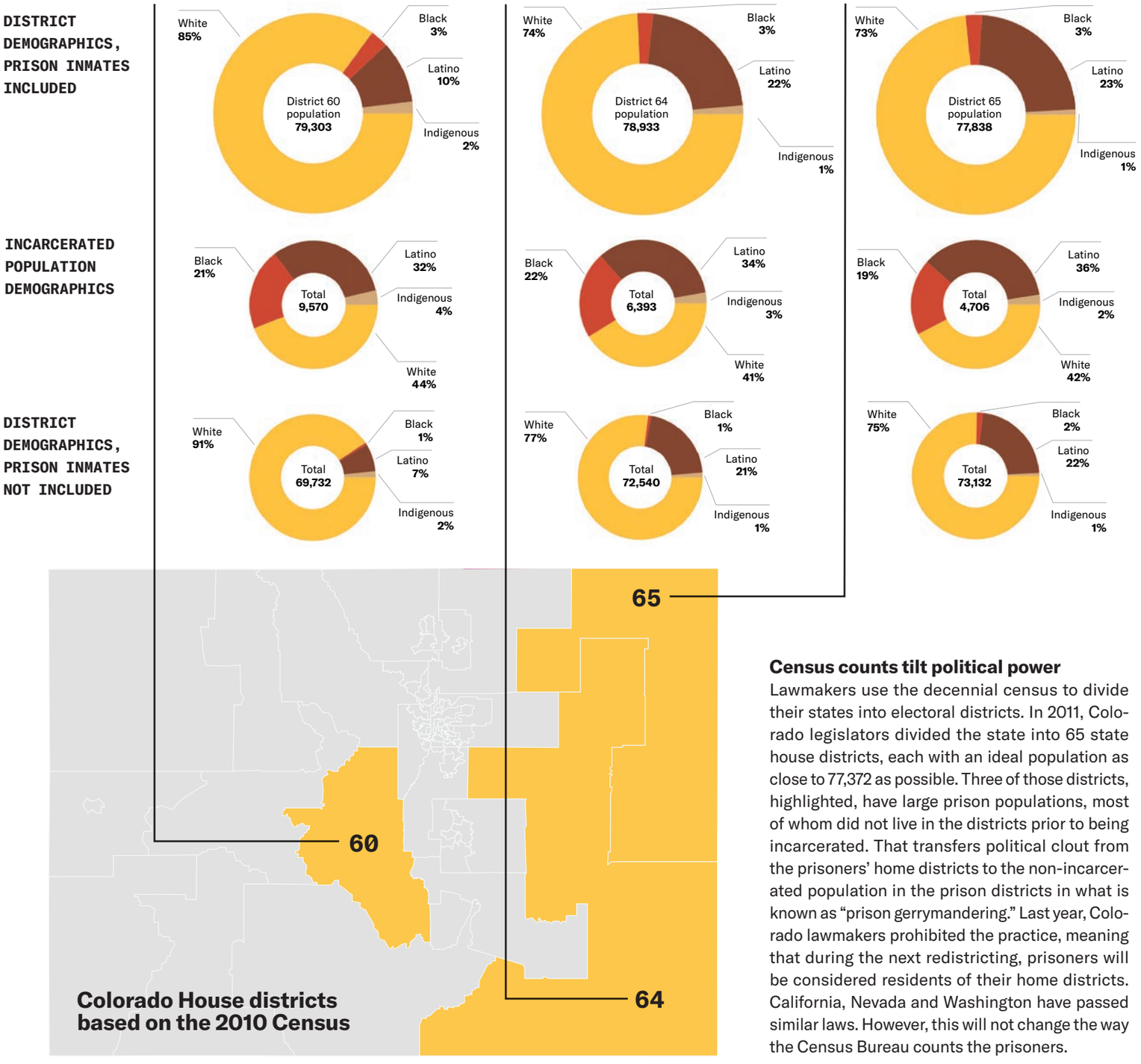
The 1790 law establishing the U.S. census states that people should be counted at their “usual place of abode,” defined as the place where they “live and sleep most of the time” on census day, which is April 1. The rule’s application has evolved slightly: Members of the military, for example, were initially counted where they were deployed. In 1970, the Census Bureau began counting them in their home states, though this year, soldiers will be considered as residents of the bases where they’re stationed. Because religious missionaries are counted at their mission location, Utah, with its many out-of-state Latter-day Saints, usually experiences an 11,000-person dent in its population count. But this year, due to COVID-19, the church ordered all missionaries to return before April, meaning they will be counted in their home states.

Prisoners, however, will still be counted where they’re imprisoned, despite nearly 80,000 comments urging the Census Bureau to end the practice. In 2016, when the federal government called for input on possible changes to residence criteria, many bemoaned the count’s effects on electoral districts, which are based on census population counts. The rule currently shifts political power away from prisoners’ home communities in favor of prison communities, which are often rural, white majority and conservative. (*See graphic, facing page.*)

In the 1970s, prison populations were seldom large enough relative to the surrounding areas to have a significant impact. But policy changes since the 1980s have greatly expanded the national prison population, resulting in a surge of prison construction, particularly in rural communities where extractive industries and agriculture are on the wane. On paper, such communities appear to be thriving, diverse places; in reality, they are essentially penal colonies, where a significant portion of the populace lives behind bars.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Prison Policy Initiative, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
Infographic design: Luna Anna Archey / HCN

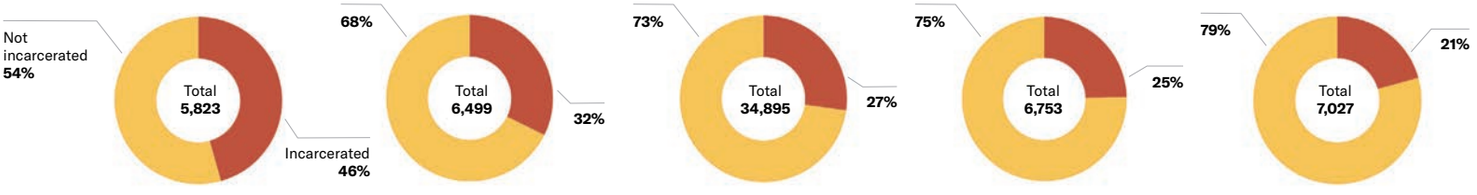




Census counts tilt political power

Lawmakers use the decennial census to divide their states into electoral districts. In 2011, Colorado legislators divided the state into 65 state house districts, each with an ideal population as close to 77,372 as possible. Three of those districts, highlighted, have large prison populations, most of whom did not live in the districts prior to being incarcerated. That transfers political clout from the prisoners' home districts to the non-incarcerated population in the prison districts in what is known as "prison gerrymandering." Last year, Colorado lawmakers prohibited the practice, meaning that during the next redistricting, prisoners will be considered residents of their home districts. California, Nevada and Washington have passed similar laws. However, this will not change the way the Census Bureau counts the prisoners.

The West's top five penal colonies



The politics of protest

November's election will test Portland's new political environment.

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

Portland, Oregon, Mayor Ted Wheeler speaks to the media while surrounded by protesters in front of the Multnomah County Justice Center in July.
Nathan Howard / Getty Images

PORTLAND, OREGON'S politics have been shaped in recent months by the city's reaction to the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in May. Ongoing nightly protests since Floyd's death were punctuated by the shooting of a Trump supporter and the police shooting of his alleged killer in September, escalating tensions over how to prevent further violence.

This November, Portland residents will cast their ballots in a mayoral election that may well be a referendum on police brutality and racial bias. The question in Portland, as in communities throughout the West and elsewhere, is whether protests and organizing can bring meaningful political change.

"There's nothing different about George Floyd's murder," Cameron Whitten, a Portland activist, said in an interview in late August. "What's different was the response." In Portland, that response has included more than $1.6 million in donations to the Black Resilience Fund, a group Whitten co-founded to help Black Portlanders pay for food, health care and other necessities. It's one of many new coalitions and organizations, including Reimagine Oregon and the Black Millennial Movement, founded amid protests this summer.

These groups have already had some success at the policy level. In June, for example, the city council cut the police budget by $15 million. (The police budget is now almost $230 million.) In July, the council approved a ballot initiative giving voters the power to create a new, stronger citizen police-oversight system authorized to subpoena police records and terminate officers for misconduct. The city also ended funding for transit police and a gun violence reduction team that advocates argued disproportionately targeted Black Portlanders.

On Election Day, Portland will choose between incumbent Mayor Ted Wheeler, who has been slow to act on police reform, and Sarah Iannarone, who has pledged to aggressively defund and rethink policing in the city. Teressa Raiford, the founder of Don't Shoot Portland, is also running a write-in campaign. Wheeler is facing a cratering approval rating and calls for his resignation for his failure to prevent deadly violence at protests. He has also been criticized for walking back some reforms; he has spoken against fully defunding the gun violence team, for example, citing an uptick in homicides in July.

Meanwhile, Iannarone has called for major changes in policing in Portland. The results of the election will be a good indicator of whether grassroots organizing can bring about broader political change. As of early last year, Portlanders still largely trusted police, said John Horvick, the political director for the Portland polling firm DHM Research, citing a 2019 survey by the firm. If Wheeler loses, it's a sign that trust has faded. "(Wheeler's) handling of protests and policing would be his downfall," Horvick said.

Iannarone is banking on voters wanting a new direction for policing. She's pledged to turn the Portland Police Bureau over to the city's only current Black commissioner, Jo Ann Hardesty, who has requested that responsibility. Portland's mayor and city commissioners oversee different departments, and the Police Bureau currently falls to the mayor, whom Hardesty has criticized during the protests. "We need clear and unambiguous leadership to drive us to a more just future," she wrote on social media after the killing of Aaron Danielson, the pro-Trump demonstrator, in August. "We cannot continue to have a police force that shows up a minute late because their leadership is not showing up at all." (Wheeler, whose campaign did not reply to requests for comment, has said he would not cede his role to Hardesty before November, but would revisit the question if re-elected.)

Iannarone said in a phone interview that she supports reducing the city police budget by $50 million instead of the current $15 million, in line with one of Reimagine Oregon's proposed reforms. "I understand the frustration of people when they see the violence done by our police," she said. "People in the streets are building power." Iannarone would also seek to criminalize right-wing protesters for inciting riots. This would be a major change from Wheeler's approach; during his tenure, police have communicated and at times appeared to coordinate with leaders of the far-right group Patriot Prayer, according to text messages obtained by *Willamette Week*.

Portland's mayoral election will show how far voters are willing to go to see policing change in the city. But the power of the movement for racial justice and police reform will echo beyond the mayor's race, with four of five city council seats possibly going to newcomers. "This could be an inflection point for political change in the city," Horvick said. The biggest question may not be who wins the races this November, but, "Do we see new leaders from these organizations and movements emerge?"

One such leader could be Candace Avalos, who co-founded the Black Millennial Movement and chairs the Citizen Review Committee, a citizen police oversight initiative. Whether organizing turns to political power in November, the movement for Black lives will persist. "The protests have pushed change," Avalos said. "They're messy and complex, but the product is incredible."

Federal boots on city streets

With Congress gridlocked and courts restrained, the public alone is facing down authoritarian tendencies.

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

FOR ONE NIGHT IN LATE JULY, the mayor of Portland, Oregon, joined a protest against police brutality outside the downtown federal courthouse. Alongside the demonstrators, the mayor, Ted Wheeler, was tear-gassed when federal law enforcement cracked down on the assembly. "I'm not going to lie — it stings; it's hard to breathe," Wheeler told *The New York Times*. "This is an egregious overreaction on the part of federal officers. This is flat-out urban warfare."

Many of the protesters were unsympathetic; some jeered or blasted him with leaf blowers and scuffled with his security team. That's because Wheeler, who is police commissioner as well as mayor, oversees a department that uses tear gas so often he's been nicknamed "Tear Gas Ted." The nightly protests, which were sparked by the killing of George Floyd in May but were tapering off at the time, took on a new dimension with the arrival of federal law enforcement from the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security, including elite militarized Border Patrol officers.

Suddenly, Portland was in the national spotlight. Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf claimed the city was under siege by violent rioters, while free-speech advocates warned of a constitutional crisis, as Oregon Public Broadcasting verified reports of federal agents detaining demonstrators in unmarked vans. Federal officers pulled back in late July, but the episode tested the limits of domestic policing by the federal government. In Portland, the impunity with which federal officers can be deployed was on full display — a challenge to the ability of the U.S. Congress and the courts to rein in an executive branch that is bending both federal policing norms and constitutional rights.

Federal law enforcement is omnipresent across the country. Agencies like the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Drug Enforcement Agency, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and (most controversially, due to its role in carrying out President Donald Trump's hard-line immigration agenda) Immigration and Customs Enforcement, are expected to enforce federal laws. But their recent arrival at protests is remarkable. "What's more unusual is seeing them add agents with the specific purpose of crowd and protest control," said Tung Yin,

Federal officers deploy tear gas and nonlethal munitions while dispersing a crowd of about a thousand protesters in front of Portland's Mark O. Hatfield U.S. Courthouse in July.
Nathan Howard / Getty Images

Protesters wave placards at a rally against police brutality and the deployment of federal troops to U.S. cities in Portland, Oregon, in July. **Kathryn Elsesser / AFP via Getty Images**

a professor at Lewis and Clark College's Law School in Portland, who specializes in national security and terrorism law.

The deployment in downtown Portland was within the purview of federal law enforcement officers, who have a "clear cause and mandate" to protect federal property, Yin said. But that mandate usually falls on the U.S. Marshals Service rather than other agencies — one sign that what was happening in Portland was different. When Customs and Border Protection officers started arresting people and dispersing nonviolent protesters with tear gas and nonlethal (but dangerous) munitions, concerns about the constitutionality of their presence grew. Even as tensions escalated, President Donald Trump openly flirted with deploying troops to other U.S. cities.

Democratic politicians condemned the actions of federal agents, with Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., leading an ill-fated legislative push to constrain federal law enforcement actions through an amendment to the defense spending bill. The "No Secret Police in America Act" prohibits federal agents from using unmarked vehicles and requires that agency and individual identification be visible on uniforms, and that agencies notify the public about deployment. Senate Republicans blocked debate and a vote. A similar bill in the House of Representatives has yet to be put to a vote.

The failure to respond to what happened in Portland is a sign that "the Senate is deeply broken," Merkley told *High Country News*. "I haven't spoken with anyone who disagrees with the need for police to have unique identifiers." With the election so close, Merkley thinks Republicans are unwilling to challenge their party's presidential candidate. Instead, they're using their majority and parliamentary tactics to avoid debating laws that curtail federal law enforcement.

Absent legislative checks, lawsuits filed in federal courts have secured some protections for legal observers, journalists and medics at Portland protests. Federal agents were issued a temporary restraining order against detaining or targeting members of the press and other legal observers, or seizing any recordings or equipment from the press, following a lawsuit from the Oregon chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. "We have a Constitution for a reason — the rubber meets the road in the courts," said Kelly Simon, ACLU Oregon's interim legal director. "There's been a waterfall of cases in the face of these unconstitutional actions, and that waterfall is going to keep falling."

Though the legal actions have helped limit the current abuses of authority, they cannot prevent them from happening entirely. "They are reactive because of legal nuances," Simon said. "It's hard to go to court before something happens."

In the end, the court of public opinion may hold the most sway when it comes to the mobilization of federal forces on U.S. streets. Some of the reforms proposed in the Secret Police Act are already being considered by federal law enforcement after widespread public backlash. In early August, Acting Deputy Homeland Security Secretary Ken Cuccinelli told Congress that law enforcement will stop wearing Army-style uniforms. Despite Cuccinelli's testimony, however, some federal officers have worn their battle dress uniforms while breaking up demonstrations in Portland.

Merkley said he thinks the escalation of federal police was a failed campaign ploy. "They alienate the suburbs because it's totally un-American," Merkley said. "I feel positive that they backed off already," he said, following a deal Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, D, made to add more state police for crowd control in Portland in exchange for a diminished federal presence. Since the agreement was announced, federal law enforcement has been less visible, but officers have still engaged with crowds outside the downtown courthouse and at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement building.

With Congress at a partisan standstill and courts unable to react quickly, public pressure has prevented the expansion of federal law enforcement. The power of public opinion can only go so far, however, and some Washington, D.C., analysts has already gamed out grim scenarios that highlight the lack of checks on executive power, should Trump lose the Electoral College but attempt to hold onto power.

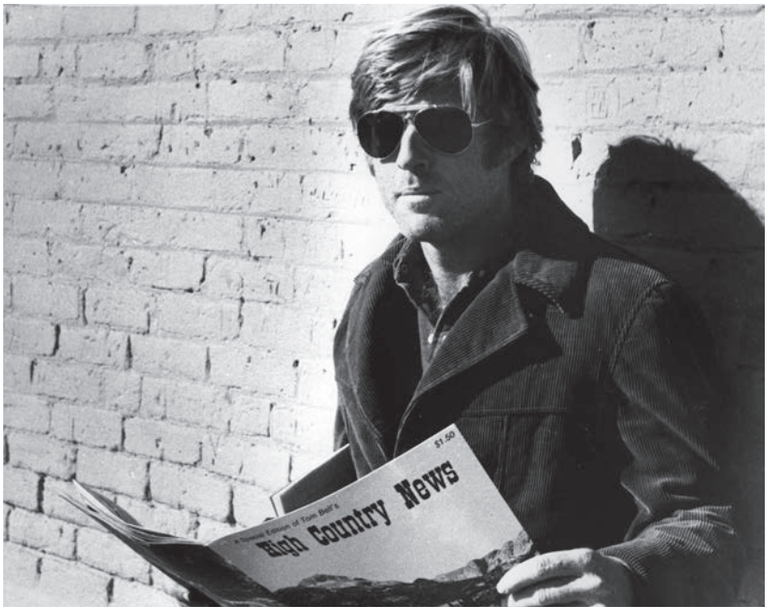
Yin, however, thinks the rhetoric around the federal deployment in Oregon belies the actual scale of what happened. "The significance of the abuses is unquestioned and impacts some people in downtown, but outside of the immediate area the disruptive nature isn't there," Yin said. Opposing sides projected their own fears and agendas onto the situation, and their conclusions don't reflect the reality for most Portlanders. "The city isn't burning, and there's not secret police all over," Yin said. Besides, he said, absent Trump federalizing the National Guard — a move that would likely be contested by state governors — there aren't enough federal agents to occupy every American city.

"There's been a waterfall of cases in the face of these unconstitutional actions, and that waterfall is going to keep falling."

50TH ANNIVERSARY

High Country News in the ’70s

Bruce Hamilton remembers HCN.



Robert Redford peruses Tom Bell’s *HCN* in Lander, Wyoming, in the early 1970s. **Wyoming State Journal (now Lander State Journal)**

In the 1970s, there was a mad dash to promote U.S. energy independence following the 1973 Arab Oil Embargo. Plans were unveiled to transform the Northern Rockies and Northern Great Plains into the Ruhr Valley of North America, tapping the region’s abundant coal, oil, gas, uranium and oil shale. Activists and conservation groups were still few and far between, and *High Country News* knit them together by sharing information and hope. There were few environmental journalists back then, and *HCN* caught the eye of major newspapers that picked up on our stories and shared them with a national audience.

The North Central Power Study proposed a transbasin diversion to bring water from the Colorado River Basin to the water-short Powder River Basin to exploit its coal resources. There were plans to pepper North Dakota with mine-mouth coal gasification plants and build a giant coal slurry pipeline from the Powder River Basin to Arkansas. The Atomic Energy Commission suggested using underground nuclear blasts to produce natural gas from tight geologic formations. As acid rain became a growing problem in the East, industry pursued the West’s low-sulfur coal, which could be easily strip-mined without pesky union labor. Another proposal called for geothermal energy development right up to the boundary of Yellowstone National Park, threatening the world’s most famous geysers.

High Country News covered all of this every two weeks and empowered the fledgling regional environmental movement. Wyoming and Montana passed the nation’s toughest strip-mine regulation, industrial siting laws, severance taxes and sulfur dioxide regulations, with one Wyoming legislator arguing that we did not want to end up having “49 states and one smudge.” The AEC’s nuking proposals and the coal slurry pipelines were blocked, and plans to fast-track and subsidize energy projects were both defeated. The proposed transbasin diversions and geothermal leasing next to Yellowstone were blocked. All these victories were won by a coalition of outspent, scrappy local volunteer conservationists, ranchers, outfitters and sportsmen, business owners, Native Americans and a handful of environmentalists. What brought them together as a powerful community with a common voice was *High Country News*. Carrying forward the spirit of its founder, Tom Bell, *HCN* fearlessly confronted powerful adversaries. One wonders what the region would look like today without *High Country News* to tell this story.

Bruce Hamilton was an HCN *editor from 1973 to 1978, and is now national policy director of the Sierra Club.*

In celebration of HCN*’s 50th birthday, we’re looking back through the decades, one issue at a time. To scroll through* HCN*’s full timeline, visit our webpage:* **hcn.org/events/50-years-timeline**

Krystal Quiles / HCN

TAKE US HIGHER

From its inception as a rare environmental voice in an ecologically fragile region, to its increasingly nuanced coverage of the country’s most rapidly growing and diverse populations, *High Country News* has, story by story, unveiled the real and complex West behind the beautiful scenery. Now we’re raising $10 million to spread the news and launch *HCN* into the next half-century. Please make a pledge or contribution today: **hcn.org/support50more**

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HCN COMMUNITY

Reflecting on the 1970s

"I'd say the most memorable story from the '70s is in Tom Bell's first issue, about 'the shame' of a fellow rancher poisoning eagles to protect his lambs."

—Betsy Marston, Paonia, Colorado

"By the early 1970s, Vietnam raged on, bloodier than ever. Many civil rights leaders had been assassinated. ... Freedom and harmony could only be found outside the system — get out of the polluted cities and stifling suburbs, find a place in the country, tend your garden and find beauty in life."

—Doug Morris, Sonoita, Arizona

"As a kid in Arizona and Utah, I understood the West's issues through grownups' conversation — that individuals, corporations and government agencies were ruining the West by overuse (including grazing and tourism), mining, logging, building roads. ... All this happened out East, of course, but the East was considered a lost cause."

—Susannah Abbey, Albuquerque, New Mexico

"The summer of 1979, I joined a Forest Service fire crew in Northern California that brought together people from around the West and exposed me to an interesting mix of personalities and cultural backgrounds. It resonates with what *HCN* is trying to do these days — expand the way we're exposed to people with different experiences and backgrounds, interacting with the Western environment."

—Tim Baker, Eureka, California

"I was involved in anti-nuke activities in Eugene, Oregon. During the 1970s, there were major efforts to develop alternative energy sources. Jimmy Carter even put solar panels on the White House — until Reagan took them off!"

—Tom Lynch, Lincoln, Nebraska

"An *HCN* story revealed heavy duck kills on waste ponds near Green River, Wyoming. I was a chemical engineer at one of the plants and helped set up a successful duck rescue and rehabilitation program."

—Jack Schwartz, Weatherford, Oklahoma

WE'D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU! Please share your memories and favorite *HCN* stories from the 1990s and we may post them here! **hcne.ws/my-west**

HCN MOURNS THE PASSING of Norman Harry, a leader of the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe. Norm was deeply involved in the historic water agreements that protected northern Nevada's Pyramid Lake, and fought to end toxic munitions burning at the Sierra Army Weapons Depot. At a 2018 lakeside gathering, Norm spoke to *HCN* about his Great Basin homeland. "Norm had the least amount of pretense of any person I've ever met," writes *HCN* board member Bob Fulkerson. "He could just as comfortably talk to senators and Congress as he could mix it up with Bernie bros or burners."

Norm Harry and his daughter, Autumn. **Kit Miller**

HCN COMMUNITY

"Pollution: Growing up in LA in the '60s and '70s, we'd have over 100 'Ozone Alert' days per year, where folks had to stay indoors because of the unhealthy air."

—Mike Newton, Las Vegas, Nevada

"The 1970s was when the working class once and for all lost the class war. The decade is when Roosevelt's New Deal was killed dead."

—Joe Ward, Farmington, NM

"What drew me to *HCN* was the fresh new environmental reporting for the Rocky Mountains on the Forest Service and BLM, the forests and rangelands. Many so-called "multiple-use" practices favored only a selected few — grazing, drilling, logging and mining."

—Gerry Snyder, Manhattan, Kansas

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Warren Truitt | Carmichael, CA
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Tom Viola | Berkeley, CA
Albert & Kathryn Vogel | Crested Butte, CO
Ingrid Vollnhofer | Santa Fe, NM
Don K. Wall | Ames, IA
Peter J. Ware | Grand Junction, CO
Grant R. Weber | Naples, FL
Meg Weesner | Tucson, AZ
Bob Weirick & Susan Slade | Bozeman, MT
William A. West | Denver, CO
Fred Wheeler | Franktown, CO
Don & Donna Whyde | Casper, WY
Eric & Brandy Wilson | Boise, ID
John C. Wise | Ashland, OR
Arthur Wisehart | Paonia, CO
Jerry Wright | Nathrop, CO
William & Suzanne Wuerthele | Denver, CO
Anny Zweifel | Williams, OR

FRIEND ($50 - $74)

Anonymous (75)
In honor of all *HCN* writers | Santa Paula, CA
In honor of Morgan Allsup | Cortez, CO
In honor of the Bates Family | New Castle, CO
In honor of Harold Case | Nipomo, CA
In honor of Dan Cogan | Culver City, CA
In honor of Wayne Hare | Gunnison, CO
In honor of MMIW | Western U.S., Canada
In honor of my ancestors
In honor of David & Suzy Pines | Aspen, CO
In honor of Larry & Lesley Rameil | Carbondale, CO
In honor of Frank Reed | Missoula, MT
In honor of Stella Blue Summer | Seattle, WA
In honor of Peter Ware | Rosevale, CO
In memory of Jenevieve May Clayton Apgar | Greeley, CO
In memory of Bodhi | Las Vegas, NV
In memory of Ella Bogdanova | Moscow, Russia
In memory of Edwin Brands | Clabasas, CA
In memory of Don Cannard & Ed Robertson | Vancouver, WA
In memory of Fred W. Cropp | Wooster, OH
In memory of Linda Wiener Elmore | Santa Fe, NM
In memory of Miles Everett | Healdsberg, CA
In memory of Jeff Grandison | Cedar City, UT
In memory of Grant O. Hagen | Jackson, WY
In memory of Robert Halford | Idaho Falls, ID
In memory of Lonnie Jay | Miami, OK
In memory of George & Donna Kashian & Ron | Andrade, MI
In memory of Stella & John Eliot Kennedy | Denver, CO
In memory of Margot Kidder | Livingston, MT
In memory of H.H. Kirchhoff | Bozeman, MT
In memory of Barbara and Bill Lawson | Granby, CO
In memory of Ann Little | Laporte, CO
In memory of Ed Marston | Paonia, CO
In memory of Donald McBee, my dad | Meadview, AZ
In memory of Arthur O. Metlyng | Tucson, AZ
In memory of Wyatt Levi Neumann | Bozeman, MT
In memory of Adam Roberts | Randle, WA
In memory of Rod Robinson | Baker City, OR
In memory of Reini & Dotty Ross, above 10,000 feet west of longitude 100 | Reno, NV
In memory of Philip W. Ryan | Bellvue, CO
In memory of David W. Schaub
In memory of Sofia Sherri | Santa Maria, CA
In memory of Kareem Shihab | Oakland, CA
In memory of Tessie Siegal & Ruth Radskin
In memory of Betsy Thibault | Albuquerque, NM
In memory of Lucretia Weed | Lexington, MA
Cristina Abbenante | San Antonio, TX
William Abney | Denver, CO
Jim Adams | Boulder, CO
Craig Adams & C.J. Schultz | San Diego, CA
Bonnie Adamson | Fort Collins, CO
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Carolyn Allabashi | Aurora, CO
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Lori Thwaite | Bowie, AZ
Larry Trammell | East Wenatchee, WA
Russell Tyldesley | Santa Fe, NM
Stephen Vago | Sterling, VA
Russell Waring | Estes Park, CO
Dennis & Renae Weder | Magna, UT
Michael Wells | Lewiston, ID
Mary Lee Wood | Parma, ID
Steve & Dana Young | Fort Lupton, CO

(continued from page 11)
its own political strategy — lobbying the state Legislature to change Nevada water law, then lobbying the Nevada congressional delegation to exempt the project from further federal environmental review, even as it aggressively promoted conservation measures and engineered a low-level intake pump at Lake Mead to secure its pumping capacities.

The Water Network's continued pressure, applied from multiple angles, ultimately paid off. In March, the Nevada District Court denied the SNWA's appeal for a final time — blocking it from pumping any water in eastern Nevada. After a string of seven straight legal losses, the SNWA announced that it would not appeal to the Nevada Supreme Court. In May, at its Board of Directors meeting, the Water Authority withdrew all its remaining water applications associated with the project, ending a 31-year battle.

Delaine Spilsbury, the Ely Shoshone leader, watched the board meeting via a video call. "I yelled at my son, Rick, 'Get the champagne! — Get the champagne!' It was hard to believe that it was happening. When it's been that way for so long, you never think it will change."

NEVADA HAS A LONG HISTORY of resource extraction, everything from gold, to rare earth minerals, to water. And the state is by no means a regulatory haven for environmental causes. But the defeat of the SNWA, along with other recent data, suggests that public opinion around natural resources, especially water, is changing. Since 2002, southern Nevada's population has increased by 46%, but its per capita water usage has decreased 38%, and its consumption of Colorado River water is down 25%. The SNWA's own partnerships up and down the Colorado River, and the Great Basin Water Network's unexpected partnerships within the state, point to a larger shift.

Regardless of these changing attitudes, and the Water Network win, the decades-long battle produced collateral damage: deep mistrust between Nevada's rural residents and the state, especially the Southern Nevada Water Authority.

Tom Baker, a fourth-generation rancher in the Snake Valley, understands as much. "We knew we could never let SNWA start at all," he said recently, "because once they started, they would keep going. We knew that the amount of water they wanted wasn't actually there. As soon as they figured that out too, they would have to keep expanding. Rural Nevada is very lucky that this project is finished."

Such criticism is understandable, Simeon Herskovits, the Water Network's longtime lawyer, said. "There is a long history of deceit and punitive actions taken by SNWA towards rural folks," he said. As recently as 2019, for example, the agency tried to change state laws that protect senior water-rights holders in Nevada, such as farmers and ranchers in rural counties. The legislation would have allowed the state engineer to re-award the rights to junior users. "That meant there was no opportunity for trust. Rural interests knew there was no way they could take SNWA at its word."

Pat Mulroy herself, former general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority and the architect of the now-failed project, agreed. Asked what she would have done differently on the Vegas Pipeline, she quickly responded: "Nothing we said or did was going to persuade then. We are city folk. People in the rural areas don't trust us." But then she paused, and turned the thought. "Look," she said, "these battles are not going away. It is one of the divides, and there has to be bridges. Every move we made — whether with farmers in Utah or ranchers in White Pine County — they said no. That, to me, is the tragedy. This will never change unless people are willing to talk to one another."

(continued from page 15)
Indian Tribes of Alaska — are asking the USDA to move toward a framework of "mutual concurrence. That concept improves on consultation and better aligns with the international standard of "free, prior and informed consent," which is enshrined in the U.N.'s Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. With mutual concurrence, "the power dynamic is much more even, where the tribe has more of a substantive say, and the agency has to respond to and respect that tribal input," said Monte Mills, director of the Margery Hunter Brown Indian Law Clinic at the University of Montana, who specializes in public lands and tribal management. "It's proposing a new relationship for the management of the forest as a whole."

THE FOREST SERVICE'S final decision on the Tongass exemption will come this fall. So, too, could the decision on whether or not the USDA will take up the petition for a traditional homelands rule. A rejection isn't necessarily the end: A new presidential administration would give the 11 tribes a new opportunity to make their case.

The Tongass National Forest encompasses a number of Southeast Alaska Native villages and their ancestral lands, so any decision about it will affect access to food sources like salmon, Sitka black-tailed deer and wild berries, as well as cultural resources like western red and yellow cedar trees, which are used for regalia, baskets, totem poles, masks and smokehouses. Yellow cedar is imperiled by climate change, and the Tongass is also a critical carbon sink. "We need (the Tongass) more than ever as the climate's warming and our tourism and fishing industries have been taking a hit, both because of the pandemic and changing ecosystem conditions that have affected fish runs," said Kate Glover, a staff attorney for Earthjustice based in Juneau who has worked on litigation around the Tongass. "We need to protect the forest that they depend on."

With Alaska warming faster than the rest of the United States, it's getting harder to put up food for the winter, a matter of survival in places like Kasaan, which has no grocery store. And the pandemic is only exacerbating the problem, creating disruptions in travel and food supplies.

At 26 years old, Marina Anderson has heard nearly all her life about the possibility that the Tongass could be logged, with little regard for the tribes who rely on it. Her father was a logger and a tribal council member, her mother president of the Alaska Native Sisterhood, a nonprofit that promotes Indigenous rights. Anderson remembers doing her homework at their meetings, as conversations about sea otter hunts, Alaska politics and Indigenous rights wafted around her. "Our way of life is something that isn't always transcribable to English," Anderson said from her office in Kasaan in August. "My relationship to the Tongass goes so deep that I'm made aware of it every day and in different ways. The salmon that I eat, that comes from the Tongass. The air that I breathe, that comes from the Tongass."

That depth of connection and intrinsic value can get lost in the tribal consultation process, especially given the way the U.S. views land and water and the life they harbor, Anderson said. Cultural needs — for generations to come — are not quantifiable. "The Forest Service asked me, 'How many trees do you guys need left for canoes and totem poles?' " Anderson said. "They understand that we need old growth: tight grain, beautiful logs, straight-grain logs. What they don't understand is that we don't have a number for them."

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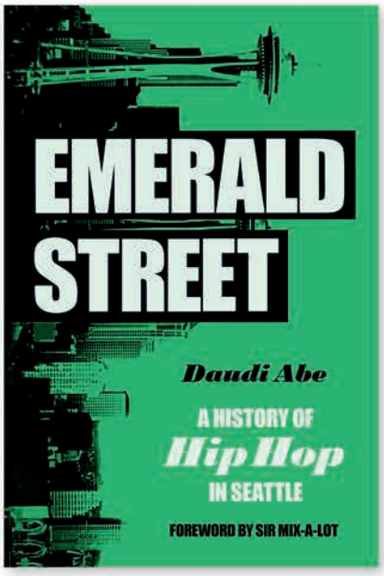

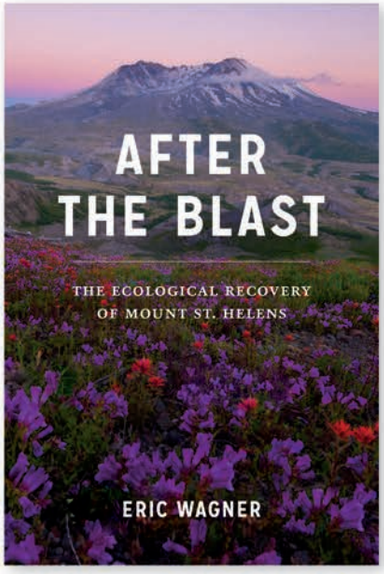

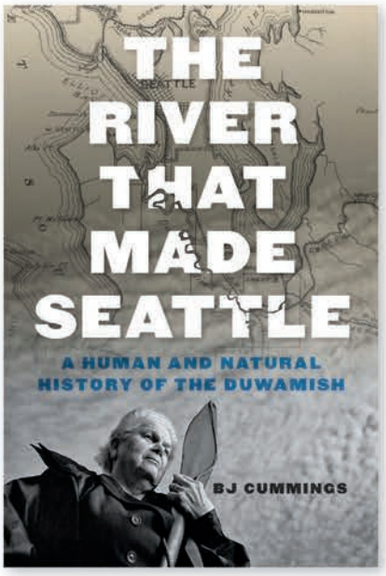

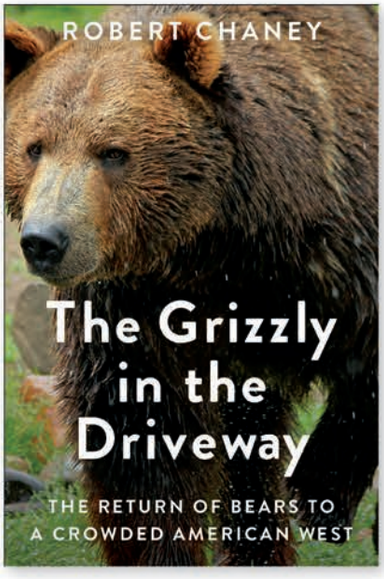

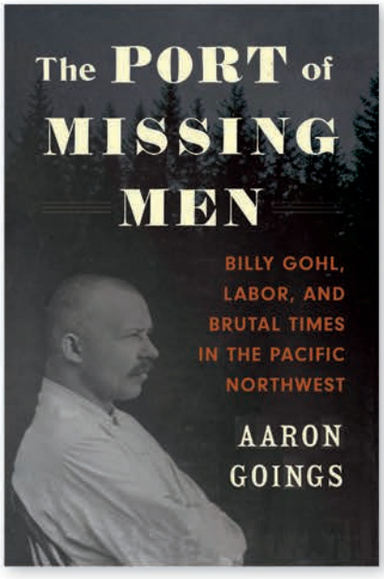

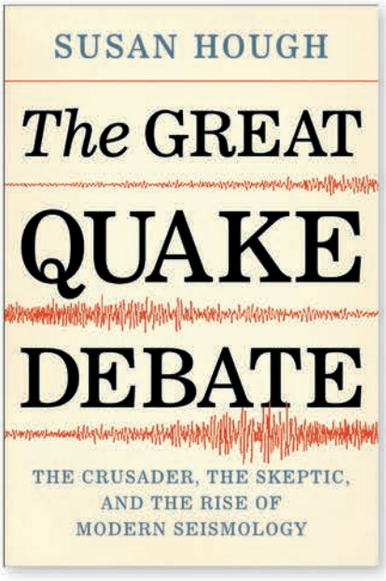

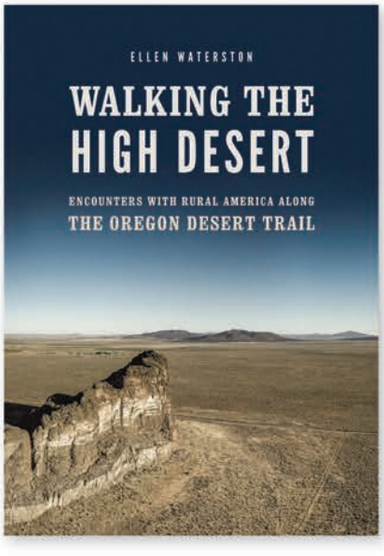

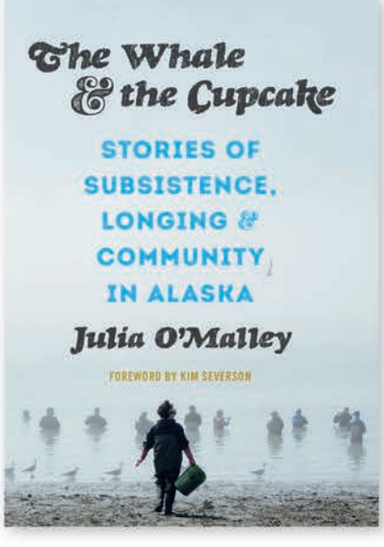

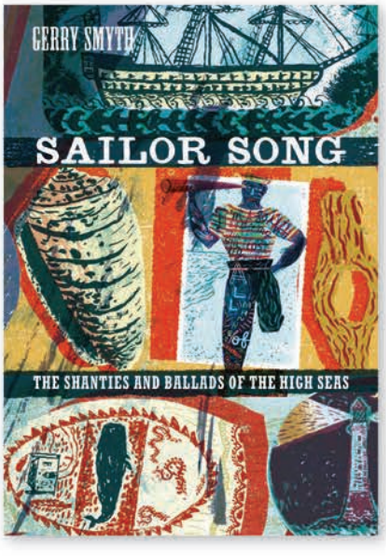

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Grand Disjunction

Public lands are at the center of Trump and Biden's competing energy goals.

By Paige Blankenbuehler | Photos by Andrew Miller

The Lunch Loops Trail System on the outskirts of Grand Junction, Colorado, was developed on public land by the Bureau of Land Management and the local mountain bike trail association. About 73% of Mesa County is public land, and about 18% of it is protected from natural resource development.

ON JULY 13, IN GRAND JUNCTION, COLORADO, a day after the coronavirus pandemic hit a local three-month peak, 45 elderly women flouted the state's "safer-at-home" directive and withstood temperatures that reached 105 degrees Fahrenheit to meet at the Grand Vista Hotel for the Mesa County Republican Women's Luncheon.

Officially, the event was meant to spotlight an issue on this year's ballot in Colorado, a contentious measure on wolf reintroduction in the state. But as the women milled about the hotel's conference room, discarding their masks and embracing each other, the scene looked more like a reunion. Although the group, which was founded in 1944, typically gathers monthly in Grand Junction, Mesa County's largest city, the meetings had been on forced hiatus since March, and the women were excited to be together, excited by their shared disobedience.

The featured speaker was Denny Behrens, co-chair of the Colorado Stop the Wolf Coalition, but the true star of the day was Lauren Boebert, a feisty MAGA Republican who had just beaten a longtime incumbent, Rep. Scott Tipton, in the Republican primary. Boebert moved from table to table for introductions, handshakes and hugs, a sidearm holstered at her hip. At 33, she was the youngest there by decades. In Rifle, Colorado, where she has lived since the early 2000s, Boebert owns the Shooters Grill, where waitresses in tight flannel shirts and denim serve burgers and steaks with loaded handguns strapped to their hips or thighs. The Grill was shut down in May for repeatedly violating public health orders restricting in-person dining, but the publicity Boebert received from the conflict — and a GoFundMe petition for the Grill that raised thousands of dollars — assisted her bid for Congress.

After a lunch of barbecued chicken, potato salad and corn muffins, the group's president officially began the meeting. She recited a prayer, quoted Abraham Lincoln, and led the room in the Pledge of Allegiance. Then she introduced key people in the room: candidates for the county commission, a representative from President Donald Trump's Mesa County campaign office, and Boebert.

Speaking to the room, Boebert described a conversation she had had with Trump, who called her after she won. "President Trump said that he was watching this from the very beginning," Boebert said. "He said, 'I knew that something big was going to happen with you, and now I get to call and congratulate you.' He said, 'Every day I'm fighting these maniacs, but now I have you to fight them with me.'"

Her audience laughed and applauded. Boebert smiled brightly.

"We are going to win this fight against the liberal socialist agenda and restore the potential for our community to develop our rich natural resources right here in the ground in Mesa County," she said.

Boebert is partly right; this election could mean a change in how much fossil fuels are extracted from public lands. Currently, a quarter of the crude oil produced in the United States comes from federal lands, and almost three-quarters of Mesa County is federally owned. Public land also accounts for 20% of the country's total greenhouse gas emissions, making it key to any national energy (or climate) policy.

If he wins in November, Trump promises to further his agenda of "energy dominance," which has already opened millions of acres of federal land across the Western U.S. to energy extraction. But if his opponent, Joseph Biden, wins the presidency, he'll bring with him the most progressive environmental platform ever proposed by a major party candidate. And, as with so many issues in this election, the stakes are high for communities that rely on public lands — and nowhere are these themes more amplified than in Grand Junction, the home of the new Bureau of Land Management headquarters.

THERE ARE 1,260 OIL WELL SITES scattered throughout Mesa County. The scene is not apocalyptic; the sites don't dominate the landscape, and the machinery is tucked away from highways and out of view from the city center. In the rural communities that orbit Grand Junction, pumpjacks, compressors and pipes sit amid a mosaic of farms and ranchland, orchards and winery towns, and numerous biking and hiking trails.

Some 63,000 people live in Grand Junction, more than 80% of them white, and around 15% Latino. The city is named for its location at the junction of the Gunnison and Colorado rivers, and has a long history of mining, including uranium. In the 1970s, thousands of homeowners were warned that their homes had been built on non-mediated radioactive sites, marked by gray, sand-like waste from a defunct uranium mill downtown.

Over the last decade, Grand Junction has developed a reputation for outdoor recreation and wineries. It is a city defined by two distinct identities: new liberal-leaning outdoor enthusiasts and a more rooted, conservative population. The different groups coexist amid the expansive public land with all its multiple uses: hunting, fishing, hiking, mountain biking, motorized off-roading and skiing, as well as ranching and the extraction of oil, gas and coal.

There are nearly 20 outdoor gear stores in the downtown vicinity alone, reflecting the myriad approaches to life here. Brochures, maps and pamphlets

A wall of flags, hand-painted signs and large campaign billboards on display atop the banked earthen wall of the Grand Junction Motor Speedway on the north side of Interstate 70 in Grand Junction, Colorado *(facing)*.

A hand-painted election sign on the south side of Monument Road just a few hundred feet from the east entrance of the Colorado National Monument. In the last decade, Mesa County has developed a reputation for its outdoor recreation and wineries, and attracted more liberal-leaning residents *(right)*.

Rural development in Mesa County, Colorado, below the Book Cliffs, which stretch west into Utah *(below)*.

at places like Hill People Gear — a family-run institution that sells hand-sewn goods and promotes gun rights on its website — and Loki Outdoor gear — where an 18-year-old sales associate told me she was "definitely" voting for Biden — tout the many nearby places where one might recreate. About 73% of Mesa County is public land, but only 18% of it is protected from natural resource development. So far, Grand Junction has had enough room for a variety of perspectives and competing interests. Since Trump took office, however, he has offered more land for oil and gas development in his first two years as president than Obama did in his entire second term, auctioning off more than 24 million acres of public lands. If Trump is re-elected and continues to lease land at the rate of the last few years, opponents fear that land that could be managed for recreation, wildlife or conservation will wind up under the control of energy companies. At best, it will remain idle, but be inaccessible to the public. At worst, it will be immediately developed and directly contribute to greenhouse emissions in a world that is already nearing the critical threshold for the climate crisis.

Even as Grand Junction has changed, the Trump years have widened the political and cultural divide between liberals and conservatives here. Multiple use and the concept of space for all have given way to sharpened political ideologies and divisiveness, and attitudes have hardened around the pandemic and its restrictions, while protests have arisen concerning police brutality.

AFTER I LEFT the Republican Women's Luncheon, I drove west to the trailhead of Lunch Loops, a popular mountain biking trail network just outside Colorado National Monument. I was there to meet Sarah Shrader and Scott Braden, two of the town's most prominent conservationists.

Shrader and Braden represent an alternate vision for Grand Junction, a future in which a sustainable economy is built around abundant access to public lands. Both are relative newcomers to the area, but they've invested their personal and professional lives in the Colorado canyon country.

I waited for them by a picnic table in the sweltering heat. Behind me, a rocky mesa hulked over the system of singletrack trails, extending out from narrow ledges and scarcely visible breaks in the canyons — the kind of landscape whose scale outflanks the mind's ability to absorb it.

The area is managed jointly by the Bureau of Land Management and the city of Grand Junction. The local BLM office, with the help of the city and a number of other land-use agencies, is extending a connector trail all the way to the monument. Once it's finished, a person will be able to bike from the heart of downtown Junction all the way to the monument in about 25 minutes.

Soon, Braden arrived and shared some relief: iced black coffee sweetened with agave nectar, which he poured from a glass jar into a tin mug for me. Braden is 44, with a friendly smile and a dark goatee. He has worked for many conservation organizations and served a stint on a resource advisory council for the BLM. Now, he runs his own firm where he provides advocacy-for-hire for Western environmental and conservation groups.

"Grand Junction is really the perfect place to be for me," he told me as we drank. "This is a place with an economic identity built around cattle and sheep, oil and gas, uranium mining. But you look out on places like this, and you see the ability of outdoor rec as an industry to transform it."

Just then, Shrader drove up, parked, and walked towards us. Shrader is the head of the Outdoor Recreation Coalition, a local interest group she founded in 2015 to help outdoor recreation businesses work together to market the area as an international destination.

The three of us stood on the sandy pavement drinking our coffee, using the picnic table to reinforce social distancing. The trails were empty except for one mountain biker, who was climbing a steep ascent to the edge of the ridge; we watched, half in awe, half concerned that the rider might collapse from heat exhaustion. Shrader thought she recognized the cyclist as a pro she knew. "I was riding my bike up the monument the other day, and she lapped me going up," Shrader said, "and she lapped me again going down."

Shrader's cheeks were moist with perspiration above a royal blue bandanna that she pulled down to drink her coffee. She moved from Prescott, Arizona, to Grand Junction in 2004 with her husband. In addition to running the coalition, Shrader owns a company called Bonsai Design, which builds adventure courses — hard-core mountain playgrounds with ziplines, obstacle courses, Indiana Jones-type bridges — for resorts, state parks and adventure-recreation companies. She started it in her basement in 2005, and her business grew quickly. She bought a building downtown, but outgrew that space, too. Just recently, she broke ground on a new location by the Colorado River — part of a revitalization project that features a water park designed to accommodate low-income families and encourage them to recreate on the river.

Shrader said the Outdoor Recreation Coalition was formed to grow adventure-based industries and the higher quality of life that goes with them. "I did that to really start talking publicly and visibly about the outdoor rec economy here and to shift focus on primarily

getting our wealth from the surface of the land, instead of underneath it," she said.

Recently, the president of Colorado Mesa University asked Shrader to develop and head a new outdoor rec industry program, which offers students experience and coursework on adventure programming, guide services and the fundamental accounting and finance classes needed to run an outdoor recreation business. This fall is its first semester. Shrader serves as the program's director and also teaches a few classes. "It came from the demand of so many outdoor industry businesses here saying, 'We need a talented and skilled workforce,' " she said. "I really created the program classes to be a reflection of what businesses need and what businesses want."

She envisions training a new workforce for outdoor-recreation businesses in what has become an $887 billion industry — creating stable, green, good-paying jobs in fields tied to conservation and landscape preservation.

Shrader views the coming election as a crucial moment for Grand Junction. "When we're talking about the economy, we're talking about creating a quality of life that is bringing people here," she told me. "Location-neutral workers, doctors, manufacturing companies — they don't have to work in the outdoor rec industry, but they're coming here and raising their families here, buying houses, buying commercial property here, paying their employees here because of this" — she motioned to the rocky mesas surrounding us.

Braden and Shrader worry that Trump's desire to develop more natural resources here could significantly alter the local landscape. "This place — along with Book Cliffs, Dolores Basin, Grand Mesa, the national monument — is the critical infrastructure of our community, if you're thinking about creating that quality of life," Braden said. "If an oil well and a surface oil truck is one picture of an economy future, this place would be the picture of the other economy future. We have a choice as a community, which one we want to run towards."

Downtown Grand Junction is home to more than 20 outdoor gear stores. Hill People Gear promotes gun rights on its website *(left)*.

Sarah Shrader and Scott Braden are two of Grand Junction's prominent conservationists *(below)*.

As Shrader drank her iced coffee, Braden continued. "Grand Junction is an avatar for this choice," he said. "This is a place that, not too long ago, our picture of our economic future was an oil field. Now we have a choice."

FOR DECADES, the Bureau of Land Management has struggled to disentangle the two contradictory directives that make up its mission: management of the landscape for conservation, and a quota for sustained yield of that landscape's natural resources. Its direction sways back and forth, reflecting the interpretation of the administration currently in charge of the agency's mandate for multiple uses. The idea is that the political appointees who run the agency have a responsibility to take a balanced approach that keeps in mind the public land's many resources — timber, energy, habitat and more — and its various other uses, including recreation, mining and grazing. The BLM's mission, in its own words, is to balance these at-odds uses "for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations."

But ever since the BLM was formed in 1946 by President Harry Truman, to act as the guardian of the public lands, it has served as more of a purveyor than a preserver of land, water and minerals. It was established to administer grazing and mineral rights, and it largely benefited ranching interests, officially combining the General Land Office and the U.S. Grazing Service — both of which aided in the exploitative conquest of the Western United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The agency has never found its balance. In 1996, President Bill Clinton made history by designating the 1.7 million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah, the first national monument to be overseen by the BLM. Then, under George W. Bush, millions of acres of public land were leased for oil and gas drilling and logging, and "Drill, baby, drill!" became a 2008 Republican campaign slogan. Barack Obama's tenure over Western public lands was marked by the implementation of policies meant to rein in extraction and focus on preservation. The result was a record of compromise and small gains: He delisted 29 recovered species, but weakened the Endangered Species Act; he designated over two dozen national monuments, more than any other president, but left other important public lands unprotected; he promoted tribal sovereignty, but failed to address systemic inequalities in Indian Country. And even though Obama is considered the first leader to seriously address climate change, he also oversaw surges in oil and gas production.

Neil Kornze, who served as BLM director under Obama, told me that the agency acted as crucial connective tissue in addressing climate change. "As we think about climate solutions and the way that plants and animals are reacting to these really strong changes in our environment, the BLM becomes the bridge to other areas of refuge," he said. "Questions about sustainable use and conservation are going to be really, really important for the next administration."

But while the Obama administration's policies were aimed at protecting more public lands from energy development, the rollout of those regulations was difficult for Bureau of Land Management field offices across the West. Jim Cagney, the BLM's former Northwest district manager, based in Grand Junction, told me that the administration was too ambitious, and it overreached. Effective land management, he said, happens over decades, not over the course of a single administration.

"I don't want to burst any environmentalist bubbles or anything, but those guys were really calling the shots from up

above," Cagney said. "My feeling at that time was that we can't take on this many battles and win them. We're going to get more pushback than we can handle. Can we slow down and bring this along at a sustainable pace? The Obama administration would have none of that."

Cagney, who worked for the BLM for three decades, retired before Trump became president. "It's plainly obvious that (the Trump administration's) public-lands approach is rooted in the denial of any science that conflicts with their extractive agenda," Cagney said. "I've spent my lifetime trying to maintain a balanced, unbiased approach to public lands. I think both parties overplay their hand, and the ever-increasing pendulum swings associated with administration changes are making management of the public lands unaffordable and impractical."

SINCE HIS INAUGURATION in 2017, Trump has worked hard to undo Obama's legacy, especially when it comes to the environment. I interviewed more than a dozen former Interior Department employees, BLM directors and staff, conservationists, environmentalists and Washington insiders, and by most accounts, Trump has narrowed the vision of the beleaguered agency far more than any of his predecessors. "Energy dominance is not the same thing as multiple use," Nada Culver, vice president of public lands and senior policy counsel for the National Audubon Society, told me. "It's a very, very radical tug on the balancing act. There is a thumb on the scale."

Back in October 2016, I attended a campaign rally for then-candidate Trump on the tarmac of the Grand Junction airport. Ten thousand people waited more than four hours outside the arena. The scene was rowdy, joyous, like an energized fan base at a music festival. Although public lands account for nearly three-quarters of the land inside Mesa County's limits, a place known as the gateway to the canyonlands and the home of Colorado's first national monument, Trump never mentioned them explicitly. But he knew that energy development would resonate with his constituency. "We're going to unleash American energy, including shale, oil, natural gas, clean coal," he told the crowd. "That means getting rid of job-killing regulations that are unnecessary. … We're going to put the miners right here in Colorado back to work.

"We are going to dominate," he said, as his audience whistled and whooped.

Trump won Mesa County by 64% — 28 points more than Clinton. And so began what critics call his "frontal assault" on regulation and public-lands protections, and a chaotic remaking of the Bureau of Land Management. Just one week into his presidency, in his second executive order, Trump took aim at the National Environmental Policy Act — the bedrock environmental legislation that safeguards public land and resources for future generations by requiring thorough environmental impact analyses — and ordered expedited environmental reviews for high-priority infrastructure projects. A few months later, Trump ordered public-land agencies to remove regulatory burdens that blocked projects to develop the "nation's vast energy resources," giving agencies 45 days to review ongoing projects.

According to an analysis by *The New York Times*, in the past few years, Trump has reversed 68 environmental rules; more than 30 similar rollbacks are currently in progress. Many of these moves impact the BLM. In April 2017, Trump signed an executive order to review all designations under the Antiquities Act; later that year, he shrank the boundaries of both Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears national monuments. In December 2017, he scrapped a rule that required mines to prove that they could reclaim their mines; a month later, he ordered Interior to expedite rural broadband projects on public lands. Trump has exempted pipelines that cross international borders, such as the Keystone XL project, from environmental review. In April 2019, he lifted an Obama-era moratorium on new coal leases on public lands; that summer, he nixed a ban on drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Under Trump's watch, the Interior Department has moved the Bureau of Land Management headquarters from Washington, D.C., where the agency had ready access to decision-makers and politicians, to Grand Junction. The controversial relocation has been criticized as a blatant attempt to deliberately shed institutional knowledge and talent. Since the announcement, the agency has lost half of the staff who were slated for relocation. The department defends the move, citing cost savings and claiming it will be better able to meet its mission by placing "leadership closer to the resource and lands that BLM manages." The Government Accountability Office, however, has determined that Interior officials lied about the reasons for the move. Cagney, the former Northwest District manager, sees the relocation as a way to dismantle the agency outright — "an attempt to divide and conquer and disband the agency and remove it from the power center of decision-making," he told me.

Trump has also refused to hire a BLM director. Instead, he selected William Perry Pendley, a controversial conservative with a history of lobbying to transfer public lands to local private interests, to serve as acting director in 2019. Trump sidestepped the nomination process altogether until this June, when he formally nominated Pendley to lead the agency in an official capacity. After months of outrage and opposition — notably from vulnerable Western politicians like Colorado's Republican senator, Cory Gardner, who is up for re-election this year — Trump withdrew the nomination. But Pendley still serves as acting director, working out of the new headquarters in Grand Junction. Conservation organizations are lobbying to have him fired outright, though that appears unlikely to happen before November's election.

By most accounts, Trump has been successful in advancing his agenda of energy dominance. Though American energy production set records during Obama's tenure, according to the Interior Department, the revenue from federal oil and gas output in 2019 was nearly $12 billion — double that produced during Obama's last year in office. The courts — and the uncertain economic situation — have acted to temper abrupt change, but Trump has done everything in his power to clear the way for development.

"Four more years of Trump means a steady stream of oil and gas lease sales and locking in leases and fossil fuel emissions when we can't afford it," Kate Kelly, public-lands director for the Center for American Progress, an advocacy organization for progressive policies, told me. "We will continue to see every acre that could potentially be leased, leased, and the hollowing out of the

"We're going to unleash American energy, including shale, oil, natural gas, clean coal. … We are going to dominate."

agencies that are there to protect these landscapes."

In late summer, Trump revealed one of his most extreme changes yet: Amid the widespread economic crisis due to the coronavirus pandemic, his administration finalized a "top-to-bottom overhaul" of NEPA. Trump's change would fast-track infrastructure and result in shorter reviews and a narrower comment process, thereby limiting what the public is allowed to scrutinize. Already, 17 environmental groups have sued. "(NEPA) is a tool of democracy, a tool for the people," Kym Hunter, a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, the firm representing the groups, wrote in the suit. "We're not going to stand idly by while the Trump administration eviscerates it."

And Trump has promised to continue what he started if he's re-elected in November. He remains skeptical of climate change, calling the crisis a "make-believe problem," a "big scam" and a "Chinese hoax." In countering Trump on the issue, Biden has been able to make his most compelling argument for the presidency yet: "There's no more consequential challenge that we must meet in the next decade than the onrushing climate crisis," he said at a virtual town hall in July. "Left unchecked, it is literally an existential threat to the planet and our very survival. That's not up for dispute, Mr. President. When Mr. Trump thinks of climate change, the only word he can muster is 'hoax.' When I think about climate change, the word I think of is 'jobs' — green jobs and a green future."

Right now, and for the foreseeable future, the public lands are the battleground for the climate crisis. The United States is the world's largest emitter of fossil fuels after China, meaning that the country must play an outsized role to curb the climate crisis. In order to keep rising temperatures within the critical 2 degrees Celsius threshold that scientists deem necessary to prevent the worst environmental impacts, the U.S. must decrease its total emissions by 25% by 2025. We are not on track to meet this benchmark, but reducing the 20% of emissions that occur on public lands would significantly help the nation to limit catastrophic ripple effects from the worsening crisis. The fight between Biden and Trump is really a fight over keeping fossil fuels in the ground.

"I want young climate activists, young people everywhere, to know: I see you. I hear you. I understand the urgency, and together we can get this done."

IN LATE OCTOBER 2019, Joe Biden traveled to Raleigh, North Carolina, for a campaign rally. There, he encountered Lily Levin, an 18-year-old climate activist with the Sunrise Movement, an international coalition of more than 10,000 young people fighting for immediate action on climate change and skyrocketing inequality. "I'm Lily from Sunrise," she said as Biden turned around to face her. "I'm terrified for our future. Since you've reversed and are now taking super PAC money — "

Biden held up a phone, pointed it toward himself and Levin, and took a selfie, as Levin continued: "How can we trust that you're not fighting for the people profiting off climate change?"

"Look at my record, child," Biden responded.

A few days earlier, Levin had learned that Biden was walking back an earlier promise that his campaign would not accept dark money from super PACS — interest groups that influence politics without regulations to require disclosures of the identities of their donors. "This lack of transparency is a problem, because young people simply cannot trust that politicians — who have kicked the can down the road for decades when it comes to climate change — will be on our side, unless we also know that they're not taking a single dollar from the merchants of our planet's destruction," Levin wrote in an op-ed for *BuzzFeed News* a few days after the encounter.

Biden has struggled to capture the support of the progressive arm of the Democratic constituency, and his exchange with Levin deepened the doubts of the Sunrise Movement, which, since its creation in 2017, has become an influential force in Democratic politics. The group was an early champion of the Green New Deal, which was initially mocked by politicians, including Nancy Pelosi, as being overly ambitious and impractical. By 2019, however, 16 of the Democrats running for president had endorsed it. Biden was not among them.

In the few years since its founding, the Sunrise Movement has grown from a small group of progressive young people — its oldest leader is 33 years old — to a highly visible organization that draws thousands of volunteers and members across the country. The group's stamp of approval has become perhaps the single most important hurdle to clear for Democratic candidates, and Biden has stumbled in his efforts to achieve it.

Biden, who has been in politics for 47 years, has a checkered environmental record, as Levin likely knew, and has long been considered a moderate on energy. Throughout his years as a senator and his tenure in the Obama administration, Biden has always aimed for the middle ground on climate policies, espousing a diversified energy portfolio that keeps "bridge fuels" such as natural gas. As recently as this August, Biden assured some constituents that fracking would continue under his administration — although he has stated that he would not allow it on public lands.

When Biden released his initial climate plan in June 2019, it fell far below what youth climate activists demanded, focusing more on market-driven changes rather than federal mandates to limit emissions. It shied away from a carbon tax, for example, instead favoring policies that finance emission-cutting efforts by the private sector. That December, the Sunrise Movement gave Biden an "F" rating, deriding his plan for its lack of specificity and saying it fell far short of promises made by other presidential candidates, such as Sens. Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Polls from the time showed that Biden lost more than three-quarters of voters younger than 45. "We don't have to beat around the bush," one Sunrise member said. "Young people ain't voting for Joe Biden."

But in the months following the primaries, Biden abandoned his moderation in favor of a bolder, more progressive climate stance, largely as a result of pressure from the Sunrise Movement. In late July, Biden released a radically progressive, $2 trillion climate plan, the most ambitious blueprint ever released by a major party nominee and the culmination of months of collaborating with members of the Sunrise Movement.

Just days after releasing his plan, Biden held a virtual fundraiser. "I want young climate activists, young people everywhere, to know: I see you," he said. "I hear you. I understand the urgency, and together we can get this done."

In his plan, Biden calls for the

complete elimination of carbon pollution by 2035. He also promises to rejoin the international Paris climate accord, which Trump withdrew the U.S. from in 2017. While Trump continues to dismiss the science behind climate change, Biden's plan uses climate science and the projections of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as a foundation. Biden's plan will focus on investing in renewable energy development and creating incentives for industry to invest in energy-efficient cars, homes and commercial buildings. Biden has pledged to end new oil, gas and coal leases on public land and has said he will emphasize more solar and wind energy projects on BLM land.

Despite their initial reservations, many environmental organizations and climate activists have been won over by Biden's new approach. In August, the Sierra Club officially endorsed him. The Sunrise Movement, which agonized publicly over the choice, said that though it would not formally endorse Biden — the group has an endorsement process with specific benchmarks, including requiring candidates to sign a "no fossil-fuel money pledge," in which lawmakers promise not to accept money from PACs or from donors in the extractive energy sector — it would campaign for him. "What I've seen in the last six to eight weeks is a pretty big transition in upping his ambition and centering environmental justice," Varshini Prakash, co-founder and executive director of the group, told the *Washington Post*.

In August, Biden named Kamala Harris as his running mate — a signal to his constituency that she would bring accountability to the promises he has made regarding climate action. Harris, who has a strong record of environmental action, made it a centerpiece of her own failed run for the presidency. She and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the progressive congresswoman from New York, introduced the Climate Equity Act, which would establish an executive team and an Office of Climate and Environmental Justice Accountability to police the impacts of environmental legislation on low-income and communities of color. Harris has also said that she wants to eliminate the filibuster — which is a tool most often used for hyper-partisan gridlock — in order to clear the way for the passage of the Green New Deal, a progressive package that aims to mitigate the worse impacts of climate change while transforming the U.S. economy toward equity, employment and justice in the country's workforce.

If Biden is elected, his nomination to lead the Interior Department and the Bureau of Land Management will have great significance for his climate agenda. Potential nominees include Rep. Raúl Grijalva, a Democrat from Arizona and the chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee; Ken Salazar, Obama's Interior secretary; and John Podesta, a lifelong Democratic operator and former chief of staff under Obama, who is credited with envisioning that era's most memorable conservation and environmental achievements, such as the Climate Action Plan and an economic recovery bill that invested $90 billion in renewable energy and energy efficiency.

Biden has signaled that he'd name a preservation-minded Interior secretary. When Trump withdrew William Perry Pendley's nomination, Biden responded on Twitter. "William Perry Pendley has no business working at BLM and I'm happy to see his nomination to lead it withdrawn," Biden wrote. "In a Biden administration, folks who spend their careers selling off public lands won't get anywhere near being tapped to protect them."

FOLDED NEATLY on the countertop that divides Tye Hess's kitchen from his living room was a large navy flag decorated with stars and a bright red stripe and the declaration: TRUMP 2020, NO MORE BULLSHIT. It was a sunny afternoon in July in Redlands, a suburb of Grand Junction. The streets and culs-de-sac in Hess' neighborhood are named after the local wine scene; Hess lives on Bordeaux Court.

"How many flags have you sold this week?" I asked. He exhaled loudly. "Quite a few, probably like 20," he said.

Hess has short brown hair, bright blue eyes and a small gap between his teeth. He was wearing a Pink Floyd T-shirt and casually sipped a ruby grapefruit White Claw as we spoke.

"On Friday, I'm getting much more in, and I'm just going to start handing them out to people saying that if they want to donate to buy more, they can," he told me. "I feel guilty, ya know?" He laughed. "It's just something I believe in, so I don't feel like charging for them. I've made plenty of money off these, and I can afford to give some away. But if somebody wants to donate money to buy another one, I'll do that. Just keep it going."

Hess typically sells the flags for $25. When I met him, he had already sold more than 200, hand-delivering each one, and setting up the deals through social media. Previously, he worked for a coal mine, overseeing methane flaring outside of Paonia, Colorado, and then working as an independent contractor, installing granite countertops, carpet and tile. He supplements his income by running his own e-commerce

store. He views his flags project as a personal campaign trail. "We have to do everything we can to get him re-elected," he said. Hess, who is 42, only registered to vote a few months before we met, and this election will be his first.

We were waiting for a customer named Eric Farr, who was picking up today's flag. Hess threw away the White Claw, opened his refrigerator, and grabbed a Coors Light. The doorbell rang.

Farr seemed surprised to see me, even though Hess had told him a reporter would be at the handoff. "You're not some super liberal lady who is going to spin everything I say, are you?" he asked. I promised him that I wouldn't. "OK," he said.

Farr was born in the mid-1980s at St. Mary's Medical Center, in Grand Junction. He grew up riding a Yamaha YZ125 motorbike, honing a talent and a love for motocross on the dips and yaws of the town's bluffs, managed for motorized use by the BLM. He had traveled widely, competing professionally on his Yamaha and sponsored by Jägermeister. "I have been all over the world, but never wanted to live anywhere else," he told me. "I just want to keep the public lands open, like the BLM area. It's just free and open space. I just want to keep a lot of it open for the motorcycles and side-by-sides."

As we talked about the land, I asked Farr what he thought of Trump's refusal to fill the position of director at the BLM. "With everything going on, I haven't seen anything about (Trump's) approach to public lands," Farr replied, referring to the pandemic and the ongoing demonstrations for Black lives. "It seems like Trump is about letting the states do what they feel is best with their public lands. So I think he's got enough on his plate that he doesn't really have time. As important as public lands are, there are a million other things that are just as important that he's focused on."

I asked whether Farr was worried about future generations being able to mountain bike, e-bike and dirt-bike the rocky plateaus and canyons, the same lands that have been such a large part of his own life.

Tye Hess and one of the flags he's been selling through an e-commerce store. Hess is 42, and this will be the first election he's voted in *(top, center)*.

Eric Farr on a dune in the BLM-managed North Fruita Desert 18 Road OHV area *(above)*.

A trail runner crosses the high desert on the Lunch Loops, which connects to downtown Grand Junction via a new bike and walking path *(facing)*.

"I get real upset when people dump their trash out there, because that's going to get them shut down quicker than anything probably," he said. He thought Trump was the country's best hope for a return to aspects of his childhood he values: "constitutional values," he said, "what the founding fathers tried to instill into our country." He told me that he wants his children — he has two children under 7 and a baby on the way — to experience the same freedom that he feels he grew up with. "I'm not a Democrat, I'm not a Republican," Farr told me. "I'm a patriot. Trump is like our savior basically. He's our only hope."

"Yep, I just barely registered (to vote) because of Trump and seeing these idiots," Hess said, referring to the social justice activists protesting in Grand Junction following the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis. "I've had plenty of disagreements, and I never seen such rude comments (on social media). Then you fight back and they play the victim."

Hess took another Coors out of the refrigerator and handed it to Farr. "It's just ignorance and — like you said — victim mentality," Farr said to Hess, taking the beer.

I tried to steer the conversation back to the Interior Department, but they wanted to focus on what they called the gall of the "radical socialist left." Though both Hess and Farr's lives have been intimately connected to the public lands in the Grand Junction area, the fate of those landscapes has not factored into their calculus for November's election.

About a week later, a lightning bolt 18 miles north of Grand Junction ignited the Pine Gulch Fire, a blaze that became the largest wildfire in Colorado's history. By early September, it had burned around 140,000 acres, mostly on BLM land. It pushed northwest, forcing evacuations for residents who live next to abandoned wells in the town of De Beque, down the road from Rifle, the home of Shooters Grill.

For weeks, Grand Junction was shrouded in wildfire smoke. Since we first talked, Hess and his fiancée had moved to the rural edges of the county. From Hess' home, he could barely make out the rows of peach trees just beyond his property line under the dense sepia-toned sky. In a photo he sent me, the sun burned an electric scarlet; he told me he was worried for the wildlife.

I imagined what someone standing in the new headquarters of the BLM might be able to see. When I visited the office in July, the sky was bright blue and clear, with mere scraps of clouds offering a respite from the heat. From its north-facing windows, you could see the Grand Valley Off-Highway Vehicle Area, where Farr loves to ride. To the southeast was the place known as Lunch Loops, the mountain biking area that Shrader can pedal to in just minutes from her front door, and the entrance to Colorado National Monument.

Due to the pandemic, most employees were telecommuting, and very few people were there, save for a few construction workers fixing electrical issues on the third floor. They were from Shaw Construction, one of the BLM's neighbors in the building. The BLM also shares the building with Chevron, the Colorado Oil and Gas Association, Laramie Energy and ProStar Geocorp, a mapping company. In the middle of a move, the BLM headquarters was a scene in flux, a place still trying to realize itself.

Along the halls of the BLM's office, large murals of iconic scenery — Colorado National Monument, Black Canyon of the Gunnison — leaned against bare walls, waiting to be hung. I remembered talking to Hess about his city as a new nexus for public-lands management, and asking him what he thought about moving the BLM headquarters from Washington, D.C., to Grand Junction. Hess just laughed: "The BLM headquarters is here?"

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High Country News

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POWDER RIVER BASIN Resource Council

Executive Director — Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition, based in Ely, Nev., is looking for a new Executive Director to replace the longtime Executive Director, who is retiring at the end of the year. ENLC is a 501C(3). For the full position announcement, go to the website. 775-289-7974. enlc@sbcglobal.net. www.envlc.org.

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Lisa Mackey Photography — Fine Art Giclée Printing. Photo papers, fine art papers, canvas. Widths up to 44 inches. Art printing by an artist. 970-247-3004. www.lisamackeyphoto.com.

Lisa Mackey Photography

Publications & Books

Chuck Burr's Culturequake.com Change will happen when we see a new way of living. Thinking to save the world.

***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.

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

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New Mexico property, Silver City — 20 acres, $80,000. Owner financing, well, driveway, fencing possible, very private, sensible covenants, broker owned. Contact 575-534-7955. timdre@comcast.net. https://www.lapalomarealestate.com.

Historic Hotel For Sale — Centennial, Wyo. Six suites plus two-bed, two-bath apartment. www.themountainviewhotel.com Make this your home or buy a turnkey hotel. $600,000. MVH4sale@mail.com.

Log home in the Gila Wilderness Beautiful hand-built log home in the heart of the Gila Wilderness on five acres. Please email for PDF of pictures and a full description. 815-684-5411. patiandmichael@gmail.com.

Ojo Caliente commercial venture — Outstanding location near the world-famous Ojo Caliente Mineral Springs Resort, N.M. Classic adobe mercantile, complete with living quarters, separate six-unit B&B, metal building and spacious grounds. 505-470-2892, wimettre@newmexico.com, wimettrealty.com.

Tours and Travel

Canyonlands Field Institute — Colorado Plateau natural and human history field seminars. Lodge, river, hiking options. Small groups, guest experts. cfimoab.org. 800-860-5262.

ESSAY

Leaving ‘Cancer Alley’

On recognizing the violence of environmental racism.

BY ADAM MAHONEY

One of the several oil refineries in Wilmington, California, seen in close proximity residential houses.
Peter Bennett/Citizen of the Planet

ONE EVENING MORE THAN a decade ago, I was 7 years old, lying on the floor, tossing my Nerf football up in the air, when I saw bright flames through our apartment window. The light came from a fiery plume, expanding from about a mile away from our home in Wilmington, California, painting the sky a burnt orange. My mom bolted through our home, on edge and frightened. She thought the community college, where my older brother was sitting in an evening class, was on fire. We turned on the local news, finding nothing. In a panic, we left for his school. As my mom drove, I tried to calm myself down by rubbing at the stain of a melted crayon in the backseat of her old Honda.

As we got closer, we were relieved to see the flames weren’t coming from his school’s makeshift campus — modular trailers set up on old tennis courts. Days later, we learned that the local ConocoPhillips refinery had undertaken a major flaring event to dispose of excess gas. Though we lived less than a mile from the refinery, we were never warned about the flaring. Only later did we learn that dangerous amounts of dozens of chemicals were being released into our air.

I grew up in a community defined by bright neon signs and strings of palm trees stretching out toward smokestacks. Fifteen minutes south of my family home, multimillion dollar homes sprawled along the Pacific Ocean. My rich neighbors got private beaches; I got the toxic Port of Los Angeles, which has continuously failed to meet water-quality standards.

Wilmington doesn’t have a single five-star resort, but my city, with a population that is 97% people of color, has five local refineries, the largest concentration in all of California. These refineries — owned by BP, ConocoPhillips, Tesoro and Valero — have helped turn my home into “Cancer Alley.” Young children and adults here die of lung and throat cancer at a rate up to three times higher than the surrounding areas, according to a report by Communities for a Better Environment. Wilmington is also home to the nation’s third-largest oil field and hundreds of active oil wells — all wedged in by three freeways and the nation’s largest trading hub.

For most of my life, I was embarrassed to say I lived here. All I knew about my home was poverty, so I concealed my connection to it. My mother enrolled me in school in Carson, about 5 miles from Wilmington, because she felt more comfortable with me there. In my sixth grade gym class, I remember hiding my paper as I filled in my address on a contact form. Throughout high school, I was reluctant to claim my home, because of the reaction I received. During October of my senior year, Amherst College in Massachusetts flew me out to entice me to attend, and only then was I finally able to understand the slow, often invisible, violence committed against my community — to see that it was more than just embarrassing; it was physically and intellectually damaging. During the four-day trip, some of my peers from across the country said they thought I was lying to fit the stereotypical traumatic narrative for people of color when I described my experiences: the mice crawling into teachers’ bags during class, having a nurse on campus only once a week — how, one Halloween, the refinery above our campus painted its 3.3 million-gallon oil tank to resemble a jack-o’-lantern. By the time I left, I understood myself as a young adult navigating an academic world defined by wealth and privilege.

My hometown has helped me recognize the state-sanctioned environmental racism directed at folks who look like me. And, in turn, its problems alienated me from my home, pushing me to hide my connection to it and eventually leave. I can’t help but think that this was deliberate — that my community was chosen to be a chemical waste ground, partly so I’d feel ashamed to stay there. Wilmington, by design, expels opportunities. I was always encouraged to leave, because escape signified success.

Now, however, I wonder exactly who was defining these markers. Now that I have begun my career in Chicago, I feel guilty not being in Wilmington. My home still lacks the resources people need in order to live without the constant threat of a slow, painful death — where children can breathe easily and play sports without developing asthma, bronchitis, respiratory infections or lung damage — where people can live free of suffocating violence without healing.

I don’t know when — or if — I’ll go back to Wilmington. But I know that in my hometown, and too many places like it, environmental racism is never a thing of the past: It’s happening now, every day, as I live and breathe.

Lauren Crow / HCN

Q&A

A ‘second wave’ of Indigenous voter suppression

A new book explains the barriers to the ballot box.

BY JESSICA DOUGLAS

IN RESPONSE TO the COVID-19 pandemic, South Dakota encouraged voters to use absentee ballots in the June 3 presidential primary election. Although the state received almost 89,000 absentee ballots in the primaries — five times the number of absentee ballots cast in the June 2016 primaries — and voting increased across the state, voter turnout on the Pine Ridge Reservation remained low, at approximately 10%. As author Jean Schroedel explains in her new book, *Voting in Indian Country: The View from the Trenches*, barriers to Indigenous voting are nothing new. Absentee ballots may only make them worse.

Though the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act granted citizenship to all Indigenous people born within the United States, voting can still be difficult for tribal communities. During South Dakota’s 2020 primary election, any voter who used an absentee ballot was required to mail in a ballot application accompanied by a photocopy of an acceptable photo ID card, or else have a public officer notarize the application. For people on the Pine Ridge Reservation, where businesses are often few and far between, producing a photocopy, or even finding a notary public, can pose significant barriers to applying for absentee ballots.

In many cases, this is deliberate. Strategies designed to suppress the Indigenous vote range from having too few polling stations on reservations, to gerrymandering to dilute the impact of tribal votes, to failing to adhere to the minority language requirement of the Voting Rights Act. Indigenous voters sometimes have to travel up to 200 miles to even reach a voter registration site or polling location.

Indigenous voters also face blatant voter discrimination from local governments; many have had to engage in costly and burdensome

lawsuits and court battles simply to gain access to the ballot box. In 2014 in South Dakota, the Jackson County Commission refused to place a satellite polling station in Wanblee, on the Pine Ridge Reservation, in time for the 2014 midterms. The county eventually installed the station, but only after four enrolled members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe sued.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down part of the Voting Rights Act in 2013, a surge of laws has made it even more difficult to vote in Indian Country. In 2016, for example, Arizona passed a so-called "ballot harvesting" law that made it a felony for third parties to mail in or drop off another person's ballot. But many rural Indigenous voters rely on other people, including workers from voter assistance organizations, to collect and turn in their absentee ballots.

Voting in Indian Country chronicles the history of Indigenous voter suppression through ethnographic data, oral histories and case studies, weaving together a comprehensive record of the centuries-long battle for voting rights. Recently, *High Country News* talked to Schroedel about her new book, the unique challenges tribes face at the ballot box, and why voting rights abuses are still prevalent in Indian Country.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

"Since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down part of the Voting Rights Act in 2013, a surge of laws has made it even more difficult to vote in Indian Country."

You write a lot about the complexities involved in voting by mail in Indian Country. With many states considering a vote-by-mail system this year due to the coronavirus pandemic, how do you see this impacting Native communities?

Many Native American reservations have what's called non-standard mail service, meaning you don't get mail at home. You may have to go to either a post office or what's called a postal provider office. The latter is very common on reservations, and it's not a full-service post office. It's not postal employees. You will find these postal provider offices are at gas stations or mini-marts; it's a little add-on to whatever the normal business is.

Well, that's a big challenge. If you can't get mail at home, that means having to find transportation to pick up your mail. You might have to pay for a post office box, but there may not be enough. I've seen some places where the cost for a post office box is as high as about $140 a year. For someone who may be experiencing economic hardships, that's a big burden.

For residents of the Arizona portion of the Navajo Nation, there are a total of 26 locations where people theoretically can receive mail. This consists of 11 post offices and 15 postal provider offices where non-U.S. Postal Service contractors provide limited mail service. For comparison, West Virginia, which has a land mass slightly less than the Navajo Nation, has 725 post offices and postal provider sites.

Why is political trust important for voting by mail to work in tribal communities?

If you have experienced racism in the white parts of your state or county, you might be very, very hesitant about voting by mail. There's a tremendous amount of discretion when an individual votes by mail. In South Dakota, your ballot goes to an election office, and the county auditor, who is elected, sees your name, and knows how you voted because they are required to verify that your signature on the ballot matches the one they have on file. Are you going to send in your vote that you're voting against that person? If you don't trust that election official, if you think that person might be racist, if you don't think your votes are going to count, why are you going to bother to vote?

In your book, you mentioned a "second wave" of voting rights abuses for Indigenous voters. What is that second wave?

The best way to explain it is to do a comparison with the first wave. First-wave voting rights abuses are when a state has a law that says "Indians can't vote" or "Black people cannot vote." Second-wave voting rights abuses dilute, suppress and abridge the right to vote. These are laws that make it harder to vote, such as having to obtain approved identification when (election) officials refuse to accept tribal IDs as valid identification, or having to travel a long distance to polling locations because those near you were closed. They don't forbid (voting). They don't deny it. They just make it harder for some populations.

Given all these challenges, why is it important for Indigenous communities to keep fighting for the vote?

At most, Native people are 2% of the population, so time and time again I have people say to me, "Why bother? Why bother working with this group? They are not important." Well, everyone should be important!

When you don't have a seat at the table and people don't have to pay attention to you, whatever issue and needs you have can easily be ignored. And when you add in the kind of geographic isolation of reservations, there is a tendency to completely ignore their needs, even if they are issues that are supposed to be handled via treaty rights.

(Voting) is important in the big elections, but also the small elections that people will feel in their everyday lives, such as who is elected to county government. In San Juan County, which is on the Utah side of the Navajo Reservation, they just finally gained a majority of Indigenous people on the county commission. This is the county that includes Bears Ears (National Monument). Now, two out of the three people on the commission are opposed to President Trump's actions in regard to (shrinking) Bear's Ears.

If you don't exercise the opportunity to have a voice, you won't have a seat at the table that makes the decisions concerning you and your people. These things are incredibly important.

REVIEW

Gentrification comes to rural Montana

A new novel explores the fraught history of the Bitterroot Valley.

BY GABINO IGLESIAS

Michelle Urra / HCN

IN THE FOOTHILLS of the Sapphire Mountains in southwestern Montana, elk are bleeding. Some are dead. Others are still alive, torn by bullets, their panicked eyes searching the landscape for a way to escape. This bloodbath was caused by hunters: A few are locals who understand the "communion between hunter and prey," but others are "weekenders in from Missoula" who have no respect for the land. Instead of rifles, they carry military-grade AKs and bump-stocked AR-15s. Ruthie Fear, the protagonist of Maxim Loskutoff's eponymous novel, belongs to the first group, but the carnage around her keeps her from focusing; when she finally shoots, she has no idea whether her bullet has found its target. Ruthie thinks the weekenders are ruining everything, changing the landscape and forever altering life in Montana's Bitterroot Valley. In his gritty debut novel, Loskutoff explores the dissolution of a mill town whose mill has shuttered, ultimately suggesting that in this destruction may be a tortured form of renewal.

Ruthie is white, an only child who lives with her father in a dilapidated trailer. On the surface, *Ruthie Fear* is a coming-of-age story that explores poverty, violence and death. But below that surface lies an examination of the shifting demographics of western Montana, where a largely white, working-class community is being displaced by tourists and second homeowners. Gentrification is at the core of this novel, and Loskutoff shows how it aggravates class resentment: People loathe the new mansions and condos, the weekend visitors and city hunters. At the same time, the book questions the idea of the rugged, individualistic, white rural Westerner. In Ruthie's world, under-employed men hunt for food and dream of a day when society collapses and the rich must "beg for help," even as their own world slowly implodes, from poverty and climate change — and supernatural forces.

The reviled wealthy newcomers' arrival forces the locals to consider their own situation more critically. Most families in the novel struggle with unemployment, inadequate nutrition and poverty, but those privations don't become enraging until rich city people appear, flaunting their wealth, buying up land and changing local customs — bringing gigantic automatic weapons to places where locals occasionally still hunt with bow and arrow. "They keep taking things from me. My pond, my woods, my view. It's likely they won't stop until there's nothing left," Rutherford, Ruthie's father, tells her. She reminds him that she's still there. Rutherford later gets arrested for destroying construction equipment.

The sheriff tells Rutherford, "I know you see this property and all the woods around it and most everything else in this valley as yours, but it's not. And when these big-money people come in, they don't take kindly to their investments getting fucked with."

Loskutoff challenges his white characters' ideas about land rights. Ruthie's neighbors clearly feel that they own the landscape their ancestors stole from Indigenous peoples. They blame the newer residents for many things, but when an earthquake hits, the locals attribute it to an "ancient Native American curse" that Loskutoff invents, "Charlo's curse," named after Chief Charlo, who led Salish resistance to their forced removal from the Bitterroot Valley by the U.S. government. Rutherford rolls his eyes at his neighbors' ignorance, even as his Salish best friend, Terry, mocks him for being upset at the newcomers for fencing off the land that Rutherford's family has used for generations.

Yet Loskutoff also perpetuates a romantic idea of the disappeared Native American, writing about Salish peoples in the same way that he describes disappeared wildlife, equating Indigenous genocide with environmental degradation. "The valley's inhabitants had done everything they could to domesticate its hillsides and riverbanks. Fence it into squares and pave roads between those squares. Slaughter the bears and wolves and mountain lions and bison. Drive out the Salish. Nail crosses to the hilltops. Yet still the wildness encroached," Loskutoff writes. Terry is the only man Rutherford trusts with his daughter, but the friendship is weighed down by symbolism: At times, the novel seems to equate gentrification with the trauma of genocide.

Even as working-class families find themselves displaced by rich vacationers, they contend with the environmental damage of the industries that they followed to the region. They also distrust the research lab on the edge of town. Loskutoff embodies these scattered, complex threats in the form of a nightmarish creature that Ruthie encounters in the woods.

One day while she's out with her dog, Ruthie sees a tall, feathered, headless creature that moves toward the creek on insect-like legs. The apparition becomes an obsession. Years later, she explains to a lover how she hated it, how the bizarre creature made her think of "pollution and all the horrible things" she was learning about in school. As ever more people move to town, Ruthie wonders if the creature she saw long ago was "a premonition, a ghost image of what was to come," even as she questions her own instinctive hatred of something she can't understand. In an unexpectedly apocalyptic ending, Ruthie finds evidence that the creature wasn't a single aberration, but rather a symbol of how far her town truly is from the idyllic wilderness she imagines it to be.

Ruthie Fear
Maxim Loskutoff
304 pages, hardcover: $26.95
W.W. Norton, 2020.

REVIEW

Is spiritual growth possible without confronting whiteness?

In *White Utopias*, cultural appropriation at festivals like Burning Man goes under the microscope.

BY JORDANA ROSENFELD

IN A GEODESIC DOME in Joshua Tree, California, hundreds of festival-goers assemble for a workshop on prānāyāma, an ancient Hindu breathing practice. Amid an acoustic blend of drumming, chanting and birdsong, a workshop leader, flanked by "guardians" dressed in white, instructs participants to drop into their heart centers and prepare to be "introduced to the place inside (themselves) that is pure love." Many of the participants take these Hinduism-derived activities seriously. But most, if not all, identify as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) — a phrase-turned-demographic category that describes the growing number of Americans who are critical of organized religion but believe in something greater than themselves. And these festival-goers have something else in common: Nearly everyone at Bhakti Fest, a multi-day annual celebration of spiritual transformation through Indian cultural practices, is white.

To research her insightful new book *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals*, Amanda Lucia, a California-based scholar of religion who specializes in global Hinduism, immersed herself in SBNR communities in California, Hawaii, Australia, Nevada and elsewhere, attending 23 different "transformational festivals" — large-scale gatherings of people attempting to create enlightened selves within imagined utopian worlds. The festivals emphasize certain qualities — kindness, inclusion, mindfulness and the rejection of conventional understandings of the self — though they vary in the details of their utopic visions (and in their acceptance of corporate sponsorships). But Lucia, who attends without hiding her role as a researcher, is struck by their overwhelming whiteness. What makes them, as Lucia writes, such "safe spaces of white ethnic homogeneity"? The festivals are intended to facilitate spiritual transformation. But do the participants ever confront their own investment in whiteness? If not, how profound could their transformations be?

Lucia's sharp analysis and enthusiasm for historical and theoretical context dominates the book, but she also takes readers inside the festival scene, with its yogis, prayer beads, ceremonial pipes, chakra wands, crystals and the other spiritual bricolage common to many "alternative" or New Age spaces. We accompany her into catharsis workshops where strangers gather to scream, sob and collapse, and experience the awe-struck silence of the conflagration of Burning Man's Temple.

Lucia grounds the book in the long tradition of "Americans turn(ing) to religious others when dissatisfied with the dominant culture." From the Transcendentalist movement of the 1840s to the 1960s counterculture and New Age in the '90s, the stresses of modern life have pushed Americans to experiment with amalgams of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism and Indigenous religions, attracted by what Lucia terms "religious exoticism." But while many of the seekers believe they're reckoning with their own whiteness, Lucia argues that their adoption of nonwhite religious and cultural identities reveals a sense of entitlement — a tendency to rely on "racialized others as unsullied, exotic, premodern subjects whose cultural products supply practical, therapeutic tools." Religious exoticism not only assumes whiteness as a default, but exploits and erases the legitimate representatives of marginalized spiritual traditions.

White Utopias shows how deeply whiteness undergirds these gatherings of spiritual seekers. But isn't whiteness, as a learned investment in one group's inherent superiority, an obstacle to spiritual transformation itself — particularly the respect for human dignity and compassion? Lucia approaches the question only in the second appendix, where she recounts her research methods. She writes that when she solicited feedback from the individuals she quoted (many of whom are considered expert yogis or spiritual gurus), many had "vitriolic reactions." They objected to Lucia's acknowledgment of their "white privilege, practices of white possessivism, and their existence within the structural context of white supremacy," interpreting it as a personal assault or accusation of racism.

Lucia found these responses disappointing — she had "somewhat naively" assumed that many of her subjects had already done the "internal social justice work" of divesting from their whiteness. Clearly, people can believe they are achieving spiritual growth without interrogating the privileges of white supremacy, but real transformation is limited by the refusal to fully examine the implications of one's place in the status quo. By relegating these unpleasant confrontations to the appendix, Lucia allows readers — presumably people who are, like her, involved in higher education, itself a predominantly white field — to extend to her subjects the same benefit of the doubt. Lucia's book suffers for not recognizing that unlearning whiteness and white supremacy is not just justice work; it is also spiritual work.

Lucia remains optimistic that these retreats help their white participants develop the skills to confront white supremacy, giving them the ability to engage with spiritual, mental and physical discomfort and to make empathetic connections with strangers. But these festivals — with their reliance on non-Western spiritual traditions — allow white participants to think they've already addressed their own role in perpetuating systemic racism, and that they've succeeded in "unlearning whiteness" by the time they pack up their yoga mats. This kind of denial happens in all predominantly white spaces, far beyond spiritual desert getaways. Lucia models a way of seeing the embedded logic of whiteness in social spaces, an analysis her white readers would do well to apply to their own settings — whether they're attempting to create a utopia or not.

White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals
Amanda J. Lucia
320 pages, softcover: $29.95
University of California Press, 2020.

Lessons from homeschool

Don't be terrified. Be ready.

BY KHADIJA QUEEN

IT'S FALL, AND SCHOOLS are only partly open, while many parents are still working from home. And that means the possibility of homeschooling. If you're hearing a horror movie soundtrack right now, that's OK! Teaching from home can be a terrifying undertaking. But as a veteran homeschooler with a son who's using the pandemic isolation to learn animation and practice his photography in Colorado, I'm offering some advice that may be useful. The main lesson: Customize for the circumstances. As parents, we can encourage, celebrate, support and fund with our tax dollars an educational system that operates flexibly, instead of a one-size-fits-all approach.

The idea that one size fits all sounds absurd when you think about it. Customization is available for everything from jewelry to Spotify channels, from Instagram ads to license plates, from mudflaps on pickup trucks to toss pillows for your sofa. The only thing I own that's labeled "One Size Fits All" is the striped summer caftan I wear around the house on laundry day. So why do we find the idea that education is customizable so shocking, so easy to reject or ridicule?

Too many myths confound our thinking about homeschooling: It's too easy, kids just run wild, they don't get enough socialization, they don't learn enough. But there's nothing easy about being stuck at home with school-aged children, as we all now know. Still, kids should run wild sometimes, and we can socialize and teach our children, even in, maybe especially in, a pandemic. To make things easier — ha — I've made a list of nine lessons folks can adapt from homeschool practices, even if you don't actually take the plunge and homeschool outright.

1. CULTIVATE CURIOSITY. Is your student all over the place with their interests? Allow your child to investigate everything! Alternatively, if they're more apathetic, your student can use this time to figure out what they're interested in and/or are good at. When my son was in high school, we looked into photography and game design. He was a rather apathetic teenager, but with those two subjects, he said: "Well, I don't hate it." I could work with that! Listening to your child is extremely important, and giving them many options and then pushing them toward those options can spark a lifelong interest; my son is still involved in both.

2. DEVELOP DEPTH. Does your student tend to have a singular focus on one or two topics? Now is the perfect time to let them dive deeply into one or two subjects — to focus. This can ease anxiety and boost comprehension.

3. RECONSIDER DISCIPLINE. What about disobedience or disruptive behavior? The crime-and-punishment model doesn't work for homeschooling. Many of the homeschooled students I spoke with mentioned a disciplinary model akin to restorative justice, where problematic behavior is discussed not behind closed doors, but in front of and with a group. No one heaps shame upon the victim, and the person causing harm is given the space to explain themselves and deliver an honest apology rooted in acknowledgment and action.

4. WHAT ABOUT STUDENTS with learning differences, who need specialized support? That is where we as a society fail the most, in my opinion. My son, who has multiple disabilities, found more encouragement and engagement from online teachers and peers in his interest areas than he did in public school. Neither model was perfect, but learning at his own pace, and focusing on subjects that kept his interest, brought him much more joy. It gave him the chance to learn to express himself clearly, and to decide what he wanted to do with his life.

5. COLLABORATE WISELY. Are you lucky enough to have neighbors, family and friends you can depend on? You can do what some colleges (not to mention cetaceans) do, and organize pods to share resources with others. Avoid collaborating with folks who might undermine safety or educational goals. Collaboration might mean leading videoconference science experiments, or socially distant backyard gardening, or botany lessons with small-group trips to the botanical gardens. It might be a story written by all the students in your neighborhood via a shared online document. Be sure, in planning those fun activities, not to overburden a single person with hosting and organizing; share your time, labor and expertise evenly.

6. ACCEPT COMPLEXITY. We each have our own ways of learning and absorbing new material. Some of us find ease and comfort in numbers and scientific inquiry. Others find delight in creative and imaginative pursuits. Still others learn kinetically — feeling closest to their highest selves when dancing, running or playing basketball. Local and state parks can be a free or low-cost way to take advantage of outdoor activity; maybe your middle-schoolers can invent new sports in an open field, or your elementary students can practice drawing pictures of your neighborhood mule deer. Then they can write about the process, encouraging critical thinking. Add a research element for high-schoolers as another way to acknowledge complexity. Building on single experiences deepens understanding.

7. INDULGE CREATIVE PURSUITS. Education as … indulgence? YES. Art, writing, film, music and theater are part of education. They teach critical thinking, empathy, dexterity and joy. What if kids actually enjoyed educating themselves? What if it's actually practical right now to advocate for enjoyment,

since everything else is so chaotic? Imagine that.

8. EMBRACE SOLITUDE. This may sting for the extroverts among us, but solitude really isn't that terrible. It invites self-reflection. And, perhaps, if socialization included more self-reflection, we'd have a kinder, more aware citizenry. We have an opportunity at this moment to prioritize safety and care, and we can extend that prioritization to educational structures — especially in cases where people are toxic, and with bullying at epidemic levels in public schools. Getting to know yourself away from other people can be one of the most valuable experiences life offers. Why shouldn't we allow our children that luxury and safety?

9. IMAGINE THE FUTURE. We are in the middle of a global disaster. Cut these kids, and yourselves, some slack. Instead of worrying about whether they'll "fall behind," recognize that many, if not most of us, have already fallen behind. We can reframe our language of success. Right now, success might mean staying alive, and helping to keep others alive. And that is enough. Learning at home gives us the freedom to become more acquainted with what we love. And, right now, that might be the most practical thing we can do: to get to know our closest company, to develop ourselves in positive ways and to make staying at home more bearable.

BEING WILLING to learn from what we don't understand is a valuable life skill. And isn't that what education is meant to do, give us the knowledge and skills we need to navigate life successfully? In a world where care and community-building are more necessary than ever, we can use this opportunity to model what that success can mean.

Throughout Colorado, we've had summer camp outbreaks of COVID-19, defiantly packed restaurants, and a persistent refusal by many residents to maintain physical distance or wear face coverings properly and consistently. Our behavior as a region and as a country ensures that the coronavirus won't disappear anytime soon. With data showing that children and younger adults contribute greatly to community spread of the virus, responsible parents must — out of necessity and citizenship, if not kindness and consideration for others — educate themselves about the safest way to keep their children engaged in learning at home when in-person class isn't possible.

The West is a unique frontier. We've had the pioneering myths of the region drilled into us, pioneering that unfortunately involved more harm than education. Our current circumstances, however, invite us to truly embrace a spirit of discovery, to energize and adapt. We don't have to reinvent the wheel with our children's education. We can look to customized ways of learning and creating community, and use tools that make sense for our current reality. Acknowledging and learning from established knowledge and solutions, I suspect, might hold lessons not just for students, but also for parents-as-teachers, and for the culture at large.

Learning at home gives us the freedom to become more acquainted with what we love.

The author and her son, T. Amari, work together in the dining room at their home in Colorado. **T. Amari & Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN**

Heard Around the West

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org or tag photos #heardaroundthewest on Instagram.

BY BETSY MARSTON

THE WEST

Every day, about 20 carloads of befuddled-looking travelers straggle down the roads of a small rural subdivision on the Idaho-Wyoming border, much to the locals' annoyance. "Is this Yellowstone National Park?" the drivers plaintively ask. Unfortunately, no; Yellowstone is about two hours away. It seems one bad app can spoil a whole getaway. If you hit the red pin instead of the green pine tree icon on your iPhone's Apple Maps app, reports the *Jackson Hole News & Guide*, you will be sorry: "Hundreds of people are going to Yellowstone and finding out it's a mailbox," said Suzanne Arden, a resident. Her neighbor, Carol Gregory, tried to help by painting some rocks yellow at the subdivision's entrance and posting a sign telling tourists they'd been led astray. Gregory said she'd notified Apple of the problem several times, but the app remained unchanged in late August. She did succeed in getting a sympathetic response from a customer rep named Vivian: "I completely get where you're coming from," Vivian said. "That's something I definitely would want to get taken care of. If I was going to Yellowstone, I would not want to show up at your doorstep." Meanwhile, Eugenio Bautista from Chicago was among the many hapless wanderers this summer who found himself in a housing development somewhere outside of Driggs, Idaho. There he found pleasant homes, but not a geyser in sight — not even a friendly elk or bison to photograph. "This is not it," he concluded. "And now we wasted two hours already."

THE NATION

The books we love tend to stay with us. Many of us remember what lawyer Atticus Finch told his daughter, Scout, in Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "It's a sin to kill a mockingbird," he said. When Scout wondered why, her neighbor cited the birds' innocence and beauty: "They don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us." The book's moral message resonated in the mind of a federal judge in New York when she recently struck down a Trump administration rule change that allowed individuals and corporations to kill untold numbers of birds. All the offenders had to do was show they had not *intentionally* set out to kill the animals. U.S. District Judge Valerie E. Caproni wrote, "It is not only a sin to kill a mockingbird, it is also a crime," adding that nothing in the Migratory Bird Treaty Act permitted this radical change, which would have hugely benefited the oil companies that pay the bulk of the fines for violating the act, reports the *Washington Post*. Under the administration's interpretation, BP could have dodged responsibility for the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill by claiming it never really *meant* to dump 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. It was just one of those things, we suppose. The disaster was one of the biggest in American history, killing an estimated 1 million birds.

CALIFORNIA

There is a "beef raging between online gun people," reports *Vice*, over something most gun owners take for granted: "trigger discipline." It's generally drilled into gun owners: Keep your finger off the trigger (unless you mean to shoot), and *never* point a gun at someone — unless, of course, you mean to shoot. This sounds eminently reasonable, though one online group of extreme gun aficionados disagrees. At "Loaded Guns Pointed at (B)enis," members delight in posting pictures and videos of themselves pointing loaded weapons at their manly parts. In May, *Vice* predicted that one of these days a weapon was bound to go off, and on Aug. 11, that's exactly what happened: "A man posted a video of himself pointing a loaded 1911 handgun at his junk. There's a brief pause before the gun discharges." The unidentified San Diego-area man kept posting throughout the bloody aftermath — though the posts have since been removed. "God's caliber (.45) went through my scrotum, mattress, box spring and floor," the man explained, though it managed to miss the copy of the U.S. Constitution clearly visible on the floor. At first he thought he'd merely grazed his testicles, but a visit to the hospital revealed both an entrance and an exit wound. Presumably chastened, and (we hope) wearing a discreet bandage over his nether regions, the man went to work the next day, according to a "Loaded Guns Pointed at (B)enis" administrator. His suffering was not in vain: The next day, the group proudly declared him "king" of its site, saying he had learned his lesson and didn't deserve "the entire world calling him an idiot."

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#IAM THE WEST

JOVAN JACKSON
Founder
Better Minds, Better Communities
Las Vegas, Nevada

When I got out of prison, I was really trying to find meaning again. I felt like less of a citizen without the right to vote. This will be the first year that formerly incarcerated (people) are able to vote. Me, being incarcerated, I have been focused on the district attorney race, city council, because a lot of these individuals only get into office with votes of 800 people. So I know if I'm able to influence incarcerated people to vote, it could make a change because their voice hasn't been heard. We had a barbecue, music, hip-hop, mass liberation. We got people registered to vote. —Eileen Guo

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