

High Country News

A person wearing a white jacket and dark boots stands on a sandy beach, looking towards a massive, light-colored rock formation that dominates the left side of the frame. The rock formation has a textured, layered appearance. In the background, the ocean is visible with a smaller rock formation on the right. The sky is a pale, hazy blue. The person's reflection is clearly visible in the wet sand in the foreground.

NEW WAYS OF SEEING THE WEST

Thinking like a mountain lion

How place names influence experience

Tracy Stone-Manning's vision for the BLM

Vol. 54
May 2022
No. 5 • hcn.org

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Anna V. Smith (on leave)

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COPY EDITOR

Diane Sylvain

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Michelle Nijhuis, Jonathan Thompson

POETRY EDITOR

Paisley Rekdal

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Black Crow #2, Yosemite, 2009, 10.5 by 12.7 inches. Richard Misrach

Know the West.

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EDITOR'S NOTE



Making connections

WHEN YOU FLY across the country, you see shapes and lines on the land scrolling far below: mountains and rivers, freeways and causeways, the green geometry of irrigated rectangles and circles. Much more difficult to discern are the geopolitical delineations: state lines, county lines, international borders, crazily gerrymandered voting districts. This borderless view is a more accurate reflection of the way people in the West are connected to and reliant on each other for essential resources and acts of kindnesses.

Showing compassion for other humans and other life-forms, learning how to live in a world rife with problems yet trying hard to be on the side of solutions — this work knows no boundaries. I was thinking about all this as I traveled to New York last month to attend the National Magazine Awards, where *HCN* was a finalist in the General Excellence, Special Interest category. Though *HCN* did not win, it was thrilling to be there among the other finalists and to celebrate all their good work. A week later I met several members of the *HCN* editorial team in person for the very first time, and it struck me that making and illuminating connections is a huge part of the work we do as journalists. We make the world more intelligible through research, reporting and writing.

In this issue, you'll read about how the war in Ukraine could lead to more mining and drilling in the Western U.S., a reminder that the struggle for peace is also the struggle for a sustainable climate future. You'll also read about one of the largest wildlife crossings in the U.S., which is being built across Route 101 in Los Angeles County, largely for the benefit of a genetically isolated mountain lion population in the Santa Monica Mountains. With habitat connectivity becoming a household concept in parts of the West, federal infrastructure bills are now taking the needs of migratory and wide-ranging species into account.

Photographer Richard Misrach offers another way of looking at landscape, entertaining the potential of the negative image to dislodge fixed assumptions and create space for new understanding. The same could be said for poetry, which returns to *HCN*'s pages under the care and curation of poetry editor Paisley Rekdal. Melissa Chadburn joins us this month as contributing editor for books, culture and commentary, and you'll find the first installment of Cassie da Costa's new column about running on public lands. Here's to more connectivity and less divisiveness, more face-to-face encounters and less isolation as we continue to work toward a future filled with justice for all living things.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief

FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS



Liza Black
Los Angeles,
California



Victoria Chang
Manhattan Beach,
California
@VChangPoet



Cassie da Costa
Ojai, California
@tooearnest



Ruxandra Guidi
Tucson, Arizona
@ruxguidi



Richard Misrach
Berkeley, California



Kylie Mohr
Missoula, Montana
@thatsMohrlikeit



Brian Oaster
Portland, Oregon



Raksha Vasudevan
Denver, Colorado
@RakshaVasudevan



Theo Whitcomb
Portland, Oregon
@theo_whitcomb



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BY RUXANDRA GUIDI | PHOTOS BY NOÉ MONTES

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A shift in perspective can reveal new truths.

PHOTOS BY RICHARD MISRACH

Sunrise over LA's Griffith Park, where a lone mountain lion makes his home (*above*).

Noé Montes / HCN

Bureau of Land Management Director Tracy Stone-Manning in front of Thomas Moran's *The Chasm of the Colorado*, an 1874 painting depicting the Grand Canyon, which hangs in the U.S. Department of the Interior Museum (*right*). **Melissa Lyttle / HCN**

ON THE COVER

Untitled #1026 (Psychedelic Jessica), 2007, 60 by 80 inches, from his book, *Richard Misrach: Notations* © Radius Books 2022. **Richard Misrach**



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LETTERS

High Country News is dedicated to independent journalism, informed debate and discourse in the public interest. We welcome letters through digital media and the post. Send us a letter, find us on social media, or email us at editor@hcn.org.

THE ARCHIVES ISSUE

Your April edition was terrific — great photos and graphics as well as quality stories. I particularly enjoyed Wufei Yu’s research on one Chinese American family’s history in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with its connections to Jemez Pueblo (“Origin Story”). It is difficult to be reminded of all of the mistakes our lawmakers and citizenry have made over the years in limiting the rainbow connections of all immigrant groups. Hopefully, we as a nation are learning to be more inclusive and celebrate our differences, however slowly.

Jamie Gagan
Tesuque, New Mexico

What a valuable issue! It’s so good to see and share diverse memorabilia and legacy. Appreciate that your focus was a variety of collected and documented memories of women. So good to see my grandparent’s generation through the Indigenous eyes of Jennie Ross Cobb (“What Jennie Saw”). I’m delighted that documentation of family is becoming easier for Chinese Americans (“Origin Story”). Lydia Otero’s “box of life” will surely be welcomed by an archive (“Here and Queer”). The illustrations by Kate Samworth

(“Nature’s File Cabinets”) made me rush to Google to see if I could order the charming pack rats, critters that plague me considerably here in the desert.

Linda Laird
Green Valley, Arizona

The April 2022 issue was another disappointment. Information related to current environmental issues concerning the West seems to be growing increasingly scarce. Editorial standards have been too hipped-up and too dumbed-down for me. I encourage you to hold to hard-hitting environmental topics, suggesting alternatives and solutions and providing info whereby readers may take action. Get radical!!!

David Lasserre
El Prado, New Mexico

WITNESSING THE WEST

I want you all to know how much I appreciate your focused attention to Westerners beyond the Euro-American white male perspective that we almost always assume. Your thoughtful and thorough exploration of the lives and experiences of the diverse peoples of the West is so needed, and has

deepened my understanding and appreciation for the cultures and struggles of these many unacknowledged Westerners.

Maybe humanity will someday get that kindness and compassion toward all of us humans is the only and ultimate way to create peace and well-being on our fragile planet. In the meantime, I am so grateful for *HCN* for caring, for opening our eyes and for working so brilliantly toward such a day. I love the West, and I love the awareness, the witnessing and the documentation that you provide with every issue. Thank you!

David A. Yeats
Boulder, Colorado

ALBUQUERQUE’S HISTORY

I enjoyed your story about the Tangs in Albuquerque (“Origin Story” April 2022). It was fascinating to read about the long history of the family, and I am always saddened by how Asians were and still are treated in this country. I never knew we had a Chinatown in Albuquerque.

Beverly Barsook
Denver, Colorado

THE GILA’S IMPORTANCE

Excellent reporting, as usual, about a vital and contentious issue here in Arizona (Colorado River Basin Spotlight, March 2022), especially for the tribes who have been cheated of their rights for so long. I was surprised, however, that one of the Colorado River’s most significant tributaries was not mentioned and doesn’t even show up on the map! The Gila River and its tributaries are essential to several nations and have been sucked dry by the Salt River Project, which facilitated the establishment and growth of the city of Phoenix. The Akimel O’odham, whose very identity comes from these rivers, have been waiting for decades for effective recognition of their rights.

Donna Tang
Tucson, Arizona

CONCRETE CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

Framing climate change as a hyperobject that defies our ability to comprehend it prevents us from being able to solve this crisis. As Adam McKay states plainly in his recent interview with Ben Goldfarb about his film *Don’t Look Up* (“How do you make a movie about a hyperobject?” February 2022), abstract problems evade straightforward solutions. Instead of pointing to “capitalism, electoral politics and human psychology” as McKay does in the interview, treating climate change as the product of a set of industrial practices with industrial policy solutions will better equip us to confront the challenge at hand. As writers at *HCN* have reported extensively in recent years, including in this issue, decarbonization of energy infrastructure will involve real, local environmental impacts, but a commitment to solving climate change requires these sacrifices. We should view climate solutions in concrete terms, while acknowledging that the benefits of decarbonization will be diffuse, hard to see and global in nature — a hyperobject in itself.

Mara McPartland
St. Paul, Minnesota

LAMPREY LOVE

I thoroughly enjoyed “I pray, you pray” (February 2022). The writing exhibited all the trademarks of *HCN*’s journalism: an environmental issue with cultural meaning, scientific integrity, humor, enlightenment and all-around great writing. Though I was vaguely familiar with the lamprey, having grown up in Oregon, I am now a big fan of *key’ween*. Let’s not be the reason for this remarkable creature’s extinction.

Lorena Williams
Ignacio, Colorado

CORRECTIONS

In our April 2022 story “What Jennie Saw,” we misspelled Frances (Thornton) Ross’s first name. In “Tech Wreck” (March 2022), we incorrectly said that the Gemini project in Henderson, Nevada, was dropped in the face of opposition. It is still going forward. We regret the errors.



Bureau of Land Management land near Austin, Nevada. In the state, 83% of assessed BLM allotments failed rangeland health standards.
Nina Riggio

REPORTAGE

54 million ‘failing’ acres

A vast amount of the land under the Bureau of Land Management’s care is not meeting required land-health standards.

BY KYLIE MOHR

DATA RELEASED in March reveals that 54 million acres of land managed by the Bureau of Land Management fail to meet the agency’s own “land-health standards.” While standards vary across states and bioregions, they generally measure biological conditions, including soil health, water quality, plant species diversity and the quality of habitat for threatened and endangered species. The standards define

the minimum benchmarks land managers need to achieve and maintain in order for landscapes to be considered functional and be used sustainably.

The BLM oversees 246 million acres of land — the vast majority of it in the Western U.S. The agency’s mission is to “sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations,” but according to

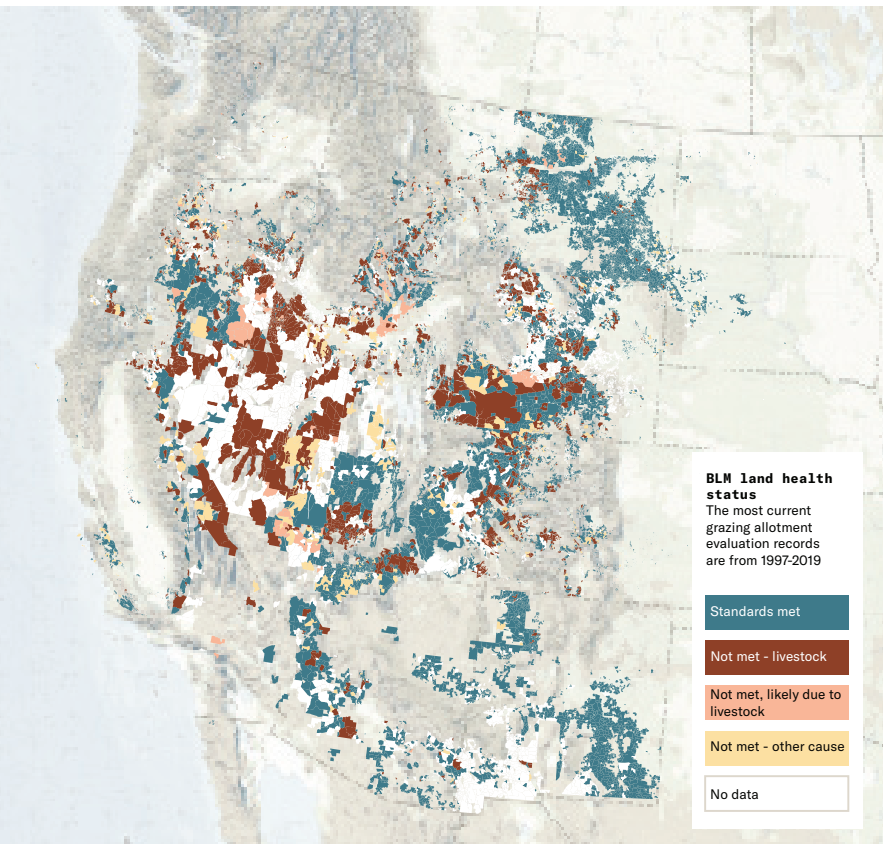
records obtained by the bipartisan watchdog organization Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), it is failing to do so on nearly a quarter of BLM land that’s leased for grazing. “We must all work together to improve conservation practices on public lands,” said Chandra Rosenthal, PEER’s Rocky Mountain Office director. “This map is a wake-up call for the BLM to not only improve and modernize their data collection and mapping efforts, but also to take action to address the vast amounts of degraded lands.”

PEER obtained 78,000 records spanning three decades through Freedom of Information Act requests. The data, which covers 13 Western states from 1997 to 2019 and holds information from every BLM field office in those states, plots 21,000 allotments on one interactive map. “This map is useful for individuals to be able to see what’s going on around them, become active and really work to hold the BLM accountable in the areas that are important to them,” Rosenthal

told *High Country News*. “It’s really empowering for people to be aware of what’s going on on their public lands.” (*Disclosure: Rosenthal is a sibling of HCN’s managing digital editor.*)

The data shows that vast areas of land are degraded. Some acreage isn’t assessed at all, and of the roughly 109 million acres that are, half fail to meet rangeland health standards. Unhealthy allotments, the slices of acres set up for grazing under the 1934 Taylor Grazing Act, while documented across the West, are predominantly found in cold desert ecoregions, often in the rain shadow of mountain ranges. These areas are characterized by lack of moisture and extreme temperature swings.

In six states — California, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon and Wyoming — more than 40% of the assessed lands are failing to meet land-health standards. In Nevada, 83% of assessed allotments do not meet standards, while data from Idaho recorded that 78% of assessed allotments failed rangeland health standards. In



Bureau of Land Management land health status, 1997-2019.
Map design by Luna Anna Archey / HCN

by Headwaters Economics and the Center for Western Priorities extensively documents the tremendous value that public lands hold for nearby gateway communities. But a prolonged megadrought in the Western U.S. poses an ongoing threat to already stressed landscapes and the communities that depend on them, as do overlapping issues, including climate change, the spread of invasive species like cheatgrass, and the increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires.

PEER’s analysis finds that livestock grazing is the primary culprit behind land degradation. The BLM leases more than half of its acreage to ranchers as grazing allotments for cattle, sheep and other livestock. Although everything from drought and wildfire to off-road vehicles can impact rangeland health, livestock grazing is a significant cause of the failing land-health standards of 72% of the assessed public land under BLM’s jurisdiction. That’s about 40 million acres.

This finding is consistent throughout the West, sometimes at a large scale: A massive, over 950,000-acre allotment in the Rock Springs area of Wyoming is just one of the areas where livestock grazing has been identified as a significant

cause for declining land health. Other stressors such as invasive species, wild horses and extreme stream degradation account for the poor health of an additional 15 million acres.

BLM grazing lands that fail to meet standards overlap substantially with greater sage grouse breeding areas and habitat. Ecoregions like the Wyoming Basin, Northern Basin and Range and Snake River Plains owe their failure to the presence of livestock on more than 40% of the lands overall assessed to date. Other animal species are implicated, too; some of the allotments that are failing to meet standards are home to the threatened desert tortoise.

PEER shared its findings in a meeting in early January with top agency officials, including BLM Director Tracy Stone-Manning and Deputy Director of Policy and Programs Nada Culver. “It was surprising to us that a lot of them didn’t even know there was grazing within wilderness areas,” Rosenthal said. “I feel like there’s a lot of unfamiliarity with the rangeland health standards data.” But Rosenthal also described the meeting as a “positive step” and said that she felt the leaders were “curious and interested in making change.” ☀

New Mexico, however, only 2% of assessed allotments are failing.

High Country News reached out to the BLM with questions prior to publication, and the agency responded with a written statement after this story originally appeared online: “While we disagree with some of PEER’s conclusions as the analysis was at a large scale and missed some on the ground improvements, we acknowledge there is work to be done in the face of a changing climate and

other challenges,” the statement read. “The BLM will prioritize assessments for areas where land health standards have never been evaluated or where standards are not being met and is also working to improve how it reports land health data.”

Flourishing landscapes are integral to the public and economic health of the West’s communities and Indigenous nations, particularly those whose ancestral lands are involved. Research

THE LATEST

Low frequency

Backstory

Broadband internet has become essential infrastructure — a fact that telecom corporations repeat ad nauseum. It’s also become a contentious issue for the National Park Service, which advocates say is shepherding companies like AT&T and Verizon into the backcountry (“Wiring the Wild,” March 2020). While reliable internet is abundant for some and scarce for others, particularly rural communities, critics are calling the agency out for encroaching on some of the last places in the country free from Big Tech and its profiteering.

Followup

In January 2021, under the Trump administration, the Park Service eliminated a policy that required it to inform the public about new applications for cell towers and allow it to appeal right-of-way approvals. Now, attorneys from Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility say this new blow to transparency gives private corporations privileges that are simultaneously denied to the public. The watchdog organization is calling on the agency to restore public participation in a process that it says has consistently favored corporate interests. —Theo Whitcomb

Cows, coal and climate change

Bureau of Land Management Director Tracy Stone-Manning talks about leading the nation's largest public-lands agency.

BY KYLIE MOHR | PHOTO BY MELISSA LYTTLE



Tracy Stone-Manning stands on the turf roof of the U.S. Department of the Interior headquarters in Washington, D.C., in late March.

TRACY STONE-MANNING, the Biden administration's director of the Bureau of Land Management, got her start in conservation at the confluence of the Clark Fork and Bitterroot rivers in Montana. As the executive director of the Missoula-based restoration nonprofit Clark Fork Coalition in the late '90s and early 2000s, Stone-Manning pushed for the removal of a Superfund site dam. Later, as a field director for U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., through 2012, she worked to build support for legislation balancing recreation and forestry. She's held a variety of leadership positions since then: director of the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, chief of staff for former Montana Democratic Gov. Steve Bullock, and, most recently, senior advisor for conservation policy at the National Wildlife Federation.

Now, as the director of the BLM, Stone-Manning is tasked with overseeing one out of every 10 acres of land in the U.S. She leads an agency that hasn't had a permanent director since 2017 and that's struggled with staff recruitment and diversity following a poorly executed headquarters relocation to Grand Junction, Colorado, during the Trump administration. Through it all, Stone-Manning must balance the desires of ranchers, energy developers and recreationists who all want different things from public lands.

High Country News recently caught up with Stone-Manning as she was traveling from Albuquerque to Farmington, New Mexico, to ask about how the BLM will achieve its conservation goals, the role the agency might play in addressing the climate crisis, and more.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

How will your experience as someone who has lived and worked in the West, rather than D.C., influence your approach to leading the BLM?

There really is something to sitting around the table, rolling up your sleeves, and listening and hearing the concerns of the person across from you. I have seen people over and over get through really intractable issues by talking to each other. That is going to help inform how I approach the work, and I do think it's a really Western sensibility. These are tough places to live in physically, so people have to work together. That sort of ethic is imbued in the West. There have certainly been well-known fights across time, but the way through those fights, and the way to settle them, is to work together.

You lead an agency that leases land for oil and gas development, which causes climate change, yet you work for an administration

that says it's trying to fight climate change. How do you reconcile those two things?

The president has asked us to pivot our economy to a clean energy future; he is asking us to find that solution that this country and the planet need for our long-term well-being. And that transition, although we all want it to happen overnight, isn't going to happen overnight. We have to be really, really smart about the choices we make on how we power this country, and efficiently, effectively and quickly transition to clean energy. Our job (at the BLM) is to make that shift and use the processes that are in place, the laws that are given to us by Congress, to help guide that transition.

What role will the BLM under your leadership play in addressing the climate crisis? Can you give readers a specific example?

Sure. We're ramping up our renewable energy development. Congress passed the Energy Act of 2020 that calls for public lands to supply 25 gigawatts of clean energy by 2025. We (the BLM) are on the path to achieving that number. It's transformational.

Since Biden took office, the BLM has reduced the royalty rates companies mining coal on public land pay to the federal government. Will you continue this policy? Do you support it?

I don't want to be pre-decisional. There are some pending requests I'm taking a hard look at.

You said in a statement in September that "our public lands are one of America's finest ideas, and I am ready to get to work alongside a remarkable team to ensure future generations benefit from them like we have." How does the history of dispossession and genocide of Indigenous peoples that led to the creation of public lands influence your thinking on how they should be managed today?

The administration has been really, really clear about how, historically, we have not done all we can to incorporate tribal voices into our management practices. We are taking that on in a truly deep sense. I'm literally driving to Farmington to meet with Navajo allottees about the Chaco mineral withdrawal, and yesterday met with the All Pueblo Council of Governors to hear their thoughts on how we move forward on a broader landscape effort around Chaco, how we respond to a recent desecration of a petroglyph site. I use these examples to say we understand the history of how we came to be stewards of these lands. And we are going to honor our obligations and our government-to-government tribal responsibilities in as deep a way as possible.

"Our overall work is to pass on lands better than we found them. That's what conservation is to me."

Senior BLM officials have said that public lands leased for grazing livestock should count toward the Biden administration's 30x30 conservation plan to protect 30% of U.S. land and water by 2030. Do you think grazing lands should be included? (Editor's note: As HCN reports elsewhere in this issue, grazing is the primary culprit behind the degradation of approximately 40 million acres of BLM land. See story on page 7.)

A pilot effort we have called "outcomes-based grazing" can really help inform how grazing lands can be used in the America the Beautiful initiative (the 30x30 plan's formal name). Cattle grazing can be used as a tool on the landscape to help restoration practices. I think that there's a way to look at landscapes in a before-and-after sense, and say, does this achieve conservation?

Our overall work is to pass on lands better than we found them. That's what conservation is to me.

Our magazine recently reported that grazing fees are the lowest they can be, according to the 1978 Public Rangelands Improvement Act and a 1986 executive order from President Ronald Reagan, and aren't keeping up with inflation. Does that system need to be updated?

That's a question for Congress.

Grazing fees are set through the U.S. Department of Agriculture and guided by a congressional mandate that they can't be raised by more than 20% a year, and they can't go over \$5 an AUM (animal unit month — the amount of forage one cow and calf, one horse or five sheep need per month).

What do you see as the role of the BLM in upholding federal law? How should the agency go ahead with enforcing federal laws, like grazing regulations, despite threats of armed conflict?

It's what we do. Our job is to implement the laws that Congress gives us, and we use science and public participation to implement those laws.

You seem really matter-of-fact about it.

I found this when I was the director of the DEQ in Montana. People would say, "Well, why don't you do X?" And I would say, "Well, because

that's against the law. If you want us to do X, go to the Legislature and change the law." The 1872 Mining Law is a really great example. People get really frustrated about how hardrock mining is implemented in this country, because it's implemented by a law that was written in 1872 to help settle the West.

Keeping sage grouse off the Endangered Species Act list is a perennial issue in the West. What, in your mind, would be a tipping point for listing sage grouse?

The reason that we're asking the public to work with us on amending the sage grouse plans is because we don't want them listed. Too much work has gone into protecting that bird — and the 350 species that that bird shares the landscape with — to get to a point of saying we have failed and we need to list. Our job is to follow the science on this, and to do everything in our power to get to a place where the science says these are appropriate management plans to keep this species around.

It is a little bit of a canary in the coal mine. We're not just solving for sage grouse when we do this kind of work, we're solving for an entire intricate landscape — the landscape that people see on their movie screens and celebrate as the West. It's our job to ensure that we do everything in our power to make sure that that intricate, ecological balance stays intact.

Is there anything else you'd like our readers to consider?

I want to make sure that we touch on the power of restoration, and how when we restore a landscape, we do a lot of things. We put people to work. We leave plants better than we found them. And we solve for some of these really intractable issues that we've just been talking about, like with sage grouse. Nature is the best engineering we have on the planet, and we should do all we can to get things back to as natural a condition as possible and then let nature take over.

The reason that some of these issues are so tough comes down to a really lovely thing, which is this shared value around the landscape. We all have opinions about it, because we all love it. And that's it. That is the force that binds us together and what I hope people can hold on to as we tackle these tough issues. ☀

The power in a name

Western landscapes and their names are stratified with personal memories, ancestral teachings, mythic events and colonial disturbances.

BY BRIAN OASTER



IMAGINE SCALING A PEAK so intimidating that it was called El Capitan, a name ringing of conquest, conferred by the Mariposa Battalion, an Indian-killing militia, in the mid-1800s. Imagine the rush of surveying Yosemite Valley from high atop it. “I wanted to test myself against El Cap,” said Alex Honnold, the only climber to free solo the 3,000-foot cliff, in an April 2018 TED talk. “It represented true mastery.”

But another story of El Capitan strikes a different tone. Settler accounts say that the Southern Sierra Miwuk, for whom Yosemite is home, originally called it Measuring-Worm Stone. Two brothers were trapped atop it, and only the lowly inchworm, or measuring worm, could scale the sheer granite cliff to rescue them. It’s a story about patience, sacrifice, smallness — and, of course, resilience. The humble inchworm is a far cry from a conquistador mastering a subjugated peak.

Place names and the stories behind them define how we perceive and connect to landscape. But we live in a world populated by places

named for colonizers: Libraries, streets and counties across the country bear names like Washington, Jefferson and Jackson, while “San”s and “Santa”s dot the Southwest, shadowing California’s coast in missionaries’ cloaks. Can we even see the land underneath those names, in all its complexities? And what is the impact on the mind — especially the Indigenous mind — of a lifetime spent repeating colonizers’ names, invoking their stories?

LAURA TOHE grew up with two sets of place names: the colonial ones on signs, and the Diné names her relatives used. As poet laureate of the Navajo Nation, Tohe has a unique insight into the power of words.

“A lot of places are attached to story. And those stories are important for us to remember, because they’re really telling us something about ourselves and our past,” said Tohe. The stories provide a sense of belonging.

Diné stories say that *Dook’o’ooshtiid* (“perpetually covered with snow”), colonially known as the San Francisco Peaks, rose from

the underworld. “We have to show the proper reverence for these places. So we don’t pollute them,” said Tohe. When a nearby resort used recycled sewage to produce fake snow because the mountains are no longer perpetually snow-capped, Tohe and her people opposed the desecration. “That’s totally disrespecting the mountain.”

Dzil is both the Diné word for mountain and the root word of strength, *dziil*. “There’s philosophy attached to these mountains. They have beauty and strength,” Tohe said, and can inspire all people, Native and non-Native alike. Diné people approach the peaks prayerfully, not haphazardly, Tohe said. Her grandma taught her that you cannot do whatever you want on a mountain, or in the water. “Water has spirit,” Tohe said. If you introduce yourself, approach it respectfully, it will help you. She honors the place where her grandma taught her that lesson: “Every time I go by that spot, when I drive past that, I remember that story she told about water.”

Psychologists call this “place

identity,” a social constructivist theory designed to shed light on our subjective perceptions of geography. Place identity was originally defined by psychologist Harold Proshansky in 1978 as “those dimensions of self that define the individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment” via “conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills, and behavioral tendencies relevant to a specific environment.”

According to linguistic anthropologist Phillip Cash Cash (Cayuse and Nez Perce), in many Indigenous worldviews, people are not central to the landscape, but rather are one component participating equally with other life-forms. Recognition of a landscape produces an inner experience: The Indigenous place name orients you to its “meaning within the community mind.”

Cash Cash described community mind as “a stable set of beliefs” containing “the ongoing narrative of that community’s interaction with the world.” Ancestors who inhabited these spaces can convey



teachings to their living descendants: “Their lives actually echo across the creational realm.”

Sacred sites also hold a mythic layer of significance, said Cash Cash. The topography of sacred landscapes is overlaid with mythical events that occurred during Creation. “When the two overlap, the time frame collapses, and they say that accessing these areas, those mythical beings and the energy they represent can affect you,” he said. Overwriting sacred place names with different information disrupts connections to mythic beings “still existing beyond our human realm.”

Colonial place names lack these deep connections. “A lot of these

places were named after males,” said Tohe, “somebody that was in the military or had some great power in the government.” *Tsé Si’ání*, for example, or “Sitting Rock,” is about as basic a name as you can get — and yet it supports and is supported by the community mind of the land’s ancient people. “We named things oftentimes because of a distinct feature in the land.”

In mainstream America, *Tsé Si’ání* is called “Lupton.”

“That’s all it says: Lupton. Who’s Lupton?” asked Tohe. “Why should this place be named after him? We still call it *Tsé Si’ání*. There’s no need to say ‘Lupton,’ because that (original) place name persists.” G.W. Lupton, the town’s namesake, was

an English settler who established a store in the area. But places named for settlers like Lupton present yet another problem, said Tohe: They give power to the dead.

DINÉ SPEAKERS add the syllable *yéę*, sometimes translated as “the late” or “deceased,” to the name of someone who is no longer living. “In that way, we don’t call the person back or keep them from going on in their journey into the afterlife,” said Tohe. “We can’t take the names of the dead without their permission.” Tohe was unable to name one of her sons after her late father, for example, because she hadn’t asked her father’s permission while he was alive.

*Yosemite Valley (previous page);
Rites of Passage (above).*

PAINTINGS BY TONY ABEYTA

In Western thinking, a person is glorified when buildings or statues are named after them, she added. “In a way, we are continuing to give power to those names, like Washington and Jackson, who, in my opinion, was one of the worst presidents,” she said. “In my community, we wouldn’t give that power to that person. We may say Washington-*yéę* or Jackson-*yéę*.”

Cash Cash added that repeating colonizers’ names keeps the trauma of dispossession fresh. The loss of homelands and hunting grounds — and, especially, sacred

sites — results in the fragmentation of a holistic worldview. “It always becomes sad when those places are destroyed, like from a dam or a railroad or what have you,” said Cash Cash.

Or a wagon train: Cash Cash described a section of the Oregon Trail running through his tribal homelands, dubbed “Deadman’s Pass” because settlers killed a Native family gathering food there. Cash Cash’s community tried unsuccessfully to change the name and historical placard, which he said gives a pleasant view of settlers.

“It’s fairly common, and it is a part of the unwillingness of the colonial structure and history to change in recognition of these tragedies and traumas and injustices,” Cash Cash said. “At some point, it just becomes unspeakable.”

Meanwhile, the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center’s website claims that four settler freight haulers were actually killed there, “victims of the Indian uprising.”

When settler narratives don’t align with Indigenous ones, Cash Cash says, it creates “a parallel meaning system,” where multiple community minds overlay one landscape. This gets complicated when historical facts are not agreed upon.

I WANTED TO KNOW how Yosemite’s original people see El Capitan, and to hear the story of Measuring-Worm Stone from a tribal elder. So, in March, I spoke on the phone with Southern Sierra Miwuk elder and historian Bill Tucker, and Vernett “Sis” Calhoun, a community volunteer and the chair of the Wahhoga Committee, which is working to re-establish a Miwuk village in Yosemite Valley.

There was just one problem: Tucker seemed unaware of Measuring-Worm Stone, the story or the place name, while Calhoun found the story in a book she bought in Yosemite, but didn’t know whether it really had a Miwuk origin. “When the settlers came to our land, they did not really understand the way our people spoke,”

she said. “So when they took notes and wrote things down, who’s to say that it’s the true story?”

The Measuring-Worm Stone story appears in settler accounts as early as 1877, in non-Native ethnographer Stephen Powers’ journal, *Tribes of California*. In his telling, two boys were magically trapped atop Measuring-Worm Stone. By 1997, a version with bears instead of boys appeared in a children’s book by non-Native folklore enthusiast Robert D. San Souci, who also wrote the story that inspired Disney’s *Mulan*.

“Who do you believe?” Calhoun said. “We don’t have that many elders left.”

Convoluting stratification of inaccurate histories and dubious Indigenous stories reflects the many layers of colonization: dispossession, removal, abuse, environmental and cultural degradation, followed by feeble attempts at restitution, such as gift-shop children’s books.

We can’t always know what stories belong to the landscape and its Indigenous peoples. This makes it hard to know what to call some places. Denali, for example, had many Indigenous names from different peoples. But when “Mount McKinley” was officially renamed in 2015, state and federal officials had to decide on one of them. Cash Cash says these complications become part of the story. “When an Indigenous place is named, or renamed, either its ancestral name or a new name, then you’re evoking reconnection,” he said. The experience of loss or removal becomes part of your history and your healing. When non-Natives approach the landscape with openness to its lessons, he added, they can learn their place on it, too. Tohe said that when a sacred name persists, it can be an agent of healing. “When you call a place by its sacred name, you are in a sense using transformation,” she said. “The story can persist. It’ll always be there, it’ll be attached to the land as long as we remember that story. I don’t think those stories ever go away.”

POEM

Untitled #5, 1998

After Agnes Martin

By Victoria Chang

When Agnes came on screen, I thought of all the canvases that still hold her gaze. Maybe a painting is an accumulation

of our gazes and why they sometimes seem human. When I look at the pastel bands, the painting collects my seeing and

sends back a dead person’s feelings. I am surprised when the feelings don’t feel outdated. Agnes said an artist *needs to be*

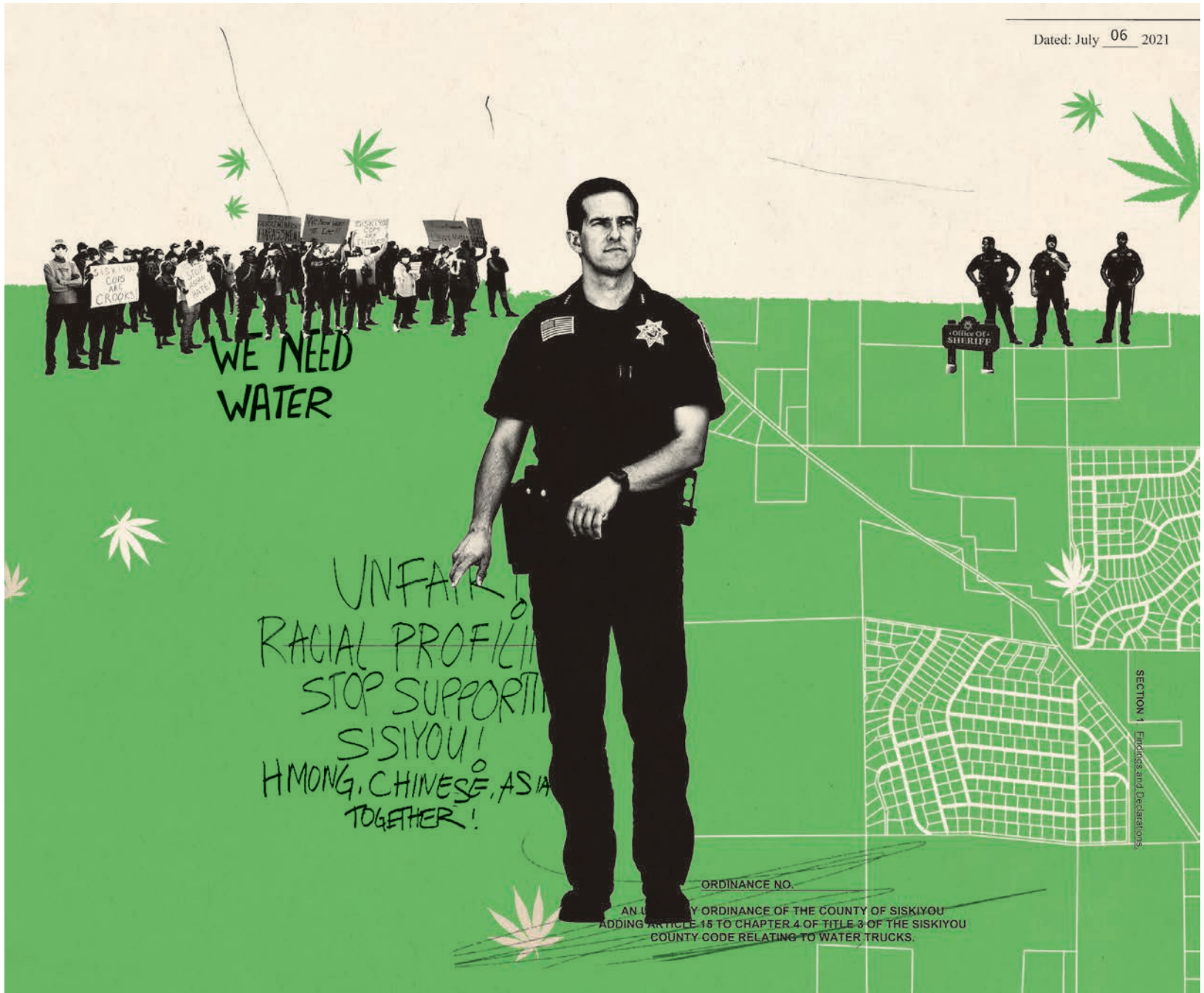
alone. What if I’ve spent my whole life wanting to be seen? In that way, I’ve wanted to be the painting, not the painter.

But I am the painter. Even now, I walk outside at night just so the sky can see me one more time. Stéphane Mallarmé once

wrote: *Paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces*. I have wanted the sky all along, but my wanting was misplaced. I lift

my hand into the air and feel something grabbing my wrist. But it’s not the sky, it’s the beauty of the sky.

WEB EXTRA Listen to Victoria Chang recite her poem at hcne.ws/untitled5



REPORTAGE

The rise of the nature cop

With a bigger budget and a booming black market, a California sheriff has taken a growing interest in policing crimes against the environment.

BY THEO WHITCOMB | ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO

LAST SUMMER, Siskiyou County’s recently appointed sheriff, Jeremiah LaRue, released a video on YouTube to explain two controversial new county groundwater laws. The drought was severe that year, he said, and the “wasteful extraction” of water for illegal cannabis cultivation was making it worse. LaRue appeared in front of a green-screen projection of iconic Mount Shasta, like a news anchor, while stock photos of cannabis plants, armed men and helicopters punctuated his talking points. The new water laws would ban the delivery of groundwater to cannabis farms, in what LaRue described as the most effective strategy to stop “violent crime draining our water and polluting our environment.”

The environmentalist rhetoric and talk of water policy signaled a shift in how LaRue's department policed the illicit cannabis industry. Increasingly responsible for the county's land use and water, LaRue told *High Country News* that he needed better "tools" — criminal penalties — to deal with "environmental crimes."

A few months later, the County Board of Supervisors that appointed him adopted a new budget that authorized over \$27 million in police protection — about \$1.6 million more than the county administrator had recommended and over \$4.1 million more than was spent the previous year. The budget line for marijuana suppression forfeiture — money set aside for confiscation — nearly doubled, from just over \$61,000 in fiscal year 2020-2021 to nearly \$119,000 for 2022. It was the largest increase in a decade. Meanwhile, the county planning department, which oversees water, building and general environmental regulations, struggled to retain its small team of code enforcement officers.

The budget increase mirrors the county's cannabis boom, something that's been difficult to quantify historically as it's moved in and out of legality. In 2019, the Siskiyou County Board of Supervisors declared a "state of emergency," claiming that over 2,000 "cultivation sites," both large and small, dotted the arid valley, overwhelming the sheriff's office. In a legal affidavit in early 2022, LaRue said that the "rugged, unspoiled countryside" was "covered with unpermitted, temporary structures." In response, the sheriff's office is cracking down on what it sees as an ever-growing problem. Instead of implementing a permitting system to manage the uptick, like nearby counties, Siskiyou's leaders decided to outlaw cannabis operations and enact a policy to eradicate as many grows as possible.

Hmong American and other Southeast Asian American farmers are frequent targets of recent efforts to shut down unpermitted cannabis grows. Even those who don't raise commercial cannabis are increasingly vulnerable to armed raids, hefty fines and the threat of losing their land — property some of them bought with their life savings. (See *previous reporting on Shasta Vista that appeared in the November 2021 issue of this magazine*.) "The county is trying to drive the Hmong out," wrote Khue Cha, a Hmong resident, in an affidavit provided to the county. "They have no right to do that because this land belongs to us."

LaRue said that cannabis farmers are polluting the area with trash, and that landowners who rent to them are "prostituting" their property. He wants stronger criminal punishment — not only to stop the cannabis farmers, but also the environmental problems he claims they cause. "We

"There is a lack of information of what is going on. At the end of the day, we know nothing about it."

need to have those laws," he told *HCN* in February. "There's no other way to protect our land."

PEOPLE HAVE GROWN cannabis in Siskiyou County's hills for decades, but the industry expanded after California legalized pot in 2016. Around the same time, a predominantly Hmong American community began to farm small subdivisions in the Shasta Valley. Within a year, the county, defying decriminalization trends across the country, banned all commercial cannabis. The move changed the trajectory of county policy, which had been moving toward regulating the market, but did little to discourage farming. Over the years, monied investors have purchased large tracts of land to produce cannabis at an unregulated, industrial scale — a stark contrast to the traditional smaller farmers, according to the real estate experts and landowners, farmers, residents and researchers *High Country News* interviewed.

The boom has genuine environmental implications: It puts more demand on an already strained water supply and poses potential threats to its availability and quality. "Even without cannabis, with the current climate conditions, there is not much room for increasing irrigated land," Laura Foglia, a hydrogeologist at the University of California, Davis and an expert in Shasta Valley's groundwater, said.

Given the worsening impacts of climate change, Siskiyou County's efforts to "protect" land and "preserve" water by eradicating cannabis has gained some local support. But the current policy is not based on hard science: Little is actually known about area farming practices, and hydrologists say that no one knows exactly how much water is used by the cannabis farmers.

Local farmers dispute the county's estimates, and a recent letter from the State Water Resources Control Board said the amount of groundwater the county claims the farms are using is "unlikely" to be causing declines in the aquifer.

LaRue told *HCN* that he is convinced that cannabis threatens his community's water and way of life, a sentiment with echoes of xenophobia: The cannabis farmers and workers in the area are mostly Asian. LaRue blamed the increase of criminal cannabis activity and rising

violence on a "criminal component," suggesting ties between crimes, gangs, and "Chinese nationals that are in our community," despite a lack of evidence. And his campaign to "protect" groundwater has targeted minority farmers, labeling them as outsiders and criminals.

Now, LaRue is working with the California Environmental Protection Agency to train deputies to identify chemicals and pesticides as possible evidence of environmental crimes, while his department is coordinating with the State Water Resources Control Board to gather proof of water violations. Yet he says he's frustrated, saying that his hands are tied by environmental laws. "Financial penalties are useless," LaRue said during an interview in February. "It might look good on paper, but the only way these people will respond is if there is consequence."

In early 2022, California lawmakers introduced a bill that would make unlicensed cannabis cultivation, formerly a misdemeanor, a felony punishable by up to three years in county jail. Similarly, at a local level, LaRue plans to ramp up punishment, pointing out the possibility of prosecuting landowners and farmers with conspiracy charges, a felony.

In Siskiyou County, however, such punishment is unevenly administered. Asian Americans comprise just 2.6% of the county's population, according to the U.S. Census, but between 2019 and 2021, they were involved in 27.4% of traffic stops, 78% of cannabis cultivation citations and nearly 82% of property liens, according to attorneys from the ACLU and the Asian Law Caucus. Many Hmong American residents describe feeling targeted by racial profiling, economic boycotts and other forms of discrimination.

The sheriff and the county government rely on creating "hooks of fear" to justify their eradication policy, said Margiana Petersen-Rockney, a researcher from University of California, Berkeley who is studying Siskiyou County's cannabis prohibition. "Connecting certain groups with environmental fears has a long-standing history," said Petersen-Rockney. "It's proven to be a very effective strategy for removing those people from their land." ❀

FACTS & FIGURES



Russian reverberations

Putin's military moves — and the globe's response to them — have unexpected consequences for the West.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON | MAP BY EMILY POOLE

KEMMERER, WYOMING, a small, soon-to-be-former coal-mining and power plant town in the southwest corner of the state, is a long way from Ukraine and the Russian invasion of the former Soviet republic. But Kemmerer's future is inextricably entwined with what happens in Ukraine — and with how the Biden administration responds to it.

That's because Bill Gates-backed TerraPower hopes to construct its first advanced nuclear reactor in Kemmerer. The new reactor will run on only one type of fuel: high-assay, low-enriched uranium — HALEU — which has higher levels of uranium-235 than conventional reactor fuel. Russian company Tenex, a division of state-owned Rosatom, is currently the world's primary commercial-scale producer of the fuel. The U.S. Department of Energy hopes to ramp up uranium enrichment capacity to produce it domestically, but success is still years away.

Now, Wyoming lawmakers are calling on President Joe Biden to expand his ban on Russian oil, coal and natural gas imports to uranium, including HALEU. Such a ban would leave the planned reactor — and Kemmerer's future — running on empty. But it might also revitalize the West's uranium mining industry, which crashed in the 1980s due to a number of factors and has been in decline ever since, as utilities turned to cheaper foreign sources, including Russia, Kazakhstan, Canada and Australia.

This is just one small example of how the Ukraine crisis is reverberating across the Western United States, in both predictable and surprising ways. Oil-state politicians and petroleum corporations are weaponizing high gasoline prices in their fight against state and federal drilling restrictions. Russian oligarchs own homes in Aspen and stash cash in Jackson, and their financial tentacles extend into enterprises across the region, from a Colorado steel mill to Nevada copper mines. ✨

Sources: U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, European Union, U.S. Department of Justice, Evraz, Washington Post.

Natural gas: The U.S. doesn't import coal or natural gas from Russia; we already have plenty here at home. But Europe gets nearly half its natural gas from Russia, and that could provide an opportunity for Western U.S. producers to sell some of their surplus. By framing LNG exports as a matter of global security, companies may be able to expedite permitting for export terminals like the one near Coos Bay, Oregon, which was denied last year. That could spur more drilling in natural gas-rich, oil-poor zones and incentivize oil producers to invest in natural gas-gathering systems so they can capture and sell methane rather than flaring or venting it. And some utilities will switch from natural gas to more affordable coal, a bonus for the beleaguered mines in western Colorado and Wyoming's Powder River Basin.

Uranium: The Western uranium mining industry originally was nourished by the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union. But when the Cold War ended, uranium from the former Soviet republics flooded the global market, effectively killing the domestic industry. About 16% of the uranium used to fuel U.S. nuclear reactors comes from Russia, with another big chunk coming from mines in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan operated by Russia's state-owned Rosatom. Less than 5% comes from U.S. mines. If Rosatom's shipments are cut off, prices will climb, finally giving Utah and Wyoming mine operators the incentive they need to rekindle their long-idle facilities. But the U.S. still lacks the infrastructure to produce the HALEU fuel used in advanced reactors.

Glasnost & grass: In March, federal prosecutors charged Russian billionaire Andrey Muraviev with making illegal political contributions in 2018 to two Nevada Republicans, Adam Laxalt and Weslev Duncan, who were running for governor and attorney general, respectively. Muraviev allegedly was trying to curry favor in hopes of obtaining licenses to sell marijuana.

Copper: Canada-based company Nevada Copper has one project, the massive Pumpkin Hollow Mine outside Yerington, that is currently in the development stage. The company's largest shareholder is Pala Investments, a Switzerland-based company started by Russian-born oligarch Vladimir Iorich. Iorich and Pala attempted to purchase the Mountain Pass rare earths mine in California in 2017, but were outbid by another consortium that included a Chinese company. Iorich is now a German citizen and apparently is not being sanctioned.

Oil: Biden's ban on Russian oil imports did not significantly dent the U.S. oil supply; the nation gets less than 1% of its petroleum from Russia, though Hawai'i acquired a significant amount to fuel one of its biggest power plants. While Hawai'i utility officials said they could replace Russian crude with other sources, mounting oil prices have driven utility bills to all-time highs. The conflict-related rising cost of oil also is likely to reverberate through Western oil patches by spurring more drilling and boosting state oil and gas tax revenues. Meanwhile, gasoline prices continue to rise, hitting high-mileage rural Westerners especially hard.





Wheat, sunflowers and fertilizer: Russia and Ukraine are two of the world's largest wheat and sunflower producers, and the conflict has kept huge supplies from being shipped to customers. This could lead to bread and cooking oil shortages in some regions, though significantly higher prices could benefit U.S. producers. North and South Dakota are also major sunflower producers, and North Dakota, Montana, Washington, Idaho and Colorado all grow wheat.

Russia is a major fertilizer exporter, and the U.S. is a big customer of nitrogen fertilizer, which is synthesized from methane using an energy-intensive process. Diminished Russian exports are likely to decrease crop yields and drive up global food costs; even organic farmers are feeling the pinch as conventional agriculture operations snatch up chicken poop to replace synthetic fertilizers. The environment might benefit, however: Excess nitrogen fertilizer often runs off into streams, encouraging harmful algae blooms, and when it oxidizes, it creates nitrous oxide, a potent greenhouse gas.

A cowboy cocktail — with vodka: Igor Makarov, a former Russian cyclist who made billions off natural gas in Russia, shelters his cash in an unregulated private trust in Wyoming, taking advantage of what's known as the state's "Cowboy Cocktail" tax haven. Although he was included on a U.S. Treasury list of Russian oligarchs in 2018, his PR people claim he has no ties to Putin, and he does not appear to have been sanctioned, yet.

Kremlin in Colorado?: The Rocky Mountain Steel Mill in Pueblo, Colorado, was established in 1881 as the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. Globalism and outsourcing took a toll in the '80s, and it declared bankruptcy in 1990. In 2007, it was purchased by steel and vanadium giant Evraz, a London-based company whose largest shareholder is Romanov Abramovich, a Russian billionaire whom Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny says is one of the oligarchs closest to Putin. On March 10, the United Kingdom sanctioned Abramovich — owner of the Chelsea soccer team — and suspended shares in the company. The entire board of directors subsequently resigned, and the stock price cratered. But Evraz has not been sanctioned, and the Pueblo mill — which is partly solar-powered — continues to run, as does Evraz's Portland mill.

Rocky Mountain dachas: Abramovich forked out \$36.3 million in 2008 for a 12,900-square-foot, 11-bedroom, 13-bathroom Snowmass, Colorado, home, which at the time was one of the area's spendiest real estate transactions. He later purchased a nearby property, this one a mere 5,500 square feet. Zillow, the real estate site, estimates the two properties combined would sell for \$42 million.

Abramovich's longtime friend and fellow Evraz major shareholder, Evgeny Shvidler, also owns a Snowmass home, a modest 6,354-square-foot mansion valued by Zillow at \$15.4 million. British authorities reportedly seized Shvidler's 370-foot yacht, *Le Grand Bleu*, originally a gift from Abramovich.

In early March, Aspen was all atwitter about the sale of one acre at the bottom of Aspen Mountain for \$76.5 million. Not only was the price tag big, even for Aspen, but it was about seven times what the sellers had purchased it for a year earlier. It turns out the purchaser was the Miami-based OKO Group, which is led by Russia-born billionaire Vladislav Doronin. Doronin is also the CEO of Aman Resorts, which runs the ultra-high-end Amangiri, a celebrity hideaway a couple miles from Lake Powell's south end. After protesters picketed Aman's new Manhattan resort over its Russian ties, Doronin posted on Twitter: "I denounce the aggression of Russia on Ukraine and fervently wish for peace."

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HCN

Jalen Bazile and Rachel Olzer at Elevenmile Reservoir near Deckers, Colorado. **Adam Andres Pawlikiewicz Mesa**

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"I have really enjoyed the added diversity you have incorporated into High Country News. Hard-hitting journalism about the people and places that define the West has always been a part of HCN, but you have now expanded that vision to tell deeper stories about the who, what and how that have been affected by our collective history of use and misuse in the region. Thank you!" –Jim Ridley, Santee, California



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WELCOME TO THE SUSTAINERS' CLUB

Anonymous (3)
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In memory of Hiram Doc Smith
Tom Baxter | Denver, CO
Thomas Biglione | Sacramento, CA
Lisa Blidar | Parker, CO
Bob & Melinda Green | Upland, CA
Brian & Mary Thornburgh | San Diego, CA
Cheri Bucciarelli | Pueblo, CO
Lynda Daley | Clovis, CA
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Karin Ebertz | Gillette, WY
Joe Alcorn & Sylvia Wittels | Bernalillo, NM
Bill Lipsey | Aspen, CO
Michelle MacKenzie | Menlo Park, CA
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Beverley Manley | Truth or Consequences, NM
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Rich Stolz | Seattle, WA

Want to tell us why you support HCN?
Email development@hcn.org

Introductions and our survey

HELLO THERE, FRIENDS! This is the first time I've formally addressed you in the pages of this magazine — though my fingerprints may have occasionally appeared in previous issues. My name is Michael Schrantz, and I'm part of the business staff at *High Country News*. I might show up in your mailbox when it's time to renew, check in with you via email, entreat your participation in our reader survey, maybe even follow up with a call — and bring you tidings from *HCN* in these Community Pages, as I'm doing now.

This month, I have an update on our latest reader survey, which closed at the end of March.

It was a tremendous success: We saw our highest levels of participation since we resumed regular surveys last year. And more than a hundred of you volunteered to let me steal even more of your time on the telephone. I didn't quite get to all of you, but please know that your willingness to participate was very much appreciated.

Overwhelmingly, the most popular story mentioned in this survey was our March spotlight on the Colorado River Basin and Indigenous water rights, written by Pauly Denetclaw and Christine Trudeau, a contributing editor at *HCN* for the past year. Readers were fascinated by the history of how tribal nations were cut out of water agreements, infuriated by the injustice but encouraged by the possibility of a more inclusive future. A common theme that emerged from the surveys was how much you appreciate *HCN's* coverage of Indigenous issues as well as our stories about Westerners who rally for their communities. I can confirm *HCN* will continue writing about both.

The other thing I want to plug this month is the opportunity I've had to interview key staffers and interesting newcomers, asking the kind of questions I imagine curious readers like you might have. I recently spoke to Paisley Rekdal, *HCN's* new poetry editor. You can find an excerpt on this page.

In the meantime, please keep emailing dearfriends@hcn.org with your suggestions about how to better connect with *HCN's* community, since it just so happens that I've been the person behind the inbox this whole time. Until next month!

—Michael Schrantz



Paisley Rekdal

Gabriella Trujillo / HCN

Michael Schrantz

'Doing something kinda sneaky around poetry'

New *HCN* Poetry Editor Paisley Rekdal's CV is extensive. She has written 10 books, been published in a long list of journals and periodicals and taken home the sorts of fellowships and prizes you know by name. (Think Guggenheim, Fulbright, NEA and Pushcart.) Since 2017, she's also served as Utah's poet laureate. A few excerpts from a longer interview are below.

On surprising people with poetry ...

"At magazines where readers are already expecting poetry, you're speaking to the converted. I like the idea of doing something kinda sneaky around poetry. Readers coming to *High Country News* for something different might find a poem that leads them to become more interested in poetry or seek out more poets living in or writing about the West."

On poetry complementing *HCN's* strengths ...

"What poetry can do is leap out of longer documents and accounts to offer new ways of seeing a subject. Poems become visual counterpoints on the page. They offer breathing space for readers moving their way through the publication online or in hand. But also, poetry offers a different way of seeing the world, and oftentimes, can compress really big stories into small images that do a lot of work. I think that if you're a reader of longform nonfiction you're always hungry for those bigger stories that poetry can actually offer in small, short ways."

On the kind of poetry that will appear in *HCN* ...

"I'd like to publish the best poems that I find written in and about the West. I'm not going to be particularly focused on just one topic. That said, I think I am going to find more delight in poems that subvert whatever the topic might be. Oftentimes, we don't talk about the urban West as a natural space. I'd be interested in seeing that. We don't tend to think of the West as a place that hosts a kind of experimental poetics, but we do. I'd be interested in seeing some poems that resist conventional lyric expression in favor of something more surprising or visually disrupting on the page. I don't want to limit what I'm looking for."

Read the full interview at <https://hcne.ws/poetry>





SEEING DIFFERENTLY

A shift in perspective can
reveal new truths.

Photos by Richard Misrach



R

ichard Misrach has taken many iconic photos of the West over the arc of his career, capturing the landscape and human pursuits therein in an artfully documentarian manner, with an eye toward the vexing questions that underlie concepts like conservation, wildness, destruction and renewal. Operating at the intersection of ecology, aesthetics and human agency, much of his work portrays the human imprint on the land with thought-provoking resonance. His most recent project involves making color

negatives of his images, to render an alternate experience of his subjects. “For pretty much the history of the medium, the photographer made a negative, and then turned it into a positive,” he said. “With the invention of the digital capture, the negative was rendered obsolete.” He describes this new work as making a positive and transforming it into a negative, “making the familiar unfamiliar to force us into a deeper awareness of our world and surroundings, as well as our own actions.”

Previous page:
Untitled #99-391
(Mono Lake), 1999/2010,
96 by 120 inches.

Untitled #99-551,
1999/2008,
60 by 74 inches *(left)*.

Untitled #553, 2007,
60 by 80 inches *(below)*.





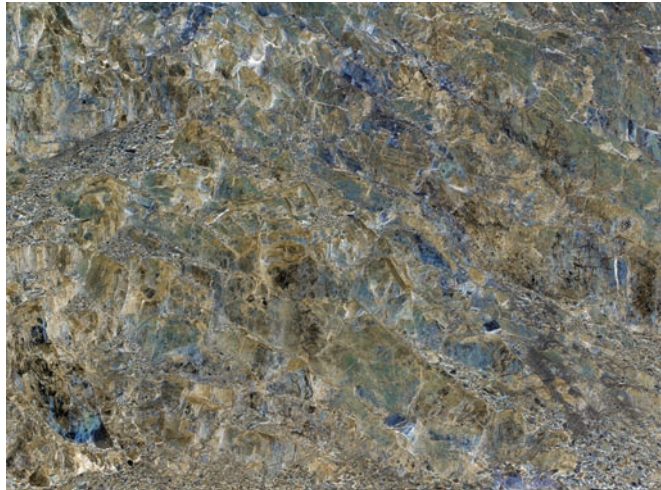
Untitled #9485FC (Man on Beach), 2008, 44 by 60 inches.



*IPS #9876 (Scrub #4), 2011,
17 by 22 inches (below, top).*

*Untitled #026800FC (Rock Wall,
Mono Lake), 2009, 60 by 80 inches
(below, center).*

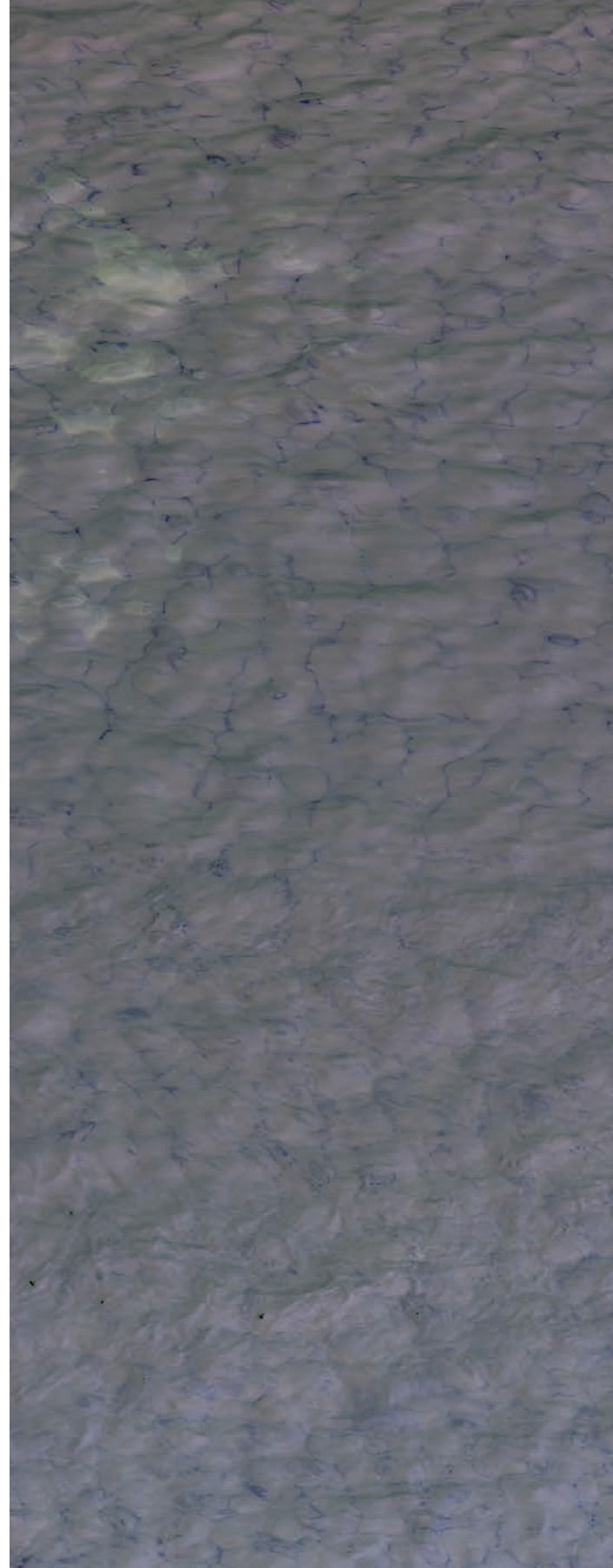
*Untitled #874 (Stone Blue), 2007,
60 by 80 inches (below, bottom).*





*IPS #0180 (My Footprints), 2011,
18.5 by 25 inches (above).*

*Untitled #322100FC
(Handstand), 2008,
60 by 80 inches (right).*





Photos by Richard Misrach from
Richard Misrach: Notations
© Radius Books, 2022, out now.



Wildlife biologist Miguel Ordeñana in a part of LA's Griffith Park known to be frequented by the mountain lion P-22.



The Lion King of Los Angeles

The story of a child spellbound by nature who became an ambassador for Southern California's mountain lions and an advocate for the habitat connectivity that is essential to their survival.

By Ruxandra Guidi | Photos by Noé Montes

A DECADE AGO, on a bright Los Angeles morning, Miguel Ordeñana hiked into Griffith Park, a defiant pocket of green hills surrounded by busy freeways and major roads. Before developers carved up the California landscape, the park hugged the Santa Monica Mountains. Now, during peak traffic hours, 15,000 cars drive Interstate 5 along its eastern edge, and the park's 4,000 acres — LA's largest green space — is just a short drive from downtown.

Back then, Ordeñana was an idealistic 29-year-old wildlife biologist who had just started a job with the U.S. Forest Service. That morning, he entered the park from the east, venturing deep into canyons of dark-green chaparral. The traffic noise faded, giving way to the muted rustle of the coastal sage scrub's low-growing leaves. Ordeñana had come to check out the motion-activated wildlife cameras he'd installed throughout the urban park to document its wildlife, an assortment of raccoons, gray foxes, skunks, coyotes, bobcats and deer. Griffith Park functions like an island surrounded by freeways; once animals find their way into



its densely vegetated core, they are, essentially, marooned. Leaving is too risky; the surrounding freeways and overbuilt neighborhood streets keep them largely confined to their newfound refuge. There's generally plenty of food there, though never enough space to roam, and, crucially, it's almost impossible for

many animals to find mates. After hiking for over an hour, Ordeñana reached the last of his cameras and collected the footage.

A few weeks later, as he returned to his cameras on the edge of Griffith Park, lost in thought, a car pulled over and the stranger in it yelled at him, threatening to call the cops:

An aerial view of Griffith Park with the Los Angeles River and the Interstate 5 Freeway in the foreground (*above*).
Noé Montes/Robert Penna

Video of a bobcat captured by one of the motion-activated trail cameras that Ordeñana uses to monitor P-22's health and activities, as well as those of other passersby (*facing*).

"You're not supposed to be here!" Ordeñana scrambled for his papers — his driver's license, U.S. Forest Service badge, the folded-up state permit that authorized his research. But the man was already on his cellphone, and, within minutes, a police car appeared. Ordeñana felt himself tense up, fear and rage roiling inside



him. *This could be it*, he thought. *One little gesture, the wrong movement, and it's over for me.* He'd be seen as an outsider, an intruder, a criminal. Someone could pull out a gun and kill him.

Ordeñana is solidly built, about 5 foot 8, with a broad chest, strong arms and short-cropped dark hair.

That day, he wore a bright orange safety vest and carried a backpack. And, fortunately, the police reacted calmly, de-escalating the situation. They did, however, remind him to make sure he carried his permit and always wore that official-looking vest.

He kept returning to Griffith

Park. One day, in mid-February, 2012, Ordeñana was reviewing footage. His trail cameras had captured plenty of wildlife. But this time, they also caught something extraordinary: On the left side of one frame, amid overgrown grasses, stood a muscular 120-pound cougar.

Ordeñana was stunned. The mountain lion looked young and well-fed, his coat a shiny beige. Somehow, this teenage predator had defied LA's relentlessly overbuilt landscape, crossed multiple freeways and sauntered right into Ordeñana's research turf. "He's in this unprecedented situation — in

a park with so many different landmarks, in a city that's so famous and associated with everything but nature," Ordeñana remembered thinking.

Ordeñana swiftly alerted his collaborators. For the preceding decade, the National Park Service had been conducting a statewide mountain lion study, and the agency was thrilled by the footage. It marked the first documented case of a cougar traveling so far into the urban core without getting run over and killed. Within weeks, the Park Service caught up with the mountain lion, sedated him and affixed a GPS radio collar. The cougar was christened P-22, identifying him as the 22nd out of the more than 100

mountain lions studied in Southern California since 2002.

Ordeñana had no idea that P-22 would impact his life the way he has, challenging his understanding of urban nature and science education. Ordeñana's influence in traditional wildlife biology research would expand, and he would become an important advocate for a more inclusive community science. P-22's life would pivot as well, as he became the hero of a new story — one about how wildlife could exist and even thrive in one of the nation's densest urban landscapes.

LOS ANGELES COUNTY'S Natural History Museum, with

its austere but impressive marble rotunda, is an early 20th-century mishmash of Spanish Renaissance and column-heavy Neoclassical style. Despite its opulence, it was a welcoming place for 5-year-old Miguel Ordeñana and his mother, Adilia Koch, a gentle, soft-spoken woman with coffee-colored eyes and hair, just like her son's. "The museum was a place you could go to when others were closed," Koch told me. "And what do you do on a Sunday with a young child, when you're a single parent with not a lot of money?"

Young Miguel loved the taxidermy displays in the museum's African Mammal Hall, which depicted Tanzania's Maswa Game Reserve. He would stare at the African lions, with the large male at the center and the tiny, playful cubs close to the lionesses. He'd ask his mom if they were fake. "They're not alive," she'd tell him, "but what you see here is real."

Koch, who had recently separated from her husband, Ordeñana's father, had left Northern California to join her extended Nicaraguan immigrant family in Los Angeles. She and her son shared a small apartment in Hollywood with her sister and cousins. Like the pride of lions at the Natural History Museum, their home was led by women and full of kids. On weekends, mother and son explored Griffith Park, where Southern Pacific rattlesnakes hid in the grass and coyotes roamed the hills. At night, they read storybooks about talking animals with human qualities and flaws. The boy began to realize that wildlife existed all around him. "I told everybody what I'd learned: Don't feed the wildlife," he said. "But some of my first memories are of a woman leaving cat food for the racoons." The real wild animals, unlike the friendly creatures in his books, kept to themselves. They were mysterious — and Ordeñana was fascinated.

A few years later, mother and son moved into their own duplex in Los Feliz, a residential neighborhood on the edge of Griffith Park

with 1960s-era apartments and lush, fenced-in backyards. At night, Ordeñana gazed out the window, trying to identify the critters he saw, from the skunks hunting for the neighbor's dog food to the family of racoons that triggered the motion-sensing lights. "I would watch what kind of animals would show up, and then I would watch them eat," he remembers. Some of the lessons he learned were harsh: His own cat, Whiskey, became a meal for LA's wild predators. "One evening," he said, "my neighbors watched as my first pet was killed by a pack of coyotes." He told the story matter-of-factly, though at the time, he wept inconsolably.

He was a shy and sensitive child, and his encounters with wildlife sparked his curiosity. He had so many questions. How did humans and wildlife share the landscape? Where did the coyotes go if their human neighbors refused to tolerate them? Wild animals were everywhere, not just in faraway places like the Tanzanian savanna. And as Ordeñana grew older and exchanged fables for science books, he realized that wildlife didn't need to be "exotic" to be interesting.

Those early years weren't easy. Koch worked full-time during the day. At 9 p.m., she put her son to bed and started her night college classes, often doing homework until the early hours, only to start another day just a few hours later. In the late '80s and early '90s, LA was rife with gang activity and heavy policing. "It was always really important for me to know that he was safe," Koch told me. Latino and Black teens were stereotyped and regularly profiled by police. A couple of Ordeñana's cousins dropped out of high school, and Koch's own brother got into gangs. Ordeñana, however, stayed out of trouble. In high school, he played football, baseball and video games, keeping his passion for animals secret because he knew his friends would tease him. Being Latino and interested in nature was "weird"; it wasn't remotely "tough" or cool. "I was a closeted nerd," Ordeñana





Miguel Ordeñana's mother, Adilia Koch, holds a photo of herself and Miguel when he was a child (*facing, top*).

Adilia Koch and Miguel Ordeñana in March, at her home near Griffith Park (*facing, bottom*).

View of Griffith Park from Lake Hollywood, a reservoir located on the southwestern edge of P-22's territory (*above*).

A 3D topographic map in the Natural History Museum showing P-22's territory (*left*).

said. “I wouldn’t talk about my interests with anyone except my mom and my dad.”

One day, when Ordeñana was a sophomore, Koch found a pamphlet about the Los Angeles Zoo’s student volunteer program. Ordeñana’s grades weren’t great, but he applied and got into the competitive program — one of only two Latino kids in the class, as far as he remembers. For six months, he spent every weekend attending lectures on zoology and learning about conservation and wildlife. Instead of hanging out with his friends, he learned how to talk about science to the families that visited the zoo.

Ordeñana often wonders where he would be if his mom hadn’t exposed him to museums and nature. He’d begun to realize that urban nature deserved conserving, too — that even if it was rarely featured in museums or zoos, it was worth studying and celebrating. Ordeñana was more than a closeted nerd; he was a closeted scientist. He had found his vocation. His path was set.

ON A CRISP, SUNNY Sunday morning last December, Ordeñana took me to one of P-22’s favorite hangouts. We made our way up an equestrian trail in Griffith Park, not far from the spot where that stranger called the cops on Ordeñana a decade ago, traversing funnels and canyons where we might find scat or tracks or what are known as “scrapes” — clawed traces where mountain lions kick back the dirt and urinate to mark their territory.

As we walked, we talked about the early years of Ordeñana’s career, when he was a struggling undergraduate student eager to find mentors who could help him reframe conservation from his own Latino-living-in-a-big-city perspective. There were not many Latinos doing the kind of work he dreamed of doing. Then, in 2005, he briefly met Roel Lopez, an expert on endangered and fragmented wildlife populations at the Texas

A&M Natural Resources Institute in College Station, Texas. Lopez encouraged Ordeñana to carve out a solo path.

Historically, non-whites have been excluded from many STEM fields, a disparity that persists today. A recent Pew Research Center study found that Latinos make up just 8% of life scientists in the country; nationwide, there are barely 20,000 Latino conservation scientists. Ordeñana has a theory for why few Latinos gravitate toward the field. “Whether we come from Central America or South America, Latinos are into family and community, and that’s just part of our culture,” he told me. “But when you’re a scientist, you’re told to disconnect, to just be objective about your research.”

About an hour into the hike, Ordeñana and I stopped at one of his trail cameras, part of the research he’s been stewarding for more than a decade. He checked out its footage. No P-22, but one capture showed a bobcat, followed by her furry, bumbling kitten. Ordeñana has had many sightings in this area, and I can see why. It’s a lovely spot: The trails aren’t marked, and there are few hikers. On a steep hill of volcanic rock, there’s a natural cave that looks out over the oak woodlands below. The canopy swayed in the gentle breeze. If P-22 rested near the edge of the cave, as I imagined he might do when no one was around, the mid-morning sun would warm his giant paws while he napped.

Ordeñana has never encountered P-22 face-to-face. The truth is, he would prefer not to: Mountain lions need their space, he said, and we should never give a wild animal a reason to approach us. “He could be just over there, and you wouldn’t know, right?” Ordeñana said, pointing to thick chaparral to our right. Mountain lions are less aggressive than most other big cats — leopards, African lions or jaguars. “They are a little bit like your scared cat,” he said. If a pack of coyotes approaches, P-22 will often simply abandon a kill. Then

again, you couldn’t call a cougar like P-22 faint-hearted; nothing timid would dare to tackle the labyrinth of LA’s massive freeway system.

Lions rarely make the kind of journey that P-22 did, but even when an animal succeeds in crossing busy freeways, the odds remain stacked against its species. Genetic isolation due to inbreeding is a serious threat to mountain lions’ survival, and, since lions are an apex predator in California, their demise could affect the entire ecosystem. Last year, a study largely based on National Park Service data found that Southern California’s mountain lions had the lowest genetic variation of any population in the nation. If urban development — and inbreeding — continue unabated, mountain lions could disappear locally within the next 50 years. Today, there are believed to be somewhere between 2,000 to 6,000 mountain lions in the state, though there is no reliable data specifically in Southern California. Across the state, traffic accidents are their leading cause of death.

AFTER THE FOOTAGE came to light, Ordeñana, Park Service researchers and Beth Pratt, the National Wildlife Federation’s California regional executive director, watched P-22’s image on a loop, trying to decipher what his long trek and urban relocation meant for his species. To Ordeñana and Pratt, it signified two things: Large predators were living in urban areas, and humans had a responsibility to live and let live. This gave new life to an old dream: building a wildlife crossing in dense LA County, over 10 lanes of crowded pavement and into the Santa Monica Mountains.

It was a radical idea, but without it, they reasoned, Southern California’s lions were doomed. These conversations marked the true beginning of what would eventually become the proposed Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing. The National Park Service had already

weighed in on the idea, not just to help P-22 and his ilk, but to be a bridge for all the other species roaming the less urbanized parts of the Santa Monica Mountains.

“I had really not been exposed to the science of connectivity when I was coming up in school, over 30 years ago,” Pratt told me last November during a Zoom call. “We were taught, ‘You put the wildlife here and the people there; the way to do conservation was through a little refuge.’” At the time of P-22’s discovery, Pratt pitched a fundraising campaign for a wildlife crossing. At first, the National Wildlife Federation held back. Pratt said that leaders in her field were saying things like P-22 “shouldn’t be there, because he’s just an outlier.” A decade ago, such a crossing might have helped P-22 make his way east to Griffith Park, or even leave the area to find a mate. Now, however, it’s too late: He’s settled about 30 miles away from the proposed bridge, in a place where he is able to find plenty of food. He has little incentive to travel too far from his adopted home.

Lions can be fiercely territorial. Typically, a solitary male mountain lion needs about 150 square miles to roam, an area about half the size of New York City. But P-22 lives on only nine square miles, less than a tenth the size of a normal range. And it’s far from traditional cougar territory, if you include the nearby Warner Brothers’ studios and Forest Lawn Memorial Park. Like other Angelenos, P-22 has visited the graves of famous people like Michael Jackson and Elizabeth Taylor.

P-22’s own celebrity status has helped Pratt, Ordeñana and their allies raise awareness about wildlife, especially among young people in communities of color, who have historically been excluded from the field and rarely get to experience nature firsthand — certainly not in a city like LA, which isn’t known for wildlife or conservation. “For me, and for a lot of people, P-22’s story is an entry into changing our thinking: Many species are



From top: A section of the Natural History Museum's exhibition "P-22: The story of L.A.'s Most Famous Feline." Ordeñana in the Natural History Museum's Mammalogy Collection area. Ordeñana with students at Montara Avenue Elementary in South Gate, where he teaches as part of the Natural History Museum's Community Science project.

running out of habitat, and we need to learn to co-exist," Pratt said. A wildlife crossing will make room for these mammals, expanding their already-shrunk range, countering the seemingly endless development of LA's sprawling landscape.

"Here's this cat that literally lives under the Hollywood sign," said Pratt, laughing over Zoom from her cabin in the foothills outside Yosemite National Park. "He's handsome, he's challenged with his dating life." P-22 is unlikely to breed: He would have to leave his Griffith Park kingdom and risk his life in Los Angeles traffic just to seek out a mate. Pratt's own life and career, like Ordeñana's, is now tied to P-22's story; she even has the famous lion's stoic face tattooed on her upper left arm, along with the Hollywood sign.

In 2020, the California Fish and Game Commission heeded conservationists' pleas and moved a step closer to protecting six mountain lion populations under the state's Endangered Species Act, which now limits the construction or expansion of highways in core cougar habitat unless measures are put into place to ensure linked habitats. Ordeñana and others say that stitching Southern California's ragged landscape back together with a wildlife bridge would allow not just mountain lions but many other species to spread through the

Santa Monica Mountains, north to Simi Hills and the Santa Susana Mountains and even farther, to Los Padres National Forest, northwest of Los Angeles. Bobcats, gray foxes, mule deer and coyotes all need room to roam.

In late April, thanks to Pratt and Ordeñana and many others, the Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing — the first wildlife crossing of this scale in an urban area of this size and density — broke ground in Agoura Hills, about 30 miles west of Griffith Park. Once built, it will be the largest urban crossing in the world.

After he discovered P-22, Ordeñana landed a job at the Natural History Museum of LA County, the same museum he'd spent countless hours in as a kid. As one of the managers of the community science team, he has created community science projects throughout Southern California.

One of his most treasured projects has focused not on mountain lions, but on bats. "Bats are like mountain lions," he said. "They're controversial. People either hate them or are afraid of them, or love them, but at minimum, they are conversation starters." Ordeñana suggested installing sensors in backyards and apartment complexes in central LA and rotating them month to month. His visits gave him a chance to meet his neighbors and educate them about conservation. Within weeks of the first installation, those neighbors found evidence of bats in some of LA's most overbuilt neighborhoods; during the first year, they identified multiple species in places that scientists had never bothered to look. Most wildlife biologists might have expected to find bats migrating along wetlands or lagoons or golf courses. Instead, they found evidence of bat migration amid the liquor stores and car washes of Long Beach's Eastside neighborhood.

For years, Ordeñana, Pratt and her team have been building momentum through the kid-friendly #SaveLACougars



science education campaign, where people can sign up to do group hikes along parts of P-22's 50-mile trek, donate to the wildlife crossing campaign or buy P-22 swag. They can watch a 3D virtual reality video that begins with an encounter with a mountain lion and ends with a computer rendering of the future wildlife crossing.

On an overcast, chilly weekday morning in December, I exited the 101 freeway and got lost near the end of the road, in an undeveloped area of rolling hills. Only a couple of valley oaks were still standing; a wildfire last year damaged this stretch of land along with other parts of the Santa Monica Mountains. An interpretive sign proclaimed "Future Site of the Wildlife Crossing at Liberty Canyon," but there was little to indicate what's to come — a 210-foot-long bridge across 10 lanes of highway and a landscape restored with native plants, designed to mitigate the sound and light disturbances from the approximately 300,000 vehicles that drive the nearby highway every day.

Despite its 164,000 miles of

freeways, the U.S. has only around 1,000 wildlife crossings, most of them in the West. So far, there's little data on landscape connectivity, and politicians have long dismissed wildlife crossings as wasteful. But there are a few ambitious projects that serve as models for Liberty Canyon — Snoqualmie Pass in Washington, Trapper's Point in Wyoming and the Trans-Canada Highway wildlife crossings in Banff National Park in Alberta, Canada. A study on the Banff crossings shows that a well-designed crossing can benefit humans as well as wildlife, reducing animal-vehicle crashes even as it creates the necessary links for animal movement and allows small mammals to avoid predators and large mammals to escape humans.

A Chicago-based firm called Living Habitats designed the \$87 million crossing. Biologists including Ordeñana advised the team, working with Robert Rock of Living Habitats on the crossing's design, along with an expert on light pollution and even a mycologist who is focused on the ecological restoration of the site. Ideally, the bridge is just the beginning. In

How could wide-ranging animals possibly survive on a green island like Griffith Park?

A rendering of the Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing, a 210-foot-long bridge across 10 lanes of highway that will become the largest urban wildlife crossing in the world, once it's completed. **Living Habitats LLC and National Wildlife Federation**

late 2021, President Joe Biden's infrastructure bill, which included \$350 million for animal-friendly projects, passed. It's the biggest investment in wildlife crossings in U.S. history.

"This is great news for other people who are thinking outside the box, who are studying an area or studying a species that usually isn't a top priority," Ordeñana said. We stood in his mother's backyard, gazing out at the downtown Los Angeles' skyline. "Griffith Park is just so isolated. ... 'Why are you wasting your time studying Griffith Park when it's an island?' Mine was a research question that not a lot of people had faith in." After all, how could wide-ranging animals possibly survive on a green island like Griffith Park?

For the past six years, Ordeñana has been one of the main ambassadors of the #SaveLACougars grassroots campaign, helping to raise more than \$78 million for the crossing from nearly 5,000 donors, not just Angelenos with big pockets, but also children and families who followed P-22's story and were eager to give whatever they could.

When Ordeñana first identified P-22 in his trail camera footage a decade ago, he never imagined becoming a protagonist in the mountain lion's journey. P-22 was a main character in Ordeñana's journey, too, as he traversed his own unclear paths with few guides. But even in the beginning, when he was a shy, nerdy kid, Ordeñana was drawn to wildlife that other people either took for granted or assumed had long vanished from urban LA. Who better to discover P-22?

"It all started with just taking a chance," he told me earnestly, as we stood between the lush trees in his mother's garden. "I'm not this extra-talented scientist; I'm just willing to take a chance looking at places where other scientists won't." We watched the sun as it set that night above the city. A cold breeze kicked in. Soon, the coyotes would descend from Griffith Park, and P-22 would likely take a stroll around his kingdom. ☀



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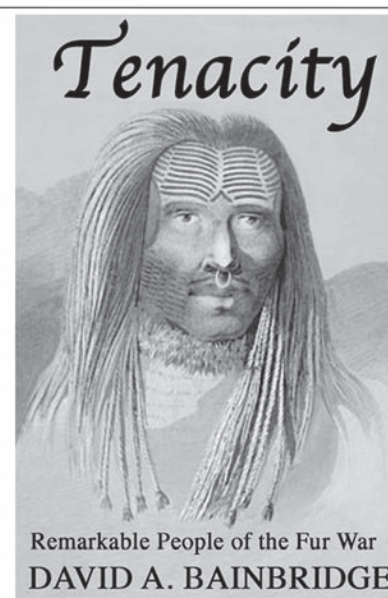
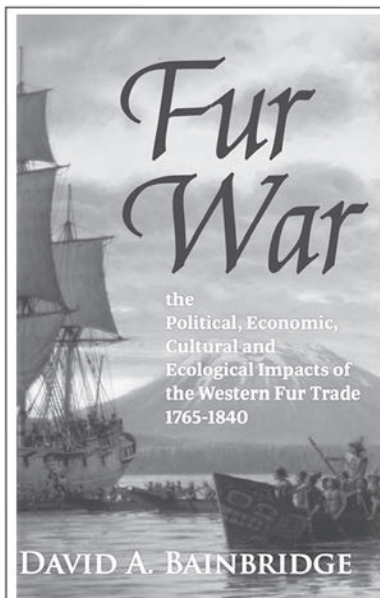
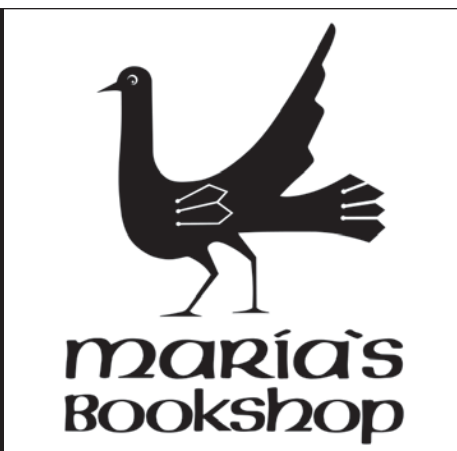
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Q&A

VAUHINI VARA began her career reporting on Silicon Valley in the early 2000s. Back then, the potential of tech companies to build community and connect people across the world seemed infinitely promising. But only a few years into her journalism career, Vara grew concerned — not only about the industry’s breakneck growth, but also about its increasingly unchecked power. That’s when she turned to fiction, getting her MFA at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop.

“In fiction, you can imagine these futures that aren’t yet here,” she said. “It’s not irresponsible to do so, it’s one of the things that fiction can do really beautifully and really well.”

The Immortal King Rao, Vara’s debut novel, imagines a dystopian

future where the tech industry is not only unregulated; it is the regulator. It is the government — globally — shaping all aspects of the “Shareholders,” i.e., the citizens’ lives. At its helm is King Rao, born into a family of Dalit coconut farmers in India. Eventually, King makes his way to the Washington

coast, where his technological innovations catapult him to fame and fortune, before plunging him into shame and accusations that he has, literally, destroyed people’s lives. *High Country News* recently spoke with Vara about drawing on her family history and her experience as a journalist to create fiction,

Where no technology has gone before

A new novel ponders caste, climate change and the dangers of Big Tech.

BY RAKSHA VASUDEVAN | ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN CROW

the implications of caste for her characters, and the importance of landscape in her writing. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Can you tell me about the inspiration for this story? Do you remember where you were when the idea was born?

I do, actually. It was the winter of 2009. I was traveling with my dad and his wife in South America when I was in graduate school. I remember we were on a train, and my dad was teasingly like, “Why do you keep writing short stories? You should be working on a novel.”

I, also teasingly, was like, “OK, dad, why don’t you give me an idea for a novel then?” He was like, “Well, you could write the story of my family

on the coconut grove in India.”

He was raised there at a time when the caste relations in the country were changing. And in that time, my dad’s family came into ownership of this coconut grove where they had previously been workers. That changed all these dynamics within his family in interesting and eventually challenging ways. That was the jumping-off point for the novel. At the same time, because I had been working as a tech reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, I had all these ideas floating around in my mind about Silicon Valley and the rise of Big Tech.

So the story of my dad’s family farm and the story of the rise of Big Tech became the same novel through King Rao, this character who is born on this coconut grove in the ’50s.

In the book, we see a Washington coast that’s plunged into ever-greater climate catastrophe — drought, wildfire, flooding — while a group of outliers, the Exes, tries to forge a different path, which is essentially a return to living off the land. Why did you choose this area of the country to illustrate the threats and joys of humans’ evolving relationship to nature?

My family moved to the Seattle area when I started eighth grade. Still, when I think of an ideal landscape, that’s what it is for me — the mountains and the water and the greenery and the beautiful vegetation. But now, coastal places like Seattle or the Godavari Delta in India, where part of the novel is also set, are experiencing some of the most devastating impacts of climate change. So, I thought the coasts could showcase how people could have a close sense of communion with the land, but are also a place where the threat of climate change was very present.

I found it remarkable to read this book at a time when there’s so much discussion about the importation of caste from India

to America. Do you see this book as part of that conversation?

Growing up, my own caste identity wasn’t something I was particularly aware of. But to write about the coconut grove and the family’s relationship to the land, I was almost forced to write about caste and class. And then I imagined King Rao becoming a tech CEO in the U.S. An Indian-American becoming a tech CEO was a stretch when I started writing, 10 years ago. I imagined I was drafting this alternate history.

Now, an Indian American CEO of a very powerful tech company doesn’t seem unusual. But the part that represents a future that we haven’t yet arrived at is a Dalit person becoming a tech CEO. King Rao is one of many Dalit characters in the book. He’s aware of how caste has narrowed his opportunities, but he doesn’t have a broadminded sense of caste oppression in the way that some of the other Dalit characters do. So, it’s not an accident that the character who becomes the head of a powerful world government that creates all sorts of social stratification is that character who is not engaged with issues of casteism and caste oppression.

What about the Exes and the alternative they offer to this techno-capitalist establishment? What were some of your inspirations in building their ideology, the individual characters, their community?

Anarchism is not a philosophy that I would consider myself very well versed in, but I did a lot of reading to understand it for the purposes of the novel. I read Emma Goldman’s autobiography. I was also reading Daoist philosophy. I tried to have the Exes not be too didactic. I wanted their way of being to be informed both by these ancient texts and by more modern anarchist thoughts. At the same time, I didn’t want it to be portrayed as a perfect alternative. I think in our current post capitalist society, a fringe group like the Exes would

exist only as long as the more powerful forces tolerated them.

I wondered if the Exes were also inspired by events like the WTO protests that took place in Seattle while you were living there.

Yes, definitely. I remember seeing images in the news of those protests right across the bridge from where I grew up and being captivated by them — by the fact that regular people were out there taking a stand on something. I found it very exciting and moving. It was such a different time too, of pre-social media, and of course, pre-cellphones. And the Exes in the novel, they reject technology. Those protests informed my understanding of what a tech-free protest movement might look like.

You grew up in Seattle, and then you lived in the Bay Area. Now you live in Colorado. How did these settings shape your writing process?

In early drafts of the book, a lot was happening on a pretty abstract level. So, Athena (Rao’s daughter) and her dad lived somewhere offshore near the U.S., but we didn’t really know where, and the Exes also lived somewhere offshore. A friend of mine, Anna North, who’s also a writer, read it and was like, “There needs to be an actual place on a map that we can visualize.”

I remember looking at Google Maps and wondering, “What’s the coastal place where these people could live?” And then zooming in closer and closer near Seattle and

realizing, “Oh, right. They could live here.” I ended up zeroing in on Blake Island. You can take a boat and hike around the island, but people don’t live there. There’s no services. So I decided to have Athena and her dad live on that island. That broke open a lot for the book. I eventually went to visit the island, traipsed through the forest. That landscape was eventually important to the book on a very visceral level.

I finished the book in Colorado. My relationship with the natural world has been stronger here than anywhere else I’ve lived. I was also doing a lot of edits two summers ago, when there were the really bad wildfires. You’d walk outside and there would be smoke in your eyes and in your throat. So, I went back to certain sections that dealt specifically with climate change, which I would describe as an ever-present backdrop of the book. I wrote through those sections that summer, because it felt very present and urgent.

I remember a line from the book about how the sunsets were too beautiful. And I was like, “Oh, yeah, that’s exactly right. It’s beautiful in this almost obscene way.”

I remember writing that during that weird summer, when you would look up at the sky and it was gorgeous, but wrongly gorgeous. That coincided with a deepening sense of setting in the book. Living in this place where I’ve been more aware of the setting of my own life helped me understand the importance of it for the book as well. ✨

“In fiction, you can imagine these futures that aren’t yet here.”

REVIEW

We don't share land here

On *Yellowstone*, and the white desire to control the narrative.

BY LIZA BLACK | ILLUSTRATION BY J.D. REEVES

KEVIN COSTNER HAS haunted me my entire life. We attended the same high school and shared a U.S. history teacher, who truly loved Costner and spoke of him often. After I graduated, thinking I was done with Costner, I wrote *Picturing Indians: Native Americans in Film, 1941–1960*, a book that describes how Native people were commodified by Hollywood for their authenticity then criticized for being modern. And yet, nearly every time my book comes up in casual conversation, people routinely single out one film, expecting me to join in their praise of it. Instead, they are met with awkward silence. The film in question? *Dances with Wolves*.

Producing and starring in *Dances* cemented Costner as the premier protagonist for white boomers everywhere, a status he's carried with him into the 21st century. But as the 2010s progressed, finally, I thought, the man who forever stained America's perception of Indian Country with *Dances* (and tried to buy part of the Black Hills for his own personal playground), seemed to be exiting stage left. Then, in 2018, *Yellowstone* appeared. The haunting resumed.

Funded by Paramount, the hit television series — written by screenwriter Taylor Sheridan, a white Gen-Xer — recognized a simple truth that has propelled Hollywood for over a century: new power must rely on old, established power. To bring in the boomer crowd and give *Yellowstone* its Western bona fides, Costner was cast as rancher and patriarch John Dutton.

Four seasons in, American audiences love *Yellowstone*. Adore it, even. It's not hard to see its initial appeal, given its photogenic Montana setting and its emergence during a pandemic that kept viewers confined to our cramped dwellings. The show's decidedly American aesthetic — cowboys, horses, country music, wealthy patriarchs, disappointing heirs, conniving lurkers — lures you in with nostalgia.

Yellowstone spins a simple story about white America, wanting you to believe that white Americans love their land, earn a living raising livestock, protect their family's legacy by holding onto valuable property, and suffer as the victims of a greedy American government.

But *Yellowstone's* subtext is another thing entirely: the



settler-colonial version of American history, which offers didactics on human nature rather than confronting the history of Native peoples. With its constant and bloody violence, *Yellowstone* suggests that white Americans must resort to bloodshed to acquire or keep money and power. Private property defines *Yellowstone*. When John Dutton finds a group of Chinese tourists on his ranch, he wields a gun, yelling at them to leave, shouting, “We don't share land here.”

Within this amoral scenario enter Native people — or, perhaps more accurately, Sheridan's

post-*Dances* version of Native people. Sheridan quickly establishes that Native people want power and money as much as white people do. The local tribal chairman, Thomas Rainwater, played by Gil Birmingham, is quick to assert the tribe's authority over the reservation, an assertion that Sheridan equates with John Dutton's assertion over his estate. In this view, no one has an intrinsic right to America because America is simply an open market. *Yellowstone* says America belongs to whoever can hold onto it. Sheridan erases the history between Natives and settlers, turning Montana into



“Yellowstone’s subtext is another thing entirely: the settler-colonial version of American history, which offers didactics on human nature rather than confronting the history of Native peoples.”

a place of brute force with no national past. I guess that’s why he had to follow it up with *1883*.

Sheridan plays a different hand when it comes to women characters in *Yellowstone*. Beth Dutton thinks, speaks and acts like a white man, engaging in the same kind of vicious competition that her white male counterparts embrace. Briefly, and belatedly, her Native corollary comes in the form of attorney Angela Blue Thunder, played by Q’orianka Kilcher. With her massive amounts of lip filler and heavy-handed lip coloring, Blue Thunder represents late-stage capitalism, scheming and backstabbing to execute Rainwater’s plan to develop Dutton’s land holdings.

The biggest problem with Native representation within the Sheridan-verse, though, is that he exhibits a sick, Tarantino-style impulse to include graphic violence against women — *Native* women, that is. In *Yellowstone*, this sadistic cudgel takes aim at Monica Dutton, the daughter-in-law of white patriarch John Dutton. Monica, who appears in all seasons and episodes, is played by Kelsey Asbille, a woman who had falsely claimed to be a citizen of the Eastern Cherokee Band of Indians. Her lie was exposed after Sheridan cast her in *Wind River*, a mess of a film with plenty of gratuitous violence against Asbille’s character.

Even if Asbille was Native, her character in *Yellowstone*, like her character in *Wind River*, would still be a disappointment — uninspiring because of Sheridan’s writing. Monica embodies injury and defeat, much like the clichéd 1928 statue *End of the Trail*. Monica attempts to gather information and make suggestions, but her husband makes her decisions. Monica comes across as lifeless at times.

Sheridan prefers injured Native female characters. He puts Monica at the center of the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women by having her survive a murder attempt on a visit to her reservation. Conveniently — academics, read ahead at your own

risk — her father-in-law, Costner’s John Dutton, then pulls some strings and somehow immediately snags her a position as a professor of Native American Studies at University of Montana. Sheridan’s commitment to consistently violating his Native characters onscreen prompts an admittedly blunt question, for him as well as his producers and studio backers: Can he only see us when we are being beaten and raped?

Somewhere along the way, either Sheridan or Costner must have learned about the forced sterilizations conducted on Indigenous women in the 1970s at federally operated Indian Health Services facilities. *Yellowstone* takes this historical reality and distorts it to make white women the victims. At the tender age of 16, Beth visits an IHS clinic to get an abortion. Instead, she receives a full hysterectomy because Jamie, her adopted brother, signed the consent forms. Sheridan’s hysterical distortion insults all Native women, but especially the survivors of forced sterilizations.

At the root of all of *Yellowstone*’s ills — the violence, the colonized relationships to Montana, the casting scandal, the erasure of Native history even as they include Native people — is a clear desire on the part of Sheridan, Costner, Paramount and Hollywood itself to maintain control of the established narrative they have offered Indian Country for over a century now. What Sheridan and *Yellowstone* seek to sell as a nuanced but raw take on the neo-Western is in fact a bland repetition of the same bullshit Costner peddled three decades ago. Sheridan merely represents a continuation of the same lust for control. Trying to pick a single bone with Costner, Sheridan or *Yellowstone* is almost an exercise in futility. Ultimately, the pursuit of power by any means necessary is all they see and all they are giving. With a long line of white guys ready to spread their gospel, Native viewers like me will be forever haunted by the ghost of Costner. ✨



Routes of access

A runner considers how access to public space isn't necessarily a given.

BY CASSIE DA COSTA
ILLUSTRATION BY DIANA EJAÍTA

MY FAVORITE running route in Ojai, California, starts at my front door. In the springtime, when the still, foggy air of winter gives way to a hotter, drier, citrus-kissed ether, I take my course. There is no sidewalk, so I walk to the shoulder, asphalt crumbling underfoot, and set my watch, giving the GPS time to calibrate. Then I set off running west, toward the Ventura River.

On the road, big trucks blaze past, cyclists weave around cars parked in the shoulder, and couples walk their dogs or push strollers. There are plenty of uneven and rocky patches, but I've never rolled an ankle, perhaps in part because I avoid stretching before a run: Keeping my muscles rigid makes for a springy transition from foot to foot. One or two or five miles in, though, legs now loosened up, my muscles settle into a rhythm and flow.

My scramble toward the river bottom follows a series of dramatic downhill-to-uphill shifts. During the first descent, a small animal farm comes into view, heralded by the yelps of what sound like several goats and a llama and a horse, maybe a few pigs. Thick, musty barn odors crescendo as I angle slightly forward to let gravity carry me, rather than leaning back to break my stride. Except for the bleating domesticated fauna, no one else is on foot on this stretch of road.

Running can be lonely in Ojai, where, unlike other places I've lived, there are no local running clubs to join. The activity has become a kind of solitary mapping experience as I weigh several factors to determine how welcome — or unwelcome — I might be in a given space. Will there be rattlesnakes on the trail, cars blocking the bike path, student athletes at a meet on the local high school track, groups of walkers obliviously fanning across my path, some local authority stationed there to tell me to get out? I form a club of one, determinedly logging miles through a handful of tried-and-true routes. The route I took that day, winding yet minimally exposed to sun and traffic, went first to the river bottom and then to a meadow, two places where I usually feel that I am allowed to be.

But first came the most dangerous segment — a curvy uphill section where cars whiz by on my left. I can't see them coming, but can hear the burr of a transmission shifting gears. It's a steep grade, and taxing to my own engine. I have to slow down so that my heart doesn't overwork, taking short, quick steps on the shoulder, gravel shifting and crunching as I try not

to over-anticipate the hill's crest, where the river-bottom trail finally comes into view.

Arriving at the trail, I drop my shoulders and un-scrunch my face. Though the start of the path is a jagged and crumbly descent around shallow holes and long branches where sideways steps direct some of the impact away from my quads, the soft, dry dirt underfoot is a relief to legs tired of absorbing the impact of running on asphalt. At the bottom of the hill, woody and grassy smells infused with sweetness erupt from the river bottom, especially after a good rain. Paths diverge in a few directions between spiky chaparral and ribbed black sage. Ultimately, all of the routes lead to the river, which, after seasons of drought, is finally running again on this spring day.

This area is owned and protected by the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy, a nonprofit organization that purchases land to keep it from being developed and makes it available to the public, removing invasive plants and reintroducing native ones. Locals and visitors alike enjoy walking through the chaparral and oak trees, the California buckwheat and many types of sage that form this drought-resistant landscape.

But in addition to the saving and the planting, the OVLC has made some more controversial moves. The first summer of the pandemic brought scorching heat and a flurry of out-of-towners from inland locales. They visited on the weekends, seeking relief in the pebble-bottomed river, a thigh-high rush of cool water. But their welcome was contingent on their adherence to rules, both stated on signs in the parking lots and unspoken. *Pack out your trash. Leash and pick up after your dog. Stay on the trails.* Then the Land Conservancy's employees and volunteers began to find diapers and discarded inner tubes floating unattended. No one knew for sure who was responsible, but many blamed the visitors, who were perhaps more likely to blast loud music or race past on bikes without warning other cyclists or pedestrians. And so the Land Conservancy hired security guards to keep everyone out on the weekends; now, locals hiked during the week.

This crystalized something for me, something that had been building run by run, along the road or the river or a bike path: What I consider public or accessible at a given moment is highly conditional. At any time, by any owner or authority, access to the land can be revoked — sometimes along established lines

of prejudice. In the aftermath of Black jogger Ahmaud Arbery's murder, I impulsively wave at everyone, both automatic in my brisk and smiley greetings and genuine in my desire to be accepted. When I pause to rub a small leaf of black sage between my fingers, its musky scent tinged with the tang of my own sweat, a thought flashes: *Is this even allowed?*

After looping through the flattest few miles of the river bottom, it's another mile or so back across my neighborhood to the Ojai Meadow Preserve. In the meadow, inhabited by a variety of vocal birds, from perching turkey vultures to swimming ducks and hyperactive scrub jays, there's a laxer vibe. The area's closeness to town — directly adjacent to liquor stores and taquerias, cafés and hair salons — makes the meadow feel more communal than the river bottom. People go to the meadow to birdwatch, spying on a family of owls high up in a still-standing invasive eucalyptus tree, or to hike up a hill and look out over the other side of town.

I wind through the meadow to a paved bike trail that goes all the way to Ventura, 14 miles away. A dirt horse path runs parallel to it, though pedestrians in search of softer footing are more common than horses. Today, a sign on the fence separating asphalt from dirt warns people to keep off the trail on Sunday for an event.

It was the Ventura Marathon. The path's closure is only a minor inconvenience; I like to let its gradual downhill carry me to the final hustle up a hilly, treelined residential road and back home, but it's not the only way back. Still, its reservation for paying marathoners reminded me of the river-bottom closure, and how the idea of "public" can feel symbolic when those in charge don't account for prejudice. The city's bike path, like the nonprofit's conserved land, is owned and managed to achieve certain aims, and admission to it is not guaranteed by the people who make those decisions. Public land doesn't merely exist, available in an instant, for all of us at once; it must be conceived and imagined with a sense of communality. Its protection requires more than its users' desire, patronage or even volunteerism, but also an expansion of who gets to be part of the imagining. ☀

Cassie da Costa is a freelance writer and an editor for the outdoor retailer REI as well as the feminist film journal Another Gaze. She lives in Ojai, California, with her partner and dog.

"Running Free" is a column by Cassie da Costa, a Black runner and writer who examines the meaning of public space and community through the lens of traversing California's beach trails, canyons and roads.



A walk through a question

Contemplating parenthood amid the joy and heartbreak of an overheating planet.

BY MIYO JOY | ILLUSTRATION BY AMY BERENBEIM

AT FIRST GLANCE, everything in the Quinault rainforest on that early July day was exactly as it should be: mild and wet, 60 degrees, with a layer of pale gray clouds forming a high ceiling above the emerald forest. Droplets of last night's rain beaded on the leaves, sparkling like jewels.

My friend Squash and her girlfriend, Amanda, who were visiting from San Francisco, gaped at the towering Sitka spruces and shoulder-high sword ferns as we walked along the East Fork Quinault River trail. We were camping on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington, where over 11 feet of rain falls each year, sustaining a sprawling temperate jungle.

All three of us were taking in new sights walking along that trail. My friends soaked in the lush green landscape, shrubs sprouting from tree trunks 20 feet in the air, while my attention returned over and over to fresh wounds.

The week before, I'd been on this trail when a heatwave rolled through the region and temperatures in the valley topped 110 degrees Fahrenheit, turning my brain to scrambled eggs. Now, the heat wave's marks were impossible to overlook: The whole forest was visibly singed. After living and working here for the past year, I had come to love this place in the way I usually reserve for people; every torched maidenhair fern felt like a wounded friend.

I pointed some of the damage out to Squash and Amanda, stopping to brush a fingertip across a false lily-of-the-valley's usually glossy leaf, burnt to a pale brown crisp. But mostly I kept quiet. They were practically skipping down the trail, and I didn't want to diminish their delight in this magical woodland, a feeling I'd had so often myself.

"This place is incredible," Squash said, looking over her shoulder at me as we walked. Amanda poked at a log covered with moss as thick as shag carpet.

Then, surrounded by dense greenery interspersed with swaths of the brown, shriveled

wreckage of a climate change-driven heatwave, we discussed having children. Really.

It came up because Amanda was about to start nursing school for midwifery. "Do you want kids yourself?" I asked her. Yes. Definitely. Squash did, too.

I didn't follow up with "*What about climate change?*" as I have done with other friends who want children. Instead, I allowed the conversation to move on to other topics. Watching the two of them sashay across a log bridge a few minutes later, I was glad I hadn't said anything. They didn't see the signs of escalating environmental crises in this landscape, a barrage of reminders that the Quinault rainforest, and the world, will be very different in only a few decades. Instead, they saw plate-sized mushrooms growing on tree trunks and lichen dripping from branches like tattered birthday streamers.

But the world is on fire. We were walking through a scorched rainforest; I could still see the air as it had appeared a few days earlier, shimmering with moisture evaporating from the forest floor in temperatures surpassing what the water-soaked life here was made to endure. As for me, I can't think about having kids without thinking of the mass extinctions and increasingly frequent extreme weather events forecasted for the coming century, and how our planet's rapidly changing climate threatens the stability of civilization itself. *How can one bring children into such a world?*

And yet, what a staggering question to be asking. Regardless of how I might choose to answer it, even to hesitate to have children, not because of my personal needs or desires but because of the kind of world they'd face, seemed profoundly unnatural to me. It's like doubting whether it's right for plants to photosynthesize, or rivers to run downhill.

But it's equally dissonant to imagine a world where natural wonders inspire grief instead of awe. Violent struggles over dwindling resources are a frightening prospect; raising a child who

could never traipse through the Quinault rainforest, searching for fairies behind toadstools, is a heartbreaking one.

And yet, Squash and Amanda's company that day presented a different but equally undeniable fact. Young, generous, bubbling over with happiness — their palpable love for one another colored any hypothetical future, even if, having been together less than a year, neither mentioned building a family specifically with the other. But together they made another truth seem obvious: People who love one another and want to grow their family should do so. Love begets love.

And life begets life. Plants flower; wood grouse call to mates with a barely audible *thwum*; salmon make their annual journey upstream to hereditary spawning grounds. From an evolutionary standpoint, the entire reason for living is to create more life.

But I struggle to see how that can be the case *now*, in this world where glossy-needed hemlock saplings grow mere feet from brown patches beneath gaps in the tree canopy, where delicate moss roasted under direct sunlight during those sweltering days.

This dramatically changing climate is the context of our time, and whether we acknowledge it or not, we will all spend the rest of our lives within the questions it raises. Beyond the choice to have children, what would it mean to live well through the losses foretold by this newly scarred landscape?

As we turned back to camp, I savored the smell of the forest, like the sharp perfume of playground wood chips released by summer rain. Walking with my hands outstretched, I relaxed into its familiar touch: the gritty scratch of sword ferns, huckleberry leaves' featherlike caress, the gentle prick of salmonberry stalks, interrupted now and then by the brittle scrape of gnarled, dead fronds and leaves. I didn't find any answers that day, but each brown, shriveled plant stalk framed by green needles — the death all around us and the life that remained — kept me asking. ✨

Miyo Joy is a writer and journalist from Seattle, Washington.

This essay was selected as the winner of HCN's 2021 Bell Prize for young essayists, which honors the spirit of our founder, Tom Bell. At a time when there was little coverage of environmental issues in the Western U.S., Bell founded HCN in 1970 and was a strong voice for conservation. The Bell Prize is awarded to emerging writers, aged 18 to 25, who can carry on that legacy. This year's prize is supported by Mountainsmith.

Heard Around the West

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

BY TIFFANY MIDGE

OREGON

A picturesque lighthouse near Cannon Beach on the Oregon coast is for sale for just \$6.5 million, *The Astorian* reports. But before you start thinking, “Wow, great site for an Airbnb,” you should know that it’s part of the federal Oregon Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex and protected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a sanctuary for sea lions and seabirds. Also, it’s practically inaccessible without a helicopter; the lighthouse has long been nicknamed “Terrible Tilly,” if that’s any indication. The last time owner Mimi Morissette dropped by, she never made it out of the cockpit; there were “too many sea lions blocking the way.” Morissette and her business partners bought the property in 1980 hoping to create a more permanent resting place than a Airbnb: “Eternity At Sea” is now a columbarium, with 31 funeral urns. There’s room for up to 300,000 more, if the new owners decide to renew its license, which, like the lighthouse’s tenants, has expired. Morissette couldn’t renew it for various reasons — vandals broke in sometime in the ’90s, for example, and absconded with two urns. KMUN reported that Morissette has met with potential buyers, including a large cemetery brokerage and consulting firm. Even if helicopter-impaired families cannot visit their loved ones directly, there’s still plenty to do nearby, Morissette said — horseback riding on the beach, salmon fishing, hiking in Ecola State Park. It all sounds heavenly to us.

MONTANA

Wolverines are as elusive as sasquatches and unicorns, seldom

seen and even more rarely photographed. However, unlike unicorns and sasquatches, they do exist. ABC News reports that according to the National Wildlife Foundation, the animal’s southernmost range touches Yellowstone National Park, though “fewer than 10 wolverines are thought to call Yellowstone and its 2.2 million acres home.” In March, Nick Nowak spotted the stealthy critter near Tractor Supply in Lewiston, Montana, telling *MTN News*: “Saw him out in a field and turned around and saw him running down the road and got that video of him running away.” The Fergus County Sheriff’s Office dutifully reported, “Wolverine has been pushed out of town and headed away from us.” A couple of days later, NBC News reported that MacNeil Lyons, operator of Yellowstone Insight, a tour company, sighted a wolverine, calling the

encounter “phenomenal.” While it’s uncertain what the uptick in sightings means, some good photos were taken and strong medicine given.

UTAH

Utah is not known for gold rushes; its biggest strike came in 1864 in Bingham Canyon, where placers yielded about \$1.5 million, though the gold was gone by 1900. Then, in 2020, at the start of the pandemic, John Maxim and David Cline had an idea. *Deseret News* reported that Maxim and Cline decided to use their COVID-19 stimulus checks to help people in need by stashing \$5,000 in cash and silver coins in a chest and burying it in a hole in the forest. Next, they posted a “poem” on their Instagram accounts, with clues detailing the chest’s whereabouts. At the time, they joked that they’d end up digging it up



Armando Veve / HCN

themselves, since nobody else would be interested. But they were in for a shock: In just four days, 8 million Instagram impressions were logged, and the treasure was found. Cline said, “We seriously underestimated the brilliance of people.” Inspired, they planned another hunt last June with a \$10,000 pot and harder clues. This second treasure hunt lasted only 17 days. Their third attempt last September jumped to a \$20,000 prize, with half the amount sponsored by a local business. This summer, they’re planning a fourth hunt. Given how bright the spotlight’s become — and how much the pot has swelled — all would-be treasure hunters should hit the hills sooner rather than later.

MONTANA

Western ghost towns have always had a peculiar appeal. Gunslinger Gulch, a ghost town and ranch just outside Anaconda, Montana, recently landed its own series on the Travel Channel. *The Ghost Town Terror* will highlight unexplained activity at the 52-acre property, home to Karen Broussard and her three kids. Paranormal investigators Tim Wood and Sapphire Sandalo spent several weeks there after the family reported voices and footsteps, doors opening and shutting and “people” walking past windows, *MontanaRightNow.com* reported. The investigators hope to determine whether the spooky energy comes from the land, the buildings or the family. If this sounds like a kick in the pantaloons, Gunslinger Gulch is also a bed and breakfast. But actual spooks are not guaranteed, so BYOG: Bring your own ghosts. ✨

VICTORY FOR WOLVES



WELC and our partners won a blockbuster, science-based court case restoring Endangered Species Act protections for the gray wolf!

Thanks to WELC and partners' legal advocacy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will resume needed recovery efforts for the imperiled wolf in most of the U.S.

This will boost wolf recovery in the Pacific Northwest, where only 350 wolves remain in their historical habitat.

In addition, Midwestern states can no longer hold wolf hunts like the one that tragically killed a third of Wisconsin's wolves over just three days in 2021.

Our victory protects some of the most vulnerable wolf populations in the country, and that is something to celebrate.

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#IAM THE WEST

JARED KEE YAZZIE (DINÉ)
Designer and Artist
Phoenix, Arizona

I went to the University of Arizona with hopes of becoming an engineer like my brothers before me, but quickly had a reality check and realized that I was more passionate about art, graffiti and fashion. I felt overwhelmed, living in a bigger city. The world moved fast around me. People were consumed with getting ahead, making money, appeasing societal standards and feeding into a system that has worked against Native people for generations.

I want people to just take a step back — to look at what's meaningful, what works: what your ancestors and your elders teach you. My grandparents tended sheep. They butchered when we were hungry; they grew corn to feed the community around them. I share these values through design, because that's how Natives communicate.

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

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