

High Country News

For people who care about the West



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The Wetland Wars

More than a decade ago, Los Angeles environmentalists saved an urban wetland from developers. Now they're trying to save it again — from each other.

By Judith Lewis Mernit. Page 12.



A Harlan's red-tailed hawk, wintering in the Ballona Wetlands, with the Hollywood sign, 13 miles away, in the background.

JONATHAN COFFIN/STONEBIRD, CC VIA FLICKR

Editor's note

L.A.'s wild side

In mid-April, one of Southern California's most reclusive celebrities found himself, quite literally, in a very tight spot. P-22, a mountain lion that lives in Griffith Park – 4,000 acres of green space in the heart of Los Angeles – was discovered in the crawlspace of a home in a hip neighborhood flanking the park. Television cameras swarmed, and wildlife officials tried to spook the lion out, chucking tennis balls at him to no avail. P-22's fans worried: Had the big cat finally gotten too close for comfort? Would he be shot?



Remarkably, he wasn't. Wildlife officials stowed their tennis balls and evicted the media, establishing a quiet perimeter around the house. By morning, P-22 had slipped away to the relative safety of Griffith Park.

Ever since P-22 left the Santa Monica Mountains in 2012, crossing two notoriously congested freeways to take up residence in the city, he's awakened Angelenos' wonder at the wildness that persists here amid the crush of concrete and rush of traffic. His presence has given traction to efforts to build wildlife bridges over highways to connect the last remnants of habitat for the few remaining lions. And he has helped shape an emerging environmental ethos – one that seeks to reconcile L.A.'s built environment and human inhabitants with the wild landscape they've consumed.

That ethos also sprang from the long-running efforts to revitalize the concrete-lined Los Angeles River and protect the Ballona Wetlands State Ecological Reserve, the last patch of coastal wetlands in the area and the subject of this issue's cover story by Contributing Editor Judith Lewis Mermit.

Decades ago, environmentalists fought developers to save the wetlands – and fought one another over how much acreage should be saved. Now, with the state trying to finalize a restoration plan, the debate over Ballona is as fraught, impassioned and divisive as ever. How much bulldozing and replanting – if any – is necessary to "heal" the landscape? Should people be banned for the sake of the wetlands' species, or do we deserve access to this tiny urban wilderness? Who, and what, is this restoration really for?

Such intense debate over a mere 600 acres in a sprawling city might seem provincial. Increasingly, however, ecologists argue that re-making our farms, city parks, front yards and roadsides into hospitable habitat for native plants and wildlife is crucial to preserving global biodiversity.

For cities to become ecological refuges, we have to evolve, too – rethinking the goals of environmentalism and adjusting the boundaries we draw between human and wild. It's work rife with ambiguity, but also hope. Consider P-22's pickle in the crawlspace: "Even the homeowners were super chill," Beth Pratt of the National Wildlife Federation told Lewis Mermit after the incident. "Everyone wanted the cat to be safe. He is L.A.'s lion!"

–Cally Carswell, contributing editor

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More than a decade ago, Los Angeles environmentalists saved an urban wetland from developers. Now they're trying to save it from each other. By Judith Lewis Mermit

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On the cover

A walking path traverses the fenced Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve, hard against the Playa Vista development in Los Angeles.

JONATHAN ALCORN



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A kangal wearing a protective collar guards a herd of sheep. See the video at hcn.org. hcne.ws/ranchdogs
CONSERVATIONMEDIA.COM AND PEOPLEANDCARNIVORES.ORG

Finding a better guard dog

As bears and wolves continue to move beyond the borders of national parks and wilderness areas, they sometimes nab a snack from sheep and cattle herds, angering livestock owners, who may retaliate by killing them. A good livestock guard dog can help minimize conflict by fending off predators. But while many of the dog breeds currently in use are successful against smaller opponents, like coyotes, they're outmatched by grizzlies and wolves. So researchers have begun experimenting with bigger, more exotic breeds, like the kangal, which is famed for its courage in the face of wolf attacks in its home country of Turkey. While conclusive results are still a couple years off, early signs suggest these foreign canines might be well-adapted to the West. One Montana rancher hasn't lost a single sheep to grizzlies since receiving his three kangals. **BEN GOLDFARB VIA ENSIA**
hcne.ws/livestock-dog

Trending

Tribes v. oil trains

For more than 20 years, the Swinomish Reservation, along Washington's Puget Sound, has agreed to let trains rumble across its land, their length and frequency tightly regulated. Burlington Northern Santa Fe LLC, the company running the trains, was required to inform the tribe of its cargo. But in 2012, reservation residents noticed the trains were longer than they should have been and carried volatile Bakken oil. In April, after repeated requests to stop the transport were ignored, the tribe filed suit. "This is yet another example of communities all across the country in different ways rising up" against oil transport, Jan Hasselman, an environmental lawyer, told *HCN*. **KINDRA MCQUILLAN**

You say

DON BRADY: "If the government stops the trains, people find and stop the trucks delivering oil, we all will be back to the horse-and-buggy era unless we want foreign oil products to be delivered to our country. Then not many would be able to afford real high prices for gas, diesel, nor natural gas."

ERIC SMITH: "I suppose they'd prefer 10,000 trucks."

ED HAMILTON: "Maybe the towns can't stop them, but the reservation can."

hcne.ws/tribeVtrain and facebook.com/highcountrynews

\$1.25 billion

The extra revenue the Interior Department could collect over the next decade if it charged market rates for onshore drilling.

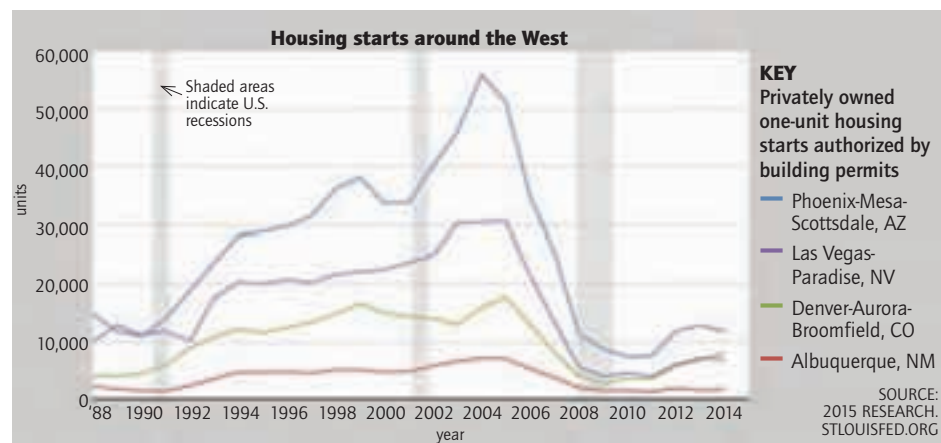
The rules governing royalties for oil and gas from federal lands have drawn fire for years. Critics say the government charges companies too little for the oil and gas they extract, shorting taxpayers. In a 2007 report, the Government Accountability Office said the low rate, an eighth of production value, results in one of the lowest government takes in the world. The rules haven't been updated in decades. Now, the Department of the Interior is considering revising the rules that govern royalties and other company costs, including an increase to the royalty rate. Many environmental groups welcome the idea of higher costs for drilling, but the industry has opposed any changes, especially given the dropping price of oil. The department has opened the issue to public comment.

ELIZABETH SHOGREN hcne.ws/oil-gas-royalty

A return to Southwestern sprawl

Once upon a time, developers in places like Phoenix and Las Vegas dreamed of suburbs spreading like lawns across the desert. When the housing bubble burst in 2007, most of them woke up to a harsh reality, one that has stifled a lot of sprawl. With the recovery, though, developers are back. In Albuquerque,

they are proposing a community called Santolina, which could eventually house nearly 100,000 people. Similar proposals have cropped up around Tucson. It'll take a long climb to return to pre-crash heights, but suburban sprawl may one day return. **JONATHAN THOMPSON** hcne.ws/AZcommunity



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Hours it took Blackbird Mine waste runoff to kill trout dropped for testing purposes into Idaho's Blackbird Creek in 1993. Now, two decades and more than \$50 million later, the creek's waters are clean. **BEN GOLDFARB**

hcne.ws/panther-creek

Audio Wake-ups

This spring was a strange one, and nobody was more surprised by it than the bears, some of whom found themselves waking from hibernation much earlier than normal. Associate Editor Brian Calvert discusses bears and climate change with experts in this online audio story.

hcne.ws/bearclimate



JIM PEACO, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, APRIL 2013

"I think overall they are (faring OK), especially adult males, who are big enough to take kills away from wolf packs."

—Kerry Gunther, Yellowstone bear biologist

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REBEL-ROUSERS

Articles and editorials about the threat to public access are springing up in outdoor and conservation magazines with regularity now (“Westerners need to stand up for public lands,” *HCN*, 4/27/15). Americans are beginning to get it: The threat is real. Do we want the European model, where private ownership of the woods and waters prevails, or do we want the freedom to roam our federal lands? I fear that people will sit idly by while federal land is transferred to the states and then sold to private individuals and corporations when state coffers run dry.

The 51 Republican senators that writer Todd Tanner cites in his article ought to reap what they sow — total rebellion by the outdoor community. And that’s what they’ll get if we organize. There’s no other way. Join an organization that stands up for public lands — like the Sierra Club, Trout Unlimited, the Elk Foundation, The Nature Conservancy or the group that I belong to, the Public Land/Water Association. We recently won a lawsuit in the Montana Supreme Court against a billionaire whose attorney claimed, in court, that his client owned the banks, riverbed and water of the Ruby River, along with the air above it. How high in that air one can only imagine.

George Alotrico
McLeod, Montana

OUR LAND

I grow tired of hearing news bites about people or industries “standing up to the government” regarding land use without accurate information (“Checking in on Cliven Bundy,” *HCN*, 4/27/15). Cliven Bundy is nothing but a mooch and a thief. The public lands are owned by every American citizen, and we pay to have government representatives care for and oversee those lands as we choose. Bundy didn’t buy that land (i.e., pay taxes for owning it, or spend money maintaining it), and he doesn’t even want to pay a piddly minimal fee for using “our” land. He should be in jail.

Mary McBee
Tama, Iowa

SHORT ON KLAMATH REPORTING

“Plague on the Klamath” (*HCN*, 4/27/15)



DAVID JACOBSON/ARTIZANS.COM

was good so far as it went. It did not, however, give readers a full view of salmon disease on the Klamath River, nor of water management and pollution issues related to disease outbreaks. Not mentioned, for example, is that most of the young salmon born in Klamath River tributaries succumb to one of several diseases before they can reach the ocean. Also not reported was the increasing reliance on hatchery salmon to make up for the loss of natural production, due to the ongoing juvenile salmon disease epidemic. And the article ignores the refusal of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to release the flushing spring flows, which scientists say are needed to reduce disease among juvenile salmon traveling the highly polluted Klamath.

The article does mention the Klamath agreements and the legislation enabling them, which is currently stalled in Congress. But it fails to note that these flows are the same that are now producing the yearly epidemics that annihilate up to 90 percent of the Klamath Basin’s naturally produced salmon. The dams, which the stalled legislation would transfer from private to government hands, along with liability for their removal, are fingered as a cause of the diseases, but massive agricultural pollution, which also contributes, is not reported.

By and large, the settlements continue to allow water to (mostly white) irrigators, while providing cash-strapped tribal governments money in exchange for it. Absent robust reporting that provides essential context, readers can’t make informed judgments about the ef-

ficacy of Western water deals or the implications of those deals for our rivers, our salmon and the tribal people whose governments are making the deals.

Felice Pace
Klamath, California

OLD EGREGIOUS

The April 13 issue includes a photo that shows a young woman standing in front of Old Faithful geyser on the dirt and off the constructed boardwalk (“On the road with America’s sightseers”). It is a well-publicized fact that it is illegal to be off trail at Old Faithful or, in fact, in any of Yellowstone National Park’s developed thermal areas. I would have thought better of *HCN* than to publish such an egregious picture.

T. Scott Bryan
Tucson, Arizona

CROWDED HOURS

“The West In 72 Hours” (*HCN*, 4/13/15), light-heartedly written, exposes a nationwide tragedy in progress. There is nothing humorous in the ongoing ruination of our national parks. It doesn’t matter whether the hordes of visitors are Asian, European or American. They are destroying the very thing they profess to love.

I’ve lived in Zion Park’s entry town of Springdale, Utah, for 25 years, and I’ve worked in the park both as summer staff and as a volunteer every year. Visitation during that time has gone from manageable crowds to total disaster. Visitors enter the park only to find that the parking lots are full. We advise them to return to Springdale, find parking and return via shuttle. On busy days, the shuttles are standing-room only. If you are seated, the view is of belt buckles. If you stand, there is a great view of the inside of the bus. The buses deliver hundreds of visitors to all the trailheads in very little time, crowding them beyond belief. During the winter “off season,” the canyon opens up again to private autos. On busy weekends, cars are parked illegally throughout the park, resulting in widespread damage. The folks who promote tourism are, of course, overjoyed.

Marcel Rodriguez
Springdale, Utah



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Wins for workers

Western cities lead national movement for a higher minimum wage

BY CALLY CARSWELL

On April 15, protesters swarmed downtown Seattle carrying signs displaying slogans in English and Spanish: “Raise the Minimum Wage,” “Because the Rent Won’t Wait,” “4 Jobs No Time to Sleep Help Momma Get \$15 per Hr.” They occupied fast-food restaurants and clustered outside Uber’s corporate offices, chanting, “We can see your greedy side!” Twenty-one people linked arms and sat in the street in front of a glass-enclosed Ferrari dealership, moving only when arrested.

All over the country, adjunct professors, home health-care workers and employees of McDonalds, Taco Bell, Wal-Mart, Target and other corporations took to the streets to demand a \$15-an-hour minimum wage. In Seattle, the protests were partly to support workers elsewhere, because on April 1, that city had already become one of the first to offer a \$15 minimum wage, which will be phased in over the next few years.

Other West Coast progressive hubs have started to follow suit, and so far, they’re the only places in the country where the “Fight for \$15” has prevailed. Seattle’s raise followed the success of a 2013 ballot measure in SeaTac, a suburb to the south, which gave a small subset of workers in this airport town \$15 an hour and paid sick leave. Last fall, San Francisco voters approved a phased-in \$15 minimum; Los Angeles and the state of Oregon are considering the same.

The West’s low-wage workers are steadily losing economic ground. Wages haven’t kept up with cost-of-living increases in many communities, whether the booming tech centers like Seattle and San Francisco, where rents are soaring, or the service-driven “amenity” and tourist towns like Aspen, Flagstaff and Durango, where second-home owners and retirees distort the housing market for working stiffs.

And in many states, average folks have benefited only marginally, if at all, from recent economic growth. According to a recent Economic Policy Institute report, be-



tween 1979 and 2007, only the wealthiest 1 percent in Nevada, Wyoming and Alaska enjoyed rising incomes; the average incomes of the 99 percent in those states fell. Over the same time period, the wealthiest 1 percent in Arizona, Oregon, New Mexico, California, Washington, Montana and Utah claimed between 50 and 84 percent of all income growth. “Today SeaTac, tomorrow the nation?” asked a *Seattle Times* columnist in 2013. Many Western workers hope the answer is a resounding “yes.”

Their dream may not be completely quixotic. It’s not just Left Coasters who support raising pay. Last fall, voters in Arkansas, South Dakota and Nebraska

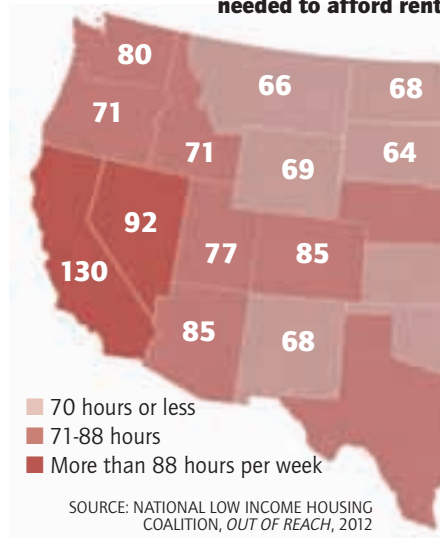
voted to hike their lowest pay above the \$7.25 federal minimum wage, which adjusting for inflation, is more than \$3 lower than it was in 1968, when its real value peaked. Alaska voters raised theirs from \$7.75 to \$9.75 by 2016.

While minimum wage workers in Seattle, SeaTac and San Francisco were already making more than \$7.25, the new \$15 minimum represents a raise of between 40 and 60 percent. And yet it still might not be enough to allow them to live in the cities where they work. According to Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s living wage calculator, a single adult supporting a child and working full-time in Seattle would need to earn \$20.53 to cover

Labor rights activists and supporters of the 15 Now movement at the Seattle City Council session last June, when raising the minimum wage to \$15 per hour — highest in the nation — was approved unanimously.

EINO SIERPE

Hours worked per week at minimum wage needed to afford rent



Federal minimum wage, 1938-2012

Shown in adjusted 2012 dollars and unadjusted dollars



HCN Contributing Editor Cally Carswell (@callycarswell) writes from Santa Fe.

"If you want to talk about a policy to benefit the poor that you can actually get done, we've seen the evidence come in from all over the country: The minimum wage is something you can get done."

—University of Washington economist Jacob Vigdor

monthly expenses; in San Francisco, that worker would need \$26.03.

Higher minimum wages alone won't rectify income inequality. There's no guarantee, even, that every low-wage worker will see higher take-home pay, explains University of Washington economist Jacob Vigdor. A restaurant owner adjusting to higher labor costs might notice she does little business in the first hour, for example, and start opening at 11 a.m. instead of 10. "Every worker on payroll from 10 to 11 is not getting paid for that hour anymore," Vigdor says. "If your higher wage is offset by lower hours, your income might not go up." From another perspective, when your time is valued more, you might be able to choose to work less, in order to, say, spend more time with your kids.

Opponents of minimum wage increases argue that they kill jobs, raise prices for consumers and may force some small businesses to close. However, a study conducted for the city of Seattle on wage hikes in places like Santa Fe and San Francisco, two of the first to raise wages above their

states' minimums, found no statistically significant impact on overall job numbers, or rates of business openings and closings.

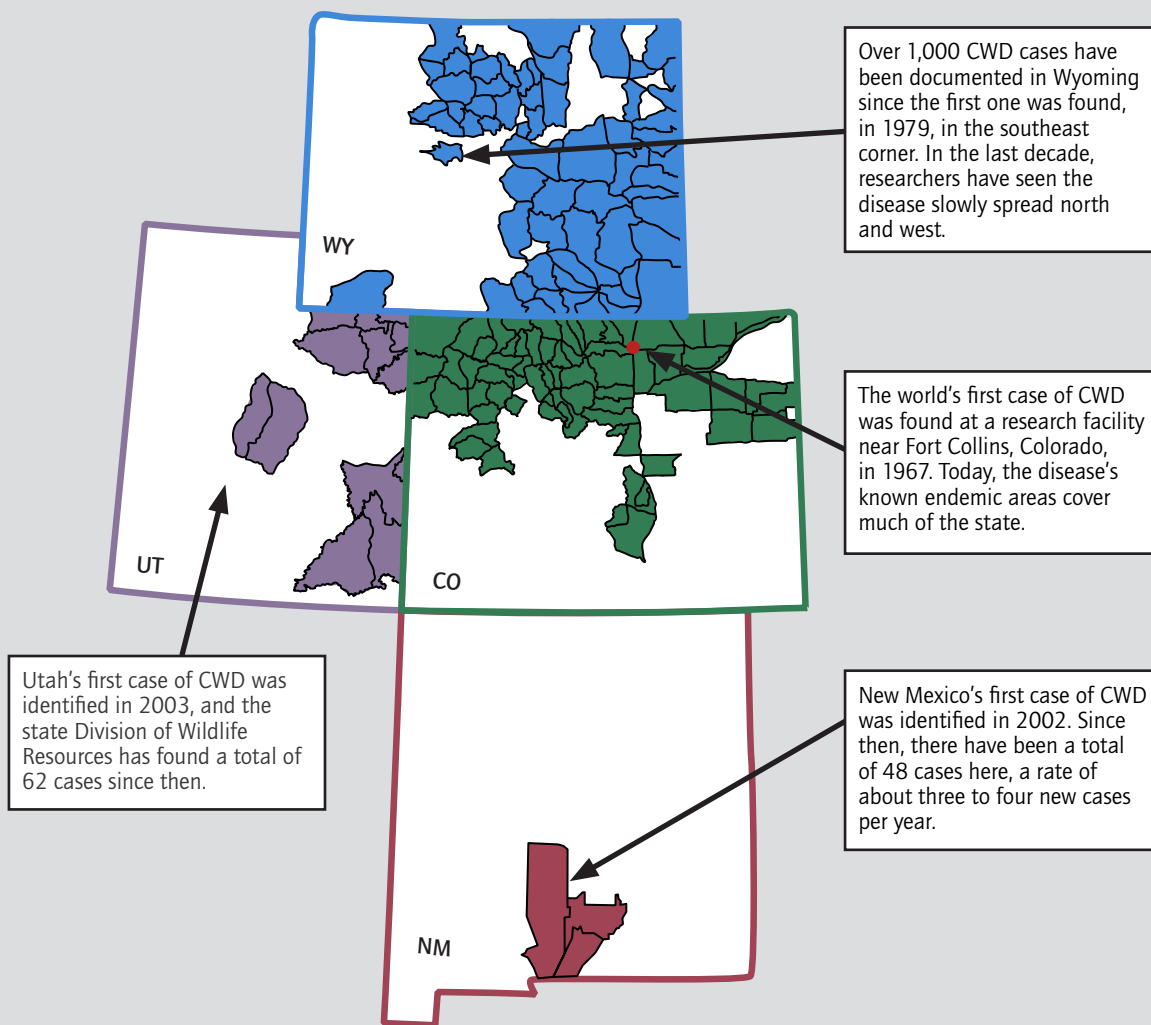
Still, there's no precedent for a raise this substantial. The only way to determine the impact is to carry out the experiment. Vigdor and his university colleagues will study its outcomes over the next five years. Among other things, they'll follow workers and businesses to capture the nuances — like the aforementioned restaurant example — that are often lost in faceless, data-driven studies. Vigdor expects to find that the raise helps some and hurts others. Whether the benefits ultimately outweigh the costs, he says, is a question not for science but for society: It's a question of values.

From a policy perspective, Vigdor thinks the minimum wage is a relatively blunt tool for alleviating poverty. More focused, he says, is the Earned Income Tax Credit, which, through a hefty tax refund, increases the year-end take-home pay of low-wage workers in low-income households, though not, say, a teenager who

works but doesn't need to help his parents pay rent. But Washington has no state income tax, so instituting such a credit in addition to the federal one wasn't an option. And politically — even morally — the minimum wage is a powerful symbol. "It's easier to rally people around," Vigdor explains. "If you want to talk about a policy to benefit the poor that you can actually get done, we've seen the evidence come in from all over the country: The minimum wage is something you can get done."

Indeed. Between the time Seattle Mayor Ed Murray convened the labor-business task force that crafted Seattle's ordinance and the city council's passage of it, less than six months passed. "History has its way of unfolding in moments," says David Rolf, the head of Service Employees International Union 775 in Seattle, and co-chair of the task force. "There is pent-up demand for something to be done about stagnant wages." Perhaps it's surprising that \$15 happened so quickly in Seattle, he says, "or perhaps it's more surprising it hadn't happened sooner." □

GAME MANAGEMENT UNITS WHERE CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE IS ENDEMIC



*THIS MAP IS NOT A DIRECT INDICATOR OF GMU BOUNDARIES. DETECTED CWD INFO IS BASED ON THE MOST RECENT DATA AVAILABLE.

Snapshot

Worrisome wasting disease

This January, a bull elk living on a commercial game farm in northern Utah tested positive for chronic wasting disease, or CWD, a fatal neurological disease that affects deer, elk and moose. In March, Wyoming Wildlife Advocates published a map showing the disease spreading westward through Wyoming — possibly carried by ultra-long-distance deer migrations. It's now less than 40 miles from Yellowstone National Park.

For wildlife advocates and sportsmen, this is troubling news. The disease has long worried Wyoming hunters east of the Continental Divide. If CWD continues to spread westward, it will affect those west of the Divide in the state, including visitors to Yellowstone. But right now there are holes in the research, so no one's quite sure how quickly the disease is spreading.

In 2003, Congress passed a bill to expand research funding, bolstering efforts to track down CWD. But that funding has decreased in recent years, creating a decline in reporting. On top of that, different states have different ways of tracking the disease, making it hard to understand over the broader region.

Miles Moretti, president of the Mule Deer Foundation, a sportsmen's group that is part of the Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance, says more funding might help researchers figure out whether or not it's spreading, and where. "We're not having a lot of new (infected) areas show up," he says, "and maybe that's because we aren't looking as hard." KINDRA MCQUILLAN

SOURCES: COLORADO PARKS AND WILDLIFE, WYOMING GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT, UTAH DIVISION OF WILDLIFE RESOURCES, NEW MEXICO DEPARTMENT OF GAME & FISH

Poets of the pale tide

A gathering of maritime minstrels on the Oregon coast

BY BEN GOLDFARB

Pat Dixon wrote his first fishing poem in 1989, in the aftermath of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. For 12 years, Dixon had gillnetted salmon in Cook Inlet, the finger of water that points from the Gulf of Alaska to Anchorage. After the *Valdez* dumped its noxious cargo into nearby Prince William Sound, fishing in Cook Inlet was shut down, and Dixon was cast adrift. One bleak afternoon by the water, as he watched a squall move along the beach, he found himself day-dreaming about all the things he was going to miss. A poem came to him, unbidden, and there, in the front seat of his parked truck, he began to write.

Twenty-six years later, on a chill night near the mouth of the Columbia River, Dixon — a barrel-chested man with a beard the color and texture of polar bear fur — climbed onto a stage in Astoria, Oregon, to read a new poem, “Exit Strategy,” to a rapt audience of 200. In a clear, unhurried voice, he intoned:

*I shall leave today,
motor through a school of leaping fish
stretching from the river mouth
to the horizon’s soft curve,
sluice my bow through a green
ocean swell, tide on my stern,
sun white alongside, burning
reflection in a moving mirror.*

Dixon was among the 87 commercial fishermen who’d come to perform at the 18th annual Fisher-Poets Gathering, a weekend-long celebration of maritime verse. Readers came from Cordova, Alaska; Camden, Maine; Jyväskylä, Finland. On the streets, pickup trucks sported bumper stickers condemning salmon farms and the overreach of the National Marine Fisheries Service. Baseball caps and facial hair were de rigueur.

“This is our party, and we’re doing it our way,” Jon Broderick, Fisher-Poets’ founder, told me. Broderick is a former high school teacher who chases salmon in Alaska’s Bristol Bay with his sons every summer. He’s also a talented songwriter, and he’d followed Dixon’s reading with a swaying, klezmer-inflected ode to an alluring female cannery worker. “There’s nothing ersatz or kitsch or phony about it.”

Ben Goldfarb (@ben_a_goldfarb) is an HCN correspondent based in Seattle.



“Write what you know,” they say, and it’s a maxim the fisher-poets have taken to heart. Their verse serves as a crash course in the daily rituals and hard-won knowledge of their profession. John Palmes, a hand-troller from Juneau, tore through a song about humpback salmon’s singular preference for pink lures (as opposed to coho, which favor chartreuse). Doug Rhodes, from Craig, Alaska, drew reliable laughs by poking fun at the government’s regulatory ineptitude. Rob Seitz, a trawler from Los Osos, California, performed “Tribute to the Five-Gallon Bucket,” a bit of doggerel about the hazards of at-sea defecation:

*The water from the bucket would get
your backside drenched
Kind of like those toilets designed by
the French.*

Even love and lust, poetry’s most timeless concerns, were contemplated through a briny lens. From Erin Fristad, of Port Townsend, Washington: “She engulfs me like she has the mouth of a lingcod / I know that shouldn’t be sexy, but it is.” The landlubbers in the audience giggled uncertainly.

On the festival’s final evening, a standing-room-only crowd packed into a waterfront restaurant that jutted out over the Columbia on wooden pilings. Rust-colored tankers glowed in the fiery sunset; sea lions honked beneath the pier. At the front of the room, a mop-haired veterinarian named Meezie Hermansen

stood at the mic. Hermansen has fished summers in Cook Inlet since she was a child — “I knew I was a fisherman before I knew I was a woman”—and she’d started writing poetry in college to amuse her friends. Fisher-Poets had long been on her bucket list, and her set at the 2011 gathering was the first time she’d ever read in public.

“Now I think about the event all year long,” she told me. She’s inseparable from her notebook. “I’ve written poems out on the skiff, which is not the most convenient place to have something come to you.”

Onstage, Hermansen had time for one more poem. “Back home in Alaska, there are some proposed projects that stand to threaten our wild salmon stocks and habitat,” she said. She ticked off the dangers: coal mines that would bury streams, dams that would obstruct rivers, the Pebble copper mine in Bristol Bay. Her voice low and lyrical, she launched into the piece without notes:

*We need to realize
Open our steel eyes
Before we jeopardize
What we should all esteem.
There is a place for enterprise
But we need to analyze and scrutinize
As they attempt to minimize and
capitalize
For we all live downstream.*

The crowd applauded at poem’s end, and Hermansen smiled shyly as she left the stage. □

Jon Broderick pushes a skiff into deeper water beside a set gillnet in Nushagak Bay, Alaska.

CHRIS MILLER



THE LATEST

Backstory

The 1987 National Parks Overflights Act prohibited below-the-rim flights and was supposed to restore peacefulness to the Grand Canyon and other parks. But only a few flight restrictions have been implemented since then. **A 2011 plan would have required aircraft to fly at a higher altitude and restore "natural quiet" to as much as 67 percent of the Grand Canyon** ("Park Service finally drafts a solution to conflicts over canyon flights," *HCN*, 6/13/11). That plan was tabled when 2012 legislation required restoration of quiet to just half of the park.

Followup

Starting last year, the Obama administration began offering incentives for commercial plane and helicopter operators to use, or convert to, "quiet technology."

A law implemented in April allows more flights in the Dragon and Zuni Point corridors, as long as the aircraft don't exceed federal noise standards.

It's expected to draw thousands more flights this year. Some environmentalists doubt the technology will reduce the overall level of noise in the canyon.

TAY WILES

Sagebrush bureaucracy

An obscure legal provision is the latest weapon in the fight to wrest public-land management from the feds

BY JOSHUA ZAFFOS

Suzu Foss became a Ravalli County, Montana, commissioner during the 2010 Tea Party wave. Sixty-five with a Sarah Palin vibe — stylish glasses, brown hair and bangs — Foss raises Arabian horses and border collies on a ranch abutting the Bitterroot National Forest, which takes up three-quarters of the county. Foss blames the federal government for the post-'90s local decline of timber sales and grazing permits, as well as the rise of wildfires and wolves, and says locals deserve more power over land management. "This is brought on us by people who mean well, but they've killed the forests of America," Foss says. "They've murdered them as deliberately as if I took a machine gun out and went and shot someone in a crowded mall."

So in 2011, Foss asked American Stewards of Liberty for help. The Texas-based nonprofit trains local governments to use "coordination," an often-overlooked provision in two key environmental laws that govern land management: the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and the National Forest Management Act. FLPMA specifically directs the Bureau of Land Management to "coordinate the land use inventory, planning, and management activities" with states, local governments and tribes as well as with their own management programs to "provide for meaningful public involvement" when developing rules and plans. The National Forest Management Act includes similar language for the Forest Service.

According to American Stewards Executive Director Margaret Byfield, coordination means that federal agencies must involve counties and states in planning and give them an "equal position at the negotiating table" for decision-making. "It is," she says, "pretty straightforward." The nonprofit says over 100 local governments have invoked coordination to fight land-use restrictions since 2006.

Many groups, including environmentalists, try to influence land management with scientific research and alternative management proposals, but policy experts say that the coordination movement has a distinctly anti-federal government flavor — a Sagebrush Rebellion in bureaucratic clothing, with links to state efforts to take over federal lands. Coordination proponents are "essentially arguing a county would have veto authority on federal land

decisions," says Martin Nie, director of the Bolle Center for People and Forests at the University of Montana. And federal officials, who interpret "coordination" very differently, fear it's stoking more conflicts than it resolves by misinforming locals.

But though critics, including federal land managers, may dismiss American Stewards' interpretation of coordination, it's gaining traction among state and U.S. lawmakers and Western governors. "It has no legal basis, but it's as much about trying to frame things politically," Nie says. "These proposals are pushing way, way outside the mainstream."

Byfield's strategy is inspired in part by the long, acrimonious legal battles waged by her father, Wayne Hage, a southern Nevada rancher and one of the West's early Sagebrush Rebels. Through the 1980s and '90s, Hage sued the feds for control of his public-land grazing leases and water. After his death, the court upheld his property-rights claims and awarded his estate \$4.2 million.

Back in Hage's day, leaders in rural Western counties with large public-land bases passed resolutions claiming "county supremacy" and ownership of federal lands. Courts rejected those, but the idea lives on: When Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy urged county sheriffs to disarm BLM officials last spring, he was waving the banner of county supremacy.

Byfield, however, says coordination is different. She learned the strategy from Fred Kelly Grant, the Hages' litigation chairman, who was president of American Stewards in 2006. Grant has promoted coordination in speeches to local governments while railing against the United Nations' Agenda 21, a sustainable-development initiative some conservatives view as an international conspiracy against private property rights.

Counties typically pay American Stewards \$1,500 for an initial daylong training, plus travel expenses. Foss says she and other citizens footed the cost in Ravalli County, but other local governments use taxpayer money for the training and additional consultation, and some rack up sizeable bills. Custer County, Idaho, had paid American Stewards more than \$23,000 as of August 2014, an *HCN* open-records request revealed, and Garfield County, Colorado, has paid the group more than \$26,000 since 2012.

The training encourages a local government to invoke "coordinating status,"

often through a resolution, and then establish a citizen advisory committee to develop natural resource policies or contract for scientific research, sometimes through American Stewards. Before Foss left office in December after losing a primary, she and her fellow Ravalli County commissioners drafted a county natural-resources policy calling for more grazing, logging, irrigation and forest-road access than is outlined in local national forest plans, and wrote another policy for higher wolf-hunting quotas and longer hunting and trapping seasons. Commissioners shared these plans with the Forest Service, but their impact is unclear, since the agency maintains that counties' role remains advisory.

Following their own 2013 training, Colorado's Garfield County commissioners hired consultants to study greater sage grouse. They claim to have found four times as much regional grouse habitat as the BLM, and say that the bird — which is being considered for endangered species listing — doesn't need federal protection.

American Stewards considers the oil-rich Permian Basin on the Texas-New Mexico border its greatest success. The group introduced coordination to local governments there in 2011, and say the resulting locally funded science forced the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to back off an endangered species listing proposal for the dunes sagebrush lizard in 2012. "We can honestly say that had it not been for what the eight counties and one soil and water district did using our coordination strategy," Dan Byfield, Margaret's husband and American Stewards' CEO, wrote on the group's website, "the lizard would have been listed."

Fish and Wildlife and others, however, credit voluntary conservation agreements covering hundreds of thousands of acres of lizard habitat on public and private lands in the region. Still, watchdogs and environmentalists charge that the decision was unscientific and politically motivated. The agency's then-Texas administrator even lodged an official scientific integrity complaint, and, after he was reassigned indefinitely, filed a whistleblower retaliation complaint. He has since retired.

Federal managers acknowledge that they meet more frequently with local officials in counties that have passed coordination resolutions and drafted resource policies — but not because they're required to heed those plans. "It's fostered dialogue and communications, and that's

Joshua Zaffos is a contributing editor for *HCN* based in Fort Collins, Colorado.

usually beneficial,” says Charles Mark, supervisor of central Idaho’s Salmon-Challis National Forest, which includes Custer and other coordination counties.

The BLM has even teamed up with American Stewards to host coordination trainings. “Five years ago, they would say there was no requirement in the law for them to (participate),” says Margaret Byfield. “That’s definitely changed.” But Cynthia Moses-Nedd, the BLM’s intergovernmental liaison, says the agency wants to clarify what coordination is and isn’t: “We’ve had to dispel some myths.”

Some federal staffers question how successful that’s been. Dave Campbell, a recently retired Bitterroot National Forest district ranger, hesitated to meet with Ravalli commissioners about coordination or the county resource policy for fear it would lend credibility to the county’s position. “They took that one word out of (federal laws) and defined it to say the county gets first shot at planning,” he says. “It was confusing to the public.” Adds Mark, “At times, I think (local officials) think they’ve got some sort of special status, which they don’t.”

And while officials generally encourage more research and data, environmentalists and others question the objectivity of county-funded research, given that

American Stewards and many rural officials oppose most endangered species listings and federal land-use restrictions.

Garfield County, for example, paid a scientist who has also worked for the oil and gas industry — which has a lot to lose if sage grouse are listed — \$35,000 to help develop its sage-grouse conservation plan. And meeting transcripts show that Byfield participated in county sage grouse strategy calls involving consultants and industry officials.

The BLM’s draft sage grouse management plan, released last August, included Garfield County’s grouse plan and habitat maps in its appendices. BLM spokeswoman Vanessa Lacayo says local governments had “significant influence,” but that final decisions “remain the BLM’s to make.”

Regardless of coordination’s on-the-ground effectiveness, its principles are gaining ground in other ways. The Western Governors’ Association is stumping for “expanded, meaningful opportunities for states to comment, participate, or take the lead” on endangered species decisions. Utah Gov. Gary Herbert, R, signed a new law this March that requires counties to develop local resource-management plans, partly as “a basis for coordinating with the federal government.” Montana

also passed a law in 2013 to ease coordination efforts and claims.

Even D.C. is hearing demands for greater local authority: Wyoming Sen. Mike Enzi, R, introduced a bill this March that would amend the Endangered Species Act to mandate that federal agencies include data from states, local governments and tribes in scientific analyses. The bill would also require agencies to provide states with all relevant studies before decisions are made. (The House passed a similar bill in 2014, largely along party lines.) The legislation would essentially provide legal grounding in line with American Stewards’ version of coordination and “something close to equal footing” for counties and states on endangered species decisions, says Jake Li, Defenders of Wildlife’s director of endangered species conservation.

“We’re all in favor of having local governments and the people closest to these landscapes be a serious part of the decision-making process,” says Jessica Goad, advocacy director at the Denver-based Center for Western Priorities. “But that changes when it comes to the agenda behind ‘coordination.’ A lot of these policies shrouded in the term are undermining the role of the federal government. We’re seeing public lands as a vehicle for achieving very anti-federal government goals.” □



Russell Begaye

LIGHT LANGUAGE STUDIOS

THE LATEST

Backstory

Last summer, incumbent Navajo President Ben Shelly unexpectedly came in seventh out of 11 candidates in the primary, disrupting the country’s largest sovereign Indian nation. It appeared that **Joe Shirley Jr., a former two-time president, would face newcomer Chris Deschene in the presidential runoff, but Deschene was disqualified, purportedly because he wasn’t fluent in Navajo** (“A question of fluency on the Navajo Nation,” *HCN*, 12/22/14). A legal and cultural battle erupted, all nine members of the Board of Election Supervisors were removed, and the election was delayed.

Followup

In an April 21 special election, businessman Russell Begaye defeated Shirley, 63 percent to 37 percent.

This may hinder the proposed Grand Canyon Escalade, a controversial but economically appealing \$1 billion tourist development on the reservation. Begaye’s priorities include jobs and infrastructure, but he says the Escalade isn’t the answer: “We need to involve ... the voice of the local people, rather than allowing big corporations to make those decisions.”

KRISTA LANGLOIS



Crowds gather at the Roswell International Air Center, New Mexico, in 2011, to protest a proposal by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the dunes sagebrush lizard as an endangered species. American Stewards claims their coordination strategy influenced the agency not to list the reptile in 2012. MARK WILSON, ROSWELL DAILY RECORD/AP PHOTO



The High Plains transform into a domestic forest of trees and the Herschler Building is built in these photos looking up Randall Avenue in Cheyenne, Wyoming, in 1910 and 2007.

JOSEPH E. STIMSON AND MICHAEL A. AMUNDSON

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Farewell, Ivan Doig

We were saddened to hear of the April 9 passing of **Ivan Doig**, the prolific and down-to-earth writer who was born in rural Montana and set many of his novels in gritty, working-class communities. Doig's work always carried the aroma of sage and the sweat of hard-lived lives, and we feel honored that he and his wife, **Carol**, were longtime subscribers and donors to *High Country News*. Doig told *HCN* Publisher **Paul Larmer** once that though he loved our gritty journalism, he was no fan of our change from a black-and-white news tabloid into a "slick" four-color magazine. Why waste cover space on a fancy photograph when we could print good old-fashioned black-inked stories there? Doig promised to keep reading the magazine nonetheless. To honor him, we encourage you to read — or re-read — his books (like *This House of Sky*, *English Creek*, *Sweet Thunder*, *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*), perhaps savoring them while on a road trip through his beloved West.

SPRING VISITORS

April winds brought **Kelsey Elwood**, a teaching and research assistant at Colorado College in Colorado Springs, to our door. She was in the area to study how those brisk winds affect local farmers' orchards. Kelsey, a Western Slope native, was delighted to be back on this side of the mountains for a week. She reminisced with fellow Colorado College alum, *HCN's* Online Editor **Tay Wiles**, about mutual friends and old professors.

Sherye Bacon Boylan, who grew up here in the area but now lives in LeRoy, New York,



Sherye Bacon Boylan and her sister, Donna Bacon Widmer, visit *High Country News*.

ALEXIS HALBERT

was in Paonia visiting her sister, **Donna**, and niece **Krista**, and they all dropped in to visit *HCN* headquarters. Sherye told us that their father used to own the old Gambles Hardware building across the street — where *HCN* was first housed when it relocated to Paonia in 1983 from its birthplace in Lander, Wyoming.

Frank DeMita and **Georgia Nakou** came all the way from Jersey — no, not that Jersey, but the largest of the British Channel Islands. Frank first ran across *High Country News* as a law student in Taos, New Mexico, and has kept an eye on the magazine ever since. They were eager to sample Paonia's culinary delights, so we sent them off with back issues and a list of scenic hikes to walk off all those tasty meals.

MAGAZINE SCAMMERS BUSTED?

Remember those "Subscriber Alert" notices in recent issues of *HCN* about an Oregon company sending unauthorized renewal offers? In March, the state's attorney general filed a lawsuit against 19 companies and nine people accused of running a "sophisticated mail scam" that tricked people into paying inflated prices to renew their subscriptions to various magazines and newspapers, bilking them of some \$20 million. Reader **R.N. Vredenburg** of Grants Pass, Oregon, sent us a clip about the lawsuit and wrote, "Out of business soon? Let's hope for the best!" We sure hope so, too!

CORRECTIONS

Alert reader **Steve Snyder** of Marlin, Texas, sent us a note about our April 13, 2015, story "The West in 72 Hours." He wrote: "Space shuttles may have landed at Edwards (Air Force Base, in the Mojave Desert), but they were, of course, never launched from there, which is the verb in your story." Thanks for the careful read, Steve. Also in that issue, we referred to the Grand Tetons rather than Grand Teton National Park, and "Glacier National Park" appeared as "Galcier." Ouch. *HCN* regrets the errors.

—Paul Larmer and
Jodi Peterson for the staff

WYOMING REVISITED: REPHOTOGRAPHING THE SCENES OF JOSEPH E. STIMSON

Michael A. Amundson
352 pages, hardcover: \$29.95.
University Press of Colorado, 2014.

In 1890, Joseph E. Stimson began photographing Wyoming's parks, ranches, people and landscapes, hoping to promote the brand-new state. In the process, he

documented an early Wyoming boom. For over 60 years, he followed the state's rise as train lines raced across the state, sheep and cattle ranching expanded and oil production increased. Photographer Michael Amundson has carefully retraced his footsteps, first in the 1980s, in black-and-white, and then again in 2007-2008, in color. Amundson reveals the unpredictable evolution of the West — the uneven ways that change ripples across a landscape. Many of the small towns Amundson revisited appear unchanged from Stimson's original photographs. But others show the traces of the state's dramatic boom-and-bust history. Images of the Cambria Coal Camp in the Black Hills of northwestern Wyoming, for example, document the gradual disappearance of the mine's infrastructure. In the final photograph, only a faint dirt road remains.

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The Wetland WARS

More than a decade ago, Los Angeles environmentalists saved an urban wetland from developers. Now they're trying to save it from each other.

FEATURE BY
JUDITH LEWIS
MERNIT

Not too long ago, Roy van de Hoek was a one-man guerrilla restoration force, a warrior for native species wherever he went. In the 1990s, while working as a Bureau of Land Management biologist on Central California's Carrizo Plain, he independently began "girdling" Australian eucalyptus trees on the protected landscape, stripping the trees of their bark until they slowly starved to death. He was convicted of a misdemeanor and lost his job managing the Carrizo, but for his pains, *Mother Jones* magazine named him June 1997's "Hellraiser of the Month."

Van de Hoek last risked arrest for native plant life in 2006, when he began pulling alien vegetation from the 600-acre Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve on the Southern California coast, near his home. The City of Los Angeles charged him with vandalism, but later absolved him on the condition that van de Hoek, a gifted interpreter of nature, provide them with scientific reports and lead wetland tours.

These days, at 58, van de Hoek is an environmental educator with Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation and a reformed man. One afternoon, as I stood with him and his fiancée, environmental activist Marcia Hanscom, counting monarchs in a eucalyptus grove on the southern fringe of the Ballona Reserve, he told me the story of his conversion. How, after a squabble with a neighbor over his girdling of a local ficus tree, he noticed native waders, like night herons and egrets, roosting in the ficus trees. How he recognized that ice plant, a South African succulent, shelters native voles and frogs. How he started reading Robert Michael Pyle.

Pyle traveled more than 9,000 miles following the monarch migration across the West for his 1999 book, *Chasing Monarchs*. Van de Hoek felt a deep kinship with him. "The way he carries books in his car about natural history, the way he drops everything to chase a butterfly," van de Hoek says. "I wanted to call him up!" Monarchs, Pyle observed, roost in eucalyptus in the absence of their native conifers. He was angry that state land managers were cutting the "eucs" down. "He was angry at *me*," van de Hoek said, pressing binoculars to his face to count the fluttering masses above our heads, clinging there like rust-colored petals.

Slowly, van de Hoek began to see certain urban ecosystems, like the Ballona Wetlands, not as places in need of a heavy-handed fix, but as places in the process of evolving — not back to what they were before humans arrived, but into something just as wild, beautiful and ecologically significant.

Van de Hoek's philosophical transformation means he no longer goes around girdling trees. It

has, however, thrown him into a bitter new dispute over the Ballona reserve's future. Officials with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the state Coastal Conservancy, allied with local nonprofits, have declared in notices of intent, blogs and an elegant website, BallonaRestoration.org, that the Ballona State Ecological Reserve needs to be restored. They want to tear out the ice plant and replace it with native marsh grasses. They want to bulldoze away old construction waste and tear down the levees that contain Ballona Creek, which cuts through the wetlands on its way to the ocean. They want to redesign the straightened creek so it meanders through the wetlands, mimicking a more natural stream.

Some local ecologists disagree with the state's specific plans, but still believe a restoration is in order. Hanscom, van de Hoek and their allies, however — who include local Sierra Club leaders, politicians and even some journalists — believe almost anything but the most gentle rehabilitation, conducted by hand, would be a disaster. As they await the state's long delayed environmental impact report for the restoration, they show up at county supervisor meetings, comment on blogs, and write letters to editors. If the restoration goes ahead, Hanscom told me, sweeping her hand over a carpet of green, less native than non, "everything that lives here now will die."

Why every discussion about the Ballona Wetlands divides environmentalists into camps so entrenched they can barely talk to one another is a question that stumps even some of the people involved in the fight. Wetlands matter, yes — they protect inland settlements from storms, offer habitat to birds, rodents and even coyotes. They treat inland runoff before it enters the ocean. They contain plants that exist nowhere else in the world. Southern California has lost 90 percent of its original 49,000 acres of coastal wetlands. For Los Angeles, Ballona is the very last patch.

But Ballona's significance goes beyond that. It's as if, in the concrete sprawl of the L.A. metropolis, where almost every view is owned and where fist-fights erupt over beach access, any swath of undeveloped land takes on outsized significance. It becomes a place to project all of our hopes for healing the climate and saving imperiled species, and perhaps even wresting power back from bureaucracy and developers.

This, right now, is the burden of Ballona, a landscape caught between competing visions of what is good, desirable and even natural in urban wildlands. If restoration ecology, as British scientist A.D. Bradshaw declared in the 1980s, is the "acid test of the ecological movement," then Ballona is the acid

A great blue heron and great egrets in a tidal channel in the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve, Playa del Rey, California.

JONATHAN COFFIN/
STONEBIRD, CC VIA FLICKR





If the proposed restoration of the Ballona Wetlands goes ahead, “everything that lives here now will die,” says activist Marcia Hanscom.

test of the acid test — a place that might prove what restoration can, and perhaps should, achieve in an increasingly urbanized West.

THE LITTLE EUCALYPTUS GROVE where van de Hoek counted butterflies — 218 of them — once belonged to a 2,000-acre system of seeps, sand dunes, willow groves, mud flats, lagoon and marsh called Ballona (pronounced *Bye-ona*). The Tongva people fished and farmed here before early Spanish colonists forced them inland to build missions. Early-19th century Mexican ranchers grazed their cattle on marsh grasses. Later, oil extractors lined the beaches with derricks.

Then came the influx of post-war residents looking for homes near the sea. Howard Hughes bought up much of Ballona in the 1940s for his own personal airport; in the 1960s, parts of the wetland were carved out to create Marina del Rey, a recreational boat harbor surrounded by upscale shopping and high-rise apartments. After Hughes died in 1976, his heirs laid plans to transform what remained of the property into a 1,000-acre housing and retail development called Playa Vista, but a local resident, Ruth Lansford, mobilized to stop them, founding the first activist group to defend the area, Friends of Ballona Wetlands. In so doing, she launched one of the signal battles of the Los Angeles environmental movement.

In 1990, Lansford entered into an agreement with a new group of developers, who promised to preserve 297 acres of

wetland in exchange for the Friends dropping their decades-old lawsuit against the development. That was never enough for Marcia Hanscom, who in 1995 founded the Wetlands Action Network to organize Playa Vista resistance. That same year, Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen announced plans to locate their DreamWorks movie studio in Playa Vista, and the fight for Ballona became a blockbuster media event.

Celebrities led marches on the wetlands’ behalf; one activist staged a hunger strike. Hanscom, then in her 40s, found herself organizing wetland tours for journalists from *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*. People who spent most of their time in dark theaters rode around on school buses learning about the lifecycle of the tidewater goby, a tiny fish gone from Ballona but native to California lagoons. They learned why the bright yellow mustard flowers blooming in the wetlands didn’t belong, and why the ragged salt grass did. They learned that sloughs and marshes and springs once extended for 20 miles inland from the Southern California coast, and that Conservation International had, in 1996, identified the California Floristic Province from Tijuana, Mexico, to southern Oregon as one of 35 “biodiversity hotspots,” rich with species found nowhere else on Earth.

Eventually, the DreamWorks partners pulled out, but Hanscom had already leveraged the spotlight they’d flicked on. Under the banner, “Citizens United to Save All of Ballona,” she brought together

more than 100 activist groups in pursuit of a sweeter deal. They didn’t stop Playa Vista — its apartments and shops and parks now loom over the wetlands like an enemy compound — but they did get the state Coastal Conservancy to purchase another 192 acres from the developer. In 2003, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife bundled it up with the acreage Lansford had secured, and designated it all an ecological reserve. Playa Vista turned another 36 acres just outside the reserve’s southeastern edge into a freshwater marsh to treat the development’s runoff. In 2005, Hughes’ heirs gave the state another 70 acres to settle a tax debt, and the modern boundaries of the reserve were set.

Little has been done around the wetlands since then. The “Friends,” as they’re known, conduct tours and do restoration whenever possible. Hanscom and van de Hoek, who in 2005 founded the nonprofit Ballona Institute, aren’t allowed any official access and have uneasy dealings with everyone who does. The public has been officially shut out. In 2013, the Annenberg Foundation donated funds for a full-time land manager, and the state hired an ecologist, Richard Brody, the first in the preserve’s history. The Annenberg money ran out last year, and California Fish and Wildlife now struggles to fund Brody’s job. The Annenberg group also at one point made a bid to build an interpretative center on Ballona property that would have included a veterinary facility for stray cats and dogs. Amid intense opposition, last December the foundation backed out.



Roy van de Hoek and Marcia Hanscom, facing page, are advocates of a minimal restoration of the Ballona Wetlands. At left, salt flats in the Ballona Wetlands butt up against Marina Del Rey, California.

JONATHAN ALCORN

There's no getting around the reality that Ballona now suffers from the kind of entropy that sets in when any urban wildland has been left alone too long. Brody says he and his crew pulled out 15 tons of debris last year alone. "Needles, stolen luggage, trash," he says, much of it left behind by homeless people who use the preserve for campouts, constructing fire pits and setting up tents. Though fences surround parts of the reserve, labeled with signs warning "No Trespassing" and "No Dogs Allowed," people let their dogs run loose and trample the vulnerable, low-to-the-ground nests of the state-endangered Belding's savannah sparrow. Fountains of pampas grass blight the landscape with their feathery excess. Feral cats breed and roam and kill.

"We can't look at this and say this is a natural system, everything's fine and healthy," says Karina Johnston, director of watershed programs for the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Foundation, an independent nonprofit that supports the work of the state-run Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission. Nor can the necessary overhaul be accomplished with volunteer labor on weekends. "Over 3 million cubic yards of sediment have been dumped there," Johnston says bluntly. "It didn't get there with wheelbarrows."

In 2012, the Bay Commission solicited a historical ecology study of Ballona to figure out what the wetlands looked like during a period from 1850 to 1890. The idea was to inform a restoration with evidence from the past. But even the study's

authors, Johnston says, disagree on its implications for restoration. An urban ecological reserve in a city of 5 million people is in some ways beyond redemption. Everything around it has been altered; it can't be returned to exactly what it was. So how close should a restoration try to get?

LIKE SO MANY MODERN ECOLOGICAL MOVEMENTS, the one that informs the Ballona restoration began with Aldo Leopold. In 1935, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Leopold led a crew in replanting native tallgrass prairie on exhausted farmland, an installation that later became the centerpiece of the school's renowned arboretum. Fifty years later, two professors at the university, John Aber and William Jordan, formalized what they called "restoration ecology" as a field of study and practice. Aber saw it as a middle ground between exploitation and preservation, a way of acknowledging that humans can, if they put their collective will toward it, benefit nature.

Aber and Jordan were clear that the goal of restoration was to bring back the native plants and animals that inhabited an area before humans mucked it up. Even then, that wasn't easy: Leopold himself had come to understand that you can't bring back tallgrass prairie without the disturbances it evolved with, such as fire to kill woody plants that out-compete grasses. Well-intentioned replantings can also be brought down by the wrong vegetation mix: In 1975, a dune restora-



tion near the Los Angeles International Airport, just down the street from Ballona, was stabilized with "native" plants that ended up encouraging insects whose competition nearly wiped out the El Segundo blue butterfly. The plants were native to Southern California, but not to the dune habitat where the butterfly had thrived.

Then there's the question of time: What point in the past should a restoration try to re-create? In 2005, the National Park Service and The Nature Conservancy began a violent restoration of Santa Cruz Island, off the Southern California coast, slaughtering feral pigs, burning tall fennel stands and relocating golden eagles, who had moved into the

Trash in the reserve.

JONATHAN COFFIN/
STONEBIRD, CC VIA FLICKR

Travis Longcore, an associate professor of spatial sciences at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, with a map he and a team created showing the historical geology of the Ballona Wetlands. JONATHAN ALCORN



"I think there are smart things you could do with Ballona that would make it better ecologically, and function better for rare species that we care about. Some of them do require bulldozers."

—Travis Longcore, USC scientist who helped map Ballona's historical geology

predator void left by DDT-ravaged bald eagles. The goal of the restoration was to return the island to what it was before 19th century ranchers colonized it. It was done primarily to save the endangered island fox.

That restoration has been a success, on its terms; since it was completed in 2007, the little fox has rebounded. But recent archaeological evidence suggests the fox might not be so indigenous. Thousands of years ago, gray foxes were brought to the islands by the Chumash Indians, who cherished them as companions; one theory suggests the island fox evolved from those animals. Whether that matters to you depends on which point in time you pick to consider the island "natural."

At Ballona, it's not just thousands of years of human influence that have made settling on a restoration epoch tricky. Earthquakes and weather, too, have altered the system through the years. Before 1825, the Los Angeles River emptied into the ocean at Ballona, and, with its relatively strong hydrologic force, kept the wetlands open to the tides. But after a series of seismic shocks and floods shoved the river's course south, only little Ballona Creek trickled down from the inland watershed, most years lacking the force to breach the dunes and let saltwater in. The creek petered out into the

estuary, feeding a freshwater marsh.

In the late 1930s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lined the banks of Ballona Creek with concrete to protect the communities around it from flooding. Where the creek emptied into the ocean, now with enough directed force to keep a channel open again, the Corps built concrete levees to keep those tides away from land.

Right now, the Ballona Wetlands contain a mixture of ecologies replenished meagerly by urban runoff, winter rains and minimal tides through a single gate. Whether any restoration should, or even can, return them to their mostly freshwater 19th century condition is a matter of much agitated debate. The state's preferred plan would lower parts of the reserve to sea level and demolish the levees, allowing the tides to flow in and create more saltwater marsh. But that, says Travis Longcore, an associate professor of spatial sciences at the University of Southern California and an authority in ecological restoration, is "the wrong big move." Those levees, he says, mimic a lost feature of the wetland as it evolved since 1825.

"The levees now function like an outer dune system," Longcore explains, keeping the tides at bay. If you're restoring the Ballona Wetlands for the sake of the species that historically depended on it, mini-

mizing the influx of saltwater matters.

Unlike Hanscom and van de Hoek, Longcore isn't completely opposed to a Ballona restoration. "I think there are smart things you could do with Ballona that would make it better ecologically, and function better for rare species that we care about," he says. "Some of them do require bulldozers." One would involve raising Culver Boulevard, a major street that bisects the wetlands. The wetlands could flow under the elevated road, connecting the north and south segments. Wildlife could then move freely under the road instead of ending up as roadkill. Culver Boulevard is also the official tsunami escape route, so raising it would be good for public safety, as well as a hedge against climate-influenced sea-level rise.

But Longcore, who is president of Los Angeles Audubon, also wants any restoration of Ballona to protect its current population of birds and animals. And that goal, he says, is often at odds with the state plan, which he believes imposes a simple, ostensibly low-maintenance ideal he calls "flush, baby, flush" on a complex and diverse ecology. That plan will have dire consequences for the habitat of certain species, like the federally endangered California gnatcatcher, a tiny bird recently spotted in Ballona's coastal scrub for the first time since 1880. The burrowing owl would also lose ground were



Snowy egret in the slough of the Ballona Wetlands.

JONATHAN COFFIN/STONEBIRD, CC VIA FLICKR



seawater to flood its habitat, and more would be destroyed, at least temporarily, when fill from the excavation of a tidal basin gets dumped on upland habitat.

To underscore his argument, Longcore brings up another restoration, completed two years ago, 20 miles up the coast from Ballona, at Malibu Lagoon. Most local environmentalists consider the restoration — done chiefly for the sake of water quality — an unqualified success. The restoration did not open the lagoon to the ocean, as would the removal of Ballona Creek’s levees, but it did create much more open water than existed there before, replacing an algae-clouded marsh with a clean, open lagoon. Biologists have reported that the populations of certain endemic fish, like the tidewater goby, are on the rise.

And yet Longcore believes that the restoration got it wrong. “Of course, there are tidewater gobies there,” he says heatedly. “There were tidewater gobies there before.” It’s the other creatures that the \$7 million state-run collaboration ran roughshod over that trouble him, animals like the south coast marsh vole. The vole, a state species of “special concern,” also exists at Ballona; it occupies a wet, meadowy area, says Longcore, above the tidal zone. Before the restoration, Malibu Lagoon had a lot of habitat for the vole, which needs room to escape the incoming

tides. The construction of the new estuary dredged and bulldozed most of it away to make way for more open water.

“So if you ask, ‘Was the Malibu Lagoon project a successful restoration for the south coast marsh vole?’” Longcore says, “the answer would be no. They removed a lot of individuals. I don’t know where they put them. Some specimens came to the natural history museum to be, you know, *specimens*.”

I talked to Longcore in his basement office on campus, on a brisk, showery day in December. At 45, he is tall and energetic, with a fountain of short dark hair. He talks with his entire being, even while sitting in his chair. He is a consummate scholar: He has examined old surveyor accounts and 19th century coastal maps, and claims to have read every *L.A. Times* story that mentions Ballona. He has contributed to several historical ecology reports on California’s coastal wetlands, including the one on Ballona curated by the Bay Commission. And he argues that Southern California is moving in the wrong direction when it comes to restoring coastal wetlands.

“We’ve had a San Francisco Bay model of wetland restoration cookie-cuttered onto almost all of our lagoon restorations here in Southern California,” Longcore says. That model favors big, open bays and lagoons. A 1997 restora-

tion of Batiquitos Lagoon on the North San Diego County coast jettied the mouth permanently open to the ocean; another wetland, Bolsa Chica, 30 miles down the coast from Ballona, was reconfigured nine years ago with a fully tidal lagoon. Longcore argues that such projects are not restorations, because they create permanent tidal openings where only ephemeral openings were found in the past. Instead, like Ballona, both Batiquitos and Bolsa Chica were blocked from the tides by sand bars and sediment, except when a major winter storm briefly blasted a tidal inlet clear.

Longcore shows me a color-coded map of the North San Diego County coast in the 19th century. The pink on the map represents “seasonally flooded salt flat,” he says. Salt flats are dry most of the spring and summer, wet when rain falls or storms blow in. “And the reason they matter ecologically,” says Longcore, “is that they provide seasonal habitat with different depths of water for all kinds of migratory birds: short shorebirds, tall shorebirds, dabbling ducks, diving ducks.” Ninety-five percent of the North County salt flats are gone. Meanwhile, open water in the area’s coastal wetlands has increased by 600 percent.

Wetland habitat “is hard for people to get their minds around,” Longcore says. “It’s neither fish nor fowl. You can drive a

With the state's plan, some animals will die. "None of us like it," says environmental scientist Shelley Luce. "But we're doing it because two years later, the whole place will come back 10 times better."

Environmental scientist Shelley Luce, at Ballona Creek in the Ballona Wetlands area.
JONATHAN ALCORN

car across it sometimes; it's covered with water otherwise. People have a hard time designing for it," and the public has a hard time appreciating it. "You hear people say, 'Oh look! There's now an octopus in Bolsa Chica! Isn't this great? We have diversity!' But no, octopus do not belong in Bolsa Chica." Sea slugs, adapted to opening and closing systems, do.

Longcore knows it's a lot easier to love blue water than to embrace the messy, tattered, sometimes brown, sometimes mucky, salt flats. Even Longcore's wife thinks he's weak on messaging. "She says, 'Look, if your argument is, 'This stuff that looks ugly to people is good,' you're going to lose. Because politicians aren't going to spend the time to sit down and understand the history of coastal wetlands. As long as there's no homeless and no trash, and there's blue water to look at and it's green, they're going to be happy.' All they want to know is, 'Is this going to be pretty?'"

IT WAS POURING RAIN the December day I met Shelley Luce for lunch at a French restaurant in Culver City, a few miles inland from the wetlands — a place once so verdant with riparian beauty that producers in the 1920s built studios here to shoot scenes of pioneers fording Ballona Creek. It was the kind of day that makes people like Luce, an environmental scientist, dream of freeing the city's streams from their confines, returning the region to its secret hydrological roots, when the Southern California landscape ran wet with creeks and sloughs.

Luce loves the old survey maps of this

once-wet city as much as Longcore does. But historical ecology is "only a snapshot," she says, and she doesn't believe the wetlands have to be returned to what they were in 1850 for a restoration to be meaningful. And anyway, it can't be done: The riverine forces that once shaped the Ballona Valley, transporting rocks and sediment from the mountains through the watershed, no longer exist in the paved-over city. Now there are "gas lines and airports and private property," Luce says. "We have to consider what's possible."

Luce is 44, willowy and calm, and an influential coalition builder. She was a major player on the Ballona restoration until recently, when she left her post as director of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission to serve as executive director for the nonprofit Environment Now. She still participates in the discussion, publishing a newsletter called *Access Ballona* and sitting on advisory committees. And she's still the scientist who makes the best case for the state's restoration plans.

Luce doesn't dispute Longcore's description of Ballona as closed to the tides. "It looks from the historical ecology that there was more freshwater than (salt marsh) at times," she says. Still, she wants those levees to come out, in part so that Ballona can join the citywide rewilding effort revolving around the Los Angeles River, where the Army Corps last May approved a \$1 billion project to demolish 11 miles of the river's 75-year-old concrete banks.

But she also wants the levees out

because she wants the wetlands to be wet again, as they were back when free-flowing freshwater creeks and streams and occasional tides refreshed them. For the creeks to water the wetlands again, they would have to be released from their concrete culverts, and floodplains would have to be cleared of homes, offices and shopping malls. "That's not going to happen in my lifetime," Luce says. So let Ballona be what it can be: A self-sustaining, mostly tidal marsh. Saltwater marsh is habitat, too, and supporters of the restoration believe that certain species, like the endangered California least tern and the clapper rail, might rebound in the project's wake.

British restoration pioneer Bradshaw once described the American approach to restoration as: "If you can't put it back like it was ... then don't do it!" But that, he wrote, is "a counsel of perfection leading only to despair." If a landscape has been altered beyond redemption, he said, it's OK to find another model for it — one that fits the local community, meshes with the local ecology, and accommodates the modern era and its inhabitants.

That's exactly what Luce believes the state's plan does. "We might create more saltwater marsh in Ballona than was there in 1850," she admits. "It might be closer to the way things looked in 1650. We don't know." Either way, she says, there's a net gain for coastal wetlands. "We've lost a lot of salt marsh up and down the coast, too," Luce says, though only a handful of those areas were ever fully open to the ocean. "We have an opportunity to get one or the other back at Ballona, and both are good. The salt marsh option just means we'll have something that might be more sustainable over time."

Longcore disagrees. If Ballona is opened to the tides, it will need periodic expensive dredging to stay that way, because sediment happens. And beyond what an expanded salt marsh would do to displace existing habitat, he worries about what will happen to the resident animals during construction.

Luce admits some will die, even if you take great care not to kill them. "None of us like it," she says. "But we're doing it because two years later, the whole place will come back 10 times better."

There's no guarantee of that, of course. Bradshaw considered restoration the best test of ecologists' understanding of nature, but he knew back then that their understanding of nature wasn't perfect. It isn't now, either. Any restoration is to some extent a risk: No one knows for sure whether any altered landscape or its biodiversity will come back better, worse, or simply different.

ROY VAN DE HOEK no longer gives tours of the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve. In 2008, he got into a dustup with Brody, then a biological consultant for state Fish and Wildlife, who had covered a segment of the wetland with a tarp to smother





Stilts on the Ballona Creek Estuary. JONATHAN COFFIN/STONEBIRD, CC VIA FLICKR

alien vegetation without herbicides. The goal was to restore native milk vetch, which had been wiped out in the wetlands in the 1950s. Van de Hoek objected — too vehemently — that the tarp would also kill squirrels, voles and Pacific chorus frogs. He was subsequently banned from the reserve.

So it was without his and Hanscom's company that I trespassed into the reserve myself, around sunset one Sunday afternoon, walking around behind a pocket park where only wooden stumps and signs warned me away.

Lizards skittered under my feet, and ducks landed out on a bare circle of sand known as the "horse-riding ring," because at one point, that's what it was. I took a deep breath and inhaled the bright, green breeze, thick with sea and flora. I walked among tendrils of California salt grass and stands of pickleweed, plants whose names I knew mostly because van de Hoek taught me to revere them a decade ago, back when he believed they were sacred, and told me to kneel upon the ground in their presence.

No one stopped me, so I kept walking.

Out onto the sandy riding ring, which was covered with footprints both human and canine — coyote, maybe; domestic dog, more likely. The ducks startled away. I walked and walked, sneezing through fields of non-native yellow crown daisy, tripping over bouncy succulents. But I never felt at ease. I was alone in an unsafe city. I was breaking the law. I worried about the Belding's savannah sparrow, nesting all around me in the pale green fingers of pickleweed.

And yet the Ballona Wetlands is still an enchanted, astonishing place, where nature persists on whatever terms civilization has allowed. I could see the adaptability Hanscom and van de Hoek so worshipped. But I also wanted trails, interpretative signs, a place to sit and think. What if I, and so many people who live nearby, could go for an evening walk in the reserve, counting the least terns and bufflehead ducks? How might that change life in our crowded and overdeveloped city?

I thought about what Shelley Luce had told me, that she considers it "a crime on the part of public agencies that,

10 years after the purchase, (Ballona) is not one iota more accessible." I also thought about what Longcore said, that the wetlands' fate isn't a matter of public opinion; it's a scientific call. "It is," he says, "an *ecological reserve*." And I thought it not so far-fetched that Ballona could be both an ecological reserve and a place the public could enjoy, with rules, and guidance. Designing for that would require a process that has been difficult to conduct around the Ballona Wetlands, ever since the rifts broke open around Playa Vista and the wetlands became a battleground. It would require open public meetings, leadership, stakeholders willing to hash out a compromise, and a steady stream of money for care and maintenance.

A constructive process could arise around the state's environmental review when it comes out at the end of the year. Or it could be thwarted by more inter-cine acrimony in the lawsuits that will inevitably follow. Land manager Brody, at least, still has faith. "I look forward to the day when I meet all of these people out on the trail in the reserve," he says. "It's going to be a great place." □



Judith Lewis Mernit is a contributing editor at *High Country News*. She has also written for *Sierra*, *Capital and Main*, *TakePart*, *The Atlantic* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

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Biennial Winter Wildlands Alliance Grassroots Advocacy Conference, June 18-20, at the American Mountaineering Center in Golden, Colo. This year's conference will focus on the Forest Service's new Over-Snow Vehicle Travel Management Rule. This is an

opportunity for individuals and organizations who are passionate about protecting winter wildlands and human-powered recreation to gather and hear the latest on policy issues, network, share successes and meet with land managers. Please go to winterwildlands.org/2015-grassroots-advocacy-conference/ to learn more and register to attend.

EWI 2015 – Environmental Writing Institute, led by David James Duncan, Sept. 9-13, 2015, in Missoula, Mont. www.umi.edu/ewi for application and details. Deadline July 15, 2015.

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PHOTO BY MARK HARVEY

The view from 31,000 feet: A philosopher looks at fracking



OPINION BY
KATHLEEN
DEAN MOORE

I was flying the red-eye home to Portland, when the pilot spoke over the intercom. “We are currently over North Dakota. Below us are the famous Bakken shale-oil fracking fields.” I looked down into the night. As far as I could see toward every horizon, the plain was studded with flames — oil rigs flaring methane. How is it possible, I remember asking myself, that humans can do this to the Earth?

Of course, what it is possible for us to do depends on the stories we tell ourselves. A culture embodies a worldview, answers to the fundamental questions of the human condition: What is the Earth? What is the place of humans on Earth? How, then, shall we live? A worldview is so pervasive, so built into the structure of our lives that we don’t notice or question it, any more than a trout questions water. Inside the structure of such a story, acts that would otherwise be unthinkable become all

that can be thought.

What story permits fracking’s and the industrial growth economy’s systematic violence against the Earth? A superhero comic book, I’m thinking, fantasies of planetary subjugation and mastery that stir the loins of boys and Wall Street bankers. That story tells us that we humans are separate from and superior to the rest of Earth’s beings, in control of a planet that is ours alone. We are lonely heroes in endless competition. The losers in that competition — plants, animals, future generations — should be grateful to live on the toxic trickle-down excess of us winners. Of course, superheroes are exempt from the rules that govern the rest of the world.

Within this story, poisoning ground water and smashing ancient rock for petroleum make perfectly good sense. But that story is wildly inconsistent with emerging ecological and evolutionary understandings.

The time when one set of stories, one worldview, grinds up against another is unstable and dangerous. Things fall apart; the center cannot hold. The facts that people encounter, the feelings they directly experience, no longer fit the story they were born to, but the new story is not yet fully formed, and who can make sense of this tectonic trembling? This is a time of shouts and bullies, as the old story struggles violently for control of the narrative.

Then something happens. The old story shatters and a new story emerges to take its place. Philosophers call it a paradigm shift, this sudden leap from one foundational understanding to another. No one can know where it begins: Copernicus’ workshop. Selma, Alabama. The Berlin Wall. The Bakken fracking fields in North Dakota.

North Dakota is the place where fracking has driven the old story to its crumbling edge. It is a *reductio*

WEB EXTRA

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ad absurdum of the theory of human domination, to crush the last drop of oil from the rocks, to take everything until there is nothing left to take, to wring out the washrag to drink the spilled wine — and to claim that this is right and smart. Suddenly, this is inconceivable. Literally that, unthinkable — because it can only make sense inside a system of thought that is now being shattered with every underground fracturing of ancient rock.

A very new, or very old, story is beginning to take its place. It's an ecological-ethical-indigenous account of human kinship in a world that is interconnected, interdependent, finite, beautiful and resilient. Like any worldview, it provides a measure of what is sensible and good.

Because we understand that the world's systems are interconnected, we realize that damage to any part is damage to the whole. This is the foundation of justice.

Because we understand the world is interdependent, we acknowledge our reliance on one another and on the life-giving systems of the Earth. This is the foundation of compassion.

Because we recognize that the Earth is finite, we embrace an ethic of restraint



A gas flare billows up on a private oil and gas installation leased near the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation, North Dakota.

BRUCE FARNSWORTH

and precaution to replace a destructive ethos of excess. This is the foundation of prudence.

Because we understand the planet's systems are resilient, we are called to stop the harm and undo the damage that has been done. This is the foundation of hope.

Because the Earth is beautiful, we will refuse to tolerate the oil industry's wars against the Earth. This is the beginning of moral courage. □

Kathleen Dean Moore is a writer and distinguished professor of philosophy emerita at Oregon State University. She is a contributor to the book, Fracture: Essays, Poems, and Stories on Fracking in America, which will be published December 2015.

Writers on the Range is a syndicated service of *High Country News*, providing three opinion columns each week to more than 70 newspapers around the West. For more information, contact Betsy Marston, betsym@hcn.org, 970-527-4898.

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In the spirit of a good old-fashioned verbal fracas — and to celebrate our region's most iconic places — *High Country News* invites you to vote in *Battle of the Lands*, a bracket-style tournament to crown our readers' favorite spot to recreate in the West. Starting **May 28**, choose between our match-ups by **voting online at hcn.org/public-lands-vote**

ESSAY CONTEST

In addition to voting for your favorite public land, consider your favorite place for outdoor recreation, and tell us why your land rules in our essay contest. Essays are due by June 12. See hcn.org/public-lands-essay

PHOTOS: NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



The Story of My Heart by Richard Jefferies: **As Rediscovered** by Terry Tempest Williams and Brooke Williams
Richard Jefferies, Terry Tempest Williams, Brooke Williams
233 pages, softcover: \$21.95.
Torrey House Press, 2014.

A lost classic made new

First published in 1886, *The Story of My Heart*, by Richard Jefferies, is a slim, mystical volume — a nature writer’s exploration of his own soul.

Three years ago, well-known naturalist and author Terry Tempest Williams and her writer husband, Brooke, stumbled upon an old copy of the book in an independent bookstore in Maine. They were immediately caught by its stunning prose.

“My heart was dusty,” Jefferies writes in the opening paragraph, “parched for want of the rain of deep feeling; my mind arid and dry, for there is dust which settles on the heart as well as that which falls on a ledge.” Who was this eloquent writer from another century, they wondered?

Their search for the answer would lead the pair to England and thence to France and the Louvre, as well as on a

journey into their own hearts. Jefferies, it turns out, was an English nature writer, essayist and journalist. And he did not lack 20th century admirers; Rachel Carson supposedly kept two books by her bedside: Thoreau’s *Walden*, and Jefferies’ book.

The Williamses’ quest culminated in this sincerely felt tribute, *The Story of My Heart by Richard Jefferies: As Rediscovered by Terry Tempest Williams and Brooke Williams*.

Jefferies’ writings, the Williamses note, are relevant today: He was a great proponent of exercise, for example, in particular daily walking, as well as of the benefits of being idle. But his real message was a spiritual one, urging the reader to “go higher than a god; deeper than a prayer.”

After each chapter by Jefferies, Brooke Williams balances the Victorian

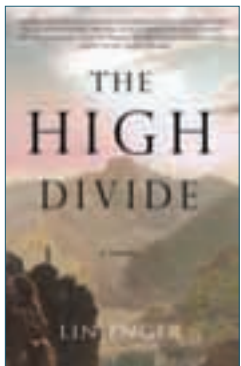
prose with a chapter of his own commentary. He sees in Jefferies a kindred spirit, someone he could imagine being friends with today. “This story,” he writes, “is about living in this modern world, vastly different from the natural world we evolved into.”

As Terry Tempest Williams writes in the introduction, readers who have never heard of Jefferies before may “rediscover what it feels like to fall back in love with the world.”

Torrey House Press and the Williamses have done a great service for the 21st century with this reissue. *The Story of My Heart* speaks across the ages, and belongs on the same shelf as Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Muir, Beston and Leopold.

BY CHARLES FINN

In pursuit of ghosts



The High Divide
Lin Enger
332 pages, hardcover: \$24.95
Algonquin, 2014.

As *The High Divide* opens in 1886, Gretta Pope’s husband, Ulysses, a U.S. Army veteran, has been missing for six weeks, leaving her with two sons to raise, past-due rent, and no idea about where he might have gone or when he’ll be back. An odious landlord begins to circle Gretta, demanding payment in more than money. Then Gretta’s son, 16-year-old Eli, intercepts a letter to his father from a woman in Bismarck, suggesting that Ulysses recently visited her. Eli sneaks out of the family home in Sloan’s Crossing, Minnesota, and hops a freight train west to find his father, but his sickly 9-year-old brother guesses his plan and follows. Meanwhile, Gretta embarks on her own travels and investigations.

Minnesota novelist Lin Enger switches to the perspective of a different family member in each chapter, updating us on their individual odysseys and making it clear that the members of this family love each other deeply and want to be together, even though their lack of communication has split them apart and left them wracked by doubts about everything.

The boys and Gretta are astonished to learn that Ulysses re-enlisted after the Civil War and served in Custer’s 7th Cavalry Regiment, which was notorious for killing women and children in Indian villages. Ulysses’ recent erratic behavior appears to spring from his secret past; he is clearly haunted by something that happened when he was in the military.

As she seeks her husband, Gretta rebukes herself for not delving into Ulysses’

past sooner: “If only she had been able to summon the strength to draw the poison out of Ulysses. ... But she had been raised to believe that a man’s burdens were meant for him alone to carry.”

In *The High Divide*, the West is swiftly transforming from a savage, blood-thirsty land into a settled place where the only remnants of the bygone, unfettered West are the buffalo bones that litter the prairie, which men scavenge for quick money. And yet this changing land will

serve as a proving ground for Ulysses’ growing sons.

In clear, vivid prose, Enger describes the family’s journeys, expanding the story of the search for one man into an investigation of the West’s conscience at a time when men had recently decimated its native peoples and fauna and were just beginning to reap the consequences. In the process, he tells a tender story of love, sorrow and the quest for redemption.

BY JENNY SHANK



Young men hop on a freight train in Bakersfield, California.
RONDAL PARTRIDGE, U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

NO STRAIGHT LINES

You're not too sure what you're seeing when you walk in these Northwestern woods. Thick-shadowed forests overgrown in the half-light, more kinds of moss and lichen than you can name, woolly-green arms above and woolly-green cushions around ... rock, tree, yielding, standing.

You can walk for hours without a real view.

What you get instead is this light tricky and shifting. Is a running whisper of questions and speculations. Things that might be one thing but, at the next step, turn out to be something else. Logic, grammar, straight thinking far from mind. Up ahead, through the tree-crowd and the green-gloom — Bear? Stump? Sasquatch? Gone when you get there.

Here in the damp upper corners of America — Oregon, Washington, maybe Vermont and Maine — we wonder about things. We wonder.



Down in the blazing desert states, I seem to remember, things were clear, horizons unmistakable, black and white. The hot, bright West produces more than its share of absolutists, untroubled by doubts or hesitations. Government bad, death penalty good. God with us. War now. I recall the razor-sharp distinctions. Me right: you wrong. Convert. Or die.

Was that really me? Hard to feel it, so long ago.

It seems that desert religions have engulfed half the world and more: Muslim, Jew, Christian — heck, even Mormon. Some days, disturbed by my own hard-edged memories, I fear their seared visions of moral clarity. But then I recall that for every haranguing jihadist, there's a quieter, subtler believer, probably just off-camera. For every absolutist, there's a Sufi, scholar, nun ... or simple follower, seeking (and giving) loving kindness. I've met them, too.



Up here, we hardly ever see it, that horizon. Unless from the beach (rocky crags and tangled forests at our backs) or from mountaintops (hard-won and temporary). Otherwise, our perspectives are closer, more changeable. Our sky is a fir-fringed scrap. And our idea of "bright" is laughable, a sun-break between clouds, flattering and then abandoning. We know gray. It is all scale, all spectrum. As many days and lights as you walk, that is how many versions you see.

The deity that fills this green-gray world is, perhaps, deities. It's tempting to see a spirit in each turn of the trail, stream by grove by dale. Such places murmur, and you wish to make friends with them, to propitiate each in its time: to shelter in a dry nook — listen at a bend in the river — tread silently among giants. It seems enough.

We have fewer churchgoers in Oregon than almost anywhere

else in America. And more hikers. We belong here, we think, in this forest, this wet paradise. Cradled here, we rest in it. Strenuously.



Yet ... sometimes we catch godlight flooding downward in beams through the moted tallness.

It will stop you, awaken strange hopes. You'll look up — straight up — where fragment blue might persist beyond the branchwork. You'll try to think what to think. It's all so very Baroque. So visions-of-heaven. Something is demanded.

Then gray will close back over, trail will pull you on, your glasses will fog with green breathing. The quotidian and the contingent. Here is your pack, your stride, footfall your next turning. Here the lungfilling smells, the soft incessant needle-fall, the easy underfoot loam. Yes. Back to the embrace. Like being inside something. Cradled, nestled, you know the words. That reassurance. Void of demand, of edge, of view.

Except ... except. ...

That air, fog-distilled or shot through with the divine — that's our air. We own it, we made (or re-made) it. Thinned here, thickened there, poisoned, hydrocarbon'd. We're breathing it, this forest and I. All the world is. And I drove a car to get to this trailhead, whatever trailhead it is, I guarantee it.

I want to see clear, but I cannot. I want to act, but what is my action? Really. I just want to hike and be hiked. Simple. But then ... I rage to slay the industries and march militant against tycoons and politicians. And voters. And non-voters. And all who drive and eat and pollute.

Then I want to be left alone, on my squishy trail, rain on my cheeks, lunch in my knapsack. I want to quiet my mind from impossible foes and fears.

O the godlight broken, O the cradle fallen from the bough.

Belonging is acting, is caretaking. Wipe the glasses. Shoulder the pack. Take a step. Action is not victory, is not glory. Does not need a master plan, a D-Day of concerted inevitability. Action is: one foot in front of the other.

This, our forest actually does teach. Take a step. Any step. Where will it lead? We wonder. Yet on we go. □

David Oates writes about nature and urban life from Portland, Oregon. He is the author of five books of nonfiction and poetry, including What We Love Will Save Us.

Sunlight
seeps through
the forest of
the Columbia
River Gorge.

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HEARD AROUND THE WEST | BY BETSY MARSTON

THE WEST

A wonderfully ugly California condor that vanished from Grand Canyon National Park and was feared dead was found alive and well in southern Colorado. Franz Carver, a seasonal park ranger, spotted the 2-year-old male near Dolores. At first, he thought it was a turkey vulture, but with a wingspan of almost 10 feet, it looked way too big, he told the *Cortez Journal*. When he closely examined his photos, he noticed a tag on the bird's wing, reading N8. California condors have wandered afar in both Arizona and Utah; now Coloradans who think they've seen the giant birds can proudly declare: "Yes, that was a condor!"

WASHINGTON

North Bonneville, a remote town of 1,000 in the Columbia Gorge, had just \$20,000 in the bank a year ago and little hope of repairing its dilapidated "tot lot" playground. Without a retail sector bringing in sales taxes, the city would stay "on its knees financially," said a consultant hired by the town to analyze its fiscal crisis. What could the little town do? Try selling drugs, of course. It might be unorthodox, but with marijuana legal in Washington, town officials wondered if they could create a public agency to run a municipal pot shop. The legal answer was yes. So, in early March, North Bonneville opened "Cannabis Corner" in a plain-Jane building on, yes, a corner, reports *TheJointBlog*. Cannabis Corner is a one-stop shop, selling buds and marijuana-infused cookies along with coffee, glass bongos and rolling papers, with sales averaging \$2,200 a day, according to *The Liberty Eagle* blog. It's strictly regulated: Pot shop workers, who start at \$11 an hour, take the same drug test as town employees. The only difference is that they're expected to test *positive* for pot, not negative. As one town official explained, "It's important to have informed workers. We need to be doing constant trial and testing." And what will the town do with the profits? Renovate that crumbling playground.

THE WEST

His "diverse content" and vivid depictions of



CALIFORNIA We have a problem with speeding squirrels. GLEN MARTINEZ

bullying earned the Native American writer Sherman Alexie a dubious honor last year. His semi-autobiographical book, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, topped the list of 2014's most frequently challenged and banned books in libraries around the country. Though it won the National Book Award in 2007, Alexie's account of leaving the Spokane Indian Reservation to go to an all-white high school was criticized for being sexually explicit as well as profane. In Idaho, which removed the book from all of its public schools last year, critics also called it "anti-Christian," containing words "we do not speak in our home," reports the American Library Association. Alexie was undaunted: The book-banners "want to control debate and limit the imagination. I encourage debate and celebrate imagination."

CALIFORNIA

Some call it a mischievous art project, others a new form of trolling, but shoppers in a West Hollywood bookstore are finding strange titles in the self-help section: *So your Son is a Centaur: Coping with Your Child's Confusing Life*

Choices, and *The Beginner's Guide to Human Sacrifice*. Actually, they're fake jackets placed over other books, explains the *Los Angeles Times*. A group called Redditor ObviousPlant claims credit. Still, we can't help echoing "author" Dr. Pinder Chipps' wise advice about raising centaurs: "Whether your children have two feet or four hooves, your love for them should come first."

COLORADO

She's a 6-foot-1 pastor who wears jeans and a clerical collar. She spurns what she calls "priggish Christianity," sports colorful arm tattoos and is proud to be "anti-excellence, pro-participation." Her name is Nadia Bolz-Weber, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation she founded in Denver in 2008 is a far cry from holier-than-thou, reports Kirsten Akens, who profiled the minister for the Colorado Springs *Independent*. Bolz-Weber, 45, holds church services for some 200 fellow sinners, telling them, "Oh, my gosh, I admit some horrible things about myself. I would stop telling the stories if they would stop happening, but I've not run out of material to offer people of me being an asshole and what I've learned about it." Bolz-Weber and her husband share a small, walkable life, focused mainly on her neighborhood and church. Being a Christian, she says, isn't about doctrine or lifestyle: "The one thing that you are more and more convinced of is how desperately in need of God's grace you are."

WYOMING

Goodbye to coalbed methane in the Powder River Basin, says WyoHistory.org: "Few of the 24,000 wells drilled during the heyday of the 2000s produce much gas, many sit idle, and approximately 3,000 wells are left orphaned (and) a liability for the state to clean up." Instead of "R.I.P.," maybe say "A.E.C.," for Aftermath is Expensive Cleanup.

WEB EXTRA For more from Heard around the West, see www.hcn.org.

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



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“National monument status will only increase tourism, and more tourists will only mar delicate landscapes.”

—Andrew Gulliford, in his essay, "Plans are percolating to remake the management of southern Utah," from *Writers on the Range*, www.hcn.org/wotr