The Idea of Wilderness

Tribal co-management at Bears Ears | Wildlife versus solar panels in New Mexico
Water inequality on the Colorado River
Art honoring three members of a community of unhoused people who were living in a flood-control channel in Ontario, California. Anthony “Poopsie” Ray Lopez, Madeline Velasquez and Josephine Guadalupe Dominguez died after they were swept away during a heavy rainstorm. *Keri Oberly / HCN*
Wild hearts

AS A CHILD, I SPENT SUMMERS with my dad in Arizona. We often went hiking, and it was during these visits that he took me on my first backpacking trips, to an enchanted place called Aravaipa Canyon. There was no established trail, so we hiked mostly in and alongside the creek. After I complained too much about my heavy pack, I was given the official duty of carrying just the apples and oranges. The canyon walls were steep. We camped near the creek, and it was there that I memorably befriended a frog. The creek and its namesake canyon were not yet an established wilderness area, but it was certainly a place apart. From the perspective of a little girl, it was a wonderland.

The Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness was officially designated in 1984, with passage of the Arizona Wilderness Act, and so many more people visit it now that you must obtain a permit from the Bureau of Land Management to hike and camp there. Limiting the number of people who can explore and enjoy the canyon is one way that land-management agencies fulfill their charge to preserve the “wilderness characteristics” of places like Aravaipa. Granting ecosystems this kind of protection was a visionary idea, hatched by a visionary man named Aldo Leopold. One hundred years ago this month, he helped establish the world’s first wilderness area, the Gila Wilderness. In a river valley in New Mexico, four decades before the passage of the Wilderness Act, the idea of legally protecting a place for its intrinsic value was born (see “Untrammeled,” p. 34).

In the years since, the need to set aside and protect places from development and extractive industries has only grown as the harmful consequences of the growth-is-god mentality wreak havoc across the West. We may not be able to stop growth entirely, but we can draw boundaries. And, in some cases, we can un-develop formerly developed places and let them return to being governed by natural laws, or by their original Indigenous inhabitants. We can turn back the growth clock, as Ruxandra Guidi writes in “Can the future be the past?” (p. 46). This is a revelation on par with the idea of wilderness, because we definitely need more places, whether in remote areas or in the hearts of cities, where a little girl can strike up a friendship with a frog.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief

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**LETTERS**

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

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**THE TRUE COST OF A BURGER**

I loved the statistics in “Cattle country” (May 2024), especially the money breakdown, because it reveals how much we’re spending to help unsustainable big corporations trash our environment when we choose to buy irresponsible beef from big-box stores, as well as how much of our tax dollars support this destruction, whether we like it or not. That beef might look cheap, but it’s not when we consider the underlying cost. Pay me now, or pay me later.

Julie Smith
Golden, Colorado

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**THERE IS NO MENTION OF HOW CARS AND HIGHWAYS KILL WILDLIFE AND WRECK THEIR COMMUNITIES. DO WE ONLY VALUE HUMAN LIVES?**


David Hayslip
Enterprise, Oregon

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**TROUT UNLIMITED HELPED**

“Undamming the Klamath” (May 2024) ignores the key role played by other stakeholders, in particular Trout Unlimited, whose core mission is to conserve and rehabilitate cold-water fisheries. Trout Unlimited is fighting to take down dams around the country, and for years has pinpointed the Klamath because of its role as one of the great salmon and steelhead rivers of the West.

Jeffrey Marshall
Trout Unlimited, Headwaters board member
Scottsdale, Arizona

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**CORRECTION**

In “Lights Out” (May 2024), we erred in describing the three extremism researchers who compiled a database of attacks on energy infrastructure. One is an assistant professor of research at the University of Cincinnati; the other two are independent researchers. We regret the error.

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**SHARING THE SURPLUS**

In May 2024’s “Heard around the West” you ran a story about the moose that was killed during the Iditarod. Apparently, such animals fall under Alaska’s “road kill” program, which distributes the meat from road- and train-killed moose to the community. Residents put their name on a list and get a call when it’s their turn. Even when you want the meat, though, it can be quite a challenge to suddenly get a whole moose, along with the chores involved getting it all home and cutting it up for the freezer, with no warning.

My friend has family in Alaska. His daughter has a place on the river, quite close to where Iditarod champion Dallas Seavey killed the moose. Their neighbor got the call to come get the Seavey moose and immediately offered to share half of it, an offer that was promptly accepted.

Eloise Twining
Ukiah, California

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**REMEMBERING BARRY**

Thank you for “The Color of the River is Light” (April 2024) and reflections on Barry Lopez by Terry Tempest Williams. It was beautifully written; it brought back his spirit for those of us who miss him, and introduced this amazing writer to High Country News readers who didn’t grow up with him. I had a much less complicated relationship with Barry — a reader, a fan. I sent him fan letters. He always responded (old-fashioned typewriter, stuff crossed out). Once I stood in line, and he signed Of Wolves and Men, “To Bart … who tries ….” I didn’t have a clue what he meant.

Barton Eberwein
Portland, Oregon

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**BRINGING BACK MEMORIES**

The April issue struck “home” for me in more than one article.

Daniel Anderson and his “drone-flying management” of livestock had many references that I could personally relate to, as I was a range rider back in the 1980s in Idaho (“Managing predators from the sky”). When a person is out with the livestock daily and committed to the resource, then ranching can remain viable in the long term. Ranching is a privilege, not a right on our public lands.

“The complex case of growing native plants” is another journey down memory lane. I grew up not far from the Tohono O’odham Nation on the south side of Tucson, Arizona, where I attended various festivals and ceremonies at the San Xavier Mission. Plants for restoration projects has been my passion.

Thank you for the reporting and content which relates to many aspects of my adult journey. High Country News deserves more thanks than I can express.

Heidi Chapman Supkis
Bend, Oregon

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**NON-HUMANS MATTER, TOO**

“Highways of hazard” (March 2024) kill people and wreck communities — absolutely true! Thanks for bringing this to our attention. But there is no mention of how cars and highways kill wildlife and wreck their communities. Do we only value human lives? We need more wildlife crossings and migration corridors. We used to limit our driving to necessary work, carrying heavy loads, buying supplies, etc. In city areas, use transit or bike when possible and walk more.

Helen Bourne
Encinitas, California

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IN 2016, A COALITION of tribal nations persuaded President Barack Obama to not only establish Bears Ears National Monument but stipulate that it would be co-managed by tribes and federal agencies. Since then, tribal-led campaigns have strategically — and successfully — sought Antiquities Act protections for ancestral lands from Avi Kwa Ame in the Mojave Desert to Baaj Nwaavjo I’tah Kukveni near the Grand Canyon. Tribes are currently leading or involved in campaigns to establish the recently proposed Kw’ts’án, Chuckwalla and Sáttítla national monuments in California and Bahsahwahbee in Nevada. On May 2, the Biden administration expanded Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument in California, directing the Department of Interior to work with tribes on co-stewardship of the monument.

Like previous national monuments, some of these designations have faced political backlash. At a hearing in late March, Rep. Tom Tiffany, R-Wis., chair of the House Subcommittee on Federal Lands, called the Antiquities Act an “obsolete law” that “ignores local communities,” while his Republican colleagues invoked Bears Ears as an example of the law’s flaws. Despite the grandstanding, federal agencies and the five tribes that comprise the Bears Ears Commission are pursuing their vision of co-management.

In early March, the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service released a draft management plan for the 1.36 million-acre monument. The draft, which is open for public comment until June 11, has five options, including the one preferred by the tribes and agencies — “Alternative E” — which would center the traditional knowledge and priorities of five tribes. Those tribes — the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute, Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, and the Pueblo of Zuni — led the initial campaign for the monument, while 25 other tribes supported it.

Co-management at Bears Ears forges ahead

Despite obstacles in Congress, five tribes and two federal agencies are figuring out how to work together on the ground.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

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BY ANNA V. SMITH
What’s the context of the Bears Ears plan?

Alternative E is the product of nearly two years of collaboration between the two federal agencies and tribal historic preservation officers, elected officials and traditional knowledge-keepers from the five tribes. The plan is historic: It is the first to be created so collaboratively between tribes and the feds, and it marks a significant step in determining what shared management of Bears Ears might look like on the ground. (It’s not, however, the first national monument to be co-managed by a federal agency and a tribe. For example, the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and the National Park Service began co-managing Grand Portage National Monument in 1999.)

“Our tribal lands and resources extend far beyond our current reservation boundaries,” Christopher Tabbee, vice chairman of the Ute Indian Tribe Business Committee and co-chair of the Bears Ears Commission, said in a statement in March. The collaborative plan, he added, “is a model for federal agencies to incorporate tribal knowledge and expertise into land-management plans and practices,” something that is “needed now more than ever.”

Its success has made it a model: Multiple Indigenous-led national monument campaigns have reached out to the Bears Ears Commission for insight and support, said Craig Andrews, Hopi Tribe vice chairman and co-chair of the Bears Ears Commission.

Over the past few years, the Biden administration has supported tribal expertise in land management through policy initiatives, funding and agreements with tribal nations. At the annual White House Tribal Nations Summit in December, the Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture announced that they had formed more than 190 new co-management and co-stewardship agreements with tribes in 2023. (Co-stewardship is an umbrella term for federal and tribal collaboration on the management of land, water or wildlife, whereas co-management is a narrower term that refers to shared legal authority.) Last year, the USDA alone invested almost $70 million in such agreements.

What’s in the plan backed by the commission and the feds?

As explained in the draft plan, the preferred management alternative, Alternative E, “recognizes spiritual, cultural, and ancestral connections to the landscape and protects Indigenous traditional uses of the Monument.”

Alternative E would maintain 88% of the monument for grazing, or about 1,194,529 acres. It would focus on plant restoration and returning natural fire to the landscape, in coordination with the commission tribes, and require the active restoration or improvement of habitat for native fish and wildlife. It would protect 100% of the monument’s dark skies and create a special management plan to “identify any activities that degrade tribes’ cultural practices requiring darkness.” It would also mandate the strict protection of paleontological resources.

The plan would put some limits on recreation; recreational shooting, for example, would be prohibited, though hunting would still be allowed. It would maintain current climbing routes, such as those at Indian Creek, but climbing would be prohibited on or near cultural sites, and routes could be closed if such sites are harmed. The plan would require approval for any new climbing routes involving the installation of bolts and anchors into rock faces — a practice that has harmed cultural sites elsewhere in Utah and the West — and would also allow for “resource rest,” which may mean more extensive seasonal restrictions or limitations on group sizes and the length of visits.

What challenges remain?

Co-stewardship efforts often face lack of funding for participating tribal governments. So far, Interior has provided $250,000 to each tribe on the Bears Ears Commission to assist with planning efforts, travel and other expenses, but there is no guarantee of future funding. And political tensions continue to hamper the process: The state of Utah has sued the federal government over the legality of the monument, and has rejected a proposal to trade state lands within the monument for other lands outside its boundaries.

Educating state officials and the public about the tribes’ relationship with the land and their cultural resources in the monument is another challenge, said Andrews. Tribal officials are participating in the public hearings on the draft management plan alternatives, and Andrews says he values the opportunity to share a Hopi perspective and converse with people, including those who don’t support the national monument. “I welcome that. So that way, at least we get to talking with one another. And maybe they don’t know why we’re doing this,” Andrews said. “I think that’s the best way to convey and build relationships — to be there in person and talk to them face to face, human to human.”

This story is part of High Country News’ Conservation Beyond Boundaries project, which is supported by the BAND Foundation. hcn.org/cbb
Two activists, using the pseudonyms Salal Golden and Rat Daddy, sit in the canopy of the tree where they and others protested for three weeks.

On April 1, activists from the group Pacific Northwest Forest Defense ascended into the uppermost branches of a ponderosa pine in southern Oregon. Nearby, they said, road construction for the Poor Windy Forest Management Project, operated by wood-products manufacturer Boise Cascade and approved by the Bureau of Land Management, had already begun. This particular pine was not part of the timber sale, but it stood in the path of a planned road, in danger of becoming collateral damage. A handful of activists took turns in the tree, sitting on a wooden platform 120 feet in the air. By April 23, the BLM had amended its contract with Boise Cascade: No road would run through the stand the activists occupied after all. The tree where they sat—which they nicknamed Poor Princess Wendy and which some arborists estimate is more than 300 years old—will, at least for now, live to see another season. —Erin X. Wong  See the full story and more photos at hcn.org/tree-sitters

“Who’s taking the extreme action here: the people who are trying to log these trees, or the people who are putting their bodies on the line to defend them?”

—Salal Golden, tree-sitter
Rising waters
California’s homelessness and climate crises are leaving unhoused communities vulnerable to floods.

BY ERIN RODE
PHOTO BY KERI OBERLY

AROUND 9 A.M. on Nov. 8, 2022, Quentin Fears noticed a small amount of water in the drainage tunnel he called home. This was unusual, so he emerged, only to find that the larger flood-control channel just outside his tunnel was filled with a violent, fast-rising torrent of water. One of his friends — perched on a bed that was now a raft — was being swept away.

For over a decade, Fears, a soft-spoken 51-year-old, has lived in and around the flood-control channel that runs under Interstate 10 in the Southern California suburb of Ontario. After storms, a little water often runs down the center of the concrete channel. But Fears had never seen a flood like this one. “It was raging,” he said.

Ultimately, a record-breaking 1.8 inches of rain fell on Ontario, exceeding the normal rainfall amount for the entire month in just two days.

“As I stood there, it rose, and it was rushing bad” — at least four feet deep, said Fears, who managed to pull his friend to safety.

Dozens of unhoused people lived in and around the flood channel near John Galvin Park, drawn to the area’s relative safety from the weather and law enforcement. But the storm swiftly inundated Ontario’s flood infrastructure, which included concrete channels built to sluice water away from houses, businesses and other structures and into a series of holding basins.

Around 10 people were swept away on Nov. 8, with some carried over three miles down the channel, which runs north-south through the city, through dark tunnels under Little League fields, busy streets and a portion of the Ontario International Airport into a catch basin. Rescuers saved several, but search efforts continued for over a week. Three people died: Anthony “Poopsie” Ray Lopez, Madeline Velasquez and Josephine Guadalupe Dominguez. Lopez and Velasquez lived in the channel, while Dominguez was visiting to provide aid.

On that Tuesday morning, Pandora Naranjo, who knew Lopez and Velasquez, woke to the sound of rushing water. The channel was still dry, though, so after trying in vain to rouse her friends, she left to find a nearby restroom. By the time she returned, the water was rushing through, and her friends were gone. “It was out of control, it was going so fast,” she said.

ACROSS THE WEST, anti-camping ordinances and law enforcement sweeps are pushing unhoused people into increasingly marginal spaces on the fringes of cities. Many camp along washes, flood channels and rivers. It’s just one of the many ways the climate and homelessness crises are colliding, leaving unhoused people increasingly exposed to extreme weather.

“Cities and states have made it virtually impossible to stay in safer locations,” said Jesse Rabinowitz, communications director for the National Homelessness Law Center. “And the outcome is people experiencing homelessness are at an even greater risk for extreme weather events.”

Fears grew up in Rancho Cucamonga, a nearby suburb. He moved to Ontario in the early 2000s but struggled to pay for housing. Over the years, he remained in the area, periodically living with friends. But lately, he said, this channel has been the only place he can go.

Ontario contracts with nonprofits and other organizations to provide limited services for unhoused people, but Fears’ relationship with the city has been largely hostile. “Their aim is not to house us here or keep us here,” he said, “it’s to push unhoused people out of town.

In more visible locations, he said, authorities quickly remove unhoused people. Sometimes the reaction is more subtle; a park gazebo and other covered structures that were used for shelter were removed, for example. Other than a limited motel voucher program, Ontario has no bad-weather or emergency shelter options.

“There’s nowhere really else to go,” Fears said. “Everywhere else, if it’s an open field or whatnot, (the police) are on them real quick.”

The channel became a permanent home for many, including Naranjo, who found herself unhoused about three years ago. She bounced between parks and hotels, then found the channel and stayed, she said, drawn by the sense of family and community. Naranjo’s neighbors made sure that everyone got food and spread warnings when police were nearby, she said: “We were just watching out for each other, always.”

GIVEN CALIFORNIA’S cycles of extreme drought and heavy rainfall, places that may have felt relatively safe and dry can suddenly turn deadly. In San Diego, according to the nonprofit San Diego River Park Foundation, the number of people living by the San Diego River grew after the city’s camping ban took effect in July 2023. About a dozen people were rescued there that August, during Tropical Storm Hilary.

When an atmospheric river hit California this February, Anaheim first responders rescued a woman from a storm drain that fed into the Santa Ana River; authorities believe she had been living in the drain. Farther upstream, 10 people were rescued after river-bottom encampments in Riverside were inundated. And in San Jose, people living along the Guadalupe River were forced to flee. Just a few days later, San Jose officials approved plans to clear all the encampments along part of the river and create a “no-return zone.”

In Ontario, a lawsuit filed by the three victims’ estates and families alleges that the city and San Bernardino County knew that people lived in the channel when they opened the floodgates during the November storm. The
suit states that officials acted “with deliberate indifference to” the lives of those in the channel.

“The government, of course, shouldn’t pick and choose who to protect,” said Christian Contreras, a lawyer representing the victims. “The government shouldn’t pick and choose who is worthy of life.”

San Bernardino County and the city of Ontario have denied liability in the deaths and declined to comment on this story, citing the pending litigation.

“I’ve seen on TV where there’s a fire or storms or whatever and you see that they’re warning everybody, and they never warned us at all,” said Naranjo.

“They should have gotten us out in time,” she said.

**WITH CLIMATE CHANGE**

Bringing more extreme weather even as the West’s housing crisis grows, experts say that unhoused communities need to be better integrated into disaster planning.

Matt Fowle, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania who tracks deaths among unhoused people in the U.S., found a 141% increase in mortality from environmental causes across 22 localities between 2011 and 2020. The environmental deaths he tracked fell into two categories: extreme heat and extreme cold. Other environmental causes, including floods, can be hard to pin down; a death certificate, for example, would not cite “flood” as the cause of death, instead labeling it as an accident or drowning.

“I think those deaths are preventable with some planning,” Fowle said.

In practice, nonprofits and other community aid groups that work with unhoused populations often end up warning people about extreme weather and natural disasters. But greater coordination with government agencies is needed, according to Jamie Vickery, whose research at the University of Washington included work on extreme weather-risk communication to unhoused communities. (She is now employed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration).

In 2022 a graduate student with whom Vickery worked, Joanne Medina, found that in cities and counties with high rates of homelessness, less than a quarter of their emergency-preparedness plans included specific strategies to address the safety of unhoused people.

Vickery stressed the need to improve coordination across agencies and between the government and organizations that serve unhoused populations. Government directives not only need to be clear, she said; they must account for the on-the-ground circumstances of people living outdoors.

“If we give guidance to someone that they need to take shelter inside, and that’s not an option, then how can we better improve those options?” said Vickery.

**IN THE IMMEDIATE**

Aftermath of the Ontario flood, the city provided hotel vouchers for several weeks, occasionally up to a few months. After those ran out, Naranjo and others returned to the relative privacy and protection of the channel. But since the flood, Naranjo said, police have come by more often, telling people to leave or risk having their belongings cleared out. Naranjo moved a few hundred feet away, outside the flood infrastructure, to a narrow, elevated strip of land wedged between Interstate 10 and a small motel.

“I miss them,” Naranjo said, referring to the friends who died in the November flood. “I miss Madeline and I miss Poopsie (Lopez). I didn’t know JoJo (Dominguez) too well, but I miss her, too. It’s just sad that they had to pass away in order for anything to happen.”

In April, the channel’s concrete walls were spray-painted with memorial tags: RIP Maddie, RIP Poopsie, RIP JoJo. On the floor, POOPSIE is painted in bright yellow block letters. Naranjo ventured back sometimes, ducking into a concrete tunnel below Princeton Street on occasion for some semblance of protection from the cold.

Fears remained in the same spot, a more elevated tunnel than the one where Naranjo’s friends lived. These days, he said, the police use bullhorns to warn people to evacuate ahead of storms. But those warnings don’t necessarily come with a new place to live.

“There’s nowhere to go,” Fears said.

An unhoused community lives along a flood-control channel that runs under Interstate 10 in Ontario, California.
When lunch is free

New programs that provide free school meals to all students are gaining popularity.

BY SUSAN SHAIN  |  PHOTOS BY WILL WARASILA  
FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES AND HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

KURT MARTHALLER, who oversees school food programs in Butte, Montana, faces many cafeteria-related challenges: children skipping the lunch line because they fear being judged, parents fuming about surprise bills they can’t afford, unpaid meal debts of $70,000 districtwide.

But at nearly half of Marthaller’s schools, these concerns have vanished. At those schools, all students get free breakfast and lunch, regardless of their family’s income. At one school, West Elementary, children grab milk cartons, cereal bars and bananas from folding tables on their way to class, with almost 80% of students eating breakfast there each school day.

“We’ve done a lot of good things to feed kids here in Butte,” Marthaller said. But introducing universal free meals, he added, was “probably the best thing we ever did.”

Child nutrition advocates have pushed for free school meals for every student for a long time, but saw significant progress in the last decade and a half. Their first big win came quietly, in 2010, when Congress passed an under-the-radar policy called the community eligibility provision, which made it easier for schools to serve free meals to all. Then, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government let every public school student eat for free, rapidly transforming the nation’s thinking around school meals.

Eight states, including California, Colorado and New Mexico, have passed their own universal free meal legislation since the federal largesse ended in 2022. Dozens more have introduced similar bills or have one in the works. A surge of additional schools — nearly 7,000 — signed up for the community eligibility program that West Elementary participates in: As of the 2022-’23 school year, roughly four in 10 public schools were enrolled.

In total, more than 21 million American children now attend schools that offer free meals to all — a tenfold increase from 2010. Over 8 million of them are in Western states. “Schools did not want to go back to charging some kids,” said Crystal FitzSimons, the director of child nutrition programs and policy at the nonprofit Food Research and Action Center. “They saw the huge benefits of providing free meals to all students: supporting families, supporting kids, changing the culture of the cafeteria.”

ONCE KNOWN AS “the richest hill on Earth” for its copper mines, Butte was one of the largest cities west of the Mississippi in its heyday. Today, it has approximately 35,000 residents,
many of whom have been there for generations.

Amber Moore lives on the east side of town, in a blue house with a view of Our Lady of the Rockies, a 90-foot-tall mountaintop statue of the Virgin Mary. A stay-at-home mom, she lives with her husband, Jake, a telecommunications technician, and their five children, four cats and two dogs.

The Moores’ house is zoned for Whittier Elementary School, which, unlike West, does not participate in community eligibility and does not have universal free meals. So, five nights a week, Moore clears off a patch of her kitchen counter and sets out five lunchboxes. In goes the SunnyD, the cheese stick, the ham-and-cheese sandwich, the Lay’s, the clementine and the fruit snacks. Moore uses three loaves of bread each week just on lunches. Add breakfast to the equation and she spends about $250 per month on the two meals for her kids.

“That’s like a power bill,” she said. “It’s not a small amount.” That bill was eliminated during the pandemic. For those two years, Moore’s children ate breakfast and lunch at school every day. Then, like the majority of schools around the country, Whittier returned to charging for meals in August 2022. And Moore returned to packing lunches.

Though low-income students at all American public schools technically qualify for free and reduced-price meals, one-third of eligible students do not participate, according to a Food Research and Action Center estimate. One reason is stigma: Because the school-provided meal, often called “hot lunch,” has long been viewed as a form of welfare, eating it can be a painful marker of poverty.

Parents may also fail to complete the requisite paperwork because they have volatile incomes, face language barriers or are embarrassed about their finances. (As Marthaller put it, “I think it’s a pride thing.”) Others may be struggling but ineligible: To receive free or reduced-price meals, a family of four must earn less than $55,500 per year. When meals are free to all, advocates say, these obstacles are eliminated.

The Moores don’t qualify for reduced-price meals: Jake Moore’s income puts them over the limit by $465 a month. “It’s one of those frustrating things,” his wife said. “I’m sure a lot of parents are in that middle area where it’s like, ‘Well, shoot.”

**THE PUSH FOR** a national school lunch program initially
came during the Great Depression, when children were hungry and farmers had surpluses to sell. In the 1960s, school breakfast was added. School meals have since become the nation’s second-largest food safety net, after food stamps.

As childhood obesity rates soared, however, the lunch program was criticized as a contributing factor. In 2010, then-first lady Michelle Obama, who made childhood obesity a signature issue, pressed for the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which led school cafeterias to serve more fruits, vegetables and whole grains and less salt, sugar and unhealthy fats. Policymakers also saw it as an opportunity to feed more hungry children. So, without much fanfare, they tucked the community eligibility provision, or C.E.P., inside the bill.

Under the C.E.P., offering universal free meals became less cumbersome: If 40% of a school or district’s students qualify for programs like food stamps or Head Start or are homeless, migrants or in foster care, it can serve free meals to everyone. It does not need to collect individual applications; it simply applies for the program and is qualified for the next four years.

Even the C.E.P.’s architects have been surprised by its impact. “I certainly did not foresee that a little more than 10 years later, 20 million kids would be enrolled in schools that were doing C.E.P.,” said Cindy Long, administrator of the Food and Nutrition Service of the Agriculture Department, who helped design the 2010 act.

The benefits of universal free meals are myriad, experts say. Most crucially, more children eat, helping to combat hunger in a country where 17% of households with children experience food insecurity. (At West Elementary, the number of students eating breakfast quadrupled after meals became free.) They also eat more healthful food. And when students are well fed, they learn better: Some research suggests that schoolwide free meals can improve test scores, attendance and behavior. Such programs also help schools, by lessening paperwork, and parents, by reducing food expenses.

Like most people, Amanda Denny, a fourth-grade teacher at West Elementary, had never heard of the C.E.P. But she has seen the difference that universal school meals can make. “In my classroom, when those kids do eat breakfast, they are ready to start their day,” she said. “Their brains are fired up, and they’re ready to learn.”

Last October, the threshold to qualify for the C.E.P. was lowered, making more schools and districts eligible. The Moores’ school, Whittier, is now eligible, as are most other schools in Butte. But because of how the federal government calculates reimbursements for school meals, only schools with high populations of needy students break even using the C.E.P.; the rest usually lose money by participating. Advocates have been pushing for higher reimbursement rates so more schools can afford the program.

But in one draft federal budget, House Republicans proposed ending the C.E.P. altogether, arguing that public
funds shouldn’t pay for wealthy children to eat lunch. Jonathan Butcher, an education researcher at the Heritage Foundation, believes school lunch aid has ballooned far beyond its original intent. He would like to see the provision repealed.

“They’re not just saying, ‘How can we better get food to kids that need it?’ They’re saying, ‘Eh, let’s not bother with the details. Let’s just give it to everybody,’” Butcher said. “That’s not being respectful to taxpayers, nor is it advancing the idea that we should improve a very waste-ful school lunch program.”

Most of the states that have passed their own free school meal legislation did so with bipartisan support. To pay for the programs, California, Maine, Minnesota, New Mexico, Vermont and Michigan tapped general revenue or education funds; Massachusetts and Colorado raised taxes on their highest earners. (In Colorado, the program has been so popular that it is facing a $56 million funding shortfall this year.)

FitzSimons, of the Food Research and Action Center, believes food is just as integral to public education as transportation and books, which are typically offered to students at no charge. “We spend billions of dollars on funding for education,” she said. “If kids are sitting in class unable to learn because they’re hungry, because their stomachs are growling, then we’re wasting our money.”

At West Elementary, a stuffed bison head presides over the cafeteria. There is no cash register, and at lunchtime, children whiz through the line, grabbing trays of applesauce and teriyaki-doused “steakettes.” They plop down next to friends eating peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches from colorful lunch boxes.

Ryder is a third grader who wants to be a YouTuber or a police officer when he grows up (and, he said, “if that doesn’t work out, NASA”). He was shocked to learn that children at other schools have to pay for lunch. “That’s mean,” he said. His friend Louis agreed: “That is cold.”

Things were different for Kaylee Rabson, a fifth-generation Butte resident whose son attends West. “When we were younger, it was definitely very separated,” she said. “Like, if you went to hot lunch, you were kind of embarrassed.” Now, all her son’s friends eat the school lunch — at least when pizza or walking tacos (ground beef, veggies and cheese in a Doritos bag) are on the menu.

“It’s ‘I eat hot lunch because it sounds good, not because I need to.’ It really has erased the stigma,” Rabson said. “They’re just there having lunch together.”

This story was published in partnership with The New York Times.
FOR THE LAST COUPLE OF DECADES, water managers in southern Nevada have promoted a plethora of conservation measures, from fixing leaks in the vast system of pipes snaking beneath Las Vegas to encouraging reduced-flow faucets to banning ornamental turf. Golf courses are irrigated with treated wastewater, and water-gulping swamp coolers are discouraged. All this has helped Nevada stay within tight limits on how much it can draw from the Colorado River, bringing per capita consumption down to just over 100 gallons per day — about one-fourth of what it was in 1991.

But the sacrifices aren’t shared equally. A few miles off the Las Vegas Strip, for example, on the far edge of a golf course and residential development, sits a cluster of red-tile-roofed buildings. With its athletic club, tennis court, pool, lawns and grandiose structures, you might mistake it for a small private college or exclusive resort. In fact, this complex is a single-family residence that belonged to the Sultan of Brunei until November of last year, when a company associated with tech-company founder Jeffrey Berns paid $25 million for it. The home, if you can call it that, is also Las Vegas’ largest water user, guzzling 13 million gallons in 2022 — more than 300 times what the average resident consumes. Run down the list of the Las Vegas Valley Water District’s top 100 users, and you’ll see more of the same: While most residents are increasingly thrifty with their water, a select few — often associated with multimillion-dollar homes — are binging on the stuff.

Call it water inequality, or the growing disparity in water consumption across the Colorado River Basin. Agriculture uses far more water than cities, and some crops are thirstier than others; Scottsdale’s per capita consumption is nine times that of Tucson’s; California’s Imperial Irrigation District pulls about 10 times more water from the river than all of Nevada; and the Sultan of Brunei’s Las Vegas estate sucks up 35,000 gallons each day. Meanwhile, nearly one-third of the Navajo Nation’s households lack running water altogether, and residents there use as little as 10 gallons daily.
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FROM A BLUFF overlooking a sunbaked valley outside Farmington, New Mexico, Aaron Facka and Michael Dax watched a black helicopter soar, thrumming loudly as it swooped low over the landscape. Inside, three men searched the grasslands for the white specks of pronghorn, the antelope-like creatures that inhabit the Western plains of North America.

It was early March, cloudless and warm, but Facka and Dax, who both work for the Wildlands Network, an environmental nonprofit, were nervous. The men in the helicopter worked for a company that specializes in capturing wildlife for biological research. Each time they spotted a pronghorn, the pilot flew close enough for a colleague to fire a gun that released a net, trapping the animal so that it could be fitted with a GPS collar. The collars provide data about herd movements, habitat use and population numbers, but the stress of trapping puts pronghorn at risk of death from overexertion or “capture myopathy.”

“There’s an unknown mortality factor with the captures, and it’s obviously not something we want,” Facka said.

Pronghorn among the panels

A research team hopes to ease the impacts of the solar boom on wildlife.

BY SARAH TORY
The operation marked the beginning of a new study by the Wildlands Network that will evaluate how pronghorn and other wildlife respond to utility-scale solar energy projects and discuss ways to mitigate their impact. Solar development is surging across the Four Corners region and the wider West. A recent study found that up to a third of potential development could overlap with wildlife migration corridors.

In the valley below, workers were installing thousands of solar panels for the 1,100-acre San Juan Solar and Storage Project, located just a few miles from the shuttered San Juan Generating Station, a coal-fired power plant. New Mexico’s 2019 Energy Transition Act set a goal of 50% renewable energy generation by 2030, and this area’s plentiful sun, dry climate and existing transmission lines make it ideal for solar development. In every direction Dax pointed, there were proposals for more utility-scale solar. Yet there’s almost no data about how large mammals would be impacted by it.

**FACKA GREW UP IN** Kirtland, New Mexico, a small town just west of Farmington in the heart of the Four Corners. After years working elsewhere as a wildlife biologist, he returned home to work for the Wildlands Network. Growing up, he was always drawn to pronghorn, which, according to Dax, “look a bit like aliens,” with the males sporting black chin straps and distinctive namesake horns. Pronghorn can run up to 60 miles per hour, making them the second-fastest land animal on earth, and they are famous for having the longest land migration in the continental United States.

Of particular concern to Facka was how little scientists know about the Four Corners’ pronghorn population and range size. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish has not prioritized pronghorn research here, in part because the area is not a hunting destination. Jurisdictional limits are also a problem; the area is a mix of state and federal parcels and tribal land, and both the Navajo Nation and Ute Mountain Ute Tribe lack the resources to conduct large-scale studies.

Dax was sure of one thing: Pronghorn numbers are declining across New Mexico, thanks in part to climate-change related drought. One study indicated that nine of the 18 pronghorn populations studied in the Southwest would be extinct or close to extinction by 2050. There were other threats, too: Pronghorn have trouble jumping over fences and other barriers, making it hard for them to cope as their habitat shrinks.

Soon after Facka started working for the Wildlands Network in 2021, the San Juan Generating Station shut down. As plans for large-scale solar development emerged, Facka saw an opportunity to help developers protect local wildlife from the resulting environmental stress.

“We can’t make the same mistakes over and over again with our policies,” he said. “I just felt like we were doing that by saying, ‘We’ll figure it out later; all that matters is we get green energy.’”

**BELOW THE BLUFF** where Dax and Facka stood, a glimmering sea of black panels stretched across the valley. At the San Juan Solar project (facing), pronghorn have trouble jumping over fences and other barriers, making it hard for them to cope as their habitat shrinks. Kevin Smith / Wildlands Network

The San Juan Solar Project occupies a big chunk of the highest-quality local pronghorn habitat, Dax said. He noted a cluster of trees lining an arroyo running through the middle of the solar field, where the pronghorn once rested in the shade.

Though the project was only about two-thirds complete, Dax expressed shock at its size, as well as the extent of the solar development planned for the surrounding area, which is already pockmarked by numerous oil and gas wells. “A lot of activity has been thrown at this place,” he mused.

The Four Corners region is a patchwork of federal, state and tribal lands. Since the many projects fall under different jurisdictions, regulators don’t have a way to account for their cumulative impacts. (The San Juan project, for example, is on private land.) Nor are there standardized methods for considering wildlife needs in planning projects or mitigating the environmental impacts.

Currently, only one other study has examined solar energy’s impact on pronghorn. It found that pronghorn in southwestern Wyoming could no longer migrate through familiar areas following construction.

“We’re in this sprint phase” of solar development, Dax said. “And yet we’re still just trying to get a sense of how best to do this.”

Thanks to a $1.7 million award from the U.S. Department of Energy Solar Technologies Office, Dax and Facka have designed a study that they hope will provide some answers. Each collared pronghorn will transmit a GPS waypoint every hour for the next two-and-a-half years, showing how and where the animals are moving and whether the development is affecting their movement patterns and
POEM

Molé Negro
By Alison Hawthorne Deming

The history is one of privation and power.
Cloistered sisters learn the bishop will arrive unexpected.
How to rise from vows of poverty to honor the institution giving them the right to live in God’s silence and pray to close the distance between themselves and mystery.

In the convent kitchen a rush to glean what their austerity availed—cacao, chilhuacle negro, banana, peanut, tomato, bread, tomatillo, garlic, cloves, allspice, almonds, pollo scratching dirt in the holy yard.

I hope the sisters laughed in their powerless power to please the dignitary.
The bishop in his red vestments and gold chalice is lost to history. The sisters in their dull habits and ceaseless devotion and readiness to meet the day we honor with each divine bite.

WEB EXTRA Listen to Alison Hawthorne Deming read her poem at hcn.org/mole-negro
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“[I] like all the directions of your moral compass: How you cover the West and how you encourage us to see the world.”

— Steve and Gayle Lamy, San Gabriel, California
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Kyle Wheeler at Dancing Swallows Big Gay Bird Sanctuary and Memorial Pond in Chehalis, Washington.
IT WASN’T IMMEDIATELY CLEAR who challenged whom to a push-up contest at the Lewis County Pride festival in Centralia last June — the white supremacist or the Pride celebrant. It was a bright Saturday in the small southwestern Washington city, and the festival was in full swing at a brick plaza on Tower Avenue, the main street. Music blasted, people danced in rainbow tutus and rainbow hats and rainbow face paint; there was a drag performance, and across the plaza, large yellow umbrellas shaded tables. The theme was “Bee Yourself.”

Kyle Wheeler, one of the festival’s co-organizers, wore an oversized straw hat with antennas on top. Someone pulled him aside and told him a group dressed in black was headed toward the festival. Wheeler looked down Tower: White supremacists were marching toward the festival from every direction. One flew a Nazi black sun flag. Others carried a banner proclaiming “DEGENERACY NOTHING TO BE PROUD OF.” They wore black shirts and brown khakis, and most had covered their faces with skull-printed balaclavas. Some shirts read “Might is Right.”

“It was almost like a swarm of bees,” Wheeler recalled. Rainbow-clad Pride attendees bunched around the men in black, blocking the plaza with their bodies. The two groups traded insults. One white supremacist sneered that the people at Pride were so out of shape, they couldn’t do a push-up.

That’s when, as Wheeler watched, a Pride-goer in a pink T-shirt and a white supremacist dropped to their hands on the warm pavement.

A clear winner emerged: The Pride attendee quickened his pace, clapping between push-ups as the white supremacist crumpled. The Pride crowd cheered, dancing victoriously around the men. A remix of Lady Gaga’s “Born this Way” blared. A woman twerked in front of the group’s banner, edging one man away with her butt. “Look at all these cowards with their masks!” another woman yelled, filming the black-clad men. The white supremacists began to trickle away, and the party resumed.

But Centralia was not the only place in Lewis County where tensions were rising. Lewis is one of the most conservative counties in Washington: Though Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee won a third term handily, by roughly 13 percentage points statewide in 2020, 69.2% of voters here opted for his far-right Republican challenger.

Later that day in Chehalis, often called
Centralia’s “Twin City,” the local Republican Party distributed literature and collected signatures opposing confidentiality for minors seeking gender-affirming care. A Pride-affiliated drag show was taking place a block away.

Tempers flared afterward. At a meeting on June 13, Republican County Commissioner Lindsey Pollock blamed her own party. “Last weekend, Neo-Nazis and leaders of the Lewis County Republican Party harassed Pride celebrants,” she said. The groups were unaffiliated, but their intent was the same: to “intimidate a minority group,” she said.

During a Centralia City Council meeting that same day, people were visibly shaken by the hands-off approach taken by local law enforcement at Pride. “I’ve never felt so scared,” Usha Sahadeva-Brooks, a resident and community organizer, said. A white business owner who was at work that day warned that bigotry like this was worrisome, especially given Centralia’s history.

“I have deep roots in this place,” she said. “My great uncle was a logger and a Wobbly, so I’m familiar with the complex history of this place.”

Another Pride attendee told the council that she tried to flag down a police officer for help, but they just drove away.

Police Chief Stacy Denham defended his department’s inaction. “This is kind of new for us,” he said. “We just didn’t see this coming.”

Wheeler didn’t buy it. “It’s not that he or his department didn’t see any of this coming, it’s that they keep continuing to look the other way rather than face it,” he told *High Country News*, noting previous attacks on queer spaces nationwide. “You can’t see something you don’t want to.”

Groups like the one that came to Centralia have been disrupting Pride festivals across the Northwest, from Missoula, to Spokane, to Oregon City. They belong to “Active Clubs”; the one in Centralia was the Evergreen Active Club. According to the Anti-Defamation League, they are white supremacist ultranationalist groups that “consider themselves vigilante soldiers standing guard against a perceived existential threat to their ‘white future.’” They emerged as state governments were flooded with Republican-backed anti-LGBTQ bills. Travis McAdam, a senior research analyst at the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), agreed that this was no coincidence: As the Republican Party increasingly adopts extremist perspectives and pushes anti-LGBTQ legislation, that, in turn, “gives (extremists) ‘mainstream’ issues to use.” If people agree with Active Clubs on one issue, they might be open to hearing more.

At the City Council meeting, one official claimed that the Evergreen Active Club was made up of out-of-towners who’d chosen Centralia as a stage for their hate. “We can’t let that ideology have a foothold in this community,” he said.

But bigotry had, in fact, already taken up literal real estate. That spring, a store called Kultur opened on Tower Avenue, amid the antique shops and restaurants that make up Centralia’s vibrant downtown. Kultur — German for “culture” — offers piano and songwriting lessons. It is also affiliated with the Asatru Folk Assembly, a whites-only religion that the SPLC has deemed a hate group.

And a look at the history of Centralia and the wider region shows that ideological extremism has century-old roots here. In 1919, a group of veterans attacked a labor union hall, and five people died in the aftermath. Locals celebrated the instigators as patriots and the unionists as anti-American troublemakers who deserved their fate — and that story has persisted for a hundred years.
At a moment when diverging narratives have become central to debates over the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol riot — not to mention the 2024 presidential election — Centralia’s history shows what happens when a community indulges in historical amnesia. By distorting truth and turning a blind eye to facts, Centralia helped smooth the way for modern-day bigotry. It is a test case, illustrating how easily extremism can find a permanent home. Casting minority voices as outsiders provides a convenient scapegoat — a shared enemy to be feared and shunned and fought. And it reinforces just how true it is that history repeats itself.

TO A LOGGER standing in the Pacific Northwest in the mid-1800s, the old-growth forests seemed so infinite, so vast, that only an act of God could obliterate them. The trees “will only be exhausted,” wrote Asa Mercer, who worked as a logger, and timber was integral to the region’s economy.

Colonialism, it turned out, was that calamity. Local Indigenous people have always seen knobby Sitka spruce and moss-draped western red cedars as one part of an ecosystem that requires care from soil to canopy. For millennia, they have built longhouses and shaped canoes. Pre-colonialism, the Salish-speaking Upper and Lower Chehalis peoples thrived on the salmon where the Skookumchuck and Chehalis rivers converged. Settlers, however, viewed the forests through the lens of Manifest Destiny, and in the 1850s, they built logging towns on unceded land.

A Black man named George Washington founded the town of Centerville. This was unusual in a region known for its whiteness. The adopted son of a white couple, he had worked as a logger, and timber was integral to Centerville, which was later named Centralia. When the railroad arrived, the city became a hub for both trees and trains; tracks were laid parallel to Tower Avenue, and people called it “Hub City.”

Timber was king in Washington, but loggers were dismissed as immigrants and low-class drifters. “Law and order’ types criticized them as rude and turbulent, and hard to control,” according to a 1985 book about the burgeoning timber industry.

It was dangerous work. In the early 1900s, an estimated one out of every 150 loggers who walked into the Northwest’s woods did not walk out: crushed by snags, mangled by mill machinery or smashed by a falling tree. By 1920, the Washington State Safety Board deemed logging “more deadly than war.”

Life in the timber camps was cold and wet. Bunkhouses were infested with lice; baths and toilets were often scarce. At the end of 10-hour workdays, rain-soaked loggers huddled around wood-burning stoves. And yet class divisions still found a home in the camps. The highest-paying jobs often went to white, Northern European loggers. In 1907, white workers walked off the job at a Chehalis River mill when four Japanese men were hired.

Timber executives dismissed loggers’ complaints about poor conditions. Workers, sniffed Edwin Ames, general manager of a major logging company and president of the West Coast Lumbermen’s Association, “all want rooms with bath, and Waldorf-Astoria fare.”

The Industrial Workers of the World — “the Wobblies” — entered the scene in the early 1910s. Their project was radical, aiming to unite workers of every industry, race, gender and immigration status into “one big union.” They were unabashedly anti-capitalist; “Communists,” some called them. “A struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class,” read the preamble to the IWW Constitution, “take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the Earth.”

Mass arrests of Wobblies happened around the state. In 1916 in Everett, north of Seattle, vigilantes and law enforcement opened fire on a steamship, killing five Wobblies. Several others drowned.

In 1917, the Northwest’s Wobblies called an all-out strike just as the country was entering the war, paralyzing the timber industry. As the main suppliers of Sitka spruce for American military airplanes, Washington lumber tycoons were forced to yield — but not before sowing rumors that the IWW was a violent force, out to destroy the industry. “There is no telling what they will resort to,” wrote George Long, the longtime general manager of the Weyerhaeuser Company, in a 1917 letter to another company executive.

Some timber executives hired armed troops to guard their mills, but no Wobblies ever arrived.

To ensure the military could get the supplies it needed, the federal government deployed 30,000 Army soldiers to work in Northwest logging and established the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen, or the “4Ls.” According to retired historian Tom Copeland, the 4Ls were “a patriotic labor union that essentially said, ‘OK, everybody’s gonna sign up for this, and if you don’t sign up for this, you’re anti-American.’

By its actions, the government effectively split the loggers’ identity. Non-unionized loggers — the 4Ls — were no longer scorned as drifters and roustabouts, but celebrated as patriots assisting the war effort, while the IWW loggers were considered un-American and disloyal. The Oregonian branded them “worse enemies than the Germans.”

On April 5, 1918, as a Red Cross fundraising parade wound through Centralia, a group of marchers broke away, smashing the windows of the IWW hall, dragging furniture into the street and burning it. Stunned Wobblies inside were hauled out and “dumped across the county line,” Copeland wrote in a book about Centralia, and “threatened with more serious harm if they dared return to Centralia.” The following day, the Centralia Chronicle excused the violence as an “orderly” raid by “determined citizens.”

In early 1919, Washington state made it a felony to be a member of any group that had a mission of “sabotage, violence, or other unlawful methods of terrorism as a means to accomplishing industrial or political reform.” Those organizations, which included the IWW, were branded as “criminal syndicalist” groups — a law that remained until early 1937. That same year in Centralia, a “Citizen’s Protective Association” — essentially a militia — formed. It was led by a timber baron named F.B. Hubbard, president of the Eastern Railway and Timber Company.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT set the stage for the next 100 years of extremism in the area.

In 1919, a group men who served in World War I formed the American Legion. In the preamble to its Constitution, the group dedicated itself to maintaining law and order, “to make right the master of might” — a motto that reverberated for a century until a version of it landed on the Active Club’s shirts at Pride. Members swore “to foster and perpetuate a 100-percent Americanism.” At its first national convention, the Legion passed a
resolution to “organize immediately for the purpose of meeting the insidious propaganda of Bolshevism, IWWism, radicalism, and all other anti-Americanism.”

Some Legion posts took this as permission for their members to take the law into their own hands, journalist Marcus Duffield reported in his 1931 book King Legion. At that time, the American Legion “wrapped its ideas of reactionism and nationalism in star-spangled bunting and labeled them patriotism.”

A week before a parade of veterans was set to take place on Armistice Day, Nov. 11, 1919, the Wobblies posted flyers all over Centralia, asking for help, saying they feared “mob violence coming from the hands of the lumber barons.”

“There are constant rumors,” the flyers read, “that we were to be mobbed, our property destroyed, and our hall closed.

“We implore the law-abiding citizens to prevent this.... We call upon you, each of you for the protection of our hall, our property — yes, even our very lives.”

“They pleaded for the police, the public — anybody — to help,” Mike Garrison, a retired diesel technology instructor from Centralia College and a member of the IWW, said. “Everybody in town knew that it was coming.”

But no one answered their call.

That afternoon, the parade stopped in front of the IWW Hall. In an instant, several American Legionnaires split off from it, bashed through the door of the union hall and shattered its front window.

This time, the Wobblies were ready to defend themselves. One of the first bullets ripped into the torso of a 31-year-old legionnaire named Warren Grimm; another went through Arthur McElfresh’s brain. He was 24. Ben Casagrande, 28, took a shot in the stomach.

The bullets fell like rain — from sentries in a nearby hotel window, from gunmen lying on a nearby hillside. In the chaos, a young Wobbly named Wesley Everest sprinted out the hall’s backdoor and down Centralia’s muddy alleys. The Legionnaires gave chase, dodging bullets.

that Everest shot wildly as he fled.

Everest’s flight ended at the Skookumchuck River — raging and too deep to cross. Ernest Dale Hubbard, the 29-year-old nephew of the anti-IWW timber baron F.B. Hubbard, ordered Everest to drop his gun, and pointed his own. Everest shot first.

Everest was thrown in jail alongside two dozen other Wobblies arrested at the union hall. Early that evening, Centralia’s power failed. In the darkness, a mob broke into the jail. They grabbed Everest, tied a rope around his neck and lynched him from a bridge over the Chehalis. No one was ever charged for the murder.

Locals called the incident the “Centralia Massacre,” implying that the IWW had attacked the Legionnaires, and not acted in self-defense. “They want to make it sound like it was not planned,” Garrison explained. “Oh, it just happened spontaneously.

“They did it in cold blood,” he said.

In early 1920, seven of Centralia’s Wobblies were convicted of murder and sentenced to 25 to 40 years. That spring, arsonists burned the Centralia IWW Hall to the ground; no one was charged.

In 1924, a committee erected “The Sentinel,” a 10-foot-tall statue honoring the four dead Legionnaires in Centralia’s George Washington Park. A World War I soldier stands atop a stone pedestal bearing the inscription: Slain on the streets of Centralia, Washington, Armistice Day Nov 11, 1919, while on peaceful parade, wearing the uniform of the country they loyally and faithfully served.

There is no mention of Everest, or his hanging; no mention that he acted in self-defense. The monument recast the American Legion’s violent nationalism as patriotism and erased the killing of someone they considered a bad American.

Far-right groups over the next century took notice. Each one paved the way for the next, culminating in the appearance, in 2023, of the white supremacists at Pride.

FIRST CAME THE KNIGHTS of the Ku Klux Klan. An estimated 35,000 attended a 1924 gathering at the area’s fairgrounds, where a Seattle judge opened with a speech called “America for Americans.” In 1927, the local newspaper reported two cross-burnings in the county.

The Silver Shirts arrived in the 1930s, led by William Dudley Pelley, a rabidly antisemitic writer who believed America was a Christian nation and that Jews and Communist “Reds” were its twin enemies. In 1934, Pelley gave a speech to a crowded Centralia High School auditorium recalling the 1919 bloodshed, saying that the “Red Jewish” IWW “fired upon” war veterans during a peaceful, “patriotic march.” Afterward, he boasted that the local Silver Shirts chapter, in Chehalis, was the second-largest in the state.

In March 1939, LIFE Magazine published an article called “Fascism in America,” which highlighted the Chehalis Silver Shirts in a large black-and-white photo. Afterward, Robert Cantwell, a novelist who grew up in Lewis County, wrote to LIFE. “Fascism cannot be explained only in terms of fanaticism,” he said, “the history of the places where it gains a lodging must also be taken into account.”

Cantwell wrote that the November 1919 incident “stunted” Chehalis and Centralia’s political growth. “Fear of radicalism, hatred and fear of social changes, distrust of the working class” have plagued it ever since. The ideologies morphed and shifted with each decade’s culture wars. “Communism” at first denoted anti-capitalist Wobblies, but by the 1930s, people like Pelley and the Silver Shirts had expanded the term to encompass Jews. With each decade, more groups of people were included. Communists were outsiders — and outsiders were enemies.

In the 1960s, the John Birch Society — a conspiratorial far-right organization that stoked fears over Communism — capitalized on this. Local supporter Alfred Hamilton put a billboard just opposite his Chehalis area turkey farm to shout conspiracies at passing drivers on Interstate 5.

A version of the sign remains. Known as “the Hamilton sign,” it features a cartoonish Uncle Sam with a continuously rotating message. “BE THANKFUL YOU LIVE IN AMERICA,” Uncle Sam said in the 1970s. “GUN CONTROL IS A STEPTOWARD ‘PEOPLE CONTROL.’”

In every era, Hamilton’s sign reflected the shifting views of conservatives, hinting at which “outsiders” were most to be feared.

In the 1980 and ’90s, it was the LGBTQ community. The sign branded a nearby college as “HOME OF ENVIRONMENTAL TERRORISTS AND HOMOS,” and said the then-governor’s order banning
discrimination against gay and lesbian state workers “SEEMS A LITTLE QUEER.”

“WHERE’S THE BIRTH CERTIFICATE?” it demanded during the Obama years.

By 2020, the sign was primed and ready for COVID conspiracies: “OH, NO! A VIRUS. QUICK - BURN THE BILL OF RIGHTS!”

By then, Lewis County was no longer a logging hub; the main industries were education, health services and retail, and the Chehalis Walmart Supercenter had become one of the largest employers. On average, Lewis is poorer and whiter than the rest of the state. According to the 2020 Census, the per capita wage was $33,000, compared to nearly $50,000 statewide. More than 81% of the residents were white in the state that was 65% white.

“We have a lot of nationalist, Patriot-type people here,” Julie McDonald, a Chronicle columnist, told High Country News.

That summer, when racial justice demonstrations catalyzed by the murder of George Floyd happened across the country, a few small Black Lives Matter protests took place in Lewis County.

Meanwhile, rumors spread on social media about vans of black-clad anti-fascists coming to burn down small towns around the West — an echo of the warnings that the striking Wobblies would be violent. Armed citizens lined streets from Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, to Klamath Falls, Oregon. But just as the Wobblies never stormed timber operations, no anti-fascists ever appeared.

Lewis County’s rumors were more specific: The Hamilton sign was under attack. A hundred people congregated at the sign in response, mostly men in camouflage with holstered guns. Lewis County Sheriff Rob Snaaza presided. He riled up the audience, speaking into a bullhorn about mask mandates. “Don’t be a sheep,” he said. People cheered. But again, no anti-fascists appeared.

BY THE FALL OF 2020, Kyle Wheeler, one of the Pride organizers, had spent his stimulus check on a triangle of blackberry-covered land with a stormwater pond near the Hamilton sign. He thought Lewis County needed a new narrative, so he towed a shipping container onto his new property and mounted a rainbow billboard on top: “LEWIS COUNTY WELCOMES EVERYONE,” it read. “Ultimately, Donald Trump bought me that,” he said.

“There’s a lot of people who are just sick of the Hamilton sign being claimed as speaking for Lewis County,” Wheeler, 35, said. He has gray-streaked black hair and tattoos. “I just want to be like the gay little nephew hanging over (Uncle Sam’s) shoulder at Thanksgiving dinner, just being like, ‘Sorry about our bigot uncle, but he doesn’t represent all of us.’”

His sign was smaller than the Hamilton sign and set back from the interstate. But before the sun was up the following morning, someone tore it down. Defiant, Wheeler climbed up onto the shipping container and put a Pride flag in its place. It was stolen. “I went back the next day and put two flags up,” he said. Those were torn down, too. “We got to the point where there was probably 13 or 14 of these PVC rainbow flags just lined up all the way down this property.” Eventually, he put up 11 birdhouses painted in the colors of the Transgender Pride flag.

And Wheeler went further: He distributed 600 window signs with his billboard’s message throughout the county.

He printed up “Rural Americans Against Racism” signs, and distributed those, too. Local Republican Party members publicized a different sign: “Rural Americans Against Communism.” It seemed strange in the year 2020 to invoke Communism, but the word by that point signified any anti-American boogeyman, like a cuss word lumping together every outsider. The signs competed for attention from yards and roadsides.

Wheeler helped found the Lewis County Dignity Guild, which worked to increase the visibility of marginalized communities. But the group, like Wheeler’s sign, often felt out-shouted by the people in power.

McDonald, the Chronicle columnist, said the local Republican Party had split into two factions in recent years. “The old guard got kind of booted out of the Republican Party by the new guard, which is more of the far, far right,” she said.

Perhaps no one embodies that shift more than Lewis County Commissioner Sean Swope. In 2021, he criticized gender pronouns during a commissioner’s meeting. “If I’m a man I can identify as a woman. Or I can identify as a goat. Or something else,” he said. Later, in a discussion of LGBTQ materials in a local library, the Chronicle reported Swope had posted on Facebook and mentioned “groomers” — a term the far right uses to demonize LGBTQ people, according to the ADL.

During a 2022 land-use rezoning discussion over a proposed local YMCA camp, Swope turned the discussion toward critical race theory, defunding police and gender reassignment. (Swope did not reply to multiple requests for comment.)

When Kultur, the store affiliated with a whites-only religion, opened in the spring of 2023, Centralia Mayor Kelly Smith Johnston issued a statement: “Let me be crystal clear here,” she wrote on Facebook. “I oppose people and businesses that promote racist ideals. I invite you to do the same.”

“I’m not aware,” said Councilor Elizabeth Cameron, “that we have a white supremacy problem.”

Recently, Middlebury College’s Institute of International Studies released a report on the upcoming election, drawing particular attention to ways hateful ideas are mainstreamed through the words of elected officials and candidates.

“For at least a brief period of recent American history, explicit racism had become unacceptable in public life,” wrote one researcher. But now, “politicians make statements that activate racial prejudice without necessarily making their audience aware of that.”

The study warned that the election could see an uptick in “lawful extremism,” which it defined as when a government commits harmful acts or creates “legal permission structures for non-governmental actors to carry out harms.”

“Lawful extremism has also led to government-sanctioned hostile action against LGBTQIA+ communities around the world,” it read.

In an interview with High Country News, Centralia Police Chief Denham said his department learned from the Evergreen Active Club’s presence at Pride and decried the Active Club. “Any time you have an ideology that any one race is better than another race, or sexual orientation, there’s always that hate that comes with it,” he said. “You never know how deep that ideology goes or how deep they’re willing to go to back up or reinforce it.”

Yet he seemed unworried, saying there’d been no rise in white supremacist incidents in his jurisdiction. When asked about local hate
crimes, he pivoted away from white supremacists. “We have (graffiti) around ‘brown pride’ — we get that a lot around town,” he said. “Would you associate that with a hate group? Some people do.”

Before June was over, a rainbow fence in Chehalis — the “Friendship Fence” — was splashed with black paint. A woodworking shop in the town of Morton, which adorned its windows with Pride flags and had a rainbow bench sitting out front, was vandalized, and its windows were shattered. The windows of the Dignity Guild office — which sponsored the fence and bench — were smashed, too.

Wheeler got word that hundreds of black-and-white posters with his face were distributed throughout the towns of Pe Ell and Mineral where LGBTQ events were scheduled. “Community Alert!” some read. “Child Groomers … Grown men seek to corrupt children under the rainbow flag!” At the bottom was Wheeler’s photo, labeled “Californian.”

“Every time we engage in anything, something happens,” Wheeler said. “We have to continue. It doesn’t get better if we don’t make it better.”

In the aftermath of the tumultuous Pride festival, Usha Sahadeva-Brooks testified before the City Council about how scared she’d been when the Active Club appeared. By then, Sahadeva-Brooks, who is multiethnic, had been actively working to create visibility for county residents with diverse backgrounds. She is an administrator for a Facebook page called Multiculturally Minded Lewis County, which eventually started hosting in-person events. “There are Blacks in Lewis County,” she said. “There are Hispanics. There are Samoans, there are Fijians, there are West Africans and West Indians — all in Lewis County.”

When she spoke before the council, a Black resident sat next to her. “I’ve always been the minority,” Jim McCully, 69, said. Still, he calls himself a “glass-half-full” kind of guy. McCully was born in Pocatello, Idaho, and has lived in the Northwest most of his life. He said living in Centralia means constantly weighing how he is perceived, being careful of his body language.

“Always being a minority, you’re a novelty,” he said. “People are either curious, fearful, anxious, and sort of standoffish.

“Until a person knows what they’re dealing with, I think it’s an arm’s-length attitude of ‘I don’t know you, I don’t want to know you if I don’t have to know you.’”

The Hamilton sign, the white supremacists at Pride, the history of far-right groups here — “it all comes out being the same thing,” McCully said. “There are people that are out there that are not educated or even willing to go out and seek out the truth.”

IN 1997, AN ARTIST created a mural of Wesley Everest, the IWW member who was lynched in 1919, in Centralia. In the painting, Everest rises from his grave, fists raised, with timber barons hugging a bloated pig, symbolizing capitalism. “It will create trouble and hard feelings,” one man told a reporter.

A Chronicle letter writer admitted “I have no idea what actually happened” in 1919, but likened the mural to “a blatant display of bankrupt communist ideology.”

Over time, though, the painting became harder to see. Construction of a rooftop patio obstructed everything but Everest’s head and fists.

In 2018, 99 years after blood was spilled in Centralia’s streets, Mike Garrison, the IWW member, gathered two dozen people inside the local library.

With the 100-year anniversary of the incident coming up, Garrison — who has a gray beard and a long ponytail and walks with a hooked wooden cane — told the group it was time for the rest of the story to be told. Centralia had honored the four dead Legionnaires but had no official remembrance of the IWW.

“The first thing I said is they should not use the ‘M’ word,” Garrison said. He proposed that people start calling it the “Centralia Tragedy” instead. People seemed receptive.

But when Garrison and other IWW members proposed putting a plaque in the park next to the Sentinel statue, listing the IWW’s victims and the union logo, people worried it would draw anarchists. Garrison recalled one incident, years prior, when a man shouted he didn’t want to hear about the IWW and walked out of a meeting.

“These are people who have grown up with a hatred for the IWW in their blood,” Garrison said.

Debate centered on whether acknowledgement of the IWW victims could be seen...
as civic endorsement of anti-capitalism. “You can make the argument that they aren’t really a labor organization,” Jay Hupp, a retired Navy veteran who grew up in Centralia and participated in the meetings, said. “What they are is a social movement.

“There are those that make the argument today, that the march toward Communism is alive and well in this country,” he said. It seemed like something the Hamilton sign might say.

At the meetings, Hupp suggested a monument that would tell a fuller story of what happened in 1919. He agreed with Garrison that the community needed to embrace the full history. But no one could agree on the wording.

“Communities develop habits just like people do,” Hupp said. “Not talking about the 1919 incident and wishing it would just go away is a habit of this community.”

By 2019, the meetings ground to a halt. In her Chronicle column, McDonald criticized the attempts to undercut Garrison’s plaque, calling it “revisionist history at its worst.”

But Garrison persisted. By the fall of 2022, Centralia’s City Council and mayor voted unanimously in favor of putting a plaque next to the Sentinel.


“FOR DEFENDING THEIR UNION HALL.”

The dedication ceremony was held on the 104th anniversary. On an overcast day, a small crowd in rain jackets assembled on the leaf-strewn grass to listen to speeches and see how the old park will look with the new plaque.

Afterward, Garrison took the plaque to a local monument company for storage until it could be affixed to a stone pedestal. By the spring of 2024, it still hadn’t been put in place.

“I wasn’t happy with the dedication,” Garrison later said. No one from the city or county government came; Hupp watched from his car across the street. “To say, ‘Yes, you can have your memorial,’ and then act like nothing has happened is not ‘healing,’” he said.

Correcting the record meant acknowledging all those who have been shut out, he said.

As Pride month played out, Garrison and his wife, Mary, started to see the struggles of the local LGBTQ community and the vandalism of Wheeler’s signs as reflecting the flyers the IWW once posted: They’d called on the community to protect them, but no one had responded.

“Who is the bad guy?” Garrison asked. “Back (in 1919) it was unions. Today it’s LGBTQ and Black Lives.”

What was happening to the LGBTQ community felt like a new development in a fight that he’d been waging for years, and that his union had been waging for a century. The faces had changed, but the stakes hadn’t. Powerful people had once sown divisions among citizens here, and powerful people continued to. Blood was spilled when the city embraced violence.

“If there was a fight today,” Garrison said, “the people that would get hurt would be common people.”

JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT on Sunday, Feb. 25, 2024, a 72-year-old man named Norman Lynn was returning home to Chehalis after playing a gig with his band, Rock City. As he drove, his headlights lit up the shadows of three masked people in black allegedly blasting paint across the rainbow Friendship Fence. He flicked on his high beams, called 911, and “I told them to get the F out of there,” he said.

The three figures ducked into an alleyway. Lynn followed. They sped away in a Subaru wagon. Lynn gave chase.

Allan Poobus, Mike Garrison and Rick Beck, pictured from left, with a mock-up of the plaque commemorating the union victims of the “Centralia Tragedy,” which is slated to be installed near “The Sentinel,” a statue in George Washington Park in Centralia (left). Downtown Centralia, Washington (facing).
He wanted to get their license plate. The Subaru got on I-5; Lynn followed. In his 1990s Ford minivan, Lynn pushed the gas until the speedometer trembled near 90 mph. In Centralia, police pulled the Subaru over. Lynn figured his work was done, drove home and went to bed.

The next day, he read *The Chronicle*. Two of the men accused of vandalizing the fence were Washington residents — one was from Centralia — who were affiliated with the white nationalist group Patriot Front. Inside the car, in addition to a can of black paint and paint-stained gloves, the police arrest report depicted images of stickers and flyers for Patriot Front, as well as handbills that read “stand up white man” and a banner reading “RETURN TO MEXICO.” The two people from Washington were arrested and posted $20,000 bail through bondsmen.

The third person arrested was a 25-year-old from Idaho; in paperwork filed with the Lewis County Superior Court, he listed the address for Kultur — the Tower Avenue music store — as his own. Bail receipts show that an alleged Evergreen Active Club organizer and a local leader of the whites-only religion posted $20,000 in cash for him.

“My initial thought was that they were just young punks,” Lynn said. “Then I read the article and thought, ‘This is a bigger thing than a teenage prank.’”

Lynn wanted to see the alleged vandals unmasked. On Feb. 29, a typically dreary winter afternoon, he sat on a long wooden bench outside the courtroom at the Lewis County Law and Justice Center. The three would be arraigned on charges of a hate crime and a second-degree malicious mischief, which could carry a sentence of up to ten years in prison.

Mike and Mary Garrison sat down next to Lynn. “I want to shake your hand,” Mary said, and offered hers.

The courtroom filled with familiar faces. The owner of the Friendship fence was there, and the woman who twerked the white supremacist away at Pride. Jim McCully sat near members of the Dignity Guild. “Am I surprised?” McCully said of the incident. “Not really.” He wanted to hear what the judge said about the alleged vandals. “You can get judges that may be sympathetic to the cause.”

Kyle Wheeler was there, too.

Before the hearing, Wheeler said he admired Garrison for the way he pushed Centralia to see the truth of its past — to look at itself in the mirror.

“Mike’s probably talked to me a couple of times the last year about the specific similarities of the way things went for the Wobblies and the way things are going for me,” he said. “It’s just a matter of history repeating itself and people not realizing it.”

Garrison’s attempt to correct the historical narrative was also cautionary: Wheeler wasn’t just creating visibility for marginalized people in Lewis County, he was making sure that history didn’t forget them, didn’t brush them off as a nuisance. “There’s a lot of people being like, ‘Oh, maybe it’s not just crazy Kyle being crazy Kyle. Maybe there is a level of validity there, and maybe we should look at it from this other perspective,’” he said.

On the day of the arraignment, Wheeler tromped across his property carrying a metal flagpole. Uncle Sam shouted nonsensically from the nearby Hamilton sign: “NO ONE DIED IN WW2 SO YOU COULD SHOW PAPERS TO BUY FOOD!”

The blackberries on Wheeler’s land had been cut back, and the stormwater pond filled in the pouring rain. A sign reading “Love Thy Neighbor” floated in the water, cast away like trash.

The 11 birdhouses on his property had been smashed to pieces. Some were lying on the ground, others tossed over the Hamilton property line. Wheeler heard that they had been destroyed the same night the rainbow fence was vandalized.

He planted the pole in the ground and fixed a new Pride flag to it, squinting into the rain as he slowly raised it overhead.

“I’d like to say that I could see it staying up over the weekend,” he said. “But I don’t have a level of confidence in that either.”

JUNE 2024
I was rushing up a trail in the Gila National Forest to see a wooden sign. Henry Provencio had to get back to his Forest Service office for a meeting, but he knew how much I wanted to see it, so we hiked along the Middle Fork of New Mexico’s Gila River, not even pausing to take off our boots at the wide, shallow river crossings. The trail we followed could take us north through the Gila Wilderness, or even all the way to Canada via the Continental Divide Trail, but our destination was only about a mile away, where it curved into the shade cast by the canyon wall. Provencio, a land-management planner for the Forest Service, pointed out the dirt piles left by javelinas digging for food, reminding me that we were only about a hundred miles north of Mexico.

Though I’d never seen this sign, one of several that marks the wilderness boundary, I recognized its not-quite-rectangular, almost Flintstones-style outline and the all-cap letters stamped into unpainted wood. I’ve seen a lot of these signs in my life, and they look the same in New Mexico as they do in California, Alaska and North Carolina. You’ve seen them, too, if you’ve ever ventured into a designated wilderness area.

The word “wilderness” might evoke certain images — remote Arctic landscapes or thick tropical rainforests — but it’s also a legal definition. In 1964, Congress passed the Wilderness Act, which required federal public land management agencies to consider large roadless areas for an extra level of protection — what some call “Big W” wilderness. There are mountainous, glacier-pocked wilderness areas, swampy wilderness areas and red-rock canyon wilderness areas; some are filled with lakes and others with saguaros. Under the law, wilderness areas are undeveloped, with no roads and minimal structures — places where “man is just a visitor who does not remain.”

The Gila Wilderness, however, was the first. In June 1924, 40 years before Congress passed the Wilderness Act, forest managers set aside this area as the nation’s first protected wilderness. That’s why I wanted to see this sign.

I’d become fascinated with these legally designated wilderness areas. I’ve backpacked in them for more than two decades; I’ve worked as a wilderness guide; I’ve carried out scientific fieldwork in them. I’m of the generation that ditched Ed Abbey’s ode to solitude in favor of William Cronon and Rebecca Solnit, writers who critique the concept of wilderness for its erasure of Indigenous histories and its implication that humans are merely visitors to nature, not part of it. But that doesn’t change how I feel when I stand on a mountain pass in the middle of a wilderness area, absorbed in the sight of peaks and valleys stretching in every direction.

Not until I became a journalist did I fully understand that the wooden signs I passed as I entered wilderness areas marked legal boundaries. That there were rules about what constitutes a wilderness, from its “naturalness” to its opportunities for “solitude.” The more time I spend in wilderness, the more I see those rules tested. More frequent, destructive fires and invasive species, both amplified by climate change, are arguably eroding its naturalness; more people, and more pinging smartphones, are making solitude harder to find. As our ideas
about wilderness evolve, the landscapes designated as such are also changing in profound ways. What do these parallel developments mean for “Big W” wilderness?

**I DIDN’T COME TO THE GILA** just for the sign; I also wanted to see a box. A few days after our hike, I met Provencio at the Gila National Forest headquarters in Silver City. “I told you where we found this, right?” he said, hoisting a cardboard banker’s box onto the glossy wood surface of a conference room table. “Sitting on top of the icebox in our breakroom.” When Provencio discovered the box during an office cleanup, he set it aside to throw away. But one of his staffers got curious. “He started reading,” Provencio told me, “And he’s like, ‘Do you realize what this stuff is?’”

The box was full of copies of documents and letters about the establishment of the wilderness area, many dating back to the 1920s. “So, in this box, we have some of those original designations and management plans that people were considering for management of the wilderness,” Provencio said.

Through the Wilderness Act considers humans only visitors, people have lived in the Gila for millennia. Today, tourists come to see the 700-year-old Gila Cliff Dwellings and visit museums displaying the beautiful black, white and red pottery made by the Mimbres people. Ancestors of today’s Zuni, Acoma and Hopi traveled through this area. The Apache, who also call the area home, are among its most enduring residents. Every year, archaeological findings reveal new details about the land’s long human history. Trying to conceive of this place before humans is like traveling toward the horizon; the destination keeps receding.

By the mid-1800s, the area was busy with Spanish ranchers, Mexican miners, Black “buffalo soldiers” and white East Coast transplants looking to stake a claim on land or minerals. After Mexico ceded its New Mexico territory to the U.S. at the end of the Mexican-American War of 1848, the Apache fought to defend their homeland from colonizers and Army troops; despite decades of resistance, many were killed or captured.

Meanwhile, in the race to build a nation, the U.S. was rapidly depleting its abundant natural resources. As undeveloped land became scarcer, Anglo-American settlers began to see “wilderness” not as a scary, untamable forest but as a threatened Eden. John Muir’s writing rallied public support for national parks, and Gifford Pinchot, the first head of the Forest Service, maintained that the public lands should be governed according to their “highest use.” The Gila National Forest, which was established in 1905, was intended, like other national forests, to be managed for sustained logging, mining and grazing.

In the 1920s, as cars became more affordable and reliable, travel to U.S. public lands increased. The National Park Service and Forest Service built roads and lodges, raising conservationists’ fears that car-based recreation was eroding the landscape — and

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**“I am beginning to believe there is a real chance of public interest developing ... on the idea of large wilderness areas before the opportunity for them has disappeared.”**

One such conservationist was Aldo Leopold, a Yale-trained forester in the Southwest. Though Leopold would later become a pathbreaking wildlife ecologist, famous for his essay collection *A Sand County Almanac*, his concerns in the 1920s were more utilitarian: As a lifelong hunter, he worried that outdoorspeople would soon be unable to go on a two-week hunting trip without running into a road. Along with his Forest Service colleague Arthur Carhart, he came up with the idea of setting aside some roadless areas as designated wilderness. Leopold knew of a remote, rugged stretch of the Gila National Forest that he thought would be perfect. He spoke to his boss, District Forester Frank Pooler, arguing that the agency should manage for the persistence of wilderness just as it managed for logging, mining and grazing. Pooler agreed and signed off on the protection of nearly 800,000 acres.

I pulled a manila folder from the box and flipped through its contents. There it was: the 1924 Recreational Working Plan for the Gila National Forest, the official record of the first wilderness area. As word of Pooler and Leopold’s action spread, the concept of wilderness gained traction across the agency. In a 1926 letter to Pooler, Leopold wrote excitedly, “I am beginning to believe there is a real chance of public interest developing ... on the idea of large wilderness areas before the opportunity for them has disappeared.” Only two years after the establishment of the Gila Wilderness, the Forest Service chief wrote to Pooler: “The wilderness idea should be given serious consideration in our plans.”

Throughout their correspondence, the foresters hashed out the details of wilderness management. “Can we use tractors? Can we use horses? Can we use airplanes? How do we get equipment and supplies and people into the wilderness?” Provencio noted. They agreed that grazing should be allowed, but that roads, structures and logging should not. “We’re still nearly 40 years before the Wilderness Act,” he said, “and they’re talking about what does this thing of ‘wilderness’ mean?”

Leopold and several other conservationists founded The Wilderness Society in 1935. In the 1940s, the group hired a young man named Howard Zahniser to edit its newsletter. Zahniser soon began to advocate for a national wilderness system that would preserve wilderness areas in perpetuity.

“Here we go,” I said, finding a letter with Zahniser’s name on it. I read aloud: “Dear Mr. Schilling, I have been looking forward to our planned inspection of the Gila and Picos Division areas.” It was signed “Zahn.” In 1949, Zahniser traveled to the Gila to learn about managing the world’s first designated wilderness. The foresters took him on a pack trip into the Gila; later, he wrote that he was surprised by the damage grazing had done to the land. By this time, Zahniser and other conservationists understood the importance of protecting land not only for its recreational opportunities but
for its ecological value. He didn’t think grazing had a place in wilderness, but he would eventually concede that without it, a national wilderness system would never win the political support it needed.

In the 1950s, as the environmental movement gained momentum, “Zahnie” began drafting legislation for a Wilderness Act. He had no illusions that the areas he sought to protect were pristine. In fact, though the word “pristine” is often associated with the concept, it is never mentioned in the Wilderness Act. Zahniser, who was more interested in protecting land from future human impacts than in repairing past harms, preferred the term “untrammeled,” which was suggested to him by conservationist Polly Dyer. In the 1950s, during her successful campaign to stop a proposed road in Olympic National Park, Dyer wrote of the “untrammeled” nature of the forests there. To “trammel” a horse is to shackle or restrain its gait. Zahniser, a poet at heart, thought the word conveyed the conditions he hoped to see in wilderness — unrestrained by humans, and free.

After my trip to the Gila, I spoke with Michelle Reilly of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a liaison for the agency at the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center. Reilly has studied the many drafts of the Wilderness Act. While other members of The Wilderness Society wanted Zahniser to use “undisturbed” instead of “untrammeled,” he resisted. “With ‘untrammeled,’ he was recognizing that there were areas that would have been disturbed,” Reilly said. “It’s a word that is more action-oriented and more outcome-oriented... it’s a bit forward-thinking. (Wilderness) can be an area that’s disturbed, but we’re not trying to control it.”

In one of the law’s early drafts, Zahniser also described wilderness as a place where “man himself is a member of the natural community.” Today, the concept of wilderness is criticized for reinforcing a false separation between humans and nature. How might we see wilderness areas differently if that single phrase had survived?

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which

AFTER 66 DRAFTS AND ENTHUSIASTIC House and Senate approval, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into law in September 1964, almost exactly two months after the much harder-fought Civil Rights Act. Thanks to Zahniser’s wordsmithing, the Wilderness Act is often called one of the most poetic pieces of U.S. legislation. At its core is the single long paragraph devoted to a working definition of wilderness:

Land managers have since distilled this definition into five more easily measurable qualities of “wilderness character”: natural; untrammeled; undeveloped; having opportunities for solitude and “primitive and unconfined” recreation; and having other features of value. Land managers conduct surveys to determine whether visitors are finding enough solitude. They deliberate whether actions like using chemicals to kill invasive fish in backcountry lakes result in an unnecessary amount of “trammeling” to the land. Wilderness managers talk a lot about exercising restraint; human interventions — ecological restoration work, hiking permit systems and
Inaction is an action at this point.

Throughout the West, social and physical changes are testing the idea of “wilderness character.” I’ve tagged along with rangers checking hiking permits in Colorado’s stunning Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness, where the increasingly popular trails make “solitude” harder to find. I’ve bushwhacked off-trail through poison oak to see a grove of ancient sequoias, killed by a fire that burned extraordinarily hot due to climate change and a century of fire suppression. Park managers are now replanting there, risking a bit of “trammeling” in a bid to restore “natural” conditions.

In the Gila, the nation’s first wilderness, fires haven’t been as firmly suppressed as elsewhere in the West. But it is still experiencing more severe burns: Over the last two decades, endangered Gila trout have been repeatedly dying in ash-choked rivers. “Zahnie” probably never pictured an airlift of endangered fish when he wrote the Wilderness Act, but it’s becoming harder and harder to preserve “natural” conditions without a little trammeling. As an ecologist planting seedlings in Sequoia told me, “Inaction is an action at this point.”

In the face of climate change and biodiversity loss, is the Wilderness Act even the right tool for the kind of conservation we need? The Mexican wolves recently reintroduced in the Gila don’t know about the wilderness boundaries; they keep wandering north, where they’re not legally protected. Science shows that large roadless areas are important for biodiversity, but that they can’t thrive in isolation. We need safe passages connecting them — coordinated, landscape-level conservation efforts.

That’s what Leia Barnett, the Greater Gila New Mexico Advocate with the group WildEarth Guardians, would like to see. Her organization envisions a regional conservation network of public lands that includes the Gila but stretches across the border from New Mexico into Arizona and south into Mexico. While wilderness remains important, Barnett said, much larger areas are needed to buffer ecosystems from the pressures of climate breakdown and biodiversity collapse. So how can lands managed for multiple use — from solar energy farms to mountain biking — also be managed for biodiversity protection? That, said Barnett, will take some radical new thinking.

“If we’re thinking back 100 years, Aldo Leopold did something to revolutionize land management culture, which was introducing this idea of wilderness,” Barnett said. “A hundred years later, what if we did something similar that is at a larger scale, but in a way that is relevant to the threats that we face in the 21st century?”

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It might start with remembering that phrase from an early draft of the Wilderness Act, about humans being a “member of the natural community,” and formally recognizing that this has always been the case. While Zahniser knew that the areas he was working to protect weren’t pristine, the law he wrote doesn’t acknowledge their long history of Indigenous management.

“Everything we’re setting aside and saying is amazing — the reason why they’re amazing is because Indigenous people actually managed them for thousands of years,” said Rosalyn LaPier, a professor of environmental history at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and a member of the Blackfeet Nation and Métis. LaPier has argued that the word “wilderness” needs to be retired because it suggests a place that is unmanaged: “The places that we set aside are not these sort of untouched places, but they’re actually the exact opposite. They are places that Indigenous people have utilized, changed, altered.” Land was commonly set aside for different uses. “Setting aside land because it’s sacred, setting aside land because you want a particular species to live there, setting aside land because you want a particular plant species to flourish” — these, she said, are all examples of landscape-management practices.

Leopold sold wilderness to his superiors as a kind of management — as one type of use among many uses, a place where the government doesn’t build roads or permit motorized equipment. In this sense, the Wilderness Act is the country’s strictest environmental zoning law. But it’s weighed down by a concept that fails to recognize Indigenous history.

“Not all concepts have laws,” LaPier said. “This one does. So the issue is not the concept. The issue is the law. The fact that we even created a law based on a lie is crazy, and it’s something that we should fix.”

The U.S. could amend the Wilderness Act to correct this error of omission, and perhaps a new generation of leaders will; LaPier said that her students are much more aware of the nation’s history of colonization than their predecessors. The U.S. could also return wilderness to tribes, and in fact, it already has: in 1996, Congress restored 764 acres of New Mexico’s Wheeler Peak Wilderness to the Taos Pueblo.

Meanwhile, nothing in the current law prevents land managers from acknowledging that these areas were once managed by tribes, or from finding ways to share decision-making authority with them. In 2021, at Point Reyes National Seashore north of San Francisco, the National Park Service signed a co-stewardship agreement with the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, the tribal government of the Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok. Nearly 40% of the park is designated wilderness with a long history of fire suppression and active ranching. Tribal Chairman Greg Sarris told me that his tribe looks forward to working
with the Park Service to restore the health of the environment. “It’s just not putting land aside and letting it be wilderness, but letting it be a managed landscape, managed Indigenously.”

Sarris sees no conflict between this and Wilderness Act regulations, but said that those regulations reflect the viewpoint of a non-Native person looking at wilderness. “When you have Indigenous people, we’re looking at it very differently. Subsequently, we’re going to approach the restoration and maintenance and stewardship of the land somewhat differently.” He did use a word familiar to wilderness land managers: restraint. His tribe, he said, has rules about respecting certain places. Managing different parts of a national park, including a wilderness area, and balancing the tribe’s needs with visitors, requires a similar approach. “The best place to learn respect and restraint is in nature,” he said.

While the agreement between the Graton Rancheria tribe and the Park Service is new, it’s an exciting example of new ways to interpret the Wilderness Act — interpretations that Zahniser may not have foreseen, but which are revealed by a close look at the law and its history.

Of the thousands of Chiricahua-Warm Springs Apache who called the Gila Wilderness home, only a few hundred survived after the U.S. Army imprisoned them for defending their land. They were eventually sent to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, more than 500 miles from the Gila Wilderness. Tribal historian Michael Darrow said the Forest Service is doing a better job of consulting with the tribe on management issues, but the Fort Sill Apache are still under-resourced, not to mention headquartered in another state. In recent decades, the tribe was able to acquire about two thousand acres of land in New Mexico. “It’d be nice if people knew that this was our tribe’s home,” Darrow said.

The nation’s first wilderness is turning 100, which is either very old — if you consider how much has changed since then — or very young, if you consider the long history of human management here. But a century is a very long time for a wooden sign, and the sign I rushed to visit isn’t the original boundary marker. Previous signs might have weathered in the intense New Mexico summer or been swept away by a flash flood. Each sign has marked a different place, altered by time or human impacts, and suggested different things to those who pass it. Future signs might look the same but inspire new interpretations — or look entirely different, with new words and new meanings.

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Image titles, from opener to above: Gila Trinity #35 (Corral Canyon from Skeleton Ridge in the Gila Wilderness and a colonial hand-built ranch wall in Northern Chihuahua); #12 (A reed meadow in the Black Range, Aldo Wilderness, and a sheep and garbage bags in Casas Grandes, Chihuahua); #33 (Willow Mountain looking north and a dead owl on a farm near Puerto Palomas, Chihuahua); #3 (Alligator juniper after the Black Fire and an Emory oak in the Davis Mountains, Texas). The images accompanying this feature are part of “The Gila at 100,” an exhibition open through June 29, presented by the New Mexico Museum of Art, Michael Berman, Obscura Gallery and WildEarth Guardians.
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Dislocating Western aesthetics

Contemporary artists in the West are reorienting ‘Western art’ for the 21st century.

BY SEAN J PATRICK CARNEY

“WESTERN ART,” as in visual art about the Western United States, often conjures romanticized and myopic depictions of an imagined past: Charles Marion Russell’s illustrative fantasies about cowboys and Indians; sublime renderings of the Rocky Mountains by East Coast painters, idealizing the landscape in service of Manifest Destiny; or James Earle Fraser’s End of the Trail, a widely reproduced — and frequently bootlegged — 1894 sculpture of an exhausted Native American, speared tucked loosely under one arm, slouched atop his equally exhausted horse.

In the 21st century, these aesthetics feel formulaic, outdated and, at times, problematic. The West has long had diverse topographies, peoples and perspectives. Western artists tackle charged topics, including environmental exploitation and community displacement, and propose new ways to think about the region’s multiple pasts, presents and futures. Today, when ranchers fly drones and water protectors reach millions on social media, it makes sense that Western artists would integrate traditional ceramics, textiles and colorful patterning with sound, video and digital art, at times employing literary strategies of speculative fiction and historical revisionism.

Cowboy, a recent exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver, aimed to “break apart the homogenous ideal of the cowboy as a white, cisgender American male.” Curators recontextualized works by heavy hitters like Andy Warhol and Richard Prince alongside younger artists, including Oregon-based Ghanaian portraitist Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, Los Angeles interdisciplinary artist rafa esparza and Colorado pop-Western conceptual artist Grace Kennison.

And New York City, the cultural and economic center of American art, has started to pay attention.

Historically, the Whitney Biennial, a contemporary survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art visited by thousands of urban art enthusiasts and international tourists, has skewed New York-centric (with cursory nods to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago). It is notable, then, that more than a dozen of the 71 artists and collectives in this year’s Better Than the Real Thing, March 20-Aug. 11, live and work in the Western U.S.

New Mexico-based Cannupa Hansasa Luger (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara and Lakota), an enrolled member of the Three Affiliated Tribes of Fort Berthold, employs a science-fiction framework and upcycled materials to subvert and literally invert Western art tropes. At the Whitney, viewers crane their necks to examine the upside-down pink-mesh tipi that hangs suspended from the ceiling, its tip anchored to the floor by lustrous claws. Luger’s TIPI — an acronym for Transportational Intergenerational Protection Infrastructure — is a speculative technology that safeguards Indigenous knowledge while dislocating viewers in time. Its flipped cone references “spacetime” diagrams, reinforcing Indigenous perspectives on nonlinear time that long predate the theory of general relativity. Titled Uŋziwosol Wašičuta (2021), a Lakota phrase meaning “the fat-taker’s world is upside-down,” the Stargate-like sculpture is part of Luger’s ongoing series Future Ancestral Technologies, which buoyantly imagines post-colonial, post-capitalist timelines, frequently incorporating a multi-temporal rallying cry: We Survive You.

Rose B. Simpson’s (Santa Clara Pueblo) installation Daughters gathers four larger-than-life ceramic entities into a powerful circle. Bound by spatial orientation, their surfaces conspicuously marked by Simpson’s laboring hands, each body is unique in its earthen tones, accouterments and distribution of glyph-like markings. Presented as a tetralogy — a work made of four individual parts — the figures gesture to the four cardinal directions, earthly elements or seasons. Designated as daughters, they forecast future generations while honoring Simpson’s own matrilineage: Santa Clara ceramicists, including her mother, Roxanne Swentzell, and Pueblo scholars, like her grandmother, the late architect, historian and activist Rina Swentzell.

Both Simpson and Luger’s works create intentional boundaries between museumgoers and the art, hinting at a healthy skepticism of the Whitney’s sudden interest in contemporary Indigenous work. It wasn’t until late last year that the museum finally presented a retrospective by a Native American artist — Memory Map by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, who is well into her 80s.

In Harmony Hammond’s four mixed-media paintings, all made between 2020 and 2022, the seams are visible. Alternately referencing quilts, folded garments and blood-soaked bandages, they evoke feminine or domestic interiors and the ongoing struggles of women. They also read cartographically, as if demarcating private property, borders or extraction sites — the territorial tools used by imperialists and industrialists to feminize landscapes as possessable or penetrable. Based in Galisteo, New Mexico, since 1984, Hammond, an early feminist artist who turned 80 this year, represents an elder queer voice in this biennial. A quarter-century ago in Santa Fe,
Hammond curated *Out West*, an audacious, groundbreaking exhibition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and two-spirit artists from New Mexico, Arizona and Texas.

For Placitas, New Mexico, painter Maja Ruznic, duality is key. After spending her adolescence in refugee camps during the Bosnian War, Ruznic dove into Jungian psychoanalysis. Jung saw trauma as two-pronged: painful, always, but also a potentially cosmological vehicle. Ruznic’s two kaleidoscopic paintings at the Whitney feel ominous, like the conspicuous coloring of a venomous octopus. Figures eerily advance and recede, violating the viewer’s eye. The dislocating effect echoes Luger’s floating tipi.

This sense of dislocation may also invoke migration or the West’s ongoing legacy of displacement. In the 1950s and ’60s, labor programs brought Central Americans and Mexicans to Los Angeles, while Southern California imported liquidambar trees for urban beautification. Later, in a temporal coincidence, President Dwight D. Eisenhower deported even the legal migrants, while Los Angeles removed the trees because their roots were destroying sidewalks.

Within a freestanding wall of modified pine sap titled *Paloma Blanca Deja Volar/White Dove Let Us Fly*, Los Angeles artist Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio embedded archival documents on immigrant rights from largely white nonprofits and activists. Drenched in sunlight through large windows and already buckling, the wall will eventually collapse; meanwhile, the history hidden in the documents is both obscured and temporarily preserved in amber. The work, which also raises questions about solidarity and privilege, appears simultaneously futuristic and ancient, implying the possibility of timelines in which xenophobic and ecologically ignorant policies are less predictably circular.

Six years ago, as the sun set through the Whitney’s enormous windows overlooking the Hudson River, Diné artist Demian DinéYazhi’ read *An Infected Sunset*, an epic poetic meditation on settler violence, Indigenous community, queer sex and the politics of death and survival. In March, DinéYazhi’, who was born in Gallup, New Mexico, and lives and works primarily in Portland, Oregon, returned to the Whitney, installing a neon text sculpture glowing westward out fifth-floor windows over the Hudson. An homage to the late Navajo activist Klee Benally and a critique of the Eurocentric “addiction with the apocalypse,” it’s a seditious but sanguine spin on Route 66 signage, reading in part: *we must stop imagining destruction... and genocide... we must stop predicting... capitalist hierarchies... we must imagine routes toward liberation!* Indigenous communities, museumgoers might recall, have already survived an apocalypse.

During an early March preview event, an *Artnet News* writer noticed a hidden message in the neon’s flickering letters that even the curators had missed: FREE PALESTINE. A *New York Times* article broadcast the dispatch globally, despite the paper’s documented bias in favor of Israel — an object lesson in speculative art as a potent, future-casting technology.

The 21st-century West is increasingly interconnected, from interstate wildfire smoke and constant tension over Colorado River claims, to cross-cultural recognition with global movements resisting colonialism, extractive industrialism and the asymmetrical impacts of climate change. As Western demographics, ecosystems and discourses continue to shift dramatically, Western aesthetics should be constantly renegotiated. If the 2024 Whitney Biennial is any indication — and it usually is — artists in the West can anticipate increased attention. It’s about time. Still, it remains to be seen just how authentically the art world, whose progressiveness routinely feels performative, will embrace Western artists who are slippery, unpredictable or confrontational.

Contemporary Western art is complex — alchemical, even — as artists critically compound traditional materials and knowledge that resonate from Taos to Tacma while theorizing about more equitable global futures. Such material and intellectual time travel challenges the view of time as a linear arrow and the continuing American fetishization of perpetual growth. By reinterpreting the past, formulating parallel presents, and predicting new and exciting futures, Western artists are transforming our Doomsday addiction into a habit we just might kick.

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ENCOUNTERS

An exploration of life and landscape during the climate crisis.

Can the future be the past?

Envisioning degrowth.

BY RUXANDRA GUIDI
I LOVE WALKING, whether it’s on a well-traveled trail or finding my own path in nature, if I can, wondering what things might have looked like 50 or 500 years ago. The Catalina Mountains in Coronado National Forest are only a 10-minute drive from my home but a world away. Whenever I set out, determined to finish the 8.2 mile there-and-back again trail — I never do — my mind starts speculating. I wonder: What would the vegetation have looked like in the past? Would there have been any roads nearby, or traffic, or as many people passing through?

I never do find solid answers, even if I remember to search for my exact location on Google Maps afterward. Most satellite images go back only about 40 years and aren’t high-definition enough to reveal every corner of the West. I’m thankful for that; I would hate for every patch of nature to be that well-documented, for all our secret, solitary refuges to be so easily discoverable.

Recently, I learned about Landscape Explorer, an online tool developed by Scott Morford, an applied spatial ecologist at the University of Montana in Missoula, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. After digitizing 170,000 aerial images taken by U.S. Army pilots during the Cold War, his team of researchers stitched them side-by-side with modern satellite images from Google Earth Engine. The resulting aerial views give clear evidence of how human development has affected open space, floodplains, forests, coastal areas and more over the past five decades. “We don’t always notice what’s unfolding on the land over longer timespans, especially when environmental changes are slow-moving,” Morford said when his tool became available.

Southeast of my home, in Tucson, Arizona, Landscape Explorer shows how Davis-Monthan Air Force Base once sat in the middle of an open landscape of desert grasslands and saguaros. Now the base is surrounded by suburban housing developments and parking lots, equipment graveyards, solar panel installations and a growing network of roads. Due to its longtime use by the U.S. military, the public water systems in this corner of southern Arizona are now contaminated with toxic PFAS, also known as forever chemicals. The nearby neighborhoods are home to many working-class Latinos who have been asking for remediation for years.

In 2017, the Los Angeles-based nonprofit Clockshop asked my husband (HCN Visuals Editor Bear Guerra) and me to research the Bowtie parcel, an 18-acre strip of land along the concrete banks of the LA River. The site was once the headquarters of Southern Pacific Railroad, which, like Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, dumped toxic chemicals into the water and the soil for years. Today, the Bowtie parcel is one of a number of plots purchased by California State Parks, which plans to remediate them before turning them into green areas once again.

Los Angeles is no stranger to such conversions. In 2022, LA County officials announced that a new 142-acre regional park would rise from the former Puente Hills Landfill, previously known as the nation’s largest dump. The land has sat fallow for almost a decade, and wildlife and hikers have already returned. The park is set to break ground in 2025.

As we interviewed people for our project about the Bowtie parcel, Bear and I kept hearing the same things over and over again: that open land had an intangible worth to locals, that people wanted to learn more about the land’s history, and they wanted to be part of the process of keeping it in public hands. This was an obvious realization: The best future could be a throwback to the past.

Land development may appear to be an inevitable part of modern life. Infrastructure and buildings, after all, have become synonymous with jobs and commerce, a self-propelling engine of never-ending growth. But such growth comes at a cost. Suburban sprawl in Phoenix has exploded exponentially over the last decade — this, in a region with precarious water sources. During that time, Arizona has also witnessed the rapid disappearance of local species, such as the pygmy owl, due to habitat loss.

None of this is inevitable. Not today, when we have the data and images to show just how land use has changed and what we may have lost in the process. The answer may lie on the other side of the coin: degrowth. The term first emerged as an economic theory in the hallways of 1970s academia, but now it represents one of the most viable options for our future. Its thesis is simple: Endless economic development is incompatible with the limited material resources available on our planet. Degrowth does not necessarily reject capitalism; rather, it brings an awareness that rampant economic expansion without proper planning has serious human and environmental consequences. Degrowth advocates for policies that focus on economic and social metrics that can benefit both ecosystems and human well-being — infrastructure projects that have a smaller carbon footprint or use only native vegetation and stay open to the public — in other words, projects that serve both humans and nature, not just the market. Even as we continue to build and settle new places, degrowth makes the case for simultaneously, actively restoring other landscapes.

At the edge of my city is a gated community that abuts the Coronado National Forest. It used to bother me to pass it and walk alongside some of the homes every time I set out to hike the 8.2 miles to the top. But now I think it must be just as frustrating for the homeowners to live this close to such beautiful mountains and to have to see strangers marching past their houses all day, every day. Fortunately, the Catalinas belong to all of us — and they’re protected from future development, because they’re located within a national forest. May they stay just as they are — or as they were — for another few centuries and beyond, and may we, the people who live near them and use them, keep seeking that delicate balance between growth and preservation.

WEB EXTRA Explore before-and-after images of some of the places mentioned herein at hcn.org/future-past
CONFETTI WESTERNS
Exploring the queer natural and cultural histories of the American Southwest.

Back from the dead
The late artist David Wojnarowicz’s work has taught me how to live and die with long COVID.

BY MILES W. GRIFFIS
PHOTO BY AARON ROBEY
THE HEADY SCENT OF WET CREOSOTE

hung in the air the morning we skirted impossible alluvial fans on our way to the lowest point in North America. Since the Pleistocene, Badwater Basin, 236 feet below sea level, has primarily been a salt flat, but deluges from Hurricane Hilary and a recent atmospheric river had filled the pan with billions of gallons of water. Lake Manly was a zombie, back from the dead. Many said it was the largest it had been for decades. Pushed by strong winds in March, it even drifted two miles north, like some kind of restless soul.

In the towering shade of the Funeral Range, my boyfriend and I blew up our rafts as our friend made roadside coffee. The ephemeral lake was so calm that I feared we would break its spell when we pushed off its crystallized shores. Its trance only grew stronger as we paddled over the yard-deep lake and got lost in the optical illusion of water: Manly was the elastic band of a jockstrap stretching toward every horizon, and it smelled just as earthy as one.

It was surreal paddling across the abyss of light blue, knowing what one of my favorite artists had scribbled here, when the lake was still asleep. In May 1991, David Wojnarowicz and his close friend Marion Scemama signed their names in the salty mud somewhere below my raft. It was Wojnarowicz’s last trip to the desert Southwest, a place he’d visited for over a decade on sojourns far from New York City. The wide-open vistas and the desert’s denizens became vital to him after his diagnosis with AIDS in 1988. Gila monsters, mesas and saguaros wove themselves into his paintings and photography.

On that trip from Albuquerque to San Francisco and back again for the launch of his 1991 memoir Close to the Knives, he experienced debilitating symptoms. “I’m in a constant flux of anxieties about my body and its exhaustion and strange waves of illness,” he wrote in his journal. “I know I need to adjust and accept my body and its levels of energy but it complicates everything.”

According to his biographer, Cynthia Carr, the two friends talked about Badwater’s playa being an ideal location for Wojnarowicz’s death. As I leaned back in my raft and felt the first rays of sun on my torso, I thought of the photos I’d seen of him on the trip, wrapped in a white sheet like a mummy, his mock funeral in the desert. During our leisurely paddle to nowhere, “exhaustion and strange waves of illness” began hitting me, too. Six weeks before, I’d been reinfected a second time with COVID-19, and I felt like I was in a constant state of heat exhaustion, dizziness and delusion. Like many other people with long COVID, each reinfec tion had further whittled down my abilities, my quality of life and health. Most days, I feel a small gust away from death.

Ever since I became disabled with the disease at the beginning of the pandemic, the force of Wojnarowicz’s art has hit me like amphetamine. His writing, painting and photography have laid bare the abandon ment and stigmatization of another generation plagued with the long-term effects of a pathogen. Through a graphic and unblinking perspective, Wojnarowicz contrasted the quick disease progression of AIDS with the glacial response of the U.S. government. Wojnarowicz’s rage still screams in his pictures and paintings, and it has shown me that society’s indifference to mass death and disability has only increased in the time that separates our crises. “WHEN I WAS DIAGNOSED WITH THIS VIRUS,” Wojnarowicz wrote, “IT DIDN’T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE I CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL.”

Untitled (Face in Dirt) (1991) is one of Wojnarowicz’s most well-known works, a photograph that depicts his face, buried alive in the desert. Some days, when I look at it, it appears as if he’s emerging from the ground. On other days, the sand consumes him. After leaving Death Valley on that final trip, Wojnarowicz directed Scemama to take the photo outside Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. It is one of the last portraits ever taken of the artist, and it has haunted my COVID-induced dreams ever since I got sick. COVID and long COVID are not HIV/AIDS, but our response to both viruses has been to bury them, to cover disabled and high-risk people with dirt. There is silence, skepticism and denial as many of us have become immunocompromised, as thousands have died of complications of long COVID, as millions have died of COVID.

Soon, we slipped out of our rafts and let the lake hold the three of us. I put my hands behind my head, closed my eyes, and felt the buoyancy. I let the water surround my face and mouth until I was just a floating oval of skin. I knew that in the coming weeks, the lake would shrink to a wet, muddy surface before disappearing as quickly as it had arrived. A great sorrow washed over me. The lake wasn’t just a mirror of the sky; it reflected the ephemerality of life.

“Even a tiny charcoal scratching done as a gesture to mark a person’s response to this epidemic means whole words to me if it is hung in public,” Wojnarowicz wrote. “Each and every gesture carries a reverberation that is meaningful in its diversity.”

Like Wojnarowicz, I write about and record my experiences with my disease, not just to process the denial and pain of this overlooked crisis, but to cast spells that will ricochet into the future. I want my words to be resurrected for other people with this disease, or the diseases caused by pandemics in the future — a noisy spirit that weaves its way through time and moves objects that society has tried to bury to the forefront, where they can’t be denied. I want to appear out of nowhere, like black ink on a blank white page. Like water on the desert floor.

“I’m in a constant flux of anxieties about my body and its exhaustion and strange waves of illness.”
**Heard Around the West**

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

**BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL GONZÁLEZ**

**IDAHO**

Here’s some (hard-to-digest) food for thought. Idaho Republican Rep. Heather Scott introduced legislation to expand the parameters of a pre-existing anti-cannibalism law, ktvb.com reported. Apparently, the current Idaho law, made official in 1990 and establishing Idaho as the only state where cannibalism is officially illegal, failed to satisfy the anthropophagist-fearing Scott and her supporters, notwithstanding the fact that it clearly outlawed “willfully (ingesting) the flesh or blood of a human being.” House Bill 522, complete with Scott’s additions — which are rather too gruesome to repeat here and, yes, you’re welcome — was introduced back in February and passed in early March. Scott had begun to worry that the green burial business, aka “human composting,” might contaminate the food supply — or something — perhaps encouraging the proliferation of “bags of compost with human bone fragments.” She’d seen an online spoof of a cooking show that joked about ingesting human flesh, and, not realizing it was a prank, took it as gospel — or something. Still, just in case, now might be a good time to go vegan.

**COLORADO**

Boulder’s Naropa University — motto: “Putting the high into higher education” — is famous for its countercultural emphasis and non-traditional educational approach. So it shouldn’t be surprising that the university has introduced an undergraduate minor in psychedelic studies; the only surprise, really, is that it hasn’t happened sooner. The course will help train and support novices and professionals as the demand for psychedelic therapies grows, the Denver Post reports. Joe Harrison, who has been the executive director of Naropa’s Center for Psychedelic Studies since it was established in 2022, said, “We really created this pathway for students, for people who want to become psychedelic practitioners to get education, training and real-world experience.” The center already certifies and trains facilitators to monitor folks under the influence and is now planning to build a clinic. The proposed curriculum will include herbal medicine, decolonial psychology, the poetry of psychedelics and more ... infinitely more ... like, you know, the whole Cosmos ... like, well, look at those colors! Wow ... downtown streets. The critter in question was identified as Viola, a 58-year-old Asian elephant, who escaped from her handlers at the World Jordan Circus, which was performing at the Butte Civic Center. Montana Public Radio reported that Viola was getting a bath in the venue’s parking lot when a passing truck backfired and caused her to flee, swinging her trunk through downtown traffic and stomping past startled vehicles. Onlookers had their cameras ready and were quick to upload the footage to social media. Viola was swiftly recovered, montanarightnow.com reported, and nobody, including Viola, was harmed, though People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) released a statement criticizing the circus and its failure to protect the elephant.

According to Jim Harmon of the Missoula Current, this wasn’t the first time a “performing pachyderm has bolted for freedom in southwest Montana.” In 1935, the Tom Mix Circus was traveling the highway near Three Forks, Montana, en route to Bozeman from Butte, when the truck carrying its elephant, Sahara, collided with a cow on the highway. The Associated Press reported the incident in colorful detail. The entire truck, including the driver and a few other prized animals, plunged into the Jefferson River, but Sahara only briefly evaded her keepers, and that afternoon’s performance proceeded on schedule. The show must go on.

**MONTANA**

Speaking of psychedelics, some Butte locals might have questioned their relationship with reality upon seeing a perky pachyderm prancing along the highway near North Bend, about 30 miles east of Seattle, on April 28. The zebras’ keeper, Kristine Keltgen, was transporting them from Lewis County to Anaconda, Montana, where she operates a petting zoo. She’d pulled over to adjust something in the trailer, and somehow the zebras got out. Fortunately, some good Samaritans, including a rodeo bullfighter and a horse-trainer couple, helped corral three of them. The fourth, however, a mare named Shug, leaped over a fence and took to the woods. For six days, Shug remained free, doing whatever it is free zebras do, while social media entertained the public with memes, our favorite being one showing the elusive Bigfoot riding the equally elusive equine, thereby revealing the cryptic cryptid’s unexpected zebra-whispering talents. But finally, on May 3, abcnews.go.com reported, the striped animal was, um, spotted, and safely recaptured. ☯
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Please thank the BLM for the Public Lands Rule.

To learn more visit actnowforpubliclands.org
Filipinos have been in Alaska for 236 years. I grew up in Juneau, and it wasn’t until I learned about our history that I understood my connection to Alaska. We are the state’s largest immigrant minority, but there are few records for us to learn from. It’s an uphill battle, trying to share our community’s stories the way we feel is right. Sometimes the institutions we work with don’t understand what we’re trying to do. They push back. But we choose to do things our way: We spend hours engaging with people; we eat with our interviewees and show up for their birthdays. What makes everything worth the challenges is knowing that our stories — our history — are out there for our future generations. I get to pass on what I’ve learned from our elders: It’s our stories that ground us to home, and it’s our stories that bind us to each other.