

High Country News



LOSING GROUND

Emptying prisons as a climate solution

Contemplating Cormac McCarthy

Predicting debris flows in Washington

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In Eureka, California, residents camp near a parking lot along the waterfront. The city wants to develop affordable housing on city-owned parking lots, but opponents are suing to block the development under the California Environmental Quality Act. **Justin Maxon / High Country News**

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ON THE COVER

Infrastructure on the Akiuk side of Kasigluk, Alaska, is surrounded by water and vulnerable to flooding, permafrost thaw and erosion.

Katie Basile / HCN

Young fall Central Valley chinook salmon swirl in one of the concrete pools at the Nimbus Fish Hatchery in Gold River, California, last spring.
Kori Suzuki / HCN



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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.

COURAGE IN THE FACE OF INJUSTICE

Great piece from Teresa Cot-sirilos (“Alone on the Range,” October 2023). I still remember where I was when I was investigating one of Towards Justice’s first cases on behalf of a sheep-herder, a man from Peru who made \$2-\$3 per hour, and I read about industry’s use of the term “runaway.” The piece includes some terrible stories about exploitation, but there remain so many systemic challenges here.

Towards Justice continues to fight for shepherders against the wage fixing that has suppressed wages to absurd levels.

Very big shout-out to all the courageous people who continue to come forward to tell their stories, and of course to the amazing advocates and direct service providers, like Jen Rodriguez from Colorado Legal

Services, who fight to remedy so many injustices.

David Seligman
@daveyseligman
Executive Director, Towards Justice, via X, formerly known as Twitter

“My eyes are opened. There’s more to this story than I could have ever imagined.”

The H-2A story grabbed my heart and had me condemning those who abuse these hard-working family men. The abuse they endure and the starvation and harassment tactics have got to stop! They’re human beings

who are working for a better life for their families, much like the ranchers who hire them. My eyes are opened. There’s more to this story than I could have ever imagined. Thank you for this superb reporting.

Montoya Whiteman
Brighton, Colorado

BEE COGNIZANT

I read your wonderful article about protecting bumblebees (“Where the wild bees are,” October 2023). This excellent piece reminded me of a recent struggle in California, where environmentalists were working to protect pollinators by listing them as endangered under the California Endangered Species Act. This listing would be unprecedented, as it’s the first to give invertebrates this level of protection.

The struggle to get this work done was met with the usual pushback. The agricultural community does not want this to happen, mainly because the listing could impact the use of pesticides that harm pollinators.

Humans are the only species on the planet cognizant of the challenges wildlife faces, and only we are positioned to do anything about it.

Scott McMorrow
Inverness, California

COMPLICATED CONSERVATION

Conservation work is complex, as demonstrated by the bass invasion currently threatening the Grand Canyon’s native fishes.

“River of bass” (October 2023) provides a look into the way conservation scientists and professionals mitigate bass population growth to allow threatened fish species to thrive.

Theckla Spainhower
Via LinkedIn

EXCELSIOR!

I first read *HCN* in the late 1970s, when I fought fire for the BLM in Wyoming and Colorado. I’ve subscribed off and on — mostly on — since the 1980s. In the ’80s and ’90s, I wrote *HCN* postcards suggesting that you cover more multicultural and Indigenous issues and union activists, and I am glad to see you do more of that now.

Perhaps now you might devote articles to the region’s children and young people, and continue profiling leaders and organizers. Keep going!

Sesshu Foster
Alhambra, California

TAX-FREE FARMING

Brilliant presentation of a serious concern in just two pages. “Who owns the West?” (September 2023) is symptomatic of what significant disposable income and “wise” investing by billionaires and foreign ownership can do. I was stunned to see that the State of Palestine owns 11,420 acres in my state.

Time to dive into the tax-exempt status accorded churches and religious organizations. My farming friends have to factor taxes into their calculations in planning each year. It is substantial. Why would churches get into competition with farmers by hiring others to farm their land ... tax-free?

Forest Tapolca
Camano Island, Washington

INESCAPABLE ROAD NOISE

To a road ecologist, noise is pernicious precisely because it isn’t confined to cities (“The Blab of the Pave,” September 2023). Road noise also afflicts national parks and other ostensibly protected areas, many of which have been gutted by roads to accommodate tourists.

@ecofriendlywest
Via the X platform

CORRECTIONS

A couple of astute readers wrote in to let us know that our photo of the smallmouth bass in “River of bass” (October 2023) most likely depicted a redeye bass, a closely related species distinguished by the horizontal rows of spots below its lateral line. Smallmouth and redeye bass, which can hybridize with each other, are both invasive species affecting the Colorado Basin. Also, in October’s Heard Around the West column, we somehow relocated the Bonneville Fish Hatchery to Washington instead of leaving it in Oregon where it belongs. The reader who kindly let us know added that the grounds are gorgeous and that it’s a nice place to stop and stretch your legs when driving along the Columbia River Gorge. We regret the errors.



REPORTAGE

Greenwashed efforts to block affordable housing

In Eureka, the California Environmental Quality Act is used to target projects that benefit low-income people.

BY OLLIE HANCOCK
PHOTOS BY JUSTIN MAXON

THE NORTHERN CALIFORNIA town of Eureka lies between ocean and redwoods. It wears signs of the many industries that shaped it: abandoned lots on a waterfront that once housed a thriving fishing industry, sawdust piles at a vacant pulp mill, dozens of cannabis businesses. In Eureka's Old Town, Victorian-style buildings host cafes, bars, smoke shops, local art and vintage clothing.

Between the development of off-shore wind farms and the world's longest fiber-optic cable, a newly branded polytechnic university and year-round temperate weather, Eureka and nearby Arcata, combined population 45,000, are in a position to grow. So, in 2019, to meet state housing laws, Eureka updated its housing plan, which calls for 330 units of affordable housing — mostly for low and very low-income households — on city-owned lots, including a number of parking lots in Old Town. Local environmental

advocates were pleased, saying that dense development in the town, near public transit, would protect the surrounding green space and agricultural land and reduce dependence on cars. Local business interests, however, were not happy — especially Rob Arkley II, a Eureka mortgage and real estate tycoon whose companies are collectively known as Security National. Well-known locally as a polarizing figure, Arkley recently made national headlines when a *ProPublica* investigation revealed that he provided free luxury accommodations to Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito on an Alaska fishing trip — a gift Alito never disclosed.

Arkley's company helped fund a group called Citizens for a Better Eureka, which has sued the city four times,

People parked underneath the Samoa Bridge, a few blocks away from Old Town in Eureka, California.



challenging the proposed affordable housing project. According to a press release, the group includes prominent former elected officials and business interests, some of them owners of businesses only blocks from the lots slated for development. They're wielding an unlikely weapon: the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), a landmark environmental law designed to monitor major land-use decisions to prevent environmental harm.

The first lawsuit, filed in April, claims the city failed to properly evaluate the environmental impacts of developing city-owned lots. When concerns about parking were raised early on, the city decided to swap several of the lots initially marked out by the housing plan. That change enabled subsequent CEQA challenges, with the second lawsuit, filed in May, challenging a project just blocks from Arkley's company offices. Citizens for a Better Eureka filed two more lawsuits in early October, directed at two other proposed sites. Like the May lawsuit, these challenge Eureka's use of CEQA exemptions designed to make affordable housing development easier.

The lawsuits aren't isolated incidents: Across California, CEQA is used to fight

affordable housing projects. A recent study published by Chapman University's law school found that from 2019-2021, almost 40% of all CEQA lawsuits targeted housing projects. Jennifer Hernandez, author of that study and an attorney at Holland & Knight's West Coast Land Use and Environmental Group, explained that these lawsuits often hide behind veiled language, such as preserving the "character of a community." A report she authored in 2022 for a nonprofit economic research group found that nearly half of California's housing developments faced CEQA lawsuits in 2020.

"Once you define the environment to mean everything," Hernandez said, "then it's almost impossible not to find an environmental impact."

THE CALIFORNIA Environmental Quality Act requires government agencies to evaluate potential impacts before construction begins, while making it simple for individuals or entities to sue proposed projects. Legal experts including Hernandez say its use has become twisted to block everything from affordable housing to renewable energy and municipal climate plans.

In Eureka, the CEQA lawsuits are hampering the city's ability to meet its 2027 state-mandated affordable housing goals. Arkley himself has long opposed Eureka's housing plans. In a December 2022 meeting at City Hall, Arkley clashed with city officials before storming out, according to a local news report. Later that evening, he emailed City Manager Miles Slattery.

"Little boy, don't be so foolish as to think this is the end...we have only just begun. The City has far more to lose than we do. Change is comin' (*sic*)," read one email HCN accessed through the city archives. In a previous combative email to Slattery, Arkley wrote, "Parking is our lifeblood and critical for safety. It is much more safe to say that the city supports its homeless and low-income people who don't work. You all deserve to live with the consequences of your actions."

The first lawsuit filed by Citizens for a Better Eureka argued that the city's plan to build affordable housing on parking lots would endanger the economic vitality of local businesses. The group's website warns that reduced parking would force people to walk farther, putting them at risk of what it calls a "rising number of attacks on pedestrians."

In a September call, however, Casey Self, a spokesperson for the group, said she was unaware of any data showing an increase in such attacks. Self works for a Tennessee-based PR firm whose clients include Citizens for a Better Eureka, the Eureka Housing for All initiative and one of Arkley's Security National companies.

"Business owners downtown have expressed concern for the safety of their employees and their patrons, (who) have to walk far away from a parking lot to get to their establishment," she said. "There is a lot of high-speed traffic that tends to come through downtown Eureka, and there tend to be folks that are, you know, unhoused folks, I guess, that camp out on the sidewalks."

Tiffany Laffoon does street outreach with the Humboldt Area Center for Harm Reduction to help unhoused community members. She moved to Arcata, just north of Eureka, because it had cheaper housing than other California college towns. In her last semester at Humboldt State (now Cal Poly Humboldt), she lost her housing anyway. After she graduated in 2015, it happened again — three more times.

Laffoon said having a car was a privilege during this time. It gave her a door to lock and, with it, a sense of security. It also allowed her to continue working, which helped her gain housing again. Despite having a job, she said it usually took her five to seven months to find a new place.

"Sometimes people have been out there for decades, because once you become homeless," she said, "it's like a domino effect of difficulties that make it next to impossible to get back into housing."

Laffoon believes that using environmental laws to fight affordable housing smacks of hypocrisy. Unhoused people on the street are blamed for littering and violence. But when

low-income housing is proposed to solve the problem, the threat of "environmental impacts" is used to stop it. Environmentalist language is weaponized against Eureka's unhoused community.

"On one hand, we're saying homelessness is impacting the environment in a significantly negative way," she said. "But then these folks are also trying to say that creating housing and getting these people indoors with garbage service, bathrooms and running water is also not good for the environment."

THE PUSH-AND-PULL over affordable housing shows no sign of abating. But Eureka is moving forward with its plan to develop in Old Town. On Aug. 30, the California Strategic Growth Council awarded \$30.1 million to Eureka and a housing nonprofit for the construction of 90 homes on three city-owned parking lots. In response, one of Arkley's companies sponsored a petition for a 2024 ballot initiative — the "Eureka Housing For All" initiative — that would prevent development on the parking lots in question, unless developers preserve the existing number of parking spots and add more parking for the new units. It would also rezone a

former junior high school campus, making affordable housing development on that site possible. But the city doesn't own that land — and according to local news reports, the California Highway Patrol is already negotiating to buy it.

The project's delay is bad news for Eureka residents in dire need of housing. In a phone call, Tom Wheeler, executive director of the Environmental Protection Information Center, a Humboldt County nonprofit, said that building on vacant or underutilized parcels within already developed areas, such as parking lots, is the best option for the environment. Wheeler expects that the Eureka area will see a "significant" population influx from people seeking more temperate weather as the climate changes. But Eureka can prepare for growth, he said, by easing the existing housing insecurity through development downtown without expanding into the surrounding forest and agricultural areas that define Humboldt County.

"CEQA was meant to protect water quality, air quality, wildlife and open space," Wheeler said. "It's not designed to prevent you from having to experience living in a city where houseless people live." ✨

Tiffany Laffoon in a parking lot underneath the Samoa Bridge, one of the places she used to park when she was living in her car (*opposite, left*).

Dillon Huffman, a parks and waterfront ranger for the Eureka Police Department's Community Safety Engagement Team, after evicting a few people living along the waterfront near Old Town in Eureka (*opposite, right*).

A parking lot in Old Town that the city hopes to use to develop affordable housing (*right*).





A float constructed for Green River's Melon Days in 1960 sits on Main Street the morning of the parade.

REPORTAGE

Melon days

Celebration and an uncertain future for Green River's landmark festival.

BY BROOKE LARSEN
PHOTOS BY LUNA ANNA ARCHEY

DURING THE LAST WEEKEND of summer, the streets of Green River, Utah were filled with melons. Farmers rapidly chopped slices of peach-colored crenshaws and classic red crimson sweets to hand out in the town's park. The fruit gave off a sugary, earthy aroma, and friends and family embraced each other with hands sticky from its juice. Pictures of melons dotted everything from bikini tops to bucket hats. A parade led by the town's major melon-growing families featured a John Deere tractor pulling a 20-foot-long,

10-foot-tall wooden watermelon slice, originally constructed back in 1960.

Melon Days has been celebrated in one form or another here since 1906. It's the town's biggest weekend of the year: The population jumps from 800 to 4,000 or 5,000, with this year's visitors coming from as far away as Alaska and Washington, D.C. Green River's hot days and cool nights, a product of the town's high desert climate on the Colorado Plateau, make it an ideal spot for melons, as does the river flowing through the center of town.

"Melons are just a happy food," Nancy Dunham, the 92-year-old matriarch of Dunham Melons, said during an interview at the family's permanent stand on Main Street. Sitting in front of a wall covered with first-place ribbons from state and county fairs, she pointed to the farm's logo — a face with a watermelon slice as the smile. Nancy, who studied agriculture at Colorado State University, drives around with a bumper sticker that says "All Soil Is Sacred." She still tries to walk barefoot every day in the grass at the family farm, which her son Chris and his wife, Olive, now run.

The Dunham family came to Green River in the 1950s, seeking a base for their uranium-mining supply company. Green River was in the midst of a uranium mining boom and was home to a mill that's now a tailings disposal site. The area also served as a missile test site; the theme of the 1964 Melon Days was "From Melons to Missiles." A giant full-scale model of an Athena missile still dominates the town's park.

The Dunhams began growing melons and pumpkins soon after their arrival; in the

1960s, the kids sold produce from a Red Flyer wagon next to the highway. Then, in the 1970s, the uranium industry collapsed, and farming became the family's primary business. Today, Chris Dunham's oldest son, Matthew, travels an hour from Moab on weekends to help during the summer. Gabriel, the younger son, currently studies mechanics in a trade school program, but he came home for Melon Days. Tossing and slicing melons in the park, he said he hopes to keep the family farm going.

While Chris Dunham oversees the farm, much of the day-to-day work is done by foreman Abel Herrera, who has worked for the Dunhams since 1991. He coordinates the farmworkers and works with Chris to manage the planting, cultivating, harvesting and soil health. Chris, who shares his mother's love of the soil, has been cutting back the farm's use of pesticides and nonorganic fertilizers. The farm grows alfalfa and fall crops like squash and pumpkin, rotate cover crops in the winter to improve the soil and manage a herd of cattle. Herrera learned how to care for livestock while working on a ranch in Mexico as a kid. "I've been working on a ranch my whole life," he said.

Herrera and his family live in Green River. He enjoys the quiet of the small town, he said, but most of his days are spent at work. At the festival, restocking heavy melons to keep up with all the purchases, Herrera said that he and his crew work long days every day during melon season. "This is hard work," he told *High Country News* during a phone interview after Melon Days. Most labor is still done by hand, including time-intensive weeding between the melons' delicate sprawling vines.

Extreme heat is making working conditions challenging for the farmworkers, who labor in 110-degree temperatures at the peak of summer, Herrera said. "Working under the sun is the worst," he said. According to recent census data, 33% of Green River's residents identify as Latino or Hispanic, and immigrant farmworkers on H-2A visas provide labor for some of the melon farms. Herrera himself is a naturalized citizen who immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico.

These days, the possibility of another bust looms over the melon festival. The extreme heat impacting workers also threatens soil and plant health, and drought across the Colorado River Basin — including the Green River — could affect farmers' access to water. The

consolidation of small family grocery stores into a few big corporations has also hit some farming families hard. Tim Vetere, whose grandfather started growing melons in Green River over a century ago, said the Veteres used to sell to Macey's, a historically family-owned grocery store in Utah. After Associated Food Stores bought the local chain, melon sales dropped, and Vetere believes his family will have to eventually give up their farm.

The Dunhams work with some distributors but prefer to sell most of their melons directly to consumers, either at their stand in Green River or at farmers markets across

the Southwest, as well as to "peddlers" who sell Dunham melons out of their own cars or stands.

Over time, melon farmers have come and gone: *Memories & Melons*, a Green River history book, documents more than two dozen melon-growing families, including three current growers, dating back to the late 1800s. But throughout these shifts in farm ownership, Green River's melons have remained. ☀

Nancy Dunham, matriarch of Dunham Melons, and Abel Herrera, farm foreman (from top).





REPORTAGE

After the fire, a new threat

Geologists in Washington are monitoring burn scars to better predict post-wildfire debris flows.

BY KYLIE MOHR

TWO SEPTEMBERS AGO, the residents of Grotto, Washington, woke to the Bolt Creek Fire ripping through the mountains above their homes. “This doesn’t happen here,” Patricia Vasquez remembers saying at the time, shocked. While areas east of the state’s Cascade mountains frequently burn in the summer, Grotto is on the mountains’ western side, in a wetter climate, where fires had been infrequent but are now increasingly common. Vasquez evacuated with her husband, Lorenzo, Ava, their dog, and the fresh Alaska halibut they’d just caught while on vacation. Elizabeth Walther, their neighbor, evacuated with a puppy, but her husband, Richard, a ski patrolter, stayed behind to hose down the house.

No one was hurt, and no houses burned. But now, wildfire survivors in Washington face a new threat: debris flows. Wildfires can lessen the soil’s ability to absorb water, so when thunderstorms, rapid snowmelt, atmospheric

ivers or rain falling on snow occur in a burned area, that can create a roaring earthen river. Debris flows can move quickly — 30 mph or more — sliding from the uplands to the valley floor in a matter of minutes.

Debris flows are more powerful and dangerous than mudslides and slower-moving landslides: They can sweep away boulders, trees and cars and destroy everything in their path, including roads and homes and the people who live in them. Last year, in Washington’s Okanogan County, two residents were rescued from their home after a debris flow. Another flow destroyed a cabin and sent a foot of water and mud into more than 30 structures. And in 2018, 23 people were killed when heavy rains triggered a debris flow in the burn scar of Southern California’s Thomas Fire.

United States Geological Survey (USGS) modeling indicates that, for perhaps the next

A post-wildfire debris flow in the burn scar of the Walker Creek Fire caused significant damage in central Washington in the summer of 2022. **Courtesy of the Washington State Department of Natural Resources**

five to seven years, there's a high probability of debris flows in the mountains above Grotto and other communities along the South Fork of the Skykomish River Corridor. The USGS models were originally created using data from drier areas in Southern California, where debris flows have been happening for years after fires, and may be less accurate in Washington's wet climate — particularly on the rainier side of the Cascade Range. And until recently, there's been little research on how post-fire debris flows behave in Washington.

ONE MAY AFTERNOON, eight months after the fire, a team of researchers made their way up a soot-blackened hillside a few miles from Grotto. Ashy dirt crunched underfoot as they scrambled over and around trees that had been toppled by the fire. They were looking for the right tree to mount a game camera on in order to document future debris flows. They also wanted to check on the rain gauges they'd installed last fall, not long after the fire, when rainy weather and still-smoldering stumps had made setting up the equipment extra-tricky.

The Washington Geological Survey's Wildfire-Associated Landslide Emergency Response Team is tracking recently burned sites in the state to understand when landslides occur and how much precipitation it takes to trigger them. "The missing piece is the exact time," geologist Kate Mickelson said. The weather patterns, geography and vegetation of the Pacific Northwest are different from California's, and these variations can influence when the earth slides.

In the Northwest, for example, debris flows can occur several years after a fire, while in California, they usually happen in the first two rainy seasons that follow. (Researchers think that might be because tree roots take longer to decay in the Pacific Northwest.) Generally, National Weather Service debris-flow warnings are triggered if a quarter-inch of rain falls in 15 minutes, or if one inch falls in an hour. Sometimes they're issued for at least the first two years post-fire, either countywide or just for the area near a burn scar. The warning system's thresholds can

be tweaked to reflect the region. But in rainy parts of western Washington, heavy rain is not unusual, and scientists fear that issuing alerts all the time could numb people to the danger, making them less likely to evacuate.

After 15 minutes of hiking, the researchers found the perfect location for their camera: a standing tree perched just above a likely flow path, a few feet up on a mound of rocks. Finding the right spot is tricky; the tree must be close enough to a debris flow for it to trigger the camera to record, but not so close that the tree (and camera) get swept away. Mickelson and geoscientist Emilie Richard wrapped a strap around the tree's trunk and mounted the solar-powered camera facing south, then took a few test pictures to make sure it was properly angled.

Game cameras, rain gauges and other tools can help scientists understand how much precipitation it takes to trigger debris flows in western Washington, and help the USGS fine-tune its modeling. Mickelson's team has set up cameras in five and rain gauges in 11 recent burn scars around the state. In some locations, they also installed pressure transducers, devices that measure the water's pressure on the earth. The devices are drilled into bedrock and can sense the rapid increases in pressure caused by a debris flow.

When the researchers returned in May to install the camera, they also checked on their other equipment. Luckily, all the rain gauges were still in place, so they downloaded the data and changed batteries that were low on juice after the cold winter months. The equipment they installed will monitor the sites for the next five years, noting real-time rainfall — unless, of course, everything gets taken out by a debris flow.

SITTING BAREFOOT in their front yard in May, amid lilac bushes and daisies, Grotto residents expressed their concerns. "We have to cross our fingers," Lorenzo Vasquez said. "We're screwed for mudslides," Richard Walther, his neighbor, agreed. They're worried that debris flows could reroute the creek between their homes and the mountainside, causing flooding or road damage. The Washington Geological Survey scientists hope their work will help residents prepare in the future. "We would like to be able to tell people, 'This is your peak risk,'" Mickelson said. "We just don't know that yet." ✨

POEM

Gold Ring

By Cecily Park

Life is short and I still haven't
slept with a married man, swum
in a fairy pool fringed by gorse
on the Isle of Skye, or swallowed
a gold ring. My finger
in another's mouth: been there. What key
opens the shed where I keep the spare?
A ring of petals rests on the table
because I touched the yellow flower
I suspected of being dead. All gone,
all gone is the song of the baby
who has eaten all her food. All gone,
the days when I could have been
doing my undones and been, perhaps,
undone. Oh wait, hold on, I slept
with a married man not long ago.
He was my husband. My days go on.

WEB EXTRA Listen to Cecily Park recite her poem at hcn.org/gold-ring

Meat to market

Montana ranchers starting small processing facilities get creative to find customers.

BY SUSAN SHAIN



IN A SQUAT 1,100-square-foot building on the outskirts of Helena, Montana, lies a pile of enormous tongues. They are thick and leaden, stacked on a steel table like fish out of water. The bovines from which they came hulk nearby, cold carcasses hanging from cold hooks. Bearded men, their white coats covered in blood, rhythmically chop livers, punctuating the hum of industrial refrigeration.

This small meat-processing facility, which a group of ranchers started under the name Old Salt Co-op, is one of many that have appeared across the country recently. “Small” is an understatement: Old Salt can process the equivalent of 20 cattle per week, while major meatpackers butcher thousands per day.

Just four companies process 85% of American beef, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Though the consolidation has long affected ranchers, it wasn’t until the pandemic — when the industry made headlines with bottlenecks, price hikes and COVID-19 outbreaks among workers — that the general public noticed. Even the White House got involved, pledging \$1 billion to boost the nation’s independent meat-processing capacity. In Montana, a state with more cows than people, this helped at least 17 plants open or expand.

But in all the excitement — the ribbon cuttings on shiny new facilities, the feel-good of fighting for the little guy — it’s easy to forget: What happens after that local chuck gets wrapped in cellophane? Since most

independent ranchers and processors lack the volume to supply major grocery chains, their survival rides not only on how much brisket they produce, but on how many people buy it.

Without a strong customer base, Rebecca Thistlethwaite, director of the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network at Oregon State University, fears that many small processors will fail. She cited a University of Illinois study that suggested success is contingent upon local demand. “It’s not a field of dreams situation; it’s not an ‘If you build it, they will come,’” Thistlethwaite said. “You can’t build supply chains without having that end consumer.”

LOCAL MEATPACKERS used to be more common. In 1980, the four largest companies processed just 36% of the nation’s beef. The authors of a recent USDA report wrote that they “knew of no mature American industry that displayed as dramatic a change in concentration in as short a time.”

The cause of that consolidation: economies of scale. “As larger processors have demonstrated lower costs of production,” said Eric Belasco, a professor of agricultural economics at Montana State University, “it’s just been harder for a smaller processing facility to compete.”

While that created better margins for the “Big Four” meatpackers — JBS, Tyson, Cargill and Marfrig (formerly National Beef) — it hasn’t lowered prices for consumers.

Since the early ’80s, the inflation-adjusted cost of ground beef has risen by about 30%.

Ranchers haven’t benefited either. Data on net profits is difficult to find, but gross profits are certainly down. Fifty years ago, ranchers got 60 cents of every dollar that consumers spent on beef; today, it’s 39 cents, according to the White House, which noted this decline when announcing its \$1 billion investment. While that money supports facility expansion and workforce development, it doesn’t help build markets for local meat.

Two decades ago, Lisa Wade Mayorga, whose family has ranched in Montana since 1903, abandoned the Big Four and began selling beef directly to consumers. Unlike many independent ranchers, who must travel long distances to process their meat, she had a small facility nearby.

But earlier this year, it went up for sale, putting Wade Mayorga’s business in jeopardy. So she joined four other ranching families to form the Glacier Processing Cooperative, which is purchasing the plant. Though the co-op has applied for a federal grant for new

Old Salt Co-op co-founder Cole Mannix at the Old Salt meat-processing facility in Helena, Montana (above). **Susan Shain / High Country News**

Chef Jaret Foster, center, oversees the grilling of a half-dozen lambs on a 40-foot-long cinder-block pit at the inaugural Old Salt Festival on the Mannix Ranch outside Helmville, Montana (facing). **Anthony Pavkovich**

equipment, its ultimate success depends on whether its members can attract and retain enough customers.

For independent ranchers, major chains — like Walmart, where 26% of America’s food dollars go — are basically out of the question. “To get into a chain grocery store, you have to have volume,” explained Bill Jones, general manager of the Montana Premium Processing Cooperative, which opened in January. And since it takes two years and roughly \$2,500 to raise a single head of cattle, Jones said it’s “a heck of a challenge” for ranchers to establish enough volume to interest a grocery chain.

Jones said the ranchers in his cooperative sell their meat online, at farmers markets or to local grocers and restaurants. “And then some are doing all three,” he added.

OLD SALT, the Helena plant with the tongues on the table, is taking yet another approach. Rather than each ranch running its own marketing and social media and fighting for a sliver of the same small pie — Montana only has 1.1 million people, after all — the company has united four ranches under a single brand.

“There’s a lot of cannibalization of each other in local food,” said Cole Mannix, an Old Salt co-founder whose family has been

ranching in Montana for five generations. “So we decided to try to consolidate that into one kind of regional effort.” Old Salt has also gone beyond selling meat online: opening a buzzy burger stand in the heart of Helena, organizing a festival and cookouts and ranch tours, and launching a butcher-shop-slash-grill that will showcase its products and host community events.

Mannix hopes these efforts convince Montanans there’s a value in local meat — a value that a Walmart rib-eye can’t offer. “How can all these breweries survive?” he asked. “Because they’re a place for people to hang out. Local food is about human connection.”

Zoe Barnard, who lives in Helena with her partner and their four children, believes that buying locally raised, grass-fed beef is healthier for her family and her community. And, since independent ranchers typically manage their cattle from birth to burger, rather than sending them to feedlots, she also believes it’s more humane and ecologically sustainable. “It’s just such a bizarre thing that you would go to the supermarket in Montana and buy meat that had come from Brazil,” she said.

Barnard gets an Old Salt meat box every six weeks. Since it’s more expensive than shopping at the store, she serves red meat

only once or twice a week. Barnard has also convinced several of her friends to get on board. “I’m like, this is the best meat I’ve ever tasted,” she said. “I don’t even get into my politics.”

Whether Old Salt can find more people like Barnard is an open question — and a critical one. As Mannix put it: “If customers don’t change their buying habits, local meat really doesn’t have a chance.”

Thistlethwaite, of Oregon State University, agrees. “I don’t think (local meat processors) are going to survive unless we see consumers step up more seriously,” she said. “But that’s not really a message that is easy to tell. I get it: Beef is super expensive right now, it’s a luxury item in my household.” While Thistlethwaite said locally processed meat is often available in bulk — and is usually cheaper per pound than beef from the grocery store — she acknowledged it’s not an option for many families, owing to the high upfront cost and requisite freezer space.

So Thistlethwaite thinks institutions like schools, prisons, hospitals, universities and government agencies should start buying meat locally. “That would make a huge impact,” she said. “There needs to be more than just household consumers purchasing local and regional meat.” ☀





An adult chinook salmon slowly makes its way upstream along the American River, east of Sacramento, California, at the tail end of the fall-run spawning season.

REPORTAGE

Losing the scent

As they migrate back to their spawning grounds, some California salmon are getting lost. The culprit is a tactic designed to save them.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY KORI SUZUKI

PICTURE YOURSELF: a chinook salmon, in the prime of your life. You dart through the water off California's central coast, winding through kelp and dodging hungry sea lions. Long,

sleek and silver, dappled with dark spots. Eyes wide and vigilant; 50 pounds of pure muscle.

You've been out at sea for several years now, first voyaging north along the Oregon coastline,

then westward into deeper water. As winter approaches and the days grow shorter, you've found your way back to California. You've felt the seasons turn before, but this year, it means something special.

Your kind, the Central Valley chinook — what fishers call the “king” salmon — are not born at sea. For thousands of years, your ancestors began their lives in the heart of California, where tributaries and streams flow together to form the mighty Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. They fanned out across the valley, across forested streams, desert rivers and delta wetlands. There, hundreds of miles from the ocean, hatchlings the size of paperclips wriggled free from eggs the color of the sun. There,

as young salmon fry, they floated, taking in the scent of their birth river — the beginnings of a map they would use to find their way back one day. There they felt the pull of the water, surrendered themselves to the current and began the long journey downstream.

But over the last 200 years, California has changed, and your kind has changed along with it. The state's rivers have become divided and parched, first by European settlers in search of gold, then by the federal government and a vast network of dams built to divert water to supply growing cities and farms, and now, by years of climate change-fueled drought. Much of those cold-water spawning grounds have vanished, and

many chinook have followed.

Still, some have endured. Imagine you're one of them, born not on a riverbed, but at a hatchery — a human facility built to help salmon survive the damming of their spawning grounds. Now, after years at sea, you have grown large and strong and carry thousands of eggs. You still remember the smell of the tributary where your hatchery stood. The river calls you home.

You find the mouth of the San Francisco Bay and dart through, using the scent of the water to guide you north. The water becomes dark and murky, clouded with silt and vibrating as massive cargo ships carve through the surface of the water above. As you continue, the taste of the water changes again. Darkness and salt give way to fresher waters as you swim below a long, curving bridge. The waters of the bay squeeze between the banks of the Sacramento River. Cities and highways become towns and fields as you travel through the Bay Delta. You remember the smell of this place. As a young smolt, this was dangerous territory, where striped bass and other predators lurked. Now, as an adult salmon, heavy and muscular, you move through without trouble.

But something is wrong. As you push north along the Sacramento River, you arrive at a fork and suddenly, the trail goes cold. You swim back and forth, searching for a familiar scent, but those smells have vanished. You don't remember these waters.

You are lost.

ACROSS CALIFORNIA'S Central Valley, more and more salmon are getting lost as they migrate back to their spawning grounds. The culprit is a conservation tactic meant to help save

them — and it all starts at the hatcheries.

On a warm morning this past June, a group of workers at Nimbus Fish Hatchery, just a few miles north of Sacramento, tended to pools filled with young chinook. One of the hatchery workers waded through the water, corralling the tiny, finger-length smolts at one end of the pool. A pump roared to life, sucking the fish up through a giant plastic tube and into the back of a large silver tanker truck. The fish rose from the pools that had given them life, their tiny silhouettes thrashing against the morning sky. By the time the pump went silent, tens of thousands of young salmon had been packed into the truck, ready to be driven towards the sea.

As salmon numbers have plummeted along the West Coast, state and federal officials have looked to more aggressive measures to stave off collapse. They first built dozens of salmon hatcheries like Nimbus, facilities that Congress funded to make up for the construction of massive dams that cut the fish off from their historic spawning grounds. They created giant staircases to help salmon scale the dams themselves. In recent decades, they have reared some salmon in flooded rice fields and used pressurized tubes to launch others up and over obstacles.

In California's Central Valley, one tactic has drawn particular attention: packing young salmon into trucks and physically hauling them downstream.

These efforts began to ramp up in the 1980s, when officials worried that young hatchery salmon were dying in the rivers before they could even make it to the ocean. Trucking, they reasoned, could bypass that risk by ferrying the young fish to release points farther

downstream or all the way to San Francisco Bay, giving more of them a chance to begin the next phase of their life. At the urging of commercial fishing industry leaders, hatcheries began driving small loads of fish to the ocean. As drought conditions intensified, fueled by climate change, hatcheries began to truck more and more young salmon. Within decades, millions of fish were trundling down the highway — a tactic that researchers say is undeniably bolstering the number of Central Valley chinook salmon that are alive today.

But, according to a growing body of scientific evidence, it's also the reason that many salmon are getting lost on their way back to their birth rivers, placing the future resilience of the species at risk.

In a 2019 study published in the journal *Fisheries*, researchers found that the farther salmon were trucked from their birthplace, the more likely they were to wander into a different river when they came back. Typically, as the young fish travel downstream, they log the scent of different streams, creating a series of waypoints they will one day use to find their way home. But sloshing around in the metal drums of trucks, disoriented and confused, young fish are completely cut off from the smell of the river.

These trucked hatchery fish may survive longer in the short term, but they will return to the river system years later with massive gaps in their memory and little sense of how to locate their spawning grounds. Instead, many end up wandering up unfamiliar rivers or streams and spawning far from home.

"It's very much a double-edged sword," said Anna Sturrock, a lead author of the *Fisheries* study and an aquatic

ecologist at the University of Essex.

The main problem is that the stray salmon are all hatchery fish. Salmon born in hatcheries are less prepared to survive in the wild after being reared in a gentle environment with plenty of food and few predators. As they stray into different rivers, they compete with and breed with the remaining wild salmon, depleting the species' genetic diversity and perhaps weakening its ability to endure threats like climate change or disease outbreaks.

And the Central Valley chinook are already far more vulnerable to these kinds of environmental threats than they used to be. Generations of dam-building and massive water diversions have dwindled their numbers and stripped away much of their historic diversity. Researchers have tied this reduced resilience to past events, like in 2008, when salmon numbers crashed to record lows.

The risks of trucking have been a concern among officials for over a decade. In 2012, a federal review of California's fish hatchery operations concluded that releasing salmon downstream had led to "unacceptable levels of straying" in the Sacramento and San Joaquin river systems and recommended that hatcheries cease all trucking operations.

The tactic has also drawn criticism from some salmon advocates. "Trucking salmon is kind of like putting a Band-Aid on a gaping wound when you cut your leg off," Regina Chichizola, executive director of the Native-led organization Save California Salmon, said. "(It) seems to me like a setup for disaster." Even leaders in the commercial fishing industry, which pushed the state to begin trucking in the first place, openly acknowledge



A display at the visitor center at the Nimbus Fish Hatchery in Gold River, California, shows the early life cycle of a young salmon (top).

A worker tends to containers of fall Central Valley chinook salmon eggs at Nimbus Fish Hatchery in Gold River, California (middle).

Winnemem Wintu Tribe's government liaison Gary Mulcahy speaks during a rally at the state Capitol in Sacramento, California, this past July (bottom).

the risks it poses to the health of the species. "I think anybody in our industry would acknowledge that it wasn't the best option," said Glen Spain, interim executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, a commercial fishing trade group. "The best option is a restored, healthy ecosystem in a restored watershed. But how we're going to get back to that, given the over-industrialization of the Bay Delta and all the dams and water diversions — it's anybody's guess."

Nevertheless, trucking has swelled from an emergency tactic to a pillar of California's approach to salmon. In recent years, state Department of Fish and Wildlife trucks have ferried millions of fish from hatcheries to the ocean.

"The valley has experienced, over the last decade, two of the worst long-term, multi-year droughts that our state has seen," said Jason Julienne, the North Central Region hatchery supervisor for the Department of Fish and Wildlife. "With all strategies that we have at our disposal, there are pluses and minuses."

ON THAT WARM June morning, the Department of Fish and Wildlife truck rumbled out of the hatchery and onto the main road. A second truck, also full of salmon, followed close behind. They trundled down the highway with their precious cargo, passing condominiums and strip-mall law offices and manicured lawns.

State authorities are currently searching for ways to alleviate the risks of trucking. In 2012, the Department of Fish and Wildlife began a pilot study on salmon barging, an option that involves transporting a few hundred thousand young salmon downstream from within the safety of a repurposed

fishing vessel, keeping them in direct contact with the river but shielded from predators and other dangers. Sturrock, the ecologist, said fellow researchers have also discussed having salmon trucks drain and refill their tanks at different places along the river to give the young salmon some points of reference, although she said they have not yet found a way to engineer that.

But the ultimate solution, most salmon advocates and researchers say, is restoring access to the species' lost habitat and reorganizing California's archaic water-rights system.

California tribes are leading rewilding movements to revive salmon in the far northern parts of the state. Along the California-Oregon border, four tribal governments — the Yurok, Karuk, Hoopa Valley and Klamath tribes — have begun the largest dam-removal project in American history with the goal of reviving the natural spawning grounds of salmon and other native species. Above Shasta Dam, scientists have been ferrying salmon eggs back upriver to help them spawn as part of a joint project between the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to bring the endangered winter-run chinook salmon back from the brink of extinction.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has also announced that it will investigate how California manages its water. The decision came after several tribes and environmental groups filed a civil rights complaint last December, accusing the California Water Board of creating an ecological crisis in the Bay Delta by diverting too much water away from the rivers, wreaking havoc on the Central

Valley chinook, among other species.

“There’s really hopeful things happening,” Save California Salmon’s Chichizola said. “Things that we thought were impossible.”

Eventually, the two Department of Fish and Wildlife trucks slowed to a halt near a parking lot along the American River. The distance hatchery workers end up transporting the young salmon depends on the location of the hatchery and how healthy the rivers are. In some cases, they end up driving loads of young chinook between 50 and 100 miles.

Today, though, they didn’t need to take the fish that far. The Sacramento River’s tributaries were surging with cold water

from the winter storms that hit California at the beginning of this year — good conditions for the salmon to make their way downstream. One by one, the trucks backed up to the water and released their cargo, sending hundreds of thousands of little fish tumbling into the river for the very first time.

YOU ARE TIRED. It’s been a long, hard journey to reach this fork where the Sacramento and American rivers meet. And now, your guiding map has gone dark. You swim back and forth slowly, allowing the water to push you backwards for a few seconds, then churning your tail in a rapid burst to retake that ground. It takes energy, a lot of energy, to even hold yourself in place here

in the river. If you relax for even a few seconds, you could lose precious yards of progress. And you only have so long to lay your eggs.

So, what now? You could follow the rushing Sacramento River to the left and forge ahead, searching for another familiar scent. You could die here — relax and sink to the riverbed or let the water carry you back downstream. Or maybe you could take the right fork towards the American River, a river your ancestors never spawned in, to look for a new place to lay your eggs. It isn’t home, but it may be the best bet you have if you still want the new generation that you carry to survive.

You swim toward it, leaving the waters you know behind. ☀

“The best option is a restored, healthy ecosystem in a restored watershed.”

Workers at the Nimbus Hatchery conduct the first downstream release of young fall-run Central Valley chinook salmon of the year at Upper Sunrise Boat Ramp in Gold River, California, in May.



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"I am donating today because I finally got around to reading Jaclyn Moyer's story about Letitia Carson and the Soap Creek Ranch (June 2023 issue). What an amazing piece of writing! I am singling it out, but almost EVERYTHING I read in HCN impresses me."

—Sue Stack, Newcastle, California

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DEAR FRIENDS

Encountering HCN

In September, I asked you to send in your stories about encountering *High Country News* in the wild — the first time the magazine crossed your path or a noteworthy rendezvous with a reader. A hearty thanks to everyone who responded. We hope the stickers we sent spark yet more conversations and encounters. (If you want a sticker, write me at dearfriends@hcn.org.)

Michael Schrantz,
marketing communications
manager

I was born and raised in South Carolina, and in 1998, the summer after my freshman year of college, I took a job at the Grand Canyon and headed West.

The first mountains I encountered were the Sangre de Cristo Range in northern New Mexico. I still remember the awe I felt, driving up through the foothills. A spark was ignited in my soul, which has continued to this day.

*That night I stayed at a hostel near Taos Pueblo. Rising to the cool crispness of a high-country morning, I was introduced to two dramatically new things. A long-haired fellow said, “Hey, do you want a breakfast burrito?” The combination of spicy Hatch chiles, slightly burnt potatoes and eggs was a culinary awakening, and I ate it with an 18-year-old’s gusto. On the table there was a copy of *High Country News*. I can’t recall the topics covered, but I clearly remember realizing that I was in a unique place, with unique stories and a publication that shared them.*

That was 25 years ago. The West has remained a constant lodestone, even though I reside in the southern Appalachians. I have traveled across the Mountain West at every opportunity and remain committed to understanding the unique stories of, and the challenges facing, the high country.

— Stuart Miles, North Carolina

I’ve happily subscribed to HCN for years, and I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been asked about an article or photograph.

I visit a hot spring at least once a month and always bring the latest issue with me. Invariably, someone asks me what I’m reading. I try to

leave my copy at the spring to pass along. I’ve certainly enjoyed discussing the West with people over the years.

— David Divine, Colorado Springs

My first encounter with HCN was in a roundabout conversation with my landlord, a gentleman with the last name of Marston. (Ed. note: This would have been David Marston, Ed and Betsy’s son.) My husband and I moved to Paonia in June 2021 and were renting office space at the Harvester Building. As a CSU journalism school grad, I was delighted to find out a rocking independent magazine was based right in my new (tiny) hometown and immediately subscribed. Never looked back, and I read every issue cover to cover.

— Emily Hancock, Paonia

*I married into the North Fork Valley after 10 years as a ski bum in Summit and Eagle counties. At the Hotchkiss Library, I found a black-and-white newspaper — *High Country News*. I read my first HCN cover-to-cover that day and subscribed in person the next day.*

That was my first visit to Paonia, exploring the back roads from my new home at the Hotchkiss National Fish Hatchery. With five free back issues of HCN in hand, I read them all in five days at the hatchery as I sat along the North Fork of the Gunnison River.

HCN introduced me to the real West. All I’d known, or cared about, until then were ski towns and Rockies baseball. I lived in a bubble of self-gratification. Since moving to western Colorado, I discovered mesas, orchards, ranches, wildlife, flora, energy development, water conflicts, and people I hadn’t previously known much about. I do now, 22 years later. Thanks for the education!

— Mary Russell, Boulder



A unique encounter: Photographer Jim Mangan spotted *High Country News* while documenting the lives of the young men who live along the Arizona-Utah border in an area called Short Creek, or the Crick, where the Fundamental Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had a stronghold before the fall of Warren Jeffs. *The Crick*, a book about the years Mangan spent photographing the community, is available this month from Twin Palms Publishers. **Jim Mangan**

Question of the month

“There are a few books that, when I think of them, I am certain they saved my life in some way.”

— Sterling HolyWhiteMountain, page 43

What is your saved-my-life book? Send it to dearfriends@hcn.org.



Unstable Earth


Kasigluk, Alaska, endures the many challenges of thawing permafrost.

Photos and text by Katie Basile

“LET’S SHOW HER THE BIG MOUTH,” Marie Twitchell said to her dad. Wilson Twitchell smiled and shifted the angle of his boat motor slightly so they could take me there. We were on a small skiff, navigating a web of tundra lakes, rivers and sloughs in Southwest Alaska near the Yup’ik village of Kasigluk. At 11 p.m., the midsummer sun was beginning to set, and the temperature was dropping; I braced myself against the wind. Wilson, his wife, Bertha, and four of their seven children — Angela, Rochelle and Yeako, as well as Marie — all sat snugly on the boat’s bench seats, along the floor or in a camping chair. Snorty, their small black dog, circled our feet, ready to bark at the ducks that flew alongside us.

Before long, we rounded a corner and I saw a sloping tundra knoll protruding from the water. A dark, gaping horizontal hole was eroding right out of it, looking very much like a big mouth. As we drew near, the smell of decay grew strong. Thick mud dripped from the ceiling into the water. The cave was shallow but dark, except where the light caught a patch of ice deep within, shining and melting in the exposed air.

Permafrost. For all the times I’ve walked over the top of it or spoken its name, it’s a rare slice of earth to actually see, the ancient ice and frozen ground that underlies so much of Alaska, including where I live in nearby Bethel. It’s a constantly shifting presence that forces us to level our homes, makes constructing basements nearly impossible and now is quietly thawing in the warming climate — taking homes, schools, boardwalks and even graveyards with it.



A tundra island near Kasigluk erodes, exposing thawing permafrost. Two months after this photo was taken, the opening collapsed completely.

Climate change and thawing permafrost are impacting both landscapes and lifestyles in and around Kasigluk. The Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta is made up of thousands of tundra lakes, ponds and silty river estuaries. Erosion and shifting land have always been a part of life here, but climate change is ratcheting up the speed and intensity of these natural processes. Along with that, forced assimilation of Yup'ik people, who traditionally moved between seasonal camps, led to the construction of permanent infrastructure on unstable land.

Wilson Twitchell stood up on his boat, pointed out toward the eroding tundra and recalled a visit to this very spot two years earlier with his kids, looking for moose. “We were able to park (the boat) right below it and just walk straight up that knoll there,” Wilson said. “You can’t do that anymore — it’s gone.”

TWO DAYS LATER I stepped off the boardwalk in Kasigluk and into the Twitchells’ home. A river, the An’arctiiq, commonly called the Johnson River, divides Kasigluk into two halves, Akiuk and Akula. Akiuk is older, and the land beneath it is sinking into tundra marsh and eroding into the river. Akula, the newer side of the village, sits much higher, on a more stable piece of land. The Kasigluk Traditional Council is working to expand Akula and relocate the entire community there. But the speed at which Akiuk is disappearing far outpaces that at which the federal government funds the relocation of communities facing climate catastrophes. Winter freeze-up provides seasonal stability in Akiuk, but for six months of the year, many homes are in

danger of flooding or falling into the river.

Kasigluk is not alone. Erosion, permafrost thaw and flooding are happening with more frequency and intensity in communities throughout Alaska. The nearby village of Napakiak is losing up to 100 feet of land a year to erosion, while out toward the Bering Sea coast, Newtok is actively relocating due to the encroaching Ninglick River. In Bethel, spring flooding is common in my low-lying neighborhood — but now we also prepare for fall floods due to stronger, scarier storms like last year’s Typhoon Merbok.

Down the boardwalk at the far end of Akiuk, Susanna Isaac, a retired teacher, talked about the changes she’s seen in Kasigluk. The tundra knolls where she gathered eggs as a child have collapsed into marsh, and the hard-packed dirt she used to play on is under water. Isaac sighed and looked out the window as she spoke.

“Nobody sane would be staying here today,” Isaac said. “We really need to relocate now. All we’re waiting for is our house to fall, and if our house falls, then we have no choice but to move away. Not here, because housing’s not available. So we have to move away.”

While visiting Isaac the evening before, I had watched her son working outside to level one of their outbuildings. Her kids and grandkids sorted and packed dried fish on the kitchen floor.

“My plan is to move to Anchorage, where I know my daughter will help us settle in,” Isaac continued. “But if they do give us land here, we’d gladly stay because this is where we grew up. The hunting, the picking berries ... all of our Native ways are here.” ❀



Some structures in Kasigluk, like this smokehouse, are sinking completely into the tundra due to thawing permafrost (*above*). Wilson Twitchell takes a step down into his home, holding ribs he barbecued on the grill. The Twitchells' house has dropped about a foot since a decade ago, when he led the construction of one of the boardwalks that connects the community's buildings. "When we first built that, we had to step down to the boardwalk. And now, 10 years later, we have to step down into the porch from the boardwalk," he said. The Twitchells would like to move across the river to Akula, but development of a subdivision is still a few years off (*right*).





Kenton Isaac, 5, one of Susanna Isaac's grandchildren, splashes his feet in the water near his home in Akiuk. "Come spring, the water goes all the way under the sidewalks we walk on," Susanna Isaac said this summer. The spring floodwaters still had not receded by mid-July (*left*). Brothers George and Jackie Isaac (under the structure), Susanna and Charlie Isaac's sons, level an outbuilding, a freezer house, near their family's home in Akiuk. When thawing permafrost causes the ground to shift in Kasigluk, as happens frequently, people have to re-level buildings. "Every year things are changing, and you can tell," said Charlie Isaac. "It got warmer (in the last five years). When the sun is out, it's really hot. So it's just heating up." (*below*)





Bertha and Wilson Twitchell stand outside their home, where Wilson grew up. On a photograph of part of present-day Akiuk, Wilson drew an image of what the land was like when he was young: Grass and dry land surrounded the house, stretching at least 80 feet to the riverbank, where he remembers playing with toy boats (above). Now, when the water is particularly high, the house is nearly an island with the Johnson River running under the front and tundra ponds encroaching on the back. "Three or four weeks ago, we were hearing some lumber and waves crashing underneath the kitchen," Wilson said. "Every time a boat would pass or we were getting west winds, we were hearing some wood knocking that was floating on top of the water, trapped underneath the floor."



Susanna Isaac stands on an old dock in Akiuk that connects to the community's boardwalks. "We can't even walk off them or we will sink. It's too swampy," she said. It wasn't like that when she was growing up. "There used to be a path of mud, hard mud, and we'd walk back and forth to houses." Isaac sketched memories of how the land has changed over time in Kasigluk (below). "I remember we used to play during recess down where those boardwalks are now," she said. "We used to pick berries, a whole lot of us from the village, and it never used to seem to run out. And we'd be picking grass, too, from here, for our winter shoes. But the land was, I would say, pretty wide at that time. Compared to today, most of it where we used to stomp around is all gone."





Children play basketball outside of Akiuk Memorial School. There are limited areas for kids to play in Akiuk because so much of the ground is saturated with water (above). The cemetery in Akiuk is no longer safe to walk in or maintain due to sinkholes and unstable ground. The community now lays its members to rest in a new cemetery in Akula (right).



This reporting was supported by the International Women's Media Foundation's Howard G. Buffett Fund for Women Journalists. KYUK reporter Nina Kravinsky contributed to this story.



Boats travel from Akiuk to Akula on the Johnson River (*left*). Jaylene Nicholas and her niece, Maeva Kassel, walk along the boardwalk in Akula. Because Akula was built on higher and drier land than Akiuk, it's a safer place to live. A recent engineering report commissioned by the Kasigluk Traditional Council found that there are at least seven structures immediately threatened by erosion in Akiuk — and none are in immediate danger in Akula (*below*).



THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS PUSHING WASHINGTON'S PRISONS TO THE BRINK. WHY NOT LET PEOPLE OUT?

By Sarah Sax and Christopher Blackwell
Illustrations by Cristiana Couceiro

Black mold covered the showers at Mission Unit, and the carpets were so thick with mold spores that a musty smell rose whenever anybody moved.

THE MISSION CREEK Corrections Center for Women (MCCCW) sits on Washington’s Kitsap Peninsula, a little over an hour’s drive west of Tacoma. The three units that comprise it are nestled in a forest between adventure resorts and off-road vehicle parks. Last winter, snow blanketed the rugged terrain and temperatures dropped to freezing, turning the roads slick with ice.

The countryside around the prison is beautiful, Tiffany Doll, a 51-year-old woman incarcerated there, told *High Country News* and *Type Investigations*. Tall trees surround it, and people inside often see deer and rabbits. Doll has a lot of time to observe the environment: She’s one of a handful of incarcerated women working on a project by Evergreen State College to raise, breed and release the endangered Taylor’s checkerspot butterfly. All year long, Doll meticulously monitors the conditions the larvae need to complete their cycle from egg to butterfly. In spring, she feeds them wildflower leaves and plantains grown on-site, and during winter, when they’re locked in a hibernation-like state called a diapause, she monitors the humidity of the terracotta containers they’re kept in. It’s a delicate balance; if the larvae get too hot or too cold, the environmental conditions too wet or too dry, they die.

Doll sees the irony of the contrast between the care she

gives to the butterfly larvae and her own environmental conditions. She was transferred to MCCCW in September 2021, and throughout that first fall and winter, the boiler was continuously breaking. Staff allowed the women just one extra blanket and permitted them to wear hats in the dayroom, but the building was freezing. “This is the facility where we are getting released from,” she said. “It’s supposed to prepare women for the outside world.”

One of the original units — Mission Unit — was built over half a century ago and the age shows itself in the omnipresent smell of mold. Melinda Barrera, a 43-year-old woman incarcerated at MCCCW, lived in Mission for several months in 2022. Black mold covered the showers, she said, and the carpets were so thick with mold spores that a musty smell rose whenever anybody moved. A 2020 survey of incarcerated women by the Washington Office of the Corrections Ombuds, a state watchdog agency for the Department of Corrections, noted a host of similar problems.

Those surveyed reported shocking conditions: the roof in Mission unit caving in from the air conditioning, leaky ceilings and light fixtures, black mildew in the showers, ventilation units full of dust and hair, termites in the cupboards. Women developed scalp fungus or their hair fell out in clumps from chemicals and fecal contaminants in the water.

One survey response, echoed by several of the five women we spoke to, said that Mission Unit was in such disrepair that it “needs to be condemned.”

Mission Creek isn’t the only prison struggling to keep its residents safe in an increasingly unpredictable environment. Many of Washington’s 12 prisons — including Washington Corrections Center, where Chris Blackwell, one of this investigation’s authors, is incarcerated — have been pushed to the brink by public health crises and years of neglected maintenance. Climate change could send them over the edge.

“We are locked into 1.5 degrees of warming,” Meade Crosby, the senior scientist with the University of Washington Climate Impacts Group, told *HCN* and *Type*. For Washington, that means a growing number of very hot days, higher chances of both increased flooding and drought, and larger and more frequent wildfires on both sides of the Cascades.

The climate is warming at such an unprecedented pace that, unless we rapidly and immediately decarbonize our entire energy system, we are no longer able to only make small, incremental changes, such as installing AC units, Crosby said. “The change that needs to happen for us to be able to live sustainably on this planet needs to be transformative.”

“We should be treated with the same respect and dignity as anyone in a long term mental health institution or assisted living facility. I’ve made mistakes, but I’m still human.”

Nowhere is this as true — or as urgent — as it is for prisons. Like prisons around the country, Washington’s 12 facilities are plagued by long-deferred maintenance and crumbling infrastructure. Even without the added impacts of climate change, prisons pose an ever-growing risk to incarcerated people.

This comes at a steep cost to the state: Last year, the Washington Department of Corrections, or DOC, submitted a 10-year capital budget request estimating that it will take nearly \$800 million over the next decade just to maintain and repair current infrastructure. That estimate increases to \$1.2 billion with new programming and basic upgrades, such as installing AC units in some prisons. According to the capital budget passed by the Legislature this year, the DOC received just over \$80 million for the next two years.

But infrastructure is just one part of the puzzle. The Washington DOC, like most corrections departments around the country, lacks a comprehensive climate adaptation plan, and there is limited agency guidance on how to keep incarcerated people safe during events like heat waves, as *HCN* and *Type* reported in the first installment of this investigation. Without infrastructure and planning, punitive measures — including solitary confinement, lockdowns and restrictions on the use of educational and recreational spaces — are more frequently employed, with negative impacts on incarcerated people.

Interviews with more than two dozen people incarcerated in eight prisons across Washington, criminal justice experts and advocates, as well as two public records requests and public documents revealed that 2022 was an inflection point for incarcerated

people in Washington. It was the first year of a new normal, one in which climate hazards, a public health crisis and deteriorating infrastructure merged to create a different type of seasonal calendar, one experienced as much through restrictive policies regulating people’s access to the environment as through changes in the environment itself.

This leaves the state with two alternatives. It can spend massive amounts of taxpayer dollars to retrofit outdated infrastructure to keep people incarcerated in ever-worsening conditions. Or it can pursue an option that some advocates and policymakers are already paving the way for: Reducing the prison population, or decarceration.

CHRISTOPHER HALL, a 49-year-old man incarcerated at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center in Connell, Washington, started feeling ill just a few days after the start of 2022. Christmas had been cold and dark, and temperatures over the New Year dipped as low as minus 5 degrees Fahrenheit. Connell, with a population of about 5,000, is on the eastern edge of the Yakima Valley, and its primary industries are food processing, agricultural chemicals — and Coyote Ridge.

It’s a land of extremes: Hot, dry summers turn the surrounding land into rolling brown fields interspersed with sagebrush. In the winter, the landscape lies bare. Inside the prison, the state’s largest by population, the compound is a study in gray, all concrete buildings and large steel doors set amid acres of asphalt.

The new, highly contagious COVID-19 variant omicron arrived at the end of 2021, just as winter was starting, edging out the previously dominant delta variant in a matter of weeks. Washington had already been

battered by a steady stream of natural disasters, each one made significantly worse by climate change: historic heat waves, atmospheric rivers of rain, record-breaking cold snaps. It was the official start of “COVID season,” a physician declared on a local Seattle news station.

For the 1,800 people incarcerated at Coyote Ridge, it would turn out to be the worst COVID season yet. At Christmas, there were no confirmed COVID cases among incarcerated people at the facility. Four weeks later, there were 410 new cases.

Hall and a half-dozen other men tested positive. He was transferred without any of his belongings to a unit that had been empty for months and lacked heat. “We didn’t have none of our medication (or) commissary,” Hall said. “And they put us in this unit where it was so cold, we had to leave the doors open to the cells all night long.”

Meals were pushed into the unit on a cart and left there. Sick with COVID and without any heat, while outside the temperature dipped into the mid-20s, the men were left with no access to medicine, not even basic pain relievers and fever reducers. Four days passed before maintenance came and turned on the heat, Hall said, and by the time he finally got his first dose of ibuprofen — more than a week later — he was basically recovered. But for the rest of the prison population, the season was just beginning.

Imagine the worst possible place for contracting a highly contagious viral disease, and you’d have a prison: a closed, overcrowded concrete structure with poor ventilation, inconsistent access to hand-washing and sanitation, and a population disproportionately made up of what the Centers for Disease Control defines as a vulnerable

demographic. Statewide, by the end of January, almost 5,000 incarcerated people out of a total population of just over 12,000 had tested positive.

Experts say the outbreak was a preview of what we can expect in a steadily warming world. “The future will not only be hotter, but also sicker,” said Greg Albery, an infectious disease ecologist who studies how climate change intersects with diseases passed from animals to humans — the primary source of most pandemics. Not only are animals getting sicker as temperatures rise and environments degrade, but as humans encroach on wildlife habitat, encounters with wild animals are becoming more frequent. “Infectious diseases are going to be increasingly a part of everyday life, and that’s coming from the climate change angle.”

THE THING that Frank Lazcano, a 35-year-old man incarcerated at Airway Heights Corrections Center, which is near Spokane, most associates with springtime at the prison is water. Located amid wetlands and along a migratory bird path, the compound is crisscrossed with ditches and culverts that drain the water from rain or that seeps up from springs. Except in the summer, there is always some water in them, Lazcano said. Rabbits and marmots occasionally make warrens in the culvert tubes, and flower gardens line the buildings. There’s a small vegetable garden and beekeeping boxes that can be seen from the recreation yard. Starting in spring, frogs begin to croak, creating a cacophony that doesn’t end until fall. It’s only drowned out by the earsplitting sound of jets from nearby Fairchild Air Force Base, located barely a stone’s throw away. Aircraft ranging from fighter jets to Apache helicopters and

huge cargo carriers circle continuously overhead, tainting the air with the smell of jet fuel and poisoning the ground with PFAS, the notorious “forever chemicals.” In 2017, testing confirmed that groundwater used by the prison had been contaminated by firefighting foam, which also contains the highly carcinogenic chemicals. The Department of Corrections is now suing the air base for millions of dollars.

Springtime also means flooding, Lazcano said. The culverts regularly overflow, often forcing the closure of the yard. To check for leaks in the water pipes that run the building’s HVAC system, maintenance will occasionally dye the water green, says Lazcano. There are so many leaks in the antiquated pipes that it turns the water in the ditches the same bright green. Many of the roofs also leak — in the gymnasium,

the education rooms, the libraries, the medical areas and the main visiting rooms. This leads to collapsing ceiling tiles and frequent closure of the gym, weight room and yard.

Lazcano worries about the long-term consequences of all of this. The poor environmental conditions affect everyone, he said, both physically and mentally, but getting any kind of medical care can take months,



also report water quality con-
taminant (e.g. Survey No. 83).
developing scalp fungus of
the bald spots due to chemi-
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Emergency Complaint
Date/Time: 7-30



and misdiagnoses are common. “We are stuck here breathing jet exhaust and drinking contaminated water with the lowest standard of medical care,” he wrote to *HCN* and *Type*. “We should be treated with the same respect and dignity as anyone in a long term mental health institution or assisted living facility. I’ve made mistakes, but I’m still human.”

Airway Heights is one of many prisons with significant infrastructure challenges. The Washington DOC is responsible for more than \$3 billion in state assets, mainly prisons. According to the 2023-2033 Ten-Year Capital Plan, 158 of the 798 DOC buildings are in what the department deems “critical condition,” with an estimated \$495 million in deferred maintenance. When asked about the conditions detailed in the report, a DOC spokesperson suggested they posed little risk. “While DOC has a significant maintenance backlog, we do not believe incarcerated individuals are placed in harm’s way as a result of infrastructure challenges,” the

spokesperson wrote in an email. “The agency makes every effort to find temporary solutions while we await funding to permanently fix problems.”

But the 630-page document painted a far more dire picture of a prison system struggling under a growing backlog of needed repairs. Deteriorating pipes cause heavy metals to leach into drinking water, fire alarms are in urgent need of updating, HVAC systems frequently don’t work. A roof replacement request for Unit 8 in the East Complex at the Washington State Penitentiary, for example, notes that “the rooftop has failed, causing water infiltration and damage to infrastructure of the building beneath the roof, saturating insulation, and other materials inside the building and causing the structure below to rust and deteriorate, which creates life safety concerns for staff and incarcerated individuals in this building.”

At the Twin Rivers Unit and the Special Offenders Unit at the Monroe Correctional Complex, “The existing plumbing is in

such terrible condition that the cells at the end of the heating loops in these living units remain unheated,” the DOC wrote, requesting \$50 million for repairs. If the HVAC systems are not repaired, “the equipment could fail completely, leaving a building(s) without heating or cooling. ... DOC does not have the operational capacity at this time that can be used in the event of a large-scale failure.”

According to the Climate Impacts Group’s studies, Washington is on track to see a 67% increase in days with temperatures above 90 degrees Fahrenheit by the 2030s. Without access to air conditioning, extreme heat in prisons could be dangerous and even life-threatening.

SUMMER ON THE COAST of Washington got off to a slow start in June 2022, but by the end of July, Seattle was setting a new record for the longest heat wave in its history, logging its sixth consecutive day of temperatures in the 90s. On July 29, when a heat

wave in the Pacific Northwest left 11 million people under excessive heat warnings and another 12 million under heat advisories, Todd Bass, a formerly incarcerated person at Cedar Creek Corrections Center just west of Tacoma, filed a grievance.

“I battle dehydration and heat exhaustion,” he wrote. “The living conditions in my unit when returning from work are unsafe due to oppressive heat.”

Bass works as a wildland firefighter during the summer. He had been out that day and the days before it, digging firelines and fire trenches with his 10-man crew in grueling heat for over 14 hours a day, only to return to his cell on the second floor of Cedar Creek, which lacked air conditioning and airflow, and where the heat never subsided.

“It stays 90-100 degrees into the evening,” he told *HCN* and *Type*. “For normal people that aren’t working all day in the heat and smoke it is already bad. But for those of us trying to perform and stay safe, it is too much.”

Like many Western states, Washington relies heavily on its incarcerated population to fight forest fires, deploying around 300 incarcerated firefighters every year. But the combination of larger, more frequent and more intense wildfires and steadily rising average temperatures is putting wildland firefighters at increased risk. Extended exposure to heat can impair physical and cognitive processes, as well as increase the risk of injury. Adequate rest, hydration and cooling are essential for people recovering from strenuous outdoor exertion, and air conditioning is the most effective way to cool indoor temperatures enough to allow for adequate sleep and recovery, especially when nighttime temperatures are high, Jeremy Hess, an emergency

physician who studies health systems and climate change, said.

In addition to the \$800 million capital preservation request, the DOC is also requesting \$10 million to add cooling capacity to housing units in the prisons that pose the greatest threat of heat illness for the incarcerated population, DOC staff and visitors. Cedar Creek is not on the list.

“If no action is taken, and in consideration of accepted climate change effects, incarcerated individuals under the care and custody of DOC will be at risk of heat-related illness in housing units that cannot maintain safe living conditions under the accepted threshold of 80 degrees Fahrenheit during extreme heat wave events,” the report said.

But even if enough funding is available, outdated electrical and plumbing systems will make it difficult to install air conditioning at many of the prisons.

Citing *HCN* and *Type*'s investigation last year into the 2021 heat wave and its impacts on incarcerated people, the former U.S. State Attorney for the Western District of Washington requested information from the DOC in June 2022 on how it was planning to deal with future heat waves.

Sean Murphy, the deputy secretary at DOC, sent an email to members of the department's Executive Strategy Team and other administrators in July 2022, requesting information on HVAC capacity and costs. “We need to know costs of renting self-contained units, buying self-contained units, and the overall costs for a significant capital expenditure to install air conditioning within the existing units,” he wrote. “We also need to know if the power at each of the priority facilities can handle the load of temporary units.”

HCN and *Type* obtained a list of those results through a public records request. It showed that eight out of 12 correctional facilities would not be able to support the electrical load needed for temporary air conditioners during a heat wave, or did not know whether they could support it, or else had structural issues that would impede installing temporary AC.

Given the problems caused by the rising heat, inadequate AC and limited help from higher-ups, staff turn to the tools most readily available in prisons: punitive measures.

On the other side of the Cascades from Cedar Creek, temperatures around Spokane were also rising, sliding into the triple digits by July 27 and hovering around there for five days. Almost immediately, a steady stream of grievances poured in. But rather than focusing on the extreme temperatures or lack of AC, incarcerated people complained about the loss of the one thing that, after months of lockdowns and quarantines, had kept many of them sane: Access to the yard and to recreation.

Gary King, who is incarcerated at Airway Heights, wrote, “AHCC is using heat advisory to not give and let (incarcerated individuals) have recreation. According to AHCC, they plan on taking (incarcerated individuals') recreation the whole summer. That's ridiculous.”

Without access to the yard, which had already been restricted because of COVID-19, incarcerated people were effectively forced to either sit in their cells or hang out in the dayroom, where they had to stay seated; standing, walking laps and other physical activities were not allowed in his particular unit, Thomus Manos, an incarcerated man at Airway Heights, wrote. Researchers have shown

that prolonged exposure to heat increases aggression and lowers cognitive ability; in the long term, it increases the risk of metabolic diseases like diabetes and high cholesterol, as well as heart attacks and stroke. But the same thing holds true for lack of exercise, which can cause obesity, metabolic and cardiac diseases. The combination is a health disaster.

According to emails obtained through a public records request regarding managerial responses to extreme heat over the summer, HVAC malfunctions at prisons like Monroe caused the library to become unbearably hot. It was shut down, and the rooms used for mental health services had to go without cooling for at least 20 days, effectively punishing people because there was no way to regulate the increasingly extreme indoor temperatures.

The increased use of punitive measures to deal with public health and environmental conditions is not new. But it skyrocketed nationwide during the pandemic, causing extensive psychological harm to the incarcerated population. In September 2022, Karen Endnote, who is currently incarcerated at Mission Creek Corrections Center for Women, caught COVID for the second time. She was transferred to the larger women's prison in Gray Harbor and put in solitary confinement.

For one week, Endnote was locked in an 8-by-10-foot room with a toilet, a sink and a concrete slab with a thin mattress. Glaring overhead lights were left on 24 hours a day, and her food was shoved into the room through a slit carved out of the thick steel door. Trash piled up around her room, and she lost her phone privileges. “We were sick!” she recalled. “We were sick, and they treated us like utter crap.” She was too sick to eat and had to be put on a liquid diet. The entire time she

was there, she was only allowed to take one shower. “It was punishment, that's what it felt like,” she said. “That we were getting punished cause we were sick.”

It was the first and only time Endnote had ever been in solitary, a practice the United Nations special rapporteur has deemed tantamount to torture. This year, she caught COVID again. At least she is pretty sure she did; she chose to not get tested. “I wasn't going to take that chance again,” she said.

The fight to end solitary confinement has been going on for decades, and it had made steady progress before the pandemic. The ACLU declared 2019 a watershed moment for ending the practice after 28 states introduced legislation to ban or restrict solitary confinement and 12 states passed reforms. And then prisons were struck, unprepared, by a major public health crisis. In October 2021, original research released by the Marshall Project and Solitary Watch showed that solitary confinement increased across the country during the pandemic, from roughly 50,000 people to nearly 300,000 on any given day, with current rates still 2.5 times higher than pre-pandemic levels.

According to the DOC, “Secretary (Cheryl) Strange has committed to drastically reducing the use of solitary confinement at all of our facilities over the next five years. We have spent the past few months working with industry experts and consultants on a comprehensive plan to achieve that goal without compromising the safety of staff or incarcerated individuals. The plan is being finalized and we expect to release it in the near future.”

COVID-19 quarantines normalized solitary confinement,

Jessica Sandoval, the national director of Unlock the Box, told *HCN* and *Type*. Now prisons are reaching for punitive measures like lockdowns and other restrictions to deal with climate disasters. “If the only tool they have is a hammer, everything is seen as a nail,” she said. “In this case and so many other cases, that’s their tool.”

THE MONROE CORRECTIONS

Complex, a campus comprising five prison units, sits in a fertile valley, flanked by the sprawling Skykomish River on one side and white-capped mountains in the background. The imposing brick administrative building at the entrance, adorned with colonial-style pillars, bright green grass and towering trees, paints a peaceful picture. But behind the brick lie gun towers and forbidding walls. One of the prisons is over a century old. It leaks when it rains and traps heat and humidity. Mold spreads, leaving black blotches on the walls and floors. Now wildfires are adding another health hazard to the mix.

Atif Rafay has been incarcerated in Washington since 2004 and is currently in Twin Rivers Unit. “I didn’t notice the smoke as much in the 2000s or early 2010s, even,” he told *HCN* and *Type* over the phone. “But now, every year about the same time, at the end of summer when stuff is heated up and dried out, the wildfires start.”

Since 2012, wildfires and smoke season have become an unofficial part of the Seattle area’s calendar. The fires went from burning tens of thousands of acres in 2011 to hundreds of thousands in 2012. Every year since then, more than 150,000 acres have burned, according to Thomas Kyle-Milward, who each year tabulates fire statistics across the various state and federal agencies involved in

wildfire management.

Last September, smoke from the Bolt Creek Fire near Skykomish added to the layer of haze from the fires burning farther north into Canada. “Seattle smoke season is here,” *Capital Hills Seattle Blog* declared.

“The sky was incredible,” Rafay remembered. The air glowed orange and sunsets were a bright fuchsia. “You could not leave your windows open because of the smoke.” He recalled walking from his unit outside to the chow hall and watching ash from the wildfires fall onto his shoulders.

The face masks he’d seen as useless against COVID-19 suddenly became useful, shielding them from the fine particulates that come from burning forests and further damage lungs. For Rafay, this was important. One study examining the correlation between increased particulate matter from West Coast wildfires in 2020 and COVID-19 cases found that wildfires significantly increased illnesses and deaths, up to four weeks after the exposure.

Rafay’s lungs were already damaged from a bad case of pneumonia in 2019, which was misdiagnosed by prison nurses for days. More than a year later, he got COVID-19. He was placed in one of the military-style tents set up on the grounds, a Rapid Deployment Care Facility (RDCF) that patients jokingly renamed the “Really Don’t Care Facility.”

He remembered being sick and yet obliged to help four other men carry a heavy hospital bed from one dormitory tent to another because the roof was collapsing under the weight of the snow. Perhaps afraid of catching the virus, the staff left baby monitoring alarms to keep track of the patients from a distance, effectively leaving the sick men

on their own. “That experience was the craziest thing I have ever seen,” Rafay said.

He noted that the systemic tendency continues to be toward less, not more, freedom for incarcerated people. During wildfires, prison administrators will cancel outdoor privileges and gym access and keep everyone cooped up inside, Rafay told *Type* and *HCN*. You can’t go outdoors because of the smoke, he said, but staying inside means everyone is confined to their cells or the day room.

While the main threat fires pose comes from poor air quality, the fires themselves are becoming more dangerous. Last year, incarcerated people at the Larch Corrections Center in Clark County were evacuated when the nearby Nakia Creek Fire expanded in size. Scientists predict that not only will the fire season become longer, the area burned by wildfires in Washington is expected to double by the 2040s, and triple by the 2080s.

And these climate hazards aren’t happening in isolation. “The challenges as we move forward — and by this I mean a decade or two — is it’s not just going to be a heat wave — it’s going to be a heat wave combined with a nearby fire combined with blackouts combined with displaced populations,” Hess, the emergency physician, said. “I don’t want to be just pointing to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse all the time, but it’s the reality of it. We’re going to be dealing with these multi-system stressors, and they may well overwhelm our capacity in certain instances.”

WHEN THE PANDEMIC first hit the United States in 2020, Seattle was ground zero. A man who had recently traveled to Wuhan fell sick, and communal spaces followed soon after:

senior homes, food-processing factories — and prisons. In March 2020, Columbia Legal Services filed a petition on behalf of five incarcerated people, including a pregnant 21-year-old. “When we were staring down the face of this potentially very deadly virus, we just felt like the state had an obligation to be as proactive as possible in trying to keep folks in custody safe,” Laurel Jones, assistant deputy director of advocacy at Columbia Legal Services, told *HCN* and *Type* over the phone. The petition asked the Washington Supreme Court to intervene in the health crisis by releasing incarcerated people, especially those who were older, had underlying health conditions, or were already close to their release date. “This is not something where we’re talking about just opening the jailhouse doors and letting everybody out without any sort of precautions being taken,” Jones said. “But also: The vast majority of people in prisons are not there to serve a life sentence and they don’t deserve to die in prison.”

The petition failed, but eventually the state Supreme Court ordered the governor and the DOC to take all necessary steps to protect the health and safety of incarcerated people in response to the Covid-19 outbreak. In response, Gov. Jay Inslee commuted the sentences of around 1,000 people as part of a larger trend that saw around 37,700 people released early from prisons around the country. This was the state’s first large-scale experiment with decarceration.

While decarceration has long been a politically divisive topic, during the pandemic, it was deemed one of the most effective ways to keep people safe. For a growing number of researchers, the same applies to combating climate change.

“Part of the strategy for keeping people safe (from climate hazards) has to be decarceration,” Jasmine Heiss, a criminal justice expert who formerly worked as a program director at the Vera Institute of Justice, told *HCN* and *Type*. “Ending mass incarceration has always been an urgent problem. In the light of the climate crisis even more so.”

Locked away in rural communities with decaying infrastructure and inadequate resources to protect themselves during extreme weather events or public health crises, incarcerated people are completely dependent on the decisions — and the whims — of the prison bureaucracy.

“The first thing many of us wonder when natural disasters happen now is whether or not anyone made a plan to keep incarcerated people, people on some form of supervision, safe? Are they literally trapped, or is there a real safety plan?” said Heiss. “I think the fact that so many people are concerned, are nervous, speaks to the infrequency with which a plan is articulated — or even created — beforehand.”

When asked about emergency management plans for climate hazards, the DOC responded that “while security concerns prevent us from disclosing the specifics of emergency evacuation plans, each of our prisons, as well as our field offices and reentry centers, is required to have one. ... In addition to wildfires, DOC has plans in place to respond to floods, windstorms, earthquakes and hazardous materials.”

HCN and *Type* reviewed DOC plans for dealing with extreme heat, obtained through department requests. The incident action plan largely deals with the chain of command during a heat event. There is a brief section on

keeping incarcerated people safe, with suggestions like putting fans in living units and opening doors. The two-page heat mitigation plan also advises providing sunscreen, allowing incarcerated people to take clear cups outside and, if it’s above 89 degrees, letting them wear shorts, T-shirts and shower shoes without socks outside.

Washington is largely seen as a progressive state on climate, with “one of the more progressive frameworks to address

environmental justice in the U.S.,” according to legal experts at Law360, but prisons are absent from the state’s climate adaptation plans. Last year, the DOC requested funds from the Legislature to hire a consultant to develop a DOC Climate Change Impact Mitigation and Resilience Plan, but were denied. When asked about climate plans for incarcerated people and prisons, the governor’s office mentioned the work the DOC has been doing to mitigate the impacts of

extreme heat events in prisons, citing a one-page pdf and adding that it was a “relevant policy discussion to have.” A law was passed earlier this year to update the state’s climate response strategy, but it did not specifically mention incarcerated people, nor is the Department of Corrections one of the agencies involved in its creation, although a Washington Department of Ecology spokesperson said, “There may be opportunities for that agency to engage in the planning process.”



A small but growing number of studies show that incarceration and climate disaster susceptibility often overlap, that failing to update prison infrastructure “will be catastrophic.”

This year, a University of Washington Climate Impacts Group report on extreme heat in the state singled out incarcerated people as a high-risk population. The group, which has worked with several other state agencies to help develop agency-wide climate adaptation plans, told *HCN* and *Type* that it would be happy to support DOC efforts to develop a climate adaptation plan but that it has not yet been approached.

Scientists have called climate change the “biggest threat modern humans have ever faced,” yet scant literature exists on how it will impact incarcerated people. A small but growing number of studies show that incarceration and climate disaster susceptibility often overlap, and that failing to update prison infrastructure “will be catastrophic,” with increasingly negative health and legal implications for incarcerated people and correctional agencies. Many studies also point out the glaring overlap between climate change and mass incarceration: Both affect BIPOC people and communities at much higher rates, stemming from systematic neglect of investment in those communities and in many cases, direct policies that have increased incarceration rates and climate vulnerability. Seen from that perspective, decarceration is a form of climate justice. From a scientific, legal and public health perspective, it is a necessary way of dealing with climate challenges ahead.

Washington state is already taking tentative steps in that direction. Until recently, incarceration in Washington state had been trending upwards, peaking in 2018, when the prison population in the state topped 18,000. The rise can be traced to harsh sentencing rules and sentence

lengths from the “war on drugs” and “tough on crime” narrative of the ’80s and ’90s, said Christie Hedman, executive director of the Washington Defenders Association, a resource center for public defenders. The year 2020 was the first time in almost two decades that Washington’s incarcerated population dipped below 16,000. Now it is hovering at around 13,000. Only 70% of prison beds are occupied, and this year the DOC announced the closure of Larch Corrections Center, citing, among other things, the falling incarceration rate, though critics say that basic budgetary concerns might also be involved.

When asked for comment, the governor’s office replied that “Gov. Inslee has sought to create a more humane corrections system that focuses on rehabilitation rather than punishment, and the State has made strides toward achieving that goal. We are committed to reducing recidivism by supporting innovative programs that provide incarcerated individuals with the tools they need to be successful when they reenter the community.”

Most of the recent decrease in incarceration rates stems from COVID-19, said Hedman. The pandemic shut down courts, reduced mobility and created a backlog of cases, so at least some of the decrease is temporary. There have also been more long-lasting changes. Advocates, incarcerated people and some legislators have fought to pass key reforms that should reduce the number of people in prison. Washington has now passed several laws that would reduce incarceration rates, such as a bill that eliminates the practice of using prior juvenile adjudications in adult sentencing. Still, many of these laws will only kick in for future defendants and do

not apply retroactively, so they will not reduce the current prison population. The most significant retroactive policy was the 2021 state Supreme Court decision that found the state’s ban on simple drug possession to be unconstitutional. That decision made more than 1,000 people eligible for release, and hundreds more are eligible for resentencing.

Hedman and other advocates we spoke to see these advances as just a small step to a much larger change that needs to happen. “I think that we really, as a society, need to look at what our definition of public safety is and who are the communities that we’re trying to protect,” she said. “We need to be willing to take some bold steps to look at shortening sentences, with the idea of really trying to focus on rehabilitation and support funding for things that stop bringing people into the system.”

At the end of 2022, winter had already gripped Mission Creek, with the rumor that a storm was approaching. The heating had failed again. But this time it wasn’t in Mission Unit; it was in Gold, a newer living unit. After a group of incarcerated women threatened to contact the media about the lack of heating, the staff brought in stadium heaters the size of jeeps, remembered Tiffany Doll, who was then incarcerated in Bear, the third unit at Mission Creek. “I don’t know why they keep these facilities open,” she told *HCN* and *Type*. “It’s 2023. Why would you subject people to this?” ☀

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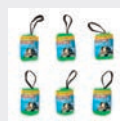
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We must go beyond it

On artistic influence and a pain peculiar to America.

BY STERLING HOLYWHITEMOUNTAIN
ILLUSTRATION BY GABRIELLA TRUJILLO

THE SUMMER I was 26, the woman I loved ended things and set me so utterly adrift that most nights I could not sleep, and unless I was at work I was consumed by the thoughts and feelings that come with first romantic loss. I made it through those dry, quiet and sunny afternoons in my hometown on my reservation by hanging out in my grandfather's small, usually empty laundromat and reading Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Only McCarthy's aestheticized world of horror and violence could turn me away from my pain. Only his vision of an apocalyptic, historical American West — the same that gave rise to my own life — could bring me that internal stillness I felt in the presence of great art.

I first encountered Cormac McCarthy's name in an interview between Gus Van Sant and the late David Foster Wallace. The interview is very late-'90s, and it fills me with nostalgia for a time when the status quo relationship to art in America was not primarily one of political and social expectation. Because the conversation took place the better part of a decade before McCarthy won the Pulitzer and his name exploded into the popular conversation about literature — a writer who had done only two interviews before that was suddenly on *Oprah* and in *Rolling Stone* — Wallace discusses him the way you would a lesser-known writer. A writer's writer. Because of the way Wallace talked about *Blood Meridian* — it was the greatest Western, it was horrific, the language biblical — I brought it to the attention of HRH, my former high school English teacher. I had not yet read the book, but I felt its dark, humming presence out there in the world, waiting for me.

HRH was a brilliant, principled man of an older order. He had been in the Navy and he had been an alcoholic and he was profoundly distrustful of the powers that be. Yet he also believed in this country, and the great American project of raising people — all of us, regardless of origin — up. He said it was important to have a sense of a higher power — else what is this world but a pointless hell? He stood well over 6 feet tall, his hair and goatee a bright white. He smiled often and slyly. He held the strong opinions of someone who had spent their life with literature, and sometimes, when faced with bad writing, he could only raise a hand and close his eyes. He had come to my reservation in the early '90s to teach because he believed he could help in some way, and during my senior year, as my basketball career wound to a disastrous close, he was also my teacher. For the first time in my schooling I had met someone who made a point of challenging me intellectually. Then I graduated and left for college, but whenever there was a holiday break I came back home and usually would visit him. Our conversations ranged broadly, but always at their center was the knowledge that literature was a path to beauty, and with that came a shared reverence for the written word and a respect for its power. We never said this out loud, but that's how it was between us. There are no bones to roll or cards to pull or leaves to read that might reveal a writer's moment of origination, but I can say with certainty I would not be the writer I am had I not met HRH. His immaculate taste in literature is a part of me. His sense that the ultimate value of art is set forever apart from material success is my sense. His belief that

one must, in some way, oppose the darkness in this world is my belief. A built-in, shock-proof shit detector is not just necessary for a writer; it is also necessary for a teacher who might convey that sensibility to another.

There are times we encounter a book before we are ready. I can't say how many times I approached the opening lines of *Blood Meridian* before, having been readied by a beginner's sense of loss, those summer afternoons in the laundromat. I had never read something that so captured an openness of land and an immensity of weather that felt familiar to me, that felt *correct*. And there is an aura about the language in that book, a sense that each word from the novel's beginning to its end is limned with the vast, extraordinary silence that defines and dominates the American West. But there is more. There is also — and I believe it to be the thing that haunts its readers the most — an unblinking look at the violence at the heart of America. More than any other book, *Blood Meridian* demands that we not just see the horror of our shared history, but understand that we cannot be apart from it.

The destiny of the power of first experience, whether of art or love or loss, is to subside. Though an extraordinary beauty remains, McCarthy's sentences no longer ride lightning for me; the logic of the book's movement is somewhat revealed. His heretical narrator has long since ceased to be the ideal voice in my head. It has taken its place as one among the many. What I now see and appreciate — no, greatly admire — because of the many years of writing I have behind me, wherein each moment of aesthetic success was merely the final step in an era of failure, is the discipline, work and patience required to produce writing of such a consistently high and singular quality. The stories of McCarthy's sacrifices, of self-enforced poverty, of isolation are the stuff of literary legend. I am reminded of Plato's charioteer as the driver of the horses of the soul. Talent, that ineffable thing equally as mysterious as a work of art, is never enough; the artist must also become the person worthy of its magnitude and force.

McCarthy's major achievement, if one can discuss such a thing so close to a writer's death, and what makes him the most important American writer of the latter 20th century next to Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison and David



Foster Wallace, was to master a particular aesthetic line in U.S. literature, one that begins with Melville, moving then to Faulkner and on to Morrison, finally arriving at *Blood Meridian*, one of those literary masterpieces that feels like an apex of the form. This is the line of baroque, lyrical sentences often composed of uncommon words and difficult syntax, of sentences that have guts, that know the nature of dirt and blood and death. Like the words of his predecessors, McCarthy's language gets into your system and changes the structure of your aesthetic DNA. His diction is drug-like, addictive, hallucinatory in its collective effect. Some writers deliver well-made narratives. Others shine on us the light of intelligence and irony. And still others come not to bring peace but the sword. They cut us open, wound us with their beauty. It is no longer possible to conceive of American literature without McCarthy's books.

There is a rhetoric in the background of American letters now, one that, while not often directly stated, runs in the undercurrent of many conversations, both private and public, among writers. It is a rhetoric that requires I acknowledge that McCarthy and HRH — in different ways both very much my teachers — are *white Americans*, and that I am *not*, and that because of this fact I *must reject*, along with the aesthetic preferences of my younger self, them and everything we are told they represent. Or I should at least keep their influence to myself. But I can't. I can't because that would mean I have to agree that the story of Indians — which includes this thing we call Native literature, and the future of tribal sovereignty within the U.S. — can finally be separated from the story of America. That somehow never the twain shall meet. I would have to deny not just the aesthetic influence HRH had on me, but also our friendship, which so profoundly changed me for the better. And I would have to deny what McCarthy showed me in his masterwork that lonely summer — that a reader's experience of sentences, and the beauty that might result, can transform one's understanding of life. Our politics cannot rise to the majesty or horror of this world; neither can they meet the simple, day-to-day realities of life in this country — only art is worthy of the task. There is a pain in America we can't be rid of. We must bear it. And we must go beyond it.

I finally read *Blood Meridian* several

*For those born under
a certain star, beauty
is often our refuge in
times of pain.*

years after mentioning it to HRH. He had read it well before then, and said it was the kind of book you cannot ignore. In the afternoons of that summer, when I wasn't working, I would walk over to my grandfather's laundromat and sit at one of the old school desks that had been put there, and I would read, kept company by the turning and whirring of washing machines and dryers. Though they were born of pain, I see them now as some of the best afternoons of my life. I was reading an extraordinary book. I had begun to dream of being a writer. I am certain HRH and I talked about the book at some point but I have no memory of it. My life began to range out from its origins. I worked in the Seattle-Tacoma area during the summers. I dropped out of college and then at my mother's behest went back. I wrote most of a failed novel in a voice that can only be described as derivative of McCarthy's. I went to graduate school and found new teachers. I felt I understood writing and maybe life, and I grew careless about the people who had helped me get there. I began to believe myself very different from HRH. We spoke less than we used to. Somewhere along the way I bought a book for him and struggled to inscribe it — I had a sense of debt and it was so large I could not get my head around it. I still haven't. Years went by and we hardly spoke and then, when I had been humbled by failure upon failure, by another novel I could not finish, by romantic relationships I could not sustain, and by the beginning of time's great acceleration, I gave him a call. His cancer, which I did not know about until that day, had begun to overwhelm him. He could barely speak. I sat in my truck in a convenience store parking lot on a cool and gray fall afternoon in a small town in Montana several blocks from where he lived and strained to hear his voice and then listened to the silence between us and it was as large as any I've ever felt. There would be no more talk. I said I loved him. I called a few months later and he did not answer and a few weeks later he was dead and a few months after that I published my first story. I felt I knew something of grief. But I did not. I did not know how often I would want to talk with him, to sit and talk with him about another book. That I would continue to feel this way. I did not know the immortality that goes with great art applies only to the art. I did not know that even the greatest of teachers cannot outlive the teachings. ✨



ESSAY

What does it mean to be American?

DACA failed Tony Valdovinos. He succeeded anyway.

BY FERNANDA SANTOS | PHOTO BY MATT WILLIAMS

HIS TEXT MESSAGE reached me on Sept. 14, the day after a federal district court judge in Texas declared, for the second time in two years, that the Obama-era program that has shielded him and many others from deportation is illegal. “Just got in,” Tony Valdovinos wrote. “Let me know when you have some time to catch up.”

I first met Valdovinos in 2012. I was newly arrived in Arizona, charged with covering the Southwest as Phoenix bureau chief for *The New York Times*. He was effectively an Arizonan, having lived in the state since he was 2 years old.

That summer, at the age of 22, he was out volunteering, knocking on doors and urging his neighbors to vote. I was covering the federal civil rights trial of Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who stood accused of discriminating against Latinos. Both Valdovinos and I are Latino, with one perverse distinction: I am a United States citizen, and he is undocumented.

Valdovinos’ determination and drive have helped fuel resistance in a state where the law still entitles the police to ask anyone they pull over about their immigration status. “I really believed in being the change I wanted to see in the world,” Valdovinos told me over dinner in New York, when he visited me after I moved back last year, after 10 years in Arizona.

The transformation I witnessed in the state during those 10 years were a counterpunch to the long history of repression underlining the relationship between Arizona’s waning white majority and the historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups that, combined, are projected to become the state’s largest demographic by 2030.

Over the years, I’ve come to appreciate, on a granular level, how policy and politics can at once propel and destabilize the trajectory of a person’s life. I’ve come to understand on a personal level — because Tony has become a dear friend — how the decisions that judges and legislators make (or don’t make), can defile the essence of what it means to be an American, whether those decisions stem from a misguided sense of righteousness or are made for the sake of electability.

Valdovinos is, by any definition that should matter, an American. He dutifully attended school and pledged allegiance to the flag every week. On weekends, he gave his free time to the family’s Arizona business,

helping his father, a college-educated accountant in Mexico, demolish old homes and build new ones. He dreamed of one day becoming a Marine.

His father was his first drill sergeant, he told me, pushing him to work from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. digging trenches, swinging sledgehammers and tossing debris into dumpsters. He learned endurance and discipline, two qualities that would have served him well in boot camp.

Shortly before he turned 18, Valdovinos approached a Marine Corps recruiter at his school, eager to enlist. When the recruiter asked him where he was born, he said, “Mexico, I guess.” When the recruiter asked for his Social Security number, Valdovinos repeated the story he had heard his mother tell many times: “My Social Security is in process.”

As it turned out, however, there was no process, and no relief in sight for either him or his parents. Valdovinos was too young to remember, or to even understand, that his family had entered the U.S. without permission, escaping the deprivation of life in Colima, Mexico.

I learned the particulars of Valdovinos’ story against the backdrop of a divisive debate about who belongs in this country. Valdovinos had dropped out of college after a 2006 ballot measure barred undocumented residents from qualifying for in-state tuition in Arizona, thereby tripling the cost of every course that he was taking.

The measure’s passage made him wonder how the voters — in a state where virtually one in three residents is Latino — could support a decision that essentially derailed the education of so many of their own. “Then I saw my first election map and realized that 60% of Latinos who can vote don’t vote,” he recalled. That, Valdovinos said, is what gave him a new purpose — a mission, if you will. Channeling the spirit of the Marines he so admired, he thought, “If you see a problem and you become the solution, that’s leadership. And that’s where I started becoming a leader.”

By Election Day 2012, President Barack Obama was riding high on the success of his Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA, the executive action that has allowed more than a half-million young immigrants to legally live and work in the U.S. without immediate threat of deportation.

Over the years, I’ve come to appreciate, on a granular level, how policy and politics can at once propel and destabilize the trajectory of a person’s life.

Obama garnered 71% of the Latino vote, the highest share among Democratic candidates since 1996, and secured a second term in office despite his dismal record on deportations.

By then, DACA had been in effect for two years. Valdovinos applied after the election; previously, he’d been too busy running the teams of volunteers who helped elect a Latino to represent a majority-Latino district on the Phoenix City Council and who also put a young Marine Corps veteran in the Arizona House of Representatives.

During our dinner in New York, I asked Valdovinos how he felt back then — a time of strife, for sure, but also one of transformation and hope. “I really believed that we were going to have immigration reform, some real and permanent change,” he told me.

And then, of course, Donald Trump came along, promising to end DACA despite overwhelming support for the program from voters on both the left and the right. In May 2018, nine states — Texas, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Nebraska, South Carolina, West Virginia, Kansas and Mississippi — challenged the program’s legality in federal court. Twice, the judge assigned to the case sided with them.

Roughly 580,000 people were enrolled in DACA as of March 31, according to the most recent numbers by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Hundreds of thousands do not qualify, owing to the timing of their arrival in the U.S. The program has strict eligibility criteria: Among other things, DACA recipients must have come to the U.S. before the age of 16 and be under 31 as of June 15, 2012. Many others cannot apply because the judge’s order has barred the federal government from accepting new applications.

Valdovinos and I talked about how

DACA’s fate — and Valdovinos’ fate, really — are very likely to end up in the hands of the U.S. Supreme Court, the most conservative court in nearly a century. “Do you still believe in a solution, Tony?” I asked.

“I’m not young and naive anymore,” he replied, a hint of resentment in his voice.

I reminded him that his work and that of many others significantly altered the political landscape in Arizona, where Latinos make up a quarter of eligible voters. “Arizona went for Biden in 2020,” I said — only the second time its voters chose a Democrat for president since 1948, when Harry Truman won the state. “You had a role in turning a Republican stronghold into a battleground.”

He nodded absent-mindedly, his eyes focused on a television screen over my shoulder. I noticed tears pooling in his green eyes; growing up, kids at school called him “whitexican” because of his eyes, his pale skin and the gold strands in his mop of curly hair.

“Look,” he said, pointing to the TV. “It’s an ad for the Marine Corps.”

Valdovinos will never be a Marine, not only because he’s not a citizen or legal permanent resident, but because he is 33 now, too old to enlist.

He is still fighting, though: Today, he runs a successful political consulting business, creates jobs and makes, he said, “more money than I ever imagined.” He is currently working on the U.S. Senate campaign of Ruben Gallego, another Marine he helped elect, this time to Congress in 2014, and someone he considers a mentor. Valdovinos recently bought a large plot of land in the outskirts of Phoenix. “I don’t have anything to prove anymore.” ✨

Tony Valdovinos, photographed in Phoenix, Arizona, in October (opposite).

THE SEASONS OF UŅALAQLIQ

An exploration of living in direct relationship with the land, water, plants and animals in and around UŅalaqliq (Unalakleet), on the west coast of what's now called Alaska.



Snow collects on a birch tree in Western Alaska. **Katie Basile**

Rise above

The beauty of a cherished and familiar landscape.

BY LAURELI IVANOFF

YOU KNOW those days. The heavy days. When the couch is the only friend you want to entertain. When your muscles are lead because there's something inside you, something deeper than your marrow, something emotional or spiritual, or both, that is reminding you. Of loss.

The ache settles in the lungs, around the lungs, making your breathing shallow. The sighs are constant. And that sciatic pain that is usually a minor annoyance is flaring hot like coals.

So, you count — five, four, three, two, one — and force your body to get up from the couch to do the hardest thing imaginable. Because the hardest thing seems like the only thing that will make any sense.

You go for a walk.

I MOVED HOME to Unalakleet nine years ago. After 16 years of living, loving, building a house, raising children and chickens, renovating a different house, rooting in identity, and chopping wood in Nome, I returned home. For support. For family. For friends. And because the land and waters surrounding our community have given to us, and nurtured us, in the way that homelands do.

But one recent winter morning in Unalakleet, sitting in another house I built, next to the fire my husband lit when he woke up and listening to pockets of steam crackle in the cast-iron wood stove, I found myself in grief. Next October, it will be 20 years since I last hugged my Mom. Since I received her cheer. Since I heard her voice, excited, telling me the Red Sox won and weren't out of the playoffs. I missed too my Auntie Abuz, who died three years before Mom. And I missed my Auntie Zoe, who died 11 years ago.

After a lot of years, a lot of joy and a lot of pain, I missed the women who raised me.

These women supported me. These women cheered me on when I did well. "Wow, Babe," I can hear Zoe say. "So champ." It felt like the pride and the joy inside of me were validated. And I'd let my body and brain sing, knowing my auntie was behind me. Beside me. This was the love they gave.

Women need women. Feeling that need, I got up and went outside.

WALKING UPHILL on the dirt road to get to the snow-dusted four-wheeler trail at the

top, I started my 23-minute every day walk. The birch and aspen trees were bare of leaves and the dark brown fireweed stalks had lost all of their seed. A few dark brown alder leaves clung on to branches, but all the plant friends were asleep. My AirPods were in, and I listened to an audiobook, hoping that something about the author's words would catalyze new thoughts that would somehow magically rise above the grief that lived in my body. The book was about breaking through limiting behavior. So, of course with grief feeling like a 35-liter backpack full of mud on my back, two minutes into my walk, I found myself ignoring the author's voice. Instead, a prayer spoke from inside me.

How do we get past this pain? How do we rise above it?

The overcast clouds added to my burden. Heavy. I felt the sting of the cold on my cheeks. Praying, still. *How do we rise above this pain?* I plucked the AirPods from my ears. To hear the redpolls and chickadees. To silence myself, to find the voice of knowing. The God inside, whom I always seem to hear during my walks up the hill behind our house.

Once on the trail, I quickly reached the top and lifted my chin. To the south I saw the Unalakleet River Valley, the hills on the other side of the river looking on like curious, kind elders at church. The ones who have a smile in their eyes and make you feel secure. The ones who give you gum. Looking at the valley that stretches far to the east, to the Whaleback Mountains that tell me I'm home, I took a long, deep breath, feeling the cold travel through my throat and into my lungs. I breathed out, slow and long. Following the river flowing to its mouth where Unalakleet sits, the southern coast greeted me, reminding me of spring picnics on volcanic rocks with my family. Of the time my niece and daughter butchered a seal together. Where land meets ocean, I again felt that elder kindness from the beach line. Fondness, even. Amid the heaviness, I heard the voice.

Beauty is always bigger than the pain, the voice said. God said. My inner knowing said. Something said. *Beauty is always bigger than the pain*, the voice said again.

I followed the coast with my eyes, to the sandy beach that we four-wheel with my brother and his wife, Yanni, with Dad and his wife, Heidi, where we pick *aqpiit*, or cloudberry. The coast where we cross

creeks and stop for picnics, sitting on white spruce driftwood logs, eating dried *ugruk* meat from vacuum-sealed bags, sandwiches Heidi brings, and tea. Always tea. I followed the edge all the way to Tolstoi, a tiny peninsula of volcanic rock topped with tundra, where we hunt for seals in the spring. From Tolstoi, my eyes followed the overcast clouds that now, with the wide this-is-the-middle-of-my-world view, seemed friendly. Although they covered the tops of the hills to the south, the valley looked peaceful. Welcoming. The clouds led me to acknowledge South River, with black spruce lining its banks all the way to the southern hills. I have not traveled in that area, but I pictured snow-machining up that small valley and into the hills that feed the river. I let myself wonder at a place I'd always seen, but never visited.

Beauty.

I noticed the willows to my right, gleaming with a hint of frost. The light shining over and kissing the ocean, yellow and gold, warm and welcoming. I walked downhill, back toward the house, the well-trodden trail open and free of trees, snow crunching underneath my boots. I saw Nuthlook, the long hill that welcomes you to the Unalakleet River and all she gives after you boat past the tundra flats. I saw the clean, quiet whiteness of winter. The snow and cold telling me to rest. To stay warm. To take care. The life, light and simple beauty of our home. And I said it to myself, from my belly, knowing: Beauty is always bigger than the pain. And along with the grief I still carried, there was a glimmer of joy. In my belly. And a lightness in my lungs and load.

I still miss them. My body will remind me, often at the most inconvenient time, of the love that was shared and the nothing that seems to sit where the love once filled our homes. And, somehow, during my walks up the hill and back to the house, I'll remember. Their beauty. Their lives. Their love. That is always bigger than the pain.

My aunts and my Mom walk beside me still. While I cannot hear their voices or physically feel their reassuring hugs or dial their phone numbers for a quick call, when I need to, I imagine them with me. And imagining them next to me is just as real as seeing Tolstoi to the south. Nuthlook greeting us to the river, and the frost holding light on the leaves. ✨

COLORADO

Here's an unfortunate example of AI giving someone a real bum steer. A tractor-trailer's navigational guidance system "trucked up" in a major way, inconveniencing slews of sightseers and campers en route to the picturesque Crystal Mill, six miles east of Marble in Gunnison County. Just how big a mistake did the GPS make? Well, it sent the driver up the very steep, very narrow and very rocky Daniels Hill — a road navigable only by four-wheel-drive vehicles, jeeps, dirt bikes, hikers and truckers who scare the bejeezus out of viewers on *IRT: Deadliest Roads*. The misguidance left the big rig jack-knifed across the road for 40 hours until three tow trucks could remove it. Samantha Smith Wilkey, owner of Crystal River Jeep Tours, said she lost 10 bookings while the road was blocked, but she doesn't blame the driver. "The driver went above and beyond," she told *Aspen Daily News*. "It's not the trucking company. It's the GPS software company." Smith Wilkey added that misguided guidance systems are misleading drivers to remote forestry roads rather than the correct routes to Gunnison or even Denver, concluding: "There is a glitch in this area." Yes — and apparently a glitch in the matrix.

CALIFORNIA

Every dog has its day, they say, but most canines don't spend theirs howling it up at a free Metallica concert. An unusually resourceful metal fan — and German shepherd — named Storm snuck out of her Inglewood home and somehow slipped unnoticed through the gate and past security to settle comfortably into a seat of her own at SoFi Stadium, KTLA5 reported. Storm's owners were baffled when a photo of their pooch hanging out with concert-goers ended up on social

media, but they were happy to welcome her home after she spent the night at an animal shelter.

Maybe it's something in the dog food, because another unusual canine incident occurred in San Juan Bautista. KSBW.com reported that a sure-paw'd terrier "learned a new meaning to the word 'bark' when it got stuck in a tree." The dog somehow climbed 20 feet up a tree and got marooned out on a limb. The Hollister Fire Department rescued the pooch, deploying a safety net, climbing the tree and carrying the pup down. Maybe there was another metal band playing nearby and the dog just wanted a good view?

ARIZONA

An understandably shaken Mesa homeowner contacted a snake-wrangling outfit after discovering a tangle of rattlesnakes lounging around in his garage, Fox10 Phoenix reported. The homeowner originally *guessss*-timated that there were three, but there were actually 20: five adult western diamond-backs and 15 babies. Oh, and one of the snakes was pregnant with babies — or eggs, technically. Like certain members of Congress, rattlesnakes are ovoviviparous, meaning that their eggs hatch inside the mama-rattler, who then gives birth to live young. Snake-wrangler Marissa Maki, who



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 ARMANDO VEVE

found the reptiles nestled cozily around the hot-water heater, used specialized tongs to grab them and carefully place them in plastic buckets for their relocation journey to the desert. Rattlesnake Solutions' owner Bryan Hughes said proudly, "This is our record for the most rattlesnakes caught in one call!" Given the number of shed snakeskins they found, as many as 40 may have resided there at some point. As Maki observed, in what we consider a definite understatement, "That is a lot of snakes."

OREGON

Here's a great example of positive messaging. Bella Organic Farm on Sauvie Island is using the 2.7 miles of pathways of its seven-acre corn maze to say something important: "No more silence. End gun violence," with the words accompanied by a peace sign and heart shapes. A Bella Organic spokesperson told *The Oregonian*, "We hope this year's maze will bring our community together." That seems like a message no one could get lost in.

WASHINGTON

Horse racing is traditionally the Sport of Kings, but Auburn's Emerald Downs Race Course has something for commoners, too. About 20 seniors hit the track at the inaugural "Grandparents Race" held during Grandparents Weekend, King5 reported. Steve Butler from Everett, who took home the prize, told Emerald Downs that the last time he'd raced was against a lineman during a high school football game 50 years earlier. The popular racetrack hosts races for horses as well as for corgis and bulldogs, not to mention the T-Rex World Championship, which we were slightly disappointed to learn involves people wearing costumes rather than contestants running shrieking from live dinosaurs. 🌟

HISTORIC CLIMATE VICTORY

We represented 16 young people in the first ever U.S. climate trial alongside our partners at Our Children's Trust and McGarvey Law, aiming to hold Montana's government accountable for worsening the climate crisis through a misguided devotion to all forms of fossil fuels.

During that trial, the youth plaintiffs bravely testified about how climate change has harmed their health, livelihoods, cultural practices, psychological well-being, and the state they call home.

World-renowned climate experts testified that Montana's promotion of fossil fuels and suppression of renewable energy have aggravated drought, fueled megafires, and depleted natural resources.

The state constitution guarantees Montanans the right to a clean and healthful environment, equal protection under the law, and more. Unfortunately, the state's laws and policies favoring fossil fuels infringed on those rights.

In August, the court issued a historic ruling in the plaintiffs' favor, recognizing that the right to a clean and healthful environment is meaningless without a livable climate.

One expert called this "the strongest decision on climate change ever issued by any court." Let us celebrate this hard-fought victory, and the bravery of these young people fighting for their future.

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#IAM THE WEST

BREE BLACK HORSE
(SEMINOLE NATION OF OKLAHOMA)
Senior associate attorney at Kilpatrick
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Yakima, Washington

I learned to make traditional powwow regalia from my mother. It's my rest and recovery from the work that I do as a lawyer; it's my way of remembering who I am and why I do what I do. Dancing at powwows was one of the things that originally inspired me to be an attorney. During grand entry, I would hear our elders and tribal leaders talk about the legal challenges that Indian Country has faced. The federal — and even state — governments, have used the law to try and dispossess us of that culture. I'm very proud to be able to wear my traditional regalia and know the stories of each piece. It reminds me that Indigenous people persevered against that dispossession, and that I need to do the same so that future generations can continue to wear regalia proudly.

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

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