

# High Country News



## LOST IN THE WEEDS

THE HAZARDS OF  
GLACIAL RETREAT  
IN ALASKA

ARE RURAL  
HOSPITALS ABLE  
TO CARE FOR US?

A DESERT ORCHID  
GETS A HELPING  
HAND



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A drone view of the levee-breaching ceremony celebrating the completion of the Lookout Slough Tidal Habitat Restoration Project in Solano County, California, in 2024. (See story on page 15.)  
**Xavier Mascarenas / California Department of Water Resources**

# Know The West.

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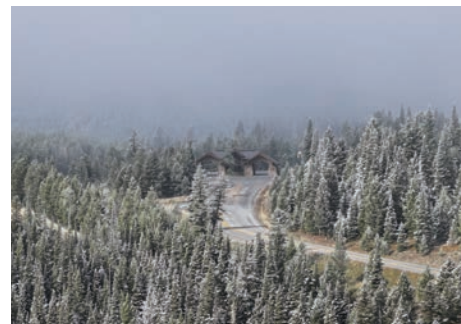
## Bloom

**FOR THE PAST EIGHT YEARS OR SO**, I have had a relationship with a plant on a foothill trail near my home. From early spring to midsummer, my anticipation builds as I pound down the steep hill, past the beehive in the trunk of an old oak, and round the corner to see how the plant is faring. By late spring, it will be taller than I am. Soon, it will sprout buds. Some years it might have as many as a dozen showy fist-sized flowers. If it's not blooming, though, it can be easy to miss. It is not far from the trail, in an area where it could easily be trampled by a hiker or a frolicking dog. This object of my affection is a Humboldt lily, a hearty California native plant that is listed as "moderately threatened" by the California Native Plant Society, largely due to development and people digging up bulbs for domestic use.

By the time you read this, the Humboldt lily will likely have finished blooming; the tall main stem will die back and the plant will go dormant until the following spring. I know this lily has other admirers, because I have seen carefully placed branches around its base to deter unknowing passersby from damaging it. It pleases me to know that there is a community gathered around this one plant, watching it go through its spectacular lifecycle and caring about its well-being. Visiting the lily not only fills me with awe — who would not feel awe in the presence of an 8-foot blooming wonder? — it also renews my faith in humanity. The fact that we are capable of caring this much for a single plant on national forest land less than a mile from the trailhead gives me hope.

One extraordinary thing about this magazine and its own community of readers is that many of you likely have similar relationships with a particular species or place or landscape. Perhaps you have volunteered to help preserve habitat or propagate seedlings or rescue injured wildlife. There is a long list of ways humans can honor and care for the world around us, bask in its magnificence and try to do our part to preserve its integrity. This issue contains a story about another endangered plant, a rare orchid that is native to desert wetlands in Arizona (*see story on page 7*), and the biologists who are working to help a foundering population gain a foothold in a rugged environment. It's a science story, yes, but it is also a story of love, as so many of the best stories are.

**Jennifer Sahn**, editor-in-chief



Evan Simon / Floodlight

### The billionaires' club at the center of America's public-lands fight

A controversial land swap orchestrated by the mega rich could be "a harbinger of what's to come" for public lands under Trump.

By Evan Simon and Ames Alexander



Courtesy of the CDT Coalition

### The Continental Divide Trail is being militarized for the border wall

A new border wall has turned one end of the long-distance trail into a construction zone.

By Alicia Inez Guzmán



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An illustrated feature about Chinese immigrants working in the illegal cannabis trade in New Mexico. (See story on page 32.) **Susie Ang / HCN**





A bedrock scar above the South Sawyer Glacier in Alaska, two days after the landslide that created it. The slide triggered a tsunami in Tracy Arm fjord. (See story on page 22.)  
**Jacek Maselko**



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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](mailto:editor@hcn.org)**

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### BACK TO THE FUTURE

Jaclyn Moyer's article on taking the McKenzie River tributary back to Stage 0 ("The Way of the River," June 2026) was excellent. I was deeply involved in river restoration for many years. While we were always doing our best to improve our river systems, Moyer's piece shows that's not always the case. Understanding how nature made that system and reverting to that is often proving to be best.

**Marc Alston**  
**Denver, Colorado**

### A DEEP DIVE INTO DEEP WATER

I learned a great deal from the Native ecological perspective in "A River Robbed of Sediment" (June 2026) and

realize how pathetically narrow my exposure has been to historical river health.

**Dorothy Cox**  
**Via email**

### A BLOODY COUGAR CONTROVERSY

Thank you for the informative article about the current Utah Division of Wildlife Resources program ("Utah's controversial new mountain lion study," June 2026). It infuriates me that the Utah DWR thinks the solution is to kill as many cougars as it can and see if that increases the mule deer population. Who has the right to live? The animals that are native to the land or the intruders with high-powered rifles, scopes and binoculars? The "study" reminds me of the eradication

of beavers, otters, grizzly bears, bison, salmon and many other indigenous species for "profit" ever since the Europeans "tamed the West." I am not a wildlife biologist, but what happened to the natural prey-and-predator relationship? It seems like that would even out natural animal populations if they were allowed to evolve naturally.

Climate change, which we are exacerbating, makes it so much harder for so many species to survive. Why do we need to kill the animals that have found a way to adapt and survive?

**Newton Morgan**  
**Poulsbo, Washington**

Hunters, houndsmen, ranchers, conservationists, biologists and the general public have all presented rational and factual arguments as to why Utah's actions are not only unfounded, but just plain wrong.

The impact of killing the cougars is beginning to reveal itself, and it's nothing short of horrifying: the deaths and mutilations, the collateral damage, the inhumane methods. The public is about to hit the boiling point on this.

The debate is showing signs of shifting from one of science to one of morality. Killing off our lions to improve the deer hunting industry is one thing. But to be unmoved by the events emerging from the field can't help but make one question one's values.

Hope remains that rational dialogue can stop the slaughter of our mountain lions. But time will tell.

**Paul Garvey**  
**Kanab, Utah**

The opportunity to kill a cougar is hard to come by since they are very elusive and generally stay away from humans. There is

an unnecessarily high number of these big cats in Utah. Most cubs will make it to adulthood because there is no "competition," and if this law falls, we will soon be overrun with these predators, and our forests and ecosystems will collapse.

**Russell Jessop**  
**Eagle Mountain, Utah**

### DON'T WALL OFF OUR TRAILS

Just a note of gratitude for the recent article, "The Continental Divide Trail is being militarized for the border wall," (May 19, 2026).

The same thing is happening to the Arizona National Scenic Trail to the west, where one mile of the trail is now closed due to blasting and road construction activities. And last week the construction crews started a fire that quickly spread to 60 acres and caused widespread closures of the National Park Service unit (Coronado National Memorial), where the Arizona Trail's southern terminus is located.

And to top it all off, the Department of Homeland Security announced its plans to build two walls through this area instead of one. It's insane.

Thank you for giving this important issue about our public lands — and the nationally significant trails that should be protected under the National Trails System Act — some ink.

**Matt Nelson**  
**Tucson, Arizona**

### HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

I loved the article about the Pacific newt in the May 2026 issue ("Meet the Pacific newt")! I've been a longtime lover of these creatures, and the article was so fun and a great ode to them. Especially, I adore the artwork that accompanies it.

**Erin Hennessy**  
**Albuquerque, New Mexico**

### CORRECTION

Following publication of our May 2026 cover story "Pinecone Cowboys," we discovered that the author had misrepresented details of his reporting, leading to significant errors in both the story's framing and its factuality. We learned that the author was never in the field with the main source; that the term "pinecone cowboys" is not commonly used by the people in the industry; and that some of the quotes the author attributed to sources have been contested as inaccurate. *High Country News* takes accuracy seriously and employs fact-checkers for all reported pieces, but we failed to catch these inaccuracies — and we deeply regret the errors. For an analysis of our editorial process on this story, the subsequent investigation and detailed corrections, see [hcn.org/pinecone-errors/](https://hcn.org/pinecone-errors/)



# An endangered desert orchid comes home

In Arizona, scientists are charting a path for rare plant restoration.

BY MELISSA SEVIGNY  
PHOTOS BY CASSIDY ARAIZA



**ARIZONA'S RAREST ORCHID**, when not in bloom, resembles a blade of grass. It vanishes easily in the lush greenery of the Canelo Hills Cienega Preserve — even to the eyes of the botanists who plant it.

On a mild April morning, after a decade of preparation, a group of scientists gathered at a desert wetland cradled in southern Arizona's hills to reintroduce a federally endangered orchid. Aside from the researchers' chatter, the only sounds were water trickling from a spring and boots squelching through mud.

Steve Blackwell, conservation biologist at the Desert Botanical Garden (DBG), ventured into the wetland, using tussocks of grass as stepping-stones. He wanted to see if a small test plot of orchids planted months before had survived. He returned at a run, fists pumping the air. "I found one!"

The rest of the team, made up of orchid experts from DBG and the North American Orchid Conservation Center (NAOCC), followed him to a soil moisture sensor stuck into the boggy ground. He pulled aside sedges and grasses to reveal a thin, grass-like leaf.

"We did it, guys," NAOCC technician Hope Brooks said.

"Now we just gotta do 360 more," Blackwell replied.

**"DESERT WETLAND"** sounds like a contradiction. Known regionally as *ciénegas*, they're pockets of green in an arid landscape, fed by freshwater springs. They're among the rarest habitats in the Southwestern United States, making up just a tiny fraction of the landscape but home to a vast array of species.

The Canelo Hills ladies'-tresses, one of the most endangered orchids in the United States, contributes to that diversity. But only a few hundred remain in the wild, and none had been seen at the Canelo Hills Cienega Preserve, where the species was first documented in a scientific publication, since the early 2000s.

In 2020, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service asked DBG botanists whether they could grow the orchid from seed. "I'm like, 'Yeah, sure I can,'" Blackwell said, chuckling at his own confidence. "I love getting these problems that are difficult and then trying to work through them."

The first challenge was locating the remaining wild orchids; there were only two known populations, both in southern Arizona. Canelo Hills ladies'-tresses bloom in late summer, sending up a stalk spiraled with white flowers. The rest of the year, they're essentially invisible. The team had to recruit two specially trained "ecology detection" dogs to sniff them out.

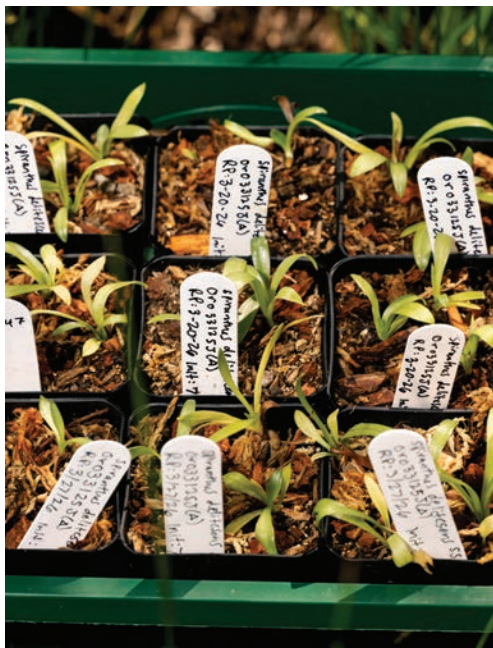
The seeds are minuscule, optimized for wind dispersal. "They're like dust," said ecologist Melissa McCormick, who directs NAOCC. "They don't have nutrients in them to support the developing seeds." Instead, baby orchids draw their nourishment from a particular type of mycorrhizal fungus.

Enter the second challenge: cultivating the right fungus in a laboratory. Researchers at NAOCC, a program of the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center in Maryland, led this task. They scrubbed orchid roots with toothbrushes and shaved off tiny pieces under a microscope. "All the little balls of fungus pop out," McCormick said, enabling researchers to cultivate them in petri dishes. The ladies'-tresses, grown in glass flasks, can germinate with a substitute supply of nutrients, but they sprout much faster with a dab of lab-grown fungus.

The scientists also checked for the presence of Sonoran bumblebees at the Canelo Hills to ensure the orchids would have a pollinator, and they conducted a prescribed burn to push back trees encroaching on the wetland. All these pieces had to come together to give

Researchers Andrew Salywon, Luis Romero, Hope Brooks and Steve Blackwell and a volunteer plant orchids at Arizona's Canelo Hills Cienega Preserve in April.





Orchid seedlings await planting at the ciénega (above).

Luis Romero and Melissa McCormick nestle an orchid seedling into the ground (right).



the reintroduction a chance. But McCormick rejected orchids' fragile reputation: "They can grow in really tough conditions."

**INCLUDING**, apparently, underwater. The team was surprised to find one of the test orchids fully submerged and still green. Fine silt clouded the water as the researchers rooted around, feeling for the metal tags that marked the planting locations.

Ultimately, the scientists located seven of the 20 orchids in the test plot; the others may have died, gone dormant or simply remained hidden. Reassured, the team set to work planting hundreds more, enough to test different restoration techniques. The first question: Can orchids thrive if they go straight from flask to ground, or do they need to spend some time potted in soil first?

Another variable is the fungus, which occurs naturally in some parts of the ciénega. This first batch of orchids was grown without the aid of the laboratory-cultivated fungus, which the plants need in the soil. The researchers placed fungus-inoculated cotton balls in the planting holes with some of the orchids. Others got cotton balls without fungus or nothing at all, to see whether the

orchids grow better with a fungal boost. And they planted some orchids in a part of the wetland where tests didn't turn up the right fungus in the ground. Would the fungus-spiked cotton balls open up new habitat for ladies'-tresses?

DBG conservation researcher Luis Romero lifted the first orchid out of its pot, brushed dirt from its roots, and put it on a scale. It was too light to register, so he counted the plant's leaves and roots instead as a baseline to measure its growth later on. Brooks recorded the data while Romero improvised a pair of forceps out of charcuterie skewers and poked a cotton ball into the mud. The orchid sprout followed, and a peaty, plant-rot smell rose from the disturbed earth. It was the first of 15 orchids planted in a half-meter-by-half-meter square, all part of one experimental treatment.

In July, the team will return to check the results. Blackwell, half-jokingly, said he dreamed of returning to "a field of just white flowers." But Romero said he will consider the project a success even if only a few orchids survive. At this early stage, both failures and successes provide lessons for future attempts. He aims to develop a blueprint for

orchid reintroduction: a protocol that can be adopted by other institutions.

Julie Stromberg, an Arizona plant ecologist who wasn't involved with the reintroduction project, echoed Romero's emphasis on good experimental design. That way, even if a project's orchids don't survive, she said, "at least you're going to learn something about what's driving the system and why it's failing."

Ciénegas face many threats, including climate change, drought, groundwater pumping, diversions of spring water, overgrazing and fire suppression. Trees have overtaken many places, consuming water that used to sustain wetland flora. Human developments, such as roads and culverts, also take a toll. "A lot of these ciénegas, as a whole, have blinked out," Stromberg said.

Because ciénegas are so isolated, they're all different. Each holds a unique mix of rare species. "When you lose one ciénega, you're losing something that really can't be replaced," she said.

**TRACING THE** causes of a ciénega's decline is part science, part detective work. Upstream from the orchid-planting site, DBG botanist



Andrew Salywon pointed out a roughly 10-foot-deep drop in a creek bed. It was a headcut, a site of dramatic erosion that would continue to carve its way upstream, deepening the creek as it goes. In a healthy wetland, water slows down and spreads out. A deep channel has the opposite effect.

“Historically, this probably was all wetland vegetation,” Salywon said, gesturing at the tree stumps on the streambanks. Now, it’s an example of a dying *ciénega*.

Headcutting happens in natural cycles but is worsened by extreme rainfall, which is becoming more frequent in a climate-changed world. It may also be a sign of the preserve’s ranchland history: Long-abandoned culverts and berms still capture and channelize water, which can cause headcuts and other erosion.

Years ago, while surveying for orchids, Salywon noticed the 10-foot headcut and decided to try to save this *ciénega*. Restoring fire, removing trees and remediating earthworks are all part of that rescue effort. But Salywon acknowledged this damaged area may never recover enough

to support ladies’-tresses — at least, not in his lifetime. Restoration, he said, “can take a long time, but you just need to start the healing.”

The new orchids, if they survive, will help cushion shocks to existing populations. They are currently the only ones known to be living on protected land; the Canelo Hills preserve was purchased by The Nature Conservancy in 1969 and is now closed to the public.

The researchers hope one day to expand the project to surrounding ranchland. Light grazing, like fire, may benefit these orchids by knocking back competing vegetation.

Curt Bernal, owner of the neighboring Z Triangle Ranch, said he welcomes opportunities to aid the restoration effort. For any rare plant, he said, “it’s incumbent upon us humans to do what it takes to make sure they continue to exist long after we’re gone.” ☀

*Melissa L. Sevigny is an Arizona writer whose work centers on the intersections of science, nature and history in the Western U.S. Her most recent book is Brave the Wild River.*

*“When you lose one  
ciénega, you’re losing  
something that really  
can’t be replaced.”*

Canelo Hills Cienega Preserve  
in southern Arizona.





# Bracing for man camps

Alaska Native communities prepare for the consequences of the development surge.

BY MEGHAN SULLIVAN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KALYN FAY BARNOSKI

**IN INTERIOR ALASKA**, near the Canadian border, a small Alaska Native community called Dot Lake Village sits just off the Alaska Highway. Cradled between the Alaska Range and the Tanana River, it is a tight-knit community whose roughly 180 tribal members live a traditional subsistence life every summer — fishing nearby rivers and lakes and harvesting food for the coming months. Elders who grew up speaking Athabascan and enjoying potlatches overflowing with salmon, berries and moose run culture camps to empower future generations.

This year, however, the community is preparing for the worst — the potentially harmful consequences of a nearby man camp.

The man camp is being constructed to house workers for the Manh Choh project, a new open-pit gold mine located roughly 10 miles from the town of Tok, part of the Trump administration's agenda to prioritize resource development.

"When we first heard of the man camp, I just had this sinking gut feeling," said Tracy Charles-Smith, president of the Dot Lake Village Council. "And I reflected long and hard about why I'm feeling this way, and I thought:

Of all my friends from the nearby villages, of all my siblings and cousins of my generation, I'm the only one that hasn't been raped. And that's a harsh reality."

Charles-Smith has lived through several waves of resource development in Alaska. She remembered the Fairbanks pipeline boom of the 1970s, which brought job opportunities to her family and others in the community. But it brought other, unwelcome things, too: In the late 1980s, for example, Charles-Smith's sister worked on the cleanup crew for the Exxon Oil Spill. The area was filled with out-of-state workers who took up temporary residence in man camps. During her time working there, her sister said, she was abducted and taken to a landfill, where two men tried to assault her. She was almost murdered but managed to escape.

Today, Alaska stands on the cusp of another surge of resource development. Projects including the Pikka Oil Project and the Alaska LNG Project are still in the early stages but expected to move forward in the coming years. The LNG Pipeline alone will cost upward of about \$46 billion, creating an 807-mile-long pipeline and providing around 10,000 jobs.

Many of the projects had

been under discussion for years, and, in some cases, decades. But now they're among the recently greenlit initiatives in Trump's Jan. 20, 2025, executive order, "Unleashing Alaska's Extraordinary Energy Potential." And Alaska Native communities are already rallying in response.

**ALASKA IN THE 1970S** was booming. When construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System began in 1974, about 70,000 workers, most of them male, flooded into the state, turning Fairbanks into a boomtown. The project brought employment opportunities and economic prosperity and helped launch Alaska's modern oil industry — something many residents welcomed.

Some Alaskans embraced the chaotic boomtown atmosphere, despite reports of prostitution, cash-fueled bar scenes and parties along the construction corridor. In an article for the PBS series *American Experience*, former Fairbanks Police Officer J.B. Carnahan recalled it as "a circus every night," fueled by an influx of workers and newcomers with thousands of dollars in cash.

Disorder naturally followed. Within a year, arrests in Fairbanks jumped by 95%, with sharp increases across nearly every major category, according to a 1976 environmental impact statement for the Alaska Natural Gas Transportation System, published by the Federal Power Commission. Sex offenses other than rape rose 90%, while rape increased by 40% and homicide by 50%. Other crimes surged as well: Robbery increased 123%, weapons possession rose by 97%, and prostitution and commercialized vice surged 700% — though some of the increase in arrests was attributed to causes other than the pipeline

project, including stricter departmental policies.

Beyond the visible chaos, there were other impacts. Local newspapers from 1974 to 1976 carried a noticeable rise in headlines about girls and women who had disappeared. The stories of murdered and missing women, including Indigenous women, haunted locals.

"We know there was trafficking of women here," Charles-Smith said. "We know that there were serial killers in the neighborhood (in the region)."

Some of the human-trafficking reports involved Bill Allen, who, in 1968, co-founded Veco Corporation, an oil field services company he oversaw as CEO for the next 40 years. Rumors of sexual assault and trafficking followed him closely. By 2004, the Anchorage Police Department and FBI had begun investigating Allen for multiple allegations of sexual abuse of underage girls. And in 2008, the Anchorage Police Department opened a case alleging that Allen had solicited sex with a minor under the age of 16. The cases exemplify the kind of resource development-related crimes Alaska Native communities are concerned about today.

In 2009, without giving a reason, the Federal Department of Justice suddenly halted the 2008 investigation. In 2016, the state of Alaska then tried — for a second time — to pursue charges against Allen for moving a minor across state lines for sex under the Mann Act, a federal law that criminalizes the transport of any individual with intent to engage in prostitution or in any sexual activity.

In 2014, Paula Roberds, a Yup'ik woman from the village Goodnews Bay who was later identified as the minor in the 2008 case, sued Allen, accusing him of



sexual assault and sexual abuse of a minor over a two-year period.

**IN 2017, RESEARCH** conducted by Loyola University New Orleans looked at trafficking rates in 10 of the cities where the problem was considered most serious. Anchorage ranked highest among the selection of U.S. and Canadian cities that have a Covenant House location, surpassing more-populated places like Los Angeles and New Orleans.

The unique dynamics of a resource boom create conditions ideal for human trafficking. In Alaska, many development projects hire workers using a two-week-on, two-week-off schedule, with most coming from other parts of the state or the Lower 48. Today, roughly 40.5% of oil and gas workers and 44.2% of miners are non-residents, according to a 2026 report released by the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development. Many of them stay in man camps provided by the development companies.

Victoria Sweet, a human-trafficking researcher, identified three characteristics common to high-trafficking areas: large numbers of transient men coming in, rural or remote locations with little law enforcement and vulnerable populations. These were found most often near resource development and near Indigenous communities — places like Alaska.

“While extractive industry development projects are not created to victimize women, violence against women has been the by-product of numerous development projects,” Sweet wrote in a study focused on human trafficking in the Arctic. Most workers stay out of trouble, but the increase in male







populations has historically been linked to an increase of violence, including human trafficking.

Sweet goes on to note that the likelihood of violent crime increases when people come in with no allegiance or connection to the community — even if they were law-abiding citizens back home. Their very anonymity can embolden them; with so many men coming and going,

individual crimes and offenders become harder to trace. Not all man camps are a threat to nearby communities; many of the camps on Alaska's North Slope are strictly regulated and constructed miles away from local communities. Some can only be accessed via bush plane. Other camps have thorough security, with only authorized workers permitted on the premises; everyone

who comes and goes from the site is closely tracked. Such measures could potentially lower trafficking risks, an industry expert says.

But other man camps are established near roadways that connect to Alaska Native villages, leaving those communities on edge.

**THE MAHN CHOH MINE** began operating in late 2023. During the permitting process earlier that year, Alaska Native advocates started preparing local communities for the coming influx of workers, most of whom would reside in man camps.

When Charles-Smith first learned about the mine, she began reaching out to tribal

leaders near similar camps in neighboring Canada and the Lower 48 and contacting sexual assault prevention coalitions and organization. She read studies that focused on man camps and violence against Native communities.

"There were horrific stories coming out ... of Canada in relationship to mining man camps in proximity to tribes," she said.

The village got to work immediately, establishing a Native-led sexual assault response team that could provide onsite medical care and connect survivors to services. Community members received training on how to recognize and respond to human trafficking,

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*"It's the first Native-led sexual assault team in the state."*



and the village created a dedicated hotline for victims.

“It’s the first Native-led sexual assault team in the state,” said Alan Faulkner, chief operating officer for Dot Lake Village. “We’ve got our number ready for anybody that is a victim — they can call, and we can respond and get them access to services.”

The training has already had tangible results. Last summer, the village received a report that two teenage girls were being trafficked near Manh Choh man camp, said Faulkner. Community members alerted village leaders who then alerted law enforcement, which quickly intervened.

“We have tried to make our tribal members aware of the dangers — to keep our staff updated and to know what the signs and symptoms are,” Faulkner said.

The people in charge of the mine carried out their own preparations. According to a statement provided to *HCN* on behalf of Kinross Alaska, the company took measures to ensure community concerns were heard.

“Since the early planning stages of the Manh Choh Mine, and as is standard practice at all projects and operations, Kinross met with and listened to nearby villages and communities to better understand their perspectives about potential social impacts associated with large industrial developments. This included increased alcohol-related crime, pressure on local law enforcement resources, and the social impacts that can accompany a predominantly male workforce operating near rural communities,” the company’s statement read.

According to the statement, the company made the man camp alcohol- and drug-free. Only authorized personnel were allowed onsite, and procedures

were established for tracking personnel. The company also supported events that raise awareness of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women.

Faulkner said, however, that to his knowledge, neither the mine itself nor Kinross had reached out to Dot Lake or to Charles-Smith or to him for consultation.

Dot Lake Village decided to take matters into its own hands owing to the community’s rural location, which left residents vulnerable to outsiders.

Law enforcement is limited in remote areas, with many villages forced to rely on a single regional state trooper. That leads to long response times — especially in villages located off the road system, where bad weather can delay bush plane travel for days. And the overlapping jurisdictions can create more confusion.

“It’s easy to hide. It’s easy to get away with stuff up here, just because of how vast our land is,” said Gwen Adams, founder of the nonprofit Priceless, which works to help sex-trafficking survivors.

In recent years, though, Adams said, law enforcement has demonstrated greater understanding about trafficking.

Tracy Charles-Smith hopes that community-wide initiatives can prevent further trafficking cases and that the initiatives taken by her village will inspire others.

“We’re in a position to help tribes do everything that we are, because, you know, we’re not going to sit there,” Charles-Smith said. “We want to empower other tribes, and we have the capability to.” ✨

*Meghan Sullivan is a journalist with a background in investigative and broadcast reporting who has previously worked for Scripps News, ICT News and NBC News.*

## POEM

### Apparitional

By Joan Kane

The first thing I will do: make myself indecipherable  
to you, for understanding  
revises a kind of hunger.

My language has taken on  
all manner of smog. I  
come to fear:

*I come to fear* the things  
that inspire me  
in the wake of our destroyers.

I dream of my dead  
peers. I see how they do not want pretty  
things. I know they do not want me to describe pain

of any kind. They gesture  
to the gold dredges  
hinging into the earth,

they sink down as permafrost thaws,  
as we all slink  
down into a kind of hell.

Let us wash ourselves in those waters.  
Let us thirst because we cannot drink them.  
Let our mothers tell us of their girlhoods:

the ones they lost when they rolled willow  
leaves tight in toilet paper:  
smoked not to get high, not to die,

but only to see visions of Mary,  
that Mary, who was some kind  
of mother.



# The wall's wide reach

A Montana company makes billions building the border wall.

BY ANNIE ROSENTHAL

**BARNARD CONSTRUCTION COMPANY INC.**, an international engineering contractor based in Bozeman, Montana, recently celebrated its 50th year in business. On its website, the company lays out a colorful history that starts in 1975, when 25-year-old Tim Barnard moved to Montana with “\$1,000, two shovels, a pick, and all of his possessions in the cab of his pickup.” A timeline offers highlights of the half-century since, from building a natural gas pipeline in Utah and hydropower in Alaska to winning a federal government contract to bring down dams in Washington.

What the website doesn't show are the company's largest federal contracts: the billions of taxpayer dollars Barnard has been awarded to build President Donald Trump's border wall. Also unmentioned are its founder's financial ties to the president.

Trump made finishing the border wall a centerpiece of his 2024 campaign, and soon after he took office, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act

allocated \$46.5 billion for the project. The administration has since waived dozens of federal contracting laws to expedite construction, and an opaque reporting system makes it difficult to track exactly where all that money is going.

But a *High Country News* analysis of publicly available federal spending data finds that Barnard is among the biggest winners. As of early June, the company and its affiliates have been awarded more than \$5.6 billion in federal border construction contracts since Trump returned to office. Combined with their previous border wall contracts, the total rises to more than \$7 billion.

Meanwhile, Federal Election Commission records show that Tim Barnard and his wife have contributed millions of dollars over the years to Republican candidates and causes — including Donald Trump's presidential campaigns.

Experts say the contracts raise red flags, and Barnard's competitors seem to agree: In May, another contractor sued the federal government after Customs and Border Protection (CBP) promised the lion's share of new Texas and New Mexico wall construction contracts to Barnard and one other company. (CBP says the contracts were awarded based on contractors' qualifications. Barnard did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

Now, the company is facing criticism both at home and on the border as it prepares to begin construction in one of the least-trafficked parts of the border. Here's a breakdown, by the numbers:

**73%:** Share of initial contract value awarded to just two contractors pre-approved for CBP wall contracts in Texas, according to the recent lawsuit. \$14 billion of \$19 billion went to Barnard and North Dakota firm Fisher Sand & Gravel. (Barnard received \$4.7 billion of those contracts. \$9.1 billion went to Fisher.)

**\$142 million:** Initial size of a contract to a Barnard subsidiary in 2019

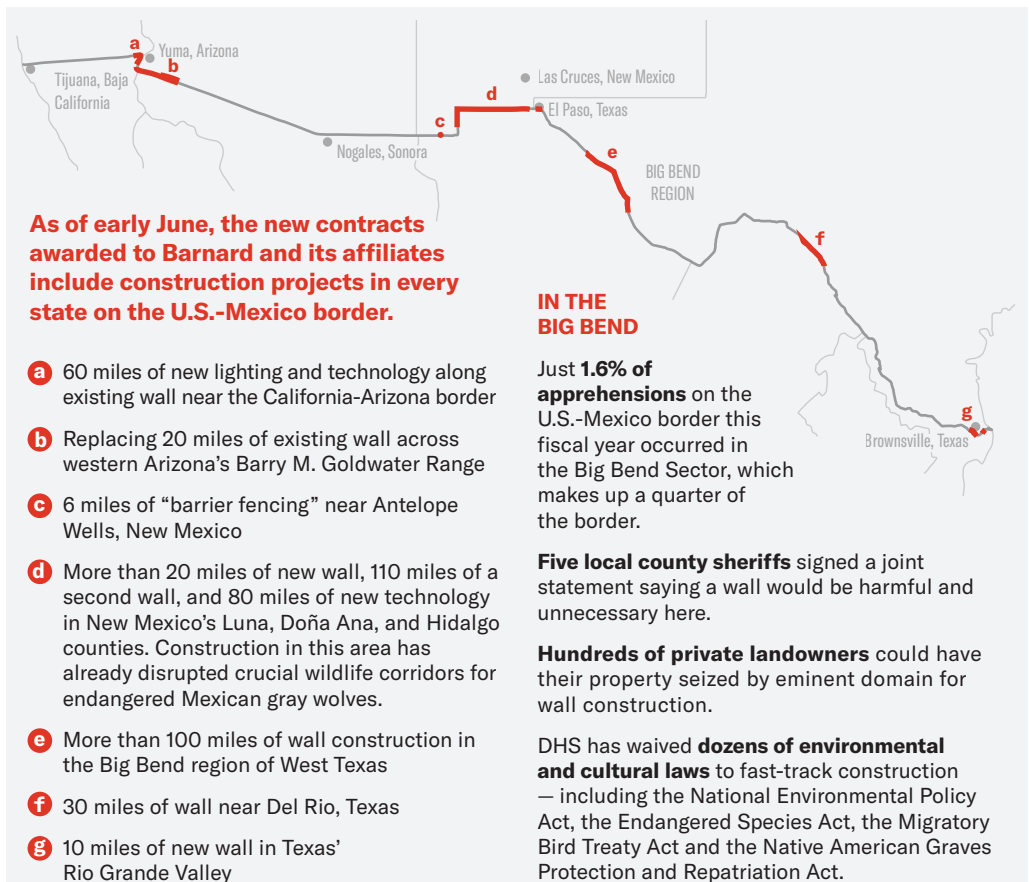
**\$1.1 billion:** The size of the same contract with the additions

**\$33 million:** The cost per mile of one section of that wall contract

**\$1.6 billion:** Barnard's biggest contract, awarded by CBP this spring for 112.5 miles of a “secondary” wall in New Mexico. CBP said this contract was awarded without competition, owing to its “urgency.”

Tim and Mary Barnard's 2024 election cycle donations include:

- **\$1 million** to Trump's presidential campaign
- **\$3,300** to a Trump political action committee (PAC), according to FEC records
- **\$300,300** to Tim Sheehy's 2024 Montana Senate campaign
- **\$365,500** to the National Republican Senatorial Committee
- **\$100,000** to Leadership in Action, a PAC committed to electing conservatives in Montana
- **\$10,000** to the Republican parties of dozens of states



Sources: Estimates compiled from CBP's Smart Wall Map ([cbp.gov/border-security/along-us-borders/smart-wall-map](https://cbp.gov/border-security/along-us-borders/smart-wall-map)), USAspending.gov, press releases and emailed statements from CBP spokespeople.





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Delta smelt are raised at the University of California, Davis Fish Conservation and Culture Laboratory to be released into the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to support the wild population.  
**Xavier Mascareñas / California Department of Water Resources**

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## REPORTAGE

# Can restoration save the Delta smelt?

In the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, new wetlands await the threatened fish.

BY MARK SCHAPIRO

**LOOKOUT SLOUGH**, a 3,400-acre wetland on the edge of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta in central California, is ringed with aquatic plants, pulsing with tides from San Francisco Bay, and home to dozens of species of fish, amphibians, reptiles and birds. Until two years ago, it was parched former farmland, cut off from the Sacramento River's floodplain by a 26-foot-tall levee.

This transformation, the delta's largest tidal restoration project, was prompted by the decline of the Delta smelt, a fish barely as long as an index finger. Adapted to the delta's brackish

tides over thousands of years, the smelt is considered a strong indicator of ecological health. No smelt means there's not enough phytoplankton or zooplankton in the water to sustain the species, and therefore less food for birds and larger fish.

Charlotte Biggs, program manager for the California Department of Water Resources (DWR), compared the smelt's role in the delta's wetlands to the blood tests that tell humans about "bigger things that may be going on in your body." The question now is whether restoring wetlands like Lookout Slough can revive the Delta smelt.

**THE SACRAMENTO DELTA** was — and remains — one of the most fertile places in California, thanks to the mix of saltwater from the San Francisco Bay and freshwater pouring in from the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers to the north and east. Thousands of years before European settlement, numerous Indigenous groups — including Miwok, Maidu and Yokut communities — fished and cultivated food along the region's riverbanks and waterways.

In the 20th century, the state and federal governments saw the delta's water as key to the growth of California's cities

and large-scale agriculture. Levees were installed across it to tame the rivers, reduce flooding, and make orchards and tomato fields possible. By 1969, seven massive impeller pumps from the California State Water Project had begun diverting the water, sending it up a 244-foot hill outside the city of Tracy and through aqueducts to the farms of the Central Valley and cities farther south.

The pumping dried up the smelt's spawning grounds, weakening the tidal flows that provided it with nourishing microorganisms and parching the aquatic plants that sheltered smelt from predators. In the early 2000s, the population plunged, along with the delta's populations of longfin smelt, striped bass and threadfin shad.

In 2008, some four decades after the Tracy pumps started pumping, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ruled that the diversion of freshwater from the delta posed enough of a threat to fish habitat to require the restoration of 8,000 acres of wetland and stream ecosystems. Thus began the state's 18-year quest to mitigate the impacts of its own water diversions.

Over the following decade, DWR identified and began working on 10 restoration sites in the delta that covered a total of about 5,000 acres. Each involved dismantling one or more of the levees that had long separated the land from the water. But with another 3,000 acres still to go, the state realized it could not complete the project on its own.



It was time to bring in the biodiversity brokers.

Under federal and many state laws, private and public developers are required to “mitigate” their projects’ impacts on certain waterways and vulnerable species by paying to restore similar habitat elsewhere. Many buy mitigation credits from private companies that specialize in restoring landscapes. This practice, known as mitigation banking, began in the 1980s and has grown dramatically over the past two decades; it’s now a multibillion-dollar industry.

In 2018, the state of California issued a request for proposals to restore that final 3,000 acres of riparian habitat. Adam Davis, co-founder and managing director of Ecosystem Investment Partners (EIP), responded. His company, one of the largest to specialize in mitigation banking, bought the 3,400 acres of what’s now Lookout Slough, aiming to restore it in exchange for credits it could sell.

EIP struck a deal with the state in 2018 and broke ground on the site in June 2022. About a year later, I took a drive with Davis atop the levee that circled the slough. Below us, bulldozers, scrapers and dump trucks churned through the soon-to-be inundated property. “People forget,” he told me, “that underneath all the ecology — the fish, the migration corridors, the places where birds need to land — underneath all that is land that people own.” Mitigation banking, he said, leverages private ownership for conservation, creating financial incentives to slow the rate of

extinction and land degradation.

To prepare the land to receive the water, EIP and its contractors had to carve nooks and crannies that would slow river and tidal flows and create spawning habitat for fish and amphibians. Over two years, they etched 26 miles of channels across the 3,400 acres of Lookout Slough and moved 30,000 dump truck loads of dirt. EIP received 2,975 mitigation credits, for which the state paid \$32,605 each — a total of almost \$97 million.

In September 2024, I returned to watch the levees come down. As a bulldozer took huge bites out of the earthen levee, water gushed across the landscape. Eighteen months later, I found a latticework of water channels and half-submerged islands. A couple of teenagers were fishing from the banks; two pelicans wheeled overhead, and a group of geese paddled near one of the distant, low-lying islands. As yet, however, DWR has not reported Delta smelt in the slough.

The restoration of Lookout Slough and other delta landscapes may have come too late

for the fish, whose population has declined by 99% since it was first listed as federally threatened by the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1993. Despite multiple releases of hatchery-raised smelt in recent years, weekly surveys of delta waterways by the Fish and Wildlife Service typically report smelt numbers in the single digits.

“The smelt used to be among the most common fish species in the delta,” said Jon Rosenfield, a fish biologist and science director of San Francisco Baykeeper, an environmental advocacy group. “Now, it’s almost impossible to find them.” The restoration effort, he said, is admirable but inadequate: “It’s like building a very nice playground in a neighborhood you’ve allowed to burn down.”

But Dan Riordan, section manager for tidal habitat restoration at DWR, said the state has documented phytoplankton and zooplankton — signs of promising smelt habitat — in the slough. Those findings will be included in a report scheduled for release in September.

More than 50 years after the

impellers in Tracy began pumping out the delta’s water, the Delta smelt has compelled a return of water to the land. If the restored wetlands continue to recover, they may provide lasting habitat for a multitude of species. The smelt may yet be among them. ☀

*Mark Schapiro is a continuing lecturer at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. His latest book is Seeds of Resistance: The Fight for Food Diversity on our Climate-Ravaged Planet.*

*This story was produced in collaboration with Bay Nature, a nonprofit news organization that connects the people of the San Francisco Bay Area more deeply with the natural world. Visit Bay Nature to read “Price-Tagging Nature,” Mark Schapiro’s in-depth look at the compensatory mitigation industry. [baynature.org](https://baynature.org)*

*This story is part of High Country News’ Conservation Beyond Boundaries project, which is supported by the BAND Foundation and the Mighty Arrow Family Foundation. [hcn.org/cbb](https://hcn.org/cbb)*

An aerial view of the Lookout Slough Tidal Habitat Restoration Project, an open water habitat for fish and wildlife in California’s Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. **Ken James / California Department of Water Resources**





■ DEAR FRIENDS

## Meet the West's new environmental reporters

**SINCE THE 1970S**, more than 230 young people have come through HCN's intern and fellowship programs, going on to use the skills and knowledge they gained here to make important contributions to the West and the wider world. Dozens have built successful careers in journalism, working as reporters, editors and photographers for *The Washington Post*, *National Geographic*, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, *The Oregonian* and a multitude of smaller local outlets.

As time passed, however, we found that an internship was no longer enough to land a first job in journalism. We shifted to yearlong fellowships, but as local news organizations downsized or ceased publication altogether, we started to wonder if we were preparing these brilliant young people for jobs that no longer existed.

That was one of the inspirations behind the Western Environmental Reporting Collaborative (WERC), a partnership with the national nonprofit Report for America and local news organizations across the region. It launches this month with two- to three-year positions for journalists in Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana, thanks to the support of our great collaborators and the HCN supporters who helped us get this thing started.

We're excited to announce the first four WERC reporters. With this combination of national, regional and local partners, we hope to make these jobs permanent, providing Westerners with consistent, insightful reporting about our land, water and wildlife.

**Stephanie Casanova** will cover the Colorado River for *Arizona Luminaria*. An independent bilingual journalist from Tucson, Stephanie has covered community stories for more than 10 years for publications including *CALÓ News*, *Somos Tucson* and *Prism*. She is a 2026 investigative fellow with the Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting and has completed fellowships with the SPJ Future Leaders Academy, the Maynard 200 investigative reporting program and the IRE Data Journalism Bootcamp.

**Chart Riggall** will be stationed at the *Ouray County Plaindealer* on Colorado's Western Slope. Prior to joining the *Plaindealer*, Chart covered courts and legal affairs

for *Law360* in his hometown of Atlanta, Georgia. He began his reporting career at the nearby *Marietta Daily Journal*, covering local and state politics and economic development. Before he got into journalism, he led a variety of other lives, including as a government oversight investigator, brewery hand and public-lands worker in southwest Colorado.

**Teal Davis** will report for Wyoming Public Media, covering wildlife, land use and the preservation of major national parks, including Yellowstone and Grand Teton. Before joining WPM, Davis worked as an environment and data reporter in central Wyoming for the *Riverton Ranger* and *Lander Journal*. Born and raised in San Diego, she interned at *inewssource*, an investigative newsroom, and freelanced for several publications in the city. She has also published work with KPBS, the *Casper Star-Tribune* and the *Wyoming Tribune Eagle*.

**Nick Mott** will cover the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and associated public lands, wildlife, water and rural community impacts for *Mountain Journal*, a project of *Montana Free Press*. A longtime freelance journalist in the Livingston area, Nick is the host and creator of the podcast *The Wide Open* and author of the 2023 book *This Is Wildfire: How To Protect Yourself, Your Home, and Your Community in the Age of Heat*. He's also written for *High Country News* and *Mountain Journal*, among others.

WERC reporters will report stories for their home publications, which can be shared with statewide and regional networks. You'll see more of their reporting in these pages, and HCN will offer their stories to newsrooms across the West for republication at no charge.

And this is just the beginning! We plan to add four more reporters to the network next year and another four the year after that, planting WERC in 12 Western states. In the process, we'll help provide insightful reporting for local communities and share those stories with other communities, as well as with policymakers in statehouses and Washington, D.C.

A little good news, for a change — in every sense of the word!

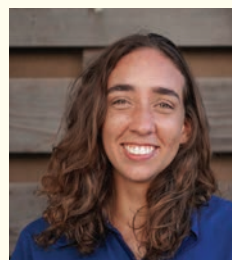
— Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher



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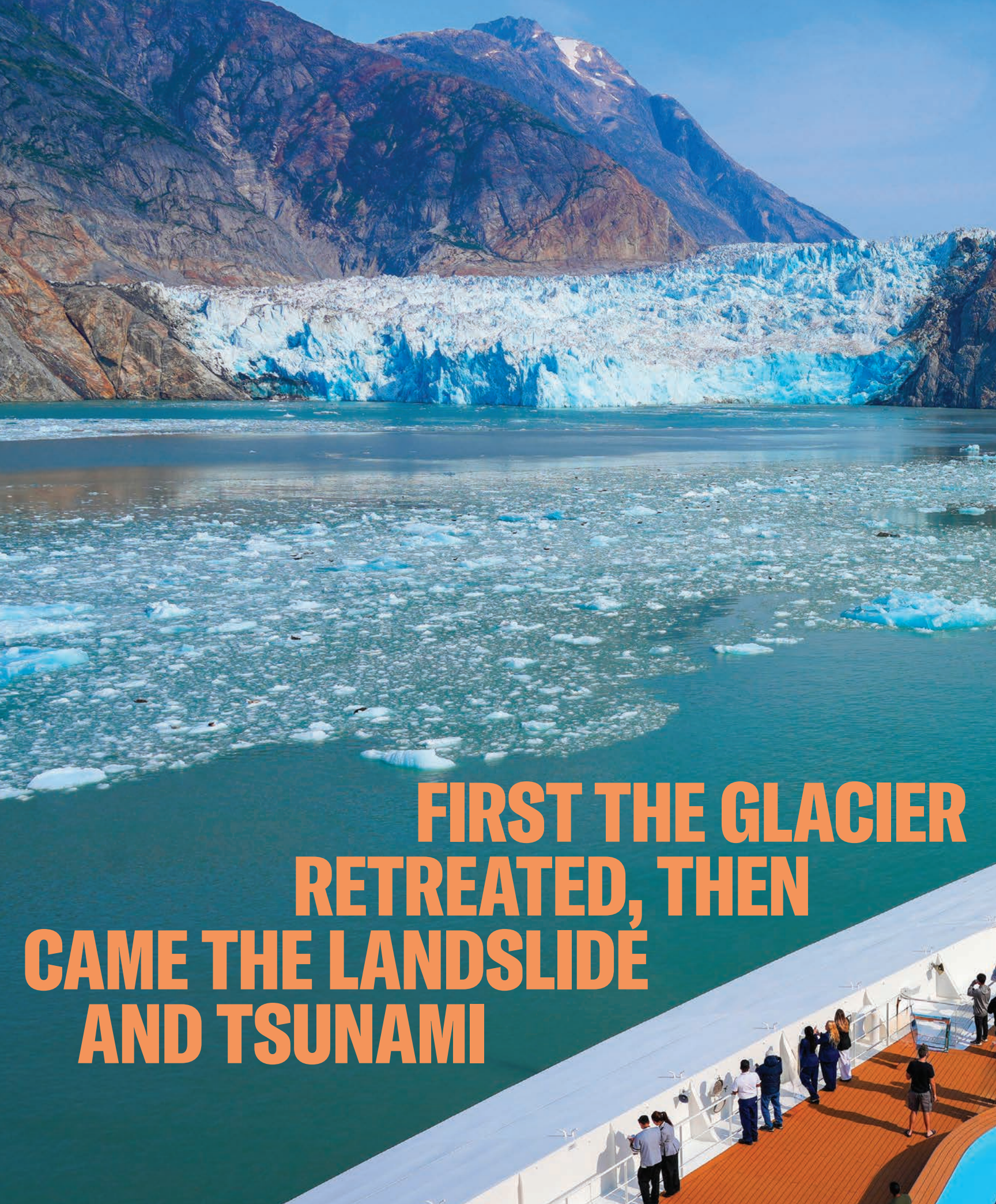
**ROBERT WIGINGTON**  
 HIGH COUNTRY NEWS READER  
 BOULDER, CO

*“I just realized that I’ve been reading HCN for almost 50 years. Through thick and thin, it has kept me connected with the agonies and beauties of the greater West, expanding my horizons and understandings of this magnificent place and its resilient people, giving me a sense of home. Let’s keep HCN going strong.”*

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**FIRST THE GLACIER  
RETREATED, THEN  
CAME THE LANDSLIDE  
AND TSUNAMI**



A high-angle photograph from the deck of a white cruise ship. In the foreground, several passengers are visible on the wooden deck, some sitting and some standing, looking out towards the water. The ship's white hull and railings are prominent. The water is a deep teal color, filled with numerous icebergs of various sizes. In the background, steep, rugged cliffs rise from the water's edge, their surfaces a mix of dark grey and reddish-brown. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

*In Alaska's fjords, climate  
change is boosting  
the chances of  
catastrophic  
waves.*

**BY TIM LYDON**



# SASHA CALVEY HEARD THE TSUNAMI COMING.

It was after 5:30 a.m. on Aug. 10, 2025, and she was camped with two friends on a remote island in Southeast Alaska. They were 74 days into a sea kayaking trip from Washington.

Heavy rain had fallen overnight, with gusts that swayed the spruce and hemlocks overhead. From her sleeping bag inside the tent, Calvey heard waves tumbling against the shore. But it was an alarming new sound that roused her: Like a waterfall but deeper, and getting louder as it got closer until it almost shook the ground.

"Everything in my gut told me to check outside," Calvey said.

The three friends scrambled out to find that 15-foot waves had just slammed into the nearby beach, shoving water into the forest. Seaweed dotted the moss beside their tent. A few steps away, water drained from the woods down to the gravel beach where

they'd stowed their food and gear, half of which was now gone. One kayak was wedged against a tree. Another hung from a bluff, and the third floated in the distance.

They were lucky. Had the tsunami arrived three hours earlier, when the tide was 10 feet higher, water could have crashed through the area, toppling trees and sweeping the trio, trapped inside their tent, into the ocean.

"The water was chaotic for hours," Calvey recalled, describing powerful swells and giant whirlpools. With so much gear missing, they radioed for rescue, ending their trip.

Later, they learned that the tsunami had

been caused by a massive landslide roughly 30 miles away. It happened at the end of Tracy Arm fjord, a narrow channel that snakes between mountains south of Juneau. The slide came down where the South Sawyer Glacier is retreating; scientists believe that glacial retreat can contribute to landslides.

The tsunami wave climbed an incredible 1,580 feet high on nearby mountainsides — a measure called its run-up — stripping away trees, brush and soil. It was the second-largest run-up ever recorded. As the tsunami raced away from the slide, it scoured steep shorelines along the approximately 30-mile fjord. Its remnants hit Calvey's beach, outside the fjord's mouth.

Evidence suggests a sharp uptick in the number of landslide-generated tsunamis in Alaska over the last decade or more. In 2015, a slide at Taan Fjord, 400 miles northwest of Tracy Arm, launched a 630-foot run-up. And in Prince William Sound, a creeping landslide near the Barry Glacier threatens to launch a tsunami potentially even larger than Tracy Arm's.

Scientists, land managers and tour operators are scrambling for answers. And they expect more slides as glaciers continue to shrink. This emerging climate-related hazard threatens communities, infrastructure and boats big and small, including the cruise ships that bring nearly 2 million visitors to Alaska yearly.

While researching her trip, Calvey found warnings about tsunamis in Alaska's fjords.

The tent where Sasha Calvey and two friends were sleeping when waves from a tsunami inundated the forest.

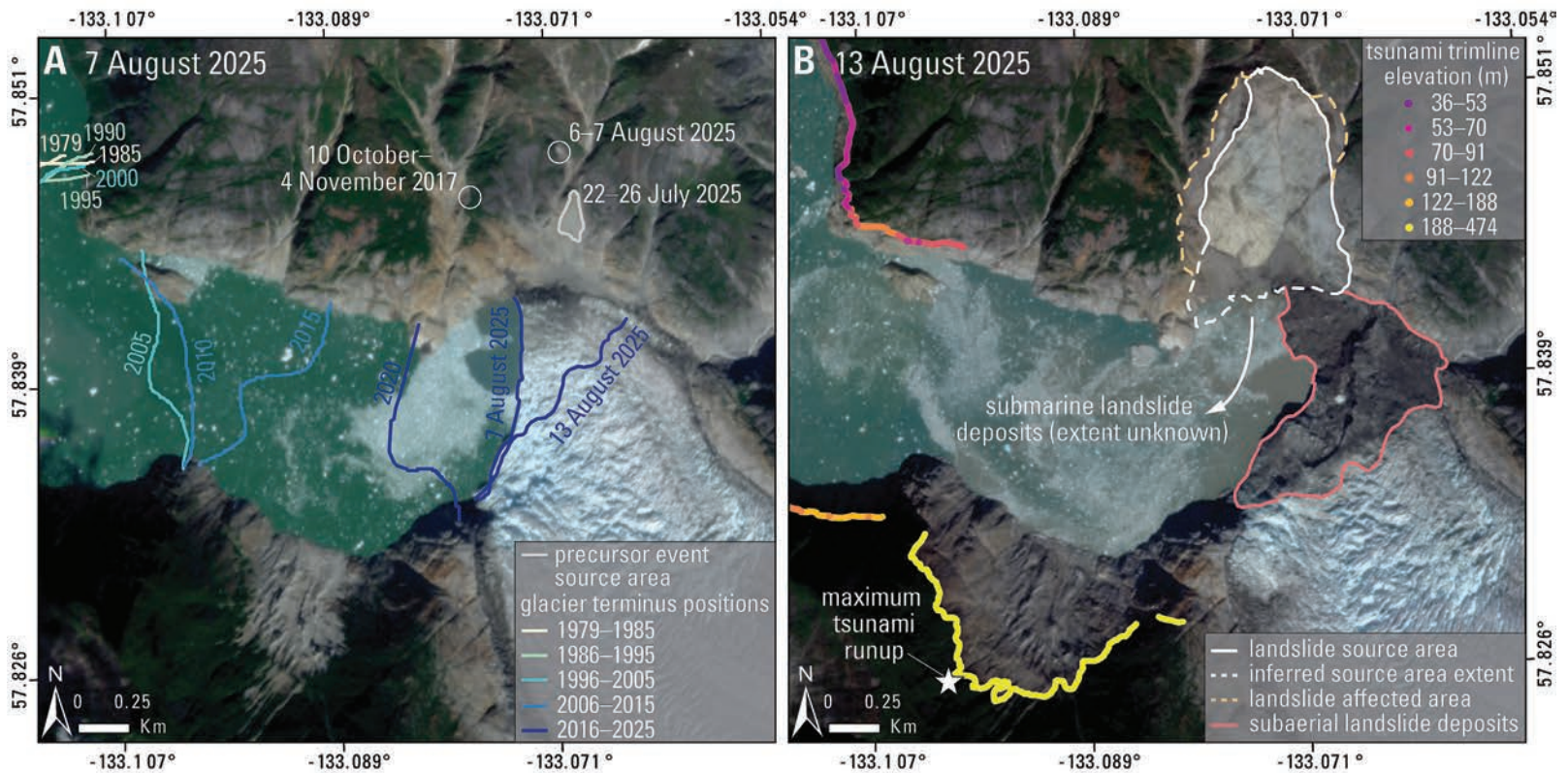
**Courtesy of  
Sasha Calvey**





Opening spread: A cruise ship motors toward the South Sawyer Glacier at the end of Alaska's Tracy Arm fjord in August 2023, near where a landslide triggered a tsunami in 2025. **Alexandre Rosa / Alamy Stock Photo**

Below, a seismogram from the Tracy Arm landslide on Aug. 10, 2025. Recorded by a seismic station about 65 miles away in Angoon, Alaska, it shows how fast the ground moved up and down, and that the shaking lasted about two minutes. **Alaska Earthquake Center**



The South Sawyer Glacier and the mountain above it before and after the landslide. (Sources: Alaska Earthquake Center, Planet Labs PBC, Science, USGS)

But they were generally tied to earthquakes, including the 1958 shaker that caused a landslide and 1,720-foot run-up in Glacier Bay National Park's Lituya Bay. Nothing mentioned giant, tsunami-causing landslides triggered by retreating glaciers. But she hopes they get attention now.

**IT'S HARD TO OVERSTATE** the good fortune that day, considering Tracy Arm's popularity: Each summer, it receives over 200 visits from lumbering cruise ships full of people hoping to see where the massive Sawyer and South Sawyer glaciers flow down to the ocean. The fjord, inside the Tongass National Forest, attracts an estimated 500,000 boat-based visitors annually. Dozens of vessels visited the area in the

days before the slide, even as gravity quietly tugged at the soon-to-collapse mountainside.

But traffic is light during early mornings. The closest-known vessel was the over-100-passenger *National Geographic Venture*, which was in Tracy Arm and motoring toward the glaciers. In deep water and still about 20 miles from South Sawyer when the mountain slid, it was unharmed by the tsunami.

If the landslide had hit a few hours later, the *Venture* would have been at the glacier, where passengers climb onto skiffs to see it up close. In that zone, whitewater waves over 100 feet high full of icebergs and debris could have destroyed the tour boat and any already-launched skiffs.

Christine and Jeffrey Smith, owners of

a 65-foot tour boat called the *David B*, were also lucky. The previous evening, with six guests aboard, they had planned to anchor overnight five miles from South Sawyer. The tsunami would have struck them minutes after the slide. But because of stormy weather, they anchored 45 miles away in neighboring Endicott Arm instead.

"We're definitely feeling our mortality," Christine Smith told me later. It was hard to imagine surviving the chaos.

But even in Endicott Arm, the tsunami reached them. Cooking breakfast in the galley, Smith watched 10-foot swells suddenly overtake a shoal and an 80-foot vessel fight an abnormally strong current.

The Smiths sent a satellite text to Jackie Caplan-Auerbach, a geologist friend





A triangle of light-colored bedrock (image center right) exposed by the massive landslide in Tracy Arm fjord above the South Sawyer Glacier, two days after the slide. Bedrock visible along both shores shows where the tsunami triggered by the landslide swept away vegetation. **Jacek Maselko**









in Washington, asking her to check nearby seismic stations for signs of landslides. It was the first report of the Tracy Arm tsunami to the outside world.

Caplan-Auerbach was sitting down to coffee and a Wordle when the Smiths' text dropped. The seismologist and Western Washington University professor quickly pivoted to scrolling for seismic stations near the *David B*. The data from many stations is publicly accessible. But there are few seismometers in Southeast Alaska, a vast and remote area where monitoring is expensive.

At a sensor in the Tlingit village of Angoon, 60 miles west of the *David B*, Caplan-Auerbach saw a telltale signal of a landslide somewhere close by. She texted colleagues, and soon a widening circle of scientists pinpointed its location in Tracy Arm.

"This is a big deal," she recalled thinking. The landslide must have displaced a huge volume of water for the tsunami to travel 45 miles to the *David B*.

Caplan-Auerbach also noticed that for hours before the slide, the Angoon seismometer had been picking up small signals from the slope. "They're tiny," she told me, adding that no one would have noticed them



Bretwood "Hig" Higman works on an instrument monitoring movement on the unstable slope above Portage Glacier (top). Tundra vegetation dangles over fresh cracks in the mountain, showing the slope's instability.

**Tim Lydon / HCN**



had the landslide not followed. Geologists later spotted them on other seismometers, too. They stopped abruptly once the mountainside gave way.

Caplan-Auerbach has studied these “precursory” signals for nearly 20 years. She and others wonder whether they could inform a future landslide warning system. But any such system is a long way off. “Landslides are notoriously difficult to anticipate,” she said, explaining that rock type, precipitation and other wide-ranging factors complicate predictions. Plus, she added, precursory signals don’t precede every slide.

**IN OCTOBER**, Bretwood “Hig” Higman and I paddled tiny packrafts along the cliffy shores of Portage Lake, an hour southeast of Anchorage and 500 miles from Tracy Arm. Higman, an independent geologist working through his nonprofit Ground Truth Alaska, needed to check sensors on a slow-moving landslide above the Portage Glacier at the far end of the lake.

Dense fog blanketed the water. As we paddled toward the glacier, a rockslide rumbled somewhere high in the mist, a reminder that steep mountains loomed overhead. Higman, wearing wire-rim glasses and a fraying ballcap, cocked his head toward the sound with boyish interest.

In May 2020, Higman and over a dozen other scientists made their own big splash. They sent an open letter warning of a potentially catastrophic creeping landslide near the retreating Barry Glacier in Prince William Sound to *The New York Times*, which published a story about the dangers. It was an unorthodox move, and some locals wished they’d learned about the threat from an official announcement rather than from national media coverage that triggered a scare before tourism season.

The Barry Arm landslide, 40 miles north of Portage Lake, is intimidating. In summer, rocks tumble down its gravelly surface, kicking up dust or splashing into the ocean. Nearby, the Barry Glacier booms as it sheds ice. Modeling shows that if the whole slope went, it could unleash a huge tsunami threatening boats, cabins, campsites and all the people in them across a broad area. A diminished yet still powerful 6-foot wave could hit the small city of Whittier 30 miles away, endangering anyone along low-lying shores.

Soon after the researchers sent the open letter, state and federal agencies laced the Barry Arm fjord with helicopter-loads of high-tech instruments, including weather stations, seismometers, live-feed cameras, radio repeaters and ground-based radar. Together, they provide real-time observations of the unsteady slope. There’s also an experimental tsunami warning system that scientists can use to notify Whittier officials or alert boaters via VHF radio. In addition, research using the Barry Arm instruments has bolstered scientists’ ability to pinpoint more distant landslides, including the Tracy Arm event. The whole project represents millions of dollars in state and federal investment.

As we paddled Portage Lake, our reflections crisp on the water, Higman explained

*As we paddled toward the glacier, a rockslide rumbled somewhere high in the mist.*

why certain of Alaska’s thousands of retreating glaciers stand out as hazards. The main ingredients are visibly unstable slopes perched above thinning ice; a body of water big enough to throw a tsunami; and proximity to people and infrastructure.

Like Barry Arm, Portage has it all. A Chugach National Forest visitor center sits lakeside and bustles with up to 1,000 visitors daily in summer. Many board the 140-passenger *Ptarmigan* tour boat, which laps the lake throughout the day. There’s also a nearby road, railroad, campgrounds and trails, all in a tsunami’s potential path.

We landed at a wedge in the shore and hung our boats from a cliff so that curious bears wouldn’t mess with them. Shoulder-packing in the cool air, we hiked up through thick alder brush, then steep green tundra. Far below, the fog dissipated, revealing the Portage Glacier, a giant river of ice between bulging mountains. Bergs floated where its face met the lake. But along its edges, rubble-darkened ice shrank away from mountain walls. The glacier looked sick.

It could be an example of “debuttering,” Higman explained. Healthy glaciers erode the adjacent mountains, steepening or

even undercutting their walls. But they also press against the slopes, supporting them.

When a glacier thins, as is happening globally due to climate change, the buttress disappears. That can cause steepened slopes to collapse. Climate change is also thawing alpine permafrost and worsening extreme rain events, which can trigger debuttering-related landslides.

But the exact mechanisms that determine if or when a slope fails remain unclear. Landslides do not always immediately follow glacial retreat. And sometimes they don’t happen at all. Over the last decade or more, the Barry Glacier has pulled away from its unstable slope’s bottom, but the slope hasn’t slid. At least not yet.

“It’s frustrating that we don’t know more about how these systems work,” Higman

said, looking down at where the wasting glacier met Portage Lake.

**AS WE ANGLED HIGHER** above the glacier, Higman pointed out thin cracks in the ground, evidence that the slope was crumbling. They’d opened so recently that living heather still straddled them, desiccated roots dangling in the air. More cracks appeared as we continued upward, until we were winding around seemingly bottomless chasms several feet wide. Far below, the Portage Glacier thundered as it dropped bergs into the lake.

The tundra abruptly ended at the landslide’s most active edge. Stretching above and below and wide as a football field, the slope was a mess of upturned rock and soil, with leaning spires, shattered boulders and deep, gravelly sinkholes. We heard the occasional hard knock of tumbling rocks. The whole thing was slumping down toward the glacier by several meters annually, Higman said. Other factors may contribute, but he believes the thinning glacier has debuttered the entire slope.

He and others worry that it may collapse catastrophically into the lake in the





The *St. Theodosius*, a tour boat, motors near the Hubbard Glacier in Disenchantment Bay, Alaska, in August 2023.  
**Bill Gozansky / Alamy Stock**

next few years as the glacier recedes from underneath it. That's what happened at Tracy Arm. Satellite imagery shows that the South Sawyer Glacier swiftly withdrew from beneath the doomed mountainside in the weeks and days before it collapsed.

Higman, Caplan-Auerbach and several other scientists, led by University of Calgary researcher Dan Shugar, recently published a paper in the journal *Science* that details how the glacier's retreat primed the slope for the landslide and tsunami.

Still, many factors can contribute to landslides, including weather and slope weakness, said Dennis Staley, the U.S. Geological Survey scientist leading the multi-agency effort at Barry Arm. The recent research renews focus on the tie between retreating glaciers and landslides large enough to cause tsunamis, but, Staley told me, "It's hard to know a specific trigger."

Higman agreed, choosing his words carefully: "There could be many causes" for the Tracy Arm slide. But he called the timing of the glacier's rapid retreat "an extraordinary coincidence" that raised imminent concerns about Portage.

We side-hilled across the steep, barren slide. Dirt and scree sloughed downward beneath our boots as we navigated around wobbly boulders many times my size. Eventually, Higman reached over the edge of a sheer column to retrieve an extensometer, a metal and glass canister smaller than a water bottle that he'd previously drilled into the rock.

"It's like an electronic tape measure," he said, using a drill to open its casing and change its battery. All day, it snaps measurements of the rock's movement. It's still experimental, but he hoped that someday he or perhaps visitor center staff could view its data online, including during periods of heavy rain or quickening glacial retreat.

Ideally, Higman said, more precise instruments would pepper the Portage slide, like at Barry Arm. They would link to satellites and a government office where someone could "push a red button" to alert the public if movement accelerates. The array could also detect any potentially critical precursory signals.

Closing the extensometer, Higman described the benefits of his small home-grown effort. Low costs, for example, mean



more instruments in more places. But the rudimentary sensors must be placed “at just the right crack” to show movement. For now, though, they’re the only sensors at Portage.

We scrambled upward to the crown of the slide and back onto firm tundra. For an hour, we traversed the slope to other sensors, each an eye on what Higman hoped were the right cracks.

**ON A DRIZZLY EVENING** a few weeks after the Tracy Arm tsunami, Staley, the scientist leading the Barry Arm monitoring, drove to Whittier for a public meeting. Dozens of companies launch boat and kayak tours into Prince William Sound from the town. Captains, guides, officials and a few locals had gathered aboard a spacious tour boat moored in the harbor, chatting and munching pizza, to hear Staley give an update on Barry Arm.

Staley spoke briefly, then invited conversation. As low clouds and darkness settled over the calm harbor, operators asked questions or shared their evolving strategies for safely bringing people to the glaciers that support their businesses. While many operators had quit visiting Barry Arm in 2020, after Higman’s initial warning, some had returned in the years since monitoring equipment was installed. Now, after Tracy Arm and a 2024 landslide and small tsunami at the Surprise Glacier near Barry Arm, some were avoiding the area again. It’s a back-and-forth that’s becoming familiar to people who work near Alaska’s melting glaciers.

Later, Jeff Pedersen, operations manager of Alaska Wildland Adventures in nearby Girdwood, called it an ongoing assessment. In 2024, his company experienced minor damage from a large landslide near the retreating Pedersen Glacier in Kenai Fjords National Park, 60 miles south of Portage.

The slide slammed into a lagoon during a night of heavy rain, causing a tsunami that reached 50 feet high or more on nearby slopes. Farther away, at the company’s backcountry lodge, a 3-foot wave overran boardwalks near a cabin where guests slept. Staff reviewed protocols and now avoid that glacier.

Christine and Jeffrey Smith of the *David B* responded similarly after the Tracy Arm slide, with sober conversations about safety and where to anchor at night. They’ll still

visit glaciers, they said, but their practices will evolve around changing conditions and ideally be informed by more research.

Major cruise lines, including Carnival, Holland America and Royal Caribbean, have also taken notice. In early April, nearly all the large cruise ship companies operating in Alaska announced they would avoid Tracy Arm in 2026. They will reroute over 300 cruise ship visits into neighboring Endicott Arm, a similar fjord where Dawes Glacier is receding from beneath steep mountainsides. None of the large cruise companies contacted for this story responded to interview requests.

Melenda Lekanof, secretary and treasurer of the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe Council, is also concerned. Yakutat, a village of 600, sits between Southeast Alaska and Prince William Sound, not far from the giant Hubbard Glacier. Lekanof recently coordinated a

*“We were taught to not be loud, we were taught to not damage the landscape, to be careful where you go.”*

community workshop attended by Higman and other scientists. It was part of a regional initiative called the Kutí Geohazards Project, which combines Indigenous and Western science to better understand landslide risk.

“We have a lot to learn about our changing landscape,” Lekanof told me, including increasing landslides and melting glaciers.

While cruise ships don’t call on Yakutat, they frequently pass the village on their way to the Hubbard Glacier, in Disenchantment Bay. Scientific models indicate a possible landslide and destructive wave along their route. Lekanof worried that a lack of coordinated emergency planning among the cruise ship companies, state and other entities would put the burden of disaster response on the small village. And that a cruise ship accident could cost lives or cause environmental harm where her people fish, hunt and visit sacred lands.

Lekanof would also like to see a monitoring array like Barry Arm’s in Disenchantment Bay. But that would require expanding the kind of funding that the Trump administration has tried to cut.

Traditional teachings about glaciers

and tsunamis reflect lessons her ancestors learned over millennia, Lekanof said. “We were taught to not be loud, we were taught to not damage the landscape, to be careful where you go.” But she has heard cruise ships blasting their horns near the glacier. “Spiritually, for the birds and mammals there, I find that to be disruptive and concerning.”

**A MONTH BEFORE I VISITED** Portage Lake, the captain of the *Ptarmigan* tour boat snapped photos of fresh debris at the base of the slow-moving landslide, in a zone recently uncovered by the Portage Glacier. She shared them with visitor center staff, who consulted Higman.

Then a multiday storm dumped 8 inches of rain. Weighing the possibilities, the Forest Service evacuated a school group and staff from the visitor center, according

to a statement from the agency. And the *Ptarmigan* canceled tours, citing landslide and tsunami risk. This kind of adaptability might reflect a new way of operating around Alaska’s retreating glaciers.

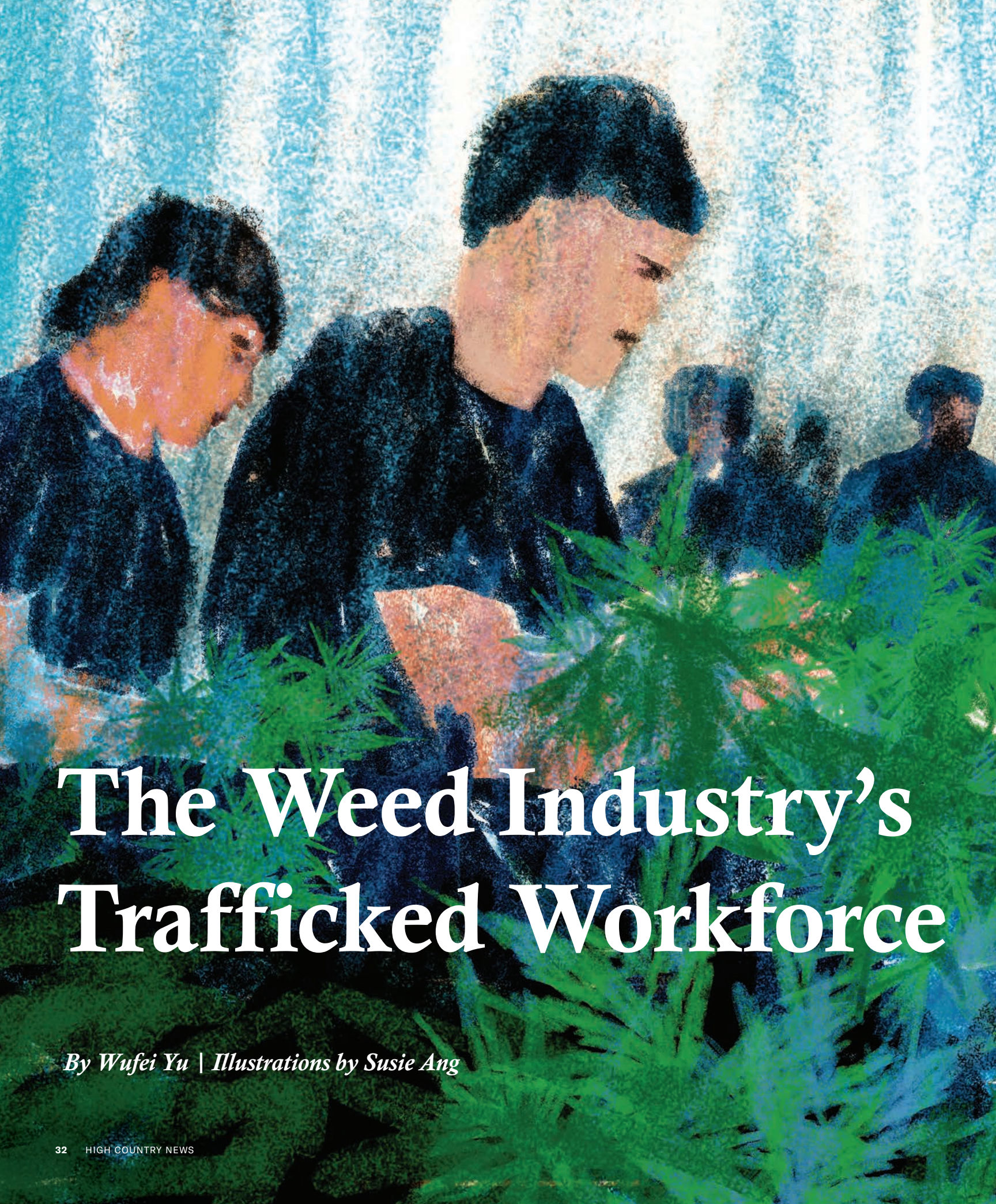
And while that may seem hopeful, Higman noted that Tracy Arm raises questions about how scientists decide which slopes to monitor. Visible slope movement, like that at Portage and Barry Arm, is important, but so is glacial retreat. Higman and other researchers have gathered preliminary data suggesting that the longer a newly exposed slope had been covered by a glacier, the more likely it may be to slide.

Endicott Arm and LeConte Bay, two busy fjords south of Tracy Arm, deserve investigation, Higman added. After all, the Tracy Arm mountain was a solid-looking mass with none of Portage’s warning signs. And no sensors.

“As scientists, we need to own up to having totally missed the ball on that one,” Higman said. ☀

*Tim Lydon writes from Alaska and is associate editor at Alaska magazine.*

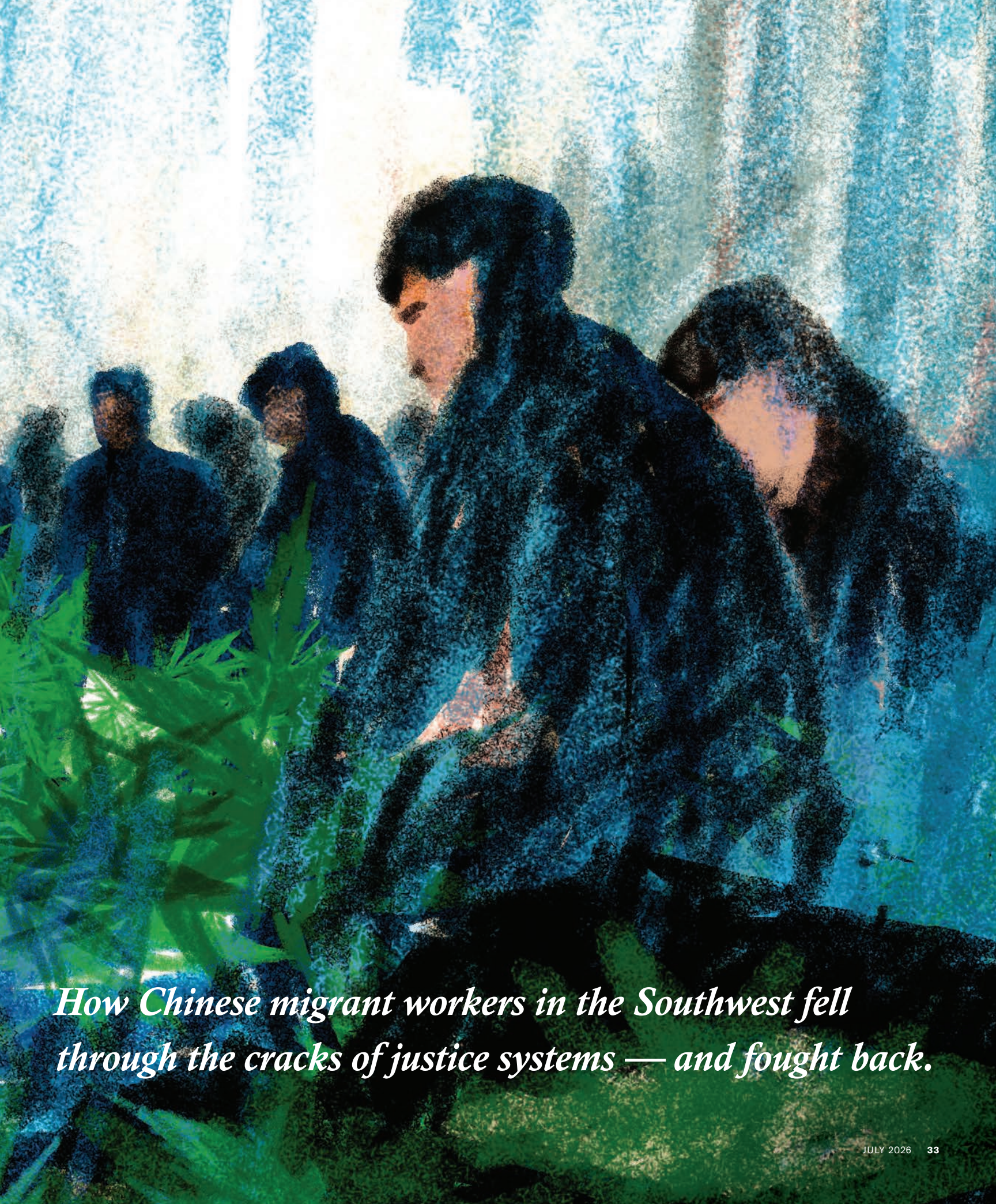




# The Weed Industry's Trafficked Workforce

*By Wufei Yu | Illustrations by Susie Ang*





*How Chinese migrant workers in the Southwest fell through the cracks of justice systems — and fought back.*



## For people who had spent their lives farming, the ad was a lifeline:

“Farmwork in New Mexico, legal work authorization card required.”

It was fall 2020, three years after Mark and Mary (not their real names) first moved to the United States from eastern China. Laid off from their jobs a few months earlier, they were desperate for income, living in a cramped Monterey Park, California, apartment that they shared with four others.

For over two decades in China, alongside their day jobs, they had cultivated peanuts, rice and sweet potatoes on two acres in an undeveloped agricultural part of the country. The crops helped keep their six children fed. But as their own parents aged and their children got older, they wanted a steadier future.

The ad, on a popular job postings site for Chinese-speaking migrant workers, didn't specify what kind of farmwork they'd be doing, but the line about paperwork made it sound

legitimate. They called the number listed in the ad, and the details sounded promising: \$200 a day for eight to 10 hours of “flowering trimming,” with food and accommodation provided. A few days later, they received a text message showing the location: Farmington, a sleepy oil-and-gas town of 46,000 on the edge of the Navajo Nation. It is the largest city in the Four Corners, the area where New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Arizona meet, and it is one of New Mexico's major towns.

In the first week of October, the couple began the 740-mile, nearly 12-hour drive east. As they neared Farmington, they watched the sun bear down on Ship Rock, an escarpment rising 1,400 feet above the rugged high desert, visible for 50 miles in almost every direction. Beneath the watchful gaze of the winged, cathedral-like pinnacle, the San Juan River trickled through a dry, khaki-colored valley

past stony mesas and rolling hills.

When the couple arrived at their destination, a pink, two-story motel, Mary told me that a middle-aged Chinese-speaking man took their car keys and confiscated their phones. Mary and her husband were put into separate rooms. Some had been converted into a makeshift processing facility, with the mattresses stashed in the bathroom and the dresser drawers emptied out. The doors were kept locked or guarded, according to legal documents, and Mark, Mary and the other workers were told to sit on an upside-down bucket beside heavy-duty black trash bags stuffed with lime-green marijuana plants.

Mary remembered the plant's distinctive odor. The work left her nose swollen “like an elephant” and she spiked a 100-degree fever. Mary's assignment was to cut the leaves from the plants' buds with scissors from 7 a.m. or





earlier, until 10 at night, working almost nonstop, according to legal documents. She was denied medication, and when she tried to stop work, she was forced to continue, a civil case she and others filed later stated.

Mark and Mary had unwittingly walked into the shadowy fringes of New Mexico's brand-new legal weed industry — and the early days of a network that sought to use Chinese immigrants as labor on the farms that supplied the growing demand for the drug.

New Mexico, which legalized the adult use of weed in 2021, began its first licensed sales in 2022, and currently sells at least \$35 million every month. Colorado and other states in the region have also legalized the plant's use over the past decade and a half. At the same time, cannabis entrepreneurs started to see the potential for an unexpected workforce: Chinese immigrants. With youth unemployment hovering around 15% in China amid the post-pandemic economic downturn, over 60,000 Chinese migrants crossed the Mexican border into the U.S. from 2021 to 2024.

When law enforcement tried to rein in illegal weed operations like this one, the workers became the focus of their efforts. Despite the efforts of social support groups, the trafficked immigrant workers ended up bearing the brunt of the punishment for the very system that exploited them.

**LATE ON THE AFTERNOON** of Oct. 8, 2020, a local passerby noticed that a man was moving marijuana plants from a vehicle into a room at the motel. A strong smell of weed was emanating from cars in the parking lot with California license plates. Shortly after that passerby dialed 911, police arrived at the motel room and knocked on the doors.

The workers opened the doors. "At first, I felt like I was finally rescued," Mary said. But that quickly changed: The officers escorted the 16 workers out of the rooms, instructed and gestured for them to sit or kneel on the ground, according to police dashcam video included in court filings against Mary. Some held their hands behind their heads, and as they waited over two hours to be transferred to the San Juan County Adult Detention Center, a policeman who spoke some Mandarin Chinese arrived and asked if the group knew what they were cutting. Everyone shook their heads.

After approximately five days of detention, Mary and the workers were advised that

they couldn't leave San Juan County pending trial, according to charging documents. She stared at the legal papers and tried to make sense of letters she did not understand.

A few days earlier, I'd been in Farmington, running down rumors about illegal marijuana grows involving hundreds of Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants on the Navajo Nation in northwestern New Mexico. I collected notes on ads for investment opportunities and jobs, describing a marijuana operation on tribal land as "undoubtedly a golden opportunity." I ran into Chinese-speaking workers in mobile home parks and half-empty strip malls in and around Farmington. Outside a motel, I stopped to talk to a Chinese-speaking man about to light a cigarette — one of Mary's co-workers, it turned out. We stayed in touch, and after he was arrested alongside Mary, he shared his charging documents with me, clearly confused.

In the wake of the bust at the Farmington motel, law enforcement intended to shut down the entire operation. More than 1,000 Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants were employed by the sprawling enterprise at its peak, Navajo Nation police told me.

Given the high-profile nature of the bust, local law enforcement took the stance that anyone, at any level, involved in illegal cannabis growing was culpable. "You can't say you don't know what's going on," one of San Juan's top police officers told me at the time. "We will charge them. And we will prosecute them."

This is not a new — or uncommon — approach. Since 1979, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) has offered grants to fund cannabis eradication. Success is often measured by tracking seizures and destruction, with state and local agencies presenting the number of weapons seized and the amount of product destroyed. That leads law enforcement to focus on the physical operation rather than its finances and leadership. It's easier to find the workers, laboring in the fields and hoop houses, than it is to catch the financial backers and often-digital systems used to bring in laborers under false pretenses. The legalization and decriminalization of cannabis has also reduced interest in prosecuting those behind the business.

This means that the harshest consequences often fall on those who were least responsible. In early November 2020, a few weeks after local law enforcement targeted the

"At first,  
I felt like I  
was finally  
rescued."



Farmington motel, federal officers from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the DEA raided Diné politician and entrepreneur Dineh Benally's farms on the Navajo Nation. They found dozens of Chinese workers, who were underdressed for the cold weather and half-asleep among the plants inside the heated hoop houses. The workers were searched and bused to a nearby high school, where the gym and classrooms were arranged for interrogation.

None of the farm's operators or backers were arrested at the time, however. By the time law enforcement arrived, they were long gone. The charges against the 16 workers who were picked up at the motel weren't dropped until late November, over two weeks after the bust. Yet they were clearly not the ones running the business, and at least some of them had no idea the work they engaged in was illegal.

Although law enforcement hadn't arrested the operation's leadership, I wanted to know just how dozens of Chinese-speaking workers had ended up in this remote part of New Mexico, a state with few Chinese communities.

**SOME OF THE WORKERS** I spoke with mentioned a "Mr. Lin." I tracked the phone number on the Chinese-language investment ads — as well as various speeding citations and calls to local and tribal police — to Irving Rea-Yui Lin, a Taiwanese American entrepreneur based in Monterey Park, California. He agreed to meet me at the lobby of a two-star motel on the eastern end of Farmington. Solid and slightly hunched at 5 feet 7, Lin, then almost 70, resembled any nonchalant grandpa you might run into at a park in China.

Around 2018, he told me, he began exploring investment opportunities in cannabis and met Benally. In early 2020, Lin brought Benally to L.A.'s suburban Chinatown and served as translator as Benally discussed cannabis investment in the Navajo Nation.

"(Benally) said they were a sovereign nation with their own regulations and licenses, which was similar to China's 'one country, two systems' arrangement in Hong Kong," Lin recalled. Around 100 people showed up at the meeting room. "The pandemic made it a golden opportunity."

"We started doing whatever we could," Lin recalled. Cannabis is strictly illegal in almost all of East and Southeast Asia. And in the U.S., Asian Americans are more likely to believe that marijuana legalization makes

communities less safe and to show less support for it than other ethnic groups.

In spite of that, Benally and Lin's strategy seemed to work. Some people invested tens of thousands of dollars — their life savings — after Benally promised that it was legitimate. Posts showed up on WeChat groups and in classified ads in Chinese-language newspapers through job agencies, offering job opportunities in "New Mexico flower trimming," "weeding on Indian Reservations" and "building greenhouses and pipework on the Navajo Nation," according to court filings.

Lin made it clear in repeated interviews with me that he was well aware of the nature of the plants involved — he knew it was marijuana — but that he saw it as part of a long tradition of surviving by using loopholes in the legal system. "Just like how I made money in New York 40 years ago: always going through *Pian Men*," he said, using a common Chinese phrase that literally means "side gates" — unofficial, higher-risk ways of earning money by working off the books, hustling in cash-only side gigs or trading in gray-market goods when you can't get a regular job.

"The tendency to find side gates is a natural one," Lin added. For first-generation immigrants, "many methods were unconventional, and jobs and gigs were also intrinsically unconventional. Over time, no matter what, it was all side gates. It becomes a habit."

Lin himself survived on these side gates: After graduating from college in Taiwan, he became a seaman on the Pacific route from Taiwan to San Francisco, where he first dreamed of immigrating while gazing at Oakland's bustling harbor. In his sailor's cabin, he studied English and read computer science textbooks between his onboard duties. He developed a plan: "Come to the United States, take the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), study computer science, and get a job at IBM," Lin said. But he needed money to cover his tuition and expenses at a computer science master's program in New Jersey, and so he was drawn in by ads shared by job agencies in Manhattan's Chinatown. There, he found his first job as a warehouse manager, earning \$220 a week, or over \$10,000 a year.

After graduating, he dabbled in other businesses, including information technology, nickel mines, gold mines and real estate. He was once the leader of a coalition of Chinese IT entrepreneurs, he told me.





“And if they’re stuck in  
New Mexico, they’re stuck  
on a whole other planet.”





Chinese people on the East Coast called him “President Lin,” he said. But his reputation was tarnished by at least one copyright lawsuit against his company in the late 1990s, and his other ventures were short-lived successes, forcing him to roam the fringes of American society and reestablish himself in L.A.’s suburban Chinatown.

The workers at Benally’s operation, he said, were doing much the same. Cannabis cultivation operates nationwide: It’s seasonal, labor-intensive and easy to staff informally through brokers. New Mexico is not the only place it has surfaced; in recent years, raids in California, Oklahoma, Massachusetts and Maine have uncovered similar recruitment and trafficking allegations.

Lin shuttled more than 100 workers from Los Angeles to New Mexico, sometimes for a fee, he said, and offered services to transport up to twenty thousand marijuana seedlings in his 12-seat van. He profited from the business, he

admitted. Meanwhile, workers and investors lacked the inside information he had.

New Mexico has a long history of trafficked workers, but the systems set up to help the victims, who often spoke Spanish, struggled to support those affected by Lin and Benally’s operation. Lynn Sanchez, director of the human trafficking outreach department at The Life Link, a Santa Fe-based nonprofit that connects crime victims with legal, economic and housing support, first met Mary and other Chinese workers shortly after the raid on the Navajo Nation. She and a few social service providers waited at the high school where the workers were bused. They brought Spanish- and English-language pamphlets, since law enforcement had told her about providing services to “displaced farmworkers.”

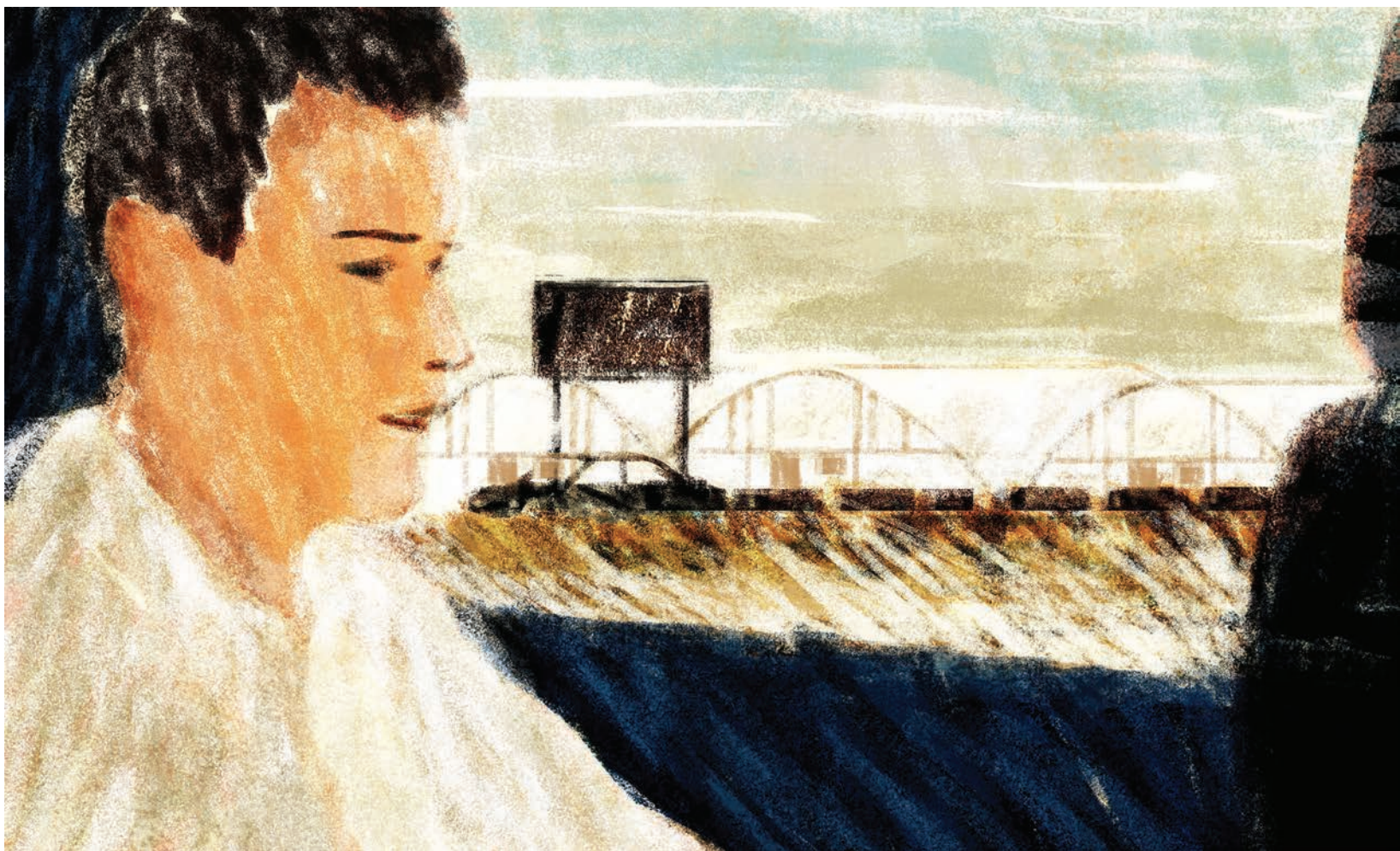
She was surprised to learn that all the workers were Chinese. With a FBI agent translating, Sanchez tried to explain what Life Link could offer. But initially only eight of

the nearly 60 Chinese workers Sanchez spoke with that day accepted Life Link’s prepaid debit cards, clothing, food and other essentials. The agent, she recalled, shook her head and snapped: “They don’t want help; they just want another job.”

A public defender later called her. The public defender, Nicole Hall, had seen a stack of case files about the 16 workers picked up at the Farmington motel, with misspelled Chinese names. “Something was wrong,” Hall later told a reporter. “And none of these people should be going to jail.”

Sanchez followed up with Mary and the other 15 workers at the two hotel rooms in Farmington they shared. “I don’t know what they were eating or how they were surviving, but it looked like they’ve been through an awful lot,” Sanchez told me.

The migrant workers found the place they’d ended up disorienting. Outside, the San Juan River Valley looked tranquil in





the shifting pink-orange light of a sunny late afternoon.

“You don’t see the world the same way when you’ve been psychologically overwhelmed like that, to be their age, to be taken at gunpoint to jail, and then to be told you have to stay here, in this climate that was really very anti-Asian,” Sanchez said. “And if they’re stuck in New Mexico, they’re stuck on a whole other planet.”

The workers’ mugshots had been published by local outlets and republished in China; the anti-Asian hatred that spread during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic further made them a target. While waiting for their hearings, many stayed inside, afraid to be seen, afraid to ask for help.

After the charges were dropped in late November 2020, many of the workers used state funds for crime victims to return to Monterey Park. They found a cold welcome: Few employers would hire them once news of their suspected involvement in the black-market marijuana industry got out in Chinatowns in the U.S. and in China. At least three workers said that they’d received random phone calls that warned them not to seek help or cooperate with law enforcement. “There was a sense that someone was following us,” Mary told me.

Some of them were desperate to take any opportunity that came their way. Hoping to save money and buy medication for his daughter in China, who suffered from a serious heart condition, a man in his 50s immediately took on a job transporting marijuana plants, according to Sanchez and Lin. In late 2021, he was pulled over while driving a truckload and was arrested in Oklahoma. He then spent around a year and a half in immigration detention centers in Colorado and Texas. During that time, his daughter died.

The other workers were due to receive checks that covered their lost wages in New Mexico. Sanchez decided to deliver them in person instead of mailing them. She repeatedly visited Monterey Park, a low-rise, predominantly Asian suburb where Chinese restaurants, storefront churches and employment agencies share the same strip malls. She walked along streets where employment agency windows were filled with ads for working-class jobs. Workers were lined up at the door, sometimes out into the street.

Sanchez realized that Mark and Mary’s

“The  
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experience wasn’t an isolated one. According to one estimate, around 2.5 million Chinese migrant workers had immigrated in recent decades, many passing through Monterey Park, driven by political suppression and economic distress. “Monterey Park was packed with a dense mass of Chinese men looking for work,” one of the other Life Link employees told me. “And some would end up in New Mexico.”

Sanchez soon learned that Mary no longer felt safe in Monterey Park. She offered Mary and other workers the chance to relocate to New Mexico. Mary and her husband were among the first to say yes. Life Link helped them apply for affordable housing, rent assistance and health care. Sanchez connected Mary and the others with legal partners, including the New Mexico Immigration Law Center and the Human Trafficking Legal Center of Washington, D.C., to apply for T-visas, which are reserved for trafficking victims and have an annual rejection rate as high as 40%.

Sanchez also hired her organization’s first Chinese-speaking employee: Yuxi Qin, whose father was one of the workers arrested in Farmington. He accepted Life Link’s assistance and moved to New Mexico, and after she saw his relocation and recovery, she began to help Sanchez with the growing number of Chinese-speaking clients.

“The illicit cannabis industry brought migrant workers from China, a place that we’d never expected to see in New Mexico,” Sanchez said. She acknowledged that it had been a learning experience; next time, she hoped, nobody would fall through the cracks. “There is much more to do.”

At the same time, some law enforcement agencies wanted to focus on the people behind the illicit cannabis trade. Like Sanchez, Kevin McInerney, a commander at California’s Department of Cannabis Control and one of Sanchez’s West Coast partners, had spent time strolling around Monterey Park. Following the lead of a Chinese-speaking anti-trafficking investigator with the U.S. Department of Labor, McInerney would sit at an unpretentious joint that served classic Northern Chinese dishes or stop by the employment agencies to read the job postings taped to the doors and talk to laborers waiting on the street for rides to worksites or to the airport for out-of-state work.

“They were picked up during the days, dropped off, and then ended up in the day-rental converted apartments, where



multiple people slept in the same room, with their belongings in a separate place,” McNerney said. The workers seemed more like victims of the system than criminals. He began to have second thoughts about local news clips showing police officers busting into residential shacks and handcuffing workers at marijuana farms. The visuals fit into the conventional logic of dealing with drug crimes, but left him with a lot of questions.

In 2022, California’s Department of Cannabis Control started an anti-trafficking and worker exploitation effort, he said, to “investigate the recruitment pipeline funneling migrant workers into cannabis” and “shift the culture of law enforcement.”

“That’s been a struggle, not just here,” he said, due to the lack of resources for the time-consuming work of investigating the people behind the recruitment, transportation, housing and coercion.

The kind of thing that Lin and others allegedly engaged in is particularly hard to tackle. Labor advocates and investigators have come to realize it is a type of “affinity exploitation.” Operators recruit newcomers through the same language and social circles that immigrants rely on to survive, turning those same trusted networks of trust into a funnel for fraud, coercion and sometimes forced labor. And once they’re involved, the people themselves become a part of the supply chain. Without stability, legal experts explained, people can be exploited by every aspect of their basic needs.

“Cannabis entered and operated within this existing infrastructure,” said Erika Moritsugu, former deputy assistant to President Joe Biden and the Asian American and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander senior liaison at the White House, in an email. The New Mexico case caught her eye after she learned about it through “community partners on the ground” and “field colleagues in government.” She met with eight of the Chinese workers over a video chat in 2021.

But law enforcement’s growing awareness of the role — and the power — of the illicit operations’ backers lagged behind the fast-moving business. Lin emerged from the Navajo Nation bust relatively unscathed, except for, he said, the visit a law enforcement officer made to his hotel in Farmington. And he quickly returned to corraling new investors for new projects that his partners were starting in Oklahoma.

The winter following the bust, I watched him pitch a group of 20 or so at a Chinese community center in Los Angeles County. The attendees sat at a safe social distance from one another, wearing masks or plastic face shields. The flyer they held promised “Legally licensed, completely transparent! The COVID-19 Pandemic has brought a turning point to the industry! A senior expert explains!”

As he took the stage, Lin urged people to join him in investing in cannabis in Oklahoma and promised them a fortune.

“The return on investment is higher than 1,000%. Finance one greenhouse, and you’ll walk away with \$300,000.” Lin wandered around in the room with a mic in his hand, gesturing like a stand-up comedian. Once investors put in the funds, he said, “our professional team will take care of the rest.”

Lin said that much of the demand for marijuana grown in Oklahoma came from out-of-state buyers because it was so costly to enter the state-sanctioned cannabis industry. “Running a dispensary is very expensive, and we reduce their cost,” he added.

Transporting marijuana products across state lines is a federal felony offense, but Lin didn’t make that clear to his potential investors at the seminar or the workers he and his partners hired from job agencies.

Lin obtained a permit for a marijuana farm in Waterflow, an unincorporated community between Farmington and Shiprock, that was issued by New Mexico’s Cannabis Control Division in December 2023. (The license for NNK Equity LLC was revoked in August 2024, after a compliance check determined that the grow had exceeded its allotted plant count.) He also reconnected with Benally, with whom he claimed to have cut ties after the Farmington hotel bust. He told me that he had helped to bring workers to Estancia, New Mexico, 45 minutes southeast of Albuquerque, for a year. Benally had established cannabis grows there.

The operation in Estancia proved to be a turning point for how law enforcement officers in New Mexico dealt with the workers they found. David (not his real name), a sturdy 20-something-year-old cattle rancher from the dry grasslands of northwestern China, was one of those who ended up working in Estancia. His spouse lived in the U.S., and in 2023, he sold his cattle, left China and entered the U.S., walking across the Mexican border to reunite with

his spouse. Drawn by the hope of earning at least \$4,500 a month, he booked a flight from New York, where he was living, to Albuquerque. There, he and another young Chinese man were picked up by a car bound for Estancia.

“I was in what seemed like a complete wasteland,” David told me. “Without a single light bulb in sight. And you wouldn’t even know if you were being sold to anyone.”

David said the farm had around 60 employees, all Chinese-speaking, in an isolated environment: one locked gate, dogs as guards. Workers worked long hours, and he wanted to quit on the second day, but his request was denied. And without a car, leaving felt impossible.

On the morning of the third day, as he ate breakfast and prepared to work, at least 100 officers arrived at the gate, David remembered. Two armored vehicles entered. A truck with a large antenna came in, he said, and a trailer with porta-potties followed. Three helicopters circled overhead. This time, law enforcement was ready: Through loudspeakers, David recalled, officers made announcements in Mandarin Chinese, saying they were from the New Mexico attorney general’s office.

“Don’t panic, we’re here to search,” one of the loudspeakers blasted. Workers emerged from hoop houses, crouching and covering their heads. Officers checked their documentation. A bus arrived for anyone who wanted to leave. Most decided to keep working until payday, but six workers boarded it, including David.

Law enforcement connected them to Lynn Sanchez and Life Link. David was initially skeptical of Sanchez and her organization. But Mary told him, “Lynn is kind-hearted and genuinely here to help you,” David recalled.

On Sept. 27, 2023, Mark, Mary and 13 other Chinese migrant workers who were arrested in Farmington filed a civil lawsuit against Lin, Benally and others they alleged had trafficked them. McNerney told me the workers’ progress — finding stable housing, legal support, a clearer path to immigration relief — offered a model: Treat trafficked workers as victims first, and use that stability to build cases that target networks rather than individual laborers.

When I asked Irving Lin for comment on the civil lawsuit, he claimed that he “has a clean background” and merely served as an interpreter for immigrant workers. He felt betrayed by his own people and claimed, inaccurately,





that the workers were able to get green cards. "Again, it's all through side gates," he said.

His obstinance reminded me of a conversation we had just before Lunar New Year in 2021. He recalled that after he started dabbling in the marijuana industry in 2018, his wife often told him: "I'm sure you'll be arrested one day." One of his daughters would say, "Daddy's crazy." "But Daddy is creating something," Lin would snap back.

"Marijuana would devalue if we don't move fast, given the wave of legalization in many states," Lin said. "I'm no longer young. Time is limited. And I might not be able to do this in another three or five years."

He faced new pressures as the legal system turned its focus to him and the other business operators. In 2024, Benally's cannabis license in Estancia and Lin's in Waterflow were revoked, and Lin was arrested in late 2024. On Jan. 23, 2025, after more than five years of federal investigations, the FBI arrested Dineh Benally, and the two men were detained

**"Finance one  
greenhouse, and  
you'll walk away  
with \$300,000."**



without bail as they face federal charges. Benally pleaded guilty to 15 felonies tied to his operations on the Navajo Nation and elsewhere in New Mexico, including “unlawfully employing illegal aliens” and “conspiracy to harbor illegal aliens.” He faced a mandatory minimum of 15 years and could be sentenced to life. Benally did not return a request for comment.

Lin was charged with three counts of drug conspiracy, manufacturing marijuana and possession with intent to distribute. After he was booked into a county correctional center, according to New Mexico court documents, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. While being transferred between jails and medical care, he continued to assert his innocence and requested English-Chinese interpretation in court. In December 2025, Lin passed away in custody. The official cause of death was heart failure; a representative of his estate filed a wrongful death case in state court. Lin’s family and lawyer did not return requests for comment.

Law enforcement’s efforts to prevent

future operators from repeating Lin’s activities face new challenges. In March 2024, Los Angeles County proposed creating a workers’ resource center — a hub for accessing physical and mental health services, transportation and housing navigation, immigration and employment-rights training, wage-theft clinics and other support in Chinese — in Monterey Park. The plan required at most about \$2 million per year, a fraction of McInerney’s total budget. Due to a lack of funding, the plan is on hold.

Some of the people trafficked to work on Lin and Benally’s farms will bear the consequences forever, such as the worker who lost his daughter. He still travels between California and New Mexico looking for work. Others, though, have begun to find their footing. Almost all the other workers who had filed suit obtained T-visas. And Mark and Mary have built a quiet life in Santa Fe, in an apartment across the street from the visual art exhibition Meow Wolf. Early in the morning, before the tourists, college students and

young professionals trickle in, the couple plays badminton in Meow Wolf’s parking lot. They checked out the exhibition once but weren’t impressed by its colorful mosaics and other dazzling features. They left immediately; they preferred nature, they said, and would drive up to the Santa Fe Mountains, where the high desert opens into a sea of aspens and ponderosa pines. They dream of opening a dumpling restaurant, or perhaps a health center based on traditional Chinese medicine.

“People like them used to feel like they were fish, always swimming aimlessly to find gigs in job agencies and floating around the United States,” Qin said. “They have become trees, started to take root, and are flourishing in New Mexico.” ❀

*A 2026 Nieman Fellow and a former editorial fellow at High Country News, Wufei Yu is an English-Chinese bilingual journalist covering the American Southwest.*

*Susie Ang is an illustrator based in Singapore.*





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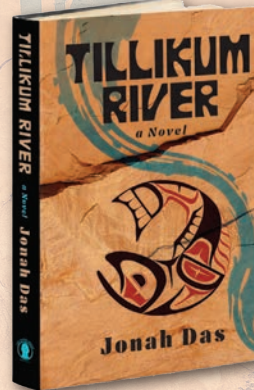
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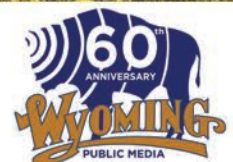
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# Let's get together

Samantha Paige Rosen's anthology illuminates the power of communal living.

BY ELIZABETH ENDICOTT

**IT'S EXPENSIVE TO LIVE** in the Western U.S. In Rocky Mountain resort towns, short-term vacation rentals have usurped affordable living options, while high-paying tech companies have driven up prices in the California Bay Area. The wealthy elite's appetite for wilderness has made the American dream of owning a home impossible for low-wage workers in places like Montana and Wyoming. Seven of the 10 states with the greatest housing shortages are in the West. The lack of affordable housing can make one feel hopeless, but Samantha Paige Rosen's new book offers a variety of contemporary perspectives on an age-old solution: communal living.

The essays and interviews in *Living, Together: Reimagining Community in the Age of Disconnection* (Beacon Press) argue that communal living needn't be just a forced practicality of those who are financially squeezed, but rather a winning arrangement that bolsters support and connection.

"The messaging in American culture that living independently ... is an important milestone, even an achievement, is nearly inescapable," Rosen writes. Yet it remains out of reach for many. "Shaping our homes to better address physical, social, emotional and financial needs is essential for our survival," she writes.

In her late 20s, Rosen was living alone while grappling with her mental health, her sexuality and chronic pain. When her rent was increased by 10%, she moved back in with her parents and was surprised to find full-spectrum relief. She and her parents worked well together, pitching in around the household. The arrangement lasted five years, well after Rosen was back on her feet.

That experience brought Rosen to ask: "How might we live together in order to have happier, healthier, and more connected lives?" Alongside 21 contributors — from 20-somethings to nonagenarians, all of whom

currently reside in the United States — Rosen explores the many reasons why people live communally.

In one tender essay, Adam Vitcavage, founder of the literary platform *Debutiful*, writes about repairing a family relationship in Arizona, where rent increased by 72% between 2010 and 2022 while the median sale price of houses rose by 57%. His sister moved in after a divorce, and their new proximity helped the two siblings heal their nearly estranged relationship. By living together, they were able to "stop wearing masks ... maybe for the first time."

Housing shortages have driven away families, forced long commutes and strained senior citizens in San Francisco, where Jake Montano's essay describes finding a home in the queer community. Montano recalls their experiences in drag pageants under the drag name Imelda Glucose and tells how they joined a house formed by a chosen family, many of whom were estranged from their family of origin. This chosen family, they write, "plays a critical role in addressing and remedying experiences of homophobia."

Los Angeles County's population has decreased by more than 500,000 over the past decade, but the housing demand has grown due to an increase in single residences. There, author Gabrielle Korn started renting out her home office on Airbnb to make ends meet. Surprised by the emotional connections she forged with the guests that filtered through, she founded The Pink Door Artist and Writer Residency, inviting creatives who would not otherwise be able to afford such an opportunity.

Housing prices in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in the nation's richest county, have skyrocketed due to the extreme luxury demanded by status-seeking celebrities and plutocrats. In response, Adam Meyer hosts popular monthly dinner parties for friends and strangers, most of whom have been priced out of homeownership. This ritual

began during Meyer's college days, when he daydreamed about all his friends living together in one big apartment building. "I really did love that part of dorm life — walking by your neighbor's room, seeing their door open, and chatting for thirty minutes."

*Living, Together* reminds us that we can reimagine and reshape the world and make it into something new. And some places have: Boulder, Colorado, recently repealed occupancy limits explicitly designed to curtail the existence of co-ops, while residents of a Durango mobile home park worked together to purchase the site with help from a land trust. In other parts of the country, Rosen takes us to intergenerational neighborhoods that benefit everyone by housing seniors alongside families adopting children through the foster system.

In a world of private equity and astronomical prices, where vacant second homes haunt resort towns, people are coming together to solve problems and live communally. In her big-hearted introduction, Rosen nods to another anthology editor, Margot Kahn, who describes the form as "the town hall bound in pages." Anthologies invite discussion and counterpoints. In our current world, where even town halls are sites of polarized conflict, this choir of voices harmonizing about building community deserves a warm welcome from readers. ✨

*Elizabeth Endicott is a writer and multidisciplinary artist based in Denver. Her work has been featured in The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Guardian, Scientific American and many more.*

## **Living, Together: Reimagining Community in the Age of Disconnection**

Samantha Paige Rosen  
208 pages, hardcover: \$32  
Beacon Press, 2026.





Scenes of daily life at a former bed-and-breakfast converted into a shared home in Paonia, Colorado. Between 14 and 17 people lived together in the house, sharing resources, expenses and household responsibilities. **Desdemona Dallas**



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## TOWNSHIP AND RANGE

Exploring the intersection of race and family in the interior rural West.



# Urgent care

What if the mountains are the medicine?

BY NINA MCCONIGLEY  
ILLUSTRATION BY TARA ANAND



**I WAS DRIVING** McClure Pass between Carbondale and Paonia a few months ago. Cell coverage had been spotty for much of the drive from northern Colorado, and I had turned my ringer off. Along the way, I kept telling my husband: *We should live here.* I loved the peaks, canyons and streams we passed. I imagined a different life: We could have animals, make gin, grow vegetables and make jam to sell at a farmers market. It was early summer, and the leaves of the cottonwoods and aspens were the color of limes, bright and small in the sunshine.

Then I noticed a text from my dad:

*Mom has fallen. Her CT showed a small brain bleed of about 5 millimeters. We will monitor it and hope it does not increase. It may resolve naturally. There were no broken bones. She has a nasty black eye. Must have been quite a hard fall. She was on the back deck, which was wet with slushy snow, in bare feet. She tried to move some geranium plants and must have slipped.*

My stomach sank. And my immediate reaction was anger. Why was she outside?! Why was she moving a pot in the wet snow that we'd thought was over for the season?! I sent an angry response. He wrote back:

*What can I say? She didn't tell me she was going out. I heard her call and thought she was in the kitchen. I went onto the deck, and she was lying there in her nightgown, which was wet and cold from the melting snow.*

My thoughts quickly shifted to the care she needed but might not be able to get. There is a health-care crisis in the rural West. The week before my mother's fall, she spent almost a week in the hospital, waiting for a specialist who never came. Suddenly I knew why I probably wouldn't raise goats or make gin or have a garden full of produce to sell at a farmers market. I was scared that there was no medical care. And even in places with beautiful shiny hospitals, there were not enough doctors.

**I AM FIRMLY** part of the sandwich generation. I have small children I had in my 40s, and my parents are aging. One minute I'm signing my kids up for summer camp, and

the next I'm asking my parents for their bank information in case I have to pay their bills. Asking for their passwords feels ugly and invasive.

Every time they visit us in Fort Collins, I ask them to move closer. My husband and I renovated our basement in hope that our parents would move in someday. We installed an accessible shower with safety bars and created a small apartment, so they'd know they were always welcome. My mother has yet to sleep there; when she visits, she sleeps in a small room upstairs to be near my girls, sharing a bathroom with toddlers.

When I beg her to move here, she says, "Why would I come live in a basement? We have a beautiful home in Wyoming. It's where I've made my life."

And it's true: Their home is gorgeous. It's in the foothills with an uninterrupted view of Casper Mountain. It is full of light, and they have a large garden where deer and rabbits graze. My dad lovingly plants an abundance of flowers every year. My mom has a large kitchen and a special rack for all her Indian spices. And all their friends are nearby. They have made a life in Wyoming for what will be 50 years this fall. They are rooted.

I was living in Wyoming when I was pregnant with Marigold. Because of my age, I was concerned about giving birth early. The doctors repeatedly told me not to worry. At one point, my OB asked me if I wanted to go on antidepressants. *You are very anxious*, she told me. But I knew there were only a handful of Level II NICUs in Wyoming, and none of them were in Laramie. And sure enough, on a night that was punctuated by the sound of owls hooting, I awoke knowing something felt off. Marigold wasn't due for another two months. Minutes after arriving at Ivins Hospital, I was asked which hospital in Colorado I wanted to be helicoptered to. I would not be having my baby in Wyoming.

I've since learned of other women who endured stress-filled life flights across the prairie to give birth, all for different reasons: No doctor, or a complex case that was beyond the capabilities of a rural hospital. A friend of mine recently had the surreal experience of going to an ER in rural Wyoming and being seen via telehealth by a doctor in Arizona.

My own mother had heart surgery in Cleveland because there was no cardiac surgeon in Casper in the late '90s. After her

surgery, she was in the hospital for six weeks. It was a lonely time, far from our community. I know of snowbirds who go to Arizona or one of the coasts for their medical care. When I was a kid, you were seen as fancy if you went to Denver to do your back-to-school shopping. Now it is medical care that the people I know go to cities for.

**HOW DO WE** live in the places we love when the places we love can't always care for us?

According to the National Rural Health Care Association, there are many obstacles facing rural care. Only 11% of U.S. physicians practice in rural areas despite serving a fifth of the nation's population. Nearly 75% of smaller rural counties lack a psychiatrist, severely limiting behavioral health options. Between 2013 and 2020, more than 100 rural hospitals closed across the U.S. And the number of physicians per 10,000 people in rural areas is 13.1, compared to 31.2 in urban areas.

I laugh because I hate the city but will probably retire to one because the care will be better. Still, I can't imagine growing old without a mountain or an expanse of sagebrush to look at.

Maybe the question isn't how you make a home when a place can't provide care for you, but what if the care just looks different? Maybe the care is a view of the mountains? Maybe it's fat corn snow in the spring? Or being able to see friends within minutes? A life where people fill your fridge with casseroles and soup. Where they bring a branch of new lilacs to you in the hospital. Where they shovel the snow off your deck and crochet a blanket for you.

When I finally came home from the NICU with Marigold, I took her straight out to the prairie. For a whole month, all she had known was the inside of the hospital. The wind blew, and I covered her with a blanket knitted by the women in my knitting group. *This is the prairie*, I whispered to her. *This is the alpenglow. This is the wind. Those are mountains. They will all care for you.* She opened her dark eyes, and for the first time since she was born, I felt she understood. The land gives a kind of care that sustains you in ways no hospital ever could. ✨

*Nina McConigley is a writer and professor at Colorado State University and the author of How to Commit a Postcolonial Murder.*



#### WASHINGTON

Back in the '70s, a ubiquitous commercial for American Tourister luggage featured an over-caffeinated gorilla trying to destroy a fancy suitcase. Today, the Washington State University Bear Research, Education and Conservation Center is conducting similar trials, but instead of gorillas, it's using grizzlies. And instead of luggage, they're testing camping equipment to measure just how "bear-proof" it is. Or rather, "bear-resistant," since camping equipment is "never 100% bear proof," the *Moscow-Pullman Daily News* reports. The WSU center opened in 1986 — the "only grizzly bear research center of its kind in the United States," according to its website. It was established so biologists could collect data from bears in captivity to better understand and manage grizzlies in the wild.

Evaluating outdoor equipment is a relatively new specialty, though bears have been testing food containers for companies since 2022 — not to mention investigating outdoor gear on their own ever since backpacking was invented. Chelsea Davis has worked at the center for four years stashing various goodies inside the products to entice the bears. "I use the something smelly, something noisy, and something oozy rule when trying to motivate the bear," she explained. Each bear has its own technique for opening test products. Kio can get into any cooler that has thin plastic walls, while a younger bear, Zuri, prefers a more direct approach, simply flinging things against the walls, and Luna does what Davis calls "CPR" on products to smash them. Davis said that the female bears are more persistent about finding solutions; if a container takes longer than five minutes to break into, the males lose interest and "tend to walk away." We



## Heard Around the West

Tips about Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write [heard@hcn.org](mailto:heard@hcn.org).

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL GONZÁLEZ

don't know how gorillas would deal with today's products, but then again, we rarely come across gorillas in our national parks. Not yet, anyway.

#### WASHINGTON

The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) was clearly caught between a rock and a hard place. A famous boulder known as the Graffiti Rock, located along Interstate 5 outside Bellingham near the Samish Way exit, had served as a community message board for the last 60 years. Recently, however, it was broken into bits and removed by WSDOT. Keith Cook, the 100-ton boulder's Facebook page manager

— these days everybody needs a manager — was not at all happy, telling *The Bellingham Herald*: "It's like a murder. It's not like a broken arm, and they can put it back together. The value of it was in its entirety." WSDOT had to move the rock to make room for a \$160 million project to widen three salmon-bearing streams that run under the freeway. The massive boulder was "blasted out of the surrounding Chuckanut sandstone" in 1966, when construction started on I-5. Its first tag read "Sealth '70," a tribute to a Seattle high school graduating class, and ever since, people have painted memorials, cheered on sports teams and congratulated graduates on

it — even left marriage proposals. Cook is asking anyone with photos of the rock to post them at [www.facebook.com/BellinghamRock](http://www.facebook.com/BellinghamRock) as a final tribute.

#### IDAHO

This April, hundreds of onlookers flocked to the annual Boise Sheep Crossing along Highway 55 through Eagle, to watch as over 2,600 ewes and lambs cross roadways in a migration that's over a century old, Boise State Public Radio reported. Wilder, Idaho, rancher Frank Shirts' sheep were herded by trusty shepherd dogs and human shepherds from the alfalfa fields of Western Canyon County to the greener high pastures of Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service lands. "There's the herder and then the lead ewe with the cowbell in front. And then all the sheep fall in behind," said Steve Stuebner, who works for the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission. Gabe Garcia brought his kids so they could watch the tufts of fluff make their annual trek. "It keeps rural Idaho still alive, essentially," said Garcia. "And I think everyone gets to be a part of it, that's what's really cool about it."

#### CALIFORNIA

Want a wedding that's out of this world, one that will be valid in galaxies far, far away and even defeat the darkside? The San Diego County Clerk's Office will happily perform your nuptials while honoring *Star Wars* Day, May 4. "In every great love story, there's a spark that brings two people together — call it destiny, or call it the Force," County Clerk Jordan Z. Marks, the self-proclaimed "Yoda of Love," told Fox 5 KUSI NEWS. What could be more romantic? Just bring your own lightsabers, and keep the Wookiees out of the Champagne. ✨





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Top to background: *HCN* Contributing Editor, Sarah Associate, Benjamin Rueck, climbing in Basalt, Washington Cascades.

Gilman and her sweet departed Taiga in the North Cascades; Revenue Products Colorado; Human Resources Associate, Gina Gurreri, hiking in Necklace Valley in the Washington Cascades.



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# #IAM THE WEST

**SCOTTY BARR (NATIVE VILLAGE OF KOTZEBUE)**  
MMIP advocate | Anchorage, Alaska

I am the parent of the late Ashley Johnson-Barr, a beautiful 10-year-old girl who enjoyed being outdoors, going to church and helping her friends and family. Unfortunately, she is now a Missing and Murdered Indigenous Person. A year after we buried her, I suffered two strokes from all the stress: the media questions, the court stuff, everything. All that heaviness took a toll. I was going through a dark time with alcohol. I sat down in my doctor's office, and he said, "I'm not going to let you go until you agree to go and see counseling." That was the best thing I ever did. We (as men) were taught not to speak our feelings. But it's OK. It's OK to cry; it's OK to learn from your mistakes. If you don't have a strong relationship with your dad or your older brothers, seek someone who's willing to help you, guide you. That's who I want to be in my community, some sort of role model or sober mentor to all these younger brothers who struggle with addictions without anyone to look up to — to help respect them for who they are and help them respect our women and girls.

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