

High Country News



ON THE
TRAIL WITH
**GARY PAUL
NABHAN**

TRIBAL
MANAGEMENT
OF BEARS EARS
CUT SHORT

PREVENTING
HUMAN-WILDLIFE
CONFLICT IN
BOZEMAN

THE TRIBULATIONS
OF AN ONLINE
COWGIRL

HighCountryNews

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A deer looks over the Gallatin Valley in Bozeman, Montana, where a "wildlife first responder" is developing a tool to help humans and animals peacefully coexist. (See story on page 9.) **Sam Wilson / HCN**

Know The West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$45 a year, \$47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898. For correspondence addressed to High Country News, HCN or to the editors, permission to publish will be considered implicit unless specifically stated otherwise.



Shine on

I'VE MADE A LIFE GOAL of being out on the land during the Perseid meteor shower. I'll spread my blanket on the ground and layer up for warmth, a rolled jacket tucked under my head. The thrill of each streak of light is felt deep in the chest. The universe puts on this show for everyone, but in these moments, it feels like it's for you alone. I recall seeing a particularly large meteor with a long sparkly tail while camping in the Ventura backcountry: the magical feeling of fairy dust falling all around. And years ago, watching from the parking lot at Oregon Caves National Monument, lying on the asphalt with my dad and a handful of other guests at the park's historic "chateau."

After each meteor lights up the sky, your senses shift from utter delight to patrolling the star-studded sky for the next fleeting streak. The longer the wait, the greater the anticipation. The fraught decision over whether to crawl into your tent or wait for the next meteor — which might be the brightest one yet! — can linger for many minutes, even hours.

The universe is vast; there are forces at work that we can't control or even completely comprehend. This is reassuring. Everything that seems wrong about the present moment — all the ways the things we value and love are under attack — is but a blip in time. Age-old forces, like the comet that spawned the Perseids, persist over centuries, but there are always new beginnings. Islands form in the ocean; a flooding river carves a new path.

Beginnings often arrive on the heels of endings, like that point on a backcountry trip when you wake up knowing you'll be home, sleeping in your own bed that night; that this is the last breakfast on the trail, for now. On the way out of the wilds, every flower looks voluptuous, every lake, sublime. You want that last day to stretch on forever, though your feet are tired and your back hurts.

This is how it is for me right now on my journey with *High Country News*. My tenure as your editor-in-chief has come to an end, as I have aging family members to take care of. The past five years have been an enormous privilege — leading this magazine in these fraught times, earning and maintaining the trust of readers, many of whose journeys with the magazine have been longer than my own. I take great pride in what we've accomplished: the impact we've had, all the stories that reverberated well beyond the pages or pixels where they were published.

Like the Perseids, my time in the editor's chair has come and gone. In time, the fairy dust will settle, and new leadership will emerge, shining brightly.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief



Josh Edelson / AFP via Getty Images

The Spokane burns show that not even suburbia is immune to wildfire

The Old Trails Fire burned through the city's northwest corner — an area considered outside the highest risk zone.

By Kylie Mohr



Mikal Jakubal

A new section of the billion-dollar border wall in Arizona is bent out of shape

At least four panels of the wall in the San Rafael Valley were mysteriously damaged months before a controversy-plagued contractor even finished construction.

By Alicia Inez Guzmán



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ON THE COVER

Writer and ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan in the Borderlands, where he has lived and worked for 50 years.
Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN



An aerial view looks south over the estimated crowd of 3,500 who attended the Oroville Dam dedication. The event featured speeches from California Gov. Ronald Reagan and Department of Water Resources Director William R. Gianelli. Oroville Dam and Lake Oroville are located one mile downstream from the junction of the Feather River's tributaries in Butte County. Construction was initiated in 1961, and the embankment was topped in 1967, making the earth-filled dam, which was the tallest in the U.S., the centerpiece of the California State Water Project. Photo taken May 4, 1968. (See story on page 32.)

Vince Arant / California Department of Water Resources

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

YOU NEVER KNOW

Rue Mapp's essay "The conversations we don't have about safety outdoors" (August 2026) was thoughtful and well-written — especially given her observations on why other people's reaction to your presence in "their outdoor space" may not be what you think it is.

I was reminded of a time decades ago. Kayaking a difficult rapid north of Buena Vista, Colorado, I could not avoid passing near an ancient fisherman standing knee-deep in the river. Close encounters between anglers and whitewater boaters, I feared, resulted only in ugliness. As I passed, he opened his mouth, his dry lower lip cracked, a drop of blood fell into the river, and he shouted at me: "*That looks funner than hell. If I was a hundred years younger, I would be out there with ya!*" Well, he is with me now wherever I go. People aren't always thinking what we think they are thinking.

Randy Welch
Lakewood, Colorado

A MORE-THAN-EMINENT SCIENTIST

In the article "On Mount Shasta, a photographic record outlasts living memory," (July 14, 2026)

Jason Dove Mark provides an excellent narrative of this unique and rich data record of Western U.S. glaciers. I appreciate that he addresses some of the people involved and the role that citizen science can play in contributing to peer-reviewed research on this topic.

However, I think that the editorial lens through which he views the broad collaborative effort to capture glacier change through photography misses the mark. In particular, although Andrew Fountain is described as "eminent," that adjective falls short of illuminating his decades of contribution to the body of research in glaciology in Oregon, throughout the West and in Antarctica. His "more than 10,000 photos" testify to the volume of just one facet of his research history. We all carry "weariness" and "certain depression," across all scientific disciplines. Research professionals have seen funding sources eviscerated and eliminated, yet still publish, build and contribute to the body of science, even as the juggernaut of fossil fuel capitalism wreaks generational havoc. An outdated website and server

infrastructure are IT problems, not a sign of waning care for the research and vanishing glaciers. The professionals who've been working to preserve this record of change in natural systems are not bunglers; they are champions.

Michael Boeder
Portland, Oregon

FREE THE RIVERS, REMOVE THE DAMS!

The June 2026 issue, which featured articles on hydrology, was superb. The two feature articles on the Columbia and McKenzie rivers were engaging, comprehensive, balanced and well-written.

Restoration projects such as these are to be encouraged, not only for their beneficial effects on endangered salmon runs but to determine to what degree, and where, they work. Long-term monitoring is essential. However, true restoration of salmon populations will not occur without a holistic watershed view of impediments to migratory species, i.e., dams. The Klamath River dam removal/riparian restoration project provides proof of how quickly salmon runs can recover if given free rein.

Karen Sjogren
Salem, Oregon

"The oligarchs and their partners in government have always acted to ruthlessly and violently suppress the rights of workers."

TIME TO FIGHT BACK

Jeff Guay's article ("The surprising socialist history of the Rocky Mountains," June 2026) was a good introduction, but it only scratched the surface. Readers wanting to know more would be rewarded by reading *Strike!, The Rebel Girl, Democracy, and Revolution*, and *American Mid-night: The Great War, A Violent Peace, and Democracy's Forgotten Crisis*. The oligarchs and their partners in government have always acted to ruthlessly and violently suppress the rights of workers to organize for better wages and working conditions. Current events in our country make it more important than ever for citizens to be aware of our labor history.

George Bacon
Montrose, Colorado

Jeff Guay's question about who will take on powerful interests is a good one. We all have to stand up. There are a lot more common citizens in this country than wealthy ones, and we're going to have to use our sheer numbers and power to put the oligarchs in their proper place. The wealthiest 10% of people in this country spew 50% of the carbon emissions that are driving our planet and wildlife to ruin, and we pay them to do it whenever we purchase their products. While it's pretty hard to buy a computer or car without contributing to extremely high CEO salaries, we can make a big difference with the food we eat and the products, pesticides and the energy that we use every day, which are the largest contributors to carbon emissions. Buy local, buy organic, stay away from beef and dairy, get off fossil fuels. Change will have to come from the grass roots on this one.

Julie Smith
Golden, Colorado

CORRECTION

In August's *Heard Around the West*, we mistakenly identified our 2,000-pound protagonist Chonkers as a "Stellar" sea lion. Chonkers is actually a *Steller's* sea lion, though undoubtedly a creature of stellar character. Many thanks to the kind reader who pointed out the error, which we regret.



REPORTAGE

Bears Ears cuts also sideline tribes

The presidential proclamation slashed the monument by 90% and ended the first-of-its-kind tribal land commission.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

THE BEARS EARS COMMISSION had a historic aim: To ensure that Southwest tribal nations had a direct role in managing 1.35 million acres of their ancestral lands in southern Utah. Established alongside Bears Ears National Monument in 2016, the commission brought five tribal nations together with federal agencies to plan for the lands' protections. But its work was abruptly

cut short in July when President Donald Trump announced that he was slashing the monument by 91% to enable resource extraction — a decision that eliminated the commission entirely. A separate proclamation cut nearby Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument by 90%.

"I am angry. I am hurt, and I am tired of standing here having to explain again why

Bears Ears matters to me," said Davina Smith-Idjesa, co-chair of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition and its Navajo Nation representative, in a press call the next day. The Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition is a nonprofit created by the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Indian Tribe, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe and Zuni Tribe to advocate for the monument.

The cuts — a combined 3 million acres of federal lands — are significantly more extensive than those made during the first Trump administration, which were later reversed under President Joe Biden. Trump's new proclamation — which has been expected since he returned to office last year — was the product of a long-running campaign by the state of Utah to slash the monuments and limit Indigenous oversight of the lands in question.

A section of Bears Ears National Monument near Mexican Hat, Utah, that has been cut from the monument by the Trump administration. **Len Necefer**

“We have been here before, but this cuts even deeper,” Smith-Idjesa said. “To reduce Bears Ears again is devastating, but to abolish the Bears Ears Commission is to attempt to erase years of tribal leadership, relationships and work between sovereign tribal nations and our federal partners.”

Under the second Trump administration, the Department of the Interior had promised to meet with the commission before considering changes to the monument’s boundaries, according to the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition. But that consultation never occurred, the coalition said in a press release.

This summer’s proclamation went much further than its predecessor in defining what the Trump administration sees as worth protecting, said Monte Mills, director of the Native American Law Center at University of Washington. The order’s language undercut the significance of a place that tribes and others have long sought to protect, dismissing the objects within the monument as “not of particular historic or scientific interest” and the landscape as merely “generic features” that were “not ... worthy of protection.” “This isn’t just about, ‘Oh, we’re going to undo this monument,’” Mills said, but about “trying to rewrite and trying to erase the real history and meaning and value of this place.”

The proclamation is part of “a broader project of white nationalism on the part of this administration,” Mills said, noting that it’s in line with other administration efforts, such as removing signs from national parks that

reference Indigenous histories or slavery.

Similar tensions exist around Grand Staircase-Escalante, which was established by President Bill Clinton in 1996. The Inter-Tribal Coalition was formed last year to defend the monument and advocate for the inclusion of tribal perspectives. Both monuments finalized their resource management plans in 2025, following years of consultation with the public and tribal nations about incorporating Indigenous knowledge. Bears Ears in particular became a model for Indigenous leadership of land stewardship.

The cuts demonstrate how vulnerable tribal co-management is to political changes in different administrations — and to political influence. Bears Ears had become a lightning rod over the years, but the administration has also made dramatic changes that affect all levels of land management.

“What we’re seeing this week is the fundamental destruction of public-lands management as we know it, from grazing rules, oil and gas rules, (Endangered Species Act) rules, Bears Ears,” Mills said. “In the same way this administration has reshaped the federal government, we’re seeing it play out across the public landscape.”

While co-management requires collaboration from all partners, Mills described the Bears Ears rollback as the federal government “fully stepping back from its obligations.” And it was doing so, he added, “at the behest of Utah politicians.”

Utah state officials have long had a contentious relationship with the monuments within the state’s borders. In blistering public comments from 2024 on a draft of the Bears Ears resource management plan, the state said federal agencies under the Biden administration chose to “focus on eliminating the State’s rights from this land,” claiming the agencies showed “wholesale deference” to the Bears Ears Commission and sought to “create a new ‘Indian Country’” through the national monument. The comments, which came from Utah’s Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office and were signed by Executive Director Redge Johnson, also asked the agencies to be “more inclusive of living, non-Indigenous people,” stating that the draft plan “gives less respect, dignity and protections to their heritage when compared to the heritage of the area’s Indigenous people.”

Utah — which sued over Biden’s

restoration of the monuments in 2022 — also complained that the plan promoted “a state of non-use,” comments that Trump echoed at Monday’s proclamation signing ceremony when he claimed, “You can’t go hunting. You can’t go fishing. You can’t do anything. You can virtually not even walk on it.” All these activities are allowed in the monuments.

The decision to shrink the monuments was met with widespread opposition from tribal leaders, members of Congress, conservationists, recreationists and locals. The Native American Rights Fund (NARF), which has represented three of the commission tribes at Bears Ears, said that the president lacks the authority to shrink national monuments. “We will pursue every available legal course of action to stop these illegal attacks on Native homelands, culture, and people,” said NARF Deputy Director Matthew Campbell in a statement.

Hillary Hoffmann, professor of law at the University of Wyoming and former co-director of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, said that the constant back-and-forth over the monuments’ boundaries over the past decade “should be a signal to the judiciary that resolution is needed on these legal questions.”

Congress could solve the problem by permanently protecting Bears Ears and Grand Staircase Escalante, Hoffmann said, and ensuring that tribes are able to continue co-management. “I don’t think that this strikes any kind of death knell for collaborative management or co-stewardship,” Hoffmann added.

Before the commission ever existed, the tribes came together to create the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition to fight for the land that became the monument. That work will continue, the five tribes said in July.

“Our connection to Bears Ears did not begin with a presidential proclamation, and it will not end with one,” said Smith-Idjesa, who co-chairs that coalition. “You can abolish a commission, you can redraw a boundary, but you cannot erase our prayers from this land. You cannot erase the footprints of our ancestors from this land. You cannot erase us. We are still here.” ☀

Anna V. Smith is an associate editor of High Country News. She writes and edits stories on tribal sovereignty and environmental justice for the Indigenous Affairs desk from Oregon.

“We will pursue every available legal course of action to stop these illegal attacks on Native homelands, culture, and people.”



REPORTAGE

Preventing human-wildlife conflicts before they start

In Bozeman, a 'wildlife first responder' is developing a tool for coexistence.

BY EMILY SENKOSKY | PHOTOS BY SAM WILSON

ON A SUNNY DAY IN MAY, Noah Starling and I parked on the edge of Grafs East Park, a sprawling green space in the middle of a residential neighborhood that connects to the 52 miles of trails that wind through Bozeman, Montana.

Recognizing Starling's Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks truck, a resident inquired if we were doing a deer count. In recent years, he said, there have been so many deer in his yard

that he finds it ironic that he can't hunt them.

Starling explained that the city, not the state, is responsible for managing wildlife within city limits. The state, however, typically responds to run-ins between humans and bears, mountain lions, and sick or injured deer. And as Bozeman's neighborhoods have sprawled into wildlife habitat, those conflicts are on the rise; the city's south side is home to an estimated 60 to 80 deer per square mile,

Noah Starling watches as a man on a lawn mower approaches two fawns in a Bozeman, Montana, neighborhood. Deer-human conflicts often arise because female deer are protective of their young around people, Starling said.

and bears and mountain lions visit Bozeman trails, green spaces and backyards.

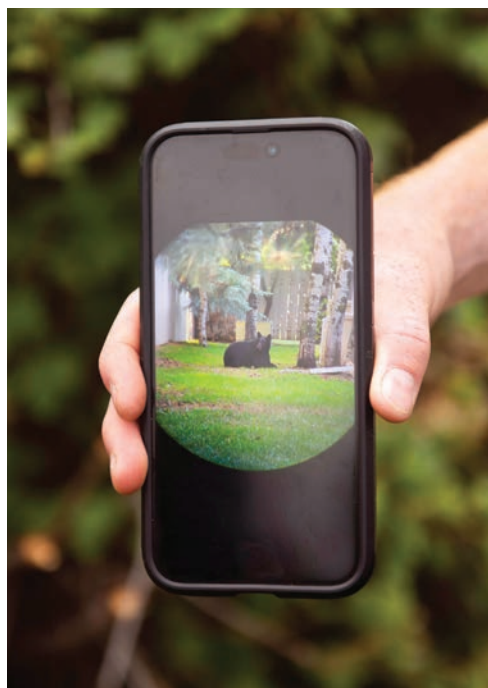
Starling, a wildlife technician, is one of eight Fish, Wildlife and Parks staff who work in these neighborhoods, acting as "first responders" when conflicts occur. The job mostly involves reacting to events, but Starling hopes to change that with a tool that could help the city and county anticipate and prevent problems with wildlife.

"Realistically, human-wildlife conflict is a human deal," Starling said. "Ultimately, it takes a community to fix it."

STARLING'S JOB OFTEN REQUIRES him to euthanize animals whose behavior poses a risk to public safety. During the especially



Noah Starling stands outside a row of Bozeman townhomes where he found a black bear he had to euthanize (above). That experience moved Starling to create a mapping tool to help identify wildlife conflict hotspots. At right, Starling shows a photograph of the problem bear, taken through binoculars.



cold winter of 2022, when hungry deer foraged along city streets and nearby highways, Bozeman drivers hit so many that Starling had to euthanize as many as six per day — about 70 altogether. On a single summer day in 2023, he euthanized three bears that lingered perilously close to humans, including one that was snacking from a Costco-sized bird feeder outside a Bozeman apartment.

“Teaching bears to be food-conditioned, thus making a dangerous bear, forces our hand as wildlife managers,” said Starling. “Human safety will always come first, and so often, we end up being the bad guy.”

The experience weighed on Starling and eventually inspired him to enroll in a master’s degree program at Montana State University, where he is studying human-wildlife conflict.

As part of his degree, Starling is creating an interactive map of Bozeman and surrounding Gallatin County that shows where human-wildlife conflicts are most likely to occur. The probability of future conflict is based on the locations of previous conflicts — where deer have been hit by vehicles or bears caught eating from trash cans — along with habitat-suitability data for black bears and two subspecies of deer. Starling hopes the map, which he’s created in collaboration with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Gallatin County Planning Office, will help city, county and state officials both prevent conflicts and reduce the number of animals that are euthanized.

“This is a tool that I hope will give decision-makers a way to know where conflict is occurring,” said Starling. “We can’t stop the increase of humans, but we can help increase knowledge.”

Cities like Missoula, Montana, and Durango, Colorado, require residents to use bear-proof trash cans in some areas, and local “bear smart” organizations encourage people to lock away attractants like pet food and grill grease traps. Durango recently approved an ordinance allowing residents to use electric fencing and electrified “unwelcome mats” within city limits to discourage bears. For a fee, Bozeman already offers bear-proof trash containers in neighborhoods bears frequently visit.

Lisa Upson, executive director of the nonprofit People and Carnivores, said Starling’s project could further pinpoint where such measures are most needed,

enabling officials and residents to address problems community-wide rather than simply moving them around. “The thing with these issues,” said Upson, “is that if you prevent a conflict on one property, the conflict just moves down the road.”

MAPPING TOOLS LIKE STARLING’S could also help cities and counties take longer-term steps to prevent human-wildlife conflicts. Gallatin County Chief Planning Officer Sean O’Callaghan, who serves on Starling’s master’s committee, said that better data on where conflicts are likely to occur could help the county prepare for future growth in ways that reduce risks for both humans and wildlife.

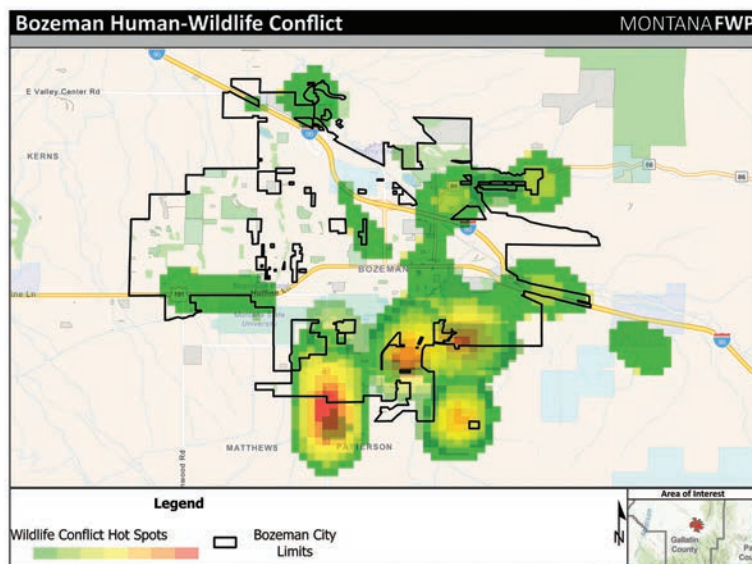
“Wildlife conflict could happen anywhere, in theory,” said O’Callaghan. “Having data and some predictive tools to help us understand the contributing factors and address them in a more meaningful manner will certainly be helpful.”

University of California, Santa Cruz ecologist Chris Wilmers, who leads the Santa Cruz Puma Project, said that regional development patterns have long ignored large animals’ need to move across the landscape. “For 20 to 30 years, throughout the Intermountain West, it’s been 30 acres and a house here, 10 acres and a house there,” said Wilmers. “So, you need a huge amount of land to support that kind of building, and then it takes away all that land from wildlife. This is what is creating massive conflicts.”

By tracking mountain lion movements and studying the species’ behavior in the Santa Cruz Mountains, the project has helped to identify locations where habitat corridors and wildlife crossings can effectively ease conflicts.

Wildlife behavior isn’t static, though, and urbanization and climate disruption are driving new changes. Wilmer and others have found that while mountain lions generally avoid people, those that are forced to take up residence in parks or other green spaces will prey on cats or raccoons. Recent work by Julie Young, a professor of ecology at Utah State University, suggests that coyotes living in and around cities are becoming bolder than their rural counterparts.

Young said climate change has introduced another layer of uncertainty by creating a “new norm of no norm.” Erratic



Overflowing trash cans can draw bears into Bozeman neighborhoods like this one (above).

Starling’s mapping tool is designed to identify “hot spots” of human-wildlife conflict in the Bozeman area (left). **Courtesy of Noah Starling / Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks**

weather patterns are making it harder to predict when food shortages will push animals toward people, and warming temperatures are disrupting the seasonal timing of nuts and berries. Changing conditions also affect when deer give birth, and early evidence suggests that some carnivores may be adjusting their reproductive cycles, too.

Despite the many variables, Starling hopes that maps like his can serve as a blueprint of sorts — one that makes living in close quarters safer for both people and wildlife.

“Hopefully, if I do this right, this tool may

be expanded across the West,” Starling said. “Living with wildlife looks similar across many landscapes; it’s just a matter of people doing it.” ❁

Emily Senkosky is a writer based in Montana who reports on the changing dynamics of the West.

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

Arctic Alaska at a crossroads

Land transfers around the remote Dalton Highway could pave the way for industrialization.

TEXT AND MAP BY SARAH GILMAN

THE DALTON HIGHWAY is the sole artery connecting Alaska's road system with its Arctic Coast. The 414-mile highway parallels the trans-Alaska oil pipeline and carries semis to and from the oilfields at its northern terminus.

East and west of the Dalton, the landscape remains largely unbroken — black spruce hills rising into mountains and rolling into tundra. This vast, intact habitat sequesters carbon and supports large caribou herds, salmon, moose and bear. Dozens of remote communities — including Koyukon, Iñupiat and Gwich'in villages — live in relationship with these animals and rely on them for food.

Now, a change in the highway corridor's ownership threatens all that the surrounding landscape sustains.

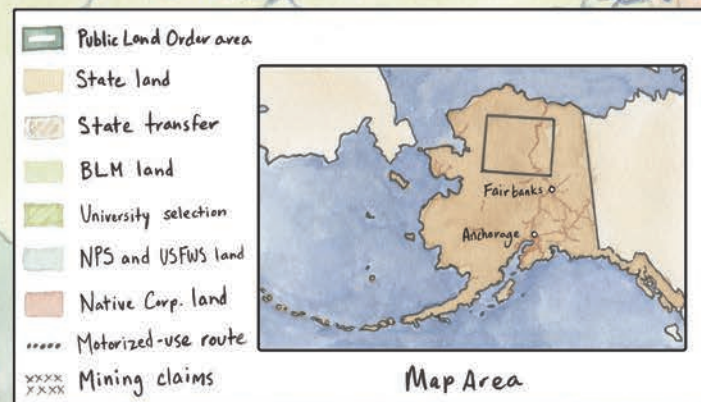
Before the road and pipeline were built in the mid-1970s, the Interior secretary set aside federal land for their route and blocked other uses that could conflict with their construction via Public Land Orders 5150 and 5180. The orders also prevented transferring the land to the state or to Alaska Native corporations. As federal land, the corridor remained under federal laws that protect historic sites and rural subsistence hunters and fishers. Federal laws also require proposed projects to undergo public environmental review and tribal consultation.

In February, however, the Trump administration rescinded both orders from 2.1 million acres of Bureau of Land Management property in the corridor north of the Yukon River. The state, which was still owed 5 million acres under its statehood act, claimed two-thirds of it. Once land is in state hands, hunting and access rights change. There are fewer layers of oversight, and challenging proposed projects is riskier, because in state court the loser pays legal fees.

"This is an incredibly destabilizing moment," said historian Philip Wight, co-author of a 2024 paper about Dalton Highway corridor development. A lawsuit to restore the orders was partially dismissed, but environmental groups appealed on Aug. 11. Whatever the outcome, activists resolve to keep fighting.

"The first, last, and only defense against climate crisis is intact ecosystems," said April Monroe, Native lands manager for the Tanana Chiefs Conference, a consortium of 42 tribal nations and villages that opposed rescinding the orders. "The fate of the world rests on whether they can be protected." ❁

Sarah Gilman is an HCN contributing editor and Washington-based writer and illustrator who covers the environment, natural history and science. Her work has appeared in The Atlantic, Audubon Magazine and YES! Magazine, among others. @hiddendrawerdesigns on Instagram.



New roads and mines

Alaska wants to develop access north, east and west from the Dalton, connecting the highway to state lands and mineral resources. The transfer includes land that the controversial Ambler Road, a proposed private industrial highway, must cross. The new route would enable mining on claims spanning the southern Brooks Range.



Disrupted migration and spawning

Caribou are sensitive to habitat fragmentation, and the Western Arctic herd has declined 75% since 2003. Studies suggest the Ambler Road could deflect or delay the herd's fall migration, already creeping later due to climate change. The road would also cross thousands of waterways and facilitate mining, threatening struggling salmon runs, sheefish and whitefish.

Fossil fuel extraction

By consolidating the corridor's ownership in state hands, the transfer may simplify construction of a proposed 800-mile natural gas pipeline that would parallel the Dalton on its way to connect North Slope deposits to a proposed Kenai Peninsula export terminal. The up-to-\$70 billion price tag remains a major obstacle, but even small wins over decades improve a megaproject's prospects. If built, the pipeline would increase Arctic drilling and related development, possibly within the Porcupine caribou herd's embattled calving grounds.

Destabilized permafrost

The Ambler Road and associated development would cross permafrost, hastening its thaw. This would release sediment and minerals into waterways, along with metals that harm fish. It could also cause land subsidence and release vast stores of carbon from the frozen soil as greenhouse gases.

Compromised food security

Habitat fragmentation hinders food access in a region where residents get their protein from the landscape. Rural residents — both Alaska Native and non-Native — also lose priority hunting and fishing rights when land is transferred out of federal hands. In Wiseman, for example, instead of being allowed one moose each winter on nearby land, local hunters must now either travel to federal land or compete for limited tags in a lottery open to all Alaskans as well as to guides serving out-of-state clients.

Expanding disturbance

Until now, locals hunting or collecting firewood were among the only users allowed to snowmobile within five miles of the Dalton, provided they were on federal land. Once ownership shifts to the state, they lose that exception. So Alaska will allow snowmobile travel on 10 historic routes for residents to access adjacent federal lands, and it is working on additional motorized easements. But since these routes and easements will be open to all Alaskans, pressure on land and wildlife will increase.

Development to bankroll higher ed?

By law, the University of Alaska can file for certain federal lands to fulfill its land grant. Lifting the orders frees up the Dalton-connected portion of a 220,000-acre parcel the university wants in the Ray Mountains—home to a small, nonmigratory caribou herd. Most of the university's current holdings generate money from leasing, sales, mitigation and natural resource development, including mining. The Ray Mountain parcel and a contiguous 96,400-acre university selection contain deposits of rare-earth minerals.

Sources: Bureau of Land Management, State of Alaska, Center for Biological Diversity, NANA Regional Corporation, University of Alaska, Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group. Features are approximate, stylized and not comprehensive.



REPORTAGE

Solar skepticism on the Navajo Nation

A large-scale renewable energy project exposes gaps in lease and tax policies, and leaves questions about regulations on Diné land.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
CHRISTOPHER LOMAHQUAHU

WHEN COALMINE CANYON Chapter's members first learned of the proposed Painted Desert Power project — one of the largest solar installations in the United States in terms of output and size — they were skeptical. The plan initially stated that it would cover roughly 1,000 acres of rangeland in solar panels, though it soon expanded to over 4,000 acres. But a long history of distrust of the tribal government and a sense of being disregarded by it left some community members anxious about the project.

"That made this whole project, as it kept progressing, more and more like we were being sold down the river. Or being taken advantage of, and not given any real voice," said Tyrel Jones, the chapter's Community Land Use Planning Committee secretary.

Freddie Hatathlie, a retired Army veteran, rancher and lifelong resident of Coalmine Canyon in northeast Arizona, said community members struggled to even picture a development that size, generating hundreds of megawatts of electricity. The technical presentations and explanations of the proposal, which were often in English,

proved hard for many locals to follow.

"Make a model, draw models, build a model, so we can see it," Hatathlie said. "The only way I understand is because I worked in a big power plant."

As solar development expands, it's exposing gaps in lease and tax policies, raising broader questions about how to ensure that benefits are distributed equitably across the Navajo Nation, as well as how information is communicated to residents. The Painted Desert Power project offers a glimpse into how large-scale renewable energy developments led by outside companies find ways to gain tribal approval.

RENEWABLE ENERGY DEVELOPMENT has become increasingly important since some of the tribe's coal-related operations, which had provided significant revenue, closed. Existing solar projects currently occupy about 915 acres, with another 4,500 acres proposed for the Painted Desert Power project in Coalmine Canyon. While several of the existing projects were led by the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, the Painted Desert

Power project stood out for its scale and partnerships. Navajo Power PBC, a Navajo-owned, non-tribal-affiliated organization that works to bring renewable energy to tribal communities, partnered with Applied Energy Services (AES), the Virginia-based energy company that would own and operate the facility, to form the subsidiary, Painted Desert Power LLC.

The proposed solar project was developed by Navajo Power PBC. Navajo Power PBC did not respond to *HCN*'s inquiries, but AES replied on the project's behalf. In an email, the project team told *HCN* that it held more than 70 chapter and community meetings before the lease received tribal approval. The project also secured four chapter resolutions of support, along with written consent from affected grazing-permit holders, as required under the Navajo leasing regulations.

"At AES, we understand that our success as a company is only as strong as our partnerships with the communities where we operate. Community consent is at the core of AES and Navajo Power PBC's approach to development on the Navajo Nation," the email read.

Despite the company's assurances, though, many of the people living closest to the development were left feeling unclear about exactly what was being proposed, how the project would operate and what it would mean for their community.

Jones noted that the project's rapid expansion — it's currently over 4,000 acres — had changed the conversation within the community about who would ultimately benefit from it.

"This large U.S. global company called AES that has no affiliation ever with the Navajo Nation comes into the Navajo Nation, making these demands and offering all of this power that they will solely control," he said. "It's just another example of a Trojan horse after another Trojan horse after another Trojan horse — which eventually we will have no say-so over any of these major promised entities."

Jones said the proposal was first presented back during the COVID-19 pandemic's early stages, and chapter members initially saw little formal paperwork, only pamphlets with some general bullet points. The amount of acreage and vague references to other organizations raised questions about exactly who was really involved in the project, how large it would

become and why its footprint kept growing.

Hatathlie added that residents were troubled by how the power would be distributed, since it would not flow directly to area homes but would instead be sent to a broader electrical grid.

He likened the Painted Desert Power project to the former Navajo Generating Station, a coal plant on the Navajo Nation that produced electricity that powered cities outside the nation.

"If you look at the Navajo Generating Station over there in Page, you know that generating station didn't power Page at all," Hatathlie said. "Zero."

AES acknowledged that the Painted Desert Power project would not power any local Navajo homes.

"Since this high-voltage project is not a registered utility in Arizona and cannot serve homes directly, Navajo Power PBC co-created a subsidiary, Navajo Power Home, to meet Navajo households' immediate need for electricity," according to AES' statement.

Navajo Power Home, the subsidiary, installs off-grid solar installations for individual homes, so AES saw it as a way to supply the community's electricity needs. According to AES, Navajo Power Home has installed more than 550 off-grid solar systems across the Navajo Nation, including more than 80 in the Cameron and Coalmine Canyon chapters. Another 300 installations are

"If you look at the Navajo Generating Station over there in Page, you know that generating station didn't power Page at all. Zero."

Freddie Hatathlie, a Coalmine Canyon Chapter member and Army veteran, said educating the community about the Painted Desert Power project has been a major challenge.





Arlando Yellowhair, a veteran who received a mobile home without water or electricity, said that Navajo Power Home's discounted \$20/month plan provided enough power for his refrigerator and a few lights while he waited for a grid hookup. The unit now powers a shed where he stores tools and charges batteries for his power tools.

“Eight kilowatts is not sufficient for a family to function. You really have to pay attention to the amount that you’re using.”

planned by the end of this year.

One recipient of a Navajo Power Home solar unit — Coalmine Canyon resident and Navy veteran Arlando Yellowhair — said the unit provided just enough electricity to run his refrigerator and a couple of lights throughout the day.

“Eight kilowatts is not sufficient for a family to function without being aware of how much you’re using. You really have to pay attention to the amount that you’re using,” Yellowhair said.

The Painted Desert Power project is expected to be built out in phases, with construction on the first phase anticipated to begin in 2027 and the facility becoming operational by 2030. Once the project is completed, it will “utilize 1,363,635 solar panels and 816 battery enclosures,” underscoring its massive scale, according to AES’ statement.

Other questions have been raised about the project. Uncertainty remains over how — and whether — AES’ lease payments and tax revenues would reach the community. Coalmine Canyon Chapter’s status as an uncertified chapter complicates how funds are distributed, and AES leases Navajo Nation trust land as well as individual grazing permits held by people in the area.

According to AES, under its lease with the Navajo Nation, the financial arrangements behind the Painted Desert Power project would pay the nation \$545 per acre each year, with payments increasing by 2% annually over the life of the project. Over its 40-year lifespan, AES estimates the project would generate more than \$310 million in lease and tax payments. AES stated that it agreed to the lease amount with the Navajo Nation Minerals Department along with a “competitive tax package.”

AES added that there were additional community benefits, including a commitment the company has made of “\$16.7 million per Chapter over project lifetime,” noting that its “annual payments would more than double the Chapter’s FY26 budget.” However, it remains unclear whether individual residents will receive any compensation. Because the Coalmine Canyon Chapter is uncertified, for example, project payments might not go directly to it. Instead, revenue would be routed through the Navajo Nation Office of the Controller in Window Rock.

Much of this information was shared

with residents in a 60-slide Powerpoint presentation over a two-day period. But Hatathlie said that the developers often relied on technical presentations and industry terminology, much of it presented in English. Although developers continued to host workshops and informational meetings, Hatathlie came to feel that key decisions had already been made by the larger Navajo government, without meaningful local input.

THE SENSE OF AMBIGUITY was reinforced by the Coalmine Canyon Chapter's uncertified status. Coalmine Canyon is what's considered a Non-Governance

Tyrel Jones, Coalmine Canyon Chapter Community Land Use Planning Committee secretary, points toward the boundary of the chapter and the site of the proposed Painted Desert Power project, a planned solar and battery storage development on Navajo Nation land.

Certified Chapter, meaning a chapter that is not able to manage its finances on its own. Instead, its finances go through the Navajo Nation Administrative Service Centers. Certified chapters, once they demonstrate they can manage their finances on their own, can expand "authorities including issuing business site leases, leasing chapter property, entering contracts with tribal, federal, and state governments, hiring legal counsel, appropriating funds, and generating revenue."

But Coalmine Canyon, according to Coalmine Canyon Chapter Grazing Official Shaun Hudson, may not directly receive any financial benefits from the solar project.

"So certified chapters, they have more freedom to, I guess, utilize their money ... with outside entities," Hudson said.

The situation highlighted how difficult Navajo Nation legislative procedures can be for residents to follow. Leases, tax measures

and project approvals often move through a variety of committees and stages of review before reaching final action.

Shawna Claw, Chinle Council delegate and member of the Navajo Nation Resource and Development Committee, said this legislative complexity sowed a lot of confusion. After the leasing process, for example, some residents worried that their grazing permits were being obtained without their consent. She said many Coalmine residents tied their concerns about grazing permits, consent and land-use agreements to another measure involving the project's tax structure, even though those issues should have been raised in the separate lease approval process.

"A lot of the community members got that confused with the lease," Claw said. "And so they started putting in comments about, well, 'My consent, or my consent wasn't given.'"

According to the Navajo Nation's legislation on the project's tax arrangement,



chapter residents submitted letters asking for their grazing permits to be rescinded because they did not want their permits used for the solar project.

Claw said residents who believe grazing permits were obtained for the project without their consent can file appeals through the Navajo Nation Department of Agriculture and request an independent review of how consent was obtained. But she added that many residents may not even be aware that these procedures exist, particularly in remote communities where access to information can be limited.

All the discussions surrounding the Painted Desert Power project have drawn attention to much broader questions about how renewable energy projects are regulated

on the Navajo Nation. Jones said tribal leaders are still working through how large-scale solar developments should be taxed and governed because the Navajo Nation has yet to establish a comprehensive renewable energy policy framework.

Former Navajo Nation Council Delegate Thomas Walker Jr., who represented the Leupp, Tolani Lake, Coalmine Canyon, Cameron and Birdsprings chapters, said the system, a comprehensive land-leasing, legislative and review process, was designed to give all stakeholders a role in the review process.

"If the processes are allowed to be utilized without any shortcuts ... if it's allowed to run its course all the way through, and you know our leaders are there to consider if they're fully informed and if they have absolutely no questions ... then they vote on it," he said. "If there's people sidestepping that, or taking shortcuts, or even missing steps, I think community and the public deserve to know what happened."

Walker said that residents should be able to question whether every step, review and approval has been completed as required under Navajo law, especially when projects involve such large-scale use of tribal land.

However, for Coalmine Canyon residents like Hudson, the grazing official, asking questions can sometimes feel pointless, especially when the local communities already feel slighted.

"I think a lot of these decisions are already pre-made in Window Rock (the Navajo Nation's capital)," he said. "So right now, yeah, these developers, they come in just to follow procedure, you know, just to show their place. So, it doesn't matter." ☀

Christopher Lomahquahu is an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Community in central Arizona, home to the Akimel O'odham. His reporting focuses on water access, public health, environmental issues and government oversight across Arizona and the Southwest.

Coalmine Canyon Chapter House sits in an area that is predominantly used for grazing by horses and other livestock.



■ DEAR FRIENDS

HCN farewells

By now you've probably read **Jennifer Sahn's** editor's note explaining that she's stepping down as *HCN's* editor-in-chief.

When *HCN* hired Jennifer more than five years ago, we were doing our best to respond to an unusually tumultuous time in what has never been an easy existence. We wanted to contribute in a serious way to the ongoing conversation about race and belonging in the West. And we needed someone with a steady hand, a sharp eye and a fearless approach to tackling tough topics.

Jennifer delivered. She brought a steadfast commitment to producing a publication that reflects the West's diverse communities and landscapes. Her years of experience in conservation- and community-focused journalism and her thoughtful, even demeanor provided clarity and comfort to our readers, who often wrote to thank her for her heartfelt editor's notes.

Jennifer loved to praise her talented team and the work they did during this challenging time. She says she's particularly proud of reviving *HCN's* online news operation, raising the quality of the print publication, recruiting and mentoring a top-notch staff and helping to raise our profile in the larger news and magazine ecosystem.

We'll share more soon about our plans for *HCN's* editorial leadership, but rest assured that we have a great crew, and Jennifer leaves a strong foundation upon which we can build.

Roberto (Bear) Guerra is off to a new job with *ProPublica* after six-plus years as *HCN's* visuals editor. Bear's fingerprints are all over the publication, seen in all the photography and illustrations that he assigned, gathered — and produced himself. A longtime photojournalist, Bear shot many of our feature stories and essays, often in dramatic black-and-white, including this issue's feature on Gary Paul Nabhan. Behind the scenes, he served on countless hiring committees and always spoke up for equity and inclusion. We're sorry to lose him but excited to see what he does on his new and bigger stage.

We're grateful, too, to **Bradon Barmann-Schwarz**, who spent four years on *HCN's* fundraising team. As he put it in a farewell message to the staff, "What started as a remote fundraising role (during the waning days of the pandemic) quickly turned into life as a full-fledged fundraising road warrior: hundreds of donor meetings, thousands of miles driven, and countless memories in between." We wish him well with whatever new adventures await.



Clockwise from top: Jennifer Sahn, Bradon Barmann-Schwarz (right, with readers Nick Waser and Mary Price), Roberto (Bear) Guerra.

REST IN POWER, DAVID PAGE: We were heartbroken to hear of the death of longtime travel and adventure writer and conservation advocate **David Page** in July, in a tragic accident on Teton Pass. David was the executive director of the nonprofit Winter Wildlands Alliance, and active in local organizations ranging from the Wasatch Backcountry Alliance to Mammoth Medical Missions Inc., which he co-founded. His colleagues at Winter Wildlands remember him as "a zealous backcountry skier, a passionate advocate for wild places, and someone who believed deeply that meaningful progress begins with open dialogue, curiosity, and collaboration." Our hearts go out to David's wife, Allison, and his sons, Jasper and Beckett.

— Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher

HCN HITS THE ROAD

At a time when our communities are experiencing rapid and often unprecedented change, and the news industry undergoes its own tumultuous transformation, the *High Country News* staff and board want to hear from you — the people who live and work in the West — about the most pressing issues you're facing, and how *HCN* can support you in your efforts to drive positive change.

And so we're embarking on a year-long "listening tour" — a series of road trips that will take us to the near and far corners of the region to visit local community halls, watering holes, parks and other gathering places. We'll meet with readers and community leaders, partnering with local nonprofit and news organizations to discuss how this place is changing and how we can step up and be of service.

Watch for more information in upcoming issues, and check for updates on our website at hcn.org/listen. If you want to help organize a community event, or if you have suggestions for places we should visit or groups we should partner with, please send us a postcard or email dearfriends@hcn.org. We're looking forward to spending some time together!

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Desert Sage



ON THE ROAD
IN THE BORDERLANDS
WITH WRITER
AND ETHNOBOTANIST
GARY PAUL NABHAN

Text by **Rubén Martínez**

Photos by **Roberto (Bear) Guerra**

October 2021:

I am driving with Gary Paul Nabhan along the U.S.-Mexico border in southern Arizona, the botanist, activist and author's natural habitat. For 50 years, the Borderlands have been his research site and laboratory, his scholarly and artistic setting, his home — he lives a mere 22 miles from the Nogales port of entry — and also his heart. It is the same region I've been drawn to most of my life, and it is Gary who has taught me that the border is much more than a line in the desert sand.

Gary has been visiting, living on and crossing the border since the early 1970s. I've followed in his footsteps, witness of the human and more-than-human drama on the line since 1984. Today, he is wearing his typical field uniform: scrunched-up khaki baseball cap, faded T-shirt calling upon peasants to "rise up" in Spanish, a small, simple wooden cross hanging from his neck. Fulsome gray whiskers flow from his chin, a pleasant belly hangs slightly over his worn loose jeans. He has the look of a farmer, which he is, and oh, his eyes: deep gray-blue pools that shimmer as he talks to you in a gentle rasp.

"It's OK to have boundaries in our lives," Gary once told me, apropos of the line that fascinates us both. "But if we were to glue all the pores on our skin shut, or all the stoma on a plant leaf shut, we would die. So we really need porous borders, because it's a time-tried way to enrich life rather than strangle it."

We are driving along the Roosevelt Reservation, a 60-foot-wide easement along 632 miles of the border that was established for security purposes by Theodore Roosevelt in 1907. We are on the U.S. side, in the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge, a vibrant ecotone between desert scrub and grasslands in the Chihuahuan Desert. Roosevelt could hardly have imagined what it has become today: a militarized cyborg desert, crawling with Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents in trucks, on ATVs and horseback, operating a vast network of surveillance towers and drones, glaring at night with spectacular carceral lighting.

Gary Paul Nabhan admires a cluster of agave plants in the hills near his home in Patagonia, Arizona.

Here is the wall: 30-foot-high rust-hued bollards carved into the impossibly cerulean blue of an early autumn desert sky. We plow through pools of muddy water from late-season monsoon thunderstorms. I want to keep my eyes fixed on the view to the left, our north, to the beautiful ecological contradiction of the refuge: the riparian desert. Sprays of sacaton grass bend in the breeze, stands of creosote, that most stoic desert species, offer up a swatch of yellow flowering; nearby, cottonwoods rise thick-trunked, light sparkling on their fluttering leaves.

Springs, creeks and ephemeral draws historically sustained wetlands here that hosted a carnival of flora and fauna, including hundreds of species of birds and dozens of mammals and reptiles, amphibians and fish (including the endangered Yaqui chub and Yaqui topminnow and the threatened Yaqui catfish). The waters were depleted throughout the 20th century by human development; the designation of the refuge in 1982 began a significant process of restoration.

But the refuge was also among the hundreds of miles targeted for the construction of President Donald Trump's "big, beautiful wall." Dozens of environmental and cultural protection statutes were waived. During the first Trump administration, \$408 million was earmarked for the area, and crews dug a well adjacent to the refuge to draw water for mixing tons of concrete — a move that damaged the fragile desert

wetland biome. Once finished, the wall stopped most cross-border mammal traffic, though it probably had little or no impact on drug smuggling, since it is estimated that more illicit drugs flow through official ports of entry.

We rattle east along the line, nothing but time to reminisce and reflect on how much has changed in just a few decades. I tell Gary about the time I saw crews building a border fence west of here near the Santa Cruz River, designed with holes big enough to prevent desert windstorms from toppling it over but small enough to prevent any human from getting a grip with their fingers and managing to scale it. When I visited, a swarm of grasshoppers popped nimbly through the holes — undocumented more-than-humans thwarting the human barrier.

Gary brings up the San Miguel Gate on the Tohono O'odham Nation, which straddles dozens of border miles, an informal crossing where the fence simply ended (the "gate" was symbolic), historically respected by the Border Patrol because of O'odham ceremonial routes and binational Indigenous families. It's been closed to vehicular traffic for years now, but not by CBP. In a cruel irony, an actual gate was put in place and welded shut by a Mexican landowner on the other side.

We both fondly remember another informal crossing, the one in Big Bend National Park at Boquillas on the Río Grande, where an old man would ferry you across when the river was low so you could get a cold one on the Mexican side, no Border Patrol in sight. (Denizens of West Texas and fans of Americana may recall the song about it by singer-songwriter Robert Earl Keen.)

The nostalgia makes today's fence even more painful to behold: At 30 feet high, it cuts across the desert plain for dozens of miles, looking as out of place as the black slab that drives the early hominids to violence in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. There is nothing remotely this shape or color anywhere in the desert, a foreign object shanked into the land, irremediably altering it.

And then, it's gone.

We stop and get out of the truck. The most recent monsoon storm flooded the wash the fence straddles, tearing a series of bollard gates off their hinges, essentially blowing the wall wide open. The Army Corps of Engineers designed the gates for such flooding, but they were meant to be opened manually *before* monsoon season. At one point during the storm, 290 cubic feet of water per second — about 112,200 gallons every minute — ran north to south, smashing into the wall in a surge that may have reached as high as 25 feet.

For a scale photo, I ask Gary to stand at the ruins of the wall, his body inches from the Mexican side. The debris line is several feet above his head. A few yards away there is a Border Patrol surveillance tower.

I say to Gary, "The Border Patrol's gotta show up any minute."

They never show up.

For those few moments, Gary and I share a glimpse into the past before the wall. And into the future, when all hominid barriers are swept away by time.



Two signs greet visitors at the bottom of the long driveway to Nabhan's home.

Top: The pond at Quitobaquito in fall of 2021 showing signs of groundwater depletion after border wall construction under the first Trump administration; the site is considered sacred to both the Tohono O'odham and Hia-C'ed O'odham peoples. Center: Building the wall in southeastern Arizona meant literally carving up Guadalupe Mountain. Bottom: Nabhan at the border in the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge after the monsoon floods tore the wall off its hinges. **Rubén Martínez**



There are many Garys.

The MacArthur “genius award”-winning ethnobotanist who was on the leading edge of transforming the field by marrying “objective” science with social witness and accompaniment — the practice, inspired by Catholic social teaching, of simply showing up and being of service if and when you were needed — in Indigenous communities. The scholar and activist of the Arizona and Sonora Borderlands on which he’s worked and lived for half a century. Gary, co-founder of Native Seeds/SEARCH, a pioneering arid lands seedbank. Spirit-quest Gary, member of the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans, inspired by St. Francis of Assisi’s regard for human and more-than-human holiness and vulnerability. Gary, the prolific writer crossing many borders of genre — scientific articles, narrative nonfiction, poetry — with 36 books to his name (almost all monographs). In these works, he freely roams not just across forms but among places and peoples and more-than-human life: the biological-cultural-spiritual presence of mesquite trees; how and why we tipple the distilled hearts of agaves; a collection of vignettes of American and more-than-American activists, artists and visionaries; a Christian Gospel-oriented guide for farmers and fishers. This summer, he published *Water in the Desert*, his first true autobiography. The book reads like an attempt to weave all these threads together, a unified field theory braiding matter, history and spirit.

From the very beginning of his study and witness of the Borderlands as a college student, he has registered loss — of habitat and species, of civil rights, of desert vistas without walls. His very first book, *The Desert Smells Like Rain*, chronicled the tenuous future of the Tohono O’odham peoples’ millenary dryland-farming traditions. More than four decades later, *Water in the Desert* documents the radical degradation of the border biome near his home in Patagonia, Arizona. Across his career, he has maintained a consistent tone of Old Testament-like lament leavened by wry humor and an easy way with puns — writing about the rhizomatic relationality of mesquite trees in the desert Southwest, *ménage a trois* becomes “ménage a tree” — ultimately cycling through grief to finally, and always, arrive at hard-won seeds of renewal and recovery.



I wanted to write this story

in 2021, but I couldn’t write, period. Five years went by, and I only recently started to write again, having cycled through my own losses. Gary, who is a little over a decade older than me, was one of the big reasons that I began writing again. I’ve reached AARP-mailer age, and among the revelations that come with the season is that being an elder doesn’t mean you don’t still need elders older than you to help light the path ahead, even as you increasingly play the elder for those younger than you.

I am writing, then, of my elder. But Gary is also, especially in the desert West, *our* elder, for those who care for the land and all that lives on it.

The writing led me to his house and out on the road, in what began as a journalistic project and has become a deepening mentor- and friendship. Even when I thought I would never write this story, we kept talking. Rather, *he* stayed in touch with *me*. I’d be hiking in

A small painting of St. Francis of Assisi, palm fronds and hawk feathers (below) adorn the front door of Nabhan's house.



San Francisco's Golden Gate Park (I lived a few blocks away from it for years), foggy breeze whooshing through Monterey cypress boughs (mirroring my depression-soggy brain), and he'd call just to talk about a new book he'd read about the Sanctuary movement, or about folk music or the great thunderstorm that had just blown across the desert. I think that he was quite intentionally accompanying me through my darkness.

His voice and his texts have been keeping me company for years. The pile of books on my desk, lectures on YouTube, the two of us talking in his Prius (with the peeling "No Border Wall" sticker in cholo-style Old English script along the top edge of the driver's-side door) as we rolled along southern Arizona roads. Dozens of iPhone shots and videos on my phone, Gary in my laptop journals and in indecipherable reporter's notebooks.

To journey alongside Gary is to be in dialogue with the world, to see it up close in landscape and species, in policy and poetry.



I'm listening to a recording

from a 2021 visit we made to Quitobaquito, a natural spring only a few dozen yards from the border and one of the most sacred sites

of the Hia-C'ed O'odham and Tohono O'odham peoples. Like the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge, it is a key crossroads, maintained to this day for Indigenous peoples' historical migratory and ceremonial routes, as well as for desert flora and fauna.

Bulrushes encircled the pond like a reedy picket fence; a couple of old cottonwoods nearby stood taller than anything else in the vicinity except Border Patrol surveillance towers. I'd heard about Trump's wall here, but nothing prepared me for the juxtaposition of the miraculous spring — the largest such water source for dozens of miles — and the wall, with the same 30-foot-high bollards as at San Bernardino, over 200 miles east as the crow flies.

Aside from the traffic on Mexican Highway 2 just across the line, things were quiet. Joe Biden was in the White House, and construction of the wall had stopped. Gary and longtime friend and Tohono O'odham leader Austin Nuñez had recently published a manifesto in the *New York Times* about healing the wounds perpetrated throughout the Borderlands during Trump's first term:

We must reimagine the landscapes we share with Mexico. The border should not be a line that divides cultures and fragments their desert environment. It is a juncture where two nations connect, where history is shared, where cultures are alive and where a common future must unfold.



Nabhan and his partner, the cultural ecologist Laurie Monti, like to joke that their house would fall down if one were to remove all of the books (left); a children's book about the Seri Indians (below) is just one of the 36 books that he has written or edited.



We had no idea, of course, that this moment of hope was only a temporary respite. The modest reclamation that took place under Biden would not only be undone in Trump's second term, but a new wave of violence was coming — preparations for a *second* wall parallel to the first, an even graver wounding than under Trump I. At the time, we innocently imagined an open-ended recovery.

A lone coot, long pale beak contrasting sharply with his flat-black feathers, chugged across the center of the main pond, indifferent to its human visitors. Rivulets of water that fed the pond created small pools where the endemic and endangered Quitobaquito pupfish, one of the scrappiest desert natives, has adapted to high salinity and water temperatures over 100 degrees. It had also somehow survived border wall construction and the rumbling of Border Patrol vehicles along the Roosevelt Reservation.

I noticed an obvious, uniform change of color on the bulrushes — lime-green turning to oatmeal about 3 feet above the water line.

I asked about the groundwater depletion. "They pumped 800,000 gallons per mile of border wall to do the concrete footing," Gary said, "and this is a fragile aquifer." The flow from the spring into the pond had been in decline even before the wall, owing to agriculture on the Sonoran side. With record-breaking heat, it reached the second-lowest level in known history.

On the recording, I kept sighing and saying "God!"

The impacts on the pond correlated with a steady decline in bird

population. According to research Gary conducted for a study published in the *Journal of Arid Environments*, 45 bird species promptly disappeared, although there was at least a temporary gain of 15 others — mostly accidentals like sandpipers and dowitchers migrating from the Gulf of California, adapted to lower water levels and mudflats.

Gary has been visiting this site since the 1970s. The pause in wall construction did not undo the decades of damage that had already been done.

"See those two cottonwoods there?" Gary pointed at them, green leaves shimmering in the breeze. "There used to be 15, 20 of them. I lowered my son down to the water to have him baptized with a Catholic priest and an Indian medicine man right off that cottonwood there." Then he pointed at the bones of a collapsed tree. "It died three or four years ago. So, there's been a complete habitat decline since I did my dissertation here in 1982."

We returned to the pupfish one more time. I have poor eyesight and didn't see them clearly when we first walked by the shallow pools in the filtered light of a mesquite thicket. This time, I knelt and caught flashes of iridescence — blues and silvers (males and females). The guppy-like fish was critically endangered before wall construction began, with such a high probability of extinction that Biosphere 2 scooped up a few dozen and introduced them to a stream environment in the "desert biome" at the research center, a sanctuary to perpetuate the species should it disappear from Quitobaquito.

Gary was carrying a beloved volume of desert verse, his friend Tohono O’odham poet Ofelia Zepeda’s *Ocean Power*. He sat at a peeling, splintered picnic table and wrote a letter to her on the blank pages at the end of the book, saying that he wanted to “speak” to Zepeda from this, her sacred place, where there was no cell reception whatever. He had listened to her talk about her childhood visits to Quitobaquito, and he was grateful for her mentorship on O’odham dialects.

Zepeda’s poems are tidy, limpid, spare desert verse. Take “Morning Air”:

The early morning air,
enveloped in heavy moisture.
I go outside and it lays on my shoulders.
I go about my business,
carrying the morning air
for the rest of the day.

Which is how desert dwellers, human and more-than-human, survive: The moisture is both material and spiritual. It emerged into the world with the wet breath of creator-god I’itoi from a cave high up on Baboquivari Peak, the fantastic, ruddy, heart-shaped sky island that dominates the Tohono O’odham’s landscape and cosmology. A place where arroyos and tinajas fill during the sudden deluges of summer and the long soaking rains of winter. I visited once by myself and got lost on the mountain — clearly, I was not prepared, or welcome. Decades ago, Gary, already years into his work alongside the “people of the desert” (the literal translation of “Tohono O’odham”), hiked up to I’itoi’s cave with young O’odham pilgrims. In *The Desert Smells Like Rain*, he described the offerings in this emergence place, the rosaries and gum and cigarettes and a multitude of others hanging

in the dimness. The experience prompted this reflection:

There is always something hidden in this world, that you can’t just realize from the outside. You need to make contact with it now and then, to nod your head in knowing, to receive its blessing.

In a landscape of loss and grief, this contact means holding the spirit of what came before, what remains of what is even now being lost, and what will be — perhaps even *what will be again*, reborn from drought, fire or flood, from steel slashing through the desert.

The healing must be both a science and an art. A policy and a prayer, a poem.

Sacred activism.



The first whisper of my dialogue

with Gary took place long before I met him, sometime in the 1990s when I first read *The Desert Smells Like Rain*, considered a classic in arid- and Borderlands ethnography and botany. The book opens with the blessing of a summer monsoon shower on the Tohono O’odham Nation; a young Native boy made the poetic remark that became the title, a reference to the fragrance released when raindrops activate the resins on creosote leaves. The nation’s traditional lands stretch along and beyond a border that was established in 1853, meaning that the frontier, 173 years old, has been around for less than 2% of the 10,000 years the O’odham and their ancestors have made the Sonoran Desert their home.

As is the case with many border scribes, Gary is not native to the region. Like so many other artists and thinkers, he came West to look for himself in a world of overlapping cultures, with its tensions and syntheses. The Borderlands have been geopolitically constituted on land that is itself a waystation, migratory to its essence in human and more-than-human terms, a place of transitions reaching back into deep time.

Gary grew up on the Indiana Dunes, an oasis of aridity on the edge of Lake Michigan, with an Irish Catholic mother, Lebanese American father and a larger paternal extended family. His attraction to the deserts of the American Southwest can be traced to the dunes of his youth and to his relatives’ roots in the arid lands between Lebanon, Syria and Israel.

I was born in Southern California to an immigrant mother from El Salvador and a Mexican American father whose parents had roots in the arid North of Mexico; between my parents, a riparian desert. That is what Gary and I share: borders, and a ceaseless desire to cross them, as well as being beaten back by them, laughing at their absurdity, shouting at them till our voices are hoarse, despairing them, contemplating them, kneeling in prayer before them, mourning their terrible cost: the border dead, both human — at least 10,000 lives lost since 1994 on what the United Nations’ International Organization for Migration calls the “deadliest land crossing in the world” — and more-than-human.

Known for his role as one of the founders of the regional seed bank Native Seeds/SEARCH, Nabhan has long been an advocate of conserving and sharing seeds.



Top: The wall in the middle of the Sonoran Desert looks as out of place as the monolith that drove early hominids to violence in 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. Middle: Nabhan translating Comcáac ethnobotanical history before the cameras on the Sonoran coast of the Gulf of California; eelgrass is visible on the sand. Bottom: Rubén Martínez, the author, with Nabhan in the burn area at Covington Flats in Joshua Tree National Park, California, March 2026. **Rubén Martínez**



In 2023, I took another road trip with Gary, this time to the Sonoran coast on the Gulf of California, a profound origin point for him; he arrived at these traditional lands as a tender undergraduate at Prescott College, which has maintained a presence here since 1969. Getting there was not easy. On the way down, we visited with his friend Wenceslao Monroy, a well-known community leader (he has hosted delegations of Zapatistas from Chiapas) who told a harrowing tale of a close call with cartel violence that forced him to flee his family's historic ranch for weeks. Later, Gary spent too long chatting with students at the Universidad de Sonora herbarium in Hermosillo, because that is when Gary is most Gary — with those hungry for knowledge and dialogue. Then it was night on an unlit two-lane desert road that, it seemed, only we were foolish enough to be driving. Not a car but ours for miles. But we made it safely to the shore, where the next day he grabbed a bunch of glistening eelgrass as a documentary film crew's high-definition cameras rolled to capture his authority on what celebrity chefs have declared the new superfood — "sea rice," the grain that sprouts from the grass.

The attention was welcome for the Comcáac, an Indigenous people so remote from centralized Mexican government authority that they were tenacious about cultivating traditional identity and vulnerable to Mexico's simultaneous romanticization of Indigenous history and disregard for the welfare of contemporary Indigenous communities.

Here, in one of the communities Gary has visited for decades, the inevitable question about his positioning arose. It's a question that I've been asking myself since I arrived on the borders of Indigeneity as a young writer. Fifty years ago, anthropology was still a field contaminated by a mostly unconscious colonial gaze, the inheritance of centuries of scribes recording Native geographies and identities in service of military conquest, economic exploitation and, at least according to the Church, spiritual salvation. Then, while Gary was in graduate school, Palestinian scholar and Columbia professor Edward Said published his groundbreaking *Orientalism*, exposing that gaze. The immediate result was a critique of the ethics of representation and increased scrutiny of "objective" research for the implicit imbalances of power between who was doing the gazing and who was being gazed upon. That critique did not actually begin with Said; it's as old as the resistance to colonialism itself, and it is ongoing.

**TO JOURNEY ALONGSIDE
GARY IS TO BE IN
DIALOGUE WITH THE
WORLD, TO SEE IT
UP CLOSE IN LANDSCAPE
AND SPECIES,
IN POLICY AND POETRY.**

If Gary were a tenderfoot grad student today wanting to research the Indigenous cultures of the Sonoran Desert, he would most likely have been questioned — by academic advisors, by Indigenous leaders — about the nature of his relationships with his research participants (previously referred to as “research subjects”). Would his mixed parentage (he refers to himself as Arab American) have been perceived as a more “horizontal” relationship, partially relieving him of colonial baggage?

Today, Gary says he wouldn’t feel comfortable in such positions — that is, as an outsider with the privilege to come and go as they please, and with the power of representing Indigenous “others” in writing.

Gary and I stand at a generational crossroads, witnesses to the changing of the guard. Slightly older than me, he was raised under the academic *ancien régime* of mostly white male researchers working in Indigenous communities. But we both were part of the post-*Orientalism* conversation that celebrated the border as the Borderlands, both a physical place and a cultural space, a site of violence and suffering but also of the intentional mixing and matching of languages and aesthetics — the theory and practice of building a third country, a distinct and transcendent region, as an act of creative and spiritual survival.

But that moment too has passed, and in recent decades there has been a stricter defining of cultural boundaries, particularly between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, following the ideal and practice of Native sovereignty.

None of this changes the reality of Gary’s relationships with the Tohono O’odham or the Comcáac, certainly not in the social sense, which I witnessed on many occasions, nor in his body of research, nor in his allyship on urgencies like the border wall or the preservation of arid lands and seeds. What has changed is that the Indigenous communities of the Americas, North and South, have steadily taken over the means of representation themselves.

This was clearly on display with the Comcáac. We spent time with Alberto Mellado Moreno, a brilliant young scholar who has authored a quartet of history books and built a healthy social media presence, posting spectacular drone shots of the Comcáac landscape. He is now an elected official in the community. With a population that had dwindled to about 130 at the turn of the 20th century, the Comcáac have rebounded to over 1,000 today.

One afternoon on a sandy bluff above the green, eelgrass-bearing sea, the serrated mass of Tiburón Island heaving from the water only a few miles to the west, Mellado regaled us with the Comcáac origin story. In his essay “Heeno,” which Gary published in the anthology *The Nature of Desert Nature*, Mellado personifies the desert, which

becomes the “skin” of creation: “... for I have grown a skin of sand and stone, of plants with spines and thorns, of leaflets small but fragrant, of miniscule pools of water that sparkle like gems in the sun.”

So entwined is the story of the Comcáac with the story of the land that Mellado’s desert “skin” cannot imagine itself surviving without the Indigenous presence: “I knew that as long as they continued to live, I too would exist.”

Which positions the Comcáac as guardians of that skin and summons the rest of us to follow their example — a call that came to me from Mellado through Gary. This is one of Gary’s essential roles: an interlocutor passing on the knowledge, continuing the conversation between those who were here before and still are, and those of us who, relative to the human history in the area, arrived just yesterday.



March 2026. Now I’m hiking

with Gary in the Mojave. My elder has a steady, sure-footed pace. This morning, he was up at 6 a.m. for a 20-minute run.

We’re staying at the 29 Palms Inn, one of the last of the old-school pre-Airbnb accommodations left in California’s high desert, with adobe cabins dating as far back as the 1920s. Joshua Tree National Park will be overrun by spring break legions today, so I suggest the little-visited Covington Flats area, which has fewer granite boulders, a wider vista and a nearly 30-year-old burn area that provides a research window into a key climate impact in arid lands: the desert on fire.

It’s been a strange water year in the Mojave. Soaking rains arrived in November and December, followed by an unseasonably warm and dry January; modest rains finally returned in February, all of which caused the flora to dance out of rhythm. When I visited in early January, there’d already been enough rain and sun for the Joshua trees to prematurely sprout their big creamy blossoms; in the dense stand of trees along the road to Covington, it looked like corn kernels had popped in the spikey green bowl of a gentle draw.

We park several miles in, no other cars in sight.

A sweeping view — the land descends steeply southward and then rears up again; a rock-walled canyon opens to the east, while modest, mildly formed peaks rise to the west.

Back in 1999, the Juniper Complex Fire burned nearly 14,000 acres, a finger of it coming within a few hundred yards of the community where I lived at the time. I visited Covington Flats in the immediate aftermath of the fire and, with zero scientific authority, believed that the desert I knew and loved was forever lost.

Humans bear losses with the rituals we’ve developed in grief, both an intimate and communal journey. The more-than-human world suffers losses, too, and its corollary to grief is adaptation, which is both species-specific and “communal” — no species is an island. On our walks, Gary is constantly pointing more to cooperation than competition among organic life, noting a mature piñon pine “nursing” a Joshua tree seedling with its shade.

The fire did not kill the desert.

You can hear our footsteps crunching the pebbly earth on my iPhone recordings, the wonder in our voices. The Joshua blossoms,

**HE HAS THE LOOK
OF A FARMER,
WHICH HE IS, AND OH,
HIS EYES: DEEP GRAY-BLUE
POOLS THAT SHIMMER
AS HE TALKS TO YOU
IN A GENTLE RASP.**

Nabhan holds a horned lizard mask (below) made by his friend, the artist Beckie Kravetz, for him to wear to a late July gathering of Borderlands activists and Indigenous community members to protect the sacred Quitobaquito Springs from encroaching border wall construction.



the carpet of brittlebush shoots with their yellow daisy-like flowers across the loamy plain, desert bluebells nodding their otherworldly cobalt hue, evening primrose loving the berms of the road, its flowers starting to turn inward mid-morning for protection as the early spring sun silvers the land.

The devastation from decades ago is most apparent in the charred skeletons of old junipers. The Joshua trees that burned are long gone; fire consumes their fibrous internal structure more rapidly and completely. But what was lost to the fire mulched the soil with potash that is helping baby yuccas, junipers and piñons to emerge. In any event, the damage was not uniform. Here, a nearly barren hillside; there, a stand of centuries-old piñon in a gully the fire leapt over.

I notice a silky-silvery cloud in a wolfberry bush, which my untrained eyes initially mistake for a catclaw. A spider web, I wonder?

No, Gary corrects me, it's a caterpillar tent. It hangs like cotton candy, woven around the bush's intricate branching. Now I realize that there are at least a dozen tents aglow in the wolfberry patch. Taking a close-up look, I see hundreds of wriggling caterpillars inside each cloud. Within days, says Gary, they will become buff-colored moths floating amid the green of spring. Once out of the chrysalis, they feed, mate and die within a week, urging the next generation on by laying eggs on the very same twigs where they were born.

The caterpillars jog my memory.

I tell Gary about an essay titled "The Desert" by Aldous Huxley that I read years ago. (Gary immediately remembers it; I think he's read every essay ever written about the desert.)

The most arresting scene in the piece is of Huxley walking out into the Mojave, where he lived during the 1940s, and seeing a carpet of caterpillars, the same species we're looking at now. Huxley juxtaposes their wild persistence with a visit to a nearby military research site, where he ruminates on the atomic bomb and how it heralded annihilation at the dawn of the Cold War.

Forget humans and their "common sense," Huxley advises. We've had tens of thousands of years developing language and its symbols, and look where it's gotten us. Look to the caterpillars, Huxley urges: "To

intelligence that operates on the organic level." There's something more: "And beyond survival," he writes, "is transfiguration; beyond and including animal grace is the grace of that other not-self, of which the desert silence and the desert emptiness are the most expressive symbols."

Maybe when we are our "not-selves," like the caterpillars, we'll find a way out of the climate crisis we face today, every bit as dangerous as the nuclear shadow Huxley lived under.

As Gary and I stand amid the wriggling mini-accordions inside the glowing silk of their tents, I remember the grasshoppers popping through the fence years ago and think of the jaguar that's been caught on wildlife cameras crossing the border not far from Gary's house. I think, too, of the human migrants in both his and my family lineages, of the migrants who even today arrive at the wall and dream of ways across it.

Mingling the ideas of both Gary and Comcáac chronicler Alberto Mellado Moreno, there is the skin of our bodies and the "skin" of the land and the necessarily porous border between them. The same could be said regarding the porousness between the skins of distinct cultures and, for that matter, in the blending of academic disciplines and literary genres: Growth happens when difference is allowed to freely roam. At a time when borders bring so much harm to the human and more-than-human realms, Gary Paul Nabhan stands steady at the line and beckons us to cross it. ☼

The son and grandson of immigrants from El Salvador and Mexico, Rubén Martínez is a writer, a performer and a professor at Loyola Marymount University. He is the author of, among others, Desert America: A Journey Through Our Most Divided Landscape.

Roberto (Bear) Guerra is a documentary photographer and a visuals editor at ProPublica. He was formerly the visuals editor at High Country News.

"Morning Air" from Ocean Power: Poems from the Desert ©1995 Ofelia Zepeda. Reprinted by permission of the University of Arizona Press.



A couple watches as the Feather River flows over the Thermalito Diversion Dam construction site in Butte County, California. The State Water Project dam is located 4.5 miles downstream from Oroville Dam. The facility has radial spillway gates and diverts water into the Thermalito Power Canal and creates a diversion pool for Edward Hyatt Powerplant located near Oroville Dam. Photo taken March 11, 1965.

Gene Russell / California Department of Water Resources



California's Aqueduct Empire

HOW POST-WAR OPTIMISM
BUILT THE STATE'S MASSIVE
WATER INFRASTRUCTURE.

BY RYAN CHRISTOPHER JONES

ARCHIVAL PHOTOS BY
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT
OF WATER RESOURCES

At the time of its initial construction, California's State Water Project was one of the largest water infrastructure projects in U.S. history. Construction began in 1961, and the first water deliveries reached Southern California in 1972. Spanning over 700 miles from the Feather River watershed in California's upper northeast to Lake Perris in the south, it remains a marvel of modern engineering and a testament to the state's 20th century technological dominance. Its construction was witnessed and documented by both the public and the state government, and California's Department of Water Resources (DWR) hosts a massive public photo archive that continues to grow. Its photos convey a notably majestic vision of California, celebrating the state's belief in its ability to "solve" the arid West's water problems.

In addition to their technical and aesthetic mastery, the images express a sense of utopian optimism. The photos in this essay, all taken from 1962 to 1968, reflect a post-World War II confidence that grand infrastructure could tame and re-engineer where "nature" fell short. Big projects were utilitarian in their capacity to solve large-scale water resource problems, yet they also communicated that the nation—or in this case, a colossal state that essentially functions as a nation — was the hero to slay Western water scarcity. Like many such projects, it was intended to be witnessed and celebrated by citizens — a perpetual reminder that the state was working to solve its water problems. As anthropologist Brian Larkin put it, its visual grandeur serves "to rearrange the hierarchy of its functions so that the aesthetic dimension of infrastructure (rather than its technical one) is dominant." Thus infrastructure at this scale does tremendous political work. These photos reflect the mid-20th century's political philosophy, back when residents rallied behind the social spectacle of large public works projects more readily than they do today. With the recent removal of the Klamath dams and the ongoing push for

more removals, the public is perhaps now more willing to celebrate water infrastructure's elimination than its construction.

The Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers meet at the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta before draining into the Pacific Ocean via the San Francisco Bay system. At this confluence, the delta's water is captured and redirected into two concrete leviathans that sprawl across the state: the federal Central Valley Project (CVP) and the southern section of the State Water Project (SWP). The delta is home to more than a thousand miles of levees, over 50 reclaimed "islands" and 700 miles of waterways that spiral wildly across a region around the size of Rhode Island. For the last 70 years, the webs of water coursing into and out of the delta have served as a popular theater for state water politics. The photos of the California Aqueduct make visible this theater, showing the historic transformation of the California landscape into what Erwin Cooper, a former information officer for the DWR, dubbed an "Aqueduct Empire."

The political vision and the operational infrastructure required to provide abundant, statewide water dominate both the landscape and the images. The earliest pictures were made right before Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, so the project was born even as American environmentalism was burgeoning into a popular movement. Over 60 years later, that mid-century optimism has collided with the 21st century's environmental collapse, when climate change and the overdevelopment of water resources have done irreparable harm to the Western landscape. The massive infrastructure that embodied hope and aspiration in the 1960s can be experienced as a historical relic today. Often seen as sites of the state's aging water infrastructure, they are in regular need of repair, as evidenced most dramatically by the major failure of the Oroville Dam in 2017, which forced nearly 200,000 people to evacuate.

The DWR Photography Unit is still at work today, with six photographers traveling the state and Bill Kelley III, the unit's

Workers assemble the rebar for the construction of a discharge line at the Dos Amigos Pumping Plant site, built on the California Aqueduct-San Luis Canal in Merced County, California. The State Water Project facility, which was completed in 1966, would lift waters over 100 feet from the aqueduct as it continues its southern path for the SWP. Photo taken March 12, 1965.

Bob Dunn / California Department of Water Resources





archivist, responsible for scanning the archival images. The unit's office is tucked away at the department's Sacramento headquarters, in a windowless room suited for glare-free scanning. Kelley estimates that more than 250,000 negatives and color slides still need to be scanned — a task that will continue well after he's gone. "Initially, these photos started as engineering research," he said, but "I appreciate that DWR made the commitment to this position," that is, the long-term photo-documenting of its water management. Given how many photos are already online, the volume of work this small unit has made over seven decades is stunning. Its sheer volume reflects photography's political power, with the Photography Unit serving both as a visual archive of state water management and as a tool to justify DWR's continued expansion.

California's population has grown from 16 million when the SWP was approved in 1960 to 39 million today. The lack of equilibrium between California's people and its water resources has long plagued the state's development, especially since more than 90% of its population has settled south of Sacramento, while roughly 75% of its rain falls north of the capital city. The history of the California empire involves a continuous reckoning with its water, from statehood and the Gold Rush to today's acute climate change. Yet these photographs do more than document historical moments. They chronicle California's ongoing pursuit of utopia — a fantasy in which water flows abundantly through rivers and aqueducts to nourish the state's farms, cities and industry, perpetually defying the region's aridity and guaranteeing its promised future. Re-engineering the environment at this scale is undeniably ambitious, but the West will forever be haunted by being on the dry side of the 100th meridian that divides the humid East from the arid West — a fact that threatens the California utopia, no matter the infrastructure, no matter the pretty picture. ✨

Ryan Christopher Jones is a photojournalist and anthropologist. He is currently completing a Ph.D. in anthropology at Harvard University, where he is writing a dissertation on the community politics of large-scale water infrastructure in California's Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. @ryanchristopherjones



The construction phase of the 35-foot diameter Oroville Dam Diversion Tunnel No. 1 in Butte County, California. Two tunnels were built to divert water from the Feather River during the dam's construction and then plugged at its completion in 1967. Today, the tunnels are used to discharge water from the underground Edward Hyatt Powerplant located near Oroville Dam. Photo taken Aug. 30, 1963. **Gene Russell / California Department of Water Resources**



A worker paints a primer coat on the second South Bay Aqueduct Surge Tank on top of a hill overlooking the South Bay Pumping Plant and Bethany Dams and Reservoir in Alameda County, California (*left*). Photo taken May 7, 1965.

Bob Mortensen / California Department of Water Resources

The completed inlet and outlet works with a long access bridge for the B.F. Sisk Dam and San Luis Reservoir, joint-use facilities designed and constructed by the federal Bureau of Reclamation and operated and maintained by the California Department of Water Resources (*below*). The San Luis Complex is located in Merced County, California. Photo taken Aug. 16, 1966. **California Department of Water Resources**







Construction of the Edward Hyatt Powerplant, located near Oroville Dam in Butte County, California. The State Water Project facility, completed in 1967, maximized power production through a pumped-storage operation where water, released for power in excess of local and downstream needs, is returned to storage in Lake Oroville during off-peak periods and used for generation during peak power needs. **California Department of Water Resources**





A vehicle is dwarfed by the size of this completed section of the San Luis Canal/California Aqueduct, which is part of the Central Valley Project and California State Water Project in Merced County, California. Photo taken Feb. 17, 1966. **J.C. Dahilig / Bureau of Reclamation**

From a construction overlook, a family observes the construction of the Delta Pumping Plant, the first major plant designed and constructed within the California State Water Project. Photo taken July 2, 1965. **Bob Dunn / California Department of Water Resources**

The earth-fill Whiskeytown Dam and the "Glory Hole," a 24-foot-diameter concrete overflow drain constructed to manage the lake's level, were completed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in 1963. President John F. Kennedy dedicated the dam on Sept. 28, 1963. Photo taken May 25, 1964. **California Department of Water Resources**





Work continued around the clock at the Oroville Dam site on the Feather River in Butte County, California. Construction of the California State Water Project facility began in 1961, and the embankment was topped in 1967. **Vince Arrant / California Department of Water Resources**



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Photo by NPS/M. Quinn

Even cowgirls get the Instagram blues

A Montana rancher wonders what is lost in her urge to share her Western life online.

BY DARBY MINOW SMITH | ILLUSTRATION BY GABRIELLA TRUJILLO

ACROSS THE LONESOME, fractured internet, a solitary figure rides. She's got her phone tucked into her breast pocket, and so her followers look out from her saddle, on her buckskin gelding, in a cattle drive. Her horse tries nudging a slow-moving calf, and when that doesn't work, he stretches out his golden neck to nibble its back. The calf takes off with a startled MOO. The cowgirl reaches down her leather-gloved hand to pat the horse's neck. She leans back, and the long Montana sky glows before the viewers, transforming into the blue light flickering upon a million mesmerized eyeballs.

The internet loves a cowgirl. Her life is full of cute animals, gorgeous scenery, beautiful women, cool boots. Social media is essentially visual; flowing manes amid a wild Western landscape make for compelling content.

The cowgirl is a potent symbol of the West, and yet more widely acceptable than the cowboy. The cowboy, after all, conjures up John Wayne; his spurs got that nationalist jingo-jangle, and he gets claimed by the right for oversimplified whitewashed stories of the messy West. The cowgirl, by dint of her gender, has got a bit of subversion and political ambiguity tucked in her back pocket.

As the government and economy crumble, the cowgirl beckons online. Who doesn't want to gallop away from it all? If artificial intelligence threatens your livelihood, you might yearn for self-sufficiency and a job where "AI" still means a chute, a cow, a tube of bull sperm — good ol' artificial insemination.

The digital cowgirl rides that uneven terrain between yearning fantasy and the disappearing real. In these modern times, people still live like this.

I still live like this.

As a Montana rancher, I spend quiet evenings out on long, open vistas, in the haze

of a life worth dreaming about. At any moment, I can gallop out into the wide blue aspirational offline. And yet here I sit on my couch, watching cowgirl content like anyone else.

The algorithm has identified me as a woman interested in rural living, and so my Instagram feed is full of cowgirl videos, ranching tips and ads for quick solutions to problems I didn't realize I had. Just massage your jaw for 20 minutes a day to get rid of that excess cortisol. Comment "EQUESTRIAN" for a free introductory guide to fixing your posture in the saddle.

I am fed Western content and feel pulled to create it. Much of my life isn't all that picturesque — paying bills, mucking out manure-filled horse trailers. But it is often beautiful. I am out on the plains, cattle rambling through the flowering sage, and my phone itches in my pocket. *It's the kind of thing that should be shared.* A click, and the scene beams up and out on a trillionaire's satellite. When I check to see who watched it, it's a long string of half-familiar names from past lives, that strange stew of old co-workers, exes' friends, strangers met once in a bar in a distant city. I'm no influencer, but I feel the glow of online approval. I don't just get a dopamine hit; I feel a rush of affection for the life and the woman on screen, which is mine and me, just only the best bits in the most flattering lighting.

I could lie and say that I'm just trying to share a little beauty, or that it's good for keeping in touch, or that internet communities can be as meaningful as those offline. We tell ourselves stories in order to live online. That rush of affection for my own life — it's like I'm forever talking to and about myself under a semi-public eye. And so I'm increasingly uncomfortable with what social media is doing to me, and to how I see my world.

In 1985, Neil Postman published *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, in which he argued that a culture's dominant form of communication shapes how it thinks. Postman was concerned about America's transformation from literate to TV-loving. "In every tool we create, an idea is embedded that goes beyond the function of the thing itself," Postman wrote. The idea embedded in television was that everything needed to be aesthetically pleasing and/or entertaining. *Everything*. Every dip in attention meant a channel flip.

I wonder what Postman would think today, with our culture's TikTok-tonian attention spans. Our dominant communication tools — social media — are designed to draw us in over and over. We are constantly connected. Unable to sit with a physical book for long, I listened to Postman's audiobook while driving the tractor.

Perhaps the problem isn't the dopamine hit we get from the occasional selfie. Maybe it's that the internet interferes with, and even supersedes, reality. Everything is potential content. Filming cows in the sage takes me out of the moment. I turn what could be simple appreciation into an advertisement for my own life.

To be honest, I can be ambivalent about this way of living. Ranching is hard, complicated work, and every time I feel like I'm making headway, it humbles me. On bad days, I wonder if I'm cut out for it. I miss the comforts of the city — lots of friends, easier dating, jobs that didn't weigh so heavily on my sense of self.

Lonely and anxious, I open my phone. Advice for dealing with avoidant men mingles with tips for dealing with anxious horses. An ex resurfaces in my messages to suggest I start an OnlyFans, dressing scantily to do ranch chores.



I can't tell if he's trying to flirt or fight. I imagine myself in a bikini trying to troubleshoot QuickBooks over email with the accountant.

Images of confident, capable cowgirls stream by. One influencer does chores, lifting bales, her vintage-jeans-clad butt often angled toward the camera. Her face looks tired; she has so much to do on a small Montana homestead, cleaning up after storms, taking care of sick critters, feeding, editing videos, monitoring partnership offers from Wrangler. Another influencer reads her poetry in a voice I want to curl up in, paired with footage of her driving tractors and taking care of horses. She stares into the camera with so much warmth and want, I feel like she's both looking right at me, and reflecting back my own hunger. I scroll away.

I know cowgirls. They've given me saddles and acted as moral North Stars. Their advice comes with the caveat that everyone does things differently and I'll find a way that

*“At any moment,
I can gallop out
into the wide
blue aspirational
offline.”*

works for me. They are brave and kind — and blessedly offline. Some belong to an older generation, but all seem too caught up in living and ranching to care about social media. They wouldn't be approached to sell an anti-wrinkle-cortisol-busting serum, except perhaps as a before photo. They wouldn't want that sort of attention anyway.

People still live like this. I could still live like this.

For now, I refresh my Western aspirational feed and offer my own world into the unending internet stream. I think of the cowgirls caught up between aching fantasy and the disappearing real, and how social media keeps pulling us away from the hardness and beauty of this life. I imagine us scattered underneath the dark sky, our smartphones glowing like the only campfires for miles. ☼

Darby Minow Smith ranches and writes in southwestern Montana.

CONFETTI WESTERNS

Exploring the queer natural and cultural histories of the American Southwest.



How to construct a queer cosmology

Recent exhibits across the Southwest focus on LGBTQ+ artists and their alternative spiritualities.

BY MILES W. GRIFFIS

AT MIDNIGHT DURING our full moon wedding, the sacred datura we planted from seed offered two blossoms. We didn't expect our toxic nightshade to burgeon so beautifully for the first time on such a special occasion. It was pure *magick*, perhaps concocted by a queer underground coven of soil microbiota. A year before, we'd cracked open *Datura wrightii*'s spiked capsule and spread its deliriant seeds around our garden.

The deep-throated flowers drooped the next morning after a busy night with numerous sphinx moths. While pouring out flat Mexican lagers and scrubbing churro sugar from sticky tables, I found a juvenile cottontail with a bleeding chest, lying as if sacrificed, likely the victim of a recently hatched rattler biting off more than they could swallow. I offered the rabbit water, but by the time all of the chairs were stacked, they had crossed over. I transported the kit into our wash and covered their eyes with dried chia, forming a small memorial of quartz granite and datura leaves — a ritual I'd often performed with other dead animals, helping deliver our nonhuman neighbors into the spirit world.

Overlapping visions of the white blooms and the departed cottontail projected in my mind weeks later, as my husband and I dropped more than 4,000 feet down the Twentynine Palms Highway to visit the Palm Springs Art Museum. Its current exhibit, "A Queer Arcana: Art, Magic, and Spirit," showcased over a century of LGBTQ+ artists who had explored those themes in their paintings, sculptures, performances and photography. It's just the most recent in a trend focused on alternative spiritualities, including "QUEER MAGIC" in Santa Fe in 2023 and "Sci-fi, Magick, Queer L.A." in 2024 in Los Angeles.

Many of Queer Arcana's artists have deep ties to the Southwest and California, and the vortices, boulderfields and dark skies that have long drawn seekers to places like Joshua Tree, Sedona, Arizona, and Crestone, Colorado, appear in their artwork. These spiritual landscapes are often overlain by a body-centric and fantastical imagery that

pierces the "thin veil" between the physical and spirit realms.

Telluride-born Ingo Swann's 1986 painting *Proto Adam* shows a galactic go-go dancer breaching a desert river, while in *Altar for Laura Aguilar* (2022), artist Clarity Haynes' pastel offering for the late photographer features images of Aguilar's nude photography. Other artwork is more subtle, like Eric-Paul Riege's *chestplate [3]* (2026), a black-and-white textile that weaves traditional Diné beliefs with his own experience with queerness.

The 35 artists in the exhibit also depict cosmic 69s, occult gatherings and aliens so well-endowed that their appendages seem to have gained their own consciousness. A set of magazine archives documents witchcraft and new age goddess worship.

"Queer artists, activists, and cultural producers have long sought spiritual practices outside the mainstream to affirm their identities, build community, and envision new ways of being in an often-oppressive world," curator David Evans Frantz wrote in a news release. When we walked into the exhibit, large text on a wine-colored wall referenced the work of queer Chicana poet and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, "who described herself as a 'spiritual mestiza' and understood spiritual seeking as a queer way of engaging the world and the infinite."

When I sat on a stool and put on headphones, directing my attention to a TV on the wall, I became hypnotized by the open portal that was *Give Us Home Spider: Ritual 5: TXI Cement Quarry, Bloomington, CA* (2017) by Edgar Fabián Frías.

As a *brujx* — a gender-neutral Spanish term for a person who practices magic — and a descendant of the Wixárika people, Frías organized a series of rituals across Southern California to address environmental racism and health disparities. Frías grew up about half a mile from the quarry featured in the video I was watching. The quarry exposed their community to hexavalent chromium, a toxic chemical compound that can cause cancer and autoimmune diseases. Frías and 13 other fluorescently dressed healers took part in the ritual, one playing a drone pipe over techno music as others dug holes in the earth, cackled and ate pomegranates.

This happened nearly a decade ago, and I found it prescient, especially as smoke

from the Lineage Fire in Los Angeles's Boyle Heights drifted across Southern California, spreading toxic fumes from a food-storage empire. Frías' ritual reminds us to address the past in the present for a more intentional future. No matter our spiritualities, it's important that we acknowledge the harms done to us and the Earth. At the very least, we can provide ourselves some solace by combating denial, and spark meaningful ways to fight injustices. Sometimes that may even just mean pausing to recognize the short life of a desert cottontail.

"A Queer Arcana" did not appear today by magic. It and other similar exhibits are intentional gatherings of ancestors and modern community members, whispering from the in-between to remind those listening today to connect and to fight not only queer repression, but all repression. Today, they invite us to hex city councils approving data centers and pour circles of salt around ourselves to protect our creative souls from the malevolence of AI-generated slop. To form coalitions with our nonhuman neighbors.

Our visit fell at the time of another ritual: observing the Summer Solstice. Displays of queer tarot decks in the museum, like the artwork of trans activist Rachel Pollack, instructed me to pull from our deck on the longest day of the year. Much of my own spirituality has been formed by nature: Milky Way worship, grounding Qi Gong, birdsong and ceremonial river cleanses with the bros. But as a Libra Sun and Scorpio Moon, I've found quarterly tarot pulls helpful in alleviating my chronic indecisiveness and epic grudges. Our *MotherPeace* deck, one of the first feminist and queer decks to alter the course of tarot in the 1970s, is another component of my own cosmology that I've assembled.

I pulled the round, moon-shaped card and flipped it over, revealing the "Son of Cups," a card one of the deck's creators wrote represented "meditative awareness." The card depicted a naked man floating with his legs crossed on the sea as he played the flute. Seagulls sang beside him. Below, large datura flowers unfurled like sails. ☀

Miles W. Griffis is a writer and journalist based in Southern California. He is the executive editor of The Sick Times, a nonprofit newsroom that covers long COVID.

COLORADO

Unlikely heroes (and sheroes) come in all shapes and sizes, but perhaps one of the most unlikely we've seen materialized in the form of a 4-year-old Nigerian dwarf goat called Goldie. Back in July, when firefighters were battling the Rock Creek Fire in Colorado Springs, Colorado, "a surprise guest decided to keep them company," KDVR reported. The spunky little goat evidently offered moral support and even some comic relief, as cute little goats are wont to do. But Goldie did more than that: She also acted like a project manager, guiding the crew through steep and rugged terrain and pausing to bleat out encouragement to the slower two-legged firefighters. As Shane Coyne, superintendent of the Southern Colorado Interagency Wildland Fire Team, told *The Denver Post*: "She wanted to make sure she knew all the humans got to the fire." The blaze, which broke out just west of Cheyenne Mountain State Park, grew rapidly and devoured about 5 acres before firefighters were able to contain it by digging a line and using chainsaws. A helpful helicopter also dumped water on the flames. But it was Goldie who really shone that day. "She knew her area, and she understood the assignment," Coyne said. Goldie comes by her firefighting aptitude naturally, since her owner, Pete Glader, is also a firefighter. Glader worked on this fire too, while Goldie also assisted with mitigation, helpfully munching down on the fire-prone underbrush. We don't hesitate to crown her the GOAT of all goats.

CALIFORNIA

The mystery behind the eerie sounds coming from a hillside near the town of Weed in Siskiyou County, California,



Heard Around the West

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

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL GONZÁLEZ

was finally solved, and the solution turned out to be "stranger and gentler than the internet guessed," *Active NorCal* reported. Mount Shasta resident Karrie Ann Snure and her daughter, Jordan, stumbled on the source of the mysterious sounds while horseback riding off Highway 97. It appears that the noises, described as sounding like "distant screams," came from solar-powered Bluetooth speakers planted in the ground; up to 200 had been scattered up the hillside and throughout the area. From a distance, the sound blurred into staticky white noise, though up close the speakers broadcast religious sermons. After the videos Snure posted of the "buzzing static-filled slope"

went viral, she tracked down the individual who installed the speakers. Snure agreed to their request to remain anonymous and has not told anyone exactly where the speakers were located. The owner told her that they simply wanted to promote messages about "peace, compassion and veganism in an effort to elevate consciousness."

There might be better ways to promote peace than by blasting out mysterious noises, but at least the solution is not as sensational as it could be. Online speculation had ranged from secret government experiments to the presence of a ritualistic cult. *Active NorCal* seemed unruffled, writing: "For a mountain with a century-long

reputation for Lemurian legends, UFO sightings, and fringe spiritual communities, a field of talking speakers preaching kindness fits right in." At last report, the audio was still playing, and the reporter sounded pleased, concluding: "Mystery solved, weirdness intact."

MONTANA

On June 25, 1876, Lakota, Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors defeated soldiers of the United States 7th Cavalry, including Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. To commemorate the 150-year anniversary the Real Bird Family hosted the 34th Annual Battle of the Little Bighorn Re-enactment along the Bighorn River, where the famous battle took place near present-day Crow Agency in southwestern Montana, KTVQ reported. The three-day event drew thousands of visitors, though one of them stood out among the crowd: A scruffy black-and-white dog called Young Man, who'd traveled 300 miles from Green Grass, South Dakota, to Greasy Grass. Young Man had been tied up outside his family's home on June 8, the morning the Santee warriors readied their horses to ride to Greasy Grass. The little dog broke from his lead and insisted on joining them. From then on, Young Man hitched rides in a horse trailer to Lane Deer camp in Montana, ran alongside horseback riders to Busby, and continued running all the way to Crow Agency, with the riders looking out for him and making sure he got plenty of food and water. By the time he made it to camp, he had attained legendary status. *Buffalo's Fire* reported, "No one planned on the little rez dog becoming the unforgettable story of the 150th anniversary of Greasy Grass, but this may have been what Indian Country needed." 🌟

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#IAM THE WEST

ANNA KERR (SHE/HER)

**Teton Adaptive program manager, ShelterJH
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Jackson Hole, Wyoming**

Disability is the one marginalized identity that anyone at any point can join. Many people, at some point in their lives, will be disabled if they live long enough. Why not look out for our future selves by making things more accessible now? Everyone deserves to have a good quality of life, access to nature and housing — *everyone*. An entire community's quality of life improves when everyone can participate and be housed. And this also has a big impact on climate: When people are housed locally and closer to their work and favorite third spaces, they're going to be driving less and walking and biking more. They're gonna have a greater appreciation for their community and be visiting different businesses, things like that. Other mountain towns are already implementing things that would also help us, things like vacancy taxes for homes that just sit empty. We have so many in Teton County — then some of that money can go back into communities.

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