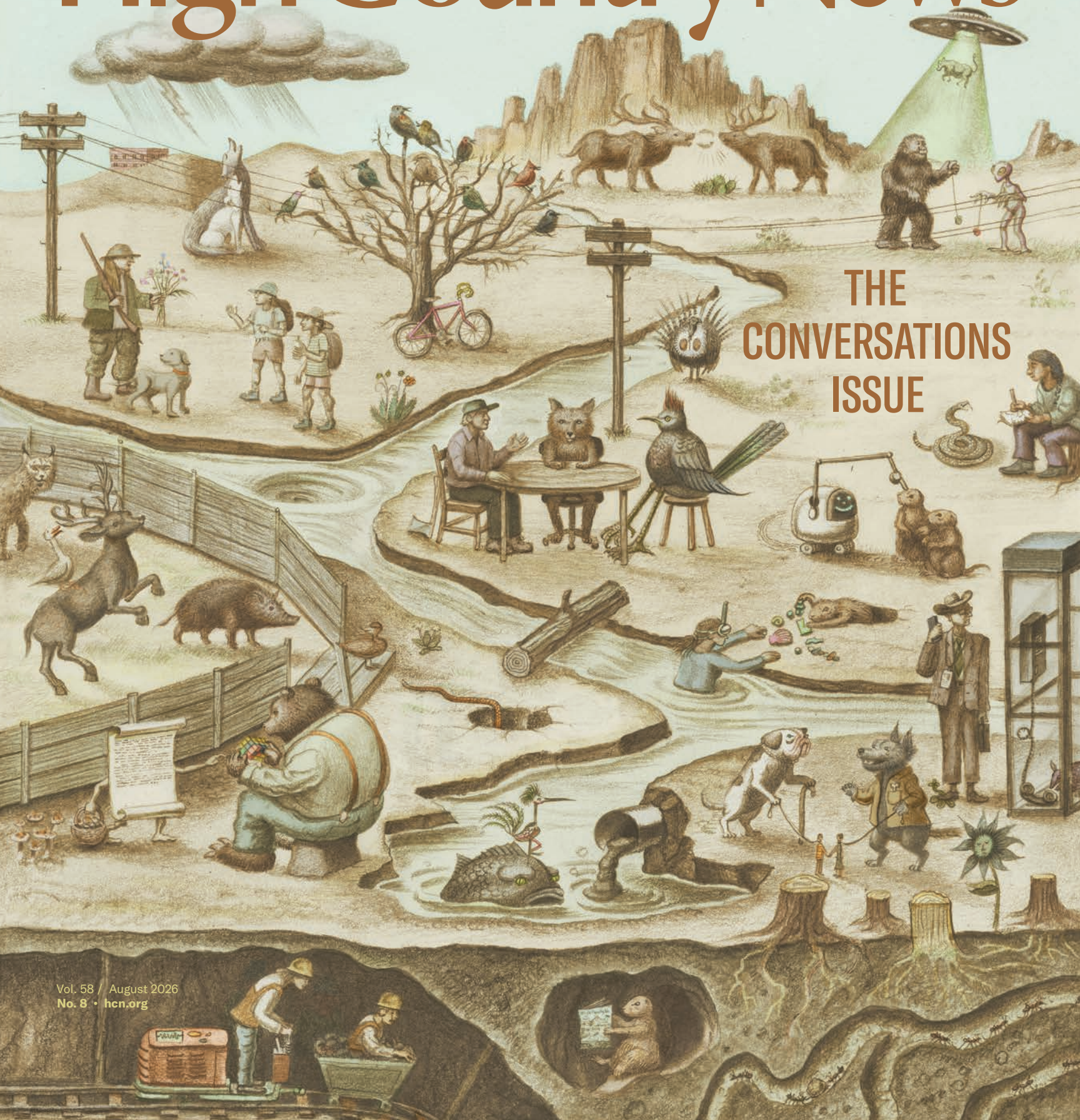


High Country News

THE CONVERSATIONS ISSUE



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Karla Saenz speaks at a protest outside Arizona's Eloy Detention Center, calling for the release of Arbellá "Yari" Rodríguez Marquez, who is critically ill, and all LGBTQIA+ migrants, on the anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising. (See story on page 19.) **Caitlin O'Hara / Reuters**

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.



The things we say

JENNIFER SAHN: Hey, McKenna. How's the weather in Portland?

MCKENNA STAYNER: It's summer for real now, so it's a little cloudy and cool in the mornings, then it gets much warmer as the day goes on. How about you, Jennifer?

JS: I'm in San Diego, and we've got a reasonably heavy marine layer, but it'll probably burn off by 3. And what better way to start a conversation about the Conversations Issue than by talking about the weather? We came up with the idea of a Conversations Issue at last year's editorial retreat in Montana's Gallatin Range. What got you particularly excited about it?

MS: At the retreat, I noticed how many conversations we were having *about* conversations — conversations that are getting harder as the world goes through what it's going through, and conversations that are getting siloed within specific communities. It made me want to break down some of the barriers that seem to be building up in the world, either through different beliefs or economic stratification or all the fear that's out there right now.

JS: In this issue, we've delved into conversations that are pretty difficult to have at the moment, as well as conversations that are helping people get through a difficult time. We cover both ends of that spectrum.

MS: I wanted to give our readers a break from their regular, day-to-day lives to reflect on why we need to have these conversations and where we're already having them. Like with interspecies communication: We are in dialogue with the natural world constantly, though we don't always notice it as such. Everything is in communication. Everything is in dialogue.

JS: There are a lot of divisions at the moment keeping people from having civil exchanges, from truly listening and being open to possibly having their minds changed. Yet that is so essential to how democracy works and how community works.

MS: Enabling people to hear new voices and helping them bridge some of the divides in their communities is critical work right now.

JS: A conversation may come to an end, but it's never really over because you'll see the person again, or the topic will come up again, or it will arise in your thoughts long after the conversation is over.

MS: One of journalism's highest goals is to build understanding and avenues of connection. So, if any of these stories spark conversations between readers, or with readers and people in their communities, then it will have been a good use of our resources and our time. It'll be something that has made an impact in the world.

Jennifer Sahn, *editor-in-chief*

McKenna Stayner, *features director*

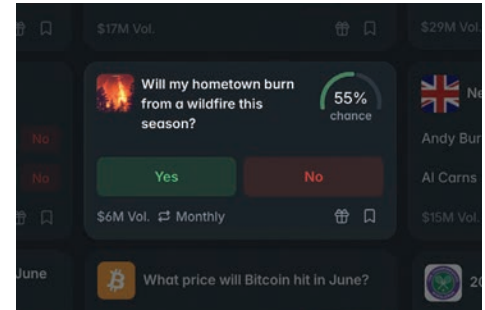


Photo illustration by Luna Anna Archey / HCN

Will betting on wildfires lead to arson?

Fire survivors say using prediction markets to gamble on wildfire is "morally reprehensible."

By Kylie Mohr



Paul Wolf Wilson

The Klamath Tribes couldn't get federal dollars for salmon. Then the Yurok stepped in.

For more than 100 years, salmon were absent from the Klamath Tribes' lands — a fact that left the tribe cut off from funding for salmon restoration.

By B. "Toastie" Oaster



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A warming world is altering the discourse between plants and fungi.

BY KYLIE MOHR

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#iamthewest

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“Tribes deserve respect, and they deserve to be a part of something that is affecting their ancestral homeland.”

Deb Haaland at the Rabbit Ear Ranch Rodeo in Clayton, New Mexico, as she chats with reporter Shaun Griswold. (See story on page 40.)
Charles Montoya / HCN

When wildflowers speak

A warming world is altering the discourse between plants and fungi.

BY KYLIE MOHR | ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALEX BOERSMA

THE NATURAL WORLD is alive with dialogue. Plants participate in conversations both above- and belowground. Their petals shout to pollinators, beckoning them with bright colors, sweet scents and food. Their roots whisper with the fungi with whom they exchange nutrients. Mycorrhizal fungi, which form symbiotic relationships with neighboring plants, draw carbon down deep into the soil while facilitating the plants' uptake of beneficial carbohydrates and minerals.

But the form this botanical discourse takes is shifting in today's warming world. Researchers led by John Harte, an ecologist at University of California, Berkeley, artificially warmed a subalpine meadow near Gothic, Colorado, for 29 years — one of the longest-running climate change experiments in the world.

Scientists used heat lamps to warm test plots, increasing the soil temperature by about 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit (2°C). Under current climate models, that's an optimistic estimate for average global temperature rise by 2100; by comparison, state models show Colorado could warm by more than 6 degrees Fahrenheit. Researchers documented changes on the surface and underground in the artificially warmed plots. The shifting temperatures had an impact on which plants flourished in the meadows and which ones faded, with ripple effects that extended throughout the ecosystem to soil and local wildlife — even the likelihood and behavior of wildfires.

Lara Souza, a plant ecologist at the University of Oklahoma, and her colleagues studied what happens in the dirt when a meadow shifts from grasses and forbs to patches of sagebrush. Their results, which were published in the peer-reviewed journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* earlier this year, suggest that a different kind of dialogue is happening now between plants and fungi, one that Souza describes as “decoupling.” As mycorrhizal fungi are replaced by saprotrophic fungi, which digest dead organic matter, the conversation between plants and soil shifts, moving from a two-way exchange, where nutrients flow both ways, to a more one-sided relationship. This has serious implications for the remaining flowers and their ability to thrive. 🌱

Kylie Mohr is a correspondent for High Country News writing from Montana.

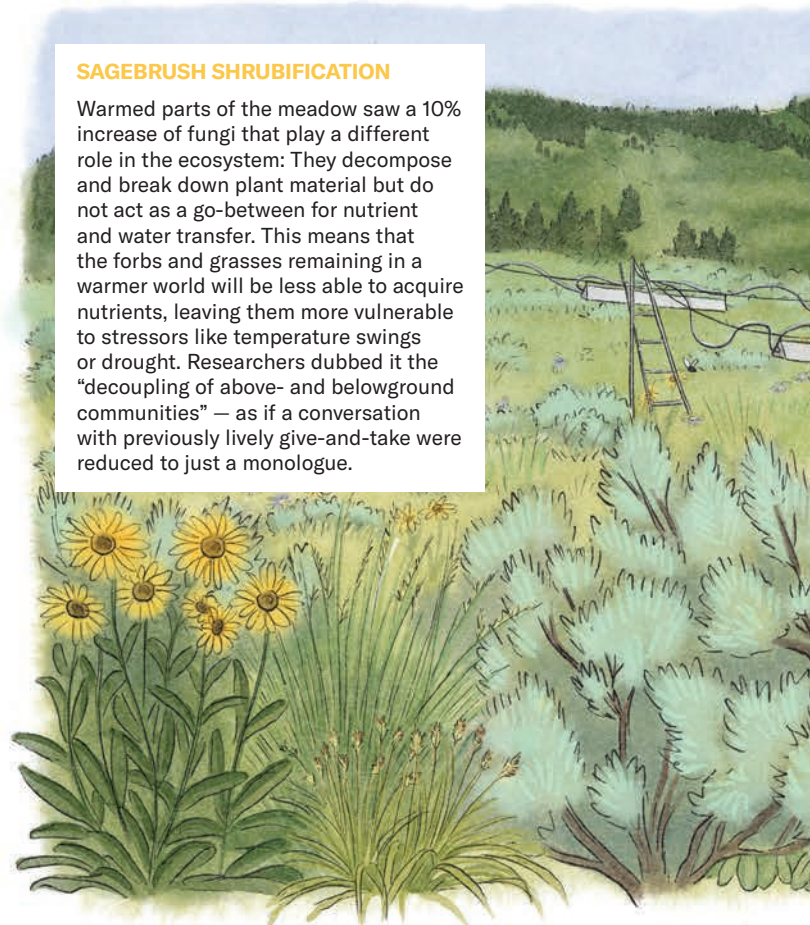
WILDFLOWER MEADOW

Meadow plots were “rich in wildflowers” before the warming started, Souza said, with grasses like meadow fescue and flowering plants like aspen sunflower predominating. As researchers warmed the meadow, sagebrush took over, transforming the meadow from a heterogenous environment to a more homogenous one. Shrubs increased by 150% in warmed plots while forbs and grasses decreased by about 28%.

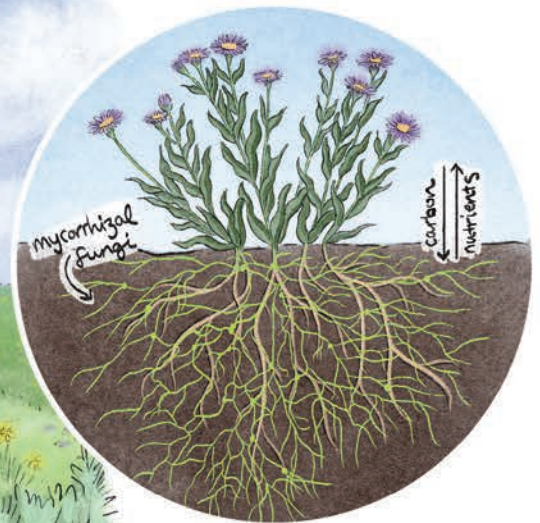
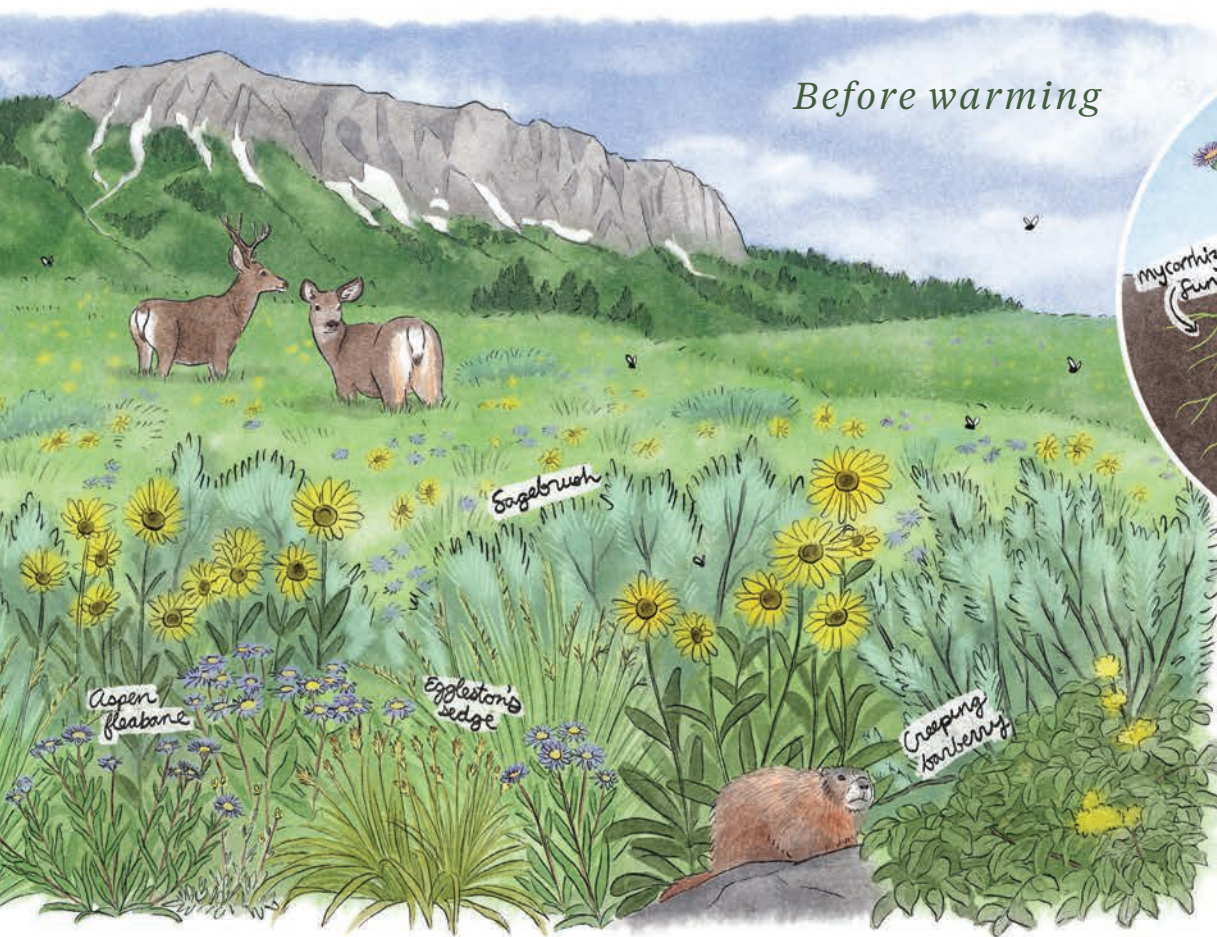


SAGEBRUSH SHRUBIFICATION

Warmed parts of the meadow saw a 10% increase of fungi that play a different role in the ecosystem: They decompose and break down plant material but do not act as a go-between for nutrient and water transfer. This means that the forbs and grasses remaining in a warmer world will be less able to acquire nutrients, leaving them more vulnerable to stressors like temperature swings or drought. Researchers dubbed it the “decoupling of above- and belowground communities” — as if a conversation with previously lively give-and-take were reduced to just a monologue.



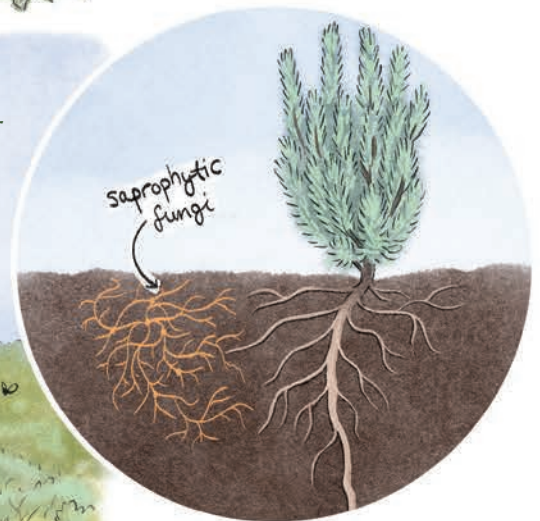
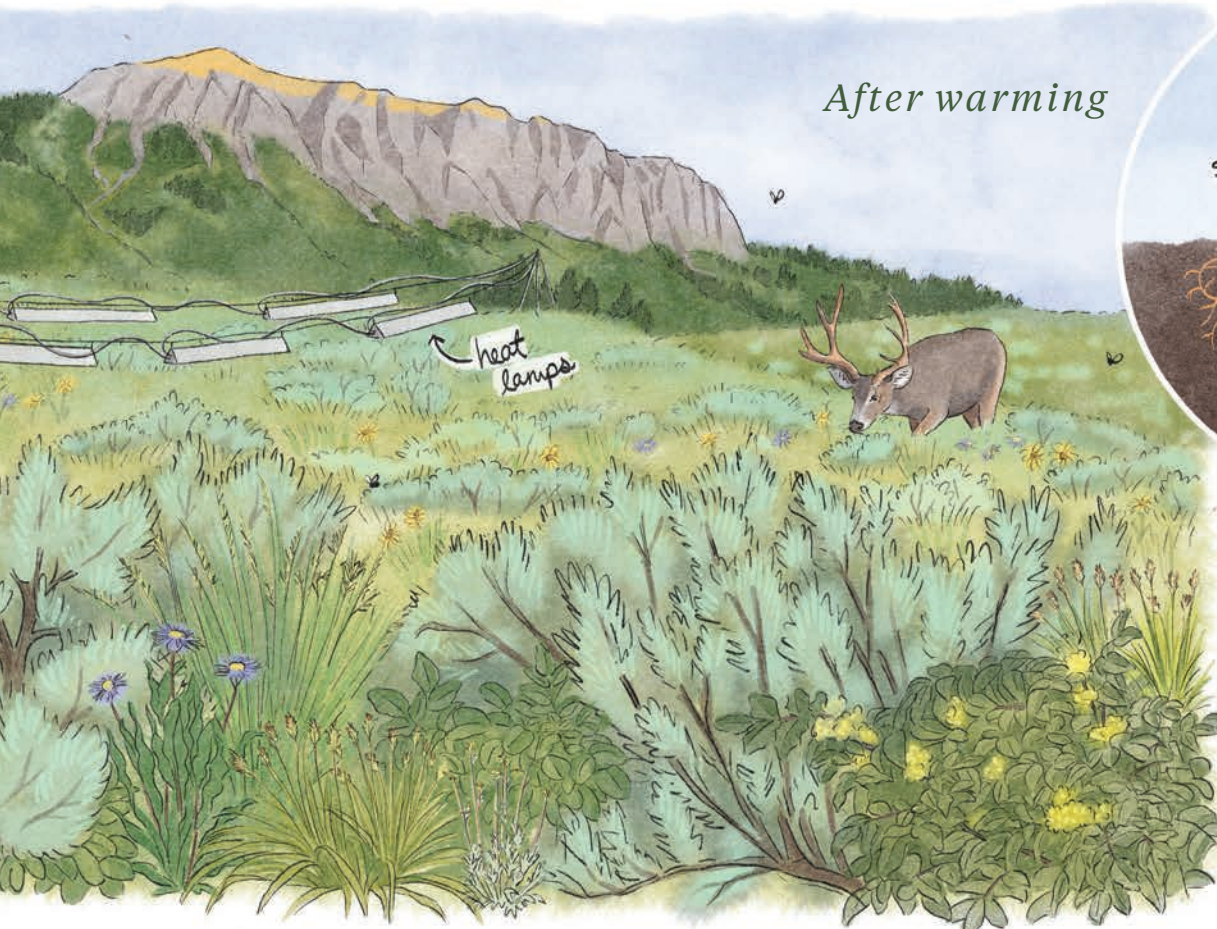
Before warming



RICH SYMBIOSIS

Plants have symbiotic relationships with the mycorrhizal fungi in the soil: They provide fungi with carbon, and, in return, receive increased nutrients and water uptake. But scientists found that warmer temperatures in the meadow, accompanied by more sagebrush and fewer flowers, caused an up to 20% decline of mycorrhizal fungi. "We had what we're calling a 'reassortment of the belowground community,'" Souza said.

After warming



A FUNGAL SHIFT

The meadow's "shrubification" has had cascading consequences. The fungi in the soil aren't the only things being altered: There's a potential decline in wildlife species, such as yellow-bellied marmots and mule deer, coming to feed on the flowers, along with a decrease in pollinator visits and a shift in fire behavior because of the increasing sagebrush. Sagebrush's aromatic oils also make it highly flammable, potentially influencing future fire characteristics.



TWO-THIRDS OF AMERICANS are worried about climate change, but many don't realize how they can play a significant role in climate action — at least, not yet.

Deadly wildfires regularly scorch California. Last winter, much of the Rockies received record-low snow, signaling water woes for millions. Then a spring heat wave hit the West, decimating what little snowpack remained. Many people understand that scientists attribute the intensity of such events to the climate crisis, but it's not always clear how that knowledge can translate into action. Atmospheric scientist Katharine Hayhoe has a suggestion for where to start: *Talk about it*.

Hayhoe, a professor at Texas Tech University, is known for both her research and her outreach, including her *Talking*



Why climate conversations matter

Atmospheric scientist Katharine Hayhoe on how talking about climate is the first step to action.

BY RAMIN SKIBBA

Climate newsletter. She has a knack for connecting with people and meeting them where they are while also keeping the big picture in mind. *High Country News* recently caught up with her to discuss why it's important to talk

about climate, and how to do so.

Through her writing and public events, Hayhoe emphatically makes the case for hope amid a world of climate despair, doom and denialism. Perhaps the 2030s will bring a new mass movement,

calling for bold climate action and transforming society for the better. If so, Hayhoe shows how that future may have humble beginnings, arising from numerous chats with neighbors and classmates, at bus stops and barber shops, in everyday life.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

You've argued that we can solve climate change by talking with others about it.

I've argued that the *first step* is to have a conversation. What people don't understand is that talking catalyzes action. If we want to catalyze action in any sector, whether it's in electricity, transportation, food, resilience or anything, talking is the first step.

How does talking catalyze action?

First, if you look at the data, the

Photo courtesy of Katharine Hayhoe

majority of people are worried about climate change. In the U.S., that's about two-thirds; in other countries, it's more. Yet less than half of them hear someone talk about climate change even once in a while. If we don't talk about something, why would we care? If we don't care, why would we do anything?

We need three things: "head, heart and hands." The head is understanding that this thing is real and it's happening, and that's where a lot of people already are right now. But sometimes when you ask people who are worried about it, "Do you think it will affect you?" a lot of people say, "No." But it's already affecting you; you just haven't connected the dots. So, we need to connect the head to the heart.

Then we need to connect the heart to the hands. What do real solutions look like that are already being implemented and can be scaled and can make our life better? That's what I'm talking about talking about.

I'm calling you from my home in California, where we've got increasingly intense wildfires, heat waves, sea-level rise, droughts and occasionally floods. How do you see lived experiences like these driving — or not — calls for systemic change to address the climate crisis?

I live in Texas, which is similar to California: We have every type of disaster you can imagine.

For years, I've been asking people: *Do you feel like the weather is getting weirder?* I haven't had a single person tell me they didn't think so. Most people have tons of stories to tell me. Then I just help them connect the dots. I say, "That's exactly what's happening here, and it's happening all over

the U.S. and all around the world. This is the number-one way that climate change is affecting us." Then we've closed the head-to-heart gap, just like that — and they did it themselves.

What do you think about systemic change at this time when it seems like even modest climate-related policies are being dismantled by the Trump administration?

There's no question that the current administration is doing its best to alter the slope down which the giant boulder of climate action is rolling. That's the way I think about it. That giant boulder is already rolling down the hill, and it already has millions of hands on it — and federal policy can change the slope, making it easier or harder for that boulder to roll downhill.

When you look around at individuals, and cities and companies and states in the U.S., action is still happening, even though it's the federal government that dominates headlines. That boulder is rolling down the hill. You cannot stop clean energy.

Lately, we've seen a "climate hushing" phenomenon: a reluctance to discuss the subject, seemingly because of today's political atmosphere. How have you seen that play out?

I think that it is primarily occurring in response to the U.S. federal government. I have noticed a decrease in the number of people and organizations who want to talk about climate change, especially organizations concerned about the potential for reprisals from the federal government.

What do you think is the best way to combat climate hushing?

If you really understand (the benefits of climate action) and you understand what's at risk if we don't act, then we can talk

about these actions in ways that do appeal to people.

Years ago, I was starting to realize that climate change is a hot-button phrase. I was asked to speak to our water managers in Texas, who are very focused on data, long-term trends and droughts. The two people speaking before me at the conference were a state representative and a state senator who explicitly rejected the reality of climate change — so I thought to myself, why don't I try something different?

I'll talk about all the same things: I'll talk about climate variability, historical data, future projections and climate resilience. But I'll never say the words "climate change." So I did that, and everybody liked it, and there were lots of positive comments and feedback. The funniest moment was when one woman ran up to me afterwards and grabbed my hand and shook it up and down. She said, "That was fantastic. Everything you say makes sense." And then she said, "Those people who talk about global warming, I don't agree with them at all. But I agree with everything you said!" That showed me that it's more *what* we talk about than *how* we talk about it.

A lot of people are feeling despair about climate change. But as Rebecca Solnit and others have said, it's not too late to make the future less bad. Do you have thoughts on how to encourage people to channel

that despair into motivation and climate action?

People who feel despair are 100% there in the head; they get it. Many of them have also made the head-to-heart connection. They understand that it's about their future, and the people and places they love. But they have not made the heart-to-hand connection. They think there's nothing that can be done.

What's partly at fault here is our very Western focus on individual action, like eating plant-based, what we drive, how we travel, how we live. As Bill McKibben says, the most important thing an individual can do right now when it comes to climate action is not be such an individual.

Work together with others. That's how social change has happened in the past. It didn't happen because of people taking action in their personal life; it happened because of people using their voices to advocate for change. We know some of their names, like Martin Luther King Jr. There were thousands of other people who marched with him and advocated with him. Those people are us, and that is how we can change the world. ☀

Ramin Skibba is a freelance climate, health and tech journalist, and a former physicist, based in the Bay Area. He has written for WIRED, Scientific American, The Guardian, Undark, Rolling Stone and other publications.

"What people don't understand is talking catalyzes action."

*Shágit, Kik-i-állus, Swin-a-mish, Squin-
-áh-mish, Sah-ku-méhu, Noo-whá-há,
Nook-wa-cháh-mish, Me-sié-gua-quileh,
Cho-bah-áh-bish, and other allied and
subordinate tribes and bands of Indians
occupying certain lands situated in said
Territory of Washington, on behalf of
said tribes and duly authorized by them,
which Treaty is in the words and figures
following, to wit:*

Treaty talks

Heirs to the 1855 Treaty of Point Elliott explain what it means today.

BY ANNA V. SMITH & B. "TOASTIE" OASTER

THE 1855 TREATY OF POINT ELLIOTT, which defines political relationships between the modern-day United States and over 20 Pacific Northwest tribal nations, has its roots in 1792, when *siʔat*, a Duwamish and Suquamish boy of about 6, watched foreign invaders anchor a ship festering with diseases in what's now called Miller Bay, Washington. The boy watched with his village — thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of relatives, according to the contemporary Suquamish Tribe. The captain was English, and couldn't speak any of the region's languages. Sixty-three years later, the boy had grown to become Chief Seattle. Only 272 Suquamish people survived, and the colonizers had established their own territorial government. A treaty was perhaps the only way for Chief Seattle to negotiate lasting protections for his descendants.

"Chief Seattle signed that treaty with the government after witnessing so many deaths that he had (to be) looking out for survival for future generations," said Rob Purser (Suquamish), director of treaty rights for the Suquamish Tribe. "There wasn't no way of fighting your way out of that problem." Leaders, he said, had to work with the colonial government and make some promises in exchange for land. But today, as in Chief Seattle's time, non-Native governments routinely ignore or reinterpret treaties, leading to dynamic, ongoing conversations involving Native ancestors, the U.S. courts and contemporary tribal nations.

Negotiations required layers of interpreters: one to translate from English to Chinook Jargon, an approximately 50-word trading language, according to the Tulalip Tribes' Hibel Cultural Center, and others to translate from Chinook Jargon into local languages like Muckleshoot and Lushootseed, leaving convoluted final translations. Over 80 Indigenous leaders signed the document, which today affects issues ranging from fishing rights to education and medical care. The Suquamish Tribe has defended the treaty in the Supreme Court nine times, Purser said, and won every time. "It was Chief Seattle's wisdom, looking at the situation his people were under, to try to protect future generations."

ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT: Negotiations

Joshua L. Reid (Snohomish), history and American Indian studies professor at the University of Washington: "Coast Salish peoples had, and continue to have, different ideas of what constitutes property, what constitutes ownership. Simply put, it's more a system where people belong to places rather than people own places in that fee simple property way that United States property concepts observe. But that doesn't mean that Native peoples didn't know what negotiations and treaties were. People in the Puget Sound region had heard of the Douglas treaties, which the British colonial governor had signed and negotiated with different First Nations around the Vancouver Island area. So they knew of those negotiations and understood that 'we reserve certain things for us, we extend certain rights to non-Natives, and there are land cessions.'"

Andrew Gobin (Tulalip), director of treaty rights for the Tulalip Tribes: "Our people saw what was coming, and they had the wisdom and the foresight to protect the things that are important to our people in our way of life, because truly, our entire culture is protected in the treaty. The rights to hunt, fish and gather protect everything. Your usual and accustomed place are your family village sites, so you're protecting your bloodline, your heritage, you're preserving family connections, that oral tradition of handing teachings down from one generation to the next through practice, through going and doing these things. When you look out at the land and water, you see every aspect of our culture."

Gobin: "Treaty rights are known: We know what is obligated, we know what is protected. And yet ... if the tribes weren't there to stand up and voice the concern, then (federal agencies) just move forward like (the treaty) doesn't exist."

ARTICLE ONE: Land

Purser: "The government didn't give us nothing. No tribe got gifts from the government. We reserved those treaty rights in exchange for land. And that's the same all across the U.S."

Reid: "There were still, demographically, many more Indigenous peoples here than settlers at the time of the signing of the treaties. ... There were plenty of times that Natives successfully fought back or chased settlers out of these homesteads that they were laying claim to. ... This loomed large in (Washington Territory Gov. Isaac) Stevens' mind, because he knew that if Native nations banded together, they could push the settlers out. He had real motivation to try to get these treaties negotiated and signed to prevent something like that from happening."

Articles of Agreement and Convention, made and concluded at Muckl-te-oh or Point Elliott in the Territory of Washington, this twenty second day of January eighteen hun-

"Articles of agreement and convention made and concluded at Muckl-te-oh, or Point Elliott, in the territory of Washington..." Territory on the part of

the United States, and the undersigned Chiefs, headmen and delegates of the Duwamish, Snohomish, Skagit, Skamish, Smalk-hamish, Skope-anish, St-han-mish, Sno-

qualmish, Skai-whamish, N'Zuchel-ma-mish, Sk-tah-le-jum, Stoluok-wha-mish, Sno-ho-mish, Skagit, Kik-i-attus, So-in-az-mish, Squin-ah-mish, Sah-hu-mehu, Neo-wha-ha, Nook-wa-chah-mish, Me-sce-qua-guilch, Cho-bah-ah-lah and other allied and subordinate tribes and bands of Indians, occupying certain lands situated in said Territory of Washington, on behalf of said tribes, and duly authorized by them.

... and duly authorized by them."

Art. I The said tribes and bands of Indians hereby cede, relinquish and convey to the United States all their right, title and interest in and to the lands and country occupied by them bounded and described as follows: Commencing at

"Art. I. The said tribes and bands of Indians hereby cede, relinquish, and convey to the United States all their right, title, and interest in and to the lands and country occupied by them..."

point on the Eastern side of Admiralty Inlet, bearing as follows: thence easterly running along the north line of lands heretofore ceded to the United States by the Nisqually, Puyallup and other Indians to the summit of the Cascade Range of mountains, thence northwardly following the summit of said range to the 49th parallel of North latitude; thence west along said parallel to the middle of the Gulf of Georgia, thence through the middle of said Gulf and the main channel through the Canal de Arro to the Straits of Fuca, and crossing the same through the middle of Admiralty Inlet to Squamish Head; thence south westerly through the peninsula and following the divide between Floods Canal and Admiralty Inlet to the portage known as Wilkes' portage; thence north-easterly and following the line of lands heretofore ceded as aforesaid to Point Southworth on the western side of Admiralty Inlet, and thence round the foot of Vashon's Island easterly and south-easterly to the place of beginning including all the Islands comprised within said boundaries, and all the right title and interest of the said tribes and bands to any lands within the territory of the United States.

Art. II There is however reserved for the present use and occupation of the said tribes and bands, the following tract of land, viz: the amount of two sections or twelve hundred and eighty acres, surrounding the small light at the head of Port Madison, called by the Indians Nwo-sch-um; the amount of two sections

ARTICLE TWO: *Reservations*

Art. II There is however reserved for the present use and occupation of the said tribes and bands, the following tracts of land, viz: the amount of two sections or twelve hundred and eighty acres, surrounding the small bight at the head of Port Madison, called by the Indians Noo-sohk-um; the amount of two sections

“Art. II. There is however reserved for the present use and occupation of the said tribes and bands the following tracts of land, viz: the amount of two sections, or twelve hundred and eighty acres, surrounding the small bight at the head of Port Madison, called by the Indians Noo-sohk-um; the amount of two sections, or twelve hundred and eighty acres...”

Reid: “Some depositions of oral histories that were collected in the 1920s from individuals who were kids or young teens who were there at Mukilteo and were elders by the 1920s, gave oral accounts that their fathers and grandfathers or grandmothers and others shared with them as they were growing up. One of the things that comes across consistently in dozens and dozens of these depositions from many different tribal nations was that Stevens had promised that there would be a large reservation created in western Washington of such size that every Coast Salish person, man, woman, and child, would receive 80 acres. So Native peoples were like, ‘OK, this is a clear statement of protecting our land rights.’ As it turned out, that big reservation that dozens of Coast Salish peoples talk about in these depositions, it doesn’t appear anywhere in the negotiation notes. That’s one of those examples of the power dynamic at play — that the United States was powerful enough to ignore some of these key promises that were made in the negotiations.”

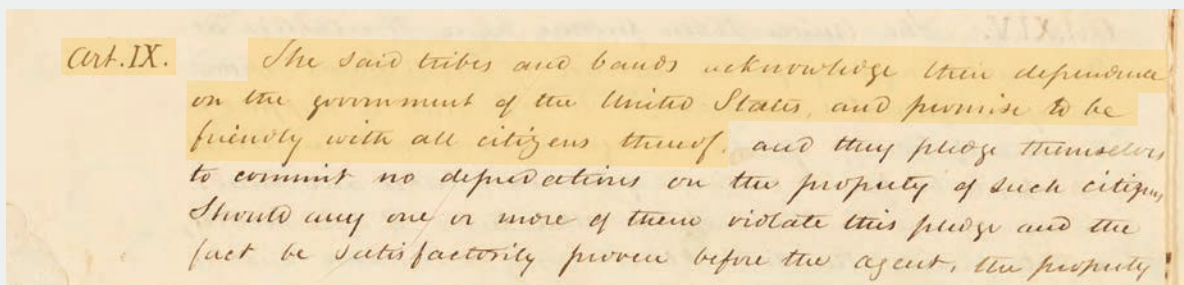


ARTICLE FIVE: *Fishing Rights*

Art. V. The right of taking fish at usual and accustomed grounds and stations is further secured to said Indians in common with all citizens of the Territory, & of erecting temporary houses for the purpose of curing, together with the privilege of hunting & gathering roots and berries on open and unclaimed lands, Provided however that they shall not take shell fish from any beds staked or cultivated by citizens.

“Art. V. The right of taking fish at usual and accustomed grounds and stations is further secured to said Indians in common with all citizens of the Territory, and of erecting temporary houses for the purpose of curing, together with the privilege of hunting and gathering roots and berries on open and unclaimed lands. Provided, however, that they shall not take shell-fish from any beds staked or cultivated by citizens.”

ARTICLE
NINE:
Power &
Responsibility



“Art. IX. The said tribes and bands acknowledge their dependence on the government of the United States, and promise to be friendly with all citizens thereof, and they pledge themselves to commit no depredations on the property of such citizens...”

Reid: “Concepts of family, like fatherhood or brothers or children, or even concepts of friendship, those meant two different things. From an Anglo perspective, the ‘Great Father’ (what negotiators called the U.S. president) wields paternalistic power over his children. From an Indigenous perspective, that father only can exercise that power if he takes care of his children. When Chief Seattle would acknowledge the Great Father, Stevens got

very excited and thought, ‘This means the chiefs are submitting to the power of the United States.’ Chief Seattle was actually bringing the president of the United States and other U.S. officials into the larger political family of Coast Salish peoples, and that came with all kinds of rights and responsibilities that the United States just blindly ignored in subsequent generations. ‘Friendship’ operated that way, too. Friendship was understood within this

Coast Salish parameter of a wealthy person has friends in many places. And so, when Chief Seattle and the other Coast Salish leaders were calling Stevens and Simmons and settlers ‘friends,’ what they were trying to do was bring them into that network of relationality where you’ve got rights and responsibilities, you feed your friends, you support your friends, you ally with your friends. You don’t take their lands, screw them over, and shoot them dead.”

“From a Coast Salish perspective, fishing isn’t just the simple act of putting a fishing pole in the water and yanking a fish out.”

Reid: “From Stevens’ perspective, fish didn’t become property until you caught it and brought it into your boat or net, whereas from Indigenous perspectives, fish were people. They were more-than-human people who were part of the larger community of the Salish Sea. They weren’t property in the sense that, when you caught it, it became yours to do with whatever you wanted. It was more that fish gave themselves to Coast Salish peoples, because of these reciprocal relations, protocols of respect. And if Coast Salish people didn’t respect salmon, then salmon would disappear, wouldn’t give themselves to the people, to put it simply. And so, of course, there were all these elaborate protocols and practices in place

around the proper treatment of salmon, so that salmon would give themselves to people. From a Coast Salish perspective, fishing isn’t just the simple act of putting a fishing pole in the water and yanking a fish out. Fishing included all those protocols, the reciprocity, the preparation that went into it and all the management structures. So, when Stevens would say something, and then it would be kind of clumsily translated into Chinook Jargon, that ‘this paper secures your fish,’ they really thought that it meant all of that, the management oversight, the protocols, the reciprocity, the relationality. So that’s where you see a disjuncture between different understandings of what fishing meant.”

Gobin: “Our language is verb-based. The parts of our language are tied to specific actions or something that happens. The word that we use for salmon is tied to something that happens every year. The way that the word is constructed, it means something that happens on a yearly cycle, and how that translates across our culture is that the times of the year are specific to where we are in that cycle of salmon.”

Smith and Oaster: In a landmark 1974 decision, Judge George H. Boldt interpreted this phrase to mean that treaty tribes can harvest 50% of the fish in Washington state. He wrote, “There is no indication that the Indians intended or understood the language ‘in common with all citizens of the Territory’ to limit their right to fish in any way. For many years following the treaties, the Indians continued to fish in their customary manner and places, and although non-Indians also fished,

there was no need for any restrictions on fishing.”

Purser: “The Boldt Decision was the biggest positive court decision in Indian Country, period, because it took an old treaty — at that time, they argued it was old and outdated, no longer needed — Judge Boldt took that treaty and recognized it’s a living document, ruling it the supreme law of the land. And what that did is that brought back to life all treaties across the U.S. that were signed. Their federal court said that those are living documents and they need to be upheld.”

Smith and Oaster: The boundaries of a tribe’s “usual and accustomed” fishing grounds are still being argued today based on the Point Elliott Treaty; this year, for example, the Quinault Tribe sought access to fishing grounds in western Washington, arguing they fall under “usual and accustomed.”

Gobin: “These are the types of things that we deal with in policy, how these historic agreements move into current events, ongoing issues, and emerging issues. We’re always looking at climate change, one example being sea-level rise. Our rights are place-based. Our rights, preserved under the treaty, exist in our usual and accustomed places. Well, with sea-level rise, we get displaced of our usual and accustomed places, or with our land-based rights, which are on open and unclaimed lands. As environments shift, our people get displaced. Or as development happens, wildlife populations are displaced, and if they move outside of areas reserved under the treaty, then they become inaccessible.”

ARTICLE 14: Healthcare & Education

"Art. XIV. The United States further agree to establish at the general agency for the district of Puget's Sound, within one year from the ratification hereof, and to support for a period of twenty years, an agricultural and industrial school, to be free to children of the said tribes and bands in common with those of the other tribes of said district, and to provide the said school with a suitable instructor or instructors, and also to provide a smithy and carpenter's shop, and furnish them with the necessary tools, and employ a blacksmith, carpenter, and farmer for the like term of twenty years to instruct the Indians in their respective occupations. And the United States finally agree to employ a physician to reside at the said central agency, who shall furnish medicine and advice to their sick, and shall vaccinate them; the expenses of said school, shops, persons employed, and medical attendance to be defrayed by the United States, and not deducted from the annuities."

Purser: "The promise of a school and a clinic is definitely what was in the treaty. That's not what happened. We had to buy our own school. We're buying our own medical facilities. None of that was ever provided."

Anthony Hillaire (Lummi), chairman of the Lummi Nation:

"In our efforts to take care of ourselves, in no way do we ever or will we ever let the United States of America off the hook of their treaty and trust responsibility to us. ... We have to do the work to ensure that they're following their own law. And it gets quite frustrating because we see that in health care, we see that in education, we see that in salmon recovery and co-management of our national resources — and the list goes on."

taken shall be returned, or in default thereof, or if injured or destroyed, compensation may be made by the government out of their annuities. Nor will they make war on any other tribe except in self defence, but will submit all matters of difference between them and the other Indians to the Government of the United States or its agent for decision and abide thereby. And if any of the said Indians commit depredations on other Indians within the Territory the same rule shall prevail as that prescribed in this article in cases of depredations against citizens. And the said tribes agree not to shelter or conceal offenders against the laws of the United States, but to deliver them up to the authorities for trial.

Art. X. The above tribes and bands ^{are} desirous to exclude from their reservations the use of ardent spirits, and to prevent their people from drinking the same, and therefore it is provided that any Indians belonging to said tribe who is guilty of bringing liquor into said reservations, or who drinks liquor may have his or her proportion of the annuities withheld from him or her for such time as the President may determine.

Art. XI. The said tribes and bands agree to free all slaves now held by them and not to purchase or acquire others hereafter.

Art. XII. The said tribes and bands further agree not to trade at Vancouver's Island or elsewhere out of the dominions of the United States, nor shall foreign Indians be permitted to reside in their reservations without consent of the Superintendent or Agent.

Art. XIII. To enable the said Indians to remove to and settle upon their aforesaid reservations, and to clear, fence and break up a sufficient quantity of land for cultivation, the United States further agree to pay the sum of fifteen thousand dollars to be laid out and expended under the direction of the President and in such manner as he shall approve.

Art. XIV. The United States further agree to establish at the general agency for the District of Puget Sound, within one year from the ratification hereof, and to support for a period of twenty years, an agricultural and industrial school, to be free to children of the said tribes and bands in common with those of the other tribes of said district, and to provide the said school with a suitable instructor

ARTICLE 15: Good Relations

"Art. XV. This treaty shall be obligatory on the contracting parties as soon as the same shall be ratified by the President and Senate of the United States."

Smith and Oaster: Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution clearly states that treaties are the "supreme law of the land."

Reid: "From a settler perspective, treaties were one-and-done-type documents, and the continuing relevance of them was up for debate, which is flat-out wrong. Treaties are the supreme law of the land. Most non-Natives assume that treaties were a figment of the past and are best kept in the mid-19th century. But from Indigenous perspectives, that's not at all what a treaty is. A treaty is something that, of course, was negotiated and signed at that place in time, but that it brought the United States and non-Natives into perpetual relations with Indigenous peoples, and that actions need to happen to continuously maintain them. Those are two radically different understandings and approaches to treaty making and treaty processes. One of the most compelling things that I've heard a tribal leader say recently was Lisa Wilson, Lummi Tribal Council member. She had mentioned that treaties are for all of us. They aren't just for Indian people in western Washington. The treaties bind all people, Native and non-Native, together around these ideas of relationality, of how to interact with each other."

Purser: "Defending treaty rights today is an everyday challenge. ... A big reason is the lack of knowledge, the lack of education. People moving in (to our area) know nothing about tribes. (In the) Boldt Decision days, there was so much misinformation put out about tribes and treaties and Indians, and we're still dealing with (that) misinformation that the public was fed. There's a lot more (people) now that know the history and have compassion for Natives and understand the struggles they've been through. There's still a lot that don't know. That's been the challenge, educating people as they come in. My department works government to government. ... It's a constant education with them. Because they retire. They work 40 years, retire, and they hire new people and we start all over, educating them on treaty rights. ... Everyone that comes in has to learn all about the treaty rights and Natives." ✨

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

B. "Toastie" Oaster (they/them) is a staff writer for HCN writing from the Pacific Northwest. They're a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

to a instructor, and also to provide a suiting and carpenter shop & furnish them with the necessary tools, and employ a blacksmith, carpenter and farmer for the like term of twenty years to instruct the Indians in their respective occupations. And the United States finally agree to employ a physician to reside at the said central agency who shall furnish medicine and advise to their sick and shall vaccinate them; the expenses of said school, shops, persons employed and medical attendance, to be defrayed by the United States and not deducted from the annuities.

Art. XV. This treaty shall be obligatory on the contracting parties as soon as the same shall be ratified by the President and Senate of the United States.

In testimony whereof the said Isaac I. Stevens, Governor and Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and the undersigned Chiefs, head men & delegates of the aforesaid tribes and bands of Indians have hereunto set their hands and seals at the place and on the day and year herebefore written.

Executed in the presence of us.

m. L. Timmony
Indian Agent

C. H. Mason
Sgt. West. Co.
Buy of Shaw
Interpreter

Chas. Kitchcock
J. A. Goldwasser
Gungelitts

John H. Seranton

Henry D. Cook

S. J. Lord Junr

Corrington Lushman

Ellis Barnes

Isaac I. Stevens (L.S.)
Gov. & Sup. of I.A.

Seattle X Chief of the Duwamish & Suquamish tribes L.S.

Pat. ka-nam X Chief of the Snoqualmie, Snohomish & other tribes L.S.

Chow-its-hoot X Chief of the Lummi and other tribes L.S.

Goliath X Chief of the Skagit and other allied tribes L.S.

Kwattatum X or Gen. Pierce Sub Chief of Skagit tribe L.S.

S-Hootst-hoot X Sub Chief of Snohomish L.S.

Snah-talc X a Bonaparte Sub Chief of Snohomish L.S.

Squash-um X a The Smoke Sub Chief of the Snoqualmie L.S.



ESSAY

The conversations we don't have about safety outdoors

History instructs Black Americans to fear the outdoors. But creating new memories outside will inform our future.

BY RUE MAPP | ILLUSTRATION BY SIMONE MARTIN-NEWBERRY



WHEN I WAS 9 YEARS OLD, I was glued to a documentary series on PBS called *Eyes on the Prize*, and particularly a segment featuring Emmett Till, a boy not much older than I was, who was lynched while visiting his Southern relatives. His fate troubled me deeply, and I ran to my father, who was relaxing in his comfortable chair in our rumpus room. “Dad,” I asked, “did you ever know of anyone who was lynched?”

“All the time,” he replied. And he left it at that.

Emmett Till’s story became a permanent part of my imagination. It was the first time I’d contemplated the weight of that narrative within Black consciousness in America: how violence has shaped our existence and limited our freedom. Over time, I understood how outdoor spaces became exclusive, unwelcoming and even deadly.

I believe that we can hold multiple truths at one time. My parents’ story is not merely one of pain and peril growing up in the Jim Crow South; they went on to lead remarkable lives in California, creating a 14-acre hobby and recreation farm with abundant fruit trees, a flourishing garden and a swimming pool in the rolling oak-studded hills near Clear Lake. It was an outdoor refuge — a place of respite and celebration. Their spirit of can-do determination and hospitality was part of a larger tradition in nature for many Black families. Resistance and agency are present in nature, and my parents wove those qualities into everyday life — tending animals, tilling the soil, sharing the land and its bountiful harvests with friends and family.

Yet safety and comfort have remained persistent themes in my personal journey outdoors, and in the conversations I have with the people in Outdoor Afro, the organization I founded in 2009 that reconnects Black Americans to nature. Even today, at trailheads with cheerful interpretive signage and around the glow of campfires, the question still surfaces, sometimes quietly, sometimes with real urgency: *Will we be safe here?*

I’ve learned over the years that feeling unsafe in the outdoors goes beyond the threat of physical violence. Discomfort can arrive with a lingering stare or pointed, awkward attention — perhaps a question about what you’re doing in that particular place.

My first experience with this came at a youth church event. We’d gathered at a city park in an affluent, predominantly white hillside neighborhood in Oakland, California, and I remember the squeals of excitement as we explored the playground,

surrounded by a stunning canopy of redwood trees. The air was cool, and the afternoon felt made for children to run free. Then, as the sun began to fade, a heavy scrutiny settled on us, cast our way by a group of nearby adults. Nothing was said; nothing needed to be. I knew it was time to go. That was the first time I understood that some of the most consequential conversations outdoors occur in silence.

THERE WAS A TIME, not so long ago, when going to a park, swimming in the pool, enjoying a beach or having a picnic could be legally — sometimes violently — prohibited if you were Black. Lists of “Sundown Towns” — places where Black people carefully timed their road trips and visits to avoid lingering after nightfall — were well circulated: real barriers that shaped generations of memory and habit.

Before the Great Migration, the vast majority of Black Americans lived in rural communities in the South. Many pursued nature tenaciously, even creating their own destinations. Places like Idlewild, Michigan, Oak Bluffs on Martha’s Vineyard and Lincoln Hills, Colorado, drew people from all over, serving as hubs of enterprise, recreation and community life where families knew they could recreate free from the weight of racism. Overnight inns, campgrounds, guides, outfitters, programming for children: These communities built infrastructure that worked, and they thrived.

During this period, the *Negro Motorist Green Book*, or *The Green Book*, was an essential pocket travel companion for Black Americans. It was created by Victor H. Green, a New York postal worker who leveraged his professional network and knowledge to circulate it widely. *The Green Book*, updated regularly, meticulously listed safe havens along interstates: overnight accommodations, dining, shopping, entertainment and outdoor destinations that were safe. It ceased publication around 1964, when the Civil Rights Act passed and its publisher believed — and hoped — that the need for

such a guide had finally passed.

But feelings of being unwelcome persisted; some families chose to stay closer to home rather than test uncertain territory. As Black Americans migrated in large numbers to Western and Northern cities, many of those old safe enclaves faded, were sold or disappeared through eminent domain.

The uncertainty over safety outdoors, especially far from one's own community or in remote public lands, remained.

In 2020, I went on my first dove hunt in the sweltering heat of California's Central Valley and got lost. It was a season of heightened social and racial tensions across the country, and there I was, wandering through waist-high grass, surrounded by people who did not look like me, many with loaded firearms.

I eventually stumbled into a field where a man met me with a hard, measured gaze. Goosebumps rose on my arms, and I moved on quickly. My first instinct was that I was unwelcome because I was Black.

I have turned that moment over many times since, now that I have more years of public-land hunting experience behind me, and I think my instinct was only partially right. That man had likely done his research, risen before dawn, driven a long way and hiked in to stake out a prime hunting spot. Then I appeared, aimlessly wandering into his carefully chosen ground. His cold frustration may have had less to do with who I was than with the competitive, careful nature of the sport.

As I have continued to hunt, fish, hike and camp on public lands, I've learned that seasoned outdoorspeople often guard stretches of river where fish are biting, the ridge where the elk are, the still flat on Bureau of Land Management land with the perfect morning view. None of them are freely shared with strangers. The outdoors can be quietly competitive, and there's a persistent concern that too much attention on a good spot will eventually diminish it. That attitude can read as coldness or hostility to someone new, but it doesn't always carry the meaning it appears to carry.

I have found some grounding in that understanding. Many moments of feeling unwelcome have nothing to do with identity and everything to do with the competitive spirit that runs through outdoor culture, and



*There is a quiet
wondering that
surfaces when there
is no one around
who shares your
history, humor
and way of reading
the world.*

in the real safety considerations involved in sharing space when firearms are present.

There's another dimension to the safety question, one that goes beyond what strangers might say or do. Growing up in Oakland, my experience was also shaped by places like Joaquin Miller Park, where the people hiking in the hills above the bay reflected the diversity of the city itself. That felt natural to me, and right — a very different feeling from that childhood afternoon in the park, and a reminder that place and context shape the outdoor experience as much as anything else.

It was when I ventured farther afield that things shifted again. At 20, I mountaineered with Outward Bound, the only Black woman in my group. Trekking for miles along the Pacific Crest Trail, I often felt alone. There is a quiet wondering that surfaces when no one around you shares your history, humor and way of reading the world. Yet when fear pinned me to a mountainside one night, my instructor's simple advice — "trust your feet" — sparked the courage I needed to keep climbing toward the summit. It made me realize that feeling isolated can coexist with being supported.

In many ways, Outdoor Afro is doing what *The Green Book* did for an earlier generation. Victor Green believed that Black people deserved to move through the world freely and with dignity, and he built a tool to make that possible. We are building something similar: drawing a living map from the stories, experiences and relationships that help people navigate unfamiliar places confidently. While generations before us handed down painful memories of being excluded, we now have the opportunity to create and share stories of connection, confidence and joy.

Every Black person who steps onto a trail today, casts a line for the first time, wakes to birdsong in a tent, carries something forward. They carry the legacy of those who built Idlewild and Lincoln Hills.

Every invitation, every trip, every first outdoor experience expands what the next generation believes to be possible. ✨

Rue Mapp is the founder and CEO of Outdoor Afro and the author of Nature Swagger: Stories and Visions of Black Joy in the Outdoors. She lives in California.



Karla Saenz speaks about her experience in Eloy during a news conference in May. David Ulloa Jr. / Arizona Republic

KARLA SAENZ'S PINK tennis shoes no longer had laces — United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) confiscated them — but her step was firm. She was hungry but not ready to eat; her voice was tired, but she refused to be silent. Clutching her black purse against her pink sweater, she sat down at a truck-stop Wendy's outside Eloy, Arizona, and described her experience in immigration detention, just minutes after being released. She was exhausted and yet determined to keep fighting.

Before she was detained, Saenz, 26, spent a year as one of the most vocal advocates for Arbella “Yari” Marquez, a longtime Phoenix



‘I’m Karla Saenz and I won’t be silenced’

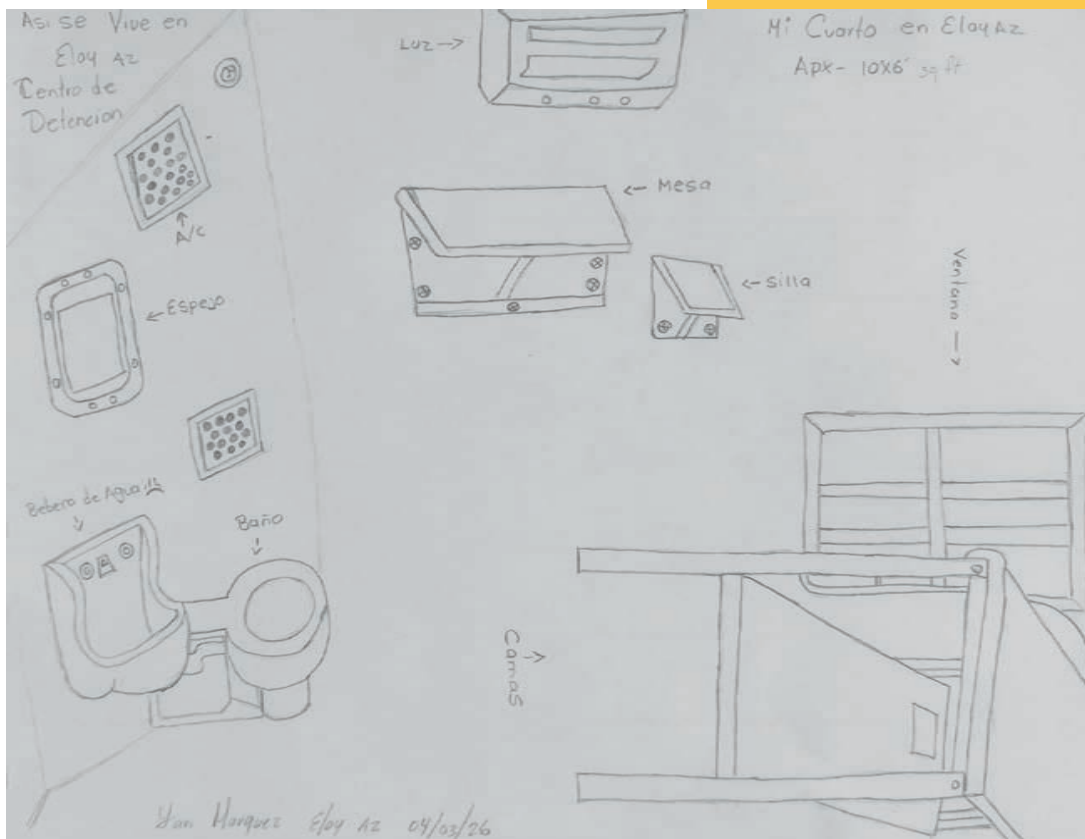
A trans Venezuelan asylum seeker details 44 days inside one of the country’s deadliest detention centers.

BY JOHN WASHINGTON

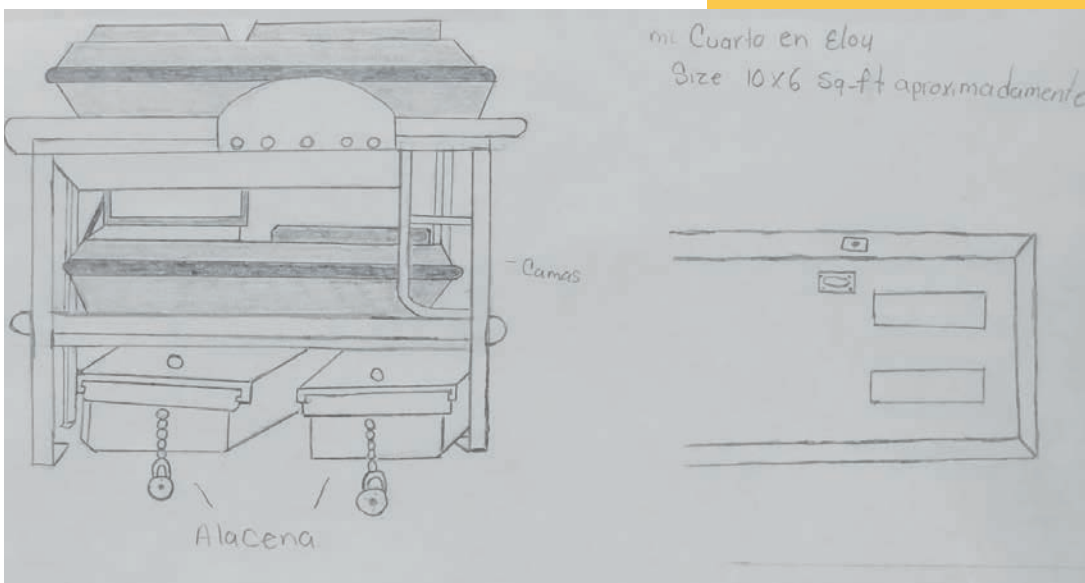
resident locked away in a notorious ICE detention camp in Eloy, where she was suffering dangerous health complications, including leukemia, and had reportedly lost more than 70 pounds. Marquez is lesbian, and for Saenz, a trans woman, the fight to try to free her was deeply personal. Saenz helped organize the campaign for Marquez, arranged visitations, was a contact for politicians and the media and fought tirelessly to publicize the conditions inside the camp, especially for LGBTQ+ people.

Saenz and Trans Queer Pueblo, a Phoenix-based racial and gender justice organization that organizes with trans and queer migrants, put Marquez’s plight on

Drawings from detention



Queer detainee Arbella “Yari” Rodriguez Marquez sent these drawings to her partner from Arizona’s Eloy Detention Center. During the over 17 months she’s been detained, she’s had little contact with the outside or time in the sunlight. Lacking anything to read, Marquez began drawing, creating detailed, revealing images of her prolonged confinement. Among them is the image below, which shows Marquez’s cell with coffins on the bunk beds.



the national stage, drawing attention from members of Congress and community faith leaders.

Saenz knows the stakes. In her home country of Venezuela, she faced intense persecution for being trans as she fled across multiple South American borders, according to the habeas petition her lawyers filed in April. She was repeatedly raped, kidnapped twice and subjected to forced labor, finally escaping in 2024. Eventually, she made it to the U.S. border to begin the asylum process.

This March, Saenz and a Trans Queer Pueblo volunteer who accompanied her went to what Saenz thought was a routine immigration check-in. An agent told her she was being detained but not why, and Saenz broke down in tears. A week later, she said, after a whirlwind of deprivation and transfers, she tested positive for COVID-19 and found herself in isolation in the same detention center as Marquez — just a few hundred yards from the person she’d been fighting to free for a year and yet unable to directly communicate with her.

After her release from isolation, Saenz spent the next six weeks in the men’s unit. Marquez, in the women’s unit, sent her a letter, telling her to be strong, that she was standing with her, that they would both eventually get out.

Saenz couldn’t help Marquez from the inside. But there were other trans women in the men’s unit with her, and she knew they needed help, too.

ELOY DETENTION CENTER, opened in 1994, has historically been one of the deadliest detention camps in the country. The facility — marked by an unhealthy-looking, droopy-armed saguaro next to a sign for CoreCivic, the for-profit company that runs it — is surrounded by a vast parking

area and dust. It's not far from three prisons run by CoreCivic, located amid farmland about 10 minutes from Eloy, a sun-baked town of just over 15,000 people.

Beyond the camp's concertina-wire double-fencing and flat gray facade, the accounts of those detained in the 1,600-bed facility describe inadequate medical care, unsanitary conditions, physical abuse and frequent lockdowns. After the first five days in isolation, Saenz said she spent weeks being denied her hormone treatment along with the medication she needed for a chronic illness. She complained of pervasive transphobia and bad food, but guards ignored her.

In response to Saenz's account, an ICE spokesperson wrote a detailed email — referring to her by her deadname and using male pronouns — saying that her allegations “regarding mistreatment and denied medical care are entirely false.” Citing patient privacy, ICE declined to comment on her COVID-19 diagnosis but insisted that Saenz filed no official grievances while inside and that she was arrested for having missed scheduled check-ins, something Saenz denies.

“Facility staff treat *all* detainees equally, with respect and dignity,” the ICE spokesperson wrote, emphasizing “all.” “Being in detention is a choice,” the spokesperson added, saying unauthorized migrants should leave the country voluntarily.

Saenz's detention unfolded amid dramatically expanding immigration enforcement. Since Trump's second term began, detention book-ins have surged — running more than 60% higher in early 2026 than the same period the previous year. For transgender detainees, the picture is both dangerous and opaque: ICE stopped publishing data on transgender people in custody in

February 2025, making it nearly impossible for advocates to track — or protect — them.

After Trans Queer Pueblo's campaign for Marquez was extended to Saenz herself and a *LOOKOUT* article was published, attorneys took up her case. Finally, after more than six weeks in detention, a judge ordered her release on April 21. The next day, she was released, and within a half-hour, she met with *LOOKOUT/High Country News* at the Wendy's off I-10, about 45 minutes south of Phoenix.

The following interview, translated from Spanish and edited for length and clarity, is drawn from three conversations: One conducted by phone while Saenz was still detained, one shortly after her release, and another several weeks later. Together, they trace the arc of her 44-day ordeal, as well as her refusal, through all of it, to go quiet.

John Washington, speaking to Saenz while she was still detained: How are you?

Bad.

Why?

Because of the inhumane treatment, living with so many men, the discrimination and transphobia. They had me isolated for five days because I supposedly had COVID, but I didn't have any symptoms. They only let me out to bathe; I ate in my cell, everything in my cell. I couldn't talk to anyone; there was nothing to do, I cried all day. I didn't know what time it was. They brought me food at different times. Sometimes they didn't bring it at all.

You went hungry?

Yes.

How are you handling it all?

I've tried to stay strong, maintain my ideals, but it's really

“I’ve tried to stay strong, maintain my ideals, but it’s really complicated to fight alone against everything when there are no human rights, no respect, no nothing.”



complicated to fight alone against everything when there are no human rights, no respect, no nothing.

You were arrested at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office in Phoenix after they said you had missed required check-ins. Can you explain what happened at the check-in?

The guy tending to me had me sit apart (from the accompanying Trans Queer Pueblo volunteer) and said we needed to do a verification. They took me to a room and asked me my name, address — and then I turned and saw an official with gloves on who said they were detaining me. They put shackles on my hands, ankles, waist, and then took me out the back like a criminal. And I started crying and shaking with nerves.

Members of Trans Queer Pueblo say your detention is retaliation, specifically for your advocacy for Arbellla “Yari” Marquez. Is that how you see it?

Yes, it's retaliation. It's their way of trying to silence us, but they won't be able to. They have me locked up without any reason except I'm trans, Black and an immigrant, because I raised my voice and have no fear.

Continuing the conversation shortly after Saenz's release: Now that you're out, how do you look back at what it was like inside?

My feelings are all mixed up, but I can say it's disgusting, and nobody deserves to be held inside — nobody.

You mentioned that you had spent the first five days in Eloy in solitary confinement. A spokesperson for ICE said that was “categorically false.” How do you respond?

It's not in their interest for people on the outside to know what's happening inside. There are no

human rights. There's no respect for anybody. They do whatever they want with us. A lot of people are isolated, a lot of people are medicated (against their will), a lot of people are dying inside, and they don't care. They try to make you sign a voluntary departure form (an agreement to leave the country without a formal deportation order), and if you don't, they throw you in a room.

How many times did they try to get you to sign voluntary departure papers?

More than 10 times. And I always refused. I would rip up the paper, fight, scream.

You said there were other trans women detained in Eloy.

Three others.

Also held with the men?

Yes. We asked to please be treated as women. We had come from fighting transphobia on the outside. They kept calling me "Mr. Carlos Saenz." I've been struggling with this for years, trying to escape

it, and all I ask is, please, respect my identity as a woman. I spoke with the manager, with the boss; I spoke with everyone, and they didn't care.

What was it like with the other trans women?

They wouldn't let us be together inside. But we'd go out to the yard together, the three of us, and we'd cry and laugh together. They had been in longer than I had. I defended them so many times. It's so hard to fight against a system and against the rooted machismo. I defended them because the men cat-called them, humiliated them. They're my sisters.

Now that you're out, what's next?

I'm going to keep fighting. Right now, I feel in my heart this desire, this need, because I was able to get free, but my sisters are still inside. They're still living that discrimination, the transphobia.

Speaking to Saenz weeks later: What do you see in your mind when you think about that time inside?

I remember everything: the pain, the sadness, the despair, the inhumane treatment we received, and the discrimination and racism we faced from the CoreCivic guards. The transphobia is really intense inside. For example, they make you wear really baggy clothes. You can't knot your shirt, can't tuck your shirt in, and if you do, they threaten you.

Did they give you a bra?

Yeah, they gave me a bra about 15 days after I asked for it. You have to wait for everything.

With all that waiting, the isolation, the nights, what did you think about?

That I couldn't give up — that I had to share my understanding with the other girls so they could defend themselves. I thought about them a lot. I've always been able to stay strong because I felt that Trans Queer Pueblo had my back.

But to see them so vulnerable, how the others inside treat them, how the guards treat them,

I just kept thinking about what talks I could give them, or how to educate them so they had the tools to defend themselves against all of it. And I'd get sad, too, and cry, though I never lost hope I'd get out of that place.

Were you ever able to rest in there, to let your guard down?

No, there's no peace or tranquility. Inside, we were the only feminine presence, and the men saw us as sexual objects. So, when I had the opportunity to share with the other inmates, I tried to educate them as well, to explain that we were women, and they should respect us as women. I stayed strong and leaned into my knowledge, and I demanded respect. I taught them how to live with a trans woman.

And you never just wanted to take a break, hide who you are?

Never. I always stood firm: that I am a trans woman, that I'm Karla Saenz, and that I won't let anything or anyone rob me of my identity.

How have you been taking care of yourself, healing, since you've been released?

When I got out, I was scared to be out again, to return to daily life, and it felt really odd. I couldn't sleep. I would wake up crying. I can tell that detention really affected me. Though I always present myself as strong, and I know I have the tools to defend myself, I really believe that nobody deserves to live that life inside. It's hell. ☼

John Washington is a staff writer for LOOKOUT and the author of How to Close a Camp: Dispatches from the Fight Against Immigrant Detention.

This story was produced in partnership with LOOKOUT, a nonprofit accountability outlet covering LGBTQ+ communities in the Southwest.



A demonstrator protests outside Eloy Detention Center, Arizona, calling for the release of Arbellá "Yari" Rodríguez Marquez. **Caitlin O'Hara / Reuters**

■ DEAR FRIENDS

Reporting on the West is a team effort

HIGH COUNTRY NEWS plays a unique role in the West's news ecosystem, providing our readers with the information you need to take part in important discussions and decisions, while also supporting other news organizations across the region. We see that as part of our job: We want to keep the conversation going.

HCN's journalists regularly work in partnership with local newspapers, statewide nonprofits and national organizations like *ProPublica*, *Type Investigations* and the *Food & Environment Reporting Network*. And we share our stories freely. In the past 12 months, almost 200 other news outlets republished *HCN* stories, ranging from the *Big Bend Sentinel* and the *Chilkat Valley News* to *Grist*, *Mother Jones* and *Native News Online*.

This year, we expanded our role when we launched the Western Environmental Reporting Collaborative, or WERC, which will put reporters in local newsrooms in 12 states, starting with Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana.

Now, we have a new editor who will oversee this program and support our growing constellation of collaborators. **Billy Arnold** joined us as Partnerships Editor in July, following eight years at the *Jackson Hole News & Guide*. A music lover and musician himself (he plays the bass), he got a toehold in journalism by freelancing arts and culture stories while working as a ski instructor and bussing tables at the Mangy Moose Restaurant & Saloon. His freelance work led to a job as the *News & Guide*, first as the arts and culture editor, then as the paper's government reporter, environmental reporter and eventually managing editor.

Billy says the experience has taught him about the importance of balancing accountability reporting with stories that capture the true character of a community, as well as its connections to the wider world. When a section of Wyoming Highway 22 collapsed in June 2024, cutting off travel over Teton Pass, he interviewed people who had to drive three hours to jobs in Jackson each day from more affordable communities in Idaho. His environmental reporting took him to neighboring Sublette and Lincoln counties to write about pronghorn and mule deer migrations.

"It's amazing how many people and animals come in and out of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem," he said. "I started to see this as one interconnected region rather than Jackson, Bozeman, Cody."

This firsthand experience in community news was a big part of why we picked Billy from the more than 140 people who applied for the job. The new job, he says, will give him an opportunity to help local newsrooms deepen their environmental coverage, which, at least in this part of the world, is hitched to just about every other topic imaginable.

A contract with our union

We're happy to report that the management team at *High*



Billy Arnold, new *HCN* Partnerships editor at Blue Miner Lake in Wyoming's Gros Ventre Range. **Courtesy of Billy Arnold**

Country News and the *HCN* Union have signed a first contract. It's the result of more than a year and a half of negotiations after a dozen *HCN* employees voted to join the Denver Newspaper Guild in 2024, part of a wave of unionization at news organizations and nonprofits across the country.

The contract enshrines many of the staff's existing benefits: For example, *HCN* covers 100% of employees' health insurance premiums, contributes to their 401k retirement plans, and provides up to 12 weeks of paid leave for folks welcoming a baby into their lives, caring for a loved one, or dealing with a medical issue or an emergency.

It also gives members of the union "bargaining unit" a 4.5% pay increase, a \$25 increase in their monthly work-from-home allowance (most *HCN* employees now work outside of our Paonia, Colorado, office) and more input into our health insurance options and the industry salary surveys that we use to set our pay rates.

The contract also includes clear guidelines and structures for resolving grievances and disputes. Meanwhile, management is assured of our right to continue running the organization in a manner that best advances *HCN's* mission.

While the road to a final agreement was rocky at times, the end result is a contract that is clear, balanced and should stand up over time. *HCN*, and our entire team, are stronger for having gone through it.

—Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher

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Got a story you'd like to share? Someone deserving of recognition or remembrance? Write it down and send it to us:

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We'll do our best to get it into the Community Pages.

A longtime donor gives back

AUTHOR, NATURALIST, PHILANTHROPIST: AUDREY BENEDICT ON HER SUPPORT FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS | BY JODI PETERSON

NATURALIST AUDREY BENEDICT has been a *High Country News* supporter for over 35 years and a major donor for more than a decade. We want to thank her for her unwavering commitment to *HCN*'s independent journalism — and to protecting the environments and communities we cover.

As a child in upstate New York, Audrey camped, hiked, canoed and fished with her parents. She collected snakeskins, animal scat and feathers, displaying them in her own “museum” in the basement. At 13, she hiked a hundred miles of Vermont's Long Trail alone.

“I was a strong person because my parents built me that way,” she said. “They gave me the bravery to chart my own course in life.” That course steered her to the Western U.S. — and eventually to becoming a key supporter of *HCN*.

“*HCN* plays a crucial role in helping us understand the critical environmental issues of our time,” Audrey said, “with stories that highlight the problems we are facing and how we can get back on track.”

Audrey first came West to study geology and biology at the University of Colorado Boulder. While working at the Niwot Ridge Mountain Research Station, she met longtime research scientist Jim Benedict; they married a year later, settling on a beautiful mountain ranch northwest of Boulder. Jim, an internationally renowned glaciologist, passed away in 2011. “We were married for 40 years,” Audrey recalled. “He was my mentor and we were kindred spirits.”

The couple shared a reverence for the natural world and a passion for science education and environmental conservation. To that end, Audrey founded a nonprofit, Cloud Ridge Naturalists, in 1979. For 40 years, she led natural history trips throughout western North America, and from the Arctic to the Antarctic.

“It was one of the most meaningful careers I could have embarked on,” she said,

“taking people to experience the natural world and illuminating the wondrous ways in which plants and animals are adapted to the ecosystems they live in.”

She is the author or co-author of five award-winning books, including a field guide to the Southern Rockies and books about Great Sand Dunes National Park, the Salish Sea and the Pacific Flyway waterbird migration. In 2021, in the wake of the COVID pandemic and overcrowding of the outdoors, she refocused Cloud Ridge Naturalists on publishing, while continuing to highlight natural history. (For more about Cloud Ridge Naturalists and Cloud Ridge Publishing, see www.cloudridge.org)

Her latest nonprofit undertaking, Project Murrelet, addresses the loss of critical funding for marine and climate change research. From her cottage in Washington's San Juan Islands, she's overseeing the complete green retrofit of a 38-foot steel-hulled motor yacht. The vessel will serve as a seagoing research platform, available to scientists at no charge for long-term studies in the Pacific Northwest. (For more about Project Murrelet, see https://fliphtml5.com/xanki/PY_MAY26/PACIFIC_YACHTING_-_May_2026/.)

Another way to encourage good science is through good reporting, Audrey said: “I've always admired *HCN*'s in-depth stories and the opportunities it provides for the next generation of journalists.” Now, she said, *HCN* needs to continue telling the hard stories about biodiversity loss, changes in public-lands management, and other major environmental and cultural issues.

One of the most significant ways *HCN* can expand its reach, she added, is through its Western Environmental Reporting Collaborative (WERC). “I'm really excited about this effort, and it's motivated me to give more to help *HCN* ramp this up,” she said, referencing the generous three-year donation she is providing through her family's foundation.



Naturalist and *HCN* donor Audrey Benedict in the Gulf of California.

The WERC partnership builds a network network of environmental reporters to deepen local coverage of public and private lands, water and drought, wildlife and wildfire, focusing on rural and Indigenous communities. The project, which launched last month, embeds reporters at newsrooms in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and Arizona, expanding to all 12 Western states.

Now in her mid-70s, Audrey has been reflecting on the legacy of environmental stewardship that she and Jim had hoped to create. “I have so loved sharing joyous experiences in wild places like I had as a kid,” she said, adding that she worries about the world her grandchildren will inherit and wonders whether future generations will be able to know those same landscapes.

Audrey's generosity and the friendship she's shown members of the *HCN* staff over the years are an inspiring example of the community spirit that has kept this institution alive and kicking for 56 years. Thank you, Audrey! ✨

Thank you, readers!

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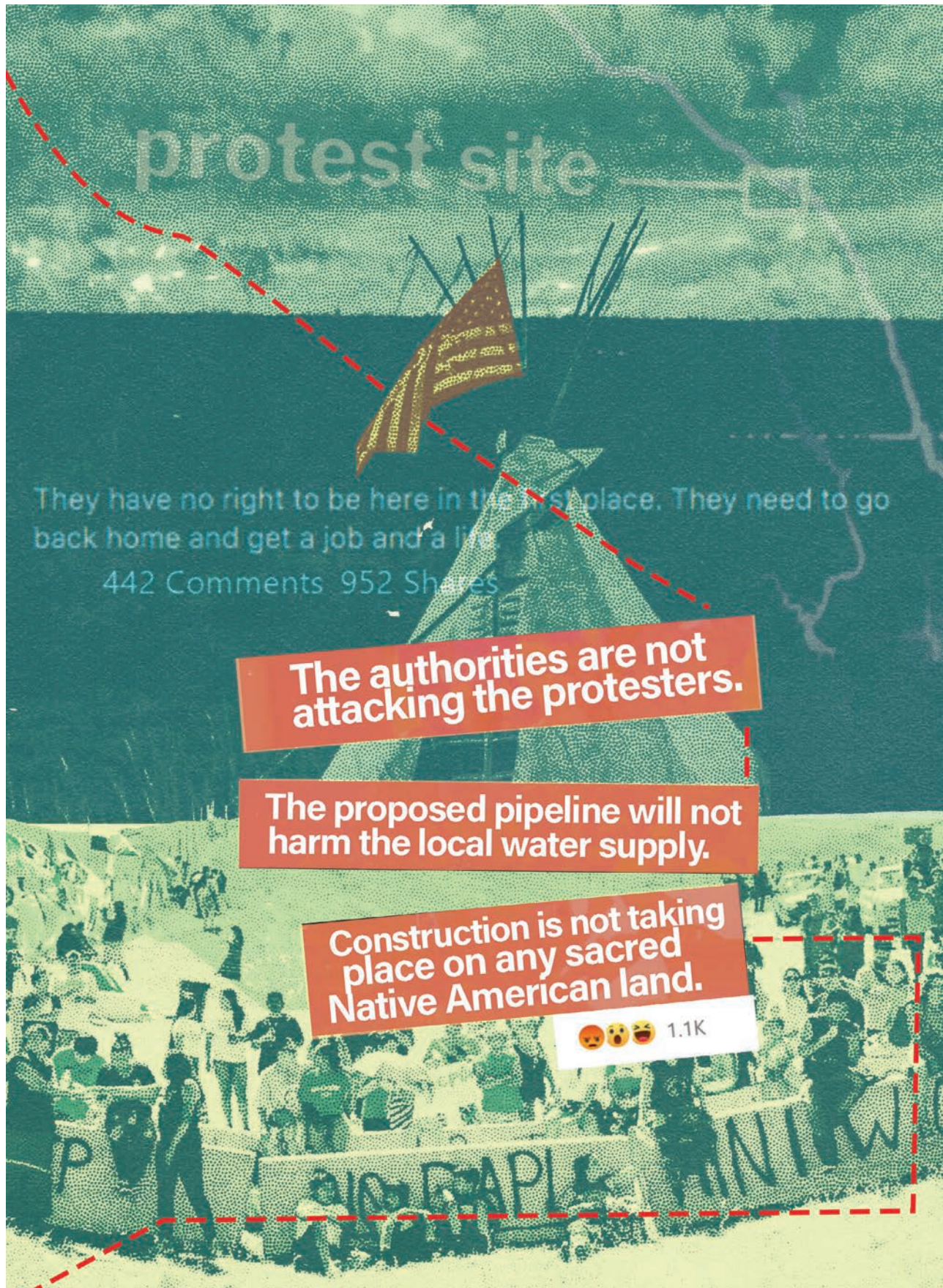
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"You continue to tell the stories that we need to hear, the big stories and the small tales about the West and the people who live here in all its rugged glory. You tell us about diversity and not stereotypes. You tell us about heroes. You tell us about struggles. You tell us unexpected stories about passion and community. And, as an aside, I'm excited for your working partnership with ProPublica. Journalism just got better. Thank you!"



INSIDE STANDING ROCK'S PROPAGANDA WAR

On the protests' 10-year anniversary, internal documents reveal how internet mercenaries targeted local communities and stirred up anti-protest sentiment.

BY ALLEEN BROWN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUMMER ESTER ORR

STRIKE UP A CONVERSATION at one of the dimly lit dive bars near Mandan, North Dakota's Main Street, or a rural tavern decorated with taxidermy animals or even a popular breakfast spot. Mention the massive protests to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline that happened here 10 years ago, and a specific sentiment may bubble up.

"Disgusting eco-terrorists is what I call all them," a bar patron told *Drilled* and *High Country News* last April. "Next time it happens, I say everybody should be on rooftops and wear masks and be protected and take 'em out." Another resident I spoke to said

they should have mowed down the pipeline opponents with a Gatling gun, and a third said they should have done what they did at Wounded Knee, the notorious 1890 massacre of Lakota people.

These feelings are likely in part a result of the tinderbox dynamics of what went down back then. The highways connecting the twin cities Bismarck and Mandan to the Standing Rock Indian Reservation are bordered by grassy, rolling hills dotted with ranches and tiny towns. Rural Morton County is the kind of place where an unfamiliar car driving past your home might be considered notable. In 2016, thousands of pipeline opponents from all over poured into this quiet corner of the world.

People in the region mostly see themselves as North Dakota nice — courteous and

willing to lend a helping hand but reserved outside their inner circles. However, this is also an area where the racist notion that Native people are "lazy" can come up casually at the local tavern — and it was members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe that initiated the protests.

But there was another force at play.

The pipeline's parent company, Energy Transfer Partners, which is now known simply as Energy Transfer, hired a private security company, TigerSwan, to protect its project. Never-before-published documents show that TigerSwan sought to use social media to identify and exploit divisions between the Standing Rock movement and the mostly white surrounding communities. The company's Facebook operation was part of a larger propaganda effort by Energy

This story is a partnership with Drilled, an independent global newsroom focused on multi-media climate accountability reporting.

Transfer meant to steer public support away from the protests and towards the pipeline. Whatever bad feelings existed on their own, the pipeline's security company sought to use Facebook to make them worse.

The new documents offer a rare look into how an embattled corporation fought its narrative ground war. TigerSwan's Facebook content was not particularly sophisticated or subtle, but it was designed for a community that already felt afraid, angry and abandoned by the media. It took off.

At the height of the protests, just as friction between the movement and locals reached fever pitch, the firm's contract propagandist, a virtual reality evangelist named Robert Rice, launched a Facebook page called Netizens for Progress and Justice. The page's posts included videos and text labeling some of the pipeline opponents as criminals, paid protesters and outside agitators.

As Rice put it over text in November 2016, "We are doing heavy targeting in the ND area mostly to focus on increasing the fracturing and creating doubt." Hundreds of thousands of people liked, shared, viewed or commented on TigerSwan's content.

Over the ensuing decade, an expanding universe of polarizing online misinformation has come to define American life and

More importantly for Energy Transfer, anti-protest and pro-oil sentiments run stronger than ever now. And over a half a million barrels of oil flow through the Dakota Access Pipeline and under the Missouri River every day. The pipeline has leaked at least a dozen times along its span.

In Morton County, the divisions sown during Standing Rock continue to have repercussions. Just after Trump took office for a second term in the winter of 2025, Energy Transfer took three Greenpeace organizations to trial, claiming the environmental nonprofits were behind the protests. The company's courtroom success hinged on the views of jurors drawn from the same area targeted by TigerSwan's propaganda.

"People in Bismarck in general were lied to," Kandi White, a resident and member of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, told me in an interview outside the courtroom. White, who was intimately involved in the pipeline fight, said, "There's a misinformation campaign about what was really happening down there."

Despite flimsy evidence, the jury ruled overwhelmingly in favor of the pipeline company. The \$345 million decision left Greenpeace in the U.S. fighting for survival. It also became the pipeline company's

tive war. If the TigerSwan files are any clue, propaganda efforts will likely be aimed at fault lines that existed long before AI was a word anybody said out loud.

IT WAS A PUBLIC RELATIONS NIGHTMARE that led Energy Transfer to hire TigerSwan in early September 2016. The previous April, members of Standing Rock and other tribal nations established a small encampment on the edge of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, near where the pipeline was set to cross the river. When construction began in August, Indigenous people from all over the Plains joined them, holding small protests to block construction, while tribes also fought the project in court.

Then, on the Friday before Labor Day weekend, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe submitted a court filing describing the locations of several gravesites they'd identified along the route. The next morning, bulldozers and pipeline security guards with dogs showed up in that same area, and the machines started overturning the earth. When pipeline opponents jumped the fence to try to protect the sacred sites, cameras were rolling, capturing the security dogs as they lunged at people, their mouths bloody.

In court, Energy Transfer said it had avoided the sites the tribe identified, but the tribe disagreed. Either way, the damage was done. The footage went viral, and thousands of people from around the world — including Indigenous leaders, anarchists, environmental activists, plus a whole lot of regular folks and a few lost souls and grifters — arrived in North Dakota, vastly expanding the protests.

The pipeline company hired TigerSwan to manage the fallout. TigerSwan was founded in 2008 by James Reese, an ex-commander of the elite Army special missions unit Delta Force. Its contractors were largely veterans, and the company held massive contracts with the U.S. State Department in Afghanistan as well as corporations like the insurance company MetLife. TigerSwan's motto, "Solutions to Uncertainty," extended beyond physical security. Reese established the company during the post-9/11 era, when counterinsurgency was the reigning military doctrine. According to the strategy, winning hearts and minds and convincing local people to take on the military's

"People in Bismarck in general were lied to. There's a misinformation campaign about what was really happening down there."

politics. These documents, created at the same time Donald Trump was first elected, amid a wave of social media slime, offer a snapshot of the year that it all accelerated.

The violent fantasies some locals expressed don't represent the majority opinion. But they do reflect an erosion of relations between tribal members from Standing Rock and residents of the surrounding communities. Some people from the cities no longer go to Standing Rock's casino, and some from Standing Rock limit their trips to Bismarck to a Walmart run when necessary.

biggest public relations coup yet — achieved via White's neighbors.

Today, people on all sides of the pipeline conflict see artificial intelligence as the next infrastructure battleground. Many water protectors — as pipeline opponents prefer to be called — are already fighting the construction of data centers that use massive amounts of water and energy to power AI. And rural communities across the West — and the country — are once again at the center of one of the nation's pivotal issues.

It's unclear yet who will win this narra-



priorities was as important as having an armed force. Reese ensured that TigerSwan's mission statement said that they were not just there to protect the Dakota Access Pipeline's infrastructure but also the brand.

It's unclear precisely how Reese chose Robert Rice to oversee the company's information operation. Rice's background didn't exactly fit the TigerSwan mold. His LinkedIn profile doesn't indicate that he ever worked in public relations, and he wouldn't answer questions for this article. However, Rice had been dabbling in altering reality since the early 1990s. He worked for an early virtual reality company called Alternate Worlds Technology and founded a series of video game companies before shifting into the business of so-called augmented reality. At times, Rice's schemes flopped, including an app that was supposed to allow users to scan geographical locations to uncover business reviews and other information.

Almost as soon as TigerSwan started on the Dakota Access Pipeline contract, Rice was on the job. His early strategy focused on generating divisions within the move-

ment and pointing out what TigerSwan considered to be inaccuracies in the pipeline opponents' stories. For example, Rice researched other threats to the tribe's water source, such as an oil train that runs over the Missouri River, to prove that the pipeline wasn't the real problem. He was also eager to highlight the views of a tribal member who thought Standing Rock leadership was to blame for the pipeline controversy. And he sought photos of injured security dogs, apparently to prove that protesters were violent. "Our best bet is to get the truth out first, and weaken the automatic support the Tribe is getting," he said in an email sent Sept. 19, 2016. "The second is to reveal the deceptions, which will generate fractures between the Tribes and the third party activists that are interfering."

In an email two days later, he said, "We want to be careful of public opinion and sentiment towards Native Americans, so we want to focus on the issues specifically, or wiggle around to take the side of the Tribes and how they are being taken advantage of." Rice was attempting to thread an impossi-

ble needle: undermining a cause supported by dozens if not hundreds of tribal nations, without appearing to be critical of Indigenous people.

He was just one node in a web of propagandists at work. The DCI Group — notorious masters of the dark arts of public relations — was hired by Energy Transfer for about \$100,000 per month to run a so-called trade group called Grow America's Infrastructure Now. Another firm called MarketLeverage was also working for Energy Transfer. And as outrage grew over law enforcement's protest suppression tactics, the National Sheriffs' Association hired a public relations firm called Off The Record Strategies, run by a guy who had done PR on the Iraq War for the George W. Bush administration, and an opposition research company called Delve, run by a guy who had formerly worked for the Republican National Committee. The Sheriffs' Association turned to distributing pipeline protest updates with headlines like "Is the Money Coming from the Rockefellers?"

DCI, MarketLeverage, the National

Sheriffs' Association and Delve all declined to respond to *Drilled* and *HCN's* comment requests. Rather than reply to questions, Off the Record Strategies CEO Mark Pfeifle pointed to an op-ed he'd recently penned in a local paper about how the Dakota Access Pipeline's route through North Dakota is a bulwark against Iran.

On its face, the pro-pipeline propaganda didn't seem terribly impressive compared to the onslaught of viral social media content coming from the other side. Water protectors on the ground, politicians, celebrities, journalists, tribal leaders and environmental nonprofits were churning out content. They even had a nickname — "keyboard warriors." The story of Indigenous people from all over the world coming together to defend the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's sovereignty, sacred sites and drinking water source from an oil pipeline company had captured the proverbial hearts and minds of people around the world. At a moment of fear and uncertainty about the climate crisis, what was unfolding on the remote prairies of North Dakota felt like

an answer to an existential question.

Making matters worse for the pipeline company, Facebook Live had become widely available that year. If it's outrage that helps drive social media algorithms, then the ability to watch in real time as police sprayed water protectors with water hoses in sub-freezing weather did the trick. Inevitably, misinformation mixed in with the deluge, including images of wounds from unrelated incidents. But authentic footage of police violence against pipeline opponents played a role in ballooning the anti-pipeline camps to an estimated 8,000 people.

Of course, TigerSwan's propagandists had at least one major advantage. At the same time the Standing Rock movement emerged, Donald Trump was campaigning for president. Trump held investments in both Energy Transfer and Phillips 66, another part-owner of the Dakota Access Pipeline. He traveled the country, shouting, "Drill, baby, drill." The candidate's combative messaging was rewarded heartily on Facebook and Twitter. Even as Trump dismissed mainstream media as "fake news," actual

disinformation, a disproportionate amount of it favorable to him, flooded social media like never before.

On Nov. 9, Trump declared victory. He'd won in North Dakota by a larger margin than all but three other states. Right then, the pipeline propagandists found their footing.

That same day, TigerSwan launched its first Facebook page, Netizens for Progress and Justice. Its opening video said that what people were seeing on social media about Standing Rock was wrong. Mixed in with the peaceful demonstrators were paid protesters, who were violent, the video claimed. Protesters were the ones attacking the police, rather than the other way around. Construction was not happening on sacred land, and the pipeline would not harm the water supply. The post garnered 1.8 million views, and 1,400 comments.

The claims were misleading at best. Some protesters did throw objects, many yelled at cops, and at least a couple sabotaged equipment, but the police's crowd-control weapons caused numerous injuries, and their guns carried a threat of deadly force.



As to whether the pipeline would harm the water supply, pipelines often leak, and they carry oil that contributes to a climate crisis that is also a water-scarcity crisis, including for North Dakota.

The theme of paid protesters would come up again and again in the months ahead. It's a fact that millions of dollars were pouring into crowdfunding pages launched by hundreds of pipeline opponents. Many donations were used for camp infrastructure or legal defense, but some of the money was spent frivolously by individuals. It's also accurate that nonprofits or tribal governments paid a small set of people for their time in the camps. But the caricature of a vast field of professional protesters who were in it for the money has never been true.

It's unclear if Rice knew how impeccable his timing was. Right then, locals from Bismarck and Mandan were getting fed up with the protests — and getting organized themselves.

What would give TigerSwan's propaganda life was that it landed on a local population that was uniquely vulnerable to its strategies.

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

Lowell professor James Forest, an expert on counterterrorism and propaganda, has a name for guys like Robert Rice: digital influence mercenaries. They're online actors who foster polarization for a profit. He explained how it works. "If you are targeting a group or even an individual," he said, "and you've gathered information about the things that they're uncertain about — that can become a weapon of sorts."

An effective digital influence mercenary triggers an echo chamber that deepens people's fear-based convictions. "You can even provoke them to do things that you want them to do," he added.

When I asked Forest what he would expect a digital influence mercenary to do in the scenario TigerSwan confronted at Standing Rock, he answered easily. "First and foremost, you want to gather information about the kind of population that you're trying to influence. Are there potential divisions within that population?"

"What you're looking for are seams that you can fracture," he added.

Mandan, North Dakota, is "where the West begins," according to its motto.

Founded in the 1870s at the western end-point of the Northern Pacific Railroad, the Bismarck-Mandan area was briefly a sort of border zone between the settled United States and the vast swaths of land belonging to Indigenous nations. The cities were established at a moment when U.S. history hinged on what was unfolding in the Dakota Territory.

"If you are targeting a group or even an individual, and you've gathered information about the things that they're uncertain about — that can become a weapon of sorts."

In 1890, police killed the famous Hunkpapa Lakota leader Sitting Bull on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, south of Bismarck. The Wounded Knee massacre happened two weeks later. The events marked the end of open warfare between the U.S. military and Indigenous nations fighting to hold onto their land. White people had already been streaming in from the East, some attracted by the Homestead Act, which promised 160-acre plots of Indigenous land to settlers and others rushing toward gold in the Black Hills, an area sacred to numerous Indigenous nations.

Since the 1890s, North Dakota has rarely found itself at the white-hot center of U.S. conflicts. "There's a local watering hole I love to go to," explained Kay LaCoe, who administered a Facebook page in 2016 where area residents complained about the protests. "Every time that door opens and somebody else walks in, everybody turns and looks at the door to see who it is and, you know, is it a local or is it not?"

LaCoe was born and raised in Bismarck. Her favorite pastime is cowboy mounted shooting, a sport that involves shooting balloons with a gun while riding a horse. Until very recently, she was a spokesperson for the lignite coal industry, but she swears that has nothing to do with how she felt about the

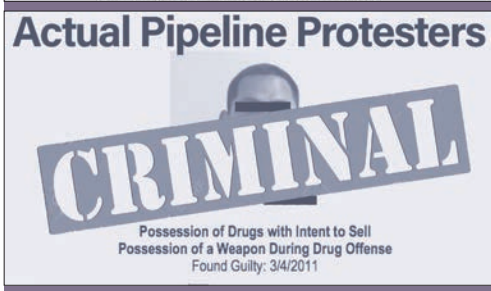
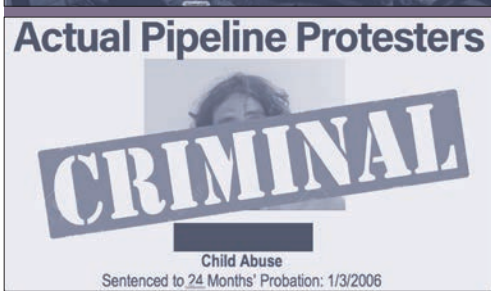
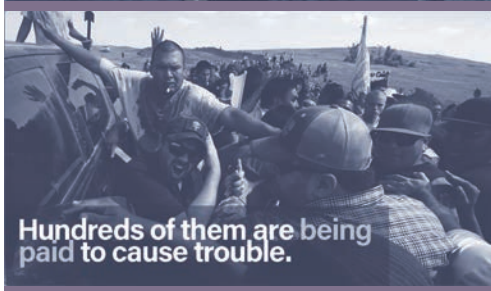
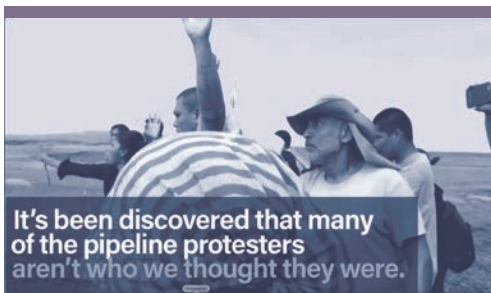
pipeline. At its best, in her view, the area's insular attitude means those who are known in the community have each others' backs.

However, it also can mean racism, said Kandi White, the water protector who observed the trial. "We have a lot of farmers and ranchers and people around here that are, like, 'We're hard workers. We grew up on the land. We're very nice people. And

if you rock the boat, then you're a bad person.'" Stereotypes of Indigenous people as alcoholics persist. "There's a lack of understanding of boarding schools and how we had a whole lost generation of elders who were hurting very, very, very bad," White said, referring to the assimilationist policies that attempted to eliminate Indigenous languages and cultures.

Plenty of people in Bismarck and Mandan were sympathetic to the protests when they started out small, but even LaCoe noticed one thing early on. "At the very beginning of the peaceful demonstrations, it really amped up that anti-Native sentiment," she said.

Fear and anger spread first in the agricultural areas closest to the protest camps. "Not many people live here, and we had strangers driving around. How's that sound?" said Doug Hille, a rancher who lives on a dead-end road that both workers and water protectors used to get to a pipeline construction site. The extra traffic made it difficult for Hille to transport hay on narrow gravel roads with semitrucks. At one point, pipeline opponents took pictures of his home until he threatened them with a rifle. "I and several other people just got in the habit that we carried weapons for personal protection," he said.



Frames from a Netizens' video, with mugs sent by law enforcement to TigerSwan. (HCN redactions.)

Pro-police sentiments are widespread in Bismarck and Mandan. There, the Facebook Live videos sparked anger on behalf of the police. Many felt that media outlets unfairly favored the water protectors' narrative of peaceful protectors against violent cops. It didn't help that some pipeline opponents doxed cops, posting their personal information online. Some public officials got threatening phone calls — even visits to their homes.

At one point, demonstrators set a bridge on fire. An idea started to circulate that this was not the "right" way to protest. Even among Indigenous leaders within the camps, disagreements over tactics left some with a sense that the movement had been exploited by outsiders or grifters.

In November, a local guy started a private Facebook group called DefeND BisMan, where people could vent about protest-related disruptions without being criticized by anti-pipeline users. As the group grew in popularity, LaCoe took over as administrator, deleting ugly comments as they'd come up.

Then, on Thanksgiving, Bismarck and Mandan residents started their day with an emergency alert, stating that protesters had blocked the intersection connecting the two cities. Images circulated on social media of a demonstrator carrying a pig's head mounted on a stick. LaCoe spent six hours on the phone with outraged community members, who took the pig's head as a threat to law enforcement. The next day, Black Friday, water protectors marched into Bismarck's Kirkwood Mall and formed a prayer circle before being arrested. One local right-wing blogger claimed it was a "war on the Bismarck/Mandan community."

It was a supercharged moment, LaCoe said: "When Trump gets elected, community voices are feeling heard and empowered, and then a group of people that doesn't live here, doesn't contribute to the community, puts pigs' heads on sticks on Thanksgiving."

Requests to join the DefeND BisMan Facebook group spiked. The group soon included about 4,000 members, and other Facebook groups like it began popping up.

According to Forest, the professor of security studies, a group like DefeND BisMan is ideal for a digital influence mercenary. "By the nature of being allowed into that

digital influence silo, in the in-group, you've already excluded other competing narratives," he said.

The group rapidly became a target for Rice.

R2: Jim we are pushing various things on Facebook (primary) and website (secondary). Definitely contributing to some infighting and factions, both internal and on the bigger scope (like anti protestors in Bisman).

11/23/16, 5:26 PM

R2: we are starting to get a following that is happily sharing what we are putting out, and a bunch of haters that are sharing it just as much to get their friends in on the proxy social media fight.

11/23/16, 5:45 PM

James Reese: Good. Send me some examples with analytics when u can.

11/23/16, 6:28 PM

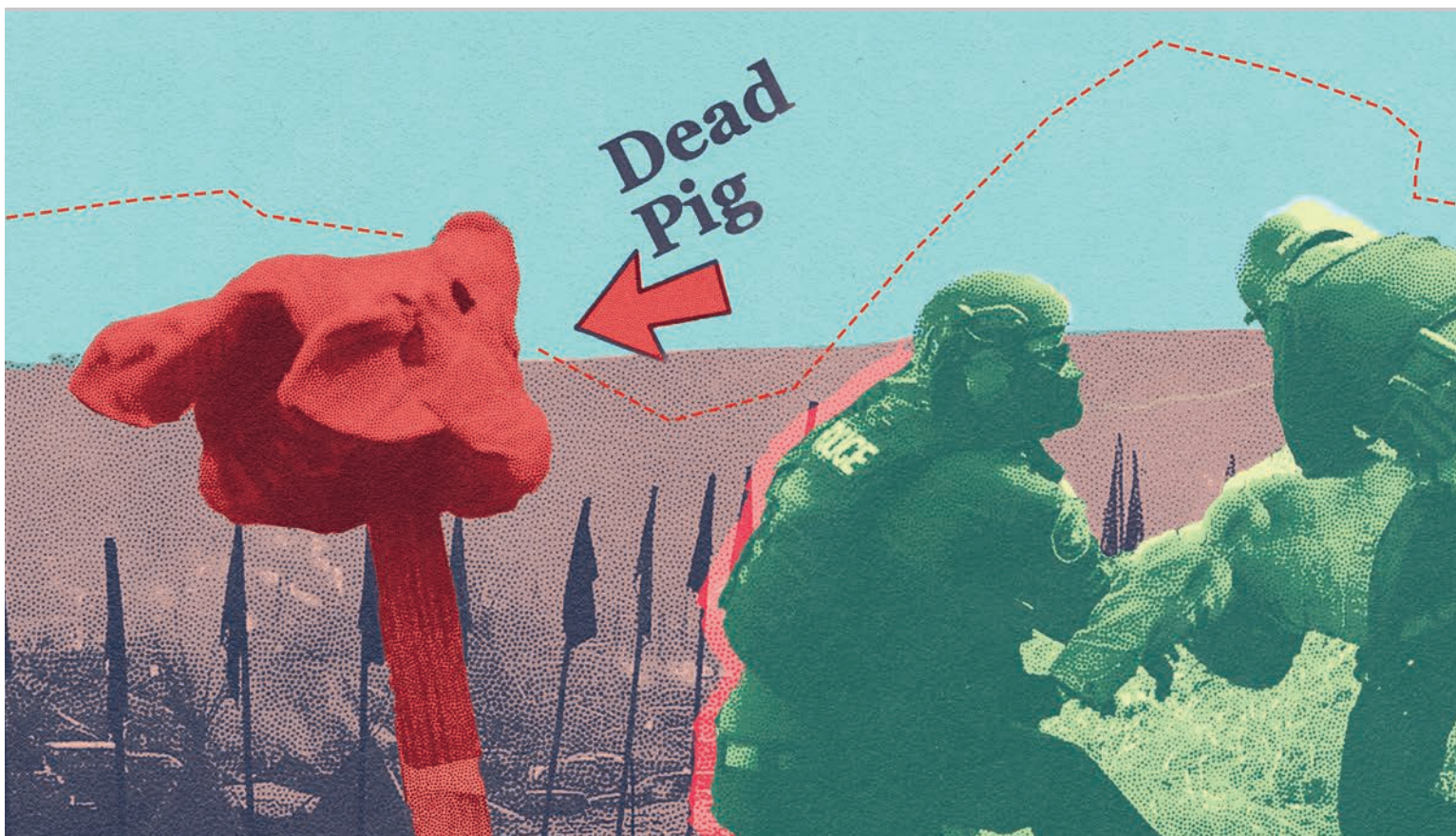
Locals responded. "Thank you Netizens for getting 'the rest of the story' out there!!!! North Dakotan's are so fed up with being invaded by the *violent* protesters," read one post that Thanksgiving week.

TigerSwan brought on Nick Johnson, who ran a "clickbait empire" that sought to generate traffic to clients' products by posting negative stories aimed at specific regions. Over the next several months, they put out a dizzying array of claims: Children were missing from the camps; there were rapes, and intoxicated people carrying STDs had been thrown out. Large amounts of meth and pain pills were being sold; gays and lesbians were verbally assaulted; people were carrying guns. Netizens routinely threw out the term "eco-terrorist."

They got support from the National Sheriffs' Association. One of Netizens' first videos featured mug shots of pipeline opponents arrested by law enforcement that had been sent to Rice directly by the association's public relations contractors. (See images at left.)

In the comment section, Netizens' administrators repeatedly denied that they were oil industry propagandists.

The action also began to move offline. TigerSwan infiltrators were entering the camps undercover, pretending to be water



protectors, and Rice regularly turned to other TigerSwan team members for intelligence to fuel his Facebook content.

LaCoe was in touch with another TigerSwan contractor, who offered tips on how to organize, and she communicated regularly with the police. Through the DefeND BisMan group, people joined rallies for police, monitored protesters' social media, and offered assistance to business owners who were feeling nervous.

LaCoe had become the public face of DefeND BisMan, and she faced blowback for it. She got death threats and was doxed and followed multiple times.

The experience went both ways. For tribal members from Standing Rock, visiting Bismarck and Mandan changed. "Things got really ugly when people were telling lies about the camp, the protectors, saying that they were dangerous," said Valerie Eagle Shield, an enrolled member of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation who was active in the camps.

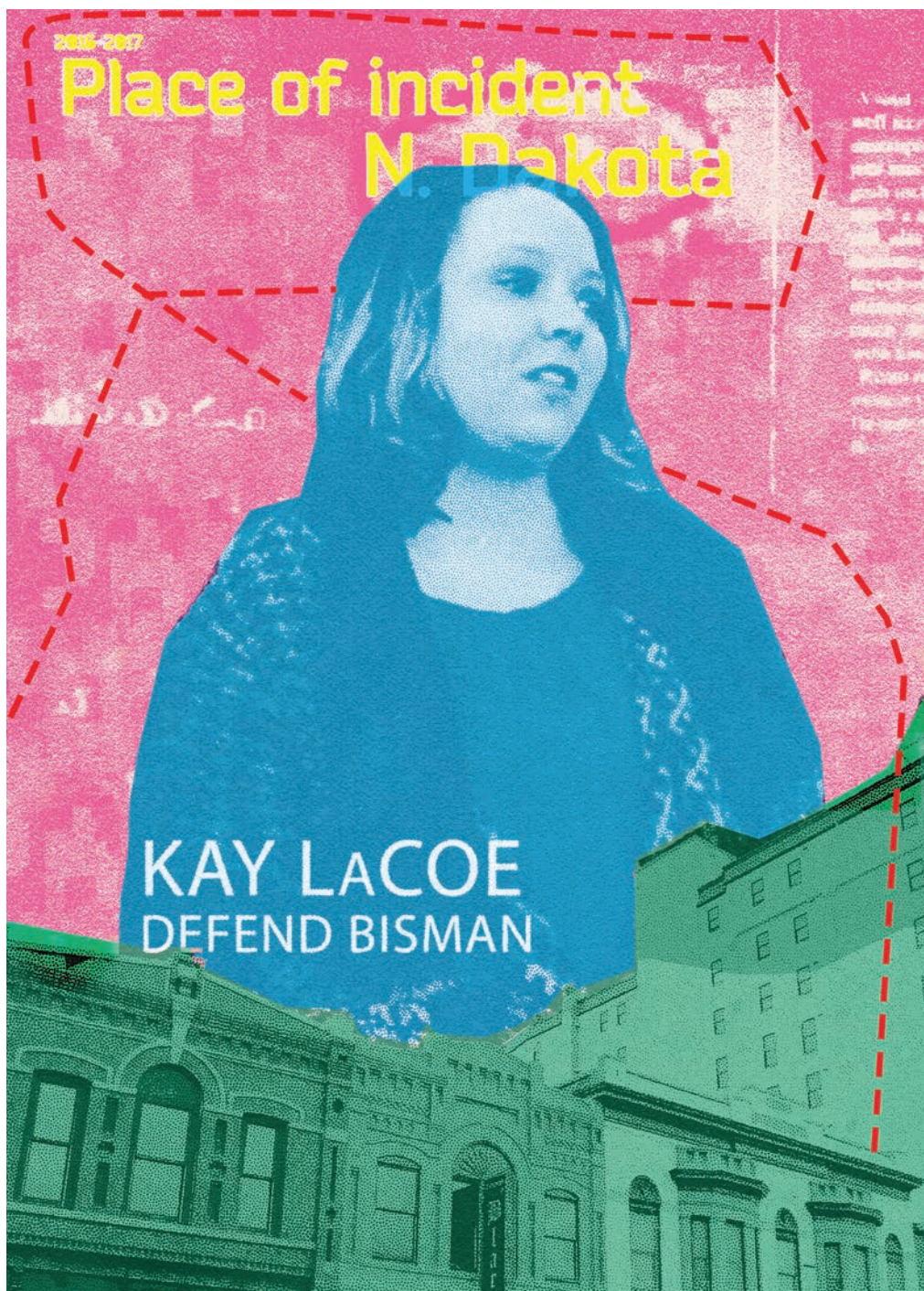
She and her husband, who were then in their mid-50s and mid-60s, respectively,

"They took regular situations where people were struggling, and where people were trying to do good things and do something they've never done before, and they tried to make them look sinister."

were frequently watched when they visited local businesses and followed as they drove between Bismarck and their home on the reservation. "They would come up really fast on you and then just follow you," she recalled. "Even if you slowed way down, they'd stay behind you."

Just as things began to spiral, a major blizzard swept through the region starting on Dec. 5. Hundreds of protesters abruptly headed home.

Netizens' posts fed on the chaos. By the end of January, its content had shifted to asserting that the camp represented an impending environmental disaster, since people's belongings, abandoned and buried when the blizzard hit, could be caught up in spring flooding. When police evicted the last campers in late February, before the snow thawed, the mess left behind became one of Netizens' biggest stories yet, leaving an impression almost as lasting as the pig's head.



The water protectors dispersed. Many headed home. Some moved to a handful of tiny encampments established throughout the region to promote healing or prepare for future fights. Many movement members were reeling from PTSD and the infighting nurtured by months spent under heavy police and private security pressure.

Most of LaCoe's contact with Rice

happened after the North Dakota camps closed. At the end of February, someone sent her a Facebook message under the name Al Netizen. The Netizens team was headed to North Dakota to make a mini documentary that would provide a counter to water protectors' narratives. He asked if LaCoe could connect them with some locals, and she did.

The result was a 52-minute documen-

tary called *#NoDAPL: The Rise and Fall of Standing Rock*. Released in late March, it featured police officers, locals and a Standing Rock tribal member who didn't like the protests. LaCoe was in it, too.

"Wow. Propaganda," she said, looking back. "It's got that 'message from President Snow' vibe to it," referring to the unsubtle propaganda efforts depicted in the dystopian film *The Hunger Games*. But back then, LaCoe didn't really care.

"Some of us felt legitimized — that we were right to care about our community, that we were right to be against these outside detractors," she said. "By a weird twist of fate, it was outside influences legitimizing our efforts."

The people of Bismarck and Mandan were becoming more than just the targets of the propaganda; they were also its mouthpieces.

BY APRIL OF 2017, pipeline construction was nearly complete, and the pipeline opponents camping in North Dakota were long gone. However, a small group of water protectors had moved two states down the pipeline's path to rural Iowa and formed a tiny resistance camp that they called Little Creek. Another group, organized by the nonprofit Bold Iowa, prepared to embark on a march from the camp across central Iowa, intended to bridge divides over how to address the climate crisis.

Two days before they set off, a post on Netizens for Progress and Justice announced a new Facebook page, DefendIowa. "A small town in Iowa County has been declared the new home for a cell of leftist protesters," it said, referring to Little Creek camp. "Don't let them grow roots. Just ask the folks in North Dakota," said an accompanying video with the hashtag #IowaBeware. In the comments, administrators pointed to the documentary in which LaCoe appeared.

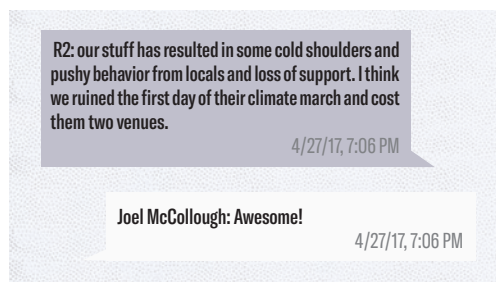
As the marchers walked, drivers buzzed them and gave them the finger. After they settled into their campsite, cars slowly circled them, setting off firecrackers. Someone parked a Jeep flying Confederate and American flags at the edge of their spot. People with Bold Iowa had been organizing to stop the pipeline as long as anyone in North Dakota. They told documentary filmmaker Ralph King they'd

never seen anything like the backlash they were experiencing.

In another surprise, the next morning the Jeep's owner, Darrin Ehret, approached the group to apologize. The filmmaker captured the exchange. "We were told you guys were going to come over and burn flags, that kind of stuff," Ehret said. "I prayed about that last night and just really felt that I was wrong."

In an interview in King's film *Crossing the Divide*, Ehret pointed to a Facebook video. "We're a typical Iowa town that everybody likes to keep to themselves. You just kind of connect on Facebook and see what's going on," he explained. Based on what he'd seen in the video, he was anticipating a bunch of degenerates.

That was the reaction Rice was hoping for. In a WhatsApp chat released via a records request, he celebrated his success in disrupting the march and described how he hoped to "unravel" the relationship between Ehret and the group.



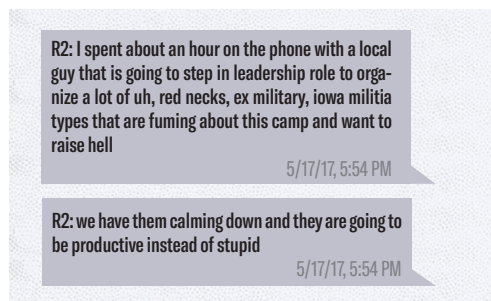
Earlier that month, one of Rice's bosses at TigerSwan had put the propagandist on a chat with Joel McCollough, who had been hanging out undercover with Iowa pipeline opponents for months. More than any other document, Rice and McCollough's chat records reveal the digital influence mercenaries' intentions: They sought to divide people, and they did.

The infiltrator told the propagandist who was bickering, or who was the subject of local rumors. Rice's team then used the information to develop Facebook videos where Rice personally posed as an amateurish newscaster, sometimes using the name "Allen."

He also pushed to move the Facebook drama into real life. LaCoe received another direct message from Al Netizen, asking her to reach out to the fiancée of one of

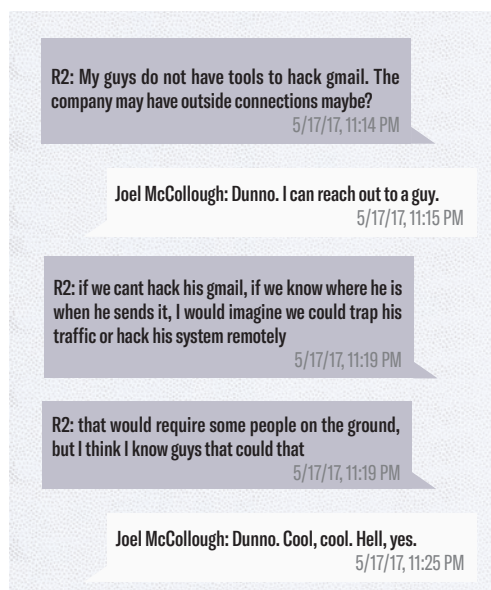
the Little Creek campers and tell her about LaCoe's bad experience with Dakota Access Pipeline opponents.

In the WhatsApp chat, Rice said he believed they could shut down the Little Creek camp entirely. He worked to foster a local countermovement.



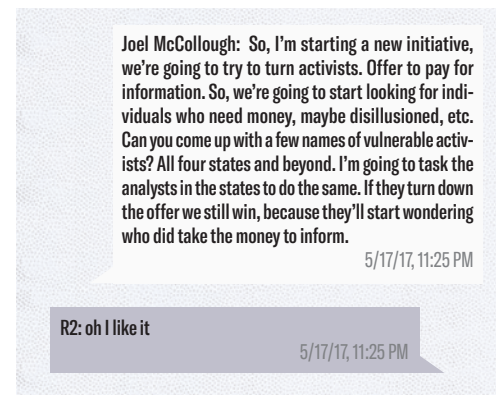
In turn, McCollough suggested Rice help him with interventions that bordered on the illegal — like hacking into a pipeline opponent's email account.

At other points, McCollough suggested the duo spread a rumor that another pipeline opponent was having an extramarital affair and proposed that they empty her bank account. "I'm not THAT good," Rice replied.



Rice, TigerSwan and Energy Transfer did not respond to requests for comment. McCollough declined to answer questions.

There's one plot from McCollough that was apparently carried to fruition. In the chat, he proposed they bribe pipeline opponents directly for information.



McCollough figured that even if people said no to the bribes, the question alone would seed distrust. He was right.

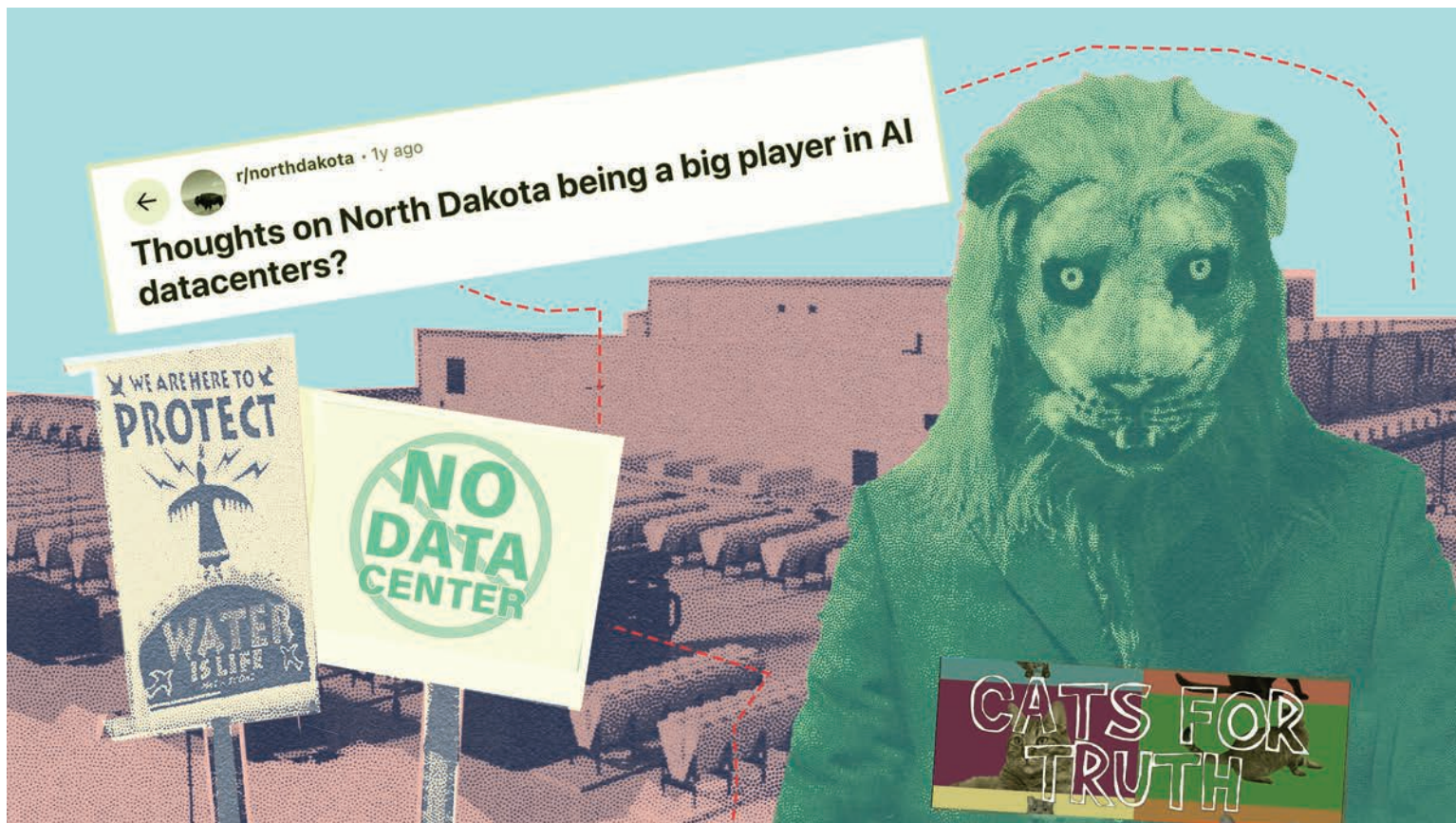
That summer, Chris Truitt, who'd been camp chef for several months, heard from a guy who offered him \$100 for the "real story" of Little Creek Camp. "I needed money at the time," he said. "They were playing a game, so I was trying to play a game back." So he went for it, but said he provided nothing very detailed or damning.

Around that time, Rice and his team were involved in new pages aimed at locals in other states where Energy Transfer had pipeline construction projects, including Pennsylvania and Louisiana. Then there were the more outlandish efforts, like a page called "Cats for Truth," which featured unidentifiable narrators wearing giant cat or unicorn masks, and a site called *Black Badger Report*, styled like an investigative news site.

In August, *Black Badger Report* published what the authors claimed to be a leaked story from inside the Little Creek camp. It described the experiences of a woman who had faced unwanted advances from two members of the camp who had been drinking. The site said the authors had paid a source inside the camp for the information. To this day, Truitt swears that information didn't come from him.

Sikowis Nobiss, who is Plains Cree and Saulteaux and who helped start Little Creek camp, said that TigerSwan's propaganda efforts caused harm. "They took regular situations where people were struggling, and where people were trying to do good things and do something they've never done before, and they tried to make them look sinister."

The impacts lingered even after the mercenaries moved on. "It's long-term mental health issues on people, making some of us



more paranoid, causing division,” she said. “Even if it’s just between two people — that’s two people that could have been friends for life, but they ruin that.”

EVENTUALLY, RICE AND JOHNSON lost traction. Rice returned to North Dakota, and took several local residents out for drinks, urging them to take their organizing further. “It is not outside the realm of possibility to, like, start a nonprofit. We came up with an acronym a couple weeks ago — it was Moms Against Violent Activists,” Rice said in a leaked recording of the meeting, published by *Type Investigations* and *The Intercept*. “You could probably get anonymous donations from interested parties. Cough — oil — cough.”

They drank his free drinks, then blew him off. They were over it.

Around the same time, Johnson used an actor to play a local in a series of video posts. In one of the videos, the actor introduced himself as Josh Baker, a Pennsylvania resident upset about anti-pipeline camps. In a second video, posted on Louisiana First, the same actor, wearing the

“You could probably get anonymous donations from interested parties. Cough — oil — cough.”

same clothing, introduced himself as Brent Williamson, a Louisiana citizen concerned about protesters. It was sloppy, and Facebook users called it out.

Invoices that were released years later in a court case said that TigerSwan paid Johnson \$122,279 between November 2016 and September 2017 for “promotion and content creation, social media monitoring,” through a company called Cedar Fork Partners. Johnson asked the company to reimburse him \$30 for the cat masks and \$25 for a payment to an “Iowa leaker.” A “task order” from TigerSwan described Rice as the project manager.

Both of the propagandists returned to their long-term projects. Johnson cultivated a career as a YouTube travel influencer.

He’d learned long ago that negativity sells on social media, and his most popular videos have titles like *These Homeless Camps in California are Beyond Belief*, and *Immigrants are Taking Over Pennsylvania Now. Everyone Here is Freaking Out*. Immediately before and after the 2024 election, the content shifted notably toward MAGA. Johnson didn’t reply to questions about whether he accepted money from the campaign.

Rice refocused on XR, combining augmented reality and virtual reality. He spent years developing a “metaverse” called Omniscap, where our digital avatars can buy and sell things. He compared it to the virtual universe in the novel *Ready Player One*, set in a world wrecked by an energy crisis and climate change.

In a 2024 interview with the media outlet *CoinGeek*, Rice acknowledged the dystopian possibilities of his digital realities. “My contribution to avoiding that is going to be letting people drop 3D poop emojis on their oppressors,” he said.

The thing about Robert Rice, though, is that his experience is in working *for* the oppressors. A version of Rice’s poop emoji vision has already come to fruition — except the other way around. In October 2025, on Truth Social, Donald Trump posted an AI video of himself wearing a crown and piloting a fighter jet. The jet swooped over a crowd of protesters in a city that looked like New York, dropping graphic volumes of liquid poop on the smiling crowd.

The Omniscape project eventually fell apart. One day, out of the blue, Rice announced to his workers that the project was out of money, according to Travis Ashcraft, who continued to work for Rice for free for a little while after that. “I’m not saying he’s a silver-tongued devil, but he can talk people into stuff,” Ashcraft said. “I’ve been played, you know?” Still, he didn’t think Rice would do anything to intentionally harm anyone.

Drilled and *High Country News* asked LaCoe what she felt about TigerSwan targeting her group. “That we got played — my words?” LaCoe said she wasn’t convinced TigerSwan deserved credit for all of the community’s anger, but she acknowledged how powerful that kind of messaging could be. “What scares me, though, is, how do you use that power? Who are you going to manipulate next and to what end?”

Radicalization and extremism occur when people come to believe that the survival of their ingroup depends on hostility toward, or even elimination of, an outgroup, explained Forest. He saw that concept mirrored in the bar patrons’ statements about shooting pipeline protesters. “It’s a fantasy, but it’s still something that is a marker of the escalation,” he said.

Johnson and Cedar Fork Partners didn’t respond to requests for comment for this story.

LaCoe condemned the racism and violence people directed at protestors and said she wished that community leaders had stepped in to mend relationships after the protests. “I really hope that we can go forward as a community long into the

**“I really hope that we can go forward
as a community long into the future
and heal those scars, reconnect. I
truly believe that without negative
outside forces, we can do that.”**

future and heal those scars, reconnect. I truly believe that without negative outside forces, we can do that.”

Except Energy Transfer has never really stopped aiming propaganda at the Bismarck and Morton County area.

As Doug Hille, the rancher, put it, “All you have to do is go to Main Street, Mandan — take a look at all the money they donated for the park and to rebuild their library and a band shell.” He once watched Energy Transfer’s co-founder, Kelcy Warren, write a check on the spot for a new school for a community near his.

As the Greenpeace trial approached last year, residents of Morton County, including potential jurors, received unfamiliar newspapers on their doorsteps, containing articles reminding them of protest-related disruptions 10 years earlier. Pro-pipeline commercials played on television and YouTube. Documents traced a trail of money that seemed to link the newspapers to Warren; in a statement to another media outlet, Energy Transfer denied any connection to the company that produced the papers.

Meanwhile, Energy Transfer was shifting its investment strategy toward pipelines that supply fuel to data centers. Many of the people who led the fight to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline have shifted their attention in a similar direction.

“That’s actually the next battle that we’re fighting now is the billions of gallons of water that it takes to use AI,” said White. “AI helps the propaganda machine. And so it’s, like, never-ending. We don’t have the ability or the convenience, the luxury, to sit back and take the time to reflect, because then we’re on to the next thing.”

Last April, on the 10-year anniversary of the first No DAPL camp, a group of self-

described future water protectors spent Easter weekend at Standing Rock’s Prairie Knights Casino, training for the fights ahead and preparing for an informational data center hearing that the tribe had scheduled for later that week.

The future of data centers and of AI itself will hinge, once again, largely on who can tell their story most effectively. At the training, kids and grandmas drew four pictures: a place that meant something to them, a family tradition, an image showing how they’ve experienced the climate crisis and another of the future they hoped for. It was earnest armor for a new narrative war.

“We’re still living in environmental injustice,” said Doug Crow Ghost, director of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s Department of Water Resources. Even if a data center were banned on the reservation, he noted, it could still be built on treaty land right outside its borders, just like the Dakota Access Pipeline was.

Crow Ghost said that the 10-year anniversary of Standing Rock is not a moment of celebration. As for repair, it will remain difficult as long as the pipeline has permission to pump oil under the river. “We are in a movement, and we’re not even halfway anywhere,” he said. “The narrative is still being spun.” ☀

Alleen Brown is an independent investigative journalist. She writes the newsletter Eco Files, and also works as a senior editor for Drilled. She’s from St. Paul, Minnesota, and lives in Brooklyn.

Summer Ester Orr is a Honduran American artist and illustrator based in rural Colorado.

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IN THE MORNING, before sunrise, I pray with corn pollen in my right hand. The corn was harvested from red clay soil in the fields of the Zuni Mountains, where my Pueblo relatives live and pray in the same way. At an early age, I was taught that a corn-pollen prayer centers the belief that a person is exactly where they're supposed to be at any given time and place, creating a presence with all existence that is determined by the prayer itself. Land-based belief systems exist across the world, and this one, which is practiced in my Southwestern home, respects the notion that life is a constant path forward, and therefore you must set your path. Facing east toward the Sandia Mountains, I speak my gratitude for the morning and offer peaceful intentions for my day. I thank my grandparents and acknowledge their ancestors and the younger ancestors I knew and loved who are no longer in this moment to breathe the morning air with me. I toss the corn pollen at my feet, just as my relatives have done before me and like everyone who comes after me will do. We have done this since, well, forever.

Along the corn pollen trail, I met Deb Haaland, a Laguna and Jemez Pueblo relative who starts her days in a similar way. "I wake up every morning, and I recommit myself to the things that I was taught by my grandparents," Haaland told me in April outside an energy summit in Santa Fe. Her grandparents were contemporaries of my great-grandparents, all of them Pueblo people who shared the knowledge and lifeways that have led us to this moment today. Haaland, who made history during the Biden administration as the first Indigenous secretary of the Interior, has been on the road since 2025, zigzagging between rural New Mexican towns like

On the corn pollen trail with Deb Haaland

Talking politics and tribal sovereignty with New Mexico's (likely) next governor.

BY SHAUN GRISWOLD | PHOTOS BY CHARLES MONTROYA

Gallup and Shiprock and then back to politicking in Santa Fe before returning home to Albuquerque for the night. She credits her ancestors' resilience for where she is now: frontrunner in the gubernatorial race and leading the path for the United States through post-Trump reconstruction.

If Haaland wins, she will be New Mexico's third consecutive female governor and the first Native American to hold the office there. Many saw the Democratic primary as her biggest hurdle, but she won by 45 percentage points. She has championed a platform that expands public health care, strengthens state environmental regulations, increases the state minimum wage, leverages energy profits for progressive policies and advances tribal sovereignty.

In many ways, a Native American governor is a contradiction: The position owes its power to a tribal self-determination movement that is against racist state violence, and yet an Indigenous person in that role becomes a part of the very system that perfected that state violence. If she's elected, it will be Haaland's responsibility to manage relationships with the 23 tribal nations in the state, using tools like the New Mexico State-Tribal Collaboration Act of 2009 to work with state and tribal leaders on government policy.

The legislation requires state agencies to form working partnerships to negotiate their practices and policies with tribes in New Mexico. It's a bit like a state version of the trust and treaty obligations the federal government has with tribes, something Haaland knows intimately, first as a Pueblo woman and then as Interior secretary, where she demonstrated how someone with land-based beliefs could lead on federal land management.

This has put her exactly where she needs to be to advance tribal sovereignty within the United States. As the first Native American woman to be elected governor, Haaland would be continuing Pueblo leadership that pre-dates multiple colonial governments.

Along the trail, we met up several times to discuss her vision and plans for New Mexico. Our conversations below have been edited for length and clarity.

You've been on the campaign trail for more than a year now and have talked with voters about how pivotal this election is given what's going on nationally. What's it like to be here at this moment?

It's always exciting. ... Donald Trump took 3% of our voters in the last election, and I'm going to get those back. Donald Trump promised to lower costs

for people. He's not focused on that at all. He's making things more expensive, and at the same time, he's focused on terrorizing our neighborhoods and creating chaos all over, not just New Mexico but all over the country. So people want us to pay attention to the issues that affect them.

What do you have to consider when beginning conversations on tribal sovereignty with populations who are beginning to learn about it, or who are non-Native?

Pueblo Indians have been in the Rio Grande Valley since the late 1200s, sometimes migrating from other places in New Mexico. Their ancestral homeland is vast. Their tribal boundaries may not be vast, and in many instances, tribes have bought back land to add to their land base. Any corporation, project developer or emerging leader needs to know and understand that history.

(Tribes in New Mexico) have been taken advantage of through the many decades. And so, they're skeptical. It's up to (outsiders) to develop that relationship, make sure they are being transparent and upfront about all of the information, so that a relationship of trust can develop, and perhaps tribes will get on board with those opportunities and move forward with them.

Is it possible to build a relationship of trust with people who may be completely opposed to tribal sovereignty principles?

Tribes deserve respect, first of all, and they deserve to be a part of something that is affecting their ancestral homeland. Maybe there's a transmission line or whatever it is that's going through, maybe it doesn't even touch their land, but if they can see it from their land, they need to be brought into the project.



“(Tribes) have been taken advantage of through the many decades. And so, they’re skeptical. It’s up to (outsiders) to develop that relationship.”

Shaun Griswold speaks with Deb Haaland at the rodeo on Independence Day in Clayton, New Mexico.

Are you noticing now that in rooms with large business leaders or small local business leaders that they understand the pronouncement of tribal capital?

Yes, I do. Talking to industry leaders on the campaign trail, one of the first things they talk about with me is that they have somebody who is reaching out to tribes, somebody

who is collaborating with tribes. In New Mexico, we have a State-Tribal Collaboration Act. We recognize the value that tribes bring to our state, and we also recognize the responsibility of our state to ensure that we are respecting tribes — their sovereignty, their land base, what they bring to our economy, all of those things.

I’m curious how you consider water use and management in a state that has to perpetually consider drought conditions, but needs more people?

If industry wants to move to New Mexico, (it) needs to be sustainable. Water should be prioritized for people.

There’s been a federal destruction of the Environmental Protection Act (EPA). Is this an opportunity for states like New Mexico to fill that gap?

We absolutely have to fill the gap. We don’t have a choice. The federal government is firing people, they’re cutting all these programs, but (it) still has an

“We have to hire more lawyers so that we can sue the federal government when (it) needs to be sued for encroaching on our state sovereignty, or ruining our environment. We need to sue the federal government when it’s taking funds away from people who are promised benefits.”



obligation to our state, and I'm going to do everything I can to make (it) live up to that. We can't just let our environment go by the wayside because Donald Trump has decided that he wants to pocket a bunch of money.

How would you as governor work with state agencies, the attorney general, or even the Legislature, to sue major companies, or to work toward settlements for claims on behalf of New Mexicans who were harmed?

We have to hire more lawyers so that we can sue the federal government when (it) needs to be sued for encroaching on our state sovereignty, or ruining our environment. We need to sue the federal government when (it's)

taking funds away from people who are promised benefits. I think that we really need to build that out, because New Mexico has to press these issues with the federal government in a big way. I think that's how we do it, through the courts.

What could you do as governor to ensure that the history curriculum about the federal Indian Boarding School era is taught in New Mexico public schools?

Native American History is American history. Every single American in this country owns that history — that terrible, violent, horrible federal Indian Boarding School history. Let's see how we can make sure that this is something that all children know

and understand, because boarding schools happened right here in New Mexico.

My grandparents were put on a train and sent to St. Catherine's here in Santa Fe. My great-grandfather was only able to visit my grandmother twice in the five years she was separated from her family, because all he had was a horse and a wagon to travel. This is New Mexico history. Fort Union, which is north of Las Vegas, was a way station, and they would take Native children to that place and shave their heads, burn their clothes, put them in uniforms, and send them on a train to whatever boarding school they felt they needed to go to. New Mexico has a deep history when it comes to federal Indian boarding schools.

We have an important state; we have an important history. It's a history that every New Mexican should know about. We all have an obligation to that. ✨

Shaun Griswold is from the high-elevation deserts in New Mexico. They're a sovereign citizen from the Pueblos of Laguna, Jemez and Zuni who writes about Indigenous people living with colonialism.

Charles Montoya (Tamaya/Walatowa Pueblos) is a New Mexico-based analog film photographer. Montoya documents everyday life, community and cultural identity. His work has been featured in both local and national publications.



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LIFEWAYS

An Inuit woman explores living in direct relationship with the land, water and plant and animal relatives of Alaska.



Sila decides

In Inupiaq, when the weather talks, you listen.

BY LAURELI IVANOFF

IN WINTER, Papa would stand at the north-facing window of his home, looking to the open sky and his neighbor's sleeping garden. "Alapaa," he would say: "It likes to be cold," in Inupiaq. He was talking about Sila, the weather.

And on January days during my childhood, when we all gathered for supper and the house shook from coastal storms and the snow berms throughout town grew and grew over the season, Papa would say something like "Piqsiguktuq," to my Gram, mom, aunts and uncles.

In Inupiaq, piqsiq translates to "stormy." The syllable *guk* means "likes to" and *tuq* signifies "it or they." The string of sounds sounded familiar and comfortable, but I didn't understand that it translates to "It likes to be stormy."

Because Papa and Gram were punished, physically and psychologically, for speaking Inupiaq in school classrooms as children, they did not want my mom and her siblings speaking the language and experiencing the deep and unjust shame and pain they carried. Mom and her siblings understood Inupiaq but couldn't speak it. I grew up not speaking or understanding it. As a kid wearing braids and bobbles, I didn't have the knowledge that our language is imbued with the Indigenous understanding that the weather, Sila, is living with us. And Sila is boss.

Papa was born with this understanding. In fact, he understood the weather so well he was a traditional weather forecaster. I imagine he learned the signals from his dad, who learned them from his father and the generations before him who made *Uᅑalaᅑliq*, the southernmost Inupiaq settlement, their homelands. What settlers changed to Unalakleet. He would stand at the beach, look out at the ocean, the current, the clouds and the color and movement of it all, and let Sila decide our days, our week ahead. If wind was coming, we couldn't hunt *ugruk*. If Sila said "rain," we waited to fish for humpies until a good stretch of clear skies arrived for days of hanging and drying. Sila told us, and continues to decide for us, our activities.

Papa was a slight, slender and sinewy man with a full head of gray hair and browline

glasses. He moved with purpose, was comfortable with silence, never complained, and always seemed to look ahead. He wore scratchy wool plaid button-up shirts, chewed snuff, and smelled like earth, fresh air and no nonsense. He had the most wrinkled face I'd ever seen, sported a crewcut, had large ears that stuck out, and was the type of man who, when he talked, people listened.

We often ate supper at Papa and Gram's house. All of us. Aunts, uncles, all the cousins. So many that there weren't enough chairs, and Papa or Dad would haul a bunch of white 5-gallon buckets from the back porch to fit as many as could sit at the kitchen table. I never wanted to sit on one of those buckets. My legs

*Our language is imbued
with the Indigenous
understanding that the
weather, Sila, is living
with us. And Sila is boss.*



were too short for my feet to reach the floor, and the raised rims on the lids hurt my thighs.

On those cold or stormy winter days, Gram would stand at the oven and stir a pot of fresh caribou soup. The yeasty smell of baking bread wafted through their small home and softened the talk, as we knew we'd eat fresh bread slathered with Crisco very soon. The oven and all our bodies warmed the room. Some of us young cousins stole away to play in the back bedroom, reserved for grandkids who lived with them, to escape boring adult conversation and the stuffiness. I didn't know it then, but those conversations I passively heard while thinking of something to do shape my values and mindset today.

THIS TIME OF YEAR, communities throughout coastal Western and Northern Alaska are thinking of and preparing for the coming fall storms. When I was a child, we experienced

fall storms, but nothing like what we're seeing today. I grew up hearing about a major flood in the 1960s. My dad's dad's house floated off its foundation and landed in the spot where it still stands, where my uncle and auntie now live. When it landed there, my papa jovially asked the man across the road, "Can I be your neighbor?"

Last fall, Typhoon Halong started in the central Pacific Ocean, southeast of Japan. The storm traveled north and hit Alaska's entire western coastline, flooding and damaging 45 communities and forcing the total relocation of Kipnuk and Kwigillingok residents, turning them into climate refugees. In response, the governor declared a state disaster emergency, and the president approved a federal disaster declaration.

These floods used to occur once every 100 years or so. Today, the fall storms that bring high water are a threat every year. I chatted with Alaska's leading climatologist, Rick Thoman, about the frequency of storms. He said the oceans are warming. Glaciers and ice sheets are melting. "They combined to produce a double whammy driving sea-level rise," he said. "Coastal erosion is aggravated by the longer sea-ice-free season. Warmer oceans can increase also the intensity of storms." That was likely a factor in the ferocity of the Halong flooding. He said permafrost is thawing only a few feet above sea level in places, and the sinking and settling land can cause catastrophic flooding where it might otherwise have been minor.

As we brace for whatever Sila may bring to us this fall, I often wonder what Papa would say today, looking out of his window. I wonder what he'd think when it rains for days on end and we're unable to dry our fish like we used to on the fish rack. How we are now drying our fish inside empty bedrooms, garages or hallways, using fans. I wonder what he'd say about the ocean eating the coastline where he and Gram camped during fishing season. I wonder if, standing on the sandy beach, looking west to the horizon, he could see the messages in the signals and predict the weather like he used to. I wonder what kind of conversations I would hear, sitting at the kitchen table. I wonder what Sila would tell him. ☀

Laureli Ivanoff is an Inupiaq writer and journalist from Unalakleet, Alaska, now based in Anchorage.

Fred W. Paniptchuk, "Papa," at camp near the mouth of the Unalakleet River. **Ivanoff family photo by Karen Erickson**



REPORTAGE

The animals are standing by

Conversations and kinship with
the creatures in our midst.

BY PAM HOUSTON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KATE SAMWORTH

MY HUSBAND, MIKE, is retired now, but he served the public for 41 years in the U.S. Forest Service. Being retired, he did not receive the now-famous “fork in the road” email, in which lifelong public servants were asked to give up their jobs or risk being fired, but it hurt him, I know, to think that 41 years could be disregarded so utterly, that

many of his still-employed friends were told unilaterally by the richest man in the world that their projects were expendable, that their work — including many scientific studies that would now be abandoned after years of collecting data — had no value at all.

We live in the Rio Grande National Forest, the forest where Mike served. We look up into that forest from every window of our house. Yesterday, while Mike sat at the kitchen table eating his birthday blueberry pancakes, 150 elk came down out of the forest and into our horse pasture. It is my unwavering belief they came, perhaps among other reasons, to remind him that the work he did was valuable, and to wish him a happy birthday.

ON THE DAYS I'M IN DESPAIR about the way our elected officials are positioning BIPOC people for erasure, the way they're setting up trans kids to be the victims of hate crimes, the way they're pushing their hypocritical and hateful agenda to the point where they'll get to achieve their primary goal: the thrill of using lethal force on their own citizenry, I follow my feet out to the corral to hang for a few hours with the horses. More often than

not, Raj, the horse I rescued on Election Day 2024, or sometimes Ben, the horse I rescued during high COVID, will place his forehead right against my forehead and keep it there for a while. We will push on each other very lightly. I think of this as a kind of mind meld, a mechanism by which Raj pulls all the distress out of my head and flicks it away with his lush auburn tail, meanwhile transmitting joyful present-based thoughts into the empty spaces those bad thoughts have left behind. *Can you feel the sun warming your coat? Isn't the sky an astounding blue today? How lucky that this alfalfa is of such high quality! If you scratch on my withers, I will wrap my giant neck around you like a shield.*





YEARS AGO, I WAS HIKING with a friend in Arizona, and we came upon a rattlesnake, not stretched across the trail but curled lazily 10 feet downslope beside it.

"Hello, beautiful!" I said, stepping higher off the opposite side of the trail to make a wider berth while my friend made noises of distress behind me. The snake watched us pass with not a lot of interest, then lay its diamond head back down on its shimmering brown and gold body. Twenty minutes later, I could no longer ignore the fact that my friend had stopped speaking to me. "You OK?" I asked.

"I can't believe," she said, hissing a little herself, "that you gave that *thing* a compliment."

Did I smile? Giggle a little? Even in those days, I thought everyone who knew me knew I talked to animals, though I didn't in those days tell too many people how often they talked back. I can report, with lingering wonder, that my complimenting the snake brought about the end of that friendship, which had not been long, nor particularly deep.

I *have* always spoken, aloud, to every animal I encounter, be it hummingbird, Arctic fox, alligator or grizzly bear, sometimes out of delight, sometimes out of fear, but mostly because it would seem rude not to. I speak to humans on deserted streets and dark alleys for some of the same reasons. At least one of us, in any scenario, is likely to be more frightened than the other. Speaking nearly always alleviates that fear. The bear chuffs, the moose snorts, the beaver slaps its tail, the redbill cries, the grasshopper clatters, the human says, *Hello, beautiful* — one being encountering another, acknowledging the other exists.

I also believe in my ability to call wild animals to me, not all animals and not at all times, but the number of times I've thought *hmmm, this looks like excellent moose terri-*

tory, right before a big bull pops out of the trees, or *it's been a long time since I have seen an eagle over the ranch*, only to look up and have one appear, or *it would sure brighten my mood on this beach walk to see a harbor seal or a humpback or a reef shark* seconds before one emerges, seems too large to be chalked up to coincidence. Since lockdown, when briefly, the skyways and byways were largely, if temporarily, returned to the animals, I have felt the animals calling *me* back out into the open. I have felt their curiosity as they've watched me encounter my post-lockdown life.

Among COVID-19's many teachings was the way it brought us face to face with our creaturely selves, reminding us that we, too, have animal bodies, bodies that need food and toilet paper and lungs clear enough to breathe. Our loss of movement gave us access to and empathy for wild creatures' incessant loss of habitat, and our adaptations during the pandemic helped us understand the animals' continuous imperative to adapt themselves to us. For all of these reasons, COVID-19 could have and should have been an inflection point, a moment we decided clean air and water was better than rich men serving each other exotic animals on platters. I believe the animals were hoping, collectively, for something like that. So I made my own inflection point. I would dedicate the rest of my life to listening to the animals. I realized, with something like true clarity, that I have always been most interested in what *they* have to say.



ON THE DAY AFTER ELECTION DAY 2024, I was opening the gate between the corral and the pasture when the reddest red fox I have ever seen found himself trapped between a rock and a hard place in the corner where the corral meets the yard. Our 1-year-old Wheaten terrier, Bodhi, has gotten

over-curious about the horses, and our mini-donk, Isaac, would like nothing better than to teach him a lesson in etiquette, so we've put up new chicken-wire fencing along the barbed wire fence that separates the pasture and the yard. The red fox's normal escape route was suddenly not available to him, and so he found himself with me on one side, the dogs on the other, the horses in between and no available holes in the fence to slip through.

"You're OK," I said, by way of greeting, though I couldn't be certain it was true.

Everybody froze for a second to gauge everyone else's intentions, even, luckily, Bodhi, and then the fox made the best decision possible and scooted right between my legs.

I spent the rest of the afternoon reading stories from many traditions about foxes, trying to interpret the visitation. I am still thinking about all of that, but I believe the main thing he came to remind me about was stealth.

ELK, HORSE, RATTLESNAKE, FOX. The animals know, especially now, how frightened we are, as we face together the destruction of the planet we call our home. They understand, even when we fail to, that we have long been and still are kin, and they are trying to help us, as kin do for one another, I am sure of that all the way down to my bones.

The owl calling *who cooks for you?* The ermine who pokes his head out from behind a hay bale, not once but six times, because each time elicits human laughter. The aging wolfhound who stands in the middle of the kitchen at precisely 4 p.m. (in spite of her fear of linoleum) to remind me it's time for her afternoon cheese. The osprey turning lazy circles above my pasture. They are, every one of them, as expendable to the current administration as we ourselves are, every one of us. So, we must bear witness to their brief, beautiful lives as they bear witness to ours. We are in this together, all of us creatures. Let us honor one another's existence, and fight for each other to be free. ☀

Pam Houston is the author of two novels, two short story collections and three books of nonfiction. She lives in Colorado and teaches at UC Davis and the Institute of American Indian Arts. This story is excerpted from her book Animals Taught Me Everything, due out in October from Torrey House Press and used by permission.

OREGON

Every night, they descend upon downtown Portland like mysterious black-cloaked characters from an old-fashioned Gothic novel — and for over a century, naturalists have wondered why. The Bird Alliance of Oregon believes that the crows — over 20,000 of them — converge during fall and winter for “information sharing,” i.e., at times caw-cophonous corvid conversations. We suspect their group chats involve subjects like where to find the best place to eat or which neighborhoods to avoid, all discussed in their customary caws, clicks and rattles. As caw-inspiring as this Crowpaloosa/Crowchella may seem, there is an inevitable downside: bird poo, gobs and gobs of it. After trying street cleaners, including the impressive-sounding Poopmaster 6000, Portland recruited some trained hawks. Overseen by the Bird Alliance, the “crow patrol” monitors the streets at twilight, and the licensed falconers send their hawks into the trees, like flying bouncers enforcing last call. In response, the crows make a discreet exit, *Discover Wildlife* reports. “Their very presence dissuades the corvids from hanging around.” Now if we could just find a way to dissuade ICE ...

Elsewhere in Portland, locals have other problems. File this next story under “awkward conversations we’d like to avoid.” Imagine knocking on your neighbor’s door, not to, say, borrow a cup of sugar, but rather, ahem, to complain about the unpleasant odor wafting from the tiny home parked on that neighbor’s property. This was the situation for one fed-up couple living in Portland’s Parkrose Heights neighborhood. John and Trudy Benjamin told *KOIN* that the smell coming from their neighbor’s tiny home “is so



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

bad, they’re forced to wear respirators on their own property.” And they’re suing to the tune of \$200,000 for “the distress caused by the odor.” The problem began last year, after the neighbors wheeled a tiny home onto their property, and a resident moved in. According to the lawsuit, the tiny home contains a chemical toilet that’s not connected to the city’s sewer system. After repeated attempts to communicate with the neighbor about the smell with no resolution, the Benjamins filed a complaint with the city, which found the tiny home to be in violation of city code. But the problem persisted, and the Benjamins say the smell has resulted in respiratory illness, nausea, light-headedness and headaches. Good fences may make good neighbors,

as the saying goes, but apparently, a good septic and sewage system can also work wonders.

CALIFORNIA

There’s a new sea-lebrity making waves at Pier 39 on San Francisco’s Fisherman’s Wharf: Chonkers, a 2,000-pound Stellar sea lion. But just what makes this dock-lounging, barking, yawning pinniped stand out among the many dock-lounging, barking, yawning pinnipeds? People have peeped at San Francisco’s sea lions since forever, so why’s everyone “bonkers for Chonkers?” Well, for one thing, Chonkers is much bigger than the others. Stellar sea lions (*Eumetopias jubatus*), and the California version (*Zalophus californianus*), are two distinct species that differ, most notably

in size. Stellars weigh up to 2,500 pounds and measure up to 10 feet long, while their California cousins generally weigh 900 pounds and reach lengths of about 7 feet. Sue Muzzin, a spokesperson for Pier 39, told *SFGATE* that Pier 39’s webcam typically gets about 2,000 visits a day, but after Chonkers’ made national news, viewing jumped up to 15,000. A stuffed animal in Chonkers’ image has been selling out, and perhaps he’ll achieve the legendary status of Humphrey the whale or San Francisco’s wild parrots.

THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

For anyone looking to “visit” with a deceased loved one, air their feelings or express their grief, a wind phone can help provide the closure they’re seeking. *What are wind phones?* you ask. They’re rotary or push-button phones placed in secluded natural areas like parks or along walking trails or overlooking a beach. They’re not connected to any actual phone line; instead, people use them to “call” their deceased loved ones and carry on one-way conversations, *Smithsonian* magazine reports. “For many, it is a deeply moving, life-affirming experience.” There’s a list of wind phones posted on the Pacific Northwest Bucket List Facebook page: Grayland, Washington, for example, has one overlooking the ocean, while others are at Tacoma’s McKinley Park, Grandview Forest Park in Gig Harbor and O.O. Denny Park in Kirkland, Washington. Altogether, there are around 200 wind phones currently available throughout the U.S., and even more around the world. According to Taryn Lindhorst, professor of social work at the University of Washington, “There is comfort to be found through a one-way call.” ☼



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#IAM THE WEST

CRUZ SALAS (THEY/THEM)

Barber

Portland, Oregon

The barber school I went to was in downtown San Diego, and the haircuts were \$5, so affordable that it really served that community. I was always pretty quiet, but it got to the point where I was doing like seven or eight haircuts a day. I was, like, "Oh, I really have to talk to people for anywhere from seven to 10 hours straight!" That's the only taxing part about my job, the social aspect. It can be a very intense thing to be in control of — how someone is going to look, and how they're going to feel about themselves. Sometimes their haircut is that deep. It depends on the person, how nervous they are, how much they want to open up, but a lot of times, I have some very heartfelt conversations. It feels really good to see how pumped they are once they get the mirror and they see how they are, looking at their new haircut.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
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