

DESERT REPORT

BY JORDAN JOAQUIN

Preserving Our Ancestral Lands

A personal perspective on the Kw'tsán National Monument

As the sun rises over the vast deserts of Imperial County, California, its golden rays illuminate a landscape that holds the very essence of my people. For centuries, the Quechan people have walked these lands, our feet tracing the paths of our ancestors, our hearts beating in rhythm with the desert winds. This land is not just our home; it is a living, breathing part of who we are. It carries our history, our stories, and our spirits. These lands also continue to be a vital part of our community today – not only for the cultural significance, but also for the great ecological value they hold.

To the Quechan people, the land is more than just

a physical space – it is a living part of us. As original stewards of this land, we have asked President Biden to help us protect this sacred landscape by designating it as Kw'tsán National Monument.

Our proposed Kw'tsán National Monument would cover over 380,000 acres, incorporating key landmarks including Avikwalal (Pilot Knob), Palo Verde Peak, and the Indian Pass Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). It would also include Singer Geoglyphs (ACEC), Buzzards Peak, and Picacho Peak Wilderness areas. These are not just geographical features – they are cultural spaces that hold our history and the spirits of our ancestors.

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All the photos are of lands within the proposed Kw'tsán National Monument. They were taken by Bob Wick and are used courtesy of the campaign to Protect Kw'tsán National Monument.

Amargosa Valley Mineral Withdrawal

The time has come

In the heart of the Amargosa River watershed, on Death Valley's eastern shoulder, a coalition of Tribes, conservation non-profits, and local government leaders has rallied around a singular idea: that life and water in these arid desert lands are the same. This is a direct response to an escalating interest in mineral exploration and lithium extraction on the doorstep of Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, and near the doorsteps of homes and businesses in the nearby communities of western Nevada. Born out of concern for impact to groundwater that sustains the human and wildlife communities near Ash Meadows, the coalition is urging leaders within the Department of the Interior and Congress to take decisive action. The call has been issued for a *withdrawal of public lands from new mineral claims and exploration* to enhance safeguards for this exceptionally sensitive cultural and ecological landscape.

The road to an Amargosa Valley mineral withdrawal began in the summer of 2023, when a proposed lithium exploration project on the boundary of the Ash Meadows Refuge first came to light. Ash Meadows is part of the ancestral homelands of the Timbisha Shoshone and Southern Paiute Tribes, and remains a culturally and spiri-

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tually significant site. Located just outside of Death Valley National Park, Ash Meadows includes 24,000 acres of springs, seeps, and wetlands in one of the hottest and driest deserts on Earth. Home to at least 26 endemic species that live nowhere else, Ash Meadows is a critically important biodiversity hotspot and a designated Wetland of International Importance under the United Nations.

Canadian mining company Rover Critical Minerals (then named Rover Metals) submitted an application to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) seeking to conduct a lithium exploration project that included drilling up to 30 boreholes to a depth of 300 feet on the northern boundary of the Refuge. The exploration would occur atop a groundwater flowpath of the Amargosa River known to contribute to the springs and wetlands of the Refuge. The company acknowledged that they expected to encounter groundwater in every drilling location. In



New Claims (April 2024) by Rover Critical Minerals

addition to potentially paving a path to the creation of an open-pit mine adjacent to one of the most critical biodiversity oases in North America, the exploration project itself raised significant concerns.

The Nature Conservancy Nevada chapter quickly commissioned a hydrological analysis to evaluate potential impacts to groundwater resources that could result from exploratory drilling in this area. This analysis indicated the potential to alter groundwater flow that sustains significant springs in the northern portion of Ash Meadows. The mining company's closest borehole location came within just a few thousand feet of Fairbanks Spring, one of the largest springs in the refuge and home to the endangered Ash Meadows Amargosa pupfish and Ash Meadows speckled dace.

A coalition including the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe, 24 nonprofit organizations, local governments, and concerned citizens led the fight against this project over the summer and raised the alarm. As a result of public pressure and litigation filed by the Amargosa Conservancy and the Center for Biological Diversity, the BLM rescinded their approval of Rover Metals' initial project application on July 19th, 2023. The BLM also required the company to conduct a full National Environmental Policy Act review and to submit a full Plan of Operations.

An awareness bloomed that despite 40 years of protected status and management under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ash Meadows remains highly vulnerable to impacts from beyond its designated borders. And beyond Ash Meadows, the rural communities of this corner of the Mojave desert also came to the realization that their lives and livelihoods revolved around the sustainable conservation of groundwater. Consensus quickly formed

around the notion that left unchecked, mineral exploration and industrial mining on unprotected public lands posed a potentially existential threat to communities whose lifeblood is the flow of groundwater ferried by the Amargosa River.

In recent months, formal support for withdrawal of certain public lands from new mining entry has been issued by the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe, the Amargosa Valley Town Board, the Beatty Town Advisory Board, and the Nye County Board of Commissioners. The diversity of this coalition which also includes numerous conservation leaders is illustrative of the true value of water in the desert, and its ability to transcend political and ideological divides. At the core of the coalition's concerns is how alteration or depletion of groundwater would fundamentally erode a host of values – cultural, spiritual, recreational, and economic alike – and perhaps make life in this hostile environment altogether untenable. “No new ghost towns in Nye County” has become a mantra guiding the coalition's efforts to raise awareness around the risks involved in permitting mining activities in such a landscape.

In an attempt to meet the BLM's new review standard for the project, Rover Critical Minerals submitted a revised draft Plan of Operation in December of 2023. The slimmed-down proposal, detailing plans for 21 boreholes to a maximum depth of 150 feet, was deemed insufficient by the BLM and not accepted. Several months later, it was discovered that the company had staked nearly 8,000 additional acres of new claims on BLM lands in and around the residential center of Amargosa Valley, and less than one mile from the boundary of Death Valley National Park.

Local residents alerted their town government board of these new mining claims, some staked directly across the street and within mere feet of residences and businesses. The new project area – named the Longstreet Lithium Project by Rover Critical Minerals – entails as many as 400 new claims and is set atop an established groundwater flow path sustaining springs and domestic wells in Death Valley and on reservation lands of the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe. Claiming this new area, in the wake of the push back against Rover Critical Minerals' initial proposal to drill near Ash Meadows has been received by some members of the tribe and Amargosa Valley residents as a redeclaration of war. Residents of both communities are once again concerned how exploratory drilling or future open-pit mining might affect their long-term water security in a basin already exhibiting signs of significant groundwater overdraft.

Though the mining company's plans remain uncertain, the communities and coalition remain resolved in urgently seeking a mineral withdrawal for public lands within Amargosa Valley. This would provide the communities with a reprieve of up to 20 years from new mineral entry. The reprieve would thus provide an opportunity to



New claim stake near Longstreet Casino. Mason Voehl

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Preserving Our Ancestral Lands

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Our sacred connection

Others may see the land as mere soil and rocks, but we see it in our DNA. We come from the air, the water, the land. This connection is who we are, and protecting these lands is crucial to preserving our past and safeguarding our future.

The area we are working to protect includes sacred sites, petroglyphs, and trails that are integral to our cultural heritage. These sites are places where our ancestors walked, where they left their marks, and where their spirits still reside.

Protecting these lands means allowing us to continue our cultural practices, ceremonies, and traditions in our ancestral homeland. It means ensuring that our children and grandchildren can walk the same trails and feel the same connection to the land that we do.

Preserving our cultural and ecological heritage

The Kw'tsán National Monument is a reclamation of our identity that would help us protect our culture, heritage, traditions, and our language. The trails encompassed within this area connect us back to the spirit world. For our Tribe, it's important for us to show future generations who we are and to see our footprints in the desert.

Ecologically, the region is home to diverse plants and wildlife, contributing to the rich biodiversity of the California desert. The desert flora includes cacti, yucca, and creosote bushes, which have adapted to survive in the harsh environment and are vital to the ecosystem. This vegetation provides habitat and food for many species, including desert tortoises, jackrabbits, and various birds. The monument would help protect these plants and animals from the threats of habitat destruction and environmental degradation.

The unique desert ecology supports a delicate balance of life that has evolved over millennia. The diverse wildlife, from the smallest insects to the majestic bighorn sheep, plays a crucial role in maintaining the health of this ecosystem. Kw'tsán National Monument would help these species continue to thrive. It would also protect the ability of our elders to collect herbs and plants used for traditional ceremonies and for healing.

Challenges and opportunities

This proposal has garnered significant support from other Tribes, elected officials,



Kw'tsán Proposed National Monument

conservation groups, businesses, and people across the local community, and nationally. However, there are challenges ahead, particularly from those interested in mining our homelands and the places our local community goes to recreate.

On March 21, 2024, we celebrated a significant win when the Imperial County Board of Supervisors voted 3-1 to deny the Oro Cruz exploration gold mining project in the Cargo Muchacho Mountains. This area, which holds immense cultural and historical importance, was under threat from exploratory drilling operations. The decision was a testament to the power of persistent advocacy from our Tribal government, our citizens, and our allied land protection groups. We presented science-based evidence highlighting the destruction this project would cause, and the Board recognized the cultural and environmental devastation that would ensue.

Councilman Jonathan Koteen articulated our collective relief and gratitude: “Like many Tribal Nations throughout this country, we consistently find ourselves having to defend the integrity of our homelands, our spirituality, and the deep cultural roots we have in this area. We are thankful to the experts who supported our claims and for the many voices that remained steadfast in helping us advocate for a place that, to this day, provides us the opportunity to practice who we are.”

Mining will not only damage cultural sites, it will scar the land and potentially poison our water. Mining will impact the ability to recreate in these areas and disrupt the habitat wildlife depend on for survival. Mining on these lands must be rejected, and one of the best ways to prevent unchecked development is through national monument designation.

The path forward

We are calling on the Biden Administration to put an end to the constant threats these lands face. We urge him to use the Antiquities Act to designate this monument and to establish an inter-governmental stewardship agreement to better manage these lands into the future. This agreement would ensure that Quechan values, knowledge, and expertise are integral to the monument’s management plan. It would allow us to continue our cultural activities, ceremonies, and gatherings within the protected area.

Today we stand on the precipice of great change, and time is not on our side. To realize the Kw’tsán National Monument, we need sustained advocacy and public support to ensure that President Biden helps us protect these sacred lands in the remaining months of his term. The Kw’tsán National Monument represents a pivotal opportunity to honor and protect a landscape that is vital to both our cultural identity, ecological health, and the local community’s resilience. Anaymatt kutt uu ook kavah show’k (protect our culture).

For more information, visit ProtectKwtsan.org.

Jordan D. Joaquin was born and raised on the Fort Yuma Indian Reservation and is an enrolled member of the Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe. He served two terms as a council member and in December 2018 he was elected as Tribal President, a position which he still holds. In March of 2023, California Governor Gavin Newsom appointed President Joaquin to a seat on the Colorado River Board of California. President Joaquin believes in building strong partnerships with local, state, and federal agencies essential in achieving goals for all tribes and surrounding communities.



Conglomerate Mesa And The Southern Owens Valley

Building support for protection



Conglomerate Mesa towers over Joshua tree forest and apricot mallow super bloom. Jaime Lopez Wolters

Friends of the Inyo is working to protect southern Inyo County from a highly destructive proposed mining exploration project on Conglomerate Mesa. As of this writing, the draft EIS release is expected in late summer or autumn of 2024. Friends of the Inyo (FOI) has been working with the local Indigenous community and many other stakeholders to strongly oppose this proposed project. The Lone Pine Paiute Shoshone Tribe and the Big Pine Paiute Tribe have both adopted resolutions opposing the project. We expect three other area Tribes will formally oppose the project in the coming months. Further, FOI has met with Sen. Padilla's public lands staff person, Sarah Swig, who indicated that the Senator would formally oppose the project as well.

To build support for protection, the Conglomerate Mesa coalition commissioned a series of four short videos that highlight the values of the area. The second video was released online on June 5th, and it provides a general update on the mining threat. The video can be viewed here.¹ The first video, Joshua Trees in Conglomerate Mesa,² was released on May 8th. Other recent activities in support of the campaign include that of Jaime Wolters and Jared Naimark, who walked along the currently proposed access road to understand the terrain and potential impact of a new road. Lynn Boulton

and Jaime Wolters spent a weekend (June 1-2) scouting a potential alternative access route south of the Mesa that the BLM may include in the EIS. Lynn and Jaime hiked the old Newmont trail and flew a drone along the length of the route to get a sense of the impacts it would have.

Friends of the Inyo is also working to *permanently* protect 160,000 acres in southern Inyo County which includes Conglomerate Mesa. At this time, efforts are focused on understanding and implementing the priorities of the area's Indigenous community. Specifically, FOI is working with Indigenous partners to put together an Indigenous Desert Health Summit in September. The goal of this event will be to bring together Indigenous community members to talk about threats and solutions at a landscape level. The Summit agenda will include a Mining 101 presentation and a panel to discuss permanent protections.

An unexpected and exciting development occurred on May 26 when FOI staff persons Allison Weber, Joseph Miller, and Jaime Wolters met with Rep. Kevin Kiley at FOI's Bishop office. The meeting went well. Indeed, he indicated that he would support a permanent protection campaign that had the support of the Indigenous community and was focused on protecting Tribal ancestral lands. Senator Padilla has previously indicated that he would support a permanent protection effort that included Indigenous support.

(1) <https://protectconglomeratemesa.com/conglomerate-mesa-explained/>

(2) <https://protectconglomeratemesa.com/joshua-trees-on-conglomerate-mesa/>

Further information about Friends of the Inyo and their activity is available at: friendsoftheinyo.org/about



Western fence lizard on Conglomerate Mesa, living in the path of proposed mining road. Jaime Lopez Wolters

Amargosa Valley

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meaningfully and collaboratively discuss how to pursue the long-term water security of this portion of the Amargosa River watershed. Limiting the possibility for drastically affecting groundwater through extraction practices gone awry would be a meaningful first step on a longer road to sustainable groundwater use.

In our modern context, opportunities to take actions informed by traditional ecological knowledge, by science, and by robust and authentic bi-partisan community support are something of a rarity, perhaps as rare as the species of endemic life that find their homes in the springs and wetlands of Ash Meadows. These iconic desert lands, with their storied rural communities and exceedingly unique biodiversity, are threads in the fabric of our American identity and not worth risking in the pursuit of any mineral. No new ghost towns, ghost wetlands, or ghost rivers in Nye County.

Mason Voehl is an activist and writer representing the Amargosa Conservancy as its Executive Director. Over the last decade, Mason has cultivated a love affair with the American West through the mediums of climbing, backpacking, and general rambling with his wife Sarah and two dogs. Mason's essays on human-land relations have been featured in The Dark Mountain Project, Climbing Magazine, and the Black Mountain Radio podcast.



Fairbanks Spring, Mason Voehl

Desert Report Website

All the articles in this issue are available individually on the Desert Report website: www.desertreport.org. Footnotes which are not available in the printed issue, can be found at the end of their respective articles along with active links to other references. Past issues of the Desert Report and other information about the Sierra Club Desert Committee can be found on the website as well.

Future Desert Committee Meetings

Unless unexpected circumstances intervene, the next Desert Committee meeting will be held in-person, on **August 17, 18 in the White Mountains**. Details concerning camping, other accommodations, and the agenda will be announced on the Desert Forum, on the website www.desertreport.com, and by email to those who have signed in for meetings in the past. Meeting chair will be Stacy Goss.

The November meeting of the Desert Committee will be held by zoom with details available as the time gets closer.

Join Us On The Desert Forum

If you find Desert Report interesting, sign up for the Desert Committee's e-mail Listserv, Desert Forum. Here you'll find open discussions of items interesting to desert lovers. Many articles in this issue of Desert Report were developed through Forum discussions. Electronic subscribers will continue to receive current news on these issues — plus the opportunity to join in the discussions and contribute their own insights. Desert Forum runs on a Sierra Club Listserv system.

SIGNING UP IS EASY

Just send this e-mail:

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From: Your real e-mail address [very important!]

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Message: SUBSCRIBE CONS-CNRCC-DESERT-FORUM
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[this must fit on one line.]

By return e-mail, you will get a welcome message and some tips on using the system. Questions? Contact Stacy Goss, stacy.goss@comcast.net, (510) 206-3760.

At Our Southern Border

Flight, hardship, and hope

The following account is not directly related to conservation issues in the desert, but it does affect everyone who lives or cares about the arid lands along the southern border. Whatever policy we might favor along the U.S.-Mexican border, we need to remember that immigrants are human beings not so different from ourselves. This story was redacted in November, 2022, by a resident of Imperial County. . . . the editors

Last week I was visiting the Posada del Migrante in Mexicali. It is a shelter filled with families and many small children who are fleeing danger from somewhere south of here and are applying for asylum in the United States. I interviewed a beautiful young woman in her early twenties who was staying at the shelter. I recorded her story and transcribed and translated it. I present her story here as she told it to me, only editing for length and clarity. For her safety, I am not giving her name or the place she comes from. – Susan Massey

We are from [redacted], from a little town in a rural area. Really, it was very peaceful. I am from a very humble family, very hard-working. My grandparents on my mother's



side were the first people to arrive there. They worked as peasants in order to support their family. My family, on my father's side, acquired some land that had no owner, nothing, and that's where our problem comes from.

My grandmother, my father's mother, passed away when he was ten years old.

From there also comes another problem – all the stories are coming together you see! My dad had to take care of many siblings, there are nine. A very large family, but a very united family. My dad was always working everywhere because my grandfather was a farmer and had no education at all. My dad had to take care of everything. In the middle of all that, he met my mother and he had us. There are four of us. We were happy for ten years, we were fine. He sent us to school. I was still studying when all this happened. I was working as a secretary in a school, but I was also studying to be a teacher. I was just short a few semesters from finishing.

There came a time when the land that my grandfather acquired just began to have value. It is a beach, it is a virgin beach. People started showing interest. And what my grandfather did was distribute land to his relatives and others so people wouldn't cause him problems. He gave land to people so that they could acquire something. They had something to help their family. He delivered the land with papers and everything. It was fine. Later our families began to have problems.

Drug traffickers started coming around. They wanted to acquire that land, but in a bad way. They tried to grab it, and if someone opposed them, they started with the fines, they call it a "quota". The first person who agreed to pay the fine was my mother's brother. He paid. There came a time when he couldn't pay it anymore, and they killed him. It was her brother with whom she was always very close.

In the little towns there is someone who is in charge of the wake, of going to pick up the body. My dad took responsibility for all of that. He was the one who was in front of all the movements, and for that simple reason of helping my mother there also comes the problem. They also began to ask for money from him. They threatened him with messages and calls and so on, and he said "Well I only have land. I don't have a business. I do not have money."



Border fence near Calexico. Top: Gate at Posada del Migrante. All photos: Susan Massey

We did not have the amount that they were asking for, and that is the truth. It was a warning that if not, then they were going to harm the family or him.

The threats returned. We did as best we could, we put together that amount, and we gave it, but later the demands were for more and more and more money, and they were more frequent, and we reached the point that we couldn't manage what they were asking for. When we said no, we couldn't. My mom, my brother, a six-year-old boy, my sister-in-law and I were at home when they came shooting up the house. (She starts sobbing)

That was July 8 last year, 2021. It was like eight at night. As I say again – the house is very humble. We were all in the house. My dad was in the living room, which was in the front of the house, and we were all in the bedroom, thank God. By the grace of God we were all in the bedroom! We were not together with my dad when a van arrived. Supposedly it was the police. They came telling my dad to get out of the house, that they were carrying an arrest warrant when he had done absolutely nothing. He looked out and said "It's not the police." And he was able to get us out. In other words, his reaction was first to protect us. We went out through the window in the back. And since there are houses next to each other, there was a lady who was like my godmother and she sheltered us. As soon as he returned, they began to shoot.

I didn't tell you that there is an armed group there that is supposedly called "the community force", which is said to be a group of policemen who are from the community and are trying to support the community. But that group is really the same, the same drug traffickers are running it. They pass themselves off as police by wearing a uniform. They are the ones who make the people of that little town disappear. Several people had already disappeared for the same reason. Some criminals forced

themselves into that group and if the others did not go along with them, they took action against their families.

My father, I tell you again, yes, he got us all out of the house, and when my father started to come out they shot up the house with AR-15s.

He received six bullet wounds. One on his knee, one on his hand, one on this side, one on this, (indicating the arms) left arm and right arm. He received hits on both arms.

The house was made of mud and stones so the bullets passed through the house, and he received six bullet wounds. They said in the town that the house received about three hundred gunshots. Three hundred holes. They left my dad to die. That's the truth. He's alive right now thank God, by God's blessing, but he was about to die.

They thought he was already dead, that he would remain on the ground. They left. They did what they came to do and left. We called one of my dad's brothers who was nearby. With his help we picked up my dad, it was a moment, the truth is that . . . (she breaks down again)

The police came, but they did nothing. They thought he was dead. What they were going to do was pick up the body. Yes, we picked him up and went to a clinic. A clinic that never opened their doors for us. I ran around screaming for them to open the doors. It was raining and since it is a small rural town, it also gets very messy because of the rain. They did not let us in. We had to go to a health center, a community center where they received him. The only thing they did there was to cover up his wounds so that they wouldn't bleed. But from there they sent us to a hospital in another city that is about two hours away.

Blessed be God, a doctor offered to come with us to watch over him. I have photos of everything he suffered. He stopped breathing twice, he was dying, his heart stopped when he was on a stretcher. They revived him twice.

Since that day everything changed.

My brother stayed in the town to be able to shelter my mother and my sister-in-law. I traveled to another town with my father to take care of him. We kept him in a hospital for almost two months. The doctors didn't really give us hope. We were still in the hospital when messages were coming to him (we had his phone). A message came to him and to us that if he did not pay the money, that it had only been a warning. That if he didn't pay, our whole family would be attacked next.

My brother was still in town and they went after him. Thank God he got out on time. What we did was try to get him to the United States going round about ways through back roads. The border was closed because of the pandemic. In that year we had to seek refuge everywhere.

We were fleeing from one place to another any way we could. But what worried us most was my brother. He



Children in front of Posada del Migrante.

Transmission Lines On Our Public Lands

New corridors and new planning rules aim to expedite permitting

In May, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) issued an expansive new rule on Long Term Regional Transmission Planning that will take effect in July, 2024.¹ The rule was passed 2-1 with Commissioner Christie issuing a fiery dissent.²

There is some good news: the new rule lays out a set of new requirements for long-term transmission planning which is to be done on a regional basis with at least a 20-year horizon and which requires reassessment and revision every 5-years. The rule appears to require transmission planners to incorporate state decarbonization objectives into transmission planning by requiring at least three alternative long-term planning scenarios to meet demands that recognize:

- (1) federal, state, local, and federally-recognized Tribal laws and regulations affecting the resource mix and demand;
- (2) federal, state, local, federally-recognized Tribal laws and regulations on decarbonization and electrification;
- (3) state-approved integrated resource plans and expected supply obligations for load-serving entities;
- (4) trends in fuel costs and in the cost, performance, and availability of electric generation and storage resources, as well as electrification technologies for buildings and transportation;
- (5) resource retirements;
- (6) generator interconnection requests and withdrawals; and
- (7) utility and corporate commitments along with federal, state, local, and federally-recognized Tribal policy goals that affect long-term transmission needs.

The rule also requires assessment of seven potential benefits of new transmission:

- (1) Avoided or deferred reliability transmission facilities and aging transmission infrastructure replacement (meaning that by planning upgrades, reliability is improved and the costs of loss of reliability are avoided);
- (2) Reduced loss of load probability or reduced planning reserve margin (meaning the benefit is less probability of loss of load or the need for additional reserves to be planned);
- (3) Production cost savings;
- (4) Reduced transmission energy losses;

(5) Reduced congestion due to transmission outages;

(6) Mitigation of the consequences of extreme weather events and unexpected system conditions; and

(7) Capacity cost benefits from energy losses incurred at peak loads.

In addition, the rule marginally increases the level of transparency and stakeholder engagement in transmission planning, requiring stakeholder meetings and advance notice for decisions that previously were entirely opaque.

The rule maintains the limited geographical areas in which incumbent utilities can build projects without competition (called the Right of First Refusal, or ROFR). If the areas had been expanded to interstate transmission projects, as initially proposed, the expanded areas where competition was curtailed would only benefit utility profits and would harm consumers.

The rule requires planners to consider whether transmission needs can be met by making existing transmission lines more efficient, such as dynamic line ratings, advance power controls, and transmission switching (examples of Grid Enhancing Technologies (GETS)). This is a step forward.³ The Rule also requires that the planning identify opportunities to increase the capability of existing transmission and infrastructure, called “right-sizing,” which can reduce the need for new transmission in some cases.

Unfortunately, FERC did not require that the transmission process expressly incorporate environmental justice and equity considerations or that the planning determine specific geographic areas where transmission should be sited (see discussion below about new DOE corridors proposals).

The rule requires that the developers allocate costs so that those benefitting from the new transmission pay for the lines and offers developers a choice of methods to achieve this. This last requirement, along with the requirement that planning consider decarbonization goals, is quite controversial as the impetus for much of the new transmission is for purposes of connecting more renewable energy to the grid and increasing climate resilience, and the new lines may benefit consumers in many states where those are not popular goals. As Commissioner Christie’s dissent put it at pp. 4-5: “the final rule inflicts staggering costs on consumers by promoting the con-

struction of trillions of dollars of transmission projects, not to serve consumers in accordance with the Federal Power Act (FPA), but to serve a major policy agenda never passed by Congress, to serve the profit-making interests of developers of politically preferred generation, primarily wind and solar, and to serve corporate “green energy” preferential purchasing policies.” In early June many requests were filed with FERC seeking a rehearing of the Order, and it will not be surprising if this rule is eventually challenged in court.

DOE National Interest Electricity Transmission Corridors

Separately, after completing a Transmission Needs Study, the Department of Energy (DOE) recently issued a preliminary list⁴ of ten proposed National Interest Electricity Transmission Corridors (NIETCs). The public comment period on this proposal closed June 24, and the DOE currently plans to develop a final list and provide NEPA review in fall 2024.

While none of the preliminary corridors are in California, *Desert Report* readers may want to look at: the proposed Mountain - Northwest corridor which runs from eastern Oregon through western Nevada and “is co-located with existing Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Section 368 energy corridors through most of Nevada and follow existing infrastructure for most of its length;” the proposed Plains-Southwest “geographic area” that includes a large swath of eastern New Mexico and runs north through Texas and Oklahoma to Kansas; and the proposed Mountain-Plains-Southwest geographic area that encompasses part of southeastern Colorado and eastern New Mexico.

The details of these new preliminary corridor proposals may look like a lot of spaghetti on the wall at this

point, but eventually these processes may expedite the approval of a lot of new transmission nationwide.

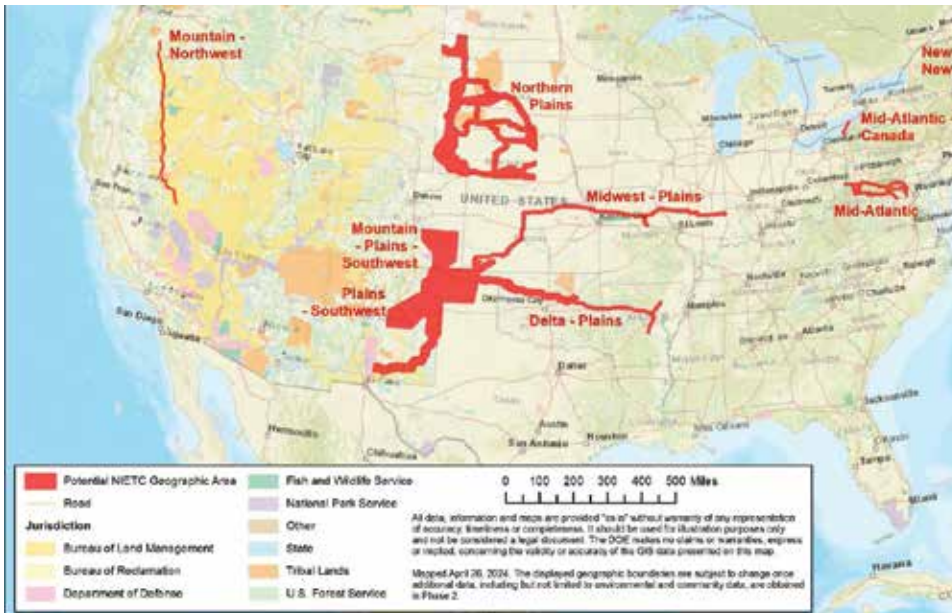
The NIETC designation will make projects within them eligible for additional DOE financing.⁵ Perhaps even more importantly, the Federal Power Act will permit FERC to permit projects in these NIETC corridors if state siting authorities do not have authority to act, if they delay action on an application for over one year, if they add conditions on an approval that make it economically “infeasible” or impair its ability to significantly reduce congestion on lines; or if they deny an application. See FERC Order No. 1977,187 FERC ¶ 61,069 (May 13, 2024). This allows FERC to step in and make these decisions, instead of the States, and is not universally supported. While some environmental groups might see it as a necessary step to move transmission forward faster to support the renewable energy transition, others are concerned that FERC will override important State and regional environmental protections that should be considered before new transmission lines are approved even within designated corridors.

DOE CX for transmission in corridors

On April 30, 2024, the Department of Energy (DOE) issued a set of new categorical exclusions that streamline NEPA review for certain projects including some energy storage systems, upgrading and rebuilding existing powerlines, and for approval of certain solar photovoltaic systems.⁶ Overall, the changes are likely to speed up review and approval of projects that may have limited impacts on the environment, but as always, the “devil” is in the details of how these exclusions are applied to each situation along with important limits on the use of all categorical exclusions such as where there are ex-

traordinary circumstances that require more detailed NEPA review.⁷

On a positive note, DOE did make a small but substantive change to the proposed categorical exclusions for solar PV projects within “previously disturbed or developed areas.”⁸ Such projects must be in accordance with applicable requirements (such as land use and zoning requirements) in the proposed project area, and also must be “consistent with applicable plans for the management of wildlife and habitat, including plans to maintain habitat connectivity.”⁹



Potential NIETC Geographic Areas. Grid Deployment Office

Fire Utilization In The California Desert

A Native American perspective

An Act for the Government and Protection of Indians

April 22, 1850

(Chapter 133, Statutes of California, April 22, 1850)

The people of the State of California, represented in Senate and Assembly, do enact as follows:

(Article 10)

10. If any person or persons shall set the prairie on fire, or refuse to use proper exertions to extinguish the fire when the prairies are burning, such persons shall be subject to fine or punishment, as Court may adjudge proper.

So begins the State of California's history of fire suppression.

It is inarguable to state that California has some of the most unique environments in the world. Hosting the tallest mountain in the contiguous United States, Mount Whitney, it also hosts the lowest point, Badwater Basin, in Death Valley. It is less than 100 miles distance between these two geographical features. Caught between the Sierra Mountains and the San Bernardino Mountains is the California Desert with its vast resources and rich history.

What is layered and preserved in the desert are the records of changing times, climate, *and utilization by plants, animals, and man*. Long before the arrival of Europeans, Native American tribes had adapted their lives in such a way that they could and did enjoy the bountiful

resources hidden within such a harsh landscape.

The wilderness that so many yearn for and aspire to create was a product that was established through the cooperative efforts of plants, animals, and man. I believe it is fair to say that there is no plant in California that does not know the presence of man. Yet we continue to remove this crucial element from the environment we wish to create. One of the tools utilized by man to impose his will on the landscape was fire. This very powerful tool was removed from man by the State of California in 1850. The State of California has spent billions of dollars interfering with the ways of mother nature. As a result, catastrophic fires are more and more frequent. However, the State is not wholly to blame for these occurrences. Climate change has been slowly creeping into our daily lives, and we chose to ignore the warning signs.

Do we have answers? The simple truth is that we don't. We are now looking back at past Native American practices and hoping to blend them with the more modern approach of managing fire. We are approaching a point of no return. This is why it is so important to begin the conversation and begin to share concepts and techniques that will result in action.

As a Native American, I and many other Native Americans, are still skeptical of the end result of sharing our knowledge. Will it mean we can return to our traditional gathering practices and benefit from this sharing? Will there be a resolution in the classification of lands that currently bar us from utilizing our traditional lands? We can only hope.

There are many ways in which fire was either employed or managed by Native Americans. One of the most obvious ways is in choosing where to live. Fire is a known factor so I would want to locate my home in a defensible space. This is not always possible, so a space that offered realistic post fire recovery is a consideration too.

An example of managing fire is demonstrated in the once vast forests of pinyon trees, generally trending along the eastern or leeward side of California's great mountains. Although referred to as "Pinyon-Juniper woodland," most of the pinyon regions are located along the desert regions. Pinyon trees alternate bearing and producing cones every two years. So important was the use of pinyon trees to the Washoe People, that the United States made allotments of land to the Washoe called



Red Maids. William Pink

the Pinyon Allotments. It was believed that each allotment would provide each allottee with a sufficient source of pine nuts to survive.

These pinyon forests didn't just happen but were the result of years of intentional management practices. Of course, that statement is open to disagreement, but the evidence is clear that many tribes engaged in practices that expanded and preserved these forests for many if not thousands of years.

My uncle, Joseph Brittain was married to a Washoe woman, Ethel Steele, and together they participated in the last traditional pinyon harvest by her People. What do I mean by last? It was the last time that the Washoe People went up the mountains on foot and camped out for two to three weeks at various elevations while harvesting pine nut. I later went out on harvest with a group of Washoe People and am able to compare the practices employed by my uncle and aunt and the current practices of today. These practices revolve around the needs and respect for the pinyon tree.

Pine nuts reach maturity at different times depending on the elevation. Successful harvests can occur as high as 8,000 feet in elevation. The first thing that occurs is a campsite is established, usually around 5,000 to 6,000 feet in elevation. It is not a first-time campsite, but a campsite that has been used for possibly thousands of years. There are piles of dried limbs around the campsite. Sleeping areas are prepared and limbs are removed from the pinyon trees in the area to build wind breaks. These freshly cut lower pine boughs were in fact fuel ladders, and it is the normal practice to remove these fuel ladders. The piles of dried limbs were then used for campfires and eventually for fuel in the roasting pits used for cooking and preserving the pine nuts. So while reducing fuel ladders, the use of the dried limbs reduced the fuel load as well.

After the pine nuts are harvested within an area, the campsite is then moved to a higher elevation where the pine nuts have begun to reach maturity. These campsites are moved in response to the pine nuts maturity. At the first campsite, a pit is dug and the pine nuts are roasted in the pit which is covered with green pine boughs and dirt. This will happen at each campsite until the harvest is complete. There is a social time, a family time that occurs at the last campsite. There is teaching and simply enjoying the environment. The children are mischievous but often disciplined in meaningful ways. My aunt would relate how, when she was a child, she and her friends would look for arrowheads and then show off their plunder to their elders. They were immediately told to return the arrowheads to where they found them but not without reason.

Then the journey down the mountain began. The roasting pits were opened, and the pine nuts were removed and carried down the mountainside. They left behind them tended lands that benefited the pinyon trees and protected them from catastrophic fires. This set the stage for the next event of fire management. Pine nuts are harvested in the fall but there is another important

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Transmission Lines

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To accompany the electrical energy transition.
Craig Deutsche

There are some ongoing concerns with the definition DOE relies on for “previously disturbed or developed area” that will necessitate watching closely as this categorical exclusion is used in the future. Particularly within designated transmission corridors, the additional wildlife and connectivity language is helpful to limit its application where projects could impact species and habitats or block key movement corridors.

Conclusion:

The new rule on Long Term Regional Transmission Planning is complicated and potentially far reaching. Developers and environmental groups may see both benefits and obstacles among its provisions, and given the controversy, it is uncertain when the rule will be implemented. Similarly, the designation of new DOE NIETC corridors and FERC's ability to override States in permitting within those corridors may speed up the pace of renewable energy development across the country by providing more available transmission. In both cases it will be imperative for concerned citizens to watchdog the implementation of these efforts to ensure that unintended negative consequences don't outweigh the promised benefits.

References for this article are available on the website desertreport.org. On the home page go to the right sidebar and click on “All Posts.” Then scroll down to the article that you wish to see, and the references will be at the end.

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Hidden Danger

The unexpected in the familiar

Approximately 3 p.m. August 9, 2016: even a casual visitor can not fail to notice the intensity of the burning sun baking this expanse of lonely desert. Only lizards, ants, rattlesnakes, and jackrabbits call this place home. The mountain ranges bordering the valley loom in the shimmering distance. Just a few picturesque cumulus clouds can be seen in the bright blue sky, and, as usual, there is a stiff breeze. The temperature is in the mid to high 90s F.

I am driving south along Big Pine Road in Death Valley National Park where I live and work as a volunteer. I contentedly maintain an unhurried pace while reflecting on the past few days. Working solo in the Park's backcountry is a genuine pleasure. I cherish these times of silence and solitude. Being solo gives me the opportunity to be fully present with and in this landscape. It also affords me the luxury to be fully present with myself.

Not surprising, I have mixed feelings about returning home. I love being out in the backcountry. Life on the edge of civilization has a different quality. It inspires me. When one of these trips ends, there always seems to be a transition period that goes beyond the arrival at my front door. But I also appreciate the conveniences of home. In approximately two and a half hours, I'll be in my kitchen cooking dinner.

The call of my kitchen recedes when my eye catches a small flat spot ahead, possibly the remains of a borrow-pit, used by workers repairing road damage long ago. It has a one notable asset. It is somewhat lower than its surroundings, and when it rains, it accumulates more run-off from the road as well as the berm on the other side. This means that it also holds moisture longer.

During this spring's stunning superbloom, now approximately six months ago, this normally unremarkable spot was transformed into a luscious miniature desert garden with a jumble of many different species of flowers such as brown eyed evening primrose, violet and purple phacelias, white gravel ghost, and vivid yellow desert gold. It was a celebration of the tenaciousness of life – vibrant and colorful. Now it has reverted to a bleak and parched spot with only a few dried stalks faintly hinting at the splendor that once was.



I stop the truck, pull the keys out of the ignition, and put them in my pocket. That's become a habit since I've heard stories about people getting accidentally locked out of their vehicle by pushing a button or an electronic malfunction. I turn around to grab the camera from the backseat and hop out.

I spend a bit of time in my mind's eye trying to recall the earlier scene to assess how I can show the contrast between then and now in photographs. Not easy, because now it looks just like any other place in the desert. I decide to let it go and return to the vehicle.

I reach for the door handle. It's locked. I reach in my pocket to retrieve the keys. Not there. Disbelief floods through me. I look into the vehicle. My keys are in the middle of the driver's seat. How did this happen? Had I not put them in my pocket? Had they fallen out somehow? Water, park radio, satellite phone, extra clothing, flashlights, food – all now irretrievable. I am standing in the middle of a vast stretch of land, full of desert scrub and lizards and with nothing but a camera in my hands.

Still struggling to fully comprehend my predicament, I try all the doors. Clearly none of them will open, but I just had to try. I briefly consider breaking a window but decide to let that be a last resort. I still feel fine and the temperature will soon start to drop. I remind myself that I'm on a road. A road offers the possibility of other travelers.

Meanwhile I want to get a better understanding of where exactly I am on Big Pine Road. A relatively short distance to the south the road goes over a hill. Perhaps standing on the hill could be helpful to get an idea how far I might be from the main road. I start walking.

The only sound is the crunching of my footsteps on the sand and gravel of the road. I take my time because I don't want to get too hot. Maybe, if the main road is close enough, I could just walk out. No. Not an option. It is drilled in to us: when something happens, *YOU STAY WITH YOUR VEHICLE*. My footsteps have slowed. I'm about halfway between the truck and the hill. Then it hits me: "This is how Chuck died." I stop. What takes me

Drawing by Birgitta Jansen

completely by surprise is the strong urge to walk. Maybe that's what Chuck felt too.

Chuck was a heavy equipment operator and long-term park employee. He had been working with a grader on West Side Road. As he was nearing the Park's south-end, he ran into a mechanical problem. From where he was, he could see his pick-up truck parked approximately five miles away. He decided to walk.

He didn't make it.

I look back toward my truck. It seems so small. Had I already walked so far?

The vehicle gives the only shade within perhaps a fifteen mile radius. The sun is still strong; the temperature probably in the low 90s. I have no water. There is no way of knowing how many more miles to Grapevine where a Park Ranger is stationed. There is no question. I need to go back.

Against all reason, the forceful compulsion to walk remains with me.

Walking back, I feel defeated. Since it is already late afternoon, someone still traveling this road is unlikely. I have not seen anyone in the last few days which does not bode well. But then again, one never knows... When I reach the vehicle, I lie down in the narrow strip of shade to stay out of sun and breeze. I relax, listen to the wind, and wait.

Every half hour I get up to move around. I watch the movement of the changing light across this inhospitable and rugged landscape. It is stunningly beautiful.

A collared lizard comes to visit, perches on a rock for a while, does some push-ups, and turns his head this way and that way as if studying me. Then he's gone.

The day is turning into a lovely evening. Perhaps once the sun is down I'll see about finding a more comfortable spot to settle in for the long haul.

Back in the park, my supervisor, Josh Hoines, is monitoring the park radio to catch my check-in with the Park's dispatch. That will notify him that I am home. By now, it should be apparent that I might be late returning. However, as time passes and there is still no message, he will become concerned.

I know the procedures. If I don't turn up when I am supposed to, and if I don't check-in on the radio, Park Rangers will come looking. However, they might not come out till daybreak. This is a big landscape. Searching for someone in the dark would be like searching a square mile for a singular microbe.

It's close to 7:30 p.m. when I hear the sound of an engine. A car is coming toward me traveling south. I get up and wave.

It turns out to be a small sedan. Husband and wife are in the front seats and two young children are tucked in the back. Any space not occupied by humans is bulging with camping gear and assorted belongings. They kindly offer me a ride, and yes I know I'm skinny, but I can't see how I'll fit in the overstuffed interior. As I chat with the husband who is the driver, I notice the young

woman turning to look back. The doubt on her face tells me that she's come to the same conclusion.

And thus it is that I direct them to the Park Ranger at the Grapevine Ranger Station. They hand me a pink Nalgene bottle of water and leave me with the promise they'll find Joe. With a smile and a big wave goodbye, the woman calls out, "Keep the bottle as a souvenir!"

I watch as the dust cloud in their wake vanishes in the distance.

The wind has lessened. I sit down. Now it's back to waiting again. I can only hope that Joe is at Grapevine, that my instructions were clear enough. What if he is out on another call? What if he is off duty or has gone for a walk? What if they decide not to bother? Maybe I should have squeezed into their vehicle. Did I give them enough information as to how to find Joe? I sip my water.

When daylight gently gives way to darkness, I see a slight glare illuminating the crest of the hill. Then there are headlights. Joe.

We are relieved to see each other. He comments, "You are much further out than I expected. I actually started to think that maybe this was a hoax. The visitors couldn't remember your name and could only tell me that there was a government worker stuck along Big Pine Road who needed a ride. To tell you the truth, I didn't quite know what to make of it." But Joe decided to check it out. He came close to turning around more than once but each time decided to push on a little further. I am grateful.

It takes Joe less than five minutes to open the vehicle while we chat amiably. With the door now open, the experience feels like no big deal. I put the key in the ignition, start it up, and go. Yet at the same time, it feels amazing to be driving. A little over two hours later I am pleased to be home. Josh Hoines is relieved to hear the message.

During the days following, I find myself frequently thinking back to the experience that day. What stands out for me is the inexplicable compulsion to walk. I know how people who lack an understanding of this environment can suffer the consequences. But I know the dangers.

I have come to understand that when a place is familiar it feels safe. This can be a dangerous illusion. The familiar can be treacherous with no mercy. Even when we've come to love a place, we must never forget that ours is a human love. The land does not love us. This is what I ponder.

There is a Nalgene bottle sitting on a shelf in my kitchen. It is pink.

Birgitta Jansen has been an active volunteer in Death Valley National Park. Currently residing in British Columbia, she is a managing editor of the Desert Report, has written previously on a number of environmental topics, and has completed a book about the October 2015 flash floods in Death Valley NP.

BY JOHN HIATT

Lessons From The China Ranch Fire

Everything Is connected

The China Ranch Date Farm is located on Willow Creek, a tributary of the Amargosa River in southeastern Inyo County, California, near Tecopa. In addition to the cultivated area of the date farm, the property includes about three-fourths of a mile of riparian forest supported by water flowing from springs upstream of the cultivated area. The riparian forest is dominated by Gooding's willow trees in the overstory and coyote willows and mesquite in the understory. There is also a significant amount of quailbush in the drier areas. With no real disturbance for several decades, the quantity of downed and dead material created the potential for a catastrophic fire. In April of 2020, an accidental, human-caused ignition was the beginning of that fire.

The initial fire started outside the main riparian area and on the east side of the dirt access road that parallels Willow Creek. The Inyo County volunteer fire department from Tecopa and BLM fire crews responded and confined the burn to about six acres of primarily honey mesquite and coyote willow vegetation. That was on a Friday evening. The following Tuesday a wind started blowing, reigniting a hot spot and blowing embers across

the road into the main riparian area. The wind driven fire then burned downstream toward a previously cleared fire break where a change in the wind direction and heroic actions on the part of the owner and responding fire crews stopped the fire and allowed it to reverse direction and burn upstream. The fire eventually ran out of fuel at the head of the riparian area and was then brought under control.

Due to the enormous bulk of dead and down vegetation, the fire burned very hot, and all the above ground plant material, save a few isolated mesquites on the periphery, was thoroughly burned. Essentially, no plant material that was less than two inches in diameter prior to the fire survived. The top inch or so of soil was heated to a high temperature, and the included organic material was turned into ash. After the fire was finally out, looking at the burn area all one saw were the charred trunks of the larger Gooding's willows and honey mesquites plus a few seedling date palms that had grown up over the years from wildlife distributed date seeds.

Post-fire challenges included replacing burned irrigation infrastructure, which included about 800 linear feet of six inch diameter aluminum water line, so that irrigation of the date orchard could be restored. There was also concern that any significant rain event would cause a serious soil erosion. To forestall that, dead palm fronds from the date orchard were tied into bundles with about six fronds per bundle to make wattles which were then staked down perpendicular to the slope to arrest potential soil movement. The wattles worked well, and there has not been any significant soil movement.

Working with The Nature Conservancy, which held a conservation easement on the property, an experienced sawyer was hired to cut down hazard trees. These were defined to include fire-killed trees that could fall onto a road or any other place that people might frequent, and these were used to build what are called beaver dam analogs or sediment retention structures in the stream channels. The sediment retention structures have worked well as they have raised the water table and



Willow Creek, June 2020. John Hiatt

At The Southern Border

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was the target because he was my father's son. Wherever we were, wherever we went they followed us. We were in the state of Mexico, we were in Colima, we were in Michoacán, we went to many different states and they followed us. They said we were making fun of them. It was a mockery for them that we were not paying.

Thank God we found this place [*Posada del Migrante*]. First we were in Tijuana. We were not received at the shelter there because it was full. At first because there was a pandemic. Because the borders were not open, everything was closed. And then I think because there were a lot of people with similar cases and even worse.

My sister-in-law and I arrived here seeking refuge first. In the year that we were traveling around, my father had not yet recovered at all. We were traveling – he was in a wheelchair – he wasn't walking very well. We were carrying him, looking for shelter, and we saw that it was very difficult for him and even more difficult for us because we were walking. We had to sleep on the street, and it was more difficult for him because of the injuries he had. So we agreed that it would be better for him to stay somewhere else with my mom while we sought refuge.

Thank God they received us here, and I am very grateful to be here. Because they are giving us a chance to live – more for my nephew who is six years old. How is this situation his fault? When they opened the doors for us, we asked that my parents be accepted although we saw that the shelter was already very full. We talked with the director and she told us that there was no problem.

My parents, thank God, have already crossed to the United States, with the help of the shelter. They crossed as refugees. They are with their niece. She is a resident over there. They were the first to be permitted to cross, due to the seriousness of my father's gunshot wounds. There was no doubt about his story.

We have already submitted papers asking for asylum, my sister-in-law, nephew and me. We are just waiting for the day to arrive. I hope it's soon. So we can be on that side. Finally to be safe.

A week after this interview was recorded the young woman was given permission to cross legally into the U.S. along with her nephew and sister-in-law.

For the last four years Susan Massey has been collaborating with other friends taking food, clothing and cash to migrant shelters in Mexicali run by COBINA, a human rights organization (<https://gofund.me/9b9b9c38>). These shelters receive no government funds from either side of the border and depend on donations from sympathetic individuals and church groups. One faith group in the U.S. has provided lawyers to guide applicants through the process of asking for asylum in the United States. With the several recent changes affecting migrants seeking asylum, it is expected that the shelters and the services that COBINA offers will be even more in demand.

created wet soil where seeds can germinate. Volunteers also did pole plantings of coyote willows to help that species re-establish itself.

Within a few weeks of the fire, green shoots of re-sprouting vegetation began to appear in the areas with wet soil. Among the first was three-square bulrush, sprouting from rhizomes. That species had long been present, but was not noticeable among all the brush. Also, seedlings of both screwbean and honey mesquite appeared. Unfortunately, tamarisk, aka salt cedar, appeared in large numbers. Although the nearest tamarisk plants were hundreds of yards to miles away, the microscopic wind-blown seeds are everywhere and will colonize any area with warm, wet mineral soil. A couple of volunteer work days took care of most of the tamarisk, and with some follow-up, the area remains pretty much tamarisk free. Another plant that appeared post fire in large numbers was datura, or jimson weed. This is a native plant with nice flowers but not otherwise very desirable. It is starting to die out as it is over-topped and shaded out. By the end of summer 2020, the Gooding's willows had started to re-sprout and were about three feet high.

This year, four years post fire, the Gooding's willow re-sprouts are 20-25 feet high, and coyote willows are 6-10 feet high along with a few cottonwoods that had also been planted. There are also quite a few screwbean and honey mesquite trees that are doing well. The vegetation is thick enough that it is difficult to find some of the photo point stakes. Aggressive species, both native and non-native, are taking over any open space. Examples of these are quailbush and five-hook bassia. Looking at the burn area today, one sees mostly green, fairly dense vegetation that is well on the road to recovery. Moving forward, a major challenge will be figuring out how to avoid a repeat of the huge buildup of dead vegetation that fueled the 2020 fire. The major lessons from this fire are that without natural disturbances such as fire or flood to limit the buildup of dead vegetation in riparian areas, catastrophic fire will inevitably happen, and when this does happen, it is imperative to control non-native invasive plants so that the native vegetation can recover.

John Hiatt, a desert activist living in Las Vegas, Nevada, is vice-chair of the Sierra Club Desert Committee, and is a board member of Friends of Nevada Wilderness. His particular concerns have been water usage and protection of Wilderness Areas.

Fire Utilization In The California Desert

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practice that requires burning and provides for a summer harvest. There is a plant belonging to the *Mentzelia* family that responds well to fire. By establishing a well-managed pinyon forest, fires could then be lit (under the pinyon) and the grasses burned so as to enhance the production of this particular *Mentzelia*. This practice successfully increases its seed yield. This *Mentzelia* ranges from the Washoe basin to the Colorado River. Evidence of similar burn practices are evident amongst the pinyon forests throughout the region. This practice also benefitted Chia which also responds well to fire. The absence of these traditional practices has resulted in the rapid destruction in our pinyon forests.

The Pinyon forests around the Thomas Mountain area and Pinyon Flats of the San Bernardino Mountains are in decline. When I was a child, we would go to these areas, and it was possible to spread a tarp on the ground and beat the pine seeds free from their cones while they hung on the tree. The current condition is that the fuel ladders are present, and brush has taken over the landscape, further preventing proper management of the pinyon forests. Probably in this case it is the lack of human resources. There just are not enough Indians left to manage this resource area properly.

There is a broad range of desert known as the territory of the Vanyume Indians. This area ranges from Victorville to Las Vegas and easterly to within proximity of the Colorado River. Vanyume is a Mojave word or name given to this group of Indians which means eaters of mush. This was in reference to the Vanyume's normal practice of consuming pine nuts. The Vanyume have all but disappeared and so has the management system of this region.

Another example of utilization of fire by tribes is in the harvest of grasshoppers. Ruby (Nombre) Modesto of Torres-Martinez Indian Reservation (Desert Cahuilla) and her husband, David Modesto of the Santa Rosa Indian

Reservation (Mountain Cahuilla) related the following. They told me that when the grasshoppers were swarming, they would go to a grassy field and in the middle, they would dig a shallow pit. They did not give the full dimensions, but it was suggested that the pit was only about a foot deep and five feet across. They would then light the field on fire in a location that would drive the grasshoppers toward the pit. According to their description, the grasshoppers would seek shelter in the pit but were eventually burned or roasted. The grasshoppers were then gathered and eaten. They said that eating grasshoppers was like eating popcorn. Crunchy is probably a better description. The Cupeno Indians were also known to gather grasshoppers the same way. They would burn the grasses within their traditional area which is situated within Warner Ranch.

Fire is fire, whether it is started by man or nature, intentionally or unintentionally. What is important to Native Americans is what happens after the fire. Plants used for basket weaving yield more and better material after a fire. The bark is slipped on the willow, cottonwood, and elder trees, making their inner bark available for harvest. The bark of these trees is used for clothing, rope, and padding. Tobacco plants respond well to the fire. Chia offers a better seed yield. Some woods are tempered by the fire and makes them a better selection for bows. Fire coppices many plants that respond by using the full force of its root system to force healthier growth. Straight shoots of chamise, mule fat, and arrow weed are more prevalent and available for a variety of uses.

It isn't just fire that is beneficial to the plants, but often the soil erosion that occurs as a result of the fire. Soil run off due to rains mixes ash with soil and can scarify seeds in two ways. Wet ashes form lye which can dissolve the protective coating on native seeds that inhibit germination. The tumbling action caused by the soil erosion abrasively removes this protective coating as well. We do believe that some native plants in the first two years after a fire event are able to out compete the non-native plants. This has to be considered in establishing a burn cycle program.

Developing proper burn strategies is not easy, and it will not be easy as climate change hands us the unpredictable. Hurricanes are getting stronger and more present on the Pacific coast. Wind patterns are changing. Temperatures are rising. Unless we learn to manage the canvas Mother Nature has provided in a cooperative and inclusive manner, we are possibly facing more than just catastrophic fires.

William J. Pink is a past members of the California Desert Conservation Area Advisory Committee; has served as Executive Secretary, California Native American Heritage Commission; is a former Tribal Chairman and Vice Chairman, Pala Band of Mission Indians; and is currently a practicing ethnobotanist and teacher.



Elderberry. William Pink



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