

NATIVE land natural RESOURCES

The University of Montana School of Journalism 2011



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i n t r o d u c t i o n

fOR COUNTLESS GENERATIONS, American Indians relied on natural resources to survive. Not only did they use these resources for food and shelter, their culture and spirituality were centered on the land.

As settlers moved west, ownership of those resources became the spark for many battles. Ultimately, Indians were forced onto reservations, ceding vast territory to the government. In return, the Indian tribes got concessions and an understanding that their lands were not to be infringed upon by new settlers. But over time the pressures increased on native people, settlers wanted the land for farming or the mineral wealth it provided, and

the size of many reservations started to shrink.

Although much of the Native American way of life was lost, connections to the land remain a large part of the culture. In this report, students in the University of Montana School of Journalism's Native News Honors class explore how natural resource issues provide new challenges and new opportunities for Montana's native people.

Many tribes are grappling with trade-offs between a traditional way of life and opportunities for economic development. On the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, the tribal council is exploring coal development. The Fort Peck Reservation is anticipating an oil boom.

The Crow tribe is working to preserve the rights to water on their land, while on the Flathead Reservation, tribal scientists are trying to save the native bull trout from extinction. Fort Belknap is raising buffalo and using the sacred animals in new ways to provide money for their tribe. On the Blackfeet Reservation, tribal members are continuing to use native plants for medicinal remedies and to pass on their knowledge to succeeding generations.

Engrained in each of these natural resource issues are the stories of the people behind them. Their struggles and victories highlight the continued importance of natural resources for Montana's first peoples.

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Prize and poison

story by **Heidi Groover** photos by **Andy Ambelang**

*Oil drilling promises jobs and development
for the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes,
but it comes at a cost*

These plains are empty, a blank expanse for miles. A light blue sky dotted with clouds meets the flat earth. The ground is white except for scabs of brown dirt, a lone bare tree and triangular black shapes bobbing slowly up and down in the distance. The black machines look simple, stark—alone in the middle of the vastness of the Fort Peck Reservation.

But below them, 7,000 feet down, is the prize and the poison of the Assiniboine and Sioux people.

The town of Poplar sits along Highway 2, the gateway to oil fields to the east and mountains to the west. Many buildings in this town of 2,900 people are old and empty, boarded up and forgotten. On a recent spring day, a gust of wind blows a half-crushed Bud Light can past a stray dog and into the street. Everything else is quiet. This silent town is the heart of this reservation, home to tribes with the opportunity to grow quickly from a new oil boom, but with painful enough memories to hesitate.

For decades the Environmental Protection Agency has been monitoring an underground oil plume seeping from the East Poplar oil fields toward Poplar’s public water supply. In late 2010, this briny plume, contaminated with toxic compounds, some of which are known to cause cancer, reached Poplar’s public water source.

The EPA issued an emergency order in December that outlined the history of the contamination and said the concentration of the toxic elements was not yet at a level in the city water supply that is harmful to human health, but that the contamination “is likely to increase and may do so abruptly.” The plume has already tainted private wells, rendering the water unsafe, the EPA report states.

The oil companies, Murphy Exploration & Production, Pioneer Natural Resources, and Samson Hydrocarbons Co., have challenged the order in court, according to an EPA spokesman. It is the latest of several court challenges to EPA orders addressing the contamination. The latest order would require the oil companies to pay for continued monitoring of wells on the reservation and to provide a safe and reliable supply of drinking water if the current city water source reaches harmful levels.

“Our first and last and continuous concern is public health, so whatever solution is finally reached, we want to assure that public health is protected,” Nathan Wiser, an

environmental scientist at the EPA’s Region Eight office in Denver, said in early May.

Wiser would not elaborate on potential outcomes of the case because EPA and the oil companies are in confidential negotiations, he said.

The plume of salty brine, a byproduct of oil drilling, is the result of more than 50 years of oil drilling practices, which have only been subject to strict rules in recent years, Wiser said.

“Any time you're pulling stuff out of the ground it's always going to be disruptive.”
Deb Madison

The brine is primarily salt water, but can also include compounds like benzene, a known carcinogen, according to the EPA order.

“It is something we have concern about,” Wiser said. “The facts we’ve seen have certainly shown that at certain monitoring well locations certain water wells have gone from pretty good to pretty bad in what in my mind is a pretty abrupt fashion, in a matter of a year or two.”

Even without the presence of benzene or other harmful chemicals, the Poplar water is so salty it is not drinkable, Wiser said.

...

Oil drilling is a business that promises jobs and economic development to this vast land, where unemployment levels regularly reach more than 50 percent of the workforce.

Since the 1950s oil production has taken place on the Fort Peck Reservation, which sits above the Bakken Formation, a 25,000 square-mile sea of oil. But only in recent years have tribal members begun to realize the

full environmental impacts of bringing the oil to the surface.

Now, as drilling is poised to make a comeback, environmental regulators, tribal leaders and former oil field employees aim to minimize harm without scaring away one of the most promising industries in the area.

As Wilfred Lambert, 35, maneuvers his navy blue four-door Ford across muddy, rutted roads, ahead is a horizon covered with oil rigs. The rough road jerks the truck back and forth and gravel pops against the undercarriage. Lambert and Les White Hawk, 39, look out on the East Poplar oil fields extending into the distance.

Both men are stocky and broad-shouldered. They wear a uniform of jeans and T-shirts. As they turn Lambert’s truck into the driveway of an oil drilling site, White Hawk jokes with Lambert, asking, “What are you going to make for dinner tonight, Bud Light?” The two let out deep laughter as Lambert turns the wheel and his truck ventures onto a muddy road that crosses the oil fields. White Hawk and Lambert grew up together here in northeastern Montana. They were childhood neighbors, playing on the land that now drives their tribe’s economy and development.

Lambert works as an inspector for the tribe’s Office of Environmental Protection and White Hawk owns wells on tribal land.

White Hawk points out his tanks—two holding oil and one holding the salty byproduct—with a pride not unlike showing off homes with landscaped yards. They used to be poorly maintained, he says, monitored by a company whose people weren’t on the ground as much as he is.

“Now they look like they belong to somebody, like somebody’s taking care of them,” he says.

Lambert and White Hawk both say a new oil boom could “wake up” the reservation, something it badly needs.

Bureau of Indian Affairs Deputy Superintendent Grant Stafne says at least five oil companies from across the United States, whose names he would not release, are applying for permits and land leases, eager to look for new oil sites on the reservation and start extracting by summer.

The BIA is responsible for navigating complicated land issues, like whether the land is allotted to a tribal member or owned by the tribe as a whole. If a tribal member sold it to a non-tribal buyer the BIA determines whether the seller kept the mineral rights, a common occurrence, Stafne says.



Three levels of government — federal, state and tribal — mean getting work done on the reservation is not easy. Some companies can be put off by the extra layer of bureaucracy, Stafne says, but that can be the cost of doing business on eastern Montana’s richest oil fields.

When hiring oil field workers, companies must comply with Tribal Employment Rights Office (TERO) regulations, a federal mandate that requires them to employ at least 80 percent Indians for all on-reservation projects.

Douglas Murdock, TERO director on the Fort Peck Reservation, says these rules guarantee there will be more jobs for unemployed tribal members as development increases, especially oil exploration and drilling. Murdock says he welcomes another oil boom and is developing an oil training program so that when it arrives he has a cache of potential employees.

“The opportunities are here. We’ve just got to grab them,” Murdock says. “It’s going to help everybody in this part of the country.”

Not everyone on the reservation shares Murdock’s optimism, though.

Everyone on Fort Peck sees the boom coming. They hear companies from just over the border in North Dakota, where oil drilling is growing fast in the Williston Basin, pleading for workers. They’re confident they’ll be next.

But members of the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes at Fort Peck, including Lambert and White Hawk, are acutely aware of the problems that came with the last oil boom.

After heightened drilling and lax regulations in the 1980s, the EPA began to track the plume of salty brine water oozing toward public water wells. For years water from taps in and around Poplar has been chalky and salty to the point of making it not drinkable, area residents say. Culligan, a water purification company, delivers

filtered drinking water to businesses and homes across the reservation in bottles and water cooler jugs. It’s the only company nearby and its water is the only option.

The process of oil exploration and drilling requires large amounts of water for hydrofracking, which forces water into an underground oil formation to crack the formation and release the oil. This process can require up to a million gallons of water per drill, says Deb Madison, Fort Peck’s environmental program manager, so even regular drilling, following all the right protocol, can negatively impact water supplies and wildlife patterns.

“Any time you’re pulling stuff out of the ground it’s always going to be disruptive,” she says.

Water used in drilling is pumped back into the ground through an injection well near the oil pump. However, when Pioneer Natural Resources, a Texas company, drilled north of Poplar, the pressure of forcing that water back into the ground near a drill loosened the concrete on the casing around it, causing the injection water to seep into the shallow aquifer that provides Poplar’s drinking water, according to a report from the U.S. Geological Survey.

The well was first plugged in 1984, but could have been releasing tainted water for at least six years, Madison says. A relief well was drilled in 1985 and after additional infusions of concrete it stopped the flowing water, but the EPA reported that by then private wells in the area were contaminated.

Tests of water nearby that drill determined that it contained as many as 10,000 parts per million of salt and was extremely warm underground. Madison says people can barely stand to drink water with more than 3,000 parts per million of salt.



DRILL Drilling rigs like this one operated by DHS Drilling Co. are capable of drilling up to 25,000 feet into the earth. Most wells drilled in the Poplar oil field are around 10,000 feet deep.



CHRISTIAN "We have a certain amount of responsibility to Mother Earth, and taking care of her," says Tribal Councilman Tommy Christian. **MADISON** Deb Madison, environmental programs manager for the Fort Peck Reservation, says well contamination on the reservation "is one of the largest groundwater contamination problems that the oil and gas industry has on record."

The tribal Office of Environmental Protection commissioned a study from the U.S. Geological Survey, which determined the leaking well as the source of contamination. Pioneer Natural Resources, which owned the well, spent about \$1 million to plug it and another \$1 million for technology to better inject water back into the ground. Nothing can reverse the encroaching plume, though.

More studies of the ground water are underway and more will likely be instigated in the coming years, Madison says.

Pioneer Natural Resources did not return calls for comment. Representatives from Samson Hydrocarbons, a Tulsa-based company that drills near Poplar, declined to comment.

Groundwater is impacted by the leak because the contaminated shallow aquifer feeds rivers and streams each fall, Madison says. Elevated chloride levels have been found in that surface water. While chloride and some of the other byproducts are harmless, others like benzene—a carcinogen—cause red flags in Madison’s department.

The area’s highly salty tap water, even if technically safe to drink, has negative impacts. Having to buy water means people drink less than they should for their health, and the salty water can have corrosive effects on piping and fixtures, she says.

“In terms of having a comfortable home it just makes it a nightmare,” Madison says.

Bad drinking water hurts opportunities to attract



businesses too, she says, which means the effects of poor drinking water impact the whole area, even those who can afford bottled and treated water.

The water in the area has always had higher levels of rust and iron, but those are easier to treat than the salty water, Madison says.

The practice of putting injection wells so close to production wells is unheard of these days, Madison says. Unlined pits are no longer acceptable and pipelines are much more fortified for extremely hot and cold temperatures. More lining and more wastemanagement means more hope future disasters can be prevented.

“But you can’t always predict the future and you just never know when something is just going to go really completely wrong,” Madison says.

...

Keven Jackson leans against his red Ford Explorer in the muddy parking lot of the Fort Peck water treatment plant. He crosses his arms and ignores the icy wind and raindrops assaulting his skin.

Jackson knows the oil business on the reservation, and he knows its impacts. The building behind him is partially the result of work for a non-tribal oil company that made him successful more than 20 years ago. In the late 1980s he worked as an oil rig inspector and says the lack of regulation in the business led to a host of environmental problems on the reservation.

He remembers unlined pits of oil and byproducts, watching oil company employees filling those pits with gravel and dirt to “clean them up,” and flares burning from spilled oil.

“I was naïve,” he says. “I didn’t know until afterwards: holy crap, you know, something should have been done about this.”

Now, the plant behind him is a sign of that naïveté’s consequences. The treatment plant is part of an ongoing federally funded project to deliver fresh drinking water to homes on the reservation’s eastern half, homes with undrinkable tap water.

Like most people on the reservation, Jackson recognizes the potential from drilling: jobs, infrastructure, attracting people to town. He remembers the positives of last time just as clearly as the negatives.



TOXIC This “mud pit” is filled with a slurry of water and diesel fuel, used in the drilling process. Flags are strung across the pond to discourage waterfowl from landing on the toxic liquid. **WELLS** Contaminants are thought to enter the Poplar River miles upstream, eventually ending up in the city of Poplar’s water supply wells.



“I didn’t think it would go away,” he says. “You know I was wearin’ two pairs of pants so I’d have enough pockets for all that money.”

Jackson now works as an oil company liaison for TERO inspecting job sites to make sure they’re hiring the proper number of Indian workers.

He says that when the expected oil boom arrives, he wants a job in the field, on the ground, watching what happens to his people’s land first-hand. That’s because he believes this time can be different, that drilling can be done responsibly on the Fort Peck Reservation. He says people like him will remember the last boom and will know how to prevent more negative environmental impacts.

He’s hopeful his tribe can restore the honor that should come with working on the land and make sure through TERO that his fellow tribal members get the jobs that come with the development.

Regulations, monitoring and enforcement are the only hope for preventing more environmental damage, Madison says. She and others in her organization say closer monitoring on the reservation, instead of in Helena or Denver, will translate to safer practices and less detriment to the people of the reservation.

She says the department will strengthen its ties with the BIA—which is responsible for on-reservation compliance with the National Environmental Protection Act and serves as a first contact for oil companies—to help ensure it can keep up with growing interest in oil drilling on the reservation. The department also works with the Montana Board of Oil and Gas and the Bureau of Land Management to lease land to oil companies.

Still, the boom will challenge the logistics and cooperation among Fort Peck’s various agencies.

“Do I think we’re going to be ready? I’m not sure. I can hope so,” Madison says. “We’re thinking about it, so I guess that’s a good first step.”

Because of the expense and work that goes into drilling, oil companies are careful to avoid areas that may

fail to produce oil or land leases that require too much bureaucracy to make a profit quickly.

The companies that can succeed are those that put in the most time to ensure they’ve met all the necessary environmental regulations and fought through all of the red tape, Madison says. Small companies don’t have the time for that, so they often don’t last on the reservation.

“Complying with environmental regulations is expensive. It just is,” Madison says. But that’s the cost of doing business in the U.S. and it’s the cost of doing business here. It will be.”

Tribal Executive Board Member Rick Kirn says he knows drilling can be done responsibly and he knows tribal members need jobs.

Kirn is stocky and wears jeans and a maroon T-shirt under a maroon and gray flannel shirt. His thin lips rarely curve into a smile as he talks about the land he has always called home. Kirn’s gray hair and leathered hands speak to his age and to years of hard labor. He says oil drilling should be cautiously welcomed on the reservation.

“We can’t be in a hurry and we can’t be blinded by the economic impact as compared to the environmental impact,” Kirn says.

A farmer, Kirn knows about land and about cultural ties to it, but he uses chemicals and modern technology to grow his wheat. That blending of traditional and modern values is necessary and inevitable, he says, especially when it comes to oil drilling, which he believes should be welcomed cautiously.

His colleague Tommy Christian isn’t so sure.

Christian is tall and thin. He wears cowboy boots, a leather jacket and a black cowboy hat with a feather in one side and a Canadian flag pin on the other. He speaks with authority. He doesn’t pause or doubt himself. He barely stops at stop signs.

A tribal spiritual leader and executive board member, Christian worries about the cultural impacts of more oil drilling. He believes federal and state governments are



already ignoring existing problems, like contaminated drinking water, and he doubts whether they’ll put forth any legitimate efforts to oversee future drilling.

Christian doesn’t question his constituents’ need for the oil jobs and says he works to strike a balance between looking out for their economic and their cultural wellbeing. He knows his fellow tribal members won’t, and in some cases can’t, leave the reservation. He knows they need the jobs.

They need them here. Now.

“This whole place could be filled with nuclear radiation and we would still be here,” he says.

Driving past the oil fields and agricultural land dotted with farm houses, Lambert takes a drink from the bottled water in the cup holder between the two front seats and looks out onto the expanse, onto what that could be the answer for a struggling economy and a Pandora’s box for environmental protection agencies. He and White Hawk discuss what’s in front of them: the oil operations, the land, the future.

“This might be all right for us, but what about generations down the road? What about our children?” White Hawk asks.

“Right now we’re buying water. Who would have ever thought you’d have to buy water?”

Sacred recreation

Rocky Boy's little-known skiing gem is increasingly threatened by the pine bark beetle

story by **Daniel Mediate** photos by **Devin Schmit**



LIFT OPERATOR Lance DeCora keeps an eye on a loaded chair from the base station. Throughout the work day, DeCora never misses a load, and slows each chair for skiers as it whips around the bull wheel.

It's early Saturday morning and the sun is creeping above the rocky skyline of the Bears Paw Mountains on Rocky Boy's Reservation in northcentral Montana. Lance DeCora, Dwight Spang and Paul Garcia pass through Rocky Boy Agency on their way to work. The quiet reservation town yawns around them. They pull into the parking lot at Bear Paw Ski Bowl, about 15 miles east of town, ready to

work as the hill's only paid employees. Dave Martens and Jon Stoner, volunteers from the off-reservation town of Havre, about 30 miles from the ski hill, are readying the slopes, grooming the snow and firing up the chairlift. Soon the lone chairlift is up and running, streaming above the snowy knolls. A handful of young skiers and snowboarders stand mumbling in impatience as

they wait to load the lift. DeCora supervises the bottom chairlift, Spang watches the midway station and Garcia manages the top unloading area. Bear Paw Ski Bowl is small—one chairlift and 24 runs—and nestled in the shadow of Baldy Mountain, a 7,000-foot peak. The crown towers high above the rolling plains, capped with snow and laden with sacredness.

"It's God's country," DeCora says. Bear Paw Ski Bowl is one of two ski hills in the nation located deep in the landscape of an Indian reservation. The Bears Paw Mountains are a cornerstone of natural resources to Rocky Boy's Reservation, though very few Chippewa Cree people use the ski hill. DeCora, Spang and Garcia are the only native presence there. Volunteers from Havre man the rest of it—management, maintenance and ski patrol—after the tribe gave up the rights to run the hill in the 1970s due to financial issues.

With challenging runs seasonally blanketed in hip-deep powder, Bear Paw Ski Bowl offers a ringside view of a frozen tidal wave of granite, the Bears Paw Mountains. Often called the Bear Paws, the mountains surface majestically amid the high plains of northern Montana. An average of 75 people make elongated Ss through the fluffy snow each winter weekend on a \$20 lift ticket. The facility operates on weekends between January and March, from 10:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. The ski hill offers a couple dozen trails compacted into 80 skiable acres. There are no ski rentals, lessons or running water, yet people from across the Hi-Line come to test their skills on its storied slopes.

The idea for a ski hill sparked in the late 1950s. The tribe funded the installation of a rope tow in 1960. Rocky Boy's tribal government ran the hill for just shy of two decades, installing a two-seater chairlift in 1976.

"Initially, the start was to create some type of recreational, economic development venture for the Chippewa Cree tribe and one of the ways was to create a ski hill—a ski hill that would offer not only recreation for the Chippewa Cree tribal members, but the surrounding area of northcentral Montana," says Alvin Windy Boy, tribal historical preservation officer and former chairman of the Chippewa Cree.

At the ski hill's inception, the area encompassed more than just slopes for downhill skiing. There were tepee villages, picnic areas, and trails for hiking, cross country skiing and snowmobiling.

Windy Boy says the tribe was looking at avenues for economic development and thought recreation was a

promising venture. But it didn't work out as planned. In the mid-1970s managing ticket sales became contentious after a few tribal members erected their own ticket booths, according to Claire Stoner, president of the Snow Dance Ski Club, a group of skiing enthusiasts from Havre. The operation proved to be more of a financial burden than a bonus. In 1978 the tribe decided to hand over operation of the ski hill to the volunteer group.

"The ski hill is a gift from the tribal council to the people of Rocky Boy and the people of Havre," says Martens, manager of the ski bowl and a member of the ski club. "There are many people from the Havre area that call the Bear Paws home. We're very fortunate Rocky Boy shares this area with us."

“We're very fortunate Rocky Boy shares this area with us.”
Dave Martens

Martens, a native of Havre, graduated from the University of Montana's School of Forestry in 1974 and has been helping out at the ski hill ever since.

Now profit from the lift tickets goes into footing the electric bill, the lease for a snow groomer and the three employees' paychecks. Under the agreement with the tribe, the only paid employees are tribal members, and the rest of the money must be put into maintenance.

Martens has done weekly radio and newspaper advertisements over his 30-plus-year tenure at the ski hill. "Ski knee-deep cheap at the steep and deep Bear Paw Ski Bowl," he says on the radio. But his message hasn't attracted many tribal members.

"There's just not a lot of people from the tribe that use

the ski hill," says Stoner. "It's a shame." Martens says it may not only be due to the \$20 lift ticket, but there is no place to rent skis at the hill so any reservation residents needing equipment would also have to drive to Havre and back. Windy Boy has a different theory. "I don't know if there really was an interest to begin with," he says.

The western half of the Bears Paw Mountains feature the tallest peaks, rising high above the tiny communities sprinkled around the smallest Indian reservation in the state. The mountains are thickly wooded, both on the slopes and in the valleys. A mixture of rolling, grassy hills with smaller buttes rising from the valley floors characterize the land east of the divide.

These mountains are a comfort zone, a home for the tribal natives. Rocky Boy's, named after Chief Stone Child, was created in 1916 by executive order of Congress as a home for bands of Chippewa and Cree. It was the last of Montana's seven Indian reservations to be established.

"Even though Rocky Boy, the elder, didn't live to see this reservation named after him ... what he saw was a lot of areas that depicted a lot of wildlife, rock effigies," Windy Boy says. "And those are signs that are reminders to us young, upcoming people to be mindful of the land, and the importance of the land, and the importance of our culture, our way of life."

DeCora stands about 6 feet tall, Carhartts draped over him and a stocking cap pulled over his ears. He is a quiet 27-year-old, friendly to all the eager skiers and snowboarders. His dark eyes and soft smile light as he watches a dad scoop his toddler onto the swooping lift.

This season marks DeCora's third year as a lift operator. His older brother, BJ, worked as a lift operator before him and got Lance DeCora the job. BJ died at the end of the



season last year from alcohol poisoning. “I grew up in these mountains,” DeCora says. “Everything in these mountains reminds me of my brother.”

DeCora has short black hair, an even demeanor and the blood of two tribal races running through his veins. His dad’s lineage hails from the Winnebago tribe, native to what is now Nebraska, and his mother is of Cree descent.

“Lance is a good kid, hardworking, and helpful to people getting on the lift,” says Mike Ley, an academic counselor at Stone Child College on the reservation and a regular at the ski hill. “People look forward to seeing him at the lift.”

The trees cast longer shadows as the afternoon light begins to fade. Last runs are called and final tracks are carved in snow. After all the skiers leave the slopes, DeCora, Spang and Garcia get their chance to have some fun.

DeCora hops on the lift toting a sled in the shape of a tricycle, only with skis instead of wheels. He meets Spang and Garcia at the midway lift, ready to race.

Side by side they line up at the top of a steep trail, each commanding a ski-bike.

“One. Two. Three. Go!” Spang yells. They tear down the middle of the run, torching the snow in their paths with Texas-sized grins planted on their faces.

The trio nears the base area using their feet to brake. They jump back on the lift, ready to go again. The races cap the end of the day for Spang and Garcia, but DeCora isn’t quite done. He walks to his truck to grab a chainsaw and heads for a heavily wooded section adjacent to the ski runs. He finds a few pine trees devastated from mountain pine beetles and cuts them down for wood to heat his home.

The pine beetle may change the face of the Bears Paw Mountains. And one casualty would be the ski hill.

Recent aerial maps show 2.1 million acres across Montana are now infested with mountain pine beetles. But that’s just the landscape with trees that have died within the last year. Counting older dead trees that have lost their needles, the beetle infestation has damaged about 5.6 million acres in the Treasure State.

In two wooded drainages in the Bears Paw Mountains on the reservation, roughly 25 percent of one has been turned into a rusty brown kill zone, and the other is at serious risk, says William Lodgepole, Rocky Boy’s forest manager.

Rocky Boy’s has examined the forest conditions and the effectiveness of various forest practices in combating a mountain pine beetle outbreak in the Bears Paw Mountains. But not much can be done.

“Unfortunately, ... in Montana and in general, we’re being devastated by a bug that’s destroying a lot of timber and this particular mountain is not immune from that,” says Windy Boy.

It’s a slow-motion forest fire and virtually impossible to prevent.



“A lot of people don’t realize the fact that even though we’re isolated, a little island out on the prairie, we do have a really, really bad pine beetle problem,” Martens says.

The consequence of the beetles’ wrath is more than just orange-tinted stands of trees scattered through the hills. The trees on the ski hill provide shade to hold the snow pack on the runs. If the trees have to be cut down, the sun will shine in more intensely on the slopes, melting the snow faster, leaving Bear Paw Ski Bowl with no way to protect its snow cover. The ski hill will also lose its shelter from the high winds that blast across northcentral Montana.

“It’s a concern,” Ley says. “If the trees are gone, there are two negatives. The sun will come in more intense and the wind will come in.”

Ley and his two teenage boys use the ski hill often during the winter and worry about the infestation. “People who use the ski hill would hate to see the pine beetle kill get any worse,” he says.

This summer, Ley, who has built a handful of cabins from timber harvested in the Bears Paw, will teach a log construction course at Stone Child College, using the mountain pine beetle-killed trees to build a cabin on the campus. Students will then haul it to a recreation area in the Bears Paw Mountains and auction it off.

Though few tribal members ski, Rocky Boy’s leaders are

MONITOR Paul Garcia jokes with ski patroller Jim Bennett on the summit of Bear Paw Ski Bowl. Lift operators and ski patrollers work closely to keep skiers safe on the upper slopes. Garcia monitors the wind and the chair sway, and shuts the top station down if the gusts become too strong. **HILL** Skiers carve down the lower slopes of the hill near closing time. The hill is a modest 900 vertical feet, but features a variety of conditions, from the wide open steeps on top to tight trees near the bottom. **SUN** The morning sun streams through a stand of beetle-killed timber near the ski hill.



taking all the measures they can to combat the feisty and devastating beetles near the ski hill.

Forest manager Lodgepole and his team at the Natural Resources Department have, with financing from the U.S. Forest Service, thinned the diseased trees, set up traps parallel to the ski runs and sprayed Verbenone, a beetle repellent.

But going to war with the beetles is expensive. Each trap is \$5 and the repellent, signaling to other bugs that beetles have already hit the tree, ranges between \$20 and \$200 a tree and loses its effectiveness after a year. The difference depends on how many trees need treatment, how far the applicator has to travel and how big the trees are.

“The reservation is dealing with it the best way they can with the limited resources that they have,” says Martens, “and we’re lucky that they are battling it.

“If the beetle kill is as bad as they say it’s going to be, it’s going to take us out until the trees come back.”

According to Lodgepole, it would take temperatures of about 40 degrees below zero for three weeks to kill off the beetles. But if cold hits when they are most vulnerable, in the fall and spring, less extreme temperatures can have an effect.

The rice-sized beetles bore through the outer bark of their favorite hosts, lodgepole pine and ponderosa pine, in the fall and each of the females lays about 75 eggs. The budding beetles go through several stages, building up a cold defense compound as they grow.

Once the process is complete, beetles can tolerate long periods of extreme cold. But if temperatures drop below minus-10 before they’re ready, the changing beetles freeze and die.

Lodgepole says the tribe’s management practices have lessened the impact of the infestation.

On the state’s smallest reservation, having a track record of strong forest management is an achievement, he says. “I mean, if somebody does the management part of it, you could save the majority of your forest. Management, I think, is key over the lifetime of the forest.”

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The Bears Paw Mountains slumber beneath a chilly blue sky. A breeze whips across the furrowed trails, and the sun begins its descent toward the horizon.

DeCora watches as a handful of skiers load onto the chairlift. He pauses, shuts his eyes and takes a deep breath.

“I like being out in the fresh air,” he says. “It beats sitting at home all day.”

These mountains are everything to DeCora. “I grew up here. I’ll probably be here as long as I can walk,” he says.

DeCora watches the weathered chairs on the ski lift glide up and down Bear Paw Ski Bowl. Advertisements are etched on the wooden paneling on the back of the chairs. One reads, “Chippewa Cree.” It sits empty, climbing the white slopes.



Vital resource

story by **Victoria Edwards**
photos by **Cole Margen**



BISON Bison on the Fort Belknap Reservation roam freely with the Little Rocky Mountains towering in the background. The Gros Ventre and Assiniboiné tribes keep more than 400 animals on the reservation.

Jerry Green is used to having blood on his hands, but today there’s nothing to slaughter. The cold metal cutting tables of the Little Rockies Meat Packing Co. in Malta, Mont., are sterile and vacant, and the holding pens outside are empty after yesterday’s slaughter of six buffalo. Their carcasses are suspended from the ceiling on this March afternoon, but buffalo rarely hang here anymore. The plant, owned by the Fort Belknap Reservation Assiniboiné and Gros Ventre tribes, has shifted its focus from processing buffalo from the tribe’s herd. Now it primarily

survives on business from cattle ranchers around Malta, which is located more than 40 miles from Fort Belknap. “I wouldn’t mind seeing 400 or 500 buffalo go through here, but right now all we’re doing is cattle for the local ranchers,” Green says. The six buffalo slaughtered at the plant came from the Fort Peck Reservation’s buffalo herd more than 100 miles east of Malta, and account for half of the buffalo slaughtered at the plant this year. Green has run the plant since 2008, and says business has picked up and gone down repeatedly in the past few

years. Slow days like today aren’t uncommon in the history of the plant. In 2009, Green says, the plant slaughtered 167 buffalo, but that number dropped to six in 2010. The sporadic demand has resulted in only enough money to cover the plant’s operating costs and payroll. It also hasn’t progressed toward the goal of becoming a place of vast employment for tribal members. Green isn’t Native American, although his four employees are tribal members. “If we can pick up and do more beef and more buffalo there will be more people coming in and I’ll have

job openings for them,” he says. “But at the present time there is none.” The meat packing plant was established in 2002 by the Fort Belknap tribal government, and is the first tribally owned, U.S. Department of Agriculture-certified meat packing plant in the country. The Little River Smokehouse in Fort Belknap Agency on the reservation was started in 2006 to sell buffalo products processed at the plant. However, the smokehouse has yet to turn a profit and shut down temporarily in March because operators weren’t able to fill orders for its products or cover operating costs. Both struggling ventures represent the difficulty Fort Belknap has faced in breaking into the growing market for buffalo meat, and restoring the bison as a natural resource on the reservation.

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Today more than 400 bison graze the 22,000-acre pasture that lies in the shadow of Snake Butte, a prominent tabletop rock formation that rises out of the prairie. Set against the endless and uninterrupted horizon of northcentral Montana, they look much like they did thousands of years ago, before westward expansion and the American government’s open encouragement of the buffalo’s extermination in the late 1800s. Despite decreasing from an estimated population of 60 million to fewer than 1,000 in a matter of decades, for more than 30 years bison have been making a comeback on Fort Belknap. Originally brought back in 1974 for their cultural importance to the reservation’s tribes, the buffalo have since become an economic tool for the reservation. Despite the idle state of the meat packing plant and smokehouse, the herd has evolved to become more than just a tie to the past; it is now moving toward becoming the future of the reservation’s economy. The Fish and Wildlife Department on Fort Belknap, which manages the buffalo, makes more money than almost any other department on the reservation, bringing in around \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year, says Mike Fox, a tribal council member who has managed the herd on and off for the past 20 years. In January the tribes made \$60,000 from selling 57 of their buffalo. The money is funneled into a general fund, and goes to support not only the Fish and Wildlife Department, but other agencies and programs on the reservation as well, he says. Revenue from the bison has so far come solely from selling the animals, but now managers are looking to stop selling and start fully utilizing the meat packing plant and smokehouse. High demand for buffalo meat outside the reservation and more populated areas is the driving force in Fort Belknap’s attempt to make their herd more profitable.

The National Bison Association reports that the price of the carcass of a young bull in 2010 was 58 percent higher than the price three years earlier. “I’ve been saying this for the past three years, we’ve had the three components — the buffalo herd, the packing plant, and the smokehouse — but we haven’t been able to connect the dots,” Fox says. “We’re finally moving in that direction this year.” Island Mountain Development Group, a company that works in developing businesses on the Fort Belknap Reservation, took over both the meat packing plant and smokehouse in January, bringing to the table a new business plan and management team that is working to turn the businesses around to make them profitable. As the chief executive officer of the organization, which employs 20 people on the reservation, Michelle Fox, Mike Fox’s niece, knows what it takes to succeed in business. She graduated from Dartmouth in 1998 with a business and marketing degree. She doesn’t falter in making tough decisions. In December Michelle Fox opened the Smokehouse Grill in Fort Belknap Agency without using any tribal funds. With a \$70,000 grant from Indian Country Economic Development Program, which is overseen by the Montana Department of Commerce, she was able to start the restaurant. A month later she opened a second business across the street in the Fort Belknap Casino, called the Smokehouse Deli. Both locations will be a tool for Michelle Fox to promote the products that come out of the Little Rockies Meat Packing Co. and the Little River Smokehouse. While the restaurants and smokehouse provide a service to the community by offering a place to dine out for those who have few other options, she’s also hoping to attract tourist traffic and begin to sell the plant and smokehouse products nationally. “It’s important the resource is here for our people, but if we’re going to make any money, it’s definitely going to be targeting other outside individuals,” she says. She’s hoping to acquire a contract with Sysco, the largest food distribution company in the country, as well the company that provides food to the U.S. National Park Service. But with the smokehouse’s temporary closure and the restaurants’ need for a reliable source of meat, Michelle Fox is branching out from selling mostly buffalo, and moving into beef. She currently has 15 cows on a feeding program in hopes that the Little River Smokehouse will reopen by May with a beef product that’s been grain fed for 45 days. But that will take money, a factor that isn’t unfamiliar. “It always takes money,” she says. She’s asking the Fort Belknap Investment Board for \$250,000 to fund four different projects, which



include the plant and the smoke-house. The money would go toward a grazing and feeding facility or pasture that would house buffalo and cattle for 30 to 45 days. They would then be taken to the plant for slaughter, and the finished products would be sold in the smokehouse, restaurants, and, she hopes, on a national scale.

With the success of the smoke-house and the meat packing plant not yet assured, Michelle Fox says it’s difficult to tell when they may be profitable.

“I hope that in six months it will cash flow, but to actually make money...I mean it could be two years, it could be five years,” she says.

But money woes in the business of buffalo haven’t been the only dilemma facing the tribes in developing the bison as a natural resource.

In winter, wind that can reach hurricane force sweeps the snow across the pasture and begins to pack against its fences, forming dense bridges of snowdrifts along the reservation’s western border. The result is an easy escape route for the buffalo to leave their pasture and go onto neighboring land.

Just as the snow rises over the fences, tension also begins to build between the tribes and landowners bordering the reservation.

Walter Funk’s property abuts five miles of the western border of the buffalo pasture. He says the buffalo have trespassed onto his land for years, but says it wasn’t until 2009 that he got the tribes’ attention on the matter.

“The buffalo had been trespassing for years and years, and we had went over and complained to the council and nothing ever happened,” he says.

By late February 2009, Funk says the buffalo had crossed over the snow and onto his land multiple times. Frustrated and fed up with the ongoing problem, he took action when the animals crossed over for a third time in three days. Returning to the area with a rifle in tow, Funk saw the solution.

“I thought, well, it’ll get your attention, so I shot four of their buffalo, and I really got their attention,” Funk says in a calm and matter-of-fact tone.

Funk says his concern with the buffalo trespassing on his land always boils down to one thing — the Conservation Reserve Program.

The program works to convert highly erodible land to vegetative cover like grass in order to allow soils to regenerate and to improve water quality and increase wildlife populations. The federal government annually pays farmers and ranchers who enroll their land in the

FOX Mike Fox, a tribal council member who manages the bison on the Fort Belknap Reservation, stands outside his office in Fort Belknap Agency. **CARCAS** Jerry Green, manager of the Little Rockies Meat Packing Plant, inspects the carcass of a freshly killed bison. The facility is the only USDA-certified, tribally owned plant in the United States.



program. Because CRP land is highly erodible, no animals can graze or even be present on the land. A few years before he shot the four buffalo, Funk says he was fined more than \$5,000 and his CRP payment was suspended when they crossed over the snow-buried fence and onto his land.

The federal government eventually waived the fine, “but it took over a year to get my money,” Funk says, referring to the annual CRP payment he receives.

Fort Belknap wasn’t reimbursed for the buffalo Funk shot, and Mike Fox says the council argued to get Funk’s fines waived.

Although Fox agrees their management plan needs to change to prevent the herd from escaping, a consistent stream of misunderstanding and miscommunication between neighbors continues to fuel the tension year after year.

“Why raise them? They’ve been nothing but trouble,” Funk says, unaware the herd is one of the biggest money-making tools for the reservation, in addition to being of cultural importance to the tribes.

Funk also says he doesn’t believe the herd is fed properly through the winter months and that’s the reason they wander onto neighboring land.

“When they get hungry, they go where there’s something to eat; they’re no different than any other living creature,” he says.

To Fox, the idea is laughable, and he shakes his head as a grin appears on his face when he hears it.

“We have the acreage to prove that we have adequate grazing,” he says.



HIDES Wesley KillEagle, an employee at the Little Rockies Meat Packing Plant, stands amongst a pile of bison hides and skulls. **Director** Sean Chandler, director of American Indian Studies at Fort Belknap College, stands outside one of his classrooms. Chandler and his wife, Lynette, founded the college’s White Clay Immersion School.



The herd is also fed hay for three months during the winter, but as wild animals, Fox says they will always prefer to graze on grass.

Fox recognizes the need for a change in management to bring an end to the ongoing escapes, and says the Fish and Wildlife Department will begin construction this summer on a holding pasture to keep the bison away from land neighboring the reservation.

Fox knows how to fix the problem, but doesn’t have the funds to fully implement the solution.

The fence for the holding pasture will cost between \$200,000 and \$250,000, and the Fish and Wildlife Department doesn’t have enough money to construct a full-scale holding pasture. Fox says they plan to construct a smaller pasture first and will expand it as money becomes available.

“We’re trying to be good neighbors, so we may not totally get that this year, but next year we’ll just keep a closer eye on them if they’re still in the main pasture,” Fox says.

The winter holding pasture is an idea that satisfies Funk’s call for better management, and staying in the good graces of their neighbors is key if Fort Belknap wants to proceed with their plan of acquiring some of Yellowstone’s genetically pure bison.

Almost all bison, including those on Fort Belknap, are the offspring of bison experimentally crossbred with cattle. One of the last genetically pure herds lies in Yellowstone National Park, and in receiving some of those bison Fox says he hopes to preserve their exceptional genetics.

“If you don’t establish satellite populations of them, some oddball disease may come in and wipe that whole population out, and they’re gone forever,” he says.

But brucellosis, a disease that causes cattle and buffalo to abort their fetuses, has caused some Yellowstone buffalo to be quarantined. Fort Belknap is looking to obtain 80 bison from Yellowstone, which have been quarantined since 2005 and do not have the disease.

Brucellosis caused an uproar among ranchers who say

the buffalo shouldn’t be moved from Yellowstone for fear of cattle catching the disease. Four bills introduced in the Montana Legislature in its 2011 session would have placed regulations and restrictions on the Yellowstone buffalo’s relocation. Two of those bills died, which will aid the Fort Belknap Reservation in moving toward getting some of the bison.

In mid-May Gov. Brian Schweitzer vetoed a bill that

slaughtered the day before. The flesh has been torn from the buffalos’ heads and streaks of blood inhabit the cracks in the skulls. The hides are stacked and their hairless sides appear polished and fresh.

Green, the plant supervisor, sells the skulls and hides to tribal members, recognizing the bison’s cultural importance. Depending on the size, he sells them for \$40 to \$100, saying he wants to keep them affordable.

Skulls are used in different ceremonies including sweats and sun dances, to keep tradition and spirituality alive. Hides are used for buffalo robes, drums and artwork, as a reminder of history and culture.

And the herd on Fort Belknap is a testament of the perseverance of the Assiniboiné and Gros Ventre tribes, says Sean Chandler, the director of American Indian Studies at Fort Belknap College.

The massacre of the buffalo brought the loss of the Plains Indians’ life source. They no longer had meat to feed themselves, hide to clothe and shelter them, and bone to create tools from.

“I think you really see how important they were to us, because after that happened we became so dependent on everybody else except ourselves. We were no longer independent. We were no longer self-sustaining. We kind of had to hold our hand out,” he says.

The buffalo are now a symbol of the Plains Indians’ history.

“By them still existing today and being here on this reservation, there’s that connection, it’s a tie,” Chandler says. “It’s a direct connection to our past.”

Despite politics and the tension between neighbors, the buffalo on Fort Belknap will graze the golden grasses of their pasture.

Despite new business plans for the meat packing plant and smokehouse, the buffalo will roam the prairie flanks of the snow-capped Little Rocky Mountains.

And the buffalo will continue to be an economic and cultural resource for the tribes, just as they have for thousands of years.



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Behind a closed door in the back of the Little Rockies Meat Packing Co., Jerry Green keeps a sacred and integral piece of the tribes’ culture.

Puddles of blood gather where the cement flooring dips. Near the red pools lie the skulls and hides of the buffalo

H₂OWN

story by **Paige Huntoon**
photos by **Matt Riley**

The Crow Tribe will soon legally possess the rights to manage their own water

Generations ago, the Crow people, the Apsáalooke, came from a “land of many lakes” to settle near the waters of the Yellowstone and Bighorn rivers. Water was the lifeblood of the tribe, the source of all being.

One-hundred and sixty years ago the first Fort Laramie Treaty with the United States set the Crow Reservation boundaries, reserving for the tribe 38.5 million acres of towering mountains and rushing waters. As more white settlers moved west, more treaties cut into the reservation, leaving it at about 2.5 million acres, guarded by the Big Horn, Pryor, and Wolf Teeth mountains and nourished by the Bighorn River.

But the Crow have never had clear claims to their water, though the first petitions to the U.S. government to clarify their rights were filed as far back as 1868. On a recent, cold March day, Dale Old Horn uses a microphone to amplify his already booming voice to translate into Crow language the Water Rights Settlement passed by Congress and signed into law in December by President Obama.

For the first time, the Apsáalooke will have a guaranteed right to the water that is the lifeblood of their reservation.

By ratifying the Water Rights Settlement, the Crow tribe waives all previous water claims and is given a guaranteed and quantified amount of water. The compact will eventually give the tribe full water adjudication rights within the boundaries of the reservation. Before the reins are completely passed to the Crow tribe, though, the settlement must be approved in the Montana Water Court,

and the tribe must create a water code to set guidelines on how to handle allotment.

With the settlement comes \$461 million in federal to improve water infrastructure on the reservation and to develop more hydroelectric power from Yellowtail Dam. The primary goals of the tribe are to improve irrigation and water quality in rural parts of the reservation with the settlement money.

Tribal Chairman Cedric Black Eagle explains that the

“ We want to be... able to capitalize on the water and be in control of our own destiny. ”

Cedric Black Eagle

money won’t be given to the tribe in one lump sum. Funds will be requested, and the U.S. Treasury will release them to the tribe via the Bureau of Reclamation or the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as water projects take shape.

Old Horn, the translator of the Water Rights Settlement into Crow, and the Crow tribal historic preservation officer, says getting clean water to rural areas of the 3,000 square-mile reservation has been a challenge.

“We have to contend with hard water all of the time,” he says. “It ruins our pipes, it ruins our water heaters, it ruins the washers. I’m always concerned about what kind of kidney stones it might produce in a human being.”

Better quality of life is what the Crow people hope the settlement brings, and in the wake of the vote to ratify it, people like Truman Jefferson are optimistic that change will happen.

Jefferson lives on the land where he grew up, just outside of Lodge Grass. He can remember as a child going to the now-dry river bed just about 50 yards from his house to get water for washing clothes.

“The river was right there at that time. It changed channels,” he says.

The old outhouse his family used is still standing by an old tree on the other side of the house. He grows hay on his land to sell to neighbors, using water from an irrigation ditch, water that without this settlement he’s not guaranteed. As a boy and a young man, Jefferson never thought too much about that.

“No one really knew about the water rights,” he says. “In fact, I didn’t even know about it until about three years ago when they were really starting to talk about the water rights.”

The river ran through his land, so he and his family used its water. Now, though, he’s glad the Crow people’s rights

are recognized and guaranteed.

The land Jefferson lives on is a bit different today than it used to be. The original house burned down a few years ago, and Jefferson and his wife now live in a cozy modular home. The inside is warm on this chilly spring day. It’s decorated with country-style décor, with woven baskets and Crow paintings hung on the wall.

In the living room, he has a picture of his grandfather, Robert Yellowtail, and himself, dressed in war bonnets. Jefferson speaks of Yellowtail with a solemn and reverent tone. His grandfather was one of the most respected and influential leaders in Crow history. A lawyer, Yellowtail fought constant attempts to further diminish Crow lands and to restore land already taken from the tribe. He successfully lobbied Congress to give Indians the right to vote—a law passed in 1924—and became the first Indian superintendent of the tribe.

Jefferson still has the war bonnet his grandfather wore,

though he keeps it in storage in Sheridan to prevent it from being soiled or stolen. His mother had a complete traditional outfit belonging to White Man Runs Him, a Crow scout who served under Gen. George Custer. Another family member got it, and he believes it was pawned, which he says “made me sick.”

Jefferson is a happy person who likes to laugh and crack jokes. He has a pleasant demeanor even when expressing his frustrations. He grins mischievously as he tells a story about helping his adopted brother in Wyoming, who portrays Buffalo Bill. Jefferson was asked to play the part of Sitting Bull, and he agreed on the condition he didn’t have to do anything too silly. However, during an interview with members of the Swedish press, Jefferson couldn’t resist pulling a little prank. His brother was talking about Gen. Custer when Jefferson interjected to remind his brother not to forget “our friend Colonel Sanders.” He caught on quickly and agreed, saying Colonel Sanders killed off all

the “prairie chickens.” To this day, Jefferson laughs at the thought of the Swedish journalists taking his joke seriously.

The kitchen in Jefferson’s house is small and has a makeshift island with what looks like a wooden buffet in the middle, propped up on one side by a phone book and a cookie tin. Casserole dishes line the top of the cabinets. The table is tall and round. Various bills and pieces of mail form a small pile on one side.

The most noticeable object in the kitchen, though, is the water cooler next to the sink. Jefferson bought the stand at a grocery store in Hardin. It holds refillable plastic jugs his family needs because their water is not good to drink. After his well was drilled the water looked fine. But let it sit for a few hours and it takes on a yellowish hue and bits of red minerals settle in the glass.

“Who in the heck’s going to drink this stuff?” Jefferson asks.

He looks over at two bottles of water filled just a half



JEFFERSON Truman Jefferson remembers when his mother would ask him to fetch drinking water from the stream that ran through their property. The settlement will guarantee tribal members’ water rights.



hour earlier. They both have bits of red sediment floating in them. According to Old Horn, who has studied the tap water on the reservation, what is floating in the water are ferrous oxide particles. While not harmful, it may make the water taste bad.

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The Water Rights Settlement will fund better water infrastructure, which will yield better water quality for more people on the reservation.

“Most of us have the luxury of turning on your tap water, and being able to drink that tap water. It’s not like that here,” Black Eagle says.

Not only will the tribe build new water systems, but it will also upgrade existing systems in towns across the reservation.

The settlement “creates the mechanism to have safe drinking water, and I think a lot of our Crows feel that that’s really a significant part of this settlement; that they will be able to have safe drinking water,” Black Eagle says.

For people like Jefferson, that means no more water coolers and bottled water. And the water they bathe in, wash clothes and dishes in will be cleaner and more sanitary.

The tribe will also explore development of a hydroelectric power plant on the lower bay of Yellowtail Dam. Black Eagle and Old Horn believe this plant could be one way to bring the tribe out of its long-standing economic slump. In 2005 the Bureau of Indian Affairs estimated the unemployment rate on the Crow reservation to be 46.5 percent.

“We’ve been in poverty for many years,” Black Eagle says. “We want to be...able to capitalize on the water and be in control of our own destiny.”

Old Horn agrees, and hopes that projects like the municipal water system and the hydroelectric plant stimulate business on the reservation.

“I see this as gateway legislation to industrial growth on the Crow Reservation. With industrial growth, the economy rises,” Old Horn says.

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Bighorn County Electric Co-op, which provides electricity on the reservation, gets its energy from the Bonneville Power Administration, a federal agency that markets wholesale electric power from dams across the West, including Hungry Horse and Libby dams in Montana. The co-op also buys electricity from the Western Area Power Administration, some of whose power comes from the Yellowtail Dam.



DAM Yellowtail Dam at the southwestern edge of the Crow Reservation was built between 1961 and 1967. It was fiercely opposed by Robert Yellowtail, a former tribal chairman and longtime Crow leader. The recent settlement gives the tribe exclusive rights to develop new hydroelectric power in the afterbay dam just below Yellowtail.

VOTE Hundreds of people gather to eat and socialize at a rally in Crow Agency before voting to ratify the Water Rights Settlement Act, which guarantees the tribe a quantified and confirmed right to use of water on their reservation.

LEGISLATURE The Tribal Legislature is creating a water code, a set of standards to be administered by a new Tribal Water Resources Department.

ECONOMICS Dale Old Horn, left, translates the settlement into Crow. Tribal Chairman Cedric Black Eagle, right, says it will open the door to economic recovery for the tribe.



For Old Horn, using power from other parts of the state seems ridiculous with the presence of Yellowtail Dam on the reservation.

“Here’s the Yellowtail Dam...producing electricity that is being shipped off to the west coast,” he says with exasperation.

However, a Western Area Power spokesman says it’s unlikely that would happen. Doug Hellekson, contracts and energy services manager for the association, says WAPA, a division of the U.S. Department of Energy, would only sell power outside the region if it had excess power in a high water year. Otherwise, the power goes first to non-profit organizations like cities and towns and electric co-ops, based on amounts negotiated in contracts.

The Yellowtail Dam’s history is a contentious one for the Crow people. Construction of the dam started in 1961 after heated debates between factions of the tribe over whether to allow the dam to be built on the Bighorn River, and whether to sell or lease 12,000 acres necessary for its construction to the federal government.

In a cruelly ironic twist, the dam was named after Robert Yellowtail, Jefferson’s grandfather. As tribal chairman, he was vehemently against selling the land and flooding the sacred Bighorn Canyon. For 10 years Yellowtail tried to go against the force of the federal government, but when threatened with termination of the reservation and the tax-free status for Native Americans, he was forced to negoti-

ate with the government to allow construction of the dam. Government officials began knocking on doors, promising payments for allowing the dam to be built, and spreading rumors to turn the people against Yellowtail.



After a brutal legal battle, the Crow people voted to sell the land and the dam. The tribe was promised \$5 million, but only got \$2.5 million. Each member of the Crow tribe received \$600. Subsequently, all the power generated by Yellowtail Dam, which created the 71-mile Bighorn Lake, is under control of the Bureau of Reclamation.

Old Horn says that the newly proposed hydroelectric plant, which would be built on the afterbay at the Yellowtail Dam, offers the tribe an opportunity to lower the cost of energy to people on the reservation and use local power to supply that energy.

“If the Crow tribe opts to set up their own co-op, then it seems to me it would be logical to be a primary off-taker,” Old Horn says.

There would be no federal government control of the proposed power plant, he explains, and the Crow tribe would receive payment if they chose to sell the power.

Jefferson hopes the projects funded by the settlement will start to happen within two years. And he’s convinced the construction jobs created by the settlement will turn into maintenance and management jobs for the completed facilities. Aside from hired consultants to train employees, Jefferson is confident most of the workers will be Crow.

“Everything else, I think they pretty much can do now,” he says of tribal members. “The young men around here? They’re learning. They’ll run the plant, and of course maintenance. There’ll be some permanent jobs for tribal members.”

Until then, tribal members will have to be patient.

“It might not happen overnight, but now we’re on the road to that...recovery that we’ve been searching for, for many years,” Black Eagle says.

Healing the land that heals

story by **Jayne Fraser** photos by **Greg Lindstrom**

Grandmother’s oven was his incubator. But the gentle heat that rose through a soft blanket into the warming box where he lay was not what Marvin Weatherwax is convinced saved him from death as an infant 64 years ago. His grandfather’s prayers and medicine did. Weatherwax says he survived a premature birth because the Creator taught his ancestors to heal with the bodies and spirits of plants. He answered the people’s prayers in dreams and on vision quests that became stories shared through more than a dozen centuries. The Creator sent *Na’pi* to form the *Niitsitapiiksi*, or Real People, in his hands from the Earth’s clay and he baked them over his prairie fire. He breathed life into the five tribes of the Blackfeet Confederacy and gave them the land east of the Rocky Mountains stretching south from the North Saskatchewan River to the Yellowstone River and east across the plains past modern day Great Falls. *Na’pi* told them to guard this land and that great trouble would come if they didn’t defend it from other peoples. He showed the Blackfeet Nation what the Creator had made to make them strong for this task. Today the Blackfeet Reservation in northwestern Montana is less than 1 percent of the tribe’s original territory, but the mountains are still filled with the powerful spirits of bears, wolves and thunder. *Na’pi* also showed them rivers and lakes where the wise, but dangerous, Under Water People lived.

Plants to nourish and heal their bodies and souls. Plants often considered weeds today. Plants, a natural resource for the tribe, that could die out unless Weatherwax and other tribal members can help re-vive the traditions that he says saved his life.

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The adult Weatherwax leans back on the table where he sits in the language room of the Blackfeet Community College, using gestures to reenact memories in rhythm with his speech. He raises a hand to one side then sweeps it across his chest to show the fierce storm that raced across the golden plains toward his family’s potato field the October just before his early birth. It was 1946 and the fall squall would ruin the crop unless it was dug up before the icy winds reached it. Catherine Grant,

Weatherwax’s mother, was seven months pregnant but still helped her family by dragging away sacks of potatoes as they were filled. The potatoes were saved, but the physical exertion

“We’ve all drifted so far from our connection to the Earth, and it’s so amazing we can’t get it through our heads.”
Pauline Matt

caused her to give birth two months early. “When I was born, I was a pound and a half or two pounds,” Weatherwax says, looking down at a cupped palm that could have cradled his infant self. “I was really little and the doctors

said, ‘Oh yeah, he’s gonna die. There’s no way we can keep him alive.’ “So my grandfather told my mother, ‘I will doctor him and I will pray for him and I will keep him alive.’” He moves his hands as if to place roots and other plants on his chest, just as his grandfather Phillip Wells did when Weatherwax was an infant. “I remember smelling onions and sucking on something,” Weatherwax says, moving his hand as if to stick a root in his mouth. “Then there was this loud whirring noise and someone said, ‘Cover the windows.’” He was one month old. His mother is amazed at the memory, but absolutely certain of its truth. His grandfather was doctoring and praying over him on the kitchen table when the sound of engines filled the sky. War planes were returning home from World War II, flying The Great Circle Route through the North Pole region, then south over the reservation to the airbase in Great Falls. The United States had won World War II, but the Blackfeet Nation was still losing its fight to keep sacred lands, maintain traditional knowledge and protect the Earth from harmful development projects. The reservation was established in 1855 as prospectors clambered for gold in the mountains where Blackfeet roamed. The tribe lost some of its most sacred lands. Even today the

plants that thrive there continue to be threatened by more contemporary searches for natural resources, such as oil drilling in the Badger-Two Medicine area southwest of the present reservation. In 1896, Blackfeet elders reluctantly agreed to allow mining exploration in “The Backbone of the World,” or the Rocky Mountains on the reservation’s western edge. They sold the land for 10 years of \$150,000 payments. After mining proved unproductive on the ceded land, the federal government created Glacier National Park in 1910. The Blackfeet still battle to restore their rights to access, fish, hunt and cut timber on the “Ceded Strip” as was written in the original agreement but nullified by the park’s creation. The Blackfeet felt the loss of their land acutely. The park’s peaks shelter plants for healing that can only be found in the Rockies’ alpine ecosystems, and the mountains are home to some of the most powerful spirits for the Blackfeet and other neighboring tribes. But the federal government had already outlawed traditional healing and many religious practices by 1887. And children were taken away to be educated and assimilated, but were often abused and isolated. Decades of policies to quash Indian culture weakened Blackfeets’ knowledge of their own history and traditions and limited succeeding generations’ ability and interest in sharing them.



MOUNTAIN Chief Mountain, right, sits on the border of the Blackfeet Reservation and Glacier National Park. The peak is so sacred to the tribe that a narrow area around the mountain is excluded from development projects.

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Pauline Matt remembers her father every time her thumbnail cuts into a small bubble on the powdered white skin of an aspen tree and sucks off the sap that gathers on her nail.

Emil’s 16 children, including Pauline, would mimic him as they walked through the woods, chewing deer leaves, picking berries, digging roots—and eating a globule of aspen sap for its antibiotic properties.

“He never told us, ‘This is used for medicine,’” Matt says. “But we learned by example.”

Her father’s generation was a quiet one of necessity, Matt says. People who openly practiced the Blackfeet religion or used traditional medicines were punished. The precaution of secrecy also led to some knowledge being lost in the hush. For instance, Matt says some of the original 288 prayers to sing when gathering tobacco were forgotten.

It also meant that children raised amid traditional practices sometimes didn’t see the uniqueness of those daily lessons.

“I never really thought about it,” Matt says. “It was just how we lived.”

She sometimes fed and taught her four children as she’d learned from her father, but it took several years for Matt to realize the larger significance of those ways.

“Whenever you have a real natural respect for the Earth, you’ll never have to worry,” Matt says about the plants. “Because I’ve respected them, they’ve always guided me and taken me on different journeys.”

The plants nourished her body and helped heal her spirit when she left to live in the woods for three months after her husband died and her house burned down.

The power of the plants later called Matt home from Whitefish, where she’d hoped her children would find better education and opportunities.

“People thought I was crazy leaving Whitefish and moving back to Browning,” Matt says. “I kept being called back here because I knew the plants were here.”

Matt scans the horizon from her porch, looking over numerous ecosystems that stretch from the high alpine regions of the mountains that border Glacier National Park, down into the wooded hills, across the snow-crusted plains past her house, to the swampy valley painted red by a tangle of willows.

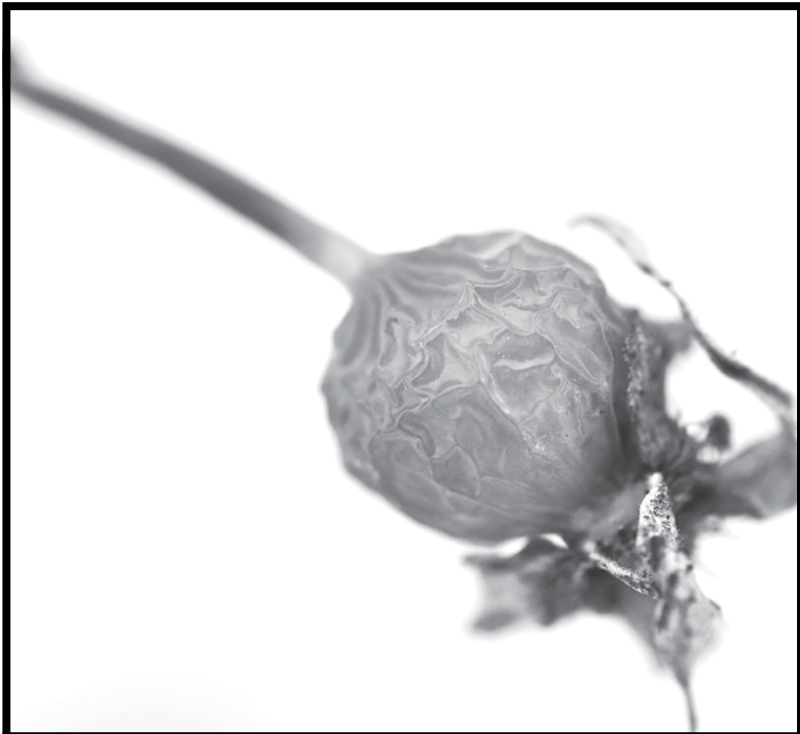
“This is an oasis and a pharmacy in itself,” Matt says, gesturing to the swamp below that has a grey ring of dying willow.

Soon, Matt will dig for roots. Plants hold the Earth’s energy in their roots through winter, so it is best to gather them in the early spring before the power—the medicine—is pushed up into leaves and buds. But today her kitchen smells like crisp pine.

Matt now uses the quiet lessons of her father to heal people using teas, balms, salves and other remedies she makes from home and sells through her business, Real People Herbsals. Small white jars form towers on one tiled counter while Matt



SALVE Pauline Matt prepares a batch of deep healing skin salve in her home outside Browning. The salves are the result of two years of gathering, drying, extracting and blending plants.



uses a ladle to scoop a light green paste from a food processor into another dish. Braided sweetgrass, Matt’s signature tobacco blend and some slow-burning sage gently release smoke from a small ceramic dish on the counter.

“I always burn the smudge first to cleanse myself and keep it going so the smoke gets in the jars,” Matt says. “I really do believe that it keeps the plants’ spirits in for better healing.”

Matt says medicines are more powerful when people recognize the plants’ sacrifice to them.

“The tobacco is a tool just as the cross is a tool,” Matt says. “Those plants are so, so powerful, especially when you take the time to really acknowledge them and give offerings and prayer.”

The practices are an extension of the Blackfeet religion and a belief that one should care for the land as it cares for them. Like many Native Americans, the Blackfeet believe that health and healing includes a spiritual element that must be treated in conjunction with physical ailments.

• • •

Matt is convinced natural medicine should be important to everyone, not just the Blackfeet.

As she holds a twisted, orange-gold cane across her palms, Matt says she spends most summers taking women on wilderness trips. She shows each one how to sand the cracked, grey limbs of diamond willow into two beautiful walking sticks, one for themselves and one as a gift for a mentor.

“Whenever you make something you always give the first one back in Blackfeet tradition,” Matt says.

Medicine doesn’t have to be something you take, she says; it can be something you experience. Matt guides wilderness trips so she can help other women find the same healing and inner strength as she did in those mountains years before.

She also knows Blackfeet medicine works for everyone because she keeps receiving orders for her herbal products from naturopathic healers and patients outside the reservation, as far as Japan.

So, the importance of these plants is not just about preserving tradition, Matt and Weatherwax say, but saving species that continue to inspire new drugs for western medicine or provide natural remedies for people everywhere.

Modern academic studies of the plants gathered by the tribe name more than 100 distinct species used to ease pain, cure liver diseases,



link fence eight feet tall. It’s the local center charged with executing centuries-old agreements that the federal government would care for the tribe and preserve a small chunk of its land in exchange for land concessions.

The convoluted halls once led to offices and conference rooms where non-tribal members would manage the land “held in trust” perpetually for the Blackfeet. Today, most of the staff are tribal members and the practice of land conservation is dually informed by both tradition and modern methods of management.

Ken Bird grew up in a logging family that cut timber on the reservation for decades. He learned the land and the trade from them, but also from professors at the University of Montana where he studied forestry. He began working for the Bureau of Indian Affairs earlier this year so that he could return home to Browning after managing timber on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in southcentral Montana.

A brown book next to the keyboard in his office is tagged throughout with thin pink sticky notes where he’s marked important passages

battle infections and bolster the immune system.

Aspirin was synthesized from the salicylate acids rich in plants such as willow, the bark of which the Blackfeet use to treat pain, fevers and swelling.

Herbologist Wilbert Fish from Blackfeet Community College recently was awarded a joint patent with other universities for a diabetes drug they co-developed from serviceberries that naturally slow the body’s intake of sugar.

A fine white powder on the inside of Douglas fir bark acts like nitroglycerin, which is used to treat heart conditions and stop heart attacks by dilating blood vessels. Weatherwax says it’s one lesson he included in a talk to park rangers about the emergency medicines that grow around them. He says one ranger saved a man’s life by scraping the powder from a nearby tree and placing it under the hiker’s tongue during a heart attack.

Matt says it’s important to remember the healing power of wilderness itself. The land is

important even before it is dissected into parts and its resources developed into pills, motor oil or a home’s wood paneling.

“Those mountains will take care of you,” Matt says. “Those mountains have that medicine, that healing power.”

• • •

The Bureau of Indian Affairs office in Browning is a drab grey building surrounded by a chain-link fence eight feet tall. It’s the local center charged with executing centuries-old agreements that the federal government would care for the tribe and preserve a small chunk of its land in exchange for land concessions.

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about his new job managing range permits for ranching on trust lands.

“This right here is the CFRs, or Code of Federal Regulations,” Bird says, picking up the thick text. “All the rules and regulations that we abide by for range, forestry, oil and natural gas, no matter what it is, we refer to this book.”

Part of the BIA’s responsibility is to protect the land for endless generations to follow.

“Our trust responsibility is to the land and the landowners,” Bird says. “Making sure the land owners get paid for timber, grazing, whatever; that’s our primary responsibility.”

But, like most areas of the BIA, Bird says his department is underfunded. And his work can be further complicated by a tangle of government agencies.

With at least five different government programs

directing land management on or near the reservation, the sometimes-divergent philosophies about conservation and development become more pronounced, Bird says. And no one in particular is charged with monitoring the health of native plant populations in the numerous ecosystems of the region. Consequently, it’s a natural resource that could disappear without notice.

Bird, however, says any of the managing agencies would work to protect a threatened cultural resource.

“People have designated Chief Mountain as a sacred place and it’s now in an exclusion area,” Bird says, explaining that no timber harvesting or other development was allowed in that section once it was deemed culturally significant.

But even the exclusion policy at Chief Mountain doesn’t preclude disputes.

“Land management causes a problem in that area

because only part of it is managed by the tribe,” says Betty Matthews, an environmental studies professor at Blackfeet Community College, who studied the contemporary land issues of the area last year. She notes in her study that cultural and ritual use of Chief Mountain is increasing, as is recreational use. Because it is only four miles from the Canadian border, and near both Waterton and Glacier parks, she says many Blackfeet want to see a joint plan among all affected governments to increase protection for the mountain.

Weatherwax says communication about preserving important cultural sites has improved, but misses the larger significance of wilderness in Blackfeet tradition. While some specific areas might be recognized as the home of certain ceremonies, he says, the medicine of spirits and the Earth are not contained by boundaries.

“My grandfather used to tell me, ‘Wherever you are



SMUDGE Marvin Weatherwax says a prayer while burning sweetgrass, sweet pine, cedar and sage. Weatherwax prays for the students and the college every morning in the Tipi Ceremony Room at Blackfeet Community College.



SEARCHING Pauline Matt, owner of Real People Herbs outside Browning, searches for cottonwood buds, which are used as a preservative in many of her products. **THUNDER SPIRIT** Chief Mountain is one of the most sacred sites to Blackfeet and many surrounding tribes. The Blackfeet believe it is the home of the Thunder Spirit, one of their most powerful medicines.



that’s where the Lord is,” Weatherwax says. “We don’t have no set altar. The whole area is sacred to us.”

...

Conservation used to be a more subtle, spiritual value for the Blackfeet, stemming from their belief that they live with the land, not on it.

“We’ve all drifted so far from our connection to the Earth,” Matt says. “And it’s so amazing we can’t get it through our heads.”

Weatherwax learned the Blackfeet stories and values from his grandfather, who asked to raise him in exchange for saving his life.

“Anywhere my grandfather went, I went,” Weatherwax says. “I was his shadow. I attended all the ceremonies. Or when he used to doctor somebody, I would go with him.”

Weatherwax, and later his brothers, often would fetch the plants his grandfather needed to make remedies for visitors. He would run to the coat closet, kneeling down as he lifted the cloth that covered the family “medicine chest.” His hands would feel in the dark for the right shape and texture, then his nose would confirm whether he had pulled out the right root or leaf.

“We could tell by the smell what it was,” Weatherwax says, sniffing an imaginary root in his raised hand.

But strong role models and leaders are scarce today. Many of the tribe’s elders have died in the last decade,

“ We’ve been here forever. It’s part of us. We’re part of it.

Marvin Weatherwax

”

so men and women like Weatherwax and Matt are filling the role of storyteller and traditional leader younger than usual. Blackfeet Community College, where every room is labeled with a Blackfeet name, has become a new center of tribal knowledge. At the college, after drinking a cup of red willow tea for the bark’s powerful antibiotics, Weatherwax joins his colleagues in teaching Blackfeet ways and how they fit into modern studies such as nursing and energy technology. They also teach the songs and prayers sung and recited when gathering plants for teas, salves and balms.

Many programs reach out to the community beyond the students and many people take courses for the sake of learning rather than a degree.

Beaver Gobert, a motel manager from East Glacier, took a course on the medicinal uses of native plants and says it radically changed his perspective.

“I always used to think there were a lot of weeds around here and someone needed to get out there and spray ‘em,” he says. “Then I took the medicine class at the college and learned all them weeds were medicine.”

Because the Blackfeet are part of the Earth and the primary stewards of the lands they still retain, Weatherwax says the fates of the Blackfeet religion, plants used for traditional healing and the next generation of Real People are indubitably tied.

“It would be very hard to keep our religion alive (without the land) because it is such a huge part of our world,” Weatherwax says. “We’ve been here forever. It’s part of us. We’re part of it.”

Failure & fortune on the frontier

story by **Lily Rabil**
photos by **Shane Bell**

The 1887 Dawes General Allotment Act left many American Indian families with nothing but scattered land and a grim future. But with grit and tenacity, one man turned his mother's allotment into a sprawling ranch.



LACOUNTÉ “Well, I’m proud of my family; they’ve done good,” Bud LaCounte says with a smile. “But I’m also very proud of the accomplishments we’ve done, building ourselves up the way we have.”

He stood in shock next to the combine on top of the hill. He felt the dread welling up in his chest, but he didn’t cry. Willard “Bud” LaCounte rarely cries.

The field was ruined. One hundred acres of wheat flattened during the night by an early September hail. They would have to go without that year. They lost \$6,000 that night and he knew they’d have to sacrifice something.

Bud composed himself and turned back down the hill on his farm near Bainville in Montana’s northeast corner. Venice LaCounte, his wife, was driving up the dirt road in their truck. It could haul 350 bushels of grain and she was expecting to fill it up.

He knew he’d have to tell her. And he knew how much it was going to hurt. He braced himself and went to meet her. It was still early in the morning and they had more work to do. This couldn’t stop them.

He explained what happened, that the golden wheat that stood two feet high across the field just yesterday was reduced to a muddy mess during the night. Venice just cried. They’d have to rely on the milk cows for extra money.

Bud assured her it would be all right. He knew they’d get through it. This, like every other tragedy in their lives, would pass and things would get better.

On a recent spring afternoon, Bud rocks slowly in his recliner in his home in Billings, remembering the worst day on the farm. It takes him a minute to recall the details; he’s not one to dwell on the negative. He prefers to remember good days and good harvests.

The LaCounte family has been through many hardships since their Chippewa ancestors were forced onto the tiny Turtle Mountain Reservation in northern North Dakota in 1882. After the 1887 Dawes Act gave enrolled tribal members 160 acres each, with the intent of making them into farmers and phasing out the reservations, Turtle Mountain could accommodate only a fraction of the enrolled members. Several Chippewa families, including the LaCountes, got allotments in eastern Montana after white settlers had laid claim to land they wanted.

Bud’s mother and father had 160 acres each but the landscape was harsh and the climate brutal. Farming was out of the question for his mother. She had her hands full trying to keep the family of nine children alive. His father was caught trying to steal horses and was sent to prison.

It would take Bud years to make something of his mother’s land. Conditions were harsh for farmers on the Great Plains, Indians and immigrants alike. An arid climate, subzero winters and rocky soil spoiled many dreams. Compounding that, for nomadic Indian

tribes, there was no farming tradition.

Bud isn’t sure how he managed to succeed, to take a 160-acre allotment and turn it into an extensive and successful farming and ranching operation, where others, including his mother and father, failed. “I just guessed,” he says. “Sometimes you miss, sometimes you don’t.”

But more than guessing, it took hard work, the sweat of a whole family.

He likes to remember a time when the farm was green and cattle milled around the crowded feed yard. A time when his oldest child, Larry, still wanted to be a cowboy. When his older daughter, Linda, still followed her mom around the kitchen while his younger daughter, Cynthia, hung onto the fence, taking in every move her father made.

Bud grins as he points to a notepad on the floor. The gold fillings in his teeth catch the sunlight pouring in through the window. He’s writing a book, he says, his history. Bud never liked to talk much about

“ I don’t think the experiment worked because I was born an Indian in 1923, which makes me 87 today, and I’m still an Indian. ”

Bud LaCounte

himself, but Larry says he’s opened up in the last year. Bud’s right hand shakes a little as he points to the floor. His fingers are long and gnarled. His veins stick up beneath his skin and run like snakes up his hands, disappearing beneath the cuff of his striped blue button-down shirt.

He’s a cowboy, though without the hat. He says he got tired of chasing after it after forgetting it on the tractor, in the car, in the house or with the neighbors. Other than that, not much has changed since he retired.

Bud started the farm by renting, and later buying, the allotted 160 acres from his mother. It was his way of supporting her. The operation was small and mostly run by the family. Over the next few years, Bud was able to save up enough money to purchase a neighboring allotment. Larry says his parents were thrifty and cautious not to overspend on indulgences.

After that, Bud added another 160 acres to the farm, and from there, things moved quickly. He bought 440 more acres and paid for them in crops until he met the purchase price of \$18,000. Then he stopped milking cows and started raising cattle. He expanded his crop fields and hired a few people to help out as needed. The farm grew from a few hundred acres, to more than 2,000 by 1973.

By the time he retired and moved to Billings in the late 1980s, land that once sold for \$40 an acre was worth \$200 an acre.

He sold most of the land when he retired, along with the cattle and the machinery. If anybody is going to farm the land, they’re going to have to start from





MANTEL Bud LaCounte sits in his favorite recliner next to the mantel where a portrait of Venice LaCounte is displayed; he was married to her for 67 years and three days. Below the image rests an urn containing her ashes.

scratch, like Bud and Venice did.

Most of his memories are with Venice. They were married for 67 years and three days. When she died, something in Bud died too.

They were driving back from Branson, Mo., where they'd gone to celebrate their anniversary. Her health had turned and they knew she didn't have long to live. She was sitting next to him in the car, arguing with him about her medication. It was making her hair fall out and she wanted to stop taking it.

Bud told her it was keeping her alive and under no circumstances would she stop. He made her promise to call the doctor when they got home.

She promised.

Minutes later she was dead. She collapsed in the passenger seat of their Mercury Marquis. "If she would have had any life left, anything, she would have looked up at me for help," says Bud, "but she couldn't even look at me."

About a week after her death, Bud was taking the car through the wash. Surrounded by darkness, he glanced

over at her seat and saw her sitting there. He drove from the car wash to the nearest dealership and bought a new Mercury Marquis in another color. The car is the only thing that's changed since Venice died.

He stares at a painting of the farm on the opposite wall. The painting hasn't been moved in years, and it never will be if Bud has anything to say about it. Behind his glasses, his eyes begin to water, but he purses his lips and rocks a little faster in the chair. His cowboy boots squeak as he rocks back and forth in his overstuffed tan recliner.

"Sometimes I can still see her crossing the yard," he says, pointing at the painting. His voice shakes as he lets her memory wash over him. He places both hands on the side of his chair and stands. He turns from the painting and looks around the living room.

"This is an awful lot of space for a bachelor," he says. The room is silent but he doesn't notice. His mind is 20 years away, still on the farm in Bainville.

Bud was born near Bainville. Family life is sort of a blur because he spent most of his young life in and out of Indian

boarding schools. When he was 6, he says a Bureau of Indian Affairs agent came to take him away to Fort Totten School in North Dakota. It was the same school they took his mother to so many years before.

"They gathered up a lot of little Indian kids like us, trying to make white folks out of us I guess," Bud says, shrugging.

The boarding schools were set up across the United States. They were designed to take the Indian out of the Indians, to educate them in trades that would help make them self-sufficient. The children were separated by gender. Their hair was cut and they were whipped if they misbehaved. Many children, like Bud, were miles away from home, making family interaction impossible. The boarding schools produced a lost generation and dealt a crushing blow to American Indian tribes across the country.

"I don't think the experiment worked because I was born an Indian in 1923, which makes me 87 today, and I'm still an Indian," he says.

Bud didn't last long at Fort Totten. A few days after school began, he was hospitalized with appendicitis.



VINTAGE LaCounte closes the door to his auto storage facility in Park City, where he keeps his collection of vintage cars. He has restored eight cars or trucks throughout his life. Two of the vehicles were his father's, including a 1939 sunset-orange Chevrolet truck, now in mint condition.

Complications led to months in the hospital and when he was released to return to Bainville for third grade he was already behind most of his classmates.

He was allowed to stay in Bainville with his mother and siblings for a year.

When Bud speaks about his mother, Theresa, it's easy to hear the respect and love he has for the woman who taught him to be proud to be Chippewa. She did her best with what she had, he says. Most of their fruits and vegetables came from cans. Sometimes meals consisted of macaroni noodles with tomato sauce sandwiched between two slices of bread, a meal Bud still fixes on occasion.

But her life was fraught with tragedy. After her husband left she did everything she could to care for her children. But her everything wasn't always enough. After third grade Bud was once again sent to an Indian boarding school, this time to Marty Mission in South Dakota.

Back home there wasn't enough food to go around. Richard and Melford LaCounte were toddlers and suffered from malnutrition. They got sick, and were too weak to

fight. Bud learned of their deaths much later from his sister, who was sent to Marty years after Bud first went.

Bud says the memory of those two boys haunted his mother until the day she died. She never spoke of them until she lived in a nursing home. He says he'd sit with her sometimes and she'd rock back and forth whispering, "Those poor babies. Those poor babies."

She didn't need to elaborate. He knew exactly what she meant. She had nine children; nine mouths to feed; nine lives to nurture, but was on her own.

While Bud was at the mission a truck ran over his legs and again he spent months recuperating. At age 15 he tried to escape, but was caught and punished. Later, two priests threatened him with a whipping.

"I told them they had to get some more help because two of them wasn't going to do it," he says. They finally let him go home.

This time, Bud was two years behind his peers. He intended to go straight to work. He was 15, strong and capable and his family needed support. But the Bainville school

contacted him and made him continue his education. The next year he took two grades worth of courses to catch up.

It wasn't long after that when he met Venice. But her family wasn't happy that she was dating him. After working for a year in Dutch Harbor, Alaska, he returned to Bainville and ran into her father.

"He called me every name anybody could call another person," Bud says. "I wasn't going to go with his daughter, and I was a no-good Indian."

They got into a fight and Bud doesn't remember just who won, but he remembers exactly what happened next. He got to her home as fast as he could.

"We loaded her clothes up and took off," he says, "and then we got married." His voice shakes as he recalls the day. "I'm not proud of that, but it was part of what happened."

From that point on she was always with him. Her family came to accept and admire Bud eventually. Their first child, Larry, was born June 7, 1944. Bud didn't know it right away, however, because he was a world away, on the beaches at Normandy.

Larry was 2 years old by the time Bud returned from World War II. Bud shakes his head and frowns. He says he missed crucial years to bond with his only son, but like so much in his early life, he didn't have a choice. Later, they would grow together on the land.

He looks toward the floor, his eyes lingering momentarily on the tips of his alligator skin boots before his attention returns to the painting of the farm on the wall. He is entranced by it, but not completely consumed by the memories. He tends to focus on two thoughts at a time, making conversations seem disjointed and random to anyone not paying attention.

His main focus is on the farm, but in the back of his mind he's mulling over the comfort of the new boots. They're attractive, but they're not his favorite. They



are, he says, the most uncomfortable pair of boots he's ever bought. They nag at the edges of his mind.

He won't give up on them though. He'll break them in eventually and they'll be perfect. They just need time.

Bud only wears boots. The exception is when he's relaxing in his recliner by the window on the first floor of his home. Then he wears a worn pair of brown bedroom slippers. For now, though, it's the boots.

He rocks slower in the chair and the boots stop squeaking. Thoughts of breaking them in are replaced with memories of Venice, his White Flower. She's a part of that painting, a part of the farm and a part of him.

Venice was with him when Bud developed his strategy for managing the land. The soil on the farm is black

and loamy. It would produce crops and feed cattle, but first layers of rocks and weeds had to be removed. Bud had his eye on the land. He knew, one day, it would fall on him to support his family and he knew he was on his own to figure out how to go about it.

For the first year after his army discharge, the two lived without running water or electricity in a modified sheep wagon on his mother's allotted 160 acres. Venice cooked while Bud hauled rocks, some as big as 50 pounds, to make the fields ready for planting. Larry stayed with his grandmother in Bainville, too young to help in the process.

Together, through sheer will, they groomed the land into something manageable.

Bud points across the room to a bronzed dairy can sitting by the sliding glass doors. Years ago, the can carried cream when Bud bought his first cows on the farm. He hated milking them, but it paid the grocery bill, and together with income from crops, helped them save enough money to buy additional acreage.

But Bud knew he couldn't rely on trust land alone to start a successful farm. Land that's held in trust can't be used for collateral to buy more land because the title is shared with the government. When he stops to think about how he developed his business plan, he smiles and shrugs and blurts out "I don't know." He says it like it's one word. He doesn't know what possessed him to start farming his mother's land. Call it a gut feeling.

His third purchase is what really started the farm. Bud bought 440 acres of land near the allotments and he knew that's where his family's home would be. This wasn't trust land. Until he could build a home on this new land he moved an old one-room schoolhouse onto the property to shelter their growing family.

Larry says he remembers hauling rocks for his dad. As he recalls all the hard work it's easy to see the respect he has for what his dad accomplished. He describes his father as a quiet, determined man. Larry doesn't know all of his secrets, but he's collected bits of the story over the years and treasures the knowledge his father has shared with him.

Larry wanted to take over the farm after Bud retired, but he couldn't afford to maintain it and he wasn't about to ask his father for money.

Bud says Larry doesn't ask for help with anything.

Larry says the same about Bud.

In its prime, the farm was more than 2,000 acres of sprawling grain fields, feed and calving yards and rolling hills. The buildings sit on the 440 acres purchased so many years ago. The house is surrounded by grain silos, a barn, a blacksmith shop and a large empty building where the machines were stored. The view from the house is perfect, overlooking miles of rolling farmland. Not far from the front door is a garden that Venice planted for vegetables. It's bordered by lilac bushes on one side and separates the house from the feed yard where the cattle were confined for fattening just before they went to market. But the farm doesn't quite look the same as Bud remembers it.

Now, the land he hasn't sold is in CRP (Conservation Reserve Program), which gives the soil a chance to recharge and lessens the damage done by years of harvesting crops and grazing cattle.

It doesn't look the same and Bud says it makes him sick. If he could have his way, his youngest daughter Cynthia would paint the buildings and replace the windows. But she's busy with her own career.

Cynthia mirrors her father. Linda looks just like her mother. In many ways Larry is his father's son but infused with his mother's kindness and his father's passion for independence.

The kids know Cynthia will inherit the farm. She lives there



now and maintains the house they grew up in. The girls don't seem to have any opposition to the idea. Larry remains indifferent, for the most part.

He wanted to be a cowboy, working out on the range. He loved watching the cattle, but Bud says Larry never wanted to maintain the crops. Larry quietly and respectfully disagrees.

There are two main components of running a farm, cows and crops. Larry loved the cows, and says he would have tolerated working the crops. But he had to do it on his own, like Bud.

It's 7 p.m. on a Saturday night. Bud sits at a table in the Billings American Legion with a glass of Black Velvet in his hand. He sips it slowly and watches couples spin around the linoleum dance floor as the Cimarron Band churns out another song.

The dancers stick to an area in the middle of a cluster of tables and bar stools. The room is dim, lit by neon signs and blinking lights from keno machines in the corner.

Larry is across town with friends who live across the street from Bud. He's watching the basketball game and losing money on friendly bets. Larry runs on game time. Bud would rather be out dancing.

He and Venice used to go out dancing every weekend. He has a new dancing partner now, who he says is too young. Donna Hill is in her 60s. Donna says she's old enough to make up her own mind about whom she wants to dance with.

He takes another sip of his Black Velvet. "I don't like it," he says, "but that's what Donna ordered for me."

Donna rolls her eyes. "Don't believe a word he says," she shouts, grinning.

The Cimarron Band belts out "There's a Tear in my Beer" and Bud leans closer to Donna. "You ready?" he asks. She nods and follows him from the table and they join the other couples in a two-step around the floor.

Bud is usually in bed by 11 p.m. and up and about by 6 a.m. Tonight, he'll stay out a little too late with Donna. He'll take her home, then settle in for the night.

Usually, the house is empty, but Larry is there tonight. Larry and Bud have the same excuse for not going back to the farm; they're retired. It's too much work for either of them to do alone and they're too stubborn to go about it any other way. They both agree, however, that the oil company needs to hurry up and get a well set up on the farm. Aegis Energy Partners and the Whiting Oil and Gas Corp. are poised to begin drilling on the land. Each family member will receive 20 percent of the profits. Bud holds Venice's share.

Bud says he'll be happy when the drilling starts. Venice was excited to learn oil was on the land, but Bud has no idea what they would have done with the extra money. He thinks he'll set up a scholarship in her name at Rocky Mountain College in Billings. Venice would have wanted it that way.



PAINTING At his home in Billings, LaCounte holds a painting of the family farm at its finest. **FRIENDS** In between dancing at the American Legion Club, LaCounte and a few of his close friends find some time to laugh and tell jokes. **DANCING** LaCounte loves to dance. Almost every Friday and Saturday night, he and his dancing partner, Donna Hill, enjoy the twang of some country western music, a few drinks, and a lot of fun at the American Legion Club.

Hidden treasure

story by **Kate Whittle** photos by **Kat Franchino**

The key to economic prosperity on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation could lie beneath its surface

Most of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation hasn't changed much since Gen. George Custer and his cavalry came trotting across the plains in their blue wool uniforms and over a rise to see thousands of Cheyenne and Sioux Indians camped out for a sun dance ceremony. Except for a curving two-lane highway and a handful of small towns, the rolling, sagebrush-dotted plains of southeastern Montana look today as they have for thousands of years.

Just a few dozen feet under the Cheyenne dirt sits about 56 billions of tons of coal, part of the enormous Fort Union formation underlying eastern Montana. It's hard not to notice it; it can be seen in eroded hillsides from the highway and the black stuff even sometimes comes up in reservation drinking water. The reservation is surrounded by mining, from the Colstrip plant up north, to the Decker mine in the west, the Wyoming coal bed methane fields to the south, and soon, Otter Creek mining to the east. The Cheyenne have struggled against development for decades. Like many Indian tribes today, they struggle economically with an estimated unemployment rate of 60 percent. But is cutting open Mother Earth worth the jobs it would bring?

"This isn't about people. This is about land. The land

won't be there," says Steve Brady, chairman of the Northern Cheyenne cultural commission. As he speaks he gestures out the window of his sister's home, where car headlights flash by in the early spring dusk on Highway 212. In 1876, thousands of Indians traveled across that very plain before being attacked by Custer at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, now a historic site on the Crow Reservation just adjacent to the Cheyenne.

Brady is semi-retired, but spends much of his time working to get historic sites designated. A fifth-generation descendant of venerated Cheyenne Chief Dull Knife, he talks with a deep, slow voice, and looks stern, save for the odd occasions when he'll crack a joke and grin.

Asked about the state of coal development on the reservation now, Brady starts with a history lesson. To understand where the tribe is today, you must understand where they came from, he says. In 1876, just months after the Battle of the Greasy Grass—the Indians' name for the fight at Little Bighorn—the cavalry attacked Dull Knife's band at the Powder River in southeast Montana. The government forced the Cheyenne to move from Montana to Indian Territory, what later would become Oklahoma.

But after more and more of his band fell ill and died, Dull Knife and his followers tried to make their way back home. Intercepted, they were imprisoned at Fort Robinson, Neb., where the army tried to starve them into submission. They made an escape and most of the band were killed, but a few survivors, including Dull Knife, eventually made it to the southeastern corner of Montana, to a reservation that has been their home ever since.

"My great-grandparents fought hard for this," he says. "They fought hard for this land."

That history, Brady says, is why coal development now is so contentious. Destroying the land that his ancestors fought and died for is wrong.

But in the last few years, tribal sentiment seems to be swinging the other way.

To see why people want coal, Steve Small, the director of economic development for the tribe, points outside the Little Wolf tribal office conference room to a view of Lame Deer, where tribal headquarters are located. Inside, the office is furnished with a large wooden table and comfortable chairs. Maps of coal tracts line the walls. Outside, the town is a sprawl of trailers and mostly dirt roads. Packs of

dogs wander down the middle of the streets. Broken-down cars sit in front of trailers with boarded-up windows. A dirt trench alongside Cheyenne Avenue serves as a sidewalk. Most of the shops are shuttered.

For health care, shopping, movies or even a good steak, reservation residents usually drive two hours to Billings. The unemployment rate means that at all hours of the day, groups of jobless people wander the streets or stand around the administration offices.

Small says coal could fix those problems, and that's why the tribe elected President Leroy Spang in 2008. Spang, a retired coal miner, is hard of hearing and when he speaks it's in a quiet, hoarse voice. In meetings, Small often speaks for him, beginning sentences with, "The president thinks..." or "Mr. Spang here..."

The tribe could make millions of dollars from coal development. "Nothing grandiose," Small explains. "We just want a standard of living."

He believes coal mining is the tribe's only real option for improving its economy. They've considered tourism, but the reservation doesn't even have a motel for travelers. And there's no money for infrastructure. "They won't let

us tax here and they wonder why we don't have roads," he says.

The worst case scenario? Small says they know coal mining won't be a benefit if companies come in, take the coal and leave behind some money. And Small doesn't want to see enormous plots of the reservation torn up or any historic sites damaged.

A chart on the wall projects 2024 as the earliest that a Cheyenne mining operation could be up and running. "This isn't something we'll see, this is something our children and grandchildren will see," Small says.

To finally escape a history of oppression, the Cheyenne need a measure of independence in how their resource is developed. Small and Spang envision bringing in experts to teach them how to mine their own coal and run their own power plant. With the money, they'd fund tribal education and infrastructure, and give per capita payments to enrolled tribal members. Tribal members would be employed. Small and Spang's grandchildren could have guaranteed free education and retirement funds.

The obstacles to this are many, but the first and most difficult is tribal resistance. Small has a memo, dated



1991, about the tribe's plans to develop coal. It didn't go through then because an anti-coal president took over in 1992. The same political swing could very well happen again, but Small wants to make sure the tribe gets a legal contract for development signed so as to prevent another plan from stagnating. Next is the tribe's Class I air status, which means the quality is the same designation as accorded national parks. When Montana Power Co. wanted



PREDICTIONS Northern Cheyenne Tribal President Leroy Spang looks over a timeline for the tribe's prospective coal development. The tribe hopes to have the infrastructure for coal development complete by 2024.



to expand its power-generating plant at Colstrip, just north of the reservation, in the early 1970s, the tribe fought all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court for the pristine airshed designation. It won, but now that victory could impact the tribe’s own coal development. Winds don’t have borders, Small points out, which is why Class I air status is tough to enforce. “Really, it’s Class 2 anyway,” Small says of the air quality on the reservation.

The concept of strip mining, which requires removing acres of soil to get at coal underneath, turns off many Cheyenne. However, Spang believes reclamation is the key to good mining practice. “They reclaim better than in the ’70s,” he says. “Now, after they mine a strip, they have to cover it.”

Small says he understands people’s concerns about their traditions and beliefs, but they still need a better standard of living. “How is it giving up your culture to walk on a sidewalk?” he asks.

Other tribal members agree that they don’t feel they’re violating their culture to develop coal.

“They say the buffalo went into the ground when the white people came,” says Vincent White Crane, a retired

coal miner. “The buffalo is coming back in the form of coal, and we’re just sitting on it.” White Crane, a soft spoken man with short graying hair and a tattoo of “Jeanie,” his wife’s name, on his left hand, worked as a liaison between the tribe and Westmoreland Coal Co. for part of his career.

About 50 Cheyenne currently work at the mine in Colstrip. A coal miner can make more than \$50,000 a year. In contrast, average annual income for reservation residents employed by private business is about \$14,000, according to the Montana Department of Labor. White Crane says the good wages from mining notwithstanding, there’s a high turnover rate in Colstrip because it’s an adjustment for tribal members to learn how to work in mainstream American jobs.

“People think you have to give up your culture to work somewhere,” he says. And “Indian time” can often be a very real issue. “To survive, you have to learn to be on time,” he says.

White Crane wants to see the Cheyenne prosper from their coal seams, but he’s not sure it will happen. “We need a business arm of the government,” he insists. “These elected officials don’t know what business is all about.”

He’s not the only pro-coal tribal member to worry about what the tribal government is doing. Spang may have a poster with projected dates for operating plants, but many people on the reservation are in the dark. Diane McLean works for the Lame Deer Head Start preschool. The 62-year-old says she’s been hearing talk about coal her entire life. “He’s been there two years and we’re still the same place as before,” she remarks about Spang’s presidency. McLean believes that with careful mining and reclamation, coal can help the tribe more than it will hurt.

“Everybody needs food,” she says. “Culture isn’t putting food on your table.”

McLean is just one person who points to Colstrip as an example of what prosperity can mean in other areas, including education. She graduated from Colstrip High School, and most of her grandchildren attend it now, choosing to make the nearly 50-mile round trip from Lame Deer every day. Tribal members spent years getting the Colstrip school district to accept students from the reservation, she says, and for good reason.

“It’s simple. They make AYP, adequate yearly progress, every year, and Lame Deer doesn’t,” she says.

Colstrip, a town of 2,400 people, owes its existence to coal. A local radio stations plays on that importance in its call letters, KOAL. Colstrip is dominated by enormous, looming coal-fire-generating smokestacks named 1, 2, 3 and 4, which pump steam, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide into the sky at all hours of the day. It’s the second-largest coal-fired facility west of the Mississippi. The plant, which has a generating capacity of 2,094 megawatts, is fed in part by an adjoining coal strip mine completely hidden from public view by mountains and miles of fencing. Much of the area that’s visible now was once part of the mine, but was reclaimed with sod. Tribal members like McLean and White Crane say Colstrip shows how reclamation can be done.

To others, Colstrip is a horrifying vision of the future. For cultural consultants Lynette Two Bulls and her husband Phillip Whiteman, the arguments about reclamation and benefits from mining are empty promises. “Yeah, they covered up the land again,” Two Bulls says, “but it’s been changed. You can’t put back what’s gone. You can’t put back the spirits.”

While all talk about developing Cheyenne coal is just conjecture at this point, what is clear is that the tribe will be affected by all the mining off the reservation. East of the reservation boundary are the controversial Otter Creek coal tracts, which will be mined in the near future. Stipulations

in the proposed Otter Creek mining contract state that the tribe will receive remunerative payment, since the area is historically important and Otter Creek itself merges into the Tongue River, which marks the eastern border of the reservation.

Other residents worry about whether coal bed meth-

“Everybody needs food. Culture isn’t putting food on your table.”

Diane McLean

ane in Wyoming and coal mining in Decker is hurting the tribe already, by increasing the salinity of the Tongue River.

And in a curious twist that’s been more than 100 years in the making, the tribe could receive money from coal development hundreds of miles away, in Roundup.

Great Northern Properties of Houston, Texas, owned the rights to some tracts in the reservation area, having purchased them in 1992 from the Burlington Northern Railroad. BN had the mineral rights, though the Northern Cheyenne had long argued that the rights should have been turned over to the tribe. Recently the rights were swapped for rights to federal land in the central part of the state, near Roundup.

Great Northern says it will retain 60 percent of the royalties from leasing the estimated 145 million tons of coal and give the remainder to the Northern Cheyenne tribe. The land swap has to clear Congress and that legislation is pending.

Tribal officials are making efforts to move the tribe toward coal development. The tribal council approved a resolution in January to formally request a division of the U.S. Department of Interior to give advice for the “the tribe’s initiative to plan environmentally sound development of its energy and resources.”

Councilman Jace Killsback was leaving the tribal headquarters on an afternoon in April after a council vote to form an exploratory energy committee. He said he’s anti-coal, but he wants to be there to make sure it’s done right. Recent tribal resolutions are just a very early step in a long process. But he can see the future.

“Looks like it’s going to happen,” he says.



POWER A man bikes past Colstrip’s sprawling power plant.



he edge of extinction

Tribal members fight to save bull trout from invasive fish in Flathead Lake

At the crack of dawn, the hum of pickup trucks disrupts the calm silence of the Blue Bay Campground. One by one, fishermen back their boats into the crisp, cold waters of Flathead Lake. They are ready for the day's first cast.

Many anglers will spend the entire day fishing, leaving only when the dusk skies darken. During Mack Days, a month-long fishing derby every spring and fall, few leave disappointed. As they return to shore, they carry with them loads of lake trout—too many for one family to consume. Anglers bring their catch to a lake-shore cabin to be tallied. Hundreds of fish with silvery scales and beady eyes are placed on ice—their bellies swollen with air from the pressure of being pulled up from deep water. The fish will be filleted and distributed to local food banks.

These fishermen's fortune is a symbol of good intentions gone awry.

Lake trout, or mackinaws, have overtaken the massive body of water. They are a driving force in the dwindling numbers of native fish, such as westslope cutthroat and bull trout, found in Flathead Lake. For countless generations, it was the native bull trout that could be counted on to provide food in times of need. The bull trout has so much cultural significance to members of the Flathead Reservation's Salish and Kootenai tribes, it's been referred to as the grizzly bear of the water.

Tribal fisherman Bill Swaney remembers when people could come to Blue Bay and catch bull trout. Today, he fishes out of the same bay and has caught more than 1,500 mackinaw. In all that time, he's hooked only one bull trout.

"I know the fishery is way out of whack and I know in my lifetime there were people who came right down here and caught bull trout," he says. "It's nice to think at some point we could come out and catch a variety of species and not just lake trout."

Swaney takes part in Mack Days, which the tribes sponsor to entice anglers to help control the lake trout population. Participants can win up to \$150,000 in cash and prizes.

Held since 2002, Mack Days has grown from an event that drew 80 anglers who caught 888 fish to a highly competitive derby that last spring saw more than 700 anglers haul in 12,651 lake trout.

Though more than 100,000 lake trout have been removed from Flathead Lake, tribal scientists say the fishing event has only managed to keep the numbers of threatened bull trout from further decline. Studies estimated bull trout in the Flathead Basin numbered about 20,000 in the early 1950s. The construction of Hungry Horse Dam in 1953 blocked off spawning routes for many of the migratory fish and by 1982 the estimated population had dropped to 13,000. Today fisheries biologists put the number at 3,000 adult bull trout. Lake trout populations are thought to be near half-a-million.

...

Germaine White has dedicated countless hours spreading the word about the plight of bull trout as the information and education specialist for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Fish, Wildlife, Recreation, and Conservation Department. The Salish-Kootenai woman has gray-black hair and her hazel eyes sparkle. As she speaks, a calm confidence quietly commands attention.

Thirty years ago, when her daughters were young, White moved to a home near Mission Creek. She took her children to the headwaters of the creek to watch bull trout swim, spawn and jump near the falls.

"There are some things in nature you will always remember because they are so magnificent," White says.

Today, there are no more bull trout in Mission Creek.

Bull trout are a sensitive species that need clean, cold water free of sediment, nearby trees and natural pools.

This native fish can travel more than 100 miles to spawn. They have pink, orange and yellow spots, a square tail and lack the black dorsal fin markings of brook trout.

In the past century, settlers have hurt the habitat bull trout need to survive. They've built dams, dug irrigation ditches, grazed animals and built homes along spawning streams. Non-native species have added new challenges to the fish's struggle to survive in Montana waters.

Preserving and protecting native animals is on the

story by **Breeana Laughlin** photos by **Megan Gibson**

top of the list of tribal members' natural resource efforts.

Historically, the Salish, Kootenai and Pend d'Oreilles tribes were hunters, subsisting primarily on big game—bison, elk, moose and deer. They also dug food plants such as bitterroot and camas. But one reason the confederated tribes didn't have a starvation winter or a famine like some of the other tribes in Montana was an abundance of available protein—bull trout.

"For the tribes that's been hugely important," says White. "We knew where the fisheries were, we knew where the streams were, where there were upwellings and the water was cold and there were a lot of fish. We knew how to deal with seasonal abundance and we knew how to take advantage of this high quality protein source."

Preserving natural resources remains embedded in the way of life on the Flathead Reservation.

Flathead Lake, the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi, whose southern half is inside the reservation boundary, continues to draw in new residents and droves of tourists during the summer months. Picturesque islands rise out of the deep, cold waters of the lake. On calm days the water reflects large pines and jagged rocks along the shoreline and mirrors the majestic Mission Mountains that tower above the valley.

In the town of Polson on the south end of the lake, Tom McDonald works alongside White as the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' Fish, Wildlife, Recreation and Conservation division manager. McDonald has a big smile and outgoing personality, but when it comes to getting the job done, he's a no-nonsense kind of man.

McDonald fished for bull trout as a young man with his father. He was taught how the fish were interwoven into the lives of his ancestors, who had witnessed the sheer number of bull trout in the Flathead Lake and River before Kerr Dam was built on the southwest corner of the lake during the Great Depression.

Conserving native species isn't just a job for the fisheries manager, it's also a personal obligation. McDonald wants to make sure his children and grandchildren have the same opportunity to share the experiences he's had. Despite the many efforts of tribal scientists and managers, bull trout populations in some lakes, rivers and creeks on the reservation have disappeared.

"Isolated populations have blinked out under my watch without the ability of me to stop or change it, because it was too late. So I lost," he says. "And I don't like losing."

It's not something he's about to let happen again.

Bull trout numbers have been dwindling for decades, but tribal scientists pinpoint the latest and most devastating crash of the bull trout population to the introduction of mysis shrimp. This mostly translucent, less than inch-long crustacean is also used for food in home aquariums.



SEARCHING Francine Pierre and her sons Shane and Isaac peer over the edge of the docks at Blue Bay looking for any sign of fish.

Between 1968 and 1976, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks introduced mysis shrimp into the tributaries of the Flathead system. By the 1980s, the tiny aquatic creatures had made their way into the lake.

Mysis shrimp were thought to be a good food source for native trout, as well as kokanee salmon. But what was intended to be a win-win for native fish populations ended up turning the fragile lake ecosystem upside down.

The shrimp live near the bottom of the lake during the day, exactly where young lake trout feed. And instead of being food for kokanee, the shrimp competed with the kokanee for zooplankton.

Consequently, fish that were intended to benefit from mysis shrimp declined dramatically, while lake trout populations boomed.

The kokanee salmon population, which was once the biggest fishery in Montana, became extinct. Bald eagles, which fed on the spawning kokanee, dissipated. Algae blooms blossomed because there were fewer zooplankton to consume algae. As lake trout feasted on the shrimp, their survival rate skyrocketed.

Because lake trout are an opportunistic predator they will eat most anything they come across, including bull trout. Bull trout also eat other fish to survive but are out-competed by the massive number of lake trout in the system.

The collapse of bull trout in the Flathead Lake system contributed to the federal government’s decision to list the fish as threatened in 1998.

“Right away, the majority of scientists recognized the importance of doing something immediately,” says McDonald. “They were on such a nosedive we were thinking it was almost too late.”

The Flathead tribes manage the south half of the lake while the northern half is state-controlled. The lake can’t be divided down the middle, so the two governments came up with a collaborative plan to restore bull trout.

In 2000, they started a 10-year joint management plan to restore the bull trout and westslope cutthroat populations. Although the tribe favored rapid reduction of lake trout, members of the public had other ideas.

More than 90 percent of the 280 people who com-



mented on the plan said they wanted a conservative conservation approach, while only a small minority favored rapid reductions of lake trout using aggressive methods like commercial fishing and netting.

“Immediate actions weren’t taken based upon the best science, due to the concerns of charter fisherman and other folks that have enjoyed lake trout, because it was a shock to them,” McDonald says.

Although plans for netting were delayed, the tribes continued their work to restore bull trout. They implemented Mack Days and completed major habitat restoration projects, including a multimillion-dollar project on the Jocko River drainage. The tribes restored habitat in and around the river, and bought land to keep the river healthy.

“It’s been a tremendous conservation effort,” says Mark Deleray, a fisheries biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Education has also been a major component of tribal efforts to conserve bull trout. The tribes published a storybook for schoolteachers to read in classrooms. This intricately illustrated, colorful book takes students on a field trip to the Jocko River to learn about the importance of bull trout. A field journal was created for older students and adults to record their personal experiences with nature on the Flathead Reservation, and an interactive DVD highlights the cultural significance of bull trout.

“We can spend millions of dollars on restoration, but if the next generation doesn’t understand how profoundly important it is, if they don’t understand the gift of water and bull trout the elders have passed on to us, they will have no interest in restoration and maintaining this valuable project,” says White.

Tribal fisheries employees say with all of the strategies they’ve put in place, they’re disappointed with the slow speed of bull trout recovery.

Last year, the tribes introduced a lake trout netting plan, but during public meetings, they were pressured to hold off until other options could be explored and an environmental assessment could be conducted in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act.

“It’s very frustrating,” says Rich Janssen, the tribes’ natural



POPULATION Rich Folsom tags a lake trout with an electronic chip that helps the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes’ biologists keep tabs on population estimates. During Mack Days anglers who catch tagged fish win cash prizes. **FLATHEAD LAKE** Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Natural Resource manager Rich Janssen, left, and Fish, Wildlife, Recreation and Conservation division manager Tom McDonald sit by Flathead Lake.



NETS Rich Folsom holds his net steady waiting for a young fisherman to transfer his lake trout. Fishermen donate their fish to be tagged and released back into Flathead Lake or for food for area food banks.

resource manager. “We came up with joint a plan with the state in 2000. Here we are almost 12 years later, and we are ready to move forward.”

FWP biologist Deleray acknowledges that collaboration has both benefits and drawbacks. Working cooperatively is not a new experience for either entity, but differences in opinion slowed progress on the bull trout recovery co-management plan.

“In many ways we work together and are very successful. We have completed quite a bit of work that has benefited habitat and species,” Deleray says. “In other areas we do have some disagreements that make it more challenging and generally progress slower.”

One group strongly opposed to removal of lake trout is charter fishermen.

Commercial fishing is not allowed on the reservation’s half of the lake, but about a dozen charter businesses operate on the lake’s northern waters. Lake trout are a major draw to their business.

“Those who are promoting the killing of all of these fish

are ruining my business,” says Lakeside charter fisherman Patrick Campanella. He’s a 30-year veteran fishing guide who has been charter fishing on Flathead Lake for about five years.

In the few years he’s been fishing on Flathead Lake, he says he’s already noticed a decline in the lake trout catch.

“They’ve already destroyed one fishery and now they are in the process of destroying another,” he says, referring to the kokanee.

If the lake becomes a single fishery even trophy lake trout would eventually disappear, McDonald says. That’s not only bad for the Flathead Lake ecosystem, it’s also bad for tourism and the economy, he adds.

Tribal fisheries managers are sensitive about public opinion on lake trout removal, but are not about to give up on their management plans.

“None of our plans are shelf art,” McDonald says. “A lot of management agencies will go through the exercise, do it for a while and then forget about it. It’s just another file on a shelf. We don’t operate that way.”

An interdisciplinary team of tribal fisheries biologists and state FWP employees are analyzing what actions to consider next.

One option is trapping live fish through a funnel system. This technique greatly reduces the likelihood of catching and killing native fish, but it’s also expensive. Also on the list is gill netting. Netting is controversial because native fish can also get caught. However, McDonald says gill netting can be targeted and site specific to limit the number of desirable fish netted. It’s also the most efficient and inexpensive way to remove lake trout, he says.

Gill netting has been used for research in Montana but as a fish removal method the practice is fairly new.

Although it’s still not clear how many lake trout will be removed from Flathead Lake, it is clear that the tribe isn’t about to let native bull trout disappear from the reservation.

“It’s part of who you are. It’s part of your culture. It’s part of your history,” Janssen says. “You don’t want to lose who you are. You don’t want to lose that connection.”