

REGAINING GROUND



Montana tribes exercise sovereignty for more than land

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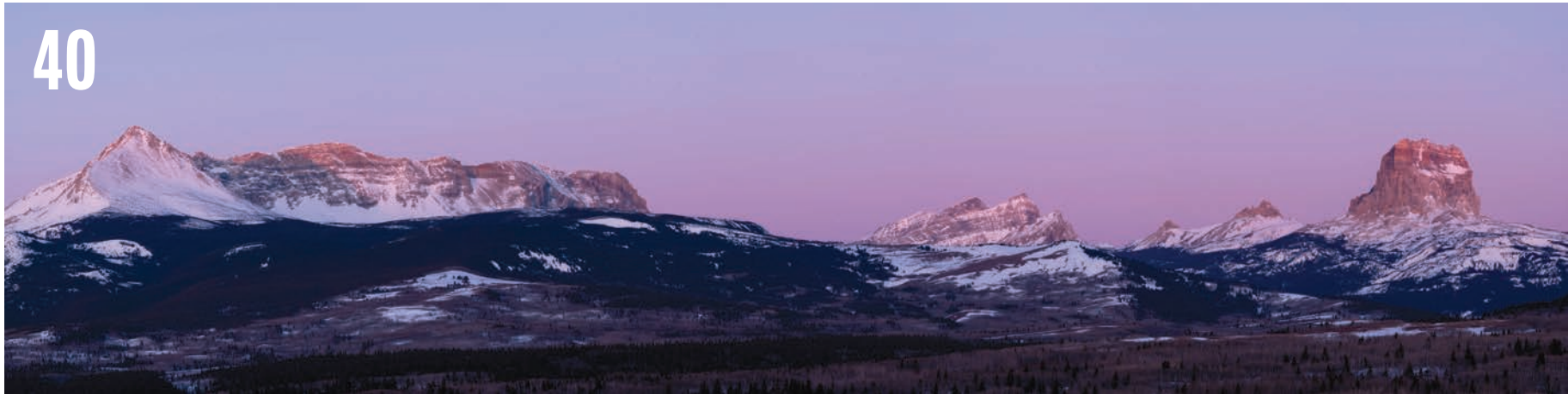


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8 **FORT PECK**
The Assiniboine and Sioux fight to reclaim sacred items and remains.

14 **NORTHERN CHEYENNE**
The Tsis tsis'tas look to the sky for renewable energy.

19 **FLATHEAD**
Salish and Kootenai envision homeownership for their middle class.

24 **FORT BELKNAP**
After establishing the basis for tribal water rights more than a century ago, the Aaniiih and Nakoda tribes close in on a \$1.2 billion settlement.

32 **ROCKY BOY'S**
The Chippewa Cree work to revitalize their languages through newly formed immersion program.

38 **LITTLE SHELL**
Little Shell Chippewa Tribe develop land with federal funds.

40 **BLACKFEET**
The Aamsskáápipikani implement first U.S. co-management conservation program between a tribe and the National Park Service.

THE LANDBACK MOVEMENT

stretches from the physical return of Indigenous homelands to the strengthening of tribal sovereignty. It's a movement that has been ramping up for a long time — some say since 1492. Yet, the gears are turning, and LandBack is gaining momentum.

With the appointment of Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, Laguna Pueblo, as and the first Indigenous person to run the government's 420 million acres of federal lands, LandBack is on the agenda for many tribes.

The Native News Honors Project traveled to Montana's seven reservations and 12 tribes to see what new progress they have made in the LandBack movement. While some tribes are acquiring new land, others harness the movement through sovereignty

The Aaniiih and Nakoda of Fort Belknap are the closest

they have ever been to a water settlement, which should alleviate the reservation's aging water systems and return hundreds of acres to the tribes.

The Aamsskáápipikani tribe has teamed up with the National Park Service to pilot a co-management program on the eastern side of Glacier National Park — the first of its kind — which will allow for the return of bison into the Crown of the Continent.

The Little Shell Chippewa Tribe, which received federal recognition in 2019, has launched new housing and food sovereignty programs to bolster the tribe's basic needs. The Chippewa Cree tribe graduated its first class of Cree speakers amid a decline in fluency.

Officials at the Salish and Kootenai housing department hope to solve high interest rates for first time homeowners on the Flathead reservation — which has become a boom town for out-of-state residents.

Since Northern Cheyenne owns 99% of its internal reservation lands, one of its newest projects is to build solar arrays that will lower the power bill for some members. For the Assiniboine and Sioux on Fort Peck, one historic preservation officer is leading the charge to museums and universities across the country to retrieve lost and stolen possessions, including their ancestral remains.

All of Montana's tribes are engaging in some part of the LandBack movement, exercising sovereignty and regaining ground in more ways than one.

Sincerely,

*Editor Griffen Smith
and the Montana Native News
Honors Project Staff*

MONTANA RESERVATIONS AND TRIBES



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Native News Honor Project is reported, photographed, edited and designed by students at the University of Montana School of Journalism. This is the 32nd annual edition. The team appreciates the advice and counsel for the project received from Kate Schimel, news and investigations editor at High Country News; Anna V. Smith, associate editor for the High Country News Indigenous affairs desk; and Kalen Goodluck, photographer and investigative journalist. We also appreciate the assistance of the students in Dennis Swibold's News Editing class.

Funding support for the 2023 publication came from the University of Montana School of Journalism and the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends and values of importance to Montanans.

If you have comments about the project, email christine.trudeau@umontana.edu, jason.begay@umontana.edu, or jeremy.lurgio@umontana.edu or write to Native News, School of Journalism, 32 Campus Drive, Missoula, MT 59812.

File map by Amelia Hagen-Dillon

Print Editor

Griffen Smith

Photo Editor

Ridley Hudson

Print Designer

McKenna Johnson

Web Designer & Social Media

Nance Beston

Assistant

Dylan Fullerton

Advisors

Jeremy Lurgio

Christine Trudeau

Blackfeet

Chloe Olsgaard

Andy Mephram

Crow

Aislin Tweedy

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Dyan Youpee reads a document she is about to fax from the Cultural Resource Center. Youpee spends much of her time at the office.

"My staff and I were talking, and we were thinking if we had cots, maybe we could sleep in here," she said.

THE LONG RETURN

The Assiniboine and Sioux fight to reclaim sacred items and remains

STORY BY **HALEY YARBOROUGH**

PHOTOS BY **CHRIS LODMAN**

RESTING ON a cabinet behind Dyan Youpee's desk is a framed hand drawing of her plans for the future. Six circles surround a sketch of a crescent moon and the sun, each circle dedicated to a different part of her tentative map for a new Cultural Resource Complex for the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, according to Youpee.

The seven sections etched onto the paper represent the Seven Council Fire or the Oceti Šakowin Oyate; the confederacy of Native Na-

tions that speak three different dialects of the same language: Nakota, Dakota and Lakota. Youpee is affiliated with all three nations.

The idea for the complex came to Youpee in a dream two years ago. When Youpee told her father about it, he said to draw it out, then jokingly asked how his hair looked in her dream. She said he wasn't there.

"He told me that's how you know I'm not going to be there to witness that," Youpee said. "But man, more than ever I wish I could have worked for my dad."

For the last five years, Youpee, 36, has worked as the director of the Cultural Resource Department and volunteered as a Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux tribes, working to repatriate items and remains from museums,

universities and other institutions.

Currently working on a multitude of repatriation cases, Youpee said the work had been far from easy.

Across the country, museums, universities and other institutions have been slow to repatriate items and human remains to Fort Peck, a challenge similar to many tribes across the United States. The Cultural Resource Department office currently holds cataloged and uncatalogued items from institutions and private collectors across the U.S., according to Youpee. Youpee is also currently working on repatriating remains from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. She said it's not only vital to have these items and remains returned, but also to have a place to put them. The Fort Peck Tribes have always had space for repatri-

ated remains, and their new cemetery will add to that with a designated space for them.

"Everything has to tie back to the land," Youpee said. "When it comes to objects, people, even animals, things are created by whatever is buried in the land."

Despite the challenges Youpee currently faces, she could not imagine doing any other work. Youpee said her work is "generational" in the sense she carries on the legacy of her father, Darrell "Curley" Youpee. Youpee's father founded the Cultural Resource Dept. in 1995 and worked as director until 2017. He passed away in 2021, but Youpee has carried on his work, shouldering many of the challenges he faced as director.

Amid all her repatriation efforts, Youpee said one of her most daunting tasks has been

working to repatriate items and remains from one of the world's largest museums: the Smithsonian.

This past January, Youpee led a team of more than 10 tribal members and Cultural Resource Department staff to examine items and remains at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C. She was surprised by the vast number of Lakota, Nakota and Dakota items held there.

"I could have just looked at all these pictures online, but it did mean something to touch them, touch them and tell them I'm going to come back," Youpee said.

While Youpee plans to get repatriated items returned to Fort Peck on loan from the Museum of the American Indian, she has not yet filed for repatriation from either museum. With a small staff and an office Youpee hopes to expand, she stressed that institutions need to make the process easier for tribes seeking to repatriate.

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Many institutions, including the Smithsonian, hold art, artifacts and remains that can be traced to the 19th century when the United States removed Native Americans from their homelands for westward expansion, often encouraging the looting of Indigenous remains, funerary objects and cultural items.

Shannon O'Loughlin, the Chief Executive for the Association of American Indian Affairs and a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, said in addition to these items and remains being exploited for purposes of "research," they were also exploited for profit. Many objects obtained by the Smithsonian in the 1800s were dispersed to schools, museums and private collections across North, Central and South America.

"The U.S. was seeking to dismember native homelands and native bodies for scientific purposes, but also for commercial interests," O'Loughlin said. "So along with the science, there was also a burgeoning market economy, selling tribal antiquities, which were funerary objects, which were human remains and sacred objects. They became trophies of war."

In the late 1980s, the Smithsonian found its reputation at risk after revealing it held 18,500 Native American human remains. Despite anthropologist's defenses to keep items and remains in museums' possession, mounting pressure on the Smithsonian in 1989 prompted the creation of the United States' first repatriation law, the National Museum of the American Indian Act, which called to repatriate thousands of skeletal remains to their tribes.

In 1990, the U.S. established its second repatriation law, the Native American Graves and Protection Act, or NAGPRA, a kind of mandate for federally-funded agencies and museums to return Native American human remains and certain cultural items to tribes upon assessment, including funerary objects, sacred ceremonial materials and items of tribal patrimony.

Around 62% of the Smithsonian is federally funded as of 2021, but it falls under the former NMAI Act, according to the Smithsonian website.

Of the Smithsonian Institution's 19 individual museums, only the Smithsonian's Museum of the American Indian and Museum of Natural History hold collections to which the repatriation legislation applies. The two museums maintain separate repatriation programs with unique policies and procedures.

For Fort Peck's Cultural Resource Department, this resulted in a vastly different experience with both museums.

Youpee said her experience with the Museum of Natural History was frustrating, while she found her time with the Museum of the American Indian far more pleasant and accommodating. Over four days, the Cultural Resource Dept. visited with human remains taken from Montana and combed through hundreds of objects, according to Youpee.

Youpee said while at the Museum of Natural History, she had to parallel the descriptions of a certain object with those provided by "collectors" and "looters." She recalled how a drum was confused with a tambourine, but she had to keep the description as "tambourine" to provide a description "in the context it was found."

"I don't know how anyone thinks they can tell us what an item is when we're the ones that have them hanging on our walls, that we utilize on a daily basis," Youpee said.

Bill Billeck, the Museum of Natural History Repatriation program manager, said errors in the descriptions often occur because of the "inadequate" descriptions provided by the people who sent the item to the Smithsonian.

For remains, the repatriation process is relatively straightforward, unless a remain is "culturally modified" or altered to become part of another object. Because human remains are not defined under the National Museum of the American Indian Act of 1989, Billeck said the line between human remains and cultural objects can be blurred if something is culturally modified.

Objects are a little more complicated. The Smithsonian currently holds nearly 155 million objects, works of art and specimens, and approximately 146 million belong to the Museum of Natural History, according to the Smithsonian Website. Because of the sheer quantity of items it holds, Billeck said that sometimes the objects have no descriptions, the descriptions are wrong or the descriptions are generalized.

"In most cases, the descriptions are very generic so someone can search for the item," Billeck said. "But they may not be culturally relevant to restitution. It may say something is a bag, but what kind of bag? We may not know what kind of bag."

For the repatriation program at the Museum of Natural History to become more efficient, Billeck said the Smithsonian will likely have to increase the number of staff in the repatriation office.

The Smithsonian has made available for repatriation the remains of more than 6,000 individuals, 250,000 funerary objects and 1,400 sacred items of cultural patrimony as of 2020, according to the Smithsonian website. With around seven employees, Billeck hopes to add at least two more staff members to the repatri-



Dyan Youpee points to a display case put together by an intern at the Cultural Resource Center in Poplar. Interns work with textiles, photographs and historical documents.



Repatriated beadwork and feather objects, including arrows, sit on display at the Fort Peck Cultural Resource Center in Poplar. "Every time the thunder or lightning hits the ground, we take all of our feather objects, everything and anything that has a feather on it, we take it outside. That's how we wash them. So, like, you wouldn't see somebody like the Smithsonian do that," Dyan Youpee said.

ation team. He said managing repatriation is a heavy burden to manage alone.

"We are responsible for repatriating one of the largest collections of human remains in the United States," Billeck said. "We have a lot of work to do."

FIGHTING FOR CHANGE

While in the U.S. capital, Youpee and two other tribal members called Sen. Jon Tester's office to talk about their experience with the Museum of Natural History's repatriation process.

Currently, Tester is working to craft a 2024 fiscal appropriation bill that directs the Smithsonian to improve its repatriation policy with the tribes and other ways to improve the repatriation process, according to a written statement from his office.

Fort Peck Tribal Chairman Floyd Azure also plans to visit Washington D.C. to meet with congressional representatives and the Museum of Natural History to discuss their repatriation policies and procedures.

Azure is currently serving his second consecutive term for the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes.



"There are certain things that we can ask (the institutions) to do, but a lot of the time they tell me they can't do anything because of federal regulations."

FLOYD AZURE, FORT PECK
ASSINIBOINE AND SIOUX
TRIBAL CHAIRMAN

"...People have waited long enough for the ancestors. I think they need to understand how much pain it causes for members of the tribe."

CINDY MORALES, POPLAR HIGH
SCHOOL ADVISOR, FORMER
SMITHSONIAN AND FORT PECK
CULTURAL RESOURCE CENTER
INTERN



He's known Youpee for around five years and worked with her father before he passed away. In his experience with talking with institutions about repatriation, he said there's often not much he can do.

"There are certain things that we can ask (the institutions) to do, but a lot of the time they tell me they can't do anything because of federal regulations," Azure said.

The implications of repatriating with the Smithsonian is a reality Cindy Morales knows well.

Morales is a non-tribal member from Walla Walla, Washington, who served as an intern and did contract work for the Museum of Natural History Repatriation office before she became an intern and the museum coordinator for the Cultural Resource Department. She now works as a career advisor at Poplar High School and accompanied Youpee on her trip to the Smithsonian in January.

During her time with the Smithsonian, Morales researched items and remains for repatriation. She said to compile the back history of an object or a remain alone usually takes a month because the items often are missing key information.

"Often times the (items) have been transferred from museums or other institutions several times," Morales said. "So they have to dig through all that information and see what's relevant to that specific item because they were often moved altogether."

Visiting the Smithsonian, Morales said she can understand why the Fort Peck Tribes were unable to return to the reservation with items and remains. She said in her experience there's no "easy" way to do repatriation, but that museums and other institutions should do their best to accommodate tribes visiting and seeking to repatriate.

"They're trying to do it in a way to make the least amount of mistakes possible, which I can understand," Morales said. "But people have waited long enough for the ancestors. I think they need to understand how much pain it causes for members of the tribe."

SEEKING CONNECTION

In Cheryl Nygaard's camera roll is a photo of a pair of her grandfather's buckskin leggings.

Nygaard took the picture while at the Museum of the American Indian as they examined items and remains available for repatriation for the Fort Peck Tribes. Nygaard said it was one of the most memorable trips she can remember while working at the Cultural Resource Department.

"When they brought them out, it just took my breath away," she said.

Nygaard, both Assiniboine and Sioux and a current student at Fort Peck Community College, has worked for the Cultural Resource Department for about a year as the Section 106 reviewer, overseeing federal projects on tribal land to ensure that historic preservation is considered.

The leggings belonged to Nygaard's grandfather, Alexander Culbertson, a leader in the fur trade and the founder of Fort Benton, Montana. From Pennsylvania, Culbertson was white but married Natwista Iksina, a Kainah



Cheryl Nygaard works as the Cultural Resource Department's Section 106 reviewer, overseeing federal projects on tribal land to ensure historic preservation is considered.

interpreter and diplomat.

Nygaard said she did not even know the leggings belonged to him until she looked them up in the Smithsonian's archives and discovered their connection to Culbertson.

"I had no clue they belonged to my family, no clue," Nygaard said. "When they brought them out, I just felt super emotional. I cried."

Beyond the office, The Cultural Resource Department's work has been a way for the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes to reconnect with ancestors lost over 100 years ago.

Currently, the Cultural Resource Department is in the process of repatriating two sets of remains from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, a boarding school where hundreds of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homeland to assimilate with white Western culture. More than 150 children were buried at Carlisle, according to the Office of Cemeteries website.

Although these children were buried on federal lands, NAGPRA does not apply to Carlisle. Instead, the Army has instituted its own process of repatriation. To recover the remains, there has to be a direct living descendant connected to the children.

Even though Youpee is early in the process of repatriation, she said she connected with one of the living descendants of the remains recovered from Carlisle Boarding School.



Patt "Grandma Patt" Iron Cloud, 70, has 50 grandchildren and serves as a councilwoman for the Fort Peck tribes. Iron Cloud ran for council to better care for the families of the tribe. "Our families were just falling apart here. And a lot of our children were being put in foster homes and breaking up as a family," she said.



Patt Iron Cloud drives through the Poplar City Cemetery, pointing to her family's graves. In her lifetime, she has lost 10 of her children. "I've realized life is real fragile," Iron Cloud said. "We never know when we're going to go, but we have to be ready."



The new tribal cemetery spans 15 acres in east Poplar and holds roughly 4,000 grave sites, with 160 of the graves dedicated to repatriated remains. Last June, the Cultural Resource Department repatriated two remains from the State Museum of Pennsylvania and buried them in the cemetery.



Bob Kelsey, who volunteered at the Poplar City Cemetery for nearly 20 years, sold the tribes the land for the new tribal cemetery. Kelsey helped many community members find family members' lost burial sites during his time at the city cemetery.



Dyan Youpee, a Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for Fort Peck, flips through her calendar, filled with meetings, dates for training interns, trips to museums and conferences. Youpee recently received an award for her excellence in tribal historic preservation.

When Youpee recovers a set of remains, if the family chooses, the remains may be buried in a designated space at the Fort Peck Tribe's new cemetery.

A PLACE TO REST

Last June, the Cultural Resource Department buried the remains of two Dakota Sioux women recovered from the State Museum of Pennsylvania in Fort Peck's new tribal cemetery.

The newly developed cemetery, which spans about 15 acres, contains approximately 4,000 grave sites. One hundred and sixty are dedicated to repatriated remains.

The Sioux women's remains were removed from box graves on the prairie of the Fort Peck reservation, according to the University of Pennsylvania curator, Robert Stewart Culin. While no known individuals were identified by name for the remains, the Cultural Resource Department held a "Returning to the Earth Reburial Ceremony" — a ceremony where remains

are buried directly into the soil, without the use of a coffin or embalming.

"The ceremony is basically acknowledging a heartbeat in the earth," Youpee said. "Once we put the remains back in there, it becomes a heartbeat across the Indian reservation in hopes we can bring more relatives home."

Councilwoman Patt Iron Cloud, 70, said it's vital to have a place for repatriated remains to rest. Iron Cloud's great grandmother attended the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in the early 1900s but passed away on Fort Peck Indian Reservation in 1984. Iron Cloud said it's important not only where remains are buried, but how they're buried. As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, she does not believe in cremation and said dirt burials are important in her beliefs.

"I need to know where my bones are gonna lay, not my ashes, my bones," Iron Cloud said.

After COVID-19 increased the demand for grave sites on the reservation in 2020, some members of the tribe did not know where they would be buried, or if they could be bur-

ied close to family. The current city cemetery only holds approximately 100 available plots, according to Bob Kelsey, a since-retired businessman who has volunteered to help manage the City of Poplar cemetery for 20 years. A few years ago, Kelsey sold 40 acres of land to the Fort Peck Tribes, the same plot of land being used for the cemetery.

Iron Cloud said she's glad there's a place for her, her ancestors and her future grandchildren to be buried.

'THIS WORK IS NEVER DONE'

Sitting at her desk in the cultural resource office, Dyan Youpee flips through a calendar with her week-to-week plans. The calendar is filled with conferences, upcoming trips to repatriate and training sessions for new interns. Youpee said she can't remember the last time she had a vacation.

"Honestly, I kind of gave up my personal life to advance my professional life," Youpee said.

"It's really just working, go home, eat, play with my nieces and then go back to work again."

Even with her busy schedule, Youpee said she's holding onto her plans to build a new Cultural Resource Complex. While she needs to secure funds for the complex, Youpee tentatively hopes to start construction in a few years.

"I feel like I could have given this to my dad and he could have taken it further," Youpee said. "He was hard on himself. I'm hard on myself."

Despite her doubts, Youpee said she could not imagine doing any other work. Just as her father taught her about repatriation, Youpee is passing her knowledge on to her niece, Madelyn. She said even with someone to potentially take on her profession, until all the items and remains are returned to Fort Peck, she will always have more work to do.

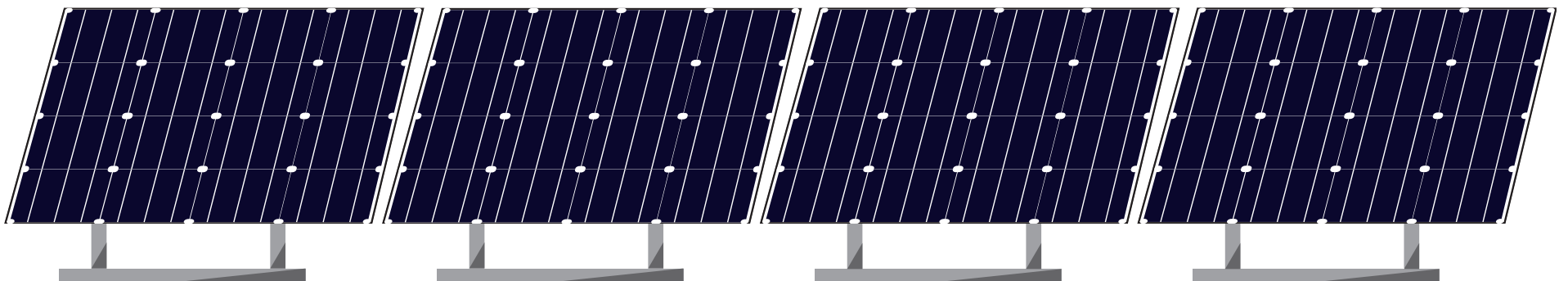
"This work is never done," she sighed. "This work is going to follow me into the next life." ■

Sandy and Zane Spang live in a house about three miles outside of Ashland. Their previous house here burned in a lightning strike fire in 2012.



AN EMPOWERED FUTURE

The Tsis tsis'tas look to the sky for renewable energy



STORY BY **KAI WILLIAMS**

PHOTOS BY **TANNER ECKER**

“I WAS HERE before electricity,” said Sandy Spang, 80, on a sunny March afternoon sitting in her electric recliner in front of a large window that overlooks her shed and the rolling hills around her home.

Indeed, Spang, an enrolled Tsis tsis'tas tribal member, lived in Ashland when the first power poles went up in the 1940s. The poles were built and installed by her father, Cornelius “Bee” Clayton Robinson, who is Northern Cheyenne and Lakota. The town was then finally powered with coal.

Now, Spang is one of the first handful of tribal members to try out a partially solar powered home.

“It was the same time the other lady in Lane Deer got on,” Spang said. “And they were putting her on as a, you know, a major demonstration of what this can do for you. But for us, it was like a total shock because we didn't know they were gonna do that for us.”

Donica Brady, solar program associate of Indigenized Energy, joined Spang to check in with her, as Spang lives with multiple sclerosis. Because of her condition, she endures a great deal of pain and can only get around in an electric chair. With high medical assistance needs, the solar power helps Spang offset large energy bills.

That's part of the reason why Indigenized Energy and the Tsis tsis'tas Tribe are working to install solar panels in the White River Community Solar Project. The project plan is to install solar panels to help power Busby High School, Busby's Head Start program and the water pumping station in Busby.

In addition to helping power these facilities, there is a plan to install solar systems to benefit 15 different elders' homes across the reservation. One of the systems will be in the shape of a morning star, the symbol proudly displayed on the Tsis tsis'tas flag.

The tribe also received a grant last year to build a renewable energy training center at Chief Dull Knife College in Lane Deer, which will create jobs and help more of the tribe get set up with renewable energy systems like solar power.

The 444,000-acre reservation sits on top of a rich coal reserve, but the tribe has no plans to extract from it. The tribe is aiming toward renewable energies to align with their “unwavering dedication to protecting both the environment and the well-being of our community,” said an emailed statement from tribal leadership. While burning coal adds to greenhouse gas pollution, the Tsis tsis'tas tribe envision “a future that prioritizes clean, sustainable, and renewable energy sources.”

MAKING THE SWITCH

About 20 miles north of the Northern Cheyenne reservation is the town of Colstrip. Towering over the town are four smokestacks, two of



Sandy Spang recounts a story about her father putting up wooden poles for power lines that sent electricity to Ashland in the early 1940s.

which still burn coal daily.

Colstrip is home to the Westmoreland Coal Company and the Colstrip power plant. They sit across Highway 39 from one another. Both facilities employ large numbers of Colstrip residents, but tribal members living on and off the reservation drive north to work in the town.

In his past, Otto “Sonny” Braided Hair III, a Tsis tsis'tas tribal member and now a co-worker to Brady at Indigenized Energy, worked at the Colstrip power plant in the scrubbers, which is a part of the smokestack that cleans gases from the steam going through them. He worked in the 160-foot by 80-foot silos on the different levels of steam cleaning.

After three years at the power plant, Braided Hair III began his own construction company. Then the COVID-19 pandemic arose. Several supply issues tested his commitment to the industry.

Braided Hair III's father, Otto Braided Hair Jr., invited him to apply for the assistant project manager position with Indigenized Energy. Braided Hair Jr. is a co-founder of Indigenized Energy, which recently branched off from the Indigenous Energy Initiative. The organization has six employees across the country. Three of them are Tsis tsis'tas.

When he was working for the power plant, Braided Hair III said his father understood that he was working there to provide for his family, not because he was ecstatic about working



Donica Brady drives a school bus for the public school district in Busby when she isn't working for Indigenized Energy. She says her two favorite jobs help her provide for her wife and children.



UPPER RIGHT: The Little Wolf Capitol Building in Lame Deer is one of many structures incorporating solar energy. The Tsis tsis'tas tribe has received funding from the U.S. Department of Energy and the U.S. Economic Development Administration for its renewable energy efforts.

UPPER LEFT: The Colstrip power plant fills the morning sky with exhaust on March 23, 2023. Coal-fired power units 1 and 2 were retired in early 2020 but newer units 3 and 4 continue to operate.

LEFT: Otto "Sonny" Braided Hair III is the assistant project manager for Indigenized Energy where he helps the Tsis tsis'tas tribe utilize renewable energy like solar power. Previously, Braided Hair III worked for three years as a scrubber for the power plant in Colstrip.

“I was really excited knowing that people have solar here, but it's almost scattered.”

DONICA BRADY, TSIS TSIS'TAS TRIBAL MEMBER
AND PART TIME SOLAR POWER LIAISON

with non-renewable energy sources.

“Since I was young, that was burned into my mind is you got to look out for your people. You have to look out for your people,” Braided Hair III said.

Working for the power plant provided for his family at the time. Now, Braided Hair III is looking to provide for his people beyond his immediate family.

He wants to help provide for his tribe.

Eventually, with Indigenized Energy, Braided Hair III would like to help other tribes provide for their people, too, and protect their land by utilizing renewable energy sources like solar power.

“The goal is to give them a tool, show them how to take care of it, how to maintain it,” Braided Hair III said. “And then they tell us when they don't need us anymore. And we kind

of get phased out, you know, and then they find these individuals to fill those roles. So, it's really a beautiful protocol, or I guess, routine process that we have.”

This goal of Braided Hair III is within reach. The Tsis tsis'tas received a \$1.8 million grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce in September 2022. The money will help start a renewable energy workforce training center at Chief Dull Knife College in Lame Deer.

The training center will create more than 30 full-time, permanent jobs for members of the Tsis tsis'tas, according to the U.S. Economic Development Administration press release. These permanent jobs will consist of training tribal members to build, install, and maintain solar systems, all of which are “high in-demand” in the energy industry, according to that same release.



Zane Spang, right, helps his wife, Sandy Spang, onto a motorized chair. Sandy Spang has multiple sclerosis and a paralyzed leg. Some of the couple's energy usage goes toward charging her motorized chairs and other devices.

Displaced coal workers are encouraged to get trained in the renewable energy field. On a longer-term scale, the project will aid in providing more residents on the reservation with solar power to offset energy costs.

SOLAR IS 'SCATTERED'

Brady, 33, a Tsis tsis'tas tribal member, serves as the part time liaison between residents who have solar power, residents who will be getting solar power and the organization itself. Brady drives buses for her day job at the Busby School District and helps raise her four children with her wife, Erlanda.

Brady is working on the new White River Community Solar Project, funded partially by the U.S. Department of Energy and donations

from NDN Collective and Grid Alternatives.

Indigenized Energy matched the rest of the funds needed.

"I was really excited knowing that people have solar here, but it's almost scattered," Brady said.

While some homes are set up with solar arrays to contribute to their energy needs, or panels to heat hot water tanks, Brady would like to see solar being utilized more widely across residents on the reservation.

The businesses and residences on the reservation get powered by two different electric co-operations: Tongue River Electric and Big Horn County Electric. Both organizations are cooperative incorporations, meaning members are part-owners of the utilities.

For houses hooked up to the grid powered by

TRECO, residents are only allowed to connect their homes to solar panel arrays that generate no more than 10 kilowatts. For some families, this could be enough to power their entire home without drawing from the electric company.

Residents utilizing solar panels are still responsible for base, energy demand and seasonal customer charges, according to the terms and conditions of TRECO's net metering interconnection standards.

This leaves on-grid residents with a power bill to the energy cooperation, even if the homes utilize only enough energy that the panels can produce. If residents produce excess energy, that energy is credited back to them to use at a later time, typically at night or cloudy days when the sun isn't shining.

TRECO has solar panels set up just off Highway

212 in Ashland as a demonstration for what energy solar panels can provide. On their website is a real-time analysis of how much power those panels, which are capable of producing about five times as much energy as Spang's, produce.

The live data report also estimates how much money the co-op saves by day, by year, and since the installation of the panels. In 2022, TRECO saved about six dollars a day with their demonstration panels.

If the TRECO panels only save the large co-op a few dollars a day with much higher-capacity panels than Spang, it makes sense that Spang still has an energy bill to pay each month.

Ideally, the Tsis tsis' tas wouldn't rely on energy cooperations at all. Energy sovereignty to Braided Hair III means leaving the old systems behind as they move forward.



Donica Brady, the solar program associate for Indigenized Energy, checks the Spangs' solar panel system to ensure the panels are working correctly.

"We're subject to our own energy, and we abide by the things that we've been told since we're young: leave it in the ground, don't touch, don't desecrate this earth," Braided Hair III said. "Use what you have, but not in abundance. Take what you need, but not all of it, because you have a community. And I think that's what a lot of tribes practice is they're very community driven."

With grants from the U.S. government and help from organizations like Indigenized Energy, the Tsis tsis'tas are making moves on the track to energy sovereignty. They aren't the only ones on this path, either.

The International Energy Agency is an inter-governmental organization that collects and analyzes data on the global energy sector. With their analysis, the organization makes recommendations on energy policy worldwide.

The IEA's 2022 report on renewable energies, updated in December 2022, predicts renewable energies will "become the largest source of global electricity generation by early 2025, surpassing coal." The amount of energy produced from solar power, along with wind power, is expected to double in the next five years, according to the report.

IMPERFECT, IMPORTANT SOLUTIONS

The Spangs didn't know their new home would be powered by renewable energy until one of the founders of Indigenized Energy installed solar panels on their roof. According to Spang, the team that now makes up Indigenized Energy worked tirelessly to put the panels on her roof in just a few days.

With multiple sclerosis, Spang's electrical

needs are a bit higher than the average family. Despite the solar panels, Spang said her energy bill to TRECO in February 2023 was still "well over \$700." Before the panels, she said her monthly energy bills were usually over \$1000 in the winter.

"I love her stories," Brady said while visiting Spang. Spang reminisced about her family's trail riding company, the Cheyenne Trail Riders, which taught ethnobotany and led visitors around the vast property.

But when Spang mentioned her high energy bill, even with having solar panels, a look of concern grew on Brady's face.

"We have never, never gotten what we thought we were going to get from them," Spang said. "I don't think it has worked."

Brady went outside Spang's house to inspect the electric meter. She pressed buttons, flipping through settings to see if anything was noticeably

wrong with it. Brady later sent pictures of the meter to Braided Hair III for further inspection.

Despite her beliefs about her solar array's effectiveness, Spang's energy bill costs have, indeed, decreased since the installation of solar panels onto her home. Further, she knows the importance of protecting the land the Tsis tsis'tas inhabit and how renewable energy sources can play a role in that.

Every morning, Spang gets up and looks outside. When she does this, she thinks of her ancestors.

"We know the story of them, what they had to go through to come back to have this land," Spang said. "444,000 acres that we got to be able to come and live here."

Brady feels the same way about the land.

"Just because of how beautiful it is, how could you not want to take care of it?" Brady said. ■

A photo panorama of the Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority visioning meeting orchestrated by Executive Director Jody Cahoon Perez.



BARRIERS TO BUYING

Salish and Kootenai envision homeownership for their middle class

STORY BY **JOSH MOYAR**

PHOTOS BY **KADEN HARRISON**

ON APRIL 17, a group of around 20 people gathered at the Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority in Pablo to discuss the future of medium-income housing for tribal members.

"I am overwhelmed in my job regularly," said Executive Director of Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Housing Authority, Jody Cahoon Perez. "There's so much need."

Perez spoke to a room that included representatives from the CSKT Tribal Council, the Missoula Tenants Union, Common Good Missoula and community members all sitting together in a circle.

"I see the generational effects—poverty, lack of skills—of the way Western society came into our (Séliš-Qlispé and kupawíḡnuk) world. It's in direct conflict with our value system and way of life," Perez said.

The meeting was called in response to the

housing crisis on the Flathead reservation, home of the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes — the Indigenous people that have inhabited the area for generations, called the Séliš-Qlispé in the Séliš language and the kupawíḡnuk in Kasanka-Kootenai. The price of land has skyrocketed in the past few years. According to Perez, a three-bedroom house that could have cost \$200,000 in 2015 is now going for as much as \$400,000. As a result, mortgage down payments are out of reach for middle-class would-be homeowners, especially the small group of families that just crossed into the demographic from low-income. In Perez's eyes, the CSKT may need to get creative to find a solution for middle-class homeownership.

Perez, an enrolled member of the CSKT, went on to tell the story of how she came into contact with Jenny Misch, a Missoula resident who was co-leading the meeting. Before the two knew each other, Misch was battling with white-guilt and looking for a way to give back to the tribe whose traditional land she was now living on. After some conversations with Perez,

the two decided that Misch willing her Missoula home to the tribe was the best way for her to give back.

This visioning meeting was held to come up with a formal program for the housing authority to accept repatriation payments, such as real estate deeds and real rent — regular installments to the tribe that are typically \$20 per month — for the purpose of easing the struggles of land ownership on the reservation.

As of now, Perez's plan is to establish a nonprofit to funnel donations through, which would then go towards a one-time mortgage assistance subsidy for medium-income families at the time of purchase. Perez feels this is the reservation's greatest need.

If this program gets off the ground, it wouldn't be the first of its kind. Real Rent Duwamish, a model for the program the SKHA is trying to launch, currently has 22,901 people regularly paying real rent. The money goes to the non-profit Duwamish Tribal Services and provides social, cultural and health resources to the Dx^wdəw[?]abš tribe of western Washington, which is still yet to be federally recognized

by the U.S. government. The CSKT would, however, be the first tribe with a designated reservation to have such a program.

"I feel very grateful for your presence and positivity," Perez said before opening the discussion to the room. "I'm very big on positivity. It feeds me. How can we go wrong when we have this much positivity in a room? The sky's the limit. Whatever we can dream of we can do. Someone just has to start the spark. Hopefully, we're starting that spark."

A MARKET ON FIRE

Across the country, the housing market is short of homes. A study conducted last year by Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies found that in every state, low-rental units have been lost in the past decade, and home prices have risen nearly 20%. For members of the CSKT, the lack of land ownership can be traced back to 1910 when the reservation was opened to homesteading. This resulted in a large amount of white people that have been living generationally on the traditional kupawíḡnuk

and Séliš-Qlispé land, which once extended throughout much of western Montana. Today, 62% of the reservation is white — about 10,000 non-tribal members to 4,000 enrolled CSKT members.

Perez has been the executive director of the SKHA for four years now. Born and raised on the Flathead reservation, Perez herself spent some time living in an SKHA low-income rental unit in her early 20s. At the time, she was crashing with a friend, something she later learned went against SKHA policy and was technically illegal.

The SKHA is funded entirely by HUD 184, a section of the Department of Housing and Urban Development administered by the Office of Native American Programs. SKHA can provide services like down payment assistance, water and sewage, and a tax credit program to enrolled members of the CSKT.

Many of the affordable living services are exclusively for low-income members. The Native American Housing and Self-Determination Act only allows for 10% of its annual Indian Housing Block Grant to go to medium-income families and above, meaning that the SKHA is only able to rent units to low-income families. This is the primary reason Perez thinks a solidarity-based real rent program is necessary to help extend their services to the middle-income.

“To my knowledge, we have never used any of the (NAHASDA) funds to benefit non-low-income Indian families,” Perez said. “We don’t have enough funds for the low-income, so we can’t justify a program for non-low-income.”

Currently, the Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority has 402 families living in low-income housing units across the reservation. Out of the 402 families, seven are stuck in the middle. These seven families were living in low-income units when either a raise or a second household salary brought them up to medium-income. As per NAHASDA guidelines, they were no longer able to just pay the \$275 ceiling rent and had to pay the fair market rent for the area, which is generally over \$1,000 per month.

Perez said the housing market is what’s kept those seven families in low-income housing. In her opinion, the biggest thing preventing people on the reservation from owning homes is steep mortgage rates, particularly down payments, that are the direct result of skyrocketing land prices.

“Our real estate market is on fire,” Perez said. “We’re outpriced on our own reservation by three or four times what we can afford.”

Pete White, an enrolled member of the CSKT, is the tribe’s credit manager. Every day, he receives an update from the Des Moines Mortgage Product Group, the district that manages mortgage interest rates on the reservation. On March 23, the rate was 6%, a nearly 50% increase from the 4.125% rate from the same date in 2022.

“That’s certainly up, right?” White said. “So this is just a fixed rate. A bank typically adds additional points to that ... that’s where they’re gonna make their money.”

Indeed, banks will typically add an additional rate of 4.5% to 6%.



This extra interest wasn’t as significant when the price of land was lower. Five to 10 years ago, a down payment on a mortgage could’ve been \$40,000. Today, with both land prices and mortgage rates gone up, that number is more likely around \$80,000. That’s a much more significant hurdle for a young family to jump, with a steeper interest rate to boot.

White said the current high price of land is attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly, accessibility to remote work made a strong internet connection the only thing people need to maintain a salary job. Out-of-staters are pouring into Montana, in many cases to buy a second or third house with a view of the pristine Flathead Lake.

As of now, there’s no sign of slowing for rising house prices or mortgage rates. The only way out of this, White said, is to increase the availability of homes, but with the cost of building also at a high, this is easier said than done.

“I think we’re gonna see that number go up until the feds see inflationary measures go down,” White said. “Right now, there’s nothing really available for lower-income or middle-income folks.”

THE MISSING MIDDLE

On the first warm day of April, the Buck household was undergoing their usual Sunday routine. Al Buck, an enrolled CSKT member and head of the house, laid out a spread of pancakes and fried Spam that people snatched as



TOP: Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority Executive Director Jody Cahoon Perez speaks with Tania Stevens, a non-tribal resident who has lived on the reservation for many years.

ABOVE: Pete White is the tribal credit manager for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Part of his duties is to monitor fluctuations in mortgage interest rates for the reservation. “Right now, there’s nothing really available for lower-income or middle-income folks,” he said.

“Our real estate market is on fire. We’re outpriced on our own reservation by three or four times what we can afford.”

JODY PEREZ, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
OF CSKT HOUSING AUTHORITY



TOP: Woodcock Homesites is a neighborhood of low-income rentals for the Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority in Pablo just west of the Mission Mountains.

ABOVE: The Mission Mountains loom over a partially snow-covered construction site, the future home of a nine-unit low-income housing development, Grizzly Bear Homesites. The site is a few minutes north of the Salish Kootenai College in Pablo.



Alleah and Al Buck sit in their living room at the Woodcock Homesites. "In communities like this, that's what you have. It's family," Al Buck said. "I wouldn't have it any other way."



Alleah Buck, 10, and her cousins play on the trampoline in the front yard of her home. Alleah's father Al Buck plans to replace the well-used trampoline with a new one soon.

they walked by the kitchen.

Ten-year-old Alleah, Buck's youngest daughter, was jumping on the trampoline in the front yard with a rotating roster of cousins and family friends who also live at Woodcock Homesites, a neighborhood of SKHA low-income rentals. The temperature was above 60 degrees, so the girls turned on the sprinkler and brought it on the trampoline with them.

Buck, his fiancé Angela, an Alaskan Native of the Tsimshian Clan, and his two youngest children Kaden and Alleah, both CSKT members, have been living in Woodcock for the past five years. Two months ago Buck was promoted from an emergency employee of the forestry department to a greenhouse technician. With this raise, the combined income of the Buck household surpassed low-income, and their monthly rent payments bumped up to the area's fair market rent of \$1,110.

"It doesn't seem very fair to me!" Buck said, laughing as he always seems to be. "We started doing better and they fined us for it."

With the help of the housing authority, the Bucks' situation will hopefully change in the next year or so. Currently, SKHA is constructing nine houses in Pablo, the Grizzly Bear Homesites. The SKHA plans to subsidize them at \$100,000 for low-income families, and because they were approved back before Buck's promotion, they get to keep their spot on the list.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm thankful we have a roof here," Buck said. "But it just seems like (these rental payments) should be going to a mortgage."

North of Woodcock Homesites is another SKHA community, known as Pache. Jordan Stasso, an enrolled CSKT member, and his wife Alice, enrolled with the Yakama tribe of eastern Washington, have been living in a house there for six years with their three children, all CSKT members, paying the low-income ceiling rent of \$275 until recently, when Alice started working as a tribal defender. Along with Jordan's job as a cultural specialist at Salish Kootenai College, the combined family income exceeded the mark.

"Our rent tripled," Stasso said. "It only costs more because we make more money."

Despite being one of the seven families in low-income housing paying fair market rent, the Stassos are a bit of an exception. Last year, Jordan went to the housing authority and filed a grievance form saying they can't afford the more than \$1,000 monthly rent.

As a result, he argued his appeal in front of the SKHA Board of Commissioners, which can waive the low rent occupancy policy that requires fair market rent price. The board granted the Stassos a six-month period of paying only half the fair market price, which ends this July.

This month, the Stassos are set to close on a 10-acre plot near Polson. Although they'll have to build a house from the ground up, Jordan still considers it a lucky strike. On the cusp of land ownership, Jordan Stasso has big plans for the future.

"I want to establish a group of like-minded people who want to practice and live in the language and the culture (of the Ksanka-Kootenai people)," he said. "At some point, create a ho-



ABOVE: Alleah Buck, 10, and her family's dog Chase enjoy a warm spring day at their home at Woodcock Homesites. Alleah likes living in the same neighborhood as her cousins.

RIGHT: Jordan Stasso, cultural specialist at Salish Kootenai College, makes traditional leather work that he sells for extra income. Stasso's family is one of seven that are part of the middle-income bracket who are living in SKHA low-income housing units.

meschool and our own traditional community where we are able to be self-sufficient. We can hang out, speak our language, teach our kids the language, all of our traditional skills and life ways and values. That doesn't happen in mainstream America."

But a new home in Polson will still be a few months away, and the Stassos still need to find contractors and cover the building costs. Until then, they'll continue living in low-income housing, likely paying full fair market rent payments starting in August.

"We're just stuck between the guidelines," Stasso said. "And that's not a fun place to be."

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

After two hours of discussing the Flathead reservation's history, sharing stories about living on the land and thinking up the best ways to shape a program based on solidarity-funded projects, the visioning meeting was coming to a close.

With only one formative meeting so far, the project is still in its infancy. As of now, Perez is planning three separate follow-up meetings, one focused on real estate deeds, one on real rent and another on miscellaneous donations.

"I'm just a conduit trying to make sure the people who are wanting to provide resources to the tribe can," Perez said. "I can help facilitate them for now, but I hope the tribe takes the reins and helps it really get accomplished."

Martin Charlo, secretary of the CSKT Tribal Council, ended the meeting with a call to keep the conversation alive.

"I've seen these things happening and losing momentum, and then they're gone," Charlo said. "So if we're gonna do something, let's go all in and let's really be fully committed to this. If you look at it, we're in a really good position as a tribe. I hope that in 10 years, we can come back here and realize that this was a great starting point." ■



WITH LAND COME

After establishing
more than a century ago
cl



STORY BY **ALEX MITCHELL**

PHOTOS BY **KENNEDY DELAP**

Irrigation manager and former ditch rider Craig Adams, an Aaniiih tribal member, leans on a fence post near the Milk River, one of the reservation's largest sources of water. Adams has taken care of irrigation systems on Fort Belknap for 14 years, along with being a father of six, ranch

ES WATER

ng the basis for tribal water rights
go, the Aaniiih and Nakoda tribes
ose in on a \$1.2 billion settlement

owner and husband.



Kristal Fox, an Aaniiih tribal member and administrator for water resources on Fort Belknap, waits to meet with representatives from the governor's office at the Montana State Capitol in March. Fox and her team sought Gov. Greg Gianforte's support before their water settlement heads to the U.S. Senate.

WHERE CENTURY-OLD water systems are failing, it becomes Fort Belknap irrigation manager Craig Adams' job to fight torrential rivers and creeks each spring to keep the water.

Retaining the water requires a 16-foot by 11-inch wooden plank and another willing swimmer to cross the freezing waters of the Milk River. Adams, an enrolled member of the Gros Ventre tribe, dams up the main gutter of the 300-foot-wide spillway — typical in guiding water — to compensate for the lack of a gate.

It's the only way he knows to capitalize on the water.

Without this process, ranchers and farmers along the river will struggle to have enough water later in the season as upstream tributaries run dry.

"Years before, they never did worry about that. They must've thought it too dangerous," 36-year-old Adams said after climbing a railing covered in late winter snowfall up to the small bedroom-sized concrete platform meant to operate the spillway.

Downstream of the Milk River at White Bear



Water is retained by the St. Mary's Dam, located east of Glacier National Park and over 200 miles away from Fort Belknap. St. Mary's Reservoir feeds into the Milk River, and under the Milk River Project, the canal will be rehabilitated to provide more efficient irrigation for the Hi-Line. PHOTO BY ANDY MEPHAM

Creek, water seeps through cracks in eroding concrete. Some water diversion gates have stopped working. Deteriorating infrastructure has left Adams to do patchwork boarding jobs as a common solution. Funding on the reservation hasn't been there to support improvements.

According to tribal leaders, neither has the federal government. That could change soon. After a major concession with LandBack, Fort Belknap has been pushing more than ever to reach a potential \$1.2 billion water settlement to improve their struggling agriculture-based economy's outlook. The act for the settlement is now planned to be introduced in Congress this May. It could be their last chance, as a Supreme Court case threatens tribal water rights across the nation.

Fort Belknap is the last Montana reservation to not have reached a water settlement. They

are in their 42nd year pushing for a deal. The Fort Belknap government chose to negotiate in 1981 instead of choosing litigation that would leave the tribes without the money they need to build upon their entitled water.

The reservation serves as the origin for superior water rights for reservations across the country. In 1908, the Supreme Court ruled in *Winters v. United States* that tribal members on Fort Belknap were entitled to water first from Milk River. This meant Fort Belknap and other reservations could use water before non-tribal irrigators. Still, problems with water persist.

CREATING A PERMANENT HOMELAND

Superior water rights originate from treaty rights establishing reservations, like the Sweetgrass Hills Agreement that established Fort Belknap in 1888. In exchange for the secession

of land and the promise of peace, tribes were entitled to a permanent homeland. That goes beyond land. What is considered at the heart of the idea of a permanent homeland is access to resources like water that meets a reservation's needs. From the *Winters v. United States* ruling, without the government honoring and safeguarding their water needs and rights, it would "destroy the reservation" leaving them with "a barren waste."

Water systems have been neglected by the federal government, with maintenance significantly deferred, according to the reservation's water resources department administrator Kristal Fox. Much of the settlement funding for the Fort Belknap Indian Community, or FBIC, would first go to modernization and rehabilitation of irrigation systems. Lands that have gone unused would be revitalized.

"The government has just let things sit, idle

and fall into sorry shape," Fox, an enrolled member of the Gros Ventre, said. "To irrigate everything by gravity, I always say it's a miracle just to get that water delivered farm-to-farm. They just have to be creative with the dilapidation of it all."

Current systems have led to arid reservation land between Blaine County and Phillips County, land dappled with brown splotches in the summer as farmlands struggle to get water. Similar farmlands in the bordering counties often remain green.

Irrigators in the counties benefit from having proper drainage, electric pumps providing push for water and a dam system that works better for them.

Downstream of the Milk River at the Dodson Dam, Phillips County starts collecting runoff from snow as early as mid-March. They use a bladder system that can be inflated across the



top of the dam to retain water for irrigators' future water needs. Meanwhile, Fort Belknap waits for ice to fully thaw before they can use their early 20th-century system to collect and divert water.

Fox, who first started working for the reservation as a water resource administrative assistant in 1989, said the reservation has received criticism for being slow to take advantage of agricultural cost-share programs. Most of the programs started in the 1980s and could have reduced the cost of irrigation projects on the reservation. Yet the tribes barely got the chance to use such programs.

"All these non-Indians, they were privileged to these cost-shares, and we weren't ever taught how to use them," Fox said. "We just

weren't privileged to use that money."

In the water settlement, following the modernization and rehabilitation phase, is the construction of projects like a significant dam and reservoir that could be relied on to store the tribes' water from the Milk River for the reservation.

The development of the dam would allow for non-irrigable lands to be better utilized in the predominantly agricultural economy. Roughly 16,500 acres of land on the Milk River would then become available for farming, according to Woldezion Mesghinna, president and principal engineer of Natural Resources Conservation Engineers and project designer for plans associated with the water settlement.

Fox has pushed for the settlement for the last



ABOVE: Mitchell Healy, water quality coordinator for the Fort Belknap tribes, stands in the doorway of the reservation's EPA building.

LEFT: Tracy "Ching" King, an Assiniboine FBIC Council member and former council president, stands in the tribal council chambers after a March water settlement meeting with Phillips County commissioners.

decade after coming into the top administrator position. She believes "time is of the essence" to complete the water settlement.

One reason stems from climate change. Fort Belknap has faced successive, exceptional droughts. The droughts in the Montana Hi-Line have only deepened struggles to get enough water for everyone.

Another reason is an ongoing Supreme Court case that could negate the basis for tribal superior water rights nationwide. Heard by the court in March this year, Navajo Nation v. Arizona challenges Navajo Nation water claims on the Colorado River.

Given the conservative court's recent ruling against historical tribal sovereignty in the 2022 Oklahoma v. Castro Huerta case and scarcer

water across the nation, reserved water rights that serve as the basis for dozens of tribal water settlements and claims could be threatened.

Fox said now the tribes are approaching that settlement with a "first and foremost" focus on securing and maintaining their water rights. Recent negotiations with the United States Department of the Interior this year helped determine the \$1.2 billion to be included with the settlement.

This has led tribal leaders to leave out 15,000 acres of the Grinnell Notch originally considered part of the land included with the settlement. It is land sacred to the Aaniiih & Nakoda tribes. It was included in negotiations with the settlement in the last couple of introductions to Congress, but has been removed to get other parties' approval in negotiations.



William "Snuffy" Main, council chair of the Gros Ventre Treaty Committee, greets his two farm dogs, Big Dumb and Puper, at the entrance to his ranch. Main inherited his land from his grandmother and his roots run generations deep on the reservation. Two of his grandfathers were part of treaty negotiations in 1855. One signed the treaty and one did not. According to Snuffy, the one that didn't sign the treaty told the others, "We can already go wherever we want."

LOSING A MOUNTAIN

Used for hunting and spiritual ceremonies by Fort Belknap tribes, what was known as the sacred site of Spirit Mountain was ceded by Fort Belknap under the threat of starvation in 1895 as prospectors pursued gold in the Little Rockies. The notch was named after George Grinnell, one of the federal negotiators, who was later influential in the establishment of Glacier National Park and the Audubon Society.

After decades of gold mining tearing apart the landscape, Spirit Mountain is a third of the height it used to be. What's left from the mining is toxic sludge from the open-pit cyanide heap-leach mines used to retrieve gold. FBIC and others filed suits for violations of the Clean Water Act throughout the 1990s for flooding drinking water with excesses of arsenic, nickel, and iron.

The suits contributed to the mines' owner Pegasus Gold filing for bankruptcy in 1997. The Environmental Protection Agency declared the area a Superfund site two decades ago. It is now the perpetual responsibility of the state and the nation to maintain clean-up of the mines. With the section of the Grinnell Notch initially included in the water settlement, having that land was considered necessary for the tribes to provide oversight of the southern watershed.

Water quality remains a problem on the reservation, with some tribal members still choosing not to drink the water. The settlement aims to provide infrastructure for a clean and safe domestic water supply.

When Assiniboine FBIC council member Tracy "Ching" King was president in 2013, he testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations for increased funding for existing on-reservation water treatment plants. The plants were on the verge of having to temporarily shut down because the reservation only had less than a third of the \$750,000 needed to maintain clean drinking water.

Concerns around cancer-causing contaminants like arsenic from the mines in their drinking water are still prevalent. Waters on and off the reservation from the mine have been treated unequally by the government and their management of it, according to King.

"The only thing I see when I go out there is racism," King said. "They want to see us dead."

On the side facing Phillips County, King mentioned two significant water treatment plants to treat the acid drainage from the mines. Yet for the water coming through the reservation's Swift Gulch, they have had a treatment plant the size of a "porta-potty," he said.

Currently, the Swift Gulch treatment plant's capacity is about half of the capacity of one treatment plant and a quarter of the other treatment plant off reservation.

Environmental Protection Agency Water Quality Coordinator Mitchell Healy said the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) have refused his attempts for a larger



Tribal Council President Jeffrey Stiffarm and his 9-year-old son A.J. leave Gov. Greg Gianforte's office in March after a meeting seeking his support for the Fort Belknap water settlement. Since the meeting, the settlement now has support from Gianforte, Sen. Steve Daines and Sen. Jon Tester.

expansion of the treatment plant. He said the DEQ said there isn't enough space. He said he sees more than enough room for an expansion.

According to Healy, an enrolled member of the Assiniboine tribe, the treatment plant runs out of capacity with spring run-off. Then, contaminants like iron are carried further downstream every year, harming ecosystems along the way.

"These waters originate from the mines and flow onto the reservation, through cultural areas, and threaten the further downstream areas where tribal members swim, fish, gather medicinal plants and berries," Healy said. He is the tribal representative for the group working on projects to maintain mine clean-up.

Montana DEQ cannot confirm whether iron contaminants continue to migrate further downstream each year. DEQ Mining Environmental Specialist Wayne Jepson said in an email that since building a structure meant to

retain iron-rich sediment in 2018, the absence of iron staining the structure proves they are now effectively trapping most, if not all of the sediment.

Jepson stated while the treatment system built in 2008 was "simple," they have continually improved its effectiveness and capacity. The Swift Gulch treatment plant now produces "similar if not slightly better quality water compared to the other water treatment plants."

Fort Belknap's Aaniih Nakoda College regularly conducts studies showing poor water quality coming from the mines. A 2021 report utilizing EPA procedures noted that aquatic organisms introduced to water samples from Swift Gulch would die in a day or less – a sign of toxic water.

"We found that the contamination from the mine, as it continues toward the reservation, is rapidly moving with rain or storm events," the report stated.

SURMOUNTING OPPOSITION

The decision to remove the notch has proved successful for Fort Belknap to surpass past opposition. Phillips County commissioners who had been historically opposed to the settlement wrote a letter of support in April. Gov. Greg Gianforte, who opposed the settlement when he served as a U.S. representative, pledged his support in March.

Both people were considered crucial in getting Sen. Steve Daines' first-time backing as tribal leaders looked to reintroduce the bill related to the settlement. And now both Sen. Daines and Sen. Jon Tester will co-sponsor the bill this May, according to FBIC Tribal President Jeffrey Stiffarm. Things are beginning to move a lot faster with the settlement, he said, with the bill hopefully included as part of the annual defense bill to be approved by Congress this fall.

With the settlement, the reservation would

still receive roughly 44,000 acres of land back in trust for the tribes, adding to the 675,000-acre reservation. The land would allow for greater control of water on the reservation and return some lands taken from the tribes over the past 150 years.

Internal opposition and different administrative perspectives have slowed down progress on the already arduous process of achieving a water settlement. It has taken 42 years for the settlement to have gotten this far.

Stiffarm, who's since been to Washington D.C. several times pushing the water settlement, used to be opposed to it. When he was a Gros Ventre council member, he signed a letter in 2018 with the Gros Ventre Treaty Committee (GVTC) addressed to former Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke wanting the settlement to be rejected.

The letter states the Gros Ventre tribe never gave proper consent to the settlement, although treaty rights are considered to entitle

History of Fort Belknap Developments, Treaties, Agreements and Cases in Montana

1851

FORT LARAMIE TREATY

Recognized Assiniboine territory as south of the Missouri River in northeastern Montana and Gros Ventre territory as shared territory with the Mandan and Arikara tribes in eastern Montana and western North Dakota and South Dakota. The boundaries were created with no claims by the federal government to any of the land, though that would be ignored by settlers and the government itself in the years to follow.

1888

ACT OF MAY 1, 1888

By an act of Congress, the Blackfoot, Gros Ventre, and Assiniboine tribes ceded 17.5 million acres of land for the establishment of permanent reservations like the 675,000-acre Fort Belknap for a smaller agricultural economy.

1895

GRINNELL AGREEMENT

After gold was found in the Little Rocky Mountains in 1884, tribes ceded about 68,000 acres in the southern part of the reservation in exchange for monetary compensation, much of which never came. Tribal leaders were told by negotiators that if they didn't agree to cede their land it was absolutely certain that "your women and babies will starve." Lands ceded included a significant portion of headwaters.

1981

FORT BELKNAP RESOLVES TO NEGOTIATE

The Fort Belknap Indian Community (FBIC) Council approved a resolution to negotiate their water rights with the recently-established Montana Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission and the Federal Government.

2001

FORT BELKNAP-MONTANA WATER COMPACT PASSES

The FBIC Council and the Montana state Legislature approve the compact that determines and quantifies much of their water on the reservation succeeding 12 years of negotiations. This process, used by all other Montana reservations, serves as the basis for the act that is then introduced to Congress for the federal government's approval.

1855

TREATY OF THE BLACKFOOT NATION

The Treaty of the Blackfoot Nation recognized land east of the Rocky Mountains for the Blackfoot Nation consisting of the Blackfeet, Blood, Gros Ventre, and Piegan tribes for executive use and control. The Assiniboine tribe was included in part of the common hunting ground recognized with the treaty.

1889

FORT BELKNAP'S FIRST IRRIGATION PROJECT

Fort Belknap began utilizing water from the Milk River on the northern boundary of the reservation for both agricultural and domestic purposes. Other water systems like People's Creek and Three Mile Creek began to be used for irrigating pastures. This would be followed by the construction of various irrigation systems by the Bureau of Indian Affairs throughout the next couple decades with congressional authority given to some projects like on the Milk River in 1898.

1908

WINTERS V. UNITED STATES

The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Fort Belknap regarding a dispute with non-tribal irrigators diverting and depleting water upstream on the Milk River. The ruling in favor of the tribes created "Winters" Rights or superior water rights for reservations across the country. With the creation of the treaties and the cession of the land, the federal government promised a perpetual and sufficient water right for tribal agricultural and domestic needs.

1989

FORT BELKNAP BEGINS NEGOTIATING

The State, the Federal Government and FBIC are each assigned negotiating teams to properly begin and set forth the process to determine their water rights. Several other Montana reservations would begin this often decades-long process around this decade, with the most recent Montana tribal water settlement passing with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes in 2022.

2019

BILL FOR WATER SETTLEMENT INTRODUCED

Tester introduced the "The Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Rights Settlement Act of 2019" to the Senate based on the compact approved 18 years ago with the state. The settlement would've offered \$630 million compared to the nearly \$1.2 billion proposed in current settlement negotiations. After failing to progress because of internal discussion, Tester reintroduced it in 2021, where it again returned to negotiations.



Jeffrey Stiffarm, the Fort Belknap tribal council president, sits on the second floor of the Montana State Capitol Building after a March meeting with the governor's office.

them to such an individual authority. The letter refers to the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty and the 1855 Blackfoot Treaty. Both recognized the Gros Ventre's status as an individual tribe.

After a March meeting seeking the governor's approval in the Capitol, Stiffarm said when he became president, he adapted to the needs of the entire reservation.

"Now, I got to look out for both tribes," Stiffarm said. "I had to reverse my role and support the water settlement. Without this settlement, my guess is in about five to 10 years down the road we're not going to be able to water our crops or water our livestock. We're going to have nothing to support clean drinking water. So, the bigger picture here is that we got to push this water settlement for our children and our grandchildren."

He embraced his nine-year-old son A.J., who

he brought with him to the meeting.

Still, tribal opposition to the settlement remains, which could prove a final stopping block for the settlement because enrolled members will ultimately vote on the settlement.

William "Snuffy" Main, GVTC Chair for the past 21 years, said the concerns of the Gros Ventre tribe have been brushed aside.

Main believes the settlement ignores their tribal history, given the Gros Ventre had individually reached settlements as recently as 1983. He would instead like to see each tribe reach an individual settlement.

"And now because of our identities as historical tribes, they're trying to whitewash that," Main, 62, said. "And they came up with this term, the Gros Ventre and the Assiniboine tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Community. There's no such thing. And so to me, it's basic-

ly a form of genocide. If the United States Congress passed a bill the way that it's titled, what does that do to the individual, historical tribes here who both have unique treaties?"

Driving his pine green truck on the south side of the reservation, Main notes the struggles he has seen with the water. Fish are still absent from polluted streams. In some areas, streams are still stained orange with contaminants from the mine, just fainter.

Creeks that used to run throughout the year only run in the spring. The "rinky-dinky" treatment plant facing the reservation struggles in comparison to the "big, sophisticated" treatment plants facing off-reservation. Ranchers and farmers are shrinking on the reservation with rising costs and difficulties obtaining water playing a contributing factor.

Yet Main remains steadfast in his opposition to the settlement. At South Fork Little People's Creek, Main stands before a stream surrounded by the hundred foot limestone walls of the Mission Canyon. He said the settlement would ultimately limit what they could do with the pristine water they have, like with Little People's Creek.

"And quality wise, it's the best stream for agricultural purposes," Main said. "But under that compact with the state, our leaders gave up their water rights completely."

Given how a water settlement works, it would quantify how much water belongs to the tribe in its four primary water systems. He says it would restrict the options the tribes could pursue with the water settlement in the future. The reservation only gets one chance to settle their rights Main said. If their rights are settled now, future water difficulties might be hard to find solutions to.

Fox believes the obstacle of tribal opposition is something they will prevail over.

"It's been really hard to deal with opposition, but I have great faith our people will pass it, because without this settlement, we will have no money to manage our own water," Fox said. "Do we forfeit all our settlement money and let all that money go down the drain? I don't think so."

Without the settlement, the tribes would have to resort to costly litigation to secure their water rights. It's a time-consuming option and every irrigator using the same water sources the reservation does could be party to the lawsuit. In the suit, all the tribes could do is secure paper rights for water. There would be no money to develop and improve systems on their current access to water, leaving them with their current water troubles.

It's an option that both irrigators on and off the reservation would be unhappy with. The settlement plans for \$275 million to improve the upstream system with the St. Mary's Canal restoration, a more-than-century-old system that contributes to the Milk River 250 miles west of Fort Belknap.

"This is just us being good neighbors," Gros Ventre FBIC Council member Geno Levaldo said. "We're all Montanans as well who have been here for generations, and realities are it's getting tougher to get water. Water is life right now."

RETURNING HOME

In his 14 years taking care of irrigation systems for Fort Belknap, Adams said he's learned how to navigate a system regularly failing him and the reservation. A few years ago a cable on the platform that diverted upstream debris snapped, leaving Adams to plunge in the waters to fix it.

"We try not to use this because it's become not so trusty. If you break it, then we gotta go down and take care of that. Then it's another day or two of trying not to kill yourself," Adams said, chuckling as he grasped the rusting valve that operates the chain to open a diversion pipe. Adams and others working on the irrigation have learned other methods, like using the combination of a backhoe and a hook to fish trash out.

After Adams spends long days up irrigation ditches while damming up others, he returns home to his 900-acre ranch where endless tasks often end in sleepless nights for him.

Like other ranchers and farmers on the reservation, he experiences the same problem with the century-old gravity-based irrigation system. More than a hundred acres of his land is unirrigated and far from properly utilized. And for other sections in the hotter months he has to engage in the bargaining process others all eventually have to do for the drippings left over in the Milk River.

He's tried to remedy his own irrigation problems with plastic tarps laid around his house and ranch to keep water. His efforts have only been somewhat successful. One project he considered to irrigate some of the non-irrigable land he owns only offered an inch of water for the whole area, about a week's worth of water for the average crop. It was far too costly and impractical for him and his family who he said have learned to live on a diet of bologna sandwiches.

While Adams isn't too familiar with the water settlement, he said it would make life a lot easier with water being able to be pumped much faster. Adams said it might take years to fully rectify the effects of their irrigation systems with drainage problems leaving former farmland to become unusable and dominated by willows.

He's used to waiting though. He continues waiting for irrigation projects that seemingly never materialize.

"What I've found is that what you can do is hope for the best, but you plan for the worst," Adams said. ■



RIGHT: Irrigation manager Craig Adams walks away from the Milk River spillway that he risks his life at each year.

'LAND IS LANGUAGE'

KAHWISTEKETINAHK HAYSTACK MOUNTAIN



**The Chippewa Cree work to revitalize their languages
through newly-formed immersion program**

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **RIDLEY HUDSON**



Dustin Whitford, executive director of Mahchiwminahnahtik Chippewa and Cree Language Revitalization program, in front of his childhood home at the base of *Kahwisteketinahk*. Whitford helps lead classes and plan curriculum at the language immersion program.

FOR A FEW years during his childhood, Dustin Whitford lived with his great-grandparents on the northwest side of *Kahwisteketinahk*, or Haystack Mountain. Every morning he would hear his great-grandparents, George and Minnie Watson, speaking in Cree to each other, as their house filled with the smell of coffee, bacon and Wikask, or sweetgrass.

Living at the base of *Kahwisteketinahk*, he heard stories from his great grandparents about the top of the mountain where a formation of shale rock resembling a *mikisiw*, or an eagle, which has significance to the land and culture for the tribe.

After helping conduct a tribal survey in 2020, Whitford found that only 3% of 650 tribal members surveyed could speak Cree, and only one was a fluent Chippewa speaker.

The results prompted Whitford's passion to revive the language, leading him to help create a nonprofit language immersion program with Brenda St. Pierre, a former language teacher at Rocky Boy's elementary school.

St. Pierre met Whitford at a tribal council meeting in 2019 when she proposed an idea for an immersion program. According to Whitford, he, St. Pierre and his cousin Bob Mitchell started meeting in March 2019 to discuss a plan to create a language program. St. Pierre started the program as the executive director, but when she got cancer she handed over the position to Whitford.

In May of 2020, the nonprofit Mahchiwminahnahtik Chippewa and Cree Language Revitalization, or MCCLR, got approved as an official program by the IRS and the state of Montana. This opened the

door for grants and funding to hire employees. They raised \$1 million from grant funding and began searching for trainees. In January 2021, eight paid full-time language trainees started learning the language for 14 months.

"(They) are reconnecting not only to the land, but they're reconnecting to their identity as to who they are as Chippewa Cree people," Whitford said. "It's a very healing process."

Every weekday for the past 14 months, the group has met in the Mission House on Rocky Boy's reservation, connected with Our Savior's Lutheran Church, built in the 1930s.

"It's ironic that we're learning and meeting in these buildings," said Clyde Brown, treasurer of the language program.

There is a history of physical punishment for speaking the language recounted by elders. However, Whitford and others say that the

local church had interpreters to translate the sermons from preachers.

"Our churches here locally didn't operate like the boarding schools," said Whitford. "Our local churches incorporated our language into their curriculum."

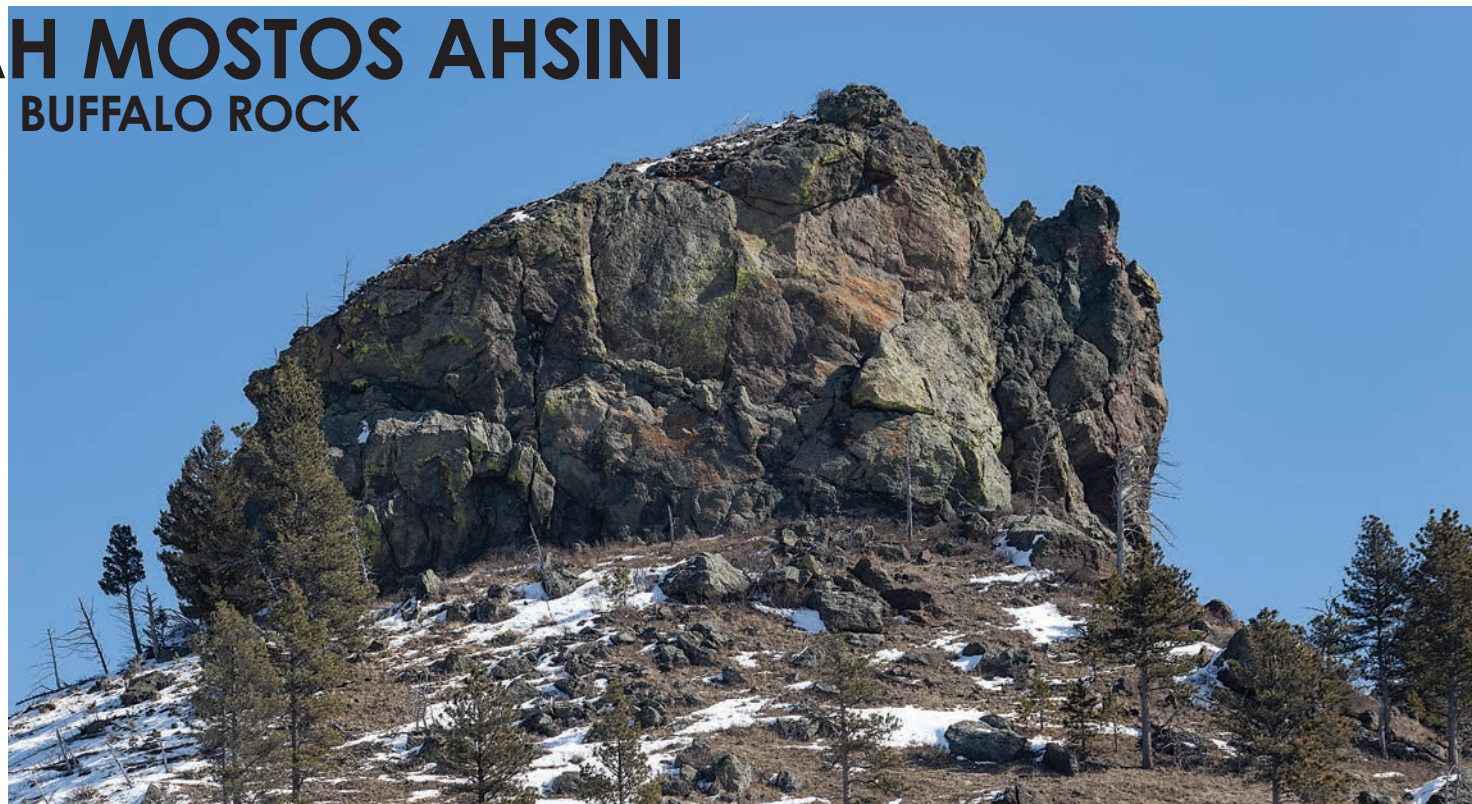
Whitford, now the president of the program, emphasizes maintaining a positive learning environment. He said generational trauma can sometimes make education difficult for tribal members, but the language class encourages the trainees to keep learning.

The Chippewa and Cree languages are unique in the way that they describe the seasons and the land surrounding them.

"May" in the English vocabulary relating to the season, is the *Sahkipahkahw Pisim* translated as Blooming Moon, which signifies the season that the flowers and other vegetation

PASKWAH MOSTOS AHSINI

BUFFALO ROCK



RIGHT: Buffalo Rock sits at the top of the hills on Rocky Boy's land, facing directly south.

OCHEHACHINAHS

BEARS HEART



ABOVE: From left: Dustin Whitford, Renita Watson, Jennifer Tendoy and Bill The Boy Jr. listen to Whitford repeat words in Cree during a learning exercise. The classes use physical motions, or Total Physical Response (TPR) and repetition to help with memorization.

LEFT: *Ochehachinahs*, or Bears Heart, is the tribe's sacred mountain. Most of the mountain is on tribal land and non-tribal members are encouraged not to hike there.

MIKISIW EAGLE



A *mikisiw*, or an eagle, sits on a branch overlooking the road that leads to *Ochehachinahs*, or the Bears Heart.

MAHSKWAWAHCHISIK BEARS PAW MOUNTAINS



Mahskawahchisik, or Bears Paw Mountains, stretch across the landscape surrounding Rocky Boy's reservation.



From left: Jennifer Tendoy, Renita Watson, Ordell Denny and Dustin Whitford talk about their plans for the day during a short break outside of the Mission House. According to Whitford, the trainees and instructors are like a family because of how much time they spend together.



Emma Rock, an elder on the Mahchiwminahnahtik Chippewa and Cree Language Revitalization program board, laughs before a meeting about the immersion program. The elders prepared to visit the tribal council to share the program's success and reinforce its importance in preserving language.



Brenda St. Pierre, one of the founders of MCLLR, says her dream is to see kids playing in the Cree language. As a teacher and mother, she saw the need for more linguistic education in schools and homes.



Kerry Murphy, a language trainee, holds an eagle feather while reflecting on her graduation from the Mahchiwminahnahtik Chippewa and Cree Language Revitalization (MCCLR) program in March. Murphy moved back to Rocky Boy's to join the program and reconnect with her culture and identity after her grandmother passed away.



start to bloom on Rocky Boy's reservation, according to Whitford.

The animals that survive off of the land around the Bears Paw Mountains can be indicators of how long and harsh the winters are going to be. If beavers build their dams deeper, it's known that the winter will be longer. If wasps build their nests higher, the winter will be short and spring will be dry.

Brown believes that without language, the balance of the tribe is thrown off.

"Language is land, and land is language," Brown said. "We're closely connected to the land, not in ways that this is our land, but in ways that we are living on it. Our language teaches about respect, it teaches about self-respect. With self-respect comes land, (and) animals. It's all connected."

The immersion program sits between the

arms of the *Mahskwawahchisik*, or Bears Paw Mountains that become visible after passing through the flat farmlands around Havre.

Mahskwawahchisik resembles a bear because it has two paws that stretch out towards Big Sandy and Great Falls.

The Bears Heart, or *Ochegahinahs*, also known as Baldy Butte on American maps, sits in the middle of the *Mahskwawahchisik*. This is a significant and sacred mountain for the Chippewa Cree.

Mahchiwminahnahtik language program has run out of its initial funding and is currently seeking new donors. Until new funding is secured, the trainees plan to keep meeting once a week to keep working towards total fluency.

St. Pierre, Whitford, the elders and everyone involved with MCCLR are continuing to push for the creation of a language department in



ABOVE: Loni Taylor stands outside of the Mission House while visiting her brother Dustin Whitford and the language program trainees.

LEFT: Clyde Brown, treasurer for the Mahchiwminahnahtik Chippewa and Cree Language Revitalization program, raises funds for the program. Brown hopes the program will continue to grow so his kids and others can learn the language.

the tribe's council to have secured funding for the program to continue, rather than relying on grants alone.

Councilwoman Loni Taylor, Whitford's sister and board member of MCCLR, is an advocate for the success and benefits of immersively learning the language because her daughter wants to join the program after school.

"This is where our land is. We have no choice but to learn it here," Taylor said.

The 14-month program ended on March 31 when the trainees, board members and elders came together at a ceremony at Our Savior's Lutheran Church, where trainees spoke about their experience and the impact that learning the language has had on them.

"If people speak (the Chippewa Cree language), they are going to feel it," said Pauline Standing-Rock, an elder language instructor

with two grandkids who are trainees.

Kikāwīnāw Askīy, 'Our mother the earth,' is a saying that Whitford heard frequently from all seven of his great-grandparents and grandparents. "They would talk about the importance of the land and taking without giving back. It's not ours. We will never own the land," said Whitford. "When it's our time to go we can't take the land with us, the land takes us back to it." ■



Scan the QR code to hear and learn more about the Mahchiwminahnahtik Chippewa and Cree Language Revitalization program from videographer Griffin Ziegert.



BREAKING OLD GROUND

Little Shell Chippewa Tribe develop land with federal funds

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **GRIFFEN SMITH**

GERALD GRAY walked through the door of a blue warehouse made of metal siding, the inside still fresh from construction. Gray, the chairman of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians, peered into the back freezer taking up a corner of the semi-completed space.

Buffalo meat sat in tightly-sealed wraps in storage boxes.

"People can come in and get the meat now," Gray said, noting that the soft opening is for members in need. "But soon, we will have rows and rows of food."

Food for the Little Shell tribe is starting to trickle in. Once the tribe finalizes a deal with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the next few weeks, the new food sovereignty program

will open for its more than 4,500 members.

But the Little Shell will pull off another feat this year, building houses on its own land at the base of Hill 57 — an area deeply connected to the tribe's members after more than 100 years of living there amid segregation and hostility against Indigenous Montanans.

"We used to live right here," Gray said as he looked up the slope of the Great Plains hill. "As time goes on, our economic development will start to provide shortfalls in everything. Everything the other tribes here can provide."

Much of this explosion in growth comes from the Little Shell obtaining federal recognition in 2019. The tribe's newfound connection with the government has ramped up funding for housing, food, health care and events like powwows.

"It's like trying to drink out of a fire hose," said Clarence Sivertsen, the first vice chairman of the tribe. He planned the food program to replace temporary programs the tribe made to

feed members during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The new program will give its members a permanent food source. Sivertsen said that although the Little Shell has access to the Great Falls Food Bank, the tribe's food sovereignty program will allow for more flexibility, more Indigenous food and possibly sending meals to rural members.

It's been a long way since the Little Shell first built its event space down Stuckey Road in the mid-2000s. By fall, the whole area will be home to dozens of the tribe's members amid a housing and price crunch in central Montana.

BUILDING THE BASICS

Don Davis, a councilman for the Little Shell tribe, looked through the schematics of all the future projects in his new office on Central Avenue. The tribal headquarters is brand new, with light and colorful travertine from the

tribe's quarry in Gardiner covering the floor and walls.

Davis, the planner for the tiny homes, explained that the Little Shell will get water and sewer systems from the City of Great Falls.

The city commission unanimously approved the annexation of the new 3.67-acre property on Stuckey Road in March. Since the adjacent property has already been connected to the city's services, the Little Shell connection shouldn't take long or much money.

Now, with the ground leveled and services ready, Davis will start fabricating small one- and two-bedroom homes that can range from 500 to 800 square feet.

"We're going to make them nice, because I told the city when we were going through this that we're not going to build them like Bozeman did," Davis said, referencing Bozeman's city-owned tiny homes that do not exceed 300 square feet.



ABOVE: Little Shell Tribal Councilman Don Davis looks over the schematics for a new wake building where members would hold funerals and celebrations of life. The project is one of several developments the Little Shell have made since gaining federal recognition in 2019.

LEFT: Gerald Gray, Little Shell tribal chairman, stands on the land below Hill 57 where the tribe plans to build a group of small one- and two-bedroom homes for members in need of housing assistance. The tribe worked with the City of Great Falls to annex the land to get access to the city's water and sewer systems.

Like Bozeman, however, the tribe's new housing will be for Little Shell members who are veterans, have disabilities or are currently displaced from housing, Davis said. The money for the project came from the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Davis said the houses will be transition homes, but added that doesn't mean the tribe won't make them nice. Most of his designs show craftsman style homes with front porches. To get one of these homes, a member just has to pay what they can.

"The price will be up on what they can afford," Davis said. "If they can only afford a couple hundred bucks a month because of their income, that's all we'll charge."

Gray said across the state, housing has appeared as the number one concern for its members.

The average home price in Great Falls is roughly \$324,000, up 10% from 2022, according to Realtor.com. The average rent for a one bedroom in the city is around \$1,000 a month according to Rent.com.

"Housing prices are going up across the state, and people can't afford it anymore," said

Gray, who lives in Billings. "It's our biggest need right now."

The project will break ground in the next couple of months. By fall, the tribe hopes most of the homes will be ready for move in.

The City of Great Falls was happy to approve the Little Shell project, according to Tom Micuda, the city's interim planning and community development director. With demand for homes increasing in Montana, Micuda said the city needs to add 450 living units each year to keep pace.

"We have a shortfall, and we need to get into catchup mode," Micuda said.

With the Little Shell contribution, Gray said the tribe is doing its part in battling high prices to live in the state. But just four years ago the tribe's council likely could not have made these developments.

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

The Little Shell tribe is one of the most recent Indigenous groups to get recognition from the federal government. Before the tribe was recognized by Montana in the 1980s, the tribe was made up of displaced bands of people around the northern Great Plains.

The Little Shell, made up of Ojibwe, Chipewa and Métis people, used to live in the Great Lakes region. Colonization of North America pushed the Little Shell farther West.

When the federal government tried to pin the tribe down with the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation near Canada in 1892, Chief Little Shell walked out of the negotiations over the absurdly-low prices the government would pay for their land.

History would show that these negotiations, known as the Ten Cents Treaty, were corrupted through one of the Indian agents on the reservation. Yet, the treaty was signed and the Little Shell suddenly became known as the "landless Indians."

Many regrouped in Montana, and called the Great Falls area home. But when the white settlers started expanding along the Missouri River, the Little Shell had to relocate up to Hill 57.

"They basically just survived in like a little shantytown," Gray said.

After getting state recognition in the 1980s, the tribe could start getting support from the government. A small operation started in Great Falls, connecting with its members spread across the state of Montana.

The tribe then set its eyes on federal recog-

nition. In 2019, Sen. Jon Tester amended the National Defense Authorization Act to include recognition for the Little Shell.

To Gray, the period of Hill 57 to federal recognition has been night and day. He already has leased more than 700 acres of farmland around Hill 57 to produce grain for the tribe and constructed a powwow arbor at the top of Hill 57.

As he looked over the hill on a sunny afternoon, he recalled how the next door neighbor was an enrolled member. It's his people's place, he said. Beside him, the food sovereignty building stood ready to be one of the center points to the new planned community.

The tribe will soon take its health care center back from Bureau of Indian Affairs control. They plan to purchase a second mobile health care vehicle.

Gray peered far into the distance of old trailers and trails. A new era for the tribe has started, he said, and it will not be slowing down anytime soon.

"I always say 'just do it,'" Gray said about the new programs. "Every other tribe has a food program or low income housing. It's time our members have the same opportunities." ■

GUARDIANS OF NINNAHSTAKO



The Aamsskáápipikani implement first U.S. co-management conservation program between a tribe and the National Park Service

STORY BY **CHOLE OLSGAARD**

PHOTOS BY **ANDY MEPHAM**

RYAN RUNNING WOLF trudged his feet, already sunk into a foot of snow, along a dismantled fence-line in East Glacier. He gazed upon not only his jurisdiction but his future. On the border of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation of Montana and Glacier National Park lies an opening in the fence that leads to one of the Blackfeet's most sacred places, Ninnahstako, also known as Chief Mountain.

Running Wolf, a 32-year-old enrolled member of the Blackfeet tribe, took jurisdiction over Ninnahstako and East Glacier when he

was appointed to the first-ever guardianship position in the United States last August as the Chief Mountain Guardian.

Ninnahstako lies on the border of Glacier National Park and the reservation, but Running Wolf's jurisdiction expands beyond the reservation and into the tribe's original lands in the park.

"It was exciting knowing that I was stepping into something that hasn't been done before, and to be able to help spearhead this, this move that a lot of people have been wanting to see happen, especially for Blackfeet," Running Wolf said.

Guardians, trained wildlife management experts who manage protected areas, play a "vital role" in creating land-use and aquatic-use

plans. That role involves connecting youth with elders, restoring animals and plants, testing water quality and training the next generation of educators, ministers and leaders, according to Running Wolf.

The Blackfeet reservation is home to the Aamsskáápipikani people, also known as the Southern Piikani, and covers 1.5 million acres, of which 26,000 now fall under Running Wolf's jurisdiction.

He said Ninnahstako and the rest of the land he's in charge of had been damaged over the years from tourism, overgrazing and overcapacity.

Along with wanting to keep the health of the land surrounding Ninnahstako, he also wanted to protect the spirituality within it.

As Running Wolf walked along the treeline leading up to Ninnahstako, he pointed out dozens of colorful fabrics tied around the trunks. The rainbow of fabric consists of prayer ties that are left, or burned, at the sight of ceremonies as an offering for the Great Spirit, said Running Wolf.

"It's definitely got a different feel to it, especially from other parts of the reservation, just because there's such a cultural significance to it," Running Wolf said. "This mountain used to be a vision quest site for our people and it's considered to have more of the sacred powers to it."

Running Wolf said that almost immediately after the guardianship program was proposed and passed in front of Congress last September,



ABOVE: Ryan Running Wolf evaluates a map that outlines the 26,000 acres of land he manages in the Chief Mountain area on Glacier National Park's eastern border.

LEFT: Part of Ryan Running Wolf's responsibility as Chief Mountain Guardian is marking fences that need to be removed to ensure that wildlife can freely move in and out of the area.

RIGHT: Ryan Running Wolf was appointed to the Guardianship position in August 2022. Previously, Running Wolf was the chief game warden for the Blackfeet Fish & Wildlife Department.

"It's definitely got a different feel to it, especially from other parts of the reservation, just because there's such a cultural significance to it."

RYAN RUNNING WOLF, CHIEF MOUNTAIN GUARDIAN

Blackfeet Fish and Wildlife got to work filling that position. Running Wolf, who was originally chief game warden at the time, had never even heard what a guardian was until he was offered the job.

Chuck Sams, an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, became the first Native American to take on the role of director of the National Park Service in December 2021.

Last year he testified in favor of introducing a nationwide co-stewardship policy. The policy did not specifically mention guardianship programs, but it paved the way for them to be implemented. The passing of the policy influenced the Blackfeet to bring a proposal to Glacier National Park officials to establish a guardian position.

"All national parks are located on Indigenous ancestral lands and this policy will help ensure

tribal governments have an equal voice in the planning and management of them," Sams said in a press release last September. "I have been an advocate for co-stewardship of federal lands for more than 27 years and I am pleased to see a national emphasis placed on this necessary work."

Gina Kerzman, a non-enrolled Blackfeet tribal member and Glacier National Park's public information officer, said the park approved

the proposal and reserved the unit through 2029. The park redirected prior grant funds from a previous "range rider" program that was funded by Glacier National Park Conservancy.

Kerzman said the previous program funded horseback riders to remove cattle that wandered into the park from the reservation. With the creation of the Ninnahstako Unit, range riders were no longer needed as the range units were no longer used for cattle leasing.

Since Running Wolf was appointed to the guardianship last August, he said he's been busy updating and reporting on the southern and eastern borders of his newfound jurisdiction.

Several obstacles have come Running Wolf's way, including thick vegetation, a short field season and cattle.

Running Wolf said one of the reasons the unit is updating fencing and borders by Glacier is to help combat interferences with wildlife migrations between Glacier National Park and the Blackfeet reservation.

From a century of colonialism and dispossession, billionaires and tourism now stand in the way of a traditional and proper return of Glacier land.

BREAKING DOWN FENCES

Along Duck Lake Road, near the east entrance of Glacier National Park, lies a snowy flat where hundreds of elk hibernate during the winter. In early March, Running Wolf partook on a helicopter fly-over and counted a combined herd of around 426 elk migrating through that area.

As Running Wolf drove along that bumpy road, he outlined that path of migration. He traced his finger along the flat top, over a few dirt roads covered in ice, across a highway and onto a large open field in North Browning.

The flat top area near St. Marys, all the way up into East Glacier, lies Zone 1 of Running Wolf's jurisdiction. A jurisdiction that Running Wolf said looked like a bunch of zigzags that someone randomly squiggled.

"Looking at a map you're like 'yeah, looks good, let's do it,'" Running Wolf said. "And then you get up here and the terrain is an obstacle in itself."

He stuck his head out of the car window as he looked up at 10 to 30-foot cliffs that were overgrown with trees on top of rocks that could landslide at any minute. Other borders of the jurisdiction, which he said needed to be altered, ran over water lines, graves and one non-tribal-owned ranch.

Billionaire Joe Ricketts, a non-tribal member and the owner of the Chicago Cubs, has owned a ranch near East Glacier since 2019. The ranch, equivalent to 2% of the entire reservation's size, is surrounded by five-foot fencing that houses Ricketts' buffalo.

In 2019, the land was put up for bid after the previous non-tribal owner had passed. That land, which wasn't under a tribal lease or tribal-owned, was sold to Ricketts after he outbid the Blackfeet's offer.

Running Wolf said that area of fencing





Lauren Monroe Jr. has been on the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council since 2020 before being elected vice chairman in July 2022. He has strongly supported the new guardianship program on the Blackfeet reservation.

resulted in damage to migration patterns of elk, buffalo, deer and moose. Several fences currently run along highways on the reservation and have little to no openings for wildlife to cross. The openings that do exist are often too tall for baby animals or too small for larger animals, including moose, to get through.

"So that (disruption) has been an issue," Running Wolf said. "And this helps. This also helps out with the research that we're trying to do by trying to get some data on their migration."

Running Wolf said that the department met with Ricketts' lawyers and biologists last summer to discuss ways to make that fencing more wildlife friendly. He added that the updated fencing would "hopefully" be placed around Ricketts' property.

"We're trying to find that middle ground, where they can consult on their bison opera-

tion while keeping them in and keeping them protected," Running Wolf said. "All of that while still allowing our wildlife to move freely in and out."

The migration research involves two ongoing studies about elk and moose, with the elk study being a priority not only for his jurisdiction but south along the Rocky Mountain Front. The studies being done are a way to help "combat" Ricketts' buffalo fences, by analyzing migration patterns around that obstacle, according to Running Wolf.

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Running Wolf became interested in wildlife management and conservation after working for fisheries on the reservation in high school. He wanted to work for the Blackfeet Fish and Wildlife Department but changed his career

path to law enforcement after attending Blackfeet Community College.

After taking on the job as a police officer for several years, he ended up on the same path he started and always wanted to pursue—with Blackfeet Fish and Wildlife as a game warden and now guardian.

"There were a lot of mixed emotions," Running Wolf said. "I had been in law enforcement for 10 years and you put a lot of your blood, sweat and tears into that. So I was a little sad, especially cleaning up my truck and turning in my weapons and my vests and my badge in particular."

Running Wolf, a father of two boys, said that once the ball of the program got rolling, his sadness dissipated and turned to an excitement his kids already shared.

"My kids were pretty happy about it because I was finally home," Running Wolf said. "Before, I was always getting called out to work, or had

court or training or something else that was going on."

He spoke about hunting, fishing and venturing in the Ninnahstako area with his sons, one of which recently shot his first elk not too far away. Along with wanting to protect the land for his community, he also wanted to preserve its beauty for his children and the generations to come through the work the guardianship will provide.

Running Wolf described Blackfeet Tribal Business Council member Lauren Monroe Jr. as a huge advocate for co-management initiatives and a key to spearheading the guardianship program. Monroe Jr., vice chairman of the council and an avid hunter, said he expressed interest to the council about those designated 26,000 acres as an area for the land to recover, instead of leasing it out and risking cattle damaging it.

Monroe stressed that the council didn't want that land managed under colonial styles, because those forms of management prevent interacting with the environment but encourage "leaving no trace."

"And I don't like to use the word conservation because it gives the definition of 'you can only access it through X amount of (entry) points,'" Monroe said. "And I think that's a really Western viewpoint of management, whereas we have to interact with it according to our culture."

Part of colonial conservation entails fencing different lands. Running Wolf said that fences surrounded almost all 26,000 acres of his jurisdiction. He said that many needed to be repaired, moved or taken down completely.

These borders and fence lines, from the east of Glacier National Park into the reservation, will soon be guiding wild buffalo back into their ancestral lands.

A LONG TIME COMING

For more than 100 years, buffalo have been missing from their original lands in Glacier National Park, until now. In 1883, buffalo were almost extinct in Montana, along with the rest of the United States. The mass-colonial eradication of buffalo forced starvation winters on many tribes in Montana, including the Blackfeet, who relied on the buffalo as a source of food, clothing, shelter and tools.

"There was a mass genocide and mass generational trauma that happened to both of us, Native Americans and buffalo," said Wyett Wippert, a Blackfeet business owner, and community engagement administrator for the linnii Initiative. "And we've done that journey separately, but together."

The linnii, the Blackfeet word for buffalo, are deemed as a cultural keystone species to the tribe and are known as caretakers of the land, Wippert said.

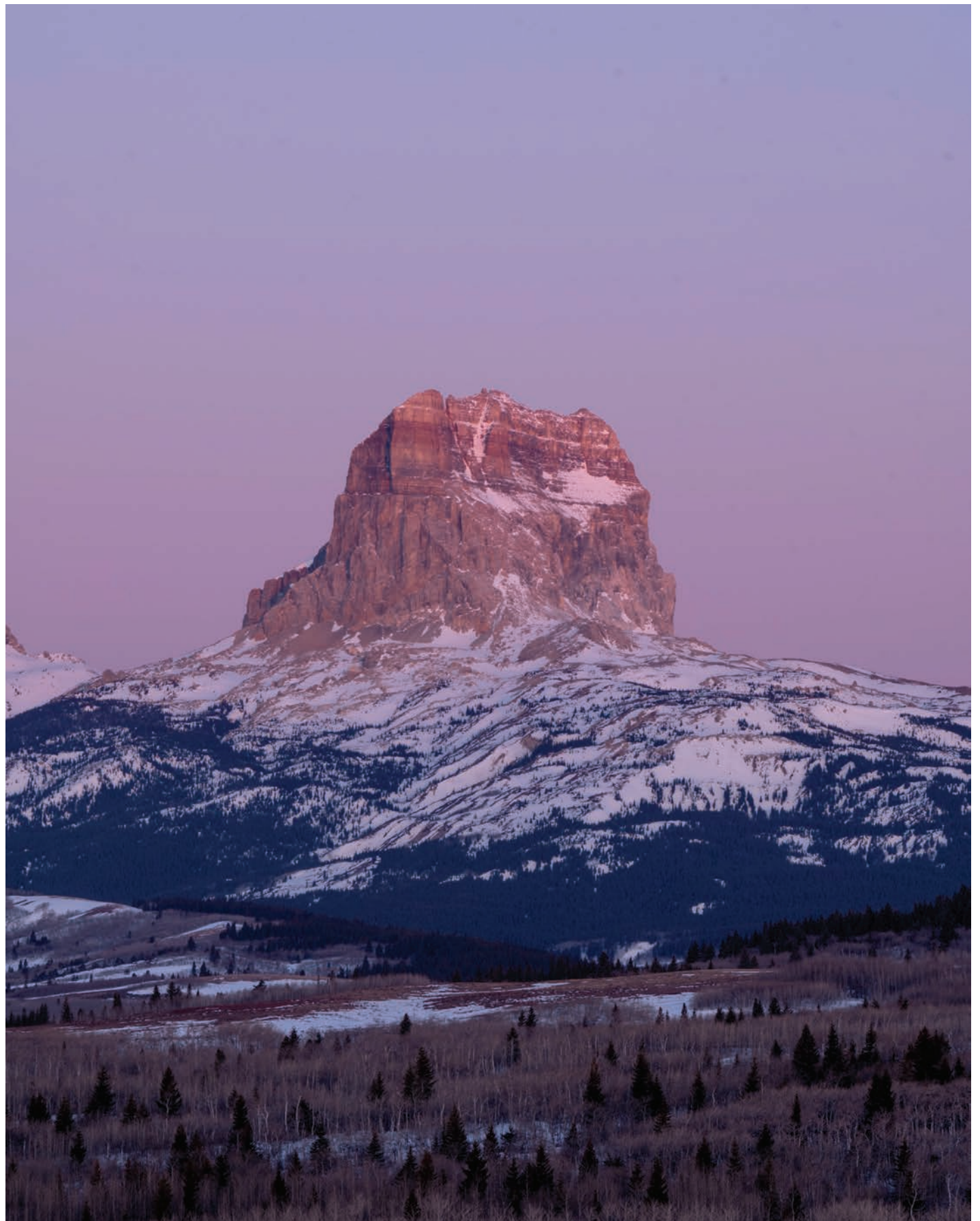
Along with the cultural effects of this reintroduction, members of the linnii Initiative and Blackfeet Fish and Wildlife believe the buffalo will have positive effects on the health and growth of the land.

Before the herd can be introduced, Running Wolf and other range rider units removed the cattle from leased properties near East Glacier. Those cattle roamed into the park over time, resulting in over-grazed grass and poor soil health in many regions of that east sector.

"The tribe and the Bureau of Indian Affairs consolidated six ranger units that create this Chief Mountain unit, or the Ninnahstako range unit," Running Wolf said.

The keystone species not only provides a cultural connection for the land, but ecological as well. As buffalo graze, their manure supplies essential nutrients and their hooves aerate the soil by burying seeds and creating moisture pockets.

In the early 1900s, the remaining buffalo on original Blackfeet lands, where Glacier National Park stands today, were purchased by the Canadian Government from the tribe in hopes of saving what little of them was left. Since then,



Chief Mountain, also known as Ninnahstako in Siksikáí'powahsin, is considered a sacred area by the Blackfeet and has been a ceremonial site for thousands of years. Ninnahstako is the oldest spirit of any mountain, and creation stories are linked to it for the tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy.



Wyatt Wippert is the community engagement administrator for the linnii Initiative. An organization started in 2010 focusing on the eco-cultural reintroduction of buffalo in the Blackfoot Confederacy to restore traditional culture and language.

the buffalo have resided within Elk Island National Park for more than 100 years, according to Wippert.

Spirit Hills Ranch, located off of U.S. Highway 89 on the reservation, has been home to the direct descendants of the Glacier buffalo herd after they were transferred from the park in Alberta, Canada, in the spring of 2016. Up until now, the population has grown upwards of hundreds.

The descendants that currently reside on that ranch will be moved into Running Wolf's jurisdiction, and guided by the fencing, onto Ninnahstako, and into Glacier National Park.

"I think overall, everybody wants to reach the goal of getting the bison there, having it preserved and protected," Running Wolf said. "It's just figuring out how we do that collectively."

Because Glacier National Park extends to the Canadian border, Running Wolf has concerns about the buffalo wandering past international lines.

"That's an issue because the ranchers up there in Canada don't want them and they can actually kill them," Running Wolf said. "Another issue is them getting into Waterton and not coming back."

The arrival of the descendants prompted not only the reintroduction of the herd but the reintroduction of sacred buffalo practices.

"They've had a long journey to come back here," Wippert said. "And now that they're here, we are also doing our work to reconnect with them, really learn from them, highlight what they teach us and their teachings that have been lost for a long time."

Songs, stories and ceremonies around the buffalo, entailed within Blackfeet culture, happened in Glacier National Park over 100 years ago when the animals still roamed the lands. With the buffalo's absence from the park, many of those practices halted, according to Treyace Yellow Owl, a member of the Blackfeet Land Board and a fluent speaker of the Blackfoot language.

Yellow Owl, an enrolled member of the Blackfeet, has also participated in the Native Speaks program in Glacier National Park. The program has provided Blackfeet members a platform to share their history, stories and knowledge about the park with tourists.

"We're going to be able to have ceremony back in the mountains again, who knows what that's gonna awaken and what energy is going to wake up that's been dormant and sleeping for some years," Yellow Owl said.

The reintroduction also prompted several projects on the reservation including a buffalo-meat program at the Blackfoot Language Immersion School, buffalo hunts at Browning High School and linnii Days at Spirit Hills Ranch, Wippert said. linnii Days in the past have involved prayers, buffalo harvests, buffalo jump reenactments, powwows and Indigenous film collectives.

"Our people were matriarchal societies," Yellow Owl said. "Buffalo are matriarchs, they have a lead cow. She's the head woman. She's



Several fence lines located along the Chief Mountain Highway will be removed to reduce the number of obstructions to wildlife movement.

one that gets them going and tells them where to go. Blackfoots, we watched and mirrored their society, we mirrored their social interactions. We watched how the wolves hunted the buffalo, that's how we ended up hunting the buffalo.”

SACRED STEPS

Running Wolf said one of the guardianship's objectives is to recruit Blackfeet members, primarily youth, to take on internships and jobs in that sector. He recently put in a grant for summer youth interns, looking to hire two to four people.

Along with hiring interns, the program is in the process of hiring another guardian to advocate and work solely toward protecting the cultural significance of that land. The Tribal Historic Preservation Office is currently in the process of interviewing candidates, Running Wolf said.

“We're kind of focusing more on the fish and wildlife side, but me and the other guardian are supposed to kind of collaborate and work closely together to kind of hit both sides,” Running Wolf said. “We'd really like to preserve the cultural kind and natural significance of Chief (Mountain) and preserve it as much as possible.”

Running Wolf said the guardian taking on

the cultural aspect of the program would specialize in protecting culturally significant areas to the Blackfeet including teepee rings, vision quest sites, lodges and more.

Ninnahstako, 9,085 feet tall, is one of the most prominent peaks along the Rocky Mountain Front and is formed out of rocks that date back 1,450 million years old. He added that the mountain was, and still is, a vision quest for the Blackfeet as it's considered to have “sacred powers” within it, not just rocks.

While Running Wolf walked his way along the fence line he's been tasked with tearing down, he smiled. “That's our home,” he said as he glanced up and smiled at the sight of Nin-

nahstako. The outline of the mountain cast a shadow over East Glacier.

“You just feel tied to it, knowing that your ancestors did everything possible to preserve it and have it available for you to experience,” Running Wolf said. ■

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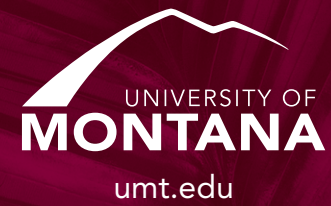
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