

Writers on the Range: What did Westerners care about in 2023?

December 28, 2023



This past year, Writers on the Range, an independent opinion service based in western Colorado, sent out 52 weekly opinion columns. They were provided free of charge to more than 200 subscribing editors of publications large and small, each of whom republished dozens of the columns.

Writers on the Range has a simple two-part mission. One of its aims is to engage Westerners in thinking and talking to each other about issues important to the region. The other aim is to entice readers to look forward to these fact-based opinions, with the hope that they'll then want to keep their local journalism outlet alive and flourishing.

This year, the focus of writers ran the gamut from A to W. Abortion bans, wrote Idaho-based Crista Worthy, caused women's health to suffer severely, while wolves, wrote Story Warren, were unfairly blamed for killing livestock in Colorado.

Several columns covered the depleted Colorado River, while longtime journalist Rocky Barker wrote that at last, four Klamath River dams would be demolished in the Northwest to help struggling salmon populations.

Greg McNamee made an excellent case for paying wildland firefighters what they deserved for their hazardous work, and Pepper Trail, the renowned Oregon biologist, wrote several opinions, including one about his own efforts to save wildlife from fatal encounters with vehicles.

No matter what Marjorie “Slim” Woodruff writes from her perch at the bottom of the Grand Canyon—insulting hikers for their lack of trail etiquette, mocking visitors for their Instagram obsessions—readers love how she slings her stings. Her pieces routinely run in 50 or more outlets.

From the Yellowstone area, Molly Absolon was also a popular writer, telling about backcountry heroes—mostly volunteers—who extricate hikers, climbers and drivers of snow machines from dangerous situations they’d gotten themselves into.

In Colorado, Erica Rosenberg detailed how federal land exchanges almost always serve the wealthy, and in Alaska, Tim Lydon wrote about his recreationally oriented town of Girdwood, so out of whack economically that teachers can’t find local housing.

Ernie Atencio celebrated the work of two Westerners who died recently, the New Mexico rancher Sid Goodloe, who transformed ranching by promoting short-duration, rotational grazing, and Dave Foreman, founder of EarthFirst! who worked to save old-growth forests, wilderness and migration corridors for big game.

The most-read award goes to Writers on the Range publisher Dave Marston, whose piece about the looming energy gap appeared in 67 publications. It also prompted an invitation from Amory Lovins, the guru of energy efficiency, for Marston to visit his Rocky Mountain Institute and learn why his column was so wrong about small, modular nuclear power being an option. Marston accepted that invitation, and this January his opinion will reveal whether he’s seen the light, so to speak.

Writers on the Range fields diverse reactions on its website, and some, to put it mildly, get personal. The column by Dana Johnson headlined “Mountains don’t need hardware,” enraged some technical climbers. The director of The Access Fund, which wants climbers to be able to put bolts into mountains in wilderness, vilified Marston, even accusing him of securing his position through “nepotism.”

Marston, who wrote eight opinions this year, didn’t bother to point out that not that many people choose to work for free, no matter what their last name.

There also emerged a healthy conversation about whether too many out-of-area hunters crowded public land. Andrew Carpenter’s opinion prompted rancher Lesli Allison to reply that 80 percent of scarce winter habitat for big game is provided by ranchers, and that cutting hunting tags for outsiders threatened the ability of ranchers to make a living.

Whatever retired land-use professor Rick Knight writes about—monster mansions polluting views or how much fun it can be to work like a dog restoring neglected land—readers love his message. They can tell he knows and cares about protecting the region’s open lands. But then, every opinion writer this year seemed to share his passion for the fascinating and often contentious West.

Finally, opinions can have impact if they’re sent out at the right time. “Outrage in Wyoming,” by Savannah Rose, urged the state not to auction off 640 acres within Grand Teton National Park. Her piece helped raise the number of angry objectors to 9,000, with 7,000 comments coming in the last week. The pressure worked: Wyoming officials postponed a decision on an auction until sometime in 2024.

Betsy Marston is the editor of Writers on the Range, an independent opinion service that seeks to spur lively conversation about the West. Want to comment, get on our newsletter list, or write a column? Go to writersontherange.org.