

From France, with glove

IAN CRAWFORD

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Two members of the Baker JV baseball team learned the game 5,000 miles from Baker City.

Raphaël Tisca and Hugo Lacaille are foreign exchange students from France who were able to visit America after pandemic restrictions were eased.

"We come from Rouen in Normandy," the pair wrote to the Herald. "We were able to participate in this exchange program through Thomas Joseph, who helped us with all the necessary steps to realize the project of studying in Baker."

Joseph, principal for the Eagle Cap Innovative High School, an alternative program in the Baker School District, is also principal and instructor at the district's Oregon International School.

Raphaël and Hugo, whose hometown is more than 1,000 years old, have appreciated the sights of the comparatively untamed Oregon.

"Oregon is a very beautiful state, with beautiful landscapes and where people are friendly and kind," they wrote. "We vis-

ited Baker City and saw Anthony's Lake under the snow."

Although baseball is renowned as America's game, the sport has a curious appeal in small pockets all over the world.

Raphaël and Hugo were enamored from their first pitch.

"My father has always been a big fan of the United States and in 2016 he suggested I take up baseball and I fell in love with the sport," Raphaël said.

"Baseball is a sport that is not very developed in France, but it is evolving," the pair wrote. "In Europe, the sport is very developed in some countries like Germany or Italy."

Hugo said he practiced dance for seven years before he started with baseball.

"And it was during a sports discovery day that I tried baseball for the first time," he wrote. "The same evening, my mother and I looked for the nearest club."

That's the Rouen Huskies, a team that has won many championships.

Raphaël and Hugo credited their hometown coaches, Dylan Gleeson, Mickael Cerda and Es-

teban Prioul, with helping them hone their skills.

"My level improved a lot, especially with the coaching of very good coaches," Raphaël wrote.

"I signed up with the Rouen Huskies where I was very well received and where my sports level evolved extremely well," Hugo wrote. "Then I was recruited in a high level center: The Rouen Baseball Center."

The two say they've felt welcome in Oregon.

"We made good friends and we were very well received," they wrote. "Moreover, the atmosphere in the junior varsity is great and everyone gets along well."

Discussing places they'd still like to see during their trip, they wished to see more of the beautiful U.S. landscape, and if given a chance, to visit San Francisco. They're also hoping they'll have a chance at some local pastimes, such as fishing and hunting.

When asked whether they have managed to get involved in any uniquely American fun, they swung for the fences.

"We got to shoot a potato launcher."



Ian Crawford/Baker City Herald

Raphaël Tisca, left, and Hugo Lacaille proudly display Bulldog colors at the Baker Sports Complex, on May 20, 2022, where they have been playing JV baseball this spring.

Grouse

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That's if the amount of land disturbed is less than five acres. Anything more than that, and the BLM must approve a more detailed plan accounting for impacts to land, water and wildlife.

Dudfield said all of the company's exploration activities are reviewed by BLM and the Oregon Department of Geology and Mineral Industries to ensure compliance with environmental regulations. He added that Jindalee is conducting environmental and cultural studies to help it avoid sensitive areas.

What's law got to do with it?

Experts argue mining regulations have not kept up with the industry.

The law governing most mining and prospecting on public lands is 150 years old. Thea Riofrancos, an associate professor of political science at Providence College and an expert on lithium extraction, says the General Mining Law

of 1872 is woefully out of date when it comes to the environmental and social impacts of modern mining.

"It actually explicitly encourages prospecting in ways that can harm the ecosystems of public lands," Riofrancos said, adding that those lands are often in close proximity to Native American reservations.

Riofrancos has closely studied mining in Latin America, which includes some of the world's biggest producers of raw battery materials such as lithium and copper.

As governments there have pushed to expand the mining industry, she's found it's come at a tremendous environmental and human cost. Riofrancos said that though the U.S. has stronger protections for the environment, labor and people, mining is just as disruptive here as it is anywhere.

"We're looking at a very invasive economic sector that is among the most environmentally destructive in the world," Riofrancos said.

Riofrancos said the U.S.

needs to envision a transition off fossil fuels that minimizes the amount of material coming out of the ground.

President Joe Biden has been cautious about encouraging new mining even as he's taken a number of steps to support battery production in the U.S., most recently invoking a Cold War-era law to speed up the process.

Biden said at a White House event on critical minerals in February that the nation needs to "avoid the historical injustices that too many mining operations left behind in American towns."

The Department of the Interior has formed a working group to potentially overhaul the federal mining law. Some lawmakers, including Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon, are promoting bills to improve cleanup operations at former mine sites and encourage more recycling of battery materials.

During a virtual town hall in March, Wyden said new mining projects can be carried out

"without throwing environmental laws in the trash can."

Long road ahead

Several abandoned mines dot the McDermitt Caldera, including the Opalite mercury mine constructed in the 1920s. Warning signs stand before gaping pits, crumbling structures and huge piles of toxic waste.

People used to haul away truckloads of the contaminated gravel to use as fill for roads and driveways in the border town of McDermitt and on the Fort McDermitt Indian Reservation, eventually requiring a \$1.2 million Superfund cleanup.

The mine predated most environmental regulations in place today, but mineral extraction itself is still extremely damaging — and in some cases done at a much larger scale. Opalite is a speck relative to the acres upon acres of adjacent mining claims.

"This is tiny compared to the devastation that would be wrought by lithium mining here," said Fite, standing at the old mine's gate.

Achieving climate goals like

electrifying vehicle fleets and increasing renewable energy production will require lithium and other raw materials. Some in Oregon and elsewhere in the country are eager to see the jobs and economic development that would accompany a new mining boom.

Many conservationists acknowledge that some new extraction may be necessary to meet future demand for these materials, but they're urging government officials to be extremely cautious about where new mines are located.

Fite says mining in southeast Oregon, even for a metal as critical to fighting climate change as lithium, would be disastrous. "You don't save the planet by tearing up intact wildland ecosystems," Fite said.

The flurry of mining claims and exploration on the Oregon-Nevada border has galvanized conservation groups like Fite's and Native American tribes. They're lining up to defend the landscape from new mining, particularly the Jindalee project and the proposed Thacker Pass

lithium mine in Nevada.

Dudfield estimates Jindalee is at least five years and a lot of work away from proposing a mine if it ever does.

"At any fork in the road, there can be a roadblock that stops you," Dudfield said. "The lithium price could fall. There could be some sort of permitting issue that arises. And so we can't just flick a switch and produce lithium immediately."

Sage grouse could be a big roadblock.

The birds have continued to suffer, despite efforts to save them. A report published last year by the U.S. Geological Survey says the sage grouse population has dropped 80% since 1965, and about half those losses have come in the past two decades alone.

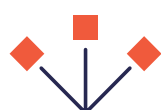
Jindalee has paused its mineral exploration in southeast Oregon until summer, and sage grouse are holding court on the sprawling high desert landscape. For now, the McDermitt Caldera still vibrates at daybreak with the ploinking song of this iconic Western bird.

Neighborly

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