

A New Angle

Episode 66

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Justin Angle: This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Justin Angle: Hey, folks, welcome back. Thanks for tuning in. Today's guest is my friend and colleague Nick Mott. Nick is an award-winning journalist and podcast producer based in Livingston.

Nick Mott: Yellowstone, one of its claims to fame, is that it's the longest free river in the lower 48. You know, no dams obstructing it. And that is a really remarkable trait of it. That also means that everybody living along this watershed is living on a wild river.

Justin Angle: Over the last several months, he's published a series of articles at High Country News documenting the catastrophic Yellowstone floods that occurred in June. Nick, thanks for coming on the show.

Nick Mott: Thanks so much for having me, Justin.

Justin Angle: And you're here in person.

Nick Mott: Indeed, in Missoula in the flesh.

Justin Angle: So, I guess I'll subject you to this. Where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Nick Mott: So, I grew up in Kansas City, born on the Missouri side, raised on the Kansas side. And my dad worked pretty sure, pretty much his whole adult life and for sure all of my life in various parts of the construction industry. He ran a lumber company for a long time and then that went under. And then he started working at a company that does garage doors, entry doors, windows, all things entry and doors, started as I think a salesperson and ended his career as vice president of the region? As vice president, we'll say that. And my mom did various forms of corporate communication internally and externally for most of her, for most of my adult life, for Sprints. She ended her career at an environmental engineering firm, and they both retired within the last year

or two and are kind of figuring out retired life. They're not good at it. They've both sort of taken up, continue to take up part time work.

Justin Angle: Interesting, they're not good at retired life. So, give us kind of the short form of how you made your way to Montana and this portfolio of journalistic pieces that you've put together.

Nick Mott: Sure. So, I lived the first, I'd say 22 years of my life in Kansas, went to the University of Kansas for undergrad, didn't do anything journalism related in school, majored in philosophy and sociology, but did work as a journalist for something called the Center for Remote Sensing of Ice Sheets like this organization that drills ice cores to get climate data and is based in Kansas of all places.

Justin Angle: Yeah, why is that place based in Kansas?

Nick Mott: Still couldn't tell you.

Justin Angle: Yeah. Okay.

Nick Mott: I mean, the same way, you know, we have people doing work all over the world here at University of Montana, so same sort of deal. And then I went into conservation work. I got an AmeriCorps job after college out west. It was the first thing that brought me West. I was, it was Nevada Conservation Corps. I was doing mostly fuels reduction and habitat restoration. So, kind of felling a lot of trees to make up for, kind of stimulate, what wildfire would have done had we let it actually happen in the wild. Doing other things like trail building, trash, cleanup in the desert and worked all over the state of Nevada, worked in the Tahoe area, and that really instilled a love of the West for me. From there, the short version is I moved to Colorado, realized that storytelling is really what I wanted to do, went to grad school for environmental reporting in Boulder, and then due to some connections I'd made there, especially I'll shout out the podcast Threshold and executive producer and founder Amy Martin moved to Missoula out of grad school to pursue working for Threshold and Montana Public Radio. And that's what brought me here to this wonderful place.

Justin Angle: And we should take a moment to mention Threshold celebrating four seasons at this point. You know, many awards, if it's a prominent podcast, particularly a prominent Montana podcast, your fingerprints are all over it. I mean, Richest Hill, Fireline, which we've worked on together, the production you put out this spring,

Biohacked, talk about just briefly your, kind of your love for the podcasting space. Why you think that's a way to kind of express this interest in storytelling you've developed?

Nick Mott: Yeah, I think through audio. We, you know, that's how humans have told each other stories for millennia. Like you get a very different sense of emotion and momentum and just drawn in in a totally different way than when you're reading something, when you're hearing something. And that's one of the things that captured me about storytelling and what made me want to go to school for journalism in the first place. And I also love writing, I should say I love different mediums, but definitely audio and podcasting has a special place in my heart.

Justin Angle: Well, let's shift gears and focus on this series you've recently published with High Country News. Actually, let's start with the Yellowstone floods. I mean, they were real up close and personal for you and some of your friends in Livingston right there.

Nick Mott: They were. The Yellowstone River runs through town and that morning I remember I was doing some work and my partner Leah was telling me, Hey, the river's, I think it's going to peak today. And her, the organization she works for is actually running this fundraiser called Predict the Peak, where like you would predict how high

the river would get, its cubic feet per second or CFS. And so, we were going to go and look and see what the peak was going to be. So, we rode our bikes out to the river and it was super huge at the time. We didn't yet know how big it was going to be. It was bigger than we'd certainly ever seen. It only been there for a couple of years and seemed like kind of like half the town was out there on the levee at this park on one side of town, just watching this water come by. It was big and muddy and there were just like logs coming by. And while we were there, you know, people were checking these community groups on Facebook and getting texts from friends. And around that same time, this bridge, that kind of is the access to an area called the Tom Miner Basin, about 45 minutes away went out. It got swept away by the floods. And that's when we knew something really big was coming our way because that was just unimaginable to think about at the time. And within a couple of hours of that, we got notice that we were under pre-evacuation and then eventually evacuation. Like I said, we were about a half mile from the river. I'd never thought about this before, but we are in what's called the 500-year flood plain, which means there's a 0.2% annual chance of flooding. And suddenly that became crazy real. So, we got ready to get out of there. We actually went to a friend's house who already had water coming up on to her property and started just laying sandbags, trying to protect her property and spent most of the day with her, her name's Celeste, trying to guard her property with a bunch of other folks that kind of joined the effort. And we didn't succeed. Her property was ruined.

Justin Angle: Gosh. And how much of the town was affected by the flood as far as like actually touched by water?

Nick Mott: I would say not a ton of the town was actually directly affected. But again, it depends totally on who you are and where you're at. So, my friend Celeste is a good example. You know, her house was totally inundated. Some of her neighbors were fine because their houses were elevated, but hers was old and was not. It's possible that elevation could have also pushed more water onto her property because, you know, you do something in one place, it reverberates elsewhere. So, I would say directly in Livingston, not a ton of places were affected, but those that were affected felt it really bad. Not that many people had flood insurance. Celeste didn't. And this was also a region wide event. So, it wasn't just Livingston. It had very different economic effects in towns like Gardiner and Cook City, just outside the park, it, you know, flooded about a quarter of homes in a little tiny community called Fromberg relatively close to Red Lodge. So, the damage of the flood totally depended on where your house was at. It hit people that never would have expected it. And I think it caused a whole lot of people to sort of reevaluate how they're living with water and rivers.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And we'll touch on some of those themes here that you've covered in your series. I mean, you highlighted that, you know, at that moment when you heard about the bridge coming your way, really, this was an unusually big event. You're managing your own life, trying to decide, like, okay, are we going to get evacuated? How do we prepare for that? At what point are you thinking, I also need to document this? Like there the world needs to kind of hear about this and understand this event and kind of what was your thought process at that point?

Nick Mott: My focus was definitely on my loved ones, my partner and my dog and our property and our home and our friends in town. And it's actually kind of funny because I wasn't thinking about documenting it at first at all. I got a call from a buddy who was going to do some photography for High Country News, and they were looking for somebody to write about it and he was like, Hey, are you interested? And I was like, I don't know. This is happening right now. I don't know if I have the mental capacity or an emotional capacity to do it. Writing and storytelling is part of who I am, and so I ended up doing it that first day and got something out that day and I'm glad I did. And I think in a way, writing about is also a way for me of processing what's happening and coping with what's happening. And of course, a lot of that writing doesn't make it to a story that gets published, but it certainly helps me understand what I'm going through in ways I otherwise might not.

Justin Angle: Yeah, and that first story was very descriptive in talking about how unusual an event it was and tying it into climate change and sort of asking the broad question like, is this, you know, we see it as an abnormal event this year, but maybe it is going to be a new form of normal as the climate changes.

Nick Mott: Absolutely. You know, I talked with the county floodplain administrators named Lawson Moorman a few weeks ago. And one thing he told me that I found surprising was that even a lot of folks in Paradise Valley who are lots of, you know, agricultural properties, a lot of ranchers who might not believe in climate change are telling him that, you know, they accept this. This stuff's going to be more common, and we got to get ready for it. And that's definitely something that people living along the river seem to be accepting and understanding. Also, Livingston, you know, is dealing a lot of housing issues. It's not no vacancies, high prices, but. And they adopted this growth policy last year. And part of that is saying, you know, the floodplain map is this baseline and climate change is likely to amplify these events in the future and make them more common. So, this is something that's definitely on people's minds. And, you know, it's kind of scary to think about what might happen next.

Justin Angle: Yeah. Let's talk about floodplain for a moment. Like, that was the focus of one of your pieces here. And I never considered it as a politically contested thing. You'd think that the floodplain is the floodplain, and if it says, I'm in a floodplain, I've got to get flood insurance. But it turns out that what's designated as in the floodplain is not always exactly what is going to be susceptible to flood, let's put it that way.

Nick Mott: Absolutely. I think to start this, we should back up just a little bit. So, there's this thing called the National Flood Insurance Program, and they map communities all over the country in areas like the 100-year flood plain where there is a 1% annual chance of a flood. And the 500-year flood plain where I live, where there's a 0.2% annual chance of flood, if you live in that 1% zone, you have to get flood insurance and that costs a bunch of money. And that cost is the center of the politics there. Right. So often the floodplain is a place people want to develop. People want to live there for aesthetic reasons, similar to why they might want to live in wildfire prone areas. You know, rivers are cool and also sometimes cheaper property is abundant in the floodplain, in part because it's more dangerous.

Justin Angle: Right, more complicated to build. More dangerous, more expensive to insure, etc.

Nick Mott: Exactly. So, when an area is mapped in that 1% annual chance of flooding, it becomes a lot more expensive to build and develop there. And when the federal government came to town in Livingston to remap the floodplain in the early 2000s, the town was not happy with how much was put in that 1% annual chance, which something I understand. Like I've talked with folks who bought a home in Livingston because it wasn't mapped in that 1% area, which was made much smaller after FEMA came to town, offered up a study from the Army Corps of Engineers saying here's a new map, and that map put a bunch of town in this flood prone area, in the 100-year flood plain.

Justin Angle: So, a new map was delivered and all of a sudden people who hadn't had to buy flood insurance were having to buy it. And that's additional expense.

Nick Mott: Had that gone into effect, that would have happened.

Justin Angle: Right, that was what they were facing.

Nick Mott: Exactly. But the town was immediately like, no, we, this is not accurate. And in part because there's this levee along town that had been built over the years and bolstered after some other floods. So, the city hired a private company out of Bozeman

to do a different mapping with a different methodology. And that map showed almost none of town in the 1% floodplain. And so, they offered this new map that cost \$100,000 to FEMA and said, basically, we need to accept this new map, not the old one, a new one that showed a bunch of town, including me and the 500-year flood plain not the 100 year, was the one that was accepted and that made it much cheaper to live in a lot of parts of town. You know, the current planning director in town told me a lot of development has happened thanks to that and including like the hospital that serves the whole county is in an area that is possibly pretty flood prone, and it was actually evacuated and shut down because it was surrounded by water even though it stayed dry.

Jeff Meese: We'll be back to our conversation with Nick Mott after this short break.

Jeff Meese: Welcome back to A New Angle. We're talking about the Yellowstone floods with reporter Nick Mott.

Justin Angle: You know, a listener hearing this might be thinking, wow, that seems outrageous that these flood plain maps would be manipulated. At the same time, you know, one of your pieces digs into housing and sort of the premises when a flood meets a housing crisis. And so, yes, we do have an affordable housing crisis here in

Montana. Livingston is sort of not necessarily at the center of it, but certainly peripheral to one of the centerpieces. Bozeman. So, we have some real conflict embedded in this system. People need affordable housing. And, you know, here a community tries to avoid not necessarily a policy, but a policy implication that would raise housing costs for many folks in town. You know, how did you see these tensions playing out and how did you think about addressing them from a storytelling standpoint?

Nick Mott: Yeah, well, there's some, there were some things I've written about and some things I haven't yet and some things I'm still grappling with. So, the first thing to talk about is actually not in Livingston. It's over in Fromberg, a place I mentioned earlier, which is in Carbon County near Red Lodge, which is an area that also is dealing with an affordability crisis. In Fromberg, I think at least 95 homes were destroyed in the flood and the vast majority of those were mobile homes. And mobile homes are a critical source of workforce housing and affordable housing. And these people were displaced, and many of them still don't have any source of permanent housing. So, when something like that can happen, it can just topple an already stressed market. In Livingston, there are at risk mobile homes as well. They did stay dry in the flood. But, you know, I talked with the Human Resources Development Council's housing director, and he was working the shelter in Livingston when evacuation orders were issued, he said, you know, everybody who came in was older folks coming from these mobile

homes. And that just highlights how vulnerable those communities are. And the other part of this equation that I haven't written about as much is what comes next. So, Livingston and Bozeman are grappling with how to grow. Like, where do your houses go? Infill. Putting more stuff in the city is part of the solution. But Livingston also has this, some land that's undeveloped and zoned right next to that hospital where there's talk of developing. And, you know, part of that development is if it gets developed, is likely to be affordable housing. And so that will start conversations about do we want housing here? What kind of houses do we want here and how do we make them safe? You know, I talked with a number of experts about development in the floodplain. It's not as simple as don't put anything here, because you have to balance like the needs of the community in the needs of people with safety and resilience. But how do we build affordably and build safely? How can we elevate these structures, make them resilient to anything that might come at them? And the answer to that is, I don't know.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And those introduce some mechanisms that raise prices as well. I mean, to do this type of building is expensive or to insure it is also expensive. Thus, you know, it's not just sort of supply and demand for the house itself. It's all the dimensions of building in a place that is exposed to these risks.

Nick Mott: Absolutely.

Justin Angle: So, another ripple to this is Yellowstone was shut down. Yellowstone National Park was shut down for a period of time and is dealing with a massive cleanup. The Lamar River and the road along it and the Gardiner River and the road adjacent to it is a key pathway into the park that was wiped out. You reported from Cooke City and from Gardiner, these two entryway or gateway communities that were sort of just instantly made vacant by this flooding event. Talk about those people in those communities that you spoke with.

Nick Mott: Yeah, that was a very different impact than the destruction of a flood. You know, instead of homes being destroyed, by and large, it was an economy that was destroyed. So, there are several entrances to Yellowstone. There's, you know, West Yellowstone. You can get in, you know, out north of Jackson and so on. There's the north entrance outside of Gardiner, like you said, and then there's another entrance by Cooke City and roads in both of those areas were destroyed, which meant visitors could not get in in either locale. Now, Yellowstone's also seeing record visitation. This year was Yellowstone's 150th anniversary, I believe. And so, people were expecting record visitation in both of those towns. And suddenly they were both ghost towns. So those entrances remain shut down to vehicle traffic.

Justin Angle: I mean, Gardiner is kind of the end of the road now.

Nick Mott: Correct.

Justin Angle: It used to be this major gateway into a giant attraction. And now it's the end of the road. Like, you really have no reason to go there other than to do something in Gardiner.

Nick Mott: True, which I should say there's a lot of really cool stuff to do in and near Gardiner.

Justin Angle: There are some awesome things.

Nick Mott: Yeah. And I should also say that the park is trying to remedy this as fast as it can. So early on they instituted and continue to offer guide visitation into the park. So, there's an old road that's been renovated since the flood that if you book a guide, you can, they can take you into the park through Gardner still. But Cooke City doesn't have that yet. And now the park is also saying that I think by mid-October they should have some sort of temporary access way between Cooke City and Gardner opening that whole stretch. Of course, this will be after peak tourist season.

Justin Angle: Sure.

Nick Mott: So much of this damage will already have been wrought. That said, it's also very important because Cooke remains a winter destination. Cooke also needs like access to it in winter. Getting there through Gardner is the only way to get there unless they plow an area that's never been plowed before on a pass. And, but the big thing that I've seen in those towns, in addition to just economic devastation, you know, hotels, empty restaurants, empty people fired and laid off and all that stuff is happening. But at the same time, the towns are having to, like, learn how to advertise themselves for the first time ever. You know, the problem in the past has been too many people. And so now they're like, Oh crap, we have to figure out how to get people here. This new problem we've never had. And one strategy to do it is kind of saying to locals, to people living nearby or people living in Livingston, Bozeman or even Missoula, to people living in the region like come experience the Yellowstone region like you never have before. In solitude and quiet. And, you know, I was able to do that visiting Cooke and Gardner and I've actually, since I only live an hour from Gardner, I've been down there a number of times and it's pretty amazing to be there right now without all the tourists and all the folks around.

Justin Angle: And this has to come at a really difficult time for these people. I mean, Montana and a lot of tourist towns in the outdoor space, they did experience a growth of a sort in demand throughout COVID. But COVID was a major shock to a lot of small businesses in these areas, and they're just starting to recover. And then they get hit with something like this. And we're talking about resilience to climate change. But there's also resilience to economic shocks that these families and their small businesses have to go through. How are they coping?

Nick Mott: It's variable. It's variable. I mean, the towns still feel very, very quiet. I think Gardner has it particularly rough. You know, they were hit by COVID. I talked with numerous people who are sort of maxed out on loans from COVID. And there's not a lot of recovery money. There's a little bit of money available through the state to recover from the flood, but not a lot else. That's not alone. And then and Gardner, I think in 2020, several businesses downtown also burnt down. So that was another shock to the town. And then the flood happened. So, it's sort of a triple whammy.

Justin Angle: And it's going to be a while. But I mean, the park is doing its best to reopen, but it's not. I mean, these are remote areas where it's hard to build roads and maintain infrastructure. It's not just a quick fix.

Nick Mott: Yeah. And the park wants to do it right. They want to take into account that these events are going to be bigger and more frequent. They want to not have to do this every few years. So, redoing the roads and redoing them right is going to take a bunch of time, I think at least a few years, if not longer, and will require a bunch of environmental impact statements and all that jazz. And at the same time there they are trying to build in temporary access. And they are, you know, I've heard all kinds of stories of park leaders reaching out directly to people in both communities to like tell them what's up, to tell them what's going on and try to do their best because they know that like the communities outside the park are very much a part of the park as well.

Justin Angle: So, let's shift gears in our remaining time to the benefits of flooding. I mean, something you and I have talked about and reported on in Fireline, I mean, fires, this sort of big, scary thing that can be really destructive and kill people. And there, you know, that they're all of their resources, etc. Floods can have the same sort of devastation, but they're important part of ecosystems, right? They bring rejuvenating effects. You did a piece on that aspect of flooding. Talk about that.

Nick Mott: So, you know, one person that I interviewed said something like, floods are really rough for people, but they're great for fish.

Justin Angle: Yeah.

Nick Mott: And, you know, it's a more complicated story than that. But, you know, floods have happened always in the same way as fire. Like this is a natural cycle, especially rivers like the Yellowstone and the whole watershed around it like they are this annual cycle of runoff happens and they, you know, get bigger every year in the spring and get smaller as the summer goes on and it happens over and over again, and it fluctuates every year. And the Yellowstone is one of its claims to fame is that it's the longest free river in the lower 48, you know, no dams obstructing it. And that is really a remarkable trade of it. That also means that everybody living along this watershed is living on a wild river, a river that is doing a lot of the things it naturally should. And so, one of those things is rivers like to move. They like to do these things that are, can be destructive to property and can inconvenience people, which people hate. But if you look at it from an ecosystem perspective, it can be perfectly normal and even good. So, there are a number of things that are happening. One thing is to think about willows and cottonwoods, these riparian areas, you know, riverside trees. They often depend on big floods to reproduce. So like cottonwoods, you can see in the springtime those fluffy balls floating in the air. When there's floods, that water is distributing that stuff. And when the water table stays high enough, you're allowing the dispersal of all these new

cottonwoods. And people have done studies in Yellowstone and elsewhere on how these big flood events actually do wonders to help establish new cottonwoods.

There's also, you know this, the Yellowstone is a blue-ribbon trout river. There's cutthroat trout. You got your brown trout, your rainbow trout, of course, whitefish and other fish in there, too. But, you know, anglers are targeting those three main species of trout. Yellowstone cutthroats are native to the area. And I talked with a fisheries biologist who said that, you know, rainbow trout spawn in the spring, usually before runoff, brown trout spawn in the fall. And because of that, the flood could have been you know, they won't know until later. The flood could have done some damage to both of those species, which are non-native to the area. But Yellowstone cutthroat spawn after runoff. And so, it's likely this could have actually helped Yellowstone cutthroat. And there's been all kinds of initiatives to try to bolster that species over the years, which is suffering due to competition from brown and rainbow trout, from climate change, from all kinds of things. And at the same time that that's happening, you know, this big, fast, muddy water is also, you know, cleaning off and pushing in all kinds of new cobblestones that trout used to breed, you know, redds, things that they actually lay their eggs in and breed and reproduce these new generations with. Other things that are happening is like, you know, this, the water is pulsing through these cobblestones in the bed and filtering and doing all this cool stuff and promoting all this kind of new aquatic life, even though a lot of aquatic life is getting destroyed and

moved by the flowing water. But, you know, one person I talked with, a professor here at UM, said that like floodplains, these big areas are so important to habitat, not just for fish but also for ungulates, for deer and elk, for, this is Yellowstone, so we're talking about wolves. We're talking about grizzly bears for, you know, a huge number of Montana's bird species utilize these floodplains and the vegetation growing in them during some course of their lifespan. So, while these floods are, you know, doing a lot of bad things for people, like at the same time, this is our fault for building in the floodplain in a lot of ways. And it's kind of a lesson in that we need to learn to live alongside these wild systems in potentially different ways.

Justin Angle: Yeah. Alongside, within, I don't know quite what the right language is, but you think of these rivers as a place that we want to go and to experience and to consume in some ways. And yeah, that puts us at risk. And one of the threads of this work is how that risk is not necessarily equally distributed. I think you do a wonderful job of capturing that human element and kind of illuminating so many of the challenges that our state has to navigate in future years. And climate change is going to accelerate that.

Nick Mott: Oh, yeah. Thank you.

Justin Angle: So, Nick, thanks so much. Where would you point people online who want to learn more about this work?

Nick Mott: Good question. Go to High Country News' website and look up the stories. Look up the other good work they're doing. I am trying to stay off the social media and so Google me if you want, but I'd say for these go to High Country News.

Justin Angle: Right. Go right to the source. Nick Mott, thanks for joining us.

Nick Mott: Thanks, Justin.

Justin Angle: Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM alums, Michele and Loren Hansen.

Justin Angle: A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larson is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music.

Editing by Nick Mott, Social Media by Aj Williams, and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.