

The new world of adventure journalism

By Steven Threndyle

My wife is freaking out a bit. We're six weeks away from downsizing from a four-bedroom (with carport, landing, a back shed and side shed) North Vancouver home to a two-bedroom condo. "What the hell are you going to do with all of those magazines?" she says. "And all of those skis?"

Maybe *POWDER* magazine editor (make that: former *POWDER* magazine editor) Rob Story had it right back in 1994. I'd been freelancing full time for more than a year and a half at the time, and he'd had the dream gig as associate editor for both *POWDER* and *Bike* for a half dozen years. "Magazines and skiing

Powder. Couloir. SKI. Skiing. Ski Racing. Off-Piste. Freeze. Apex. Ski Trax. Ski Racing. Ski Racing Canada. S Magazine, Snowboard Life. International Snowboarder Magazine. Snowboarder. Transworld Snowboarding. Frequency. (Actually, I stand corrected. The magazine rebranded itself as the *Snowboarder's Journal* in the early '00s). *Warren Miller's SnowWorld. Telemark Skier. Telemark Journal. Concrete Powder. Action Now. Surfer. Surfing. TW Surf. SBC Surf Canada. Windsurfer. Wind Surf. American Windsurfer. WindSurfing Now, Northwest Windsurfer. Mountain Bike. Bike. Beta. Peloton. Northwest Runner. California Runner. Running Times. Marathon. Climbing. Summit* (the original, not the new version) *Mountain*

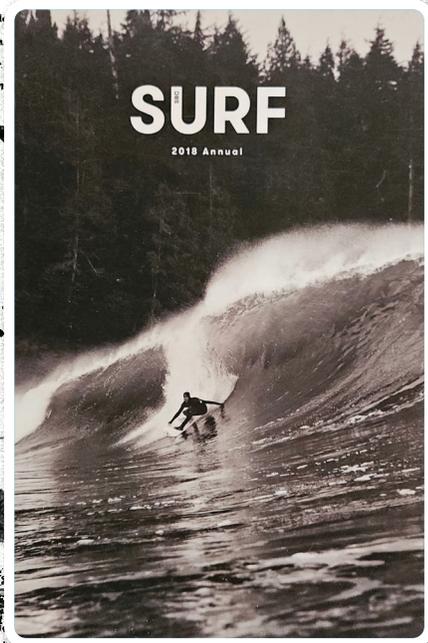
mid-'90s, probably a bit ahead of its time. I am neither a completist (someone who has to have every issue of, say, *The Surfer's Journal*) nor, well, that much of a hoarder—I don't even keep each and every copy of the 800-plus stories I've written since my first placement in the March, 1984, issue of *Explore* magazine (long gone...).

For most readers, these magazines made as much of an impression as a café Americano in a mountain town coffee shop. Post-COVID, scarcely any coffee shops even carry newspapers. It's a brutal truth that advertisers will use whatever means necessary to say "no" to an advertising rep, including the COVID crisis from 2020 to 2022, an event which, according to *Mountain Life* publisher Todd Lawson, forced the artfully-designed *Mountain Life Annual* out of business; although its Whistler and Collingwood editions seem to have recovered.

'PRINT AIN'T DEAD'

Then, there's *Mountain Gazette*. When Mike Rogge purchased the rights to *Mountain Gazette* magazine in 2019, he probably never envisioned readers would post videos on their social media feeds of "unboxing" each issue; slowly pulling the heavy-stock publication from its massive

stories that demanded to be told as hot dog skiers invaded the slopes and rock climbers scaled walls of granite and limestone, while whitewater kayakers and oarsmen tackled Class V rivers.



'Can I have your attention, please?'

ruined my life," he told me. I think he was going through a divorce at the time.

The skis I can deal with, the magazines are another matter.

You might say I have a bit of a magazine graveyard in my basement. Most will end up in the blue box, but there are some true friends, too.

I'm especially fond of titles that flared up by printing outrageous stories and photography but then disappeared without a trace. *Rocky Mountain* out of Denver, "The Voice of the West." *The Intermountain Skier* from Salt Lake, a local rag that documented the Park City ski scene in a style and format not unlike what Bob and Kathy Barnett would do with *Pique Newsmagazine*, the very publication you're holding in your hands. There was *Blue*, a high-production travel magazine out of New York, *Adventure Travel*, edited by Bob Woodward of Bend, Ore., and *Wend*, a quirky outdoor hipster glossy based in Portland. One magazine you'll pry from my cold, dead bookshelf will be four issues of *Monocle Alpino*, a large-format journal of mountain design magazine that was breathtaking in its curated content. And, of course, there was David and Jake Moe's *POWDER* magazine. Purchased at Harvey Ross and Sons, a funky billiards room and smoke shop in my hometown of Kincardine, Ont., that cover photo of Wayne Wong floating down an alpine bowl wearing a Canadian flag toque probably changed my life.

But while *POWDER* still is in print, my magazine graveyard has more than four decades' worth of deceased titles.

SKIER. Ski Press. Ski Freak Radical.



(U.K.). *The Mountain Yodel. Backpacker. Wend. Kootenay Mountain Culture. Coast Mountain Culture.* (You want back copies? Call me). *Equinox. National Geographic Traveler. National Geographic Adventure. Adventure West. Hooked on the Outdoors. Alpine Modern. Mountain Sports and Living. Snow Country. Bomb Snow. Below Zero. Men's Journal.*

I also have the full set of *COAST: The Outdoor Recreation Magazine*, which I edited and had a small financial stake in for the better part of a decade. Heck, you can even throw *The Whistler Question* and the *Whistler Answer* in there. And there was also *99 North*, an ambitious attempt at a lifestyle magazine in the

12-by-18-inch cardboard mailing envelope; reinforced so it can't be folded or crushed while in transit. Getting an issue of *Mountain Gazette* feels a bit like Christmas morning, you never know for sure what's under the tree.

"Print ain't dead," claims Rogge. In fact, the North Lake Tahoe owner/publisher/editor believes in it to the extent that he copyrighted the slogan, along with another euphemism from the magazine's scrappy, irreverent past, "When in doubt, go higher."

If that's the case, then Rogge must be pretty close to the summit these days, because since he purchased the floundering title in 2021, he's silenced the doubters who believed outdoor magazines no longer offer a financially secure way to tell bold, controversial stories, express outrageous opinions or feature fine-art quality photography.

Rogge was fuelling his freelance/van-life/ski-bum lifestyle as a fisherman up in Alaska when he heard the magazine was up for sale. *MG* is like one of those indie bands in a Cameron Crowe movie that attain some measure of critical and even financial success for a short while, are forgotten about, then roar to life as a couple new members take things in a whole new direction. Sort of like when Buckingham/Nicks joined the Mac in the mid-'70s.

Mountain Gazette was a niche publication started in '60s-era Colorado as a sort of *Village Voice* of mountain culture. It was a time when Hunter S. Thompson ran for sheriff of Aspen, Colo., on the "Freak Power" ticket, and a Hollywood actress would "accidentally" shoot a glamorous young ski racer who looked a lot like Robert Redford. There were exciting new

I first happened upon some issues at the Canmore clubhouse of the Alpine Club of Canada in 1983 while participating in a backcountry skiing skills course. Jammed haphazardly on a library shelf groaning with well-thumbed guidebooks and other musty-smelling mountaineering books was a large-format magazine printed on newsprint which was already yellowing and ripping at the edges. Like the early years of *Rolling Stone*, stories went on for thousands and thousands of words. The photos were in black and white, nothing to write home about. Distributed free of charge at bars, backcountry stores and libraries of the American West, *Mountain Gazette* was full of wild, fantastical stories that quite likely were the product of drug-fuelled imaginations. Edward Abbey, Galen Rowell, Lito Tejada-Flores, Dick Dorworth and many others kick-started an entire genre of New American Western non-fiction. I had worked maybe halfway through the 10 or so issues when I had to leave; it was all I could do not to roll them up into my backpack for the trip to Vancouver. Because only hoarders steal magazines, right?

Little did I know the magazine I read in Canmore was already dead by the time I'd discovered it.

Like many of love's labours, *Mountain Gazette's* original owners ran out of money and patience in 1979. It enjoyed a Phoenix-like rebirth in 2000, this time in colour but in a less ambitious, magazine-size format, and available free of charge throughout the West.

Printed on sturdy, yet 100-per-cent recycled paper using soy-based inks splashed on a gigantic 11-by-17-inch canvas, Rogge's

MG re-build is a sight to behold. Alas, the new MG only comes out twice a year, and a subscription costs a rather wallet-melting \$177.86. During its '70s heyday, MG retailed for US\$0.60 per issue, and the 2000s version was distributed.

These boutique outdoor publications, as *Adventure Journal* founder and editor Stephen Casimiro calls them, (see sidebar) are often likened to the extravagantly produced boxed-set records bands put out for superfans who prefer to sit down and listen to an entire record in one sitting. Like, say, the 50th-anniversary re-issue of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* or the recently-released 13-volume edition of Wilco's *A Ghost is Born*, this new crop of titles is saturated with delicious imagery, finely tuned story-telling and mind-tweaking graphics and page layouts.

"Curated" is the word that's thrown around to describe the selection of stories these magazines produce each month. Casimiro explains, "I always believed that the best magazine, regardless of genre, would be one where the inherent friction between an advertiser and the editorial product would be removed; where the editor directed both the style and content of the magazine."

One thing *Adventure Journal* and its peers cannot do regularly is to support the kind of investigative journalism that requires two or three dogged reporters who know how to get people to talk on the record. In other words, to finance a travel budget, pay for legal counsel, and hire fact-checkers in the same manner newspapers do. There used to be a magazine that carried that editorial vision, and while you still see *Outside* magazine on the newsstands, it, too, has changed with the times.

THE OUTSIDE EFFECT

It's not very often the demise of a magazine is reported upon by another magazine—media outlets are loathe to report on either the triumphs or the failures of their competitors. Sure, everybody loves to rag on the CBC in an online forum, but you'll never hear Global News or CTV badmouthing the Mother Corp on the dinner-hour news.

Yet here it was, in the pages of *The New Yorker*, the Western world's most rigorously edited and fact-checked publication. "The Decline of *Outside Magazine* is also the End of the Vision of the Mountain West," is not only a wordy title, but illustrates the enormous cultural power and political influence it once wielded in the outdoor industry.

Back in March, a group of highly esteemed adventure writers, filmmakers, and

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE JOURNALISM IN 2025: PRINT AIN'T DEAD... (AND NEVER WILL BE)

START HERE: THE GOOD ONES

(All prices in U.S. dollars; postage extra.)

Mountain Gazette, \$89, two issues annually;

"When in doubt, go higher."

Adventure Journal, \$60, four issues; "The deeper you get, the deeper you get."

The Surfer's Journal, \$84, six issues; "Never Ending Surf Escapism, since 1992."

Alpinist, \$75, four issues; "The Sharp End of the Rope."

Trails, \$70, four issues; "For people who sleep in the dirt."

ORI, \$84, two issues; "Don't just see the world, be part of it."

Kinfolk, \$80, four issues; "What do you believe in?"

Like The Wind, \$69, four issues; "It's Not How to Run, it's Why We Run."

Freehub, \$70, four issues; "The Community-Driven Mountain Bike Magazine."

Hard Pack, \$60, two issues; "A New Kind of Ski Magazine."

photographers informed Outside Inc. CEO Robin Thurston they no longer wished to be listed as contributors on the masthead of the company's eponymous magazine. The diverse list included esteemed photographer/filmmaker Jimmy Chin (*Free Solo*), humorist E. Jean Carroll, award-winning science writer David Quammen and a stack of other contributors who probably haven't written a story for the magazine in 20 years. (It's a peculiar quirk of magazines that once you become famous, you are gifted in the masthead as a "contributing editor.")

This stable of outstanding journalists was protesting Mr. Thurston's mass firing of the magazine's editorial staff, the shrinking of the number of issues from six (and previously, just after Thurston purchased the magazine, 12) to four, annually—and, in the weeks after Donald Trump's early days, a new editorial mandate that would dispense with lengthy environmental and social justice warrior type issues.

It's hard to describe just how powerful and influential the monthly magazine was, started on a whim by *Rolling Stone* founder Jann Wenner (indeed, the first two "prototype issues" were folded into the pages of the counterculture publication). During a time when environmental battles were beginning to rage across the United States (along with the Vietnam War and civil rights), *Outside* published what would soon be called "advocacy journalism," stories championing the preservation of wild places and the activities you could do there. One of the earliest issues I ever purchased, sometime in the late '70s, had a cover story with the enticing title "Skiing Out of Bounds." There were stories on climbing frozen waterfalls, on the strange cult of birdwatchers who travelled around the world so they could put a checkmark beside a "tick list." For the longest time, the most hilarious (and utterly unbelievable tale, even in 2025), was "King of the Ferret Leggers," whereupon author Donald R. Katz travels to Scotland to track down a wildly eccentric man who stuffs ill-

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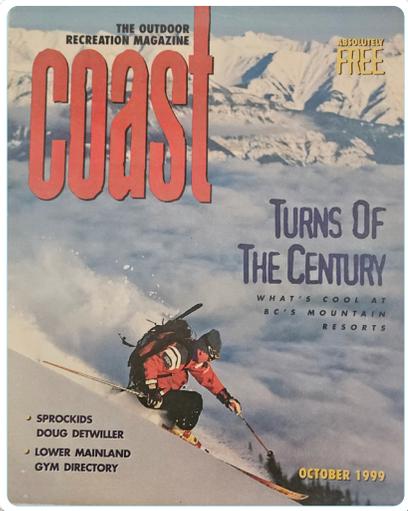
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In an ironic twist (and there's much that's ironic about the magazine's success), each monthly issue was manually (until the early '90s) put together by an incredibly dedicated team of staffers based in the not-so-wild urbanity of Chicago, Ill. But even after it moved to the decidedly more adventure-friendly after-work city of Santa Fe, New Mexico in the mid-'90s, *Outside* was geographically agnostic.

While it's worth noting that *Outside* won numerous awards for its articles and art direction (Canadian-born creative director Susan Casey would single-handedly overhaul the magazine's "look" during her tenure, and



take home Magazine of the Year—General Excellence—on three consecutive occasions), there was an element to *Outside* that caused jaded outdoor adventurers to kinda barf in their mouths.

Indeed, way, way before Instagram influencers revealed the locations of remote hikes and deserted shorelines, *Outside* covers were "blowing up the spot" with tantalizing listicles such as "The 11 BEST FALL TRIPS ON THE PLANET" and "The WORLD'S 15 MOST BEAUTIFUL BEACHES."

Outside perfected clickbait that appealed to a casual "weekend warrior" who probably made a nice living in finance, medicine, real estate or high tech, but who was far too cool to play golf, for instance. Aside from some very minor competition from Boulder-based *Hooked on the Outdoors* and *National Geographic Adventure*, *Outside* grew a massive subscriber base of more than 600,000 readers, plus substantial newsstand sales, doubtless driven by eye-candy covers with "sell-lines" like "World's 15 Most Beautiful Beaches."

Its real moneymaker was the *Outside Annual Gear Guide*, a gorgeously produced special issue that came out twice annually and was breathtaking in its celebration of material consumption without environmental consequences. *Outside's* new owners claim the staff cuts were needed to finance the acquisition of digital properties as the magazine lost both readers and advertisers.

'CONTRIBUTING TO A COMMON GOOD'

Adventure Journal editor Casimiro admits these are fraught times. Casimiro himself is a bit leery about advocacy journalism when it comes to issues like the environment or

corrupt labour practices (*AJ* published a story three years ago about how managers at the beloved REI outdoor co-operative tried to stymie union organizers at its hundreds of retail stores across America). "It's easy to print stories about environmental and social injustice and certainly we've done that, but right now I'm trying to focus on people who are keeping things positive and contributing to a common good," he says.

Or, they're just esoteric; in *Mountain Gazette* 205, journalist Ari Schneider traces how the Holocaust shaped his family history. (He had an uncle who travelled to local schools telling "survivor" tales; the problem was, as Schneider found out, most of them were fabricated.) There are photo essays on jam-bands and polar bears. I wrote a dazzlingly-illustrated story on mid-century modern resort architect Henrik Bull, co-inventor of the A-frame.

Boutique adventure magazines hew to a different set of rules than more mainstream titles do, sometimes counterintuitively. The business case for magazines has traditionally been to "deliver a target market to an advertiser." But as *AJ's* Casimiro says, "It was always a bit rigged. Magazines would charge \$5 at a newsstand, then sell a subscription for \$10. The magazine would essentially be padding their readership by devaluing their product."

To keep editorial integrity, advertisers must provide ads that hew to the magazine's overall design which is a big ask given that paper stock, inks, graphic design and mailing costs are surely many times more expensive than slapping a mailing label on a flimsy rag that will easily slide through a mail slot. Rogge at *Mountain Gazette* calls these advertisers "partners." Indeed, many brands will hire the magazine's very own designers to create words and imagery that are consistent with the overall "vibe" of the publication. For instance, you won't find price-sensitive ads like "Pay for three nights, get an extra night FREE."

At *Like The Wind*, a British quarterly devoted to running in all its myriad forms, ads by shoe companies cross the line into sponsored content or what used to be called "advertorial"—an advertisement written and designed to look like a "real" story. These advertorials are stunningly produced stories that carry the same high production values as the magazine itself.

Part of the reason these titles have for going circulation only can surely be found in the fact that if they were distributed in an old-fashioned way, in convenience stores or even conventional bookstores, very, very few people would pay \$40 per copy and they would end up destroying many of the back issues, once returned.

To preserve what marketers call "the



CURATED BY CASIMIRO

Adventure Journal is its formal title, but once you start reading one issue after the next, you'll soon find out that *AJ* is really "curated by Casimiro."

That's Stephen Casimiro, the one-time editor at *POWDER* magazine and western editor for *National Geographic Adventure*, which, at the time, was *Outside* magazine's biggest competitor.

At *POWDER*, he saw first-hand how its fanatical readers would devour each issue, building on a 1980s-era legacy that eschewed gear reviews and stylized New York fashion shoots for cover photos of blissed-out powder hounds, fat gobs of fresh snow clinging to their beards and alpaca wool hats. At *National Geographic Adventure*, he saw how the pressure to sell advertisements to clothing brands and outdoor adventure destinations could potentially corrupt editorial coverage—and wanted nothing to do with it.

On the newsstand, "sell lines" on the covers lure potential readers with promises of a "Brand New You" or some other form of personal transformation.

He cautions: "Consumer magazines prey upon readers' insecurities as vehicles to sell things. How can my life look cooler? Where should I travel next?"

Thanks to social media, consumer magazines are flailing in the "attention economy," where readers can endlessly scroll through three-second action sports clips on their phones.

But to Casimiro, "These are not stories. The scroll sucks, and listicles suck."

Believing perhaps that print was indeed dead, Casimiro first launched *The Adventure Journal* website in the early 2000s. It quickly became a valuable hub for mountain culture and uncovering delightfully obscure stories found in its Historical Badass and Weekend Cabin features. But Casimiro wanted more.

"True storytelling is a basic human need. Print can deliver stories in a way that digital cannot," he says. "I wanted to put out the very best magazine in any genre; where readers could immerse themselves in a story that they wouldn't find anywhere else. Where the photos, the copy, the typeface and even the paper stock contribute to a

value proposition" for the reader, publishers of these magazines seldom, if ever, post stories that have appeared in the magazine onto the website. Indeed, if all newspaper and magazine publishers had adhered to "not giving away their stories for free" when the internet first came onto the scene, the media landscape right now might not be so incredibly confusing and, it must be said, unprofitable for so many players in the industry.

FRIEND OR FOE?

These boutique publications' stout presence on one's coffee table (definitely not the bathroom), could make them semi-collectable. What is the magazine's value and its role in today's adventure market, dominated as it is by pros, bros, influencers, bloggers, YouTubers and Substackers?

David Beers, founding editor of The Tye and former editor at the progressive San Francisco-based magazine *Mother Jones*, (RIP), once told me that "the magazine feature is the great American storytelling art form; far

unique reading experience. I also wanted to somehow circumvent the icky relationship between advertisers and editors." These are not magazines for car companies wishing to reach a broad audience; Casimiro has turned down advertising proposals in the past that he felt would compromise the publication.

So did the transformation from digital to print work? Or to borrow from Rogge, "Print ain't dead, yet?"

"It's never been easy and it's never going to be easy since outdoor magazines will always be financially challenging. But every issue has made money," Casimiro says. "We'd published *Adventure Journal* online for five years before doing the first issue of the magazine and had developed an impressive database of potential subscribers. But I probably underestimated how many of those readers would subscribe to a print magazine."

Indeed, the 7,000-plus copies he sends to subscribers and sells to boutique lodges and mountain town bookstores is a long way from the 600,000-plus circulation once claimed by *Outside* magazine. Financial support from advertisers—it's worth nothing that Vancouver-based Arc'teryx pays for space—is probably more of a donation compared to the \$60,000 per page the glossy consumer magazines command.

There have definitely been financial challenges. The website no longer exists, and former editor Justin Housman was laid off two years ago. Some of Casimiro's subscriber campaigns verge on the PBS style of "contribute today! Our very survival depends upon it!"

And like most of these boutique titles, it's Casimiro and his wife Joanie who do the majority of the heavy lifting. "We have the systems in place to create a magazine that hums along quite nicely," he says. Beyond that, "It's a gift to be able to present these stories to our audience."

The ultimate compliment to Casimiro's vision occurred last year when *AJ*, along with *Surfer's Journal*, *Mountain Gazette*, and *Summit Journal*, were all featured in a lengthy, splashy edition of the *Sunday New York Times*.

The print version, of course.

ahead of films, documentaries, books, and even novels." It seems true; although their lens on the world has changed dramatically, *Time*, *Life* and *National Geographic* carry some weight on a newsstand, even if the subject matter is Taylor Swift.

On the other hand, when I met a former editor at *Outside* at the Western Magazine Awards back in the '90s and breathlessly told him that I had Volume One, Issue One as well as many other copies, he sounded incredulous. "What, you mean you keep magazines after you've read them?" I felt like a fool.

At the same event, (which no longer exists because there aren't enough magazines) former *LIFE* and *New England Journal* editor Daniel Okrent described a well-conceived magazine as being like "a conversation with your best friend. It entertains you, informs you, makes you think, and can change your perspective."

As I close in on my 70s, a few of my friends are dead. But there are many new ones to make out there, too. ■