

CONTACT: Beth Foster
(202) 857-7543
befoster@ngs.org

EVOLUTION OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE

WASHINGTON—When National Geographic magazine debuted in October 1888, it was a scholarly, scientific journal that reflected the interests of its small, mostly professional, readership. Between its conservative, dull-brown covers, there were no photographs — only studious articles that discussed such topics as “Geographic Methods in Geologic Investigation,” “The Classification of Geographic Forms by Genesis” and “The Great Storm of March 11-14, 1888.”

One-hundred-and-twenty-four years later, the now yellow-bordered National Geographic brings the world of geography — in its broadest sense — to some 8 million subscribers around the globe each month. With comprehensive and timely articles and legendary photographs and maps, the magazine documents and interprets the world’s sweeping changes through the lens of personal experience.

The magazine’s metamorphosis was engineered by its first full-time editor, Gilbert H. Grosvenor, and shaped by decades of refinement and technological progress. Grosvenor, whose tenure spanned 55 years, recognized when he began in 1899 that the key to building the Society’s membership was to “transform the Society’s Magazine from one of cold geographic fact...into a vehicle for carrying the living, breathing, human-interest truth about this great world of ours.”

One of Grosvenor’s earliest legacies was the use of first-person narrative and straightforward, simple writing. By 1910 the magazine also was distinguished by the growing use of black-and-white and color-tinted photographs, as well as lifelike paintings by staff artists; its cover had adopted the border of oak and laurel leaves, acorns and hemispheres that characterized it for the next six decades.

While Grosvenor was making changes, he also fought to preserve aspects of the magazine he felt were unique. He resisted early attempts to change the name of National Geographic, to move its headquarters to New York, and to make it available by subscription and on newsstands. “A combination of membership and a magazine will be a stronger attraction than a mere subscription to a magazine,” Grosvenor predicted in 1900. He was right. The magazine’s circulation — and the Society’s membership — jumped from 1,400 in 1899 to 74,000 by 1910, and to more than 713,000 by 1920.

In the 1920s and 1930s National Geographic readers witnessed a series of firsts in both exploration and color photography. “All the world is watching how the rest of the world lives,” wrote staff journalist Maynard Owen Williams in 1921, a decade before he motored across Asia from the Mediterranean to the Yellow Sea in a record-setting expedition. In the 1930s the Leica camera and Kodachrome film gave the magazine a means of bringing faraway places into readers’ homes.

Under the enthusiastic editorship of Grosvenor’s son, Melville Bell Grosvenor, who headed the magazine from 1957 to 1967, National Geographic mirrored the burst of optimism and idealism that characterized the 1950s and early ’60s. Better quality film and the switch to a new printing process made photographs appear noticeably more vivid. The September 1959 issue introduced the regular use of color on the cover of the magazine — in a photograph of a U.S. Navy jet.

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During the 1960s space exploration gave National Geographic a new frontier to illuminate for its readers, and pull-out supplement maps showed for the first time the peaks and valleys of the ocean floors, as if the water had been drained away. The decade also brought the first all-color issue and the beginning of the phased removal of the oak-and-laurel-leaf border to dramatize cover photographs.

In the 1970s the magazine's leadership finally challenged a policy that had been established early in its history: "Only what is of a kindly nature is printed about any country or people, everything unpleasant or unduly critical being avoided." Editor Gilbert M. Grosvenor, grandson of the first full-time editor, and his successors led the magazine into the coverage of controversial issues, including chemical pollution, nuclear power, illegal wildlife trade and human evolution.

The technological breakthroughs of the past three decades have been reflected in such features as a supplement map using satellite imagery to provide a unique view of the United States, and close-up views of the world of cells and atoms, life in the ocean depths and the wonders of space. Extensive coverage of environmental issues has continued, especially with publication in 1993 of an extra issue of National Geographic on freshwater and a single topic issue on water in 2010.

Today, the magazine has a monthly circulation of around 8 million, with a global readership of 60 million. It is published in English and 36 local-language editions: Japanese, Spanish (Spain and Latin America), Italian, Greek, Hebrew, Orthodox Hebrew, French, German, Polish, Korean, Portuguese (Portugal and Brazil), Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Dutch, Chinese (traditional characters and simplified characters), Finnish, Thai, Turkish, Czech, Hungarian, Romanian, Russian, Croatian, Bahasa Indonesia, Bulgarian, Slovenian, Serbian, Lithuanian, Arabic, Mongolian, Latvian and Georgian. It is also available as an e-magazine, available on the App Store.

National Geographic magazine has a long tradition of combining on-the-ground reporting with award-winning photography to inform people about life on our planet. It won a National Magazine Award in 2012 for best tablet edition as well as a further 13 National Magazine Awards in the previous five years: for Magazine of the Year and Single-Topic Issue in 2011; for General Excellence, Photojournalism and Essays, plus two Digital Media Awards for Best Photography and Best Community, in 2010; for Photojournalism in 2009; for General Excellence, Photojournalism and Reporting in 2008; and for General Excellence and Photography in 2007.

In 2010 AdWeek Media Group named NationalGeographic.com Magazine Website of the Year. In 2008 Editor in Chief Chris Johns was named editor of the year by Advertising Age magazine.

FULL-TIME EDITORS OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE

GILBERT HOVEY GROSVENOR	February 1903 – May 1954
JOHN OLIVER LA GORCE	May 1954 – January 1957
MELVILLE BELL GROSVENOR	January 1957 – August 1967
FREDERICK G. VOSBURGH	August 1967 – October 1970
GILBERT M. GROSVENOR	October 1970 – August 1980
WILBUR E. GARRETT	August 1980 – April 1990
WILLIAM GRAVES	April 1990 – December 1994
WILLIAM L. ALLEN	January 1995 – December 2004
CHRIS JOHNS	January 2005 – present

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