Exploration's clarion call

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Going out into the world's wildernesses or performing extraordinary feats of endurance have long been opportunities to inspire and educate. Matt Maynard asks what standard we should hold modern-day explorers to in the wake of the climate and environmental crises

ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY (WITH IBG) PICTURE LIBRARY

Ernest Shackleton and Frank Hurley (skinning penguin) at Patience Camp during the Endurance expedition, 1914–16

In 1968, William Anders took what has been described as the greatest environmental photograph of all time while venturing farther than any other human had travelled before aboard the Apollo 8 spacecraft. He was orbiting the Moon when a half-illuminated slice of our home planet suddenly emerged beyond the lunar horizon. Grabbing his camera, Anders captured the image that later moved the world to an intimate understanding of both the fragility of our home and the dominion that humanity has come to have over it. They called that photograph Earthrise.

This wasn't the first time that art had proved to be an important tool for environmentalists. In the 19th century, Tomas Moran's painting from a little-explored corner of Wyoming helped to inspire US President Ulysses S Grant to create Yosemite National Park. But Anders' adventure on Apollo 8 transcended national boundaries. His depiction of what Carl Sagan later described as our 'pale blue dot', far out there in space, was an artwork that had relevance to everyone.

Yet, while Yellowstone, the world's first national park, today enjoys a modicum of protection, our planet is in serious trouble. In the 52 years that have passed since Earthrise was taken, the humans on that little speck in space have increased the concentration of carbon dioxide in their atmosphere by almost 30 per cent, wiped out 60 per cent of its mammal, bird, fish and reptile populations, and now teeter on the brink of environmental catastrophe.

A lot of CO_2 was produced when Apollo 8 was launched into orbit. Perhaps the result justified the carbon-intensive means – but what about today's explorers? What expectations and values should we place on modern-day adventurers as they travel and return, often with stories from our last remaining wildernesses?

AGE OF HEROES

Things were very different for the explorers of the past. With the planetary poles still up for grabs, Everest unclimbed and the Moon a distant dream – adventure for adventure's sake was very much in vogue. Context is everything, insists Ernest Shackleton's biographer, Michael Smith, when evaluating the historic success of such explorers in giving a voice to the silent fragility of the remotest corners of our planet.

Science, and the inclusion of its practitioners on expeditions, was a necessary means for Shackleton to obtain funding, according to Smith, not something he was particularly interested in himself. The famous explorer once declared: 'You are either an explorer or you are a scientist.' Shackleton didn't interview his prospective scientists on matters of scientific rigour, instead famously asking the University of Bristol student Raymond Priestly, 'Can you sing?' Science was done, Smith explains, and our understanding of the natural world expanded on these expeditions, not because of Shackleton, but in spite of him. Nevertheless, hugely important discoveries were made. Coal was discovered on the Antarctic continent

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at an altitude of more than 2,000 metres in 1909 during Shackleton's *Nimrod* expedition, helping to develop our understanding of continental drift. The expeditions' work on glaciology, weather and geology in particular, laid the foundation for modern scientific endeavour in the Antarctic. Shackleton's seemingly spurious criteria for choosing scientists perhaps distracted from what Smith describes as 'an extraordinary ability to pick people', with four members of his *Nimrod* and *Endurance* expeditions later being knighted for their scientific contributions, including Raymond Priestly, who went on to become president of the Royal Geographical Society. Shackleton's own single-minded dedication to the physical feat of

White-water kayaker Sal Montgomery prepares to descend. 'We are using the journey to witness and explore what's happening in the environment,' she says

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exploration, Smith ventures, may ultimately have been what kept him alive. Conversely, Scott – who Smith describes as a frustrated scientist – instructed his already starving men to collect 15 kilograms of rock on the Beardmore Glacier on their ultimately fatal return trip from the South Pole.

According to Smith, the modern concepts of environmentalism and 'leave no trace' would have been alien to these men. 'None of the explorers cleared up their "mess",' he writes. They were the last of the great explorers of the Victorian era, a time when derring-do, showcasing the feats of man and the expansion of the Empire in the name of Queen and country were the focus. The study of the planet they travelled across only held a mirror to their accomplishments, rather than being valued for its own intrinsic worth.

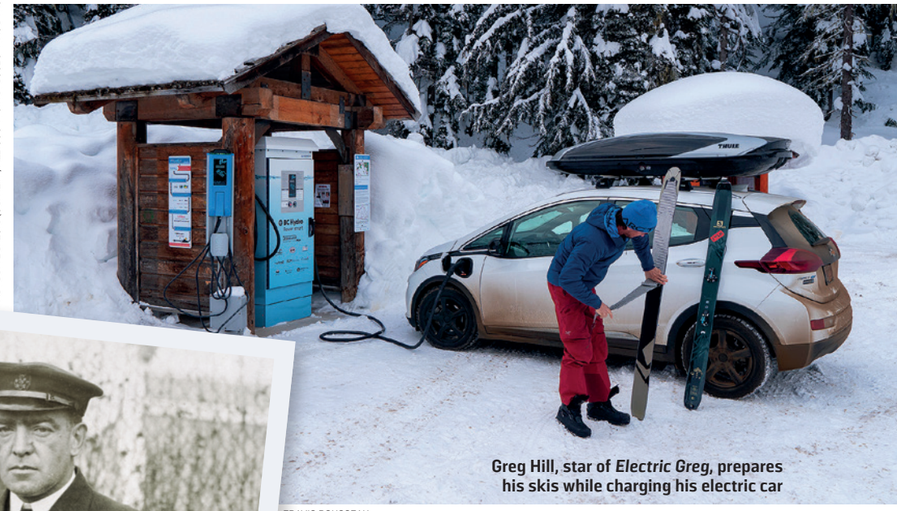
Some 53 years after Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition and the year after Earthrise, Neil Armstrong took his small step onto the moon. The giant leap forward for mankind it represented, however, meant that Armstrong, an engineer and test pilot by training, was harangued by questions about its global significance for the rest of his life. For the US astronaut, the challenge of landing this exciting new machine on the lunar surface was the real attraction of the mission and was an immense source of pride, according to Armstrong's biographer, James Hansen. 'Everything else,' he says of actually walking on the Moon 'was gravy'.

After Apollo 11, Armstrong maintained a policy of avoiding overt political statements, explains Hansen, and that included discussion of environmental issues. Restraint emerges as one of the defining characteristics of the astronaut portrayed in Hansen's book, *First Man*. 'It wasn't that he didn't have views,' Hansen says, 'and wasn't moved by Earthrise and his own experience on the surface of the moon, looking back at Earth, seeing it as an oasis.' But he chose not to show it. According to Hansen, many of Armstrong's friends and family encouraged him to be more expressive of his views and would sometimes come away very frustrated with him. 'They didn't get quite as much as they knew was probably there.'

Ernest Shackleton (right) and Frank Wild (left) scout for a path through hummocks of ice and snow during the Endurance expedition

LEFT AND BELOW: ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY (WITH IBG) PICTURE LIBRARY

Ernest Shackleton: the ultimate explorer of his time



Greg Hill, star of *Electric Greg*, prepares his skis while charging his electric car

TRAVIS ROUSSEAU

Hansen believes that the position Armstrong took following the Apollo 11 mission was born partly out of a natural shyness. He also thinks it stemmed from a fear of being misinterpreted or having his words co-opted for political means. The biographer describes the tension that was building in the environmental movement during the late 1960s and early '70s, and how Armstrong did make comments in support of this new ecological mindset, highlighting the need to apply the best scientific, engineering and public policy to address the emerging problems.

'The very success of the human species over eons of time now threatens our extinction,' Armstrong told an audience at Ohio State University in June 1971. 'It is the drive that made for such success that must now be curbed, redirected or released by world expansion into a new world ecology. It is extremely doubtful that mankind can be stabilized and held permanently in check at any given population level, at any given standard of living, in a world of decreasing natural resources. The political clout needed to accomplish this

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iron control staggers the imagination and credulity.' However, explicitly environmental comments such as these by the first man on the moon seem to have been the exception rather than the rule. 'I always want a little more from him,' the biographer writes of his subject.

MODERN STANDARDS

A glance at many modern adventures suggests that individuals today, who may well have a Shackleton- and Armstrong-like desire simply to push themselves, are now motivated to spread their net wider, often responding to a past spent adventuring for the sheer joy of it. Providing a platform for the environmental concerns motivating some modern explorers is now a major focus for the curators of the Sheffield Adventure Film Festival (ShAFF). In one film, *Electric Greg*, a 43-year-old backcountry skier recognises that his globe-trotting lifestyle comes with a serious carbon price tag. Resolving to live more sustainably, Greg Hill embarks on a mission to climb 100 different summits, reached only by an electric car. This attitude isn't going to change the world; at only 18 minutes, the documentary doesn't address the huge privilege inherent in the purchase of a Chevrolet Bolt. But the skier's discussion with his family about why he can't fly with them on holiday begins to address the more profound lifestyle changes now deemed necessary by some within the more affluent and highest-polluting segment of society. Hill's outreach on social media, leading to a follower buying his own Bolt, also touches upon the role modern adventure-influencers have in generating change beyond their own carbon impact.

Another film, *Beyond the Break,* documents the grounded lives of three pro surfers turned organic vegetable farmers. 'I'm learning as much not going anywhere as I ever did going everywhere,' says Matt Smith about his decision to surf local Irish breaks to reduce his carbon footprint. Daniel Klein, the film's director, notes that *Beyond the Break* would never have been made without the focus on food and sustainability.

'We wouldn't have made the film if it was just about a surfer or just a farmer, but the story of professional surfers settling down to care for the land was compelling visually and emotionally,' Klein says. 'We are in a time where we can't just focus on our passion (surfing, filmmaking...), but must also bring the climate crisis into the equation, adjusting our actions to meet the moment.'

This sense of a widening view is present again in *Every Single Street*, in which ultrarunner Rickey Gates dedicates five weeks to covering 1,100 miles as he runs each individual road in San Francisco. Gates doesn't just run – he also provides an empathetic insight into the lives of the city's homeless community.

ShAFF has recently introduced a sustainability stamp for films on its 2021 programme, which include elements of what the festival's director, Matt Heason, describes as the emergent 'adventure activism' genre. But it's a stepped process and Heason is reticent about suddenly judging filmmakers against an incipient standard: 'People are coming to see an adventure film festival,' he explains, 'they're not expecting an educational lecture.'

However, when the story is strong and the adventure compelling, adventure-activism films can be a platform for change. According to Anna Paxton, a mountain runner, film producer and judge for ShAFF, including a clear call to action for the audience is a key aspect of the refocused direction in which the festival is heading. 'Adventure films are there to inspire,' she says, 'but we want to go beyond that and give the audience the tools to act on that inspiration.' That might include giving festival goers links to websites, recommending specific campaigns or challenging them to reconsider how they travel on their own adventures. This might seem like small beer in the face of the climate and environmental emergencies. But the decision to showcase work from first-time filmmakers, such as the *Ala Archa Expedition,*

in which local University of Sheffield students travelled to Kyrgyzstan to study climate change's effect on glaciers, provides a platform for talented young scientists to potentially get picked up by professional production companies. 'All of a sudden,' Heason says of this scenario, 'you've got the adventure-activism film that gets the million views.'

A NEW ERA

Sal Montgomery knows all about getting a message to the masses. An adventure kayak guide, she works on television productions for Bristol-based independent company True to Nature and is often found leading TV personalities on first-ever descents of rivers, from the mountains of Bhutan to the wilds of the Kamchatka peninsula in Russia. What standard does she think we should hold modern explorers to in the wake of the climate and environmental crises? Montgomery is an advocate of purposeful adventure. Her latest work in Kamchatka, for *Expedition with Steve Backshall,* out later this year, takes a river-seat view of the life of wild Russian bears. 'We are using the journey,' Montgomery explains, 'to witness and explore what's happening in the environment.' Tellingly, not long after filming had finished, an oil spill on nearby Khalaktyrsky beach wiped out a suspected 95 per cent of marine life.

Montgomery believes that TV is reacting to changing consumer attitudes. 'In yesterday's telly, there was a lot of emphasis on particular individuals,' she says before deepening her voice for comic effect. 'Here I am, flying across the world, in military style and the programme is all about me and how epic I am!' This tone, she believes, is changing rapidly. 'Viewers are starting to step back now, asking of these presenters: "What's the purpose. What's the meaning?"'

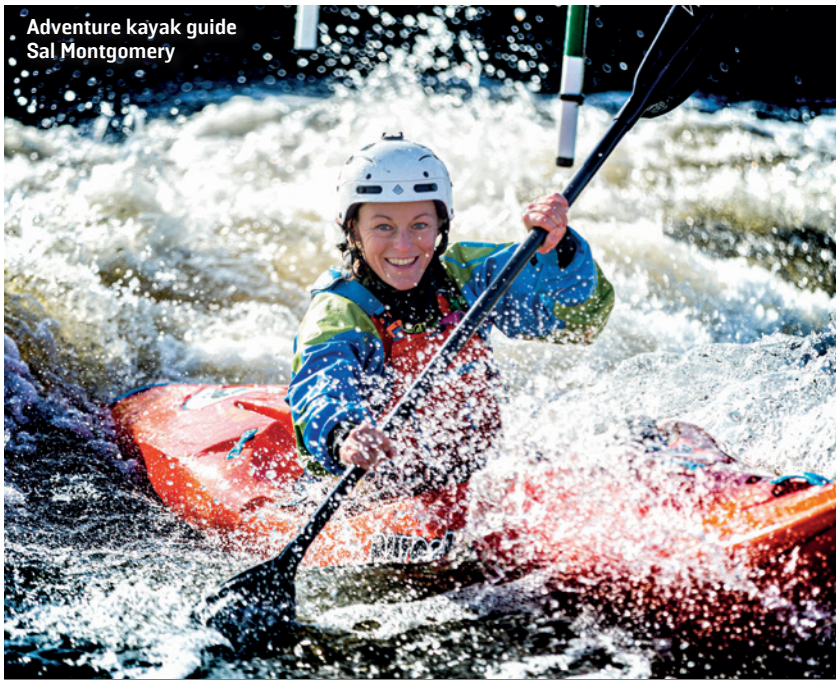
Montgomery draws meaning not only by highlighting the fragility of the natural world when in the field – but by what she describes as 'paying my dues once back home.' After her trip to Bhutan, she took two months off and began a 20-lecture tour of the UK to raise money for the rainforest-conservation charity the World Land Trust. The Bhutan expedition was also the first-ever carbon neutral TV production, accredited by the CarbonNeutral Protocol, and channelled funding to a UN REDD+ forest-conservation project in Indonesia.

Montgomery is also a Scouts Adventure Ambassador and makes a point of highlighting the importance of inspiring young people. 'People will only want to protect what they care about,' she says of her recent work with inner-city school children. 'But once you remove the barriers to them gaining access to nature, you won't have to convince people to look after our wild places – they'll do it on their own.'

Our ability to push into the remote corners of our planet has increased dramatically between Shackleton and ShAFF. Expeditions today are cheaper and more carbon intensive than ever before. As a result, many adventurers are now grappling with the paradox that underpins their lives: these are people who love the planet so dearly that they dedicate their lives to exploring it, but they are often among the biggest carbon emitters as a result.

On the plus side, addressing climate change could give such people what they really crave: unchartered waters. With the world's unmapped corners now shrunk from continents to obscure mountaintops, being 'first' to anywhere or at anything, is pretty difficult. But as Mark Agnew, extreme athlete and editor at the *South China Post* wrote in 2020: 'Climate change gives adventurers one last great first. Simply put, the role nowadays is to raise the alarm about climate change. Being in remote regions – the rainforests, a desert, the Arctic or Antarctic – adventurers are on the front line of the climate crisis.'

Adventurers and extreme athletes also have the chance to speak up for places that only they get to see or know intimately. As Adventurers for Climate Change, a non-profit coalition of US advocacy organisations, including the American Canoe Association, International Mountain Bicycling Association and the Surfrider Foundation, write: 'People who love to get outside are already bearing witness to climate change. We don't claim to be climate experts and we don't think you need to be either. Instead, we think that the most important thing right now is to generate energy on climate and use the power of our community to make this a top priority for lawmakers.'



Adventure kayak guide Sal Montgomery

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'I think that adventurers are those that get so much back from nature that they should be stewards to protect what they love most,' says Greg Hill, star of *Electric Greg*. 'Also, adventurers are used to breaking trail into new terrain and should also be willing to break trail into new technologies or ways of living.'

A certain celebrity is still attached to the people who return from our remaining wild places. Yet our judgement of what they achieved there appears to be becoming more discerning. The scientific progress achieved from Antarctic and space exploration provided us with the lens to observe our relentless destruction of the Earth. The upshot seems to be that little bandwidth now remains for explorers who come back from the wilderness with a story about themselves, rather than our planet. ●