



AAC Publications

Fifteen Years at the AAC

What wonderful years.

Fifteen years ago, newly at the helm of the American Alpine Club, I quoted the AAJ subtitle—"the world's most significant climbs"—in my first note to members. One recipient reminded me that, "The most significant climbs are the ones we do ourselves." What we do as climbers is infinitely wilder and more varied today than I ever could have imagined when I read those words.

The central effort of these years at the AAC, as our membership has grown to over 25,000, has been to welcome the full and expanding variety of climbers and the extraordinary diversity with which we approach the vertical world. These pages tell some of those stories. But as I was reminded, the power of climbing is the role it plays in each of our lives and the ways in which we apply ourselves to the issues we face in the larger world.

Climbing has been a central force in my life since I first touched rock in Oklahoma's Wichita Mountains. It demands health and fitness and, especially for those of us who came to climbing through informal instruction, a personal commitment to competency. These years at the AAC have offered me the chance to befriend some of the early greats of our craft while, even as my own climbing slows, roping up with some of the groundbreaking talents of today. As a lifelong pursuit, climbing has anchored me in health and discipline. And, like a meditation, it draws me back when distractions steal my focus.

The most rewarding part of these years has been witnessing the growth of this discipline—that is good news for the planet and each other. In the face of existential threats like we've never seen, I'm comforted by the fact that so many are finding their way to this craft—one that demands so much of the individual while offering intimacy with and passion for the natural world. The world we depend upon.

While the AAC's membership has grown, I think the percentage of climbers who actually join the club has not. You, as a reader of this journal, are among the most engaged—leaders in efforts that benefit the entire climbing community.

Climbing has a voice on the national scene like never before. Today's climbing athletes are articulate, talented policy spokespeople. The portfolio of efforts and issues the AAC has been able to influence has expanded our horizons. National public land policy (an exceedingly broad issue) and climate change (even broader) are at the center of this agenda. Climbers open doors in these conversations, and the next generation of advocates is extremely well equipped for the job.

Given the variety we find in the climbing population, AAC membership will never be the only way this organization engages with climbers. We find ways to meet people—with knowledge and community—at every place along one's path in climbing. The AAJ has always been central to that. As one longtime editor said, "It's a book of dreams."

It is also a book of tragedy. We all know that the vertical world does not forgive mistakes; it sometimes brings hazard directly to us. Reinhold Messner described a sixth sense that practiced alpinists might use to anticipate and dodge objective hazard. In our prime, we may become expert at

avoiding hazard, but we've seen it catch up with even the most skilled and aware. My personal and professional lives come together in climbing. Even having experienced great loss, I am grateful for all of it.

Tied to the great joy and clarity that climbing brings is the deep and recurring experience of loss, tragedy, and sadness. These years include nights on the phone encouraging rescue efforts, days with the families of fallen climbers, and the loss of too many friends.

In grief, climbers come with action. We respond: let's teach that skill, discuss that mistake, never let another climber rappel off the end of a rope.

Climbing allows a deep interaction with an exquisite, magical, and, as it turns out, exceedingly rare ecosystem called Planet Earth. My personal experience with fallen friends, lost partners, and grieving families leads to responses like expanding affordable climbing education and opening conversations around our mental health and loss.

Today I see a world that is being tangibly destroyed—climbers see it firsthand—by the changing climate and an economy exposed for its lack of resilience, especially for the poor, in the face of a global pandemic. But I credit climbing for helping me combine that real despair I feel with action.

I leave the AAC with what I hope is a foundation for great future. But as a climber, I also leave with a drive to turn the concern I feel for our world into the solutions I know we can find (have found) and can deploy.

As a teacher and guide I've often said that anyone can climb. But it is still not true that everyone has access to climbing. I very much hope that helping people find their way to climbing—to share this passion we are so blessed to enjoy—will remain at the very center of the AAC's work.

At each of our annual dinners, I make a point to acknowledge the support we all receive from friends and family members. My own family and friends have made it possible for me to bring my best to this job and these years—thank you for joining me in a climbing life. For me, this group overlaps thoroughly with the staff and leaders with whom I have worked: all the committee and section leaders, past presidents, board members and, importantly, the seven board presidents I have served under—thank you for your hard work, positive attitude, and dedication to climbing.

Thank you.

Phil Powers served as CEO of the American Alpine Club from 2005 to 2020.

Images



Phil Powers (front row, second from right) with American Alpine Club staff in front of the American Mountaineering Center in Golden, Colorado.

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