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SEEKING DIRECTION

BY DEVON O'NEIL

There has always been a fine line between the benefits of backcountry-skiing guidebooks and exposing local secrets. But with more people heading off piste now than ever, is it time to reevaluate how they're written and what role they should play?

It's late May in Colorado's Front Range, just past 6 a.m., when Fritz Sperry, Gary Fondl and I set out from the Herman Gulch trailhead. A few minutes earlier I introduced myself and shook Sperry's hand while he held a cigarette in the other. Now, we are skinning along the valley floor, en route to a 13,294-foot peak known as The Citadel.

Sperry, a well-known blogger and guidebook author from Denver, and Fondl, his longtime ski partner and closest friend, intend to shoot some photos for Sperry's latest book, a guide to 100 lines north of Interstate 70 between Rocky Mountain National Park and Summit County that is due out this fall. During the climb they catch up on what they have skied recently. Fondl gushes about yesterday's tour at a spot I will call Hairball, for secrecy's sake—an easily accessed zone just off I-70, one hour from Denver. The corn was perfect, save for the countless skintracks he crossed in the middle of the bowl, which, he grumbles, never were there until the masses discovered it a few

years back. He turns to Sperry, suddenly with a more serious look.

"We can't put Hairball in the book," Fondl says. "I've been talking to a lot of people, and we really don't need to drive traffic up there. There's already too many people parking where they shouldn't; our access could get shut down."

"Well, maybe we'll just put the north side in or a photo of the trailhead," Sperry counters.

Fondl shakes his head. "Nope. Third book in, that's my request."

Such dilemmas have been part of writing guidebooks for decades, but in light of the recent explosion in backcountry use, the process has grown even more delicate and political. Sperry is already a controversial figure in some of the communities where his books detail which lines to ski and how to get there. He is only half-joking when he says he worries about his car getting keyed or his tires slashed in certain zones. >>

The name of the above mountain range has been withheld to protect the serenity of the location. **Liam Doran**



I can relate to the angst. Five years earlier, I had sent Sperry a feisty, not-in-my-backyard email questioning why he was writing a guidebook to the Tenmile Range, which sits just above my home near Breckenridge. Sperry never responded. (He would later tell me that he looked me up online, saw that I had been backcountry skiing for less time than he had and dismissed my stance as unworthy of engagement.)

After Sperry's 310-page book, *Making Turns in the Tenmile-Mosquito Range*, came out in 2012, other locals and I saw a significant increase in traffic at a handful of spots, including places he did not mention. I noticed the crowding corresponded with a drastic drop in etiquette—suddenly people were post-holing up and skiing down skintracks, ascending the middle of ski runs and barely acknowledging other users on the trail. Whether those effects were related to Sperry's book or not, I began to wonder whether the role of backcountry guidebooks had changed...or should change. Could guidebooks do more to mitigate the drawbacks and mold the impacts of an increasingly crowded backcountry?

I emailed Sperry again and asked if he would be interested in discussing it for a story. I promised I would give him a fair shake. He replied immediately and told me he hadn't forgotten my first email but was open to meeting. We made plans to ski the following week.

Backcountry skiing guidebooks have been around in some form—usually with one seminal book for each classic zone, but sometimes more—since the 1970s. Some of the most noted guidebook authors in North America also rank among the most accomplished skiers—think Chic Scott, Lou Dawson and Andrew McLean. Still, they published most of their guidebooks in the '80s and '90s, long before the surge in users and improvements in gear that have defined the past decade.

As terrain preference goes, backcountry skiers' horizontal focus of old has given way to a vertical infatuation. Instead of dishing out navigational secrets to long traverses, like Scott did in 1992 with *Ski Trails in the Canadian Rockies*, we have Colorado writer/photographer Andy Sovick's 36-page *Off-Piste Ski Atlas: Crested Butte*, which includes photographs of 11 zones and offers five- to 50-word descriptions of each line within the zone. Descriptions could be as simple as: "Tight, steep trees. Cliff band and rollover midway down."

Twenty years ago, a skier probably would have apprenticed under a seasoned veteran, too, and slowly built up the skills and knowledge needed to ski the kind of lines Sovick covers in his books. That's >>



Noah Howell surveys his home range, Utah's Wasatch Mountains, before the crowds arrive. **Adam Clark**

“A GUIDEBOOK SHOULD BE YOUR FIRST MENTOR FOR THE ZONE,” SPERRY SAYS. “BECAUSE THE AUTHOR KNOWS THE ZONE, KNOWS THE SECRETS AND IS TRYING TO GET THOSE ACROSS IN EACH ROUTE.”



“EVEN IF WE BURN ALL THE MAPS AND GUIDEBOOKS, PEOPLE ARE STILL GOING TO COME. I THINK WE SHOULD BE PROACTIVE ABOUT SHAPING THE INFORMATION THEY USE IN THE BACKCOUNTRY.”

how McLean, author of *The Chuting Gallery*, a cult-classic 1998 guide to 90 steep descents in Utah’s Wasatch Range, cut his teeth. “I really learned from Alex Lowe how to skin and when to go and what to look for and how to break trail,” McLean says. “Now, people are getting into it, and they’re very self taught, and there’s not so much of the mentoring.”

Sperry argues that guidebooks could be counted on to fill that void. “A guidebook should be your first mentor for the zone,” he says. “Because the author knows the zone, knows the secrets and is trying to get those across in each route.”

But Sovick, who lives in Gunnison, Colo. and has published short guidebooks on Crested Butte and Silverton, with another scheduled for Snoqualmie Pass, Wash. (written by Matthew Schonwald), disagrees. “In general,” he says, “the idea of substituting a guidebook for a mentor is a fairly daunting one and not something I’m trying to take on.”

Sovick opens his books by encouraging newbies to hire a (human) guide. “I wanted beginners to say, ‘This doesn’t tell me enough—this is useless,’” he says. “I didn’t want them to be able to use the guidebook as a crutch. Am I successful? Probably a little bit, but I’m sure there are super beginners still taking this book and going for it.”

In many ways, too, the notion of secrecy that once gave backcountry skiing a mystical feel has given way to transparency. And recent guidebooks reflect this. Tom Turiano, a mountain guide in Jackson Hole, Wyo. for 30 years, has written five guidebooks on the Teton Range and surrounding areas since 1995. He, like

every guidebook author, receives frequent requests to protect certain lines. He has never granted one.

“I say, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll be vague about it,’” Turiano says. “I’m not trying to hide anything. Everything that I know is in the book. A lot of them are my favorite places,

but they’re in there. That’s just my nature. If it’s part of this region, then it goes in the book.” Of course, it helps to deploy that strategy in northwest Wyoming, instead of near a population center with five million people like Colorado’s Front Range.

Sovick was particularly wary of disclosing secret stashes and stuck mainly to the “low-hanging fruit” in his books, which have sold 1,500 copies each (Turiano’s bestseller, *Select Peaks of Greater Yellowstone*, sold 5,000). “I’m giving barroom napkin advice: What can you go to a ski-town bar and find out?” Sovick says. Still, people started pointing fingers when his Crested Butte book came out, blaming him for increased crowds.

“I was like, ‘Yeah. I’m contributing, but let’s also look at Dynafit, Colorado in general, all-wheel-drive cars, Facebook, for crying out loud,’” Sovick says. “The gear’s better and no matter how secretive we are, even if we burn all the maps and guidebooks, people are still going to come. I think we should be proactive about shaping the information they use in the backcountry.”

The alternative, as it were, amounts to people stalking lines on social media and online forums, where the beta tends to come from less reliable sources. And maybe that’s inevitable, too. As McLean says, “When I got into it, going up the Y Couloir [a 3,400-foot, north-facing test piece in Little Cottonwood Canyon] was kind of taboo. But now, somebody’s booting up the Y and they’re Instagramming from halfway up the chute, saying, ‘The booter’s in, the snow is soft,’ and all of a sudden you’ve got a lot more people going there.” >>

TRAILHEAD TENSIONS

TETON PASS AMBASSADOR JAY PISTONO SAYS COMMUNICATION IS KEY TO BETTER ETIQUETTE

Since 2008, Jay Pistono has been the official spokesperson for trailhead and skintrack etiquette on Teton Pass, Wyo., and over the past eight years, he’s learned that speaking up and collaboration make for better backcountry behavior.

Pistono started by volunteering at one of the nation’s busiest trailheads before the U.S. Forest Service hired him as a full-time ambassador. Now, he spends his winters ensuring dogs stay leashed and skintracks go unpostholed and, most importantly, as a liaison with the local transportation authority, managing the massive influx of cars parked at the trailhead.

Here is what Pistono has to say about keeping the peace in the Tetons and beyond.

“When my job started, it was an open-ended job description. I realized quickly that I couldn’t just talk to the skiers. I also reached out to enforcement agencies and other people who had jurisdiction there.”

“It is great for us to come up with what we think is important as skiers and riders, but we wanted to hear what other agencies had to say on an ongoing basis.”

“I think it’s really important for backcountry skiers and riders to talk to the other user groups and spread the word. You can’t get these messages out with signage alone.”

“Encouraging core users to keep an eye on things is important. Some people are worried about how they might seem if they confront others, but if you believe in the message and deliver it consistently, things will improve. We can’t be so polite. That’s not how you get the message out.”

“If I see someone with a leashed dog or people who are carpooling, I reward them. But I am not nervous telling [people] they are doing things wrong, either. I have asked, ‘How many people would be willing to leave their keys in their car if we need to move them for plowing?’ And locals now are starting to leave their keys so I can move cars to create spaces. It is a good example of having faith in the community and the recreational users in the area.”

“Yeah. We want you to come use our recreational zones, but we want you to use them efficiently.” —Louise Lintilhac

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If the goal is to develop better etiquette, a guidebook could help augment information put forth by amateurs who may not understand all of the craft's nuances. Some authors devote space to this already; Turiano is known for pushing a non-motorized-beyond-trailheads stance in his section on etiquette and ethics.

"I want to keep this place pristine and preserve the spirit of adventure and challenge," he says. Sperry implores readers to beware of other parties above or below them, depending on what ascent route they use for a given line. He plans to address skintrack do's and don'ts in his new book, too.

But Sovick steers clear of micromanaging one's experience. "I don't even say, 'This is the skintrack. Go here.' I say, 'People generally use this ridge to ascend,'" he says. "I don't want to pretend people are dumb who are reading the book, but I also don't want to explain every step of the way."

For his part, McLean laments the proliferation of Wasatch post-holders and that he can rarely snag first tracks on all the classics he once wrote about. "It's just crazy to me what people are skiing in higher avalanche danger. They're just in a feeding frenzy," he says. Nevertheless, he says he would still publish *The Chuting Gallery*. "When I meet the people who are doing it, they're all 100 percent psyched about it. They're just thrilled to be out there," he says. "And I like that part. I think it's cool to turn people on."

Back in Herman Gulch, I press Sperry on whether he will include Hairball in his new book, even though his longtime ski partner asked him not to. "I look at Gary as my best friend. And that's important to me," Sperry says to answer my question. "Plus, he presents a valid argument. If we lose access because Hairball gets overcrowded, that's a fun zone that nobody's going to ski. And it's already known. So why put it in there?"

I can't help but wish he would have used the same rationale with my home range, but I also sympathize with Sperry. Turiano has seen modest revenue from sales of *Select Peaks*,



Andrew McLean takes a page out of *The Chuting Gallery* in Little Cottonwood Canyon's Y Couloir—p. 37, to be specific. **Jay Beyer**

"IF WE LOSE ACCESS BECAUSE HAIRBALL GETS OVERCROWDED, THAT'S A FUN ZONE THAT NOBODY'S GOING TO SKI. AND IT'S ALREADY KNOWN. SO WHY PUT IT IN THERE?"

which took him six years to write. He lives, in part, off the income his books bring in. Sperry, however, has not reaped a financial windfall. He has just moved into his 1998 Toyota 4Runner, unable to afford an apartment. His books and his blog, which he started in 2009, give him purpose and a reason to keep skiing into July, but

the printing costs also put him in debt.

We climb under bluebird skies to the summit—a narrow spine with precipitous exposure on either side—then ski the best corn any of us has skied all spring, snapping quick turns through the peppery choke before ramping up to fast, wide arcs down the lower bowl. We are still beaming back at the trailhead, celebrating a perfect day of skiing.

I thank Sperry and Fondl for showing me a new place. Despite our disagreement about promoting the backcountry, today's information sharing felt organic and pure.

Then Sperry starts talking about the photos he got and how I will likely be part of his guidebook. I interject, suddenly uneasy. "I don't need to be in the book," I say. A brief, tenuous silence passes before Sperry tells me he understands.

After all, we both know he will still have plenty of pictures, and, for better or worse, people will still buy his book. ■

A GUIDE TO GUIDES

THREE BOOKSHELF ESSENTIALS



ROGERS PASS: UPTRACKS, BOOTPACKS & BUSHWHACKS

BY DOUGLAS SPROUL
\$45 | geobackcountry.com

To fund what was just planned as an e-book guide to British Columbia's Rogers Pass, Sproul launched a Kickstarter campaign in 2014. But when he nearly doubled his goal of \$22,000, he did a print run, too.



THE CHUTING GALLERY: A GUIDE TO STEEP SKIING IN THE WASATCH MOUNTAINS

BY ANDREW MCLEAN
\$15 | straightchuter.com

The cult classic to Utah's Wasatch Mountains' steepes was published by the steep-skiing master himself in 1998. Nearly two decades later, it remains completely relevant—even beyond McLean's detailed descriptions and witty captions.



JACKSON HOLE BACKCOUNTRY SKIER'S GUIDE: SOUTH

BY THOMAS TURIANO
\$95 | selectpeaks.com

Turiano's latest book, *Teton Pass Backcountry Guide*, came out this past February. But the fourth book in his series, a 400-page hardcover from 2014, remains the gold standard for high-gloss, coffee-table-quality guides.



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