

GSA Acquires Mountain Press Series and Officially Enters the Field of Public Science

Bridgette Moore, Chief Operating Officer and Director of Publications, Geological Society of America, Boulder, Colorado 80301, USA; bmoore@geosociety.org

INTRODUCTION

In an exciting and strategic move, the Geological Society of America (GSA) recently acquired the popular geology series developed and published by Mountain Press Publishing Company out of Missoula, Montana, USA. Written for the interested and geo-curious public, these books have been popular for decades, with more than a million copies sold. And, not surprisingly, more than 50% of Mountain Press titles have been written by GSA members—there's a natural synergy between the Mountain Press series and GSA. When they learned of this historic opportunity, GSA leadership moved decisively to enter the public-facing science market and bring the relevance, excitement, and diversity of the geosciences to a broader public audience. Moving the Mountain Press geology portfolio to GSA is a truly special initiative because we will immediately be able to put our science in front of more people and in places such as national parks, where the public comes to see the scenery. Earth and the geoscientists who study this dynamic planet have wondrous and important stories to tell about the past, present, and future—with GSA's new platform we'll be able to grow and amplify our message in significant new ways and reach so many more readers and potential future scientists.

A MISSION-DRIVEN DECISION

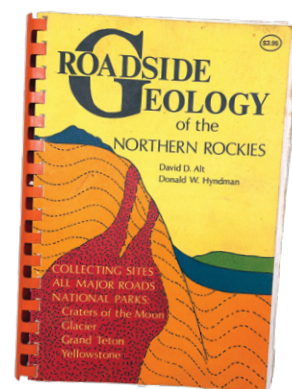
In the late 2010s, GSA leadership recognized that “in order to remain relevant and sustainable well into the future” transformational change was needed in the coming decade (GSA, 2019). GSA has been successful for more than 130 years, but changes in the geosciences and shifting membership trends (seen industry wide) require careful attention to our key programs and services as well as looking beyond our traditional offerings. In October 2022, GSA Council took a major transformational step by hiring our first nongeologist Executive Director and CEO, Melanie Brandt. The Council felt certain that, with Melanie's vision and experience, she could create new opportunities and growth at GSA as she had done for

previous organizations in the areas of membership, events, and strategic and operational excellence.

GSA's Decadal Strategic Plan (2019) includes five strategic aspirations: (1) advance scientific discovery, rigor, and integrity; (2) support early career professionals and students; (3) host premier conferences and meetings; (4) influence geoscience policy and link geoscience to society; and (5) provide a sense of community and venues for networking. These aspirations are inspired by the actions GSA members want to see in their Society, including making our scientific offerings inclusive, investing in education, conveying geoscience to the public, and forging connections within all levels of the scientific community. The geosciences are critical for sustainability, yet both the public and policymakers are often woefully underinformed about Earth. GSA, with its mission of science, service, and stewardship, has a responsibility to both educate and inform. Public-facing science is critical for GSA's future success, as it is how we will attract a larger audience and grow their interest in Earth and its environment. Given our membership's expertise and passion for Earth, plus our long history of publishing impactful research, the Society is uniquely positioned to deliver high-quality geoscience to the public. A missing piece, up until now, was GSA's access to a broader audience. GSA meetings and publications are primarily for professional and student geoscientists; new advances and great science overall are discussed at our meetings and published regularly in our journals, but that's nearly invisible to the wider world.

As John Rimel, publisher (and owner) at Mountain Press Publishing, states, “the earth sciences are so vital to understanding the issues...that are impacting our world,” and outward-facing science offers a means to “translate...science to the layperson in a way that makes sense to them”

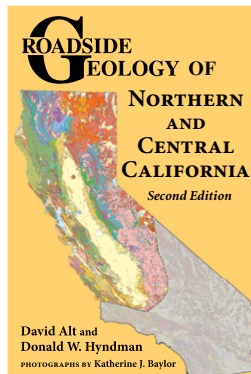
Read GSA's strategic plan at <https://bit.ly/3AwHpXI>.



(Witherspoon and Rimel, 2020, p. 327). Many geologists are natural-born storytellers with fascinating field observations and experiences to share. When science is presented in educational, easy-to-understand ways, the public responds with enthusiasm. This is easy to see in Mountain Press's leadership in this field and continued popularity since the 1972 publication of their first *Roadside Geology* book. With our successful history of publications and mission of better serving society through geoscience, public science is clearly an area in which GSA should play a leading role. And, who better to partner with than Mountain Press?

MOUNTAIN PRESS'S STORY

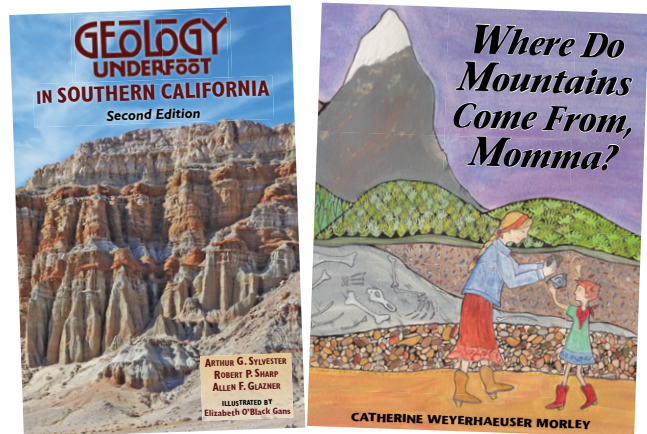
Founded as an offset printer in 1948 by David Flaccus, Mountain Press first began publishing books in 1964, and then found great success in the geosciences eight years later. In 1971, Flaccus was approached by David Alt and Don Hyndman about publishing their first foray into geology books for nonprofessionals. Although skeptical over whether the book would sell, Flaccus agreed, and Alt and Hyndman's *Roadside Geology of the Northern Rockies* was published in 1972. It sold through its entire first print run of 1800 books in just a few weeks (Witherspoon and Rimel, 2020) and had to be reprinted almost immediately. They went on to publish *Roadside Geology of Northern California* in 1975 and volumes devoted to Oregon, Washington, Montana, and Idaho through the late 1970s and '80s.



Alt and Hyndman set the tone and format for the series with their first two books, and their influence can still be seen in the books published today. As Hyndman related to William Witherspoon, they wrote for “an audience with little or no background in geology....Since we wanted to give our nongeologist readers a feel for the rocks and how they originated and evolved, we spent a lot of time and effort to make our own interpretations based on available information, and driving as many of the roads as we could” (Witherspoon and Rimel, 2020, p. 328–329). Subsequent authors have carried on the tradition of driving the roads and explaining the geological significance and wonders of specific locations to the general reader.

As the books grew in popularity, Alt and Hyndman were contacted by other professional geologists and potential authors who wanted to write their own volumes. The visionary pair ended up taking on editor roles for other books in the series and discovered most of their authors at GSA meetings. For a fascinating account of GSA member William Witherspoon's experience writing the *Roadside Geology of Georgia* (2013) and his deep appreciation of the work and guidance of Alt and Hyndman, see the more complete history of Mountain Press written by Witherspoon and Rimel (2020). Both Alt, who sadly passed away in 2015, and Hyndman were active contributors to the Society, and Hyndman, who has been a member since 1969, is also a GSA Fellow. Their contributions to public science and education, along with

their traditional geoscience publications and careers, have left a lasting and incredibly wide-ranging legacy that continues to be applauded and honored today.



This legacy is evident in all of Mountain Press's geology series, which are written to educate and engage general readers. John Rimel took over as Publisher and co-owner with Chief Financial Officer Robbin (Rob) Williams in the early 1990s. Both originally joined the company as summer sales reps in 1977, and after a few detours for John, they ended up making Mountain Press their own. They worked closely with Alt and Hyndman to continue publishing award-winning titles, and introduced the *Geology Underfoot* series to readers in 1993 with *Geology Underfoot in Southern California* by Robert P. Sharp and Allen F. Glazner. Using vignettes instead of road guides, these works employ a “hands-on, get-out-of-the-car” narrative approach to the stories they tell. With each vignette focusing on an individual place or feature, usually in well-traveled and easily accessible areas, readers are encouraged to stop and closely examine the geological beauty right outside their car windows. These volumes are full of color images and maps and make perfect traveling companions.

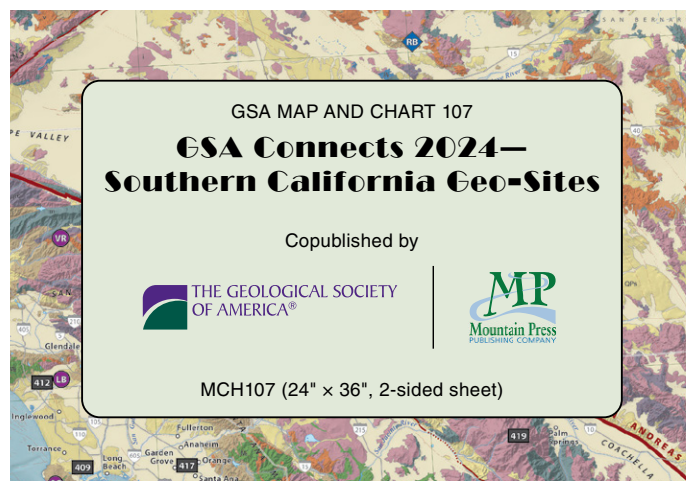
Mountain Press added a third public-science series in 2010 called *Geology Rocks!* These volumes are known for their quick, one-page descriptions of individual settings that introduce geological concepts in an easy-to-understand way. The first in the series, *California Rocks! A Guide to the Geologic Sites in the Golden State* by Katherine J. Baylor (2010), set the tone for the rest, with directional maps, a clear geologic time scale for California events, and a simplified introduction to plate tectonics, alongside beautiful photos that easily convince readers to visit these locales. Over the years, Mountain Press has also published a variety of *Earth Science* series titles on specific topics like meteorites, geysers, and fossils throughout the United States, as well as educational geology for ages 4 and older in their *Young Readers* series. Their variety of books adds up to a fun



and unique portfolio favored by the public and professionals alike—tourists, locals, parents and educators, road trippers, beginning or future geologists, and GSA attendees at Connects and Section Meetings, where the Mountain Press booth is always a hub of buzzing activity.

GSA AND MOUNTAIN PRESS: HOW WE GOT HERE

Given their long and successful history with popular geology, Mountain Press was an ideal choice to advise GSA on developing public-facing science and geotourism-related publications. Certain that an opportunity existed for GSA to enter this field and that the timing was right to add public science to GSA's more traditional publications portfolio, Melanie reached out to John in May 2023. During that first conversation, she made sure to mention that GSA would like to be his first call if he ever considered selling Mountain Press (Brandt, 2024, pers. comm.). They continued their conversations from there, including discussions about possible joint publication projects. At GSA Connects 2023 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, they met with GSA President Chuck Bailey and me, where we began brainstorming ideas that resulted in the exciting new



map created for the next big meeting in Anaheim, California, USA, *GSA Connects 2024—Southern California Geo-Sites*, compiled and crafted by Chelsea M. Feeney with geological input from Chuck. Quite a success with attendees, the map showcased the 2024 meeting themes of “Water in Our Changing World” and “Life along an Active Margin,” the meeting’s dynamic field trips, and the geological expertise found in both organizations’ publications.

As we worked on this project together, we continued discussing future possibilities for the complementary strengths of Mountain Press and GSA. And we were all impressed to discover that 52% of Mountain Press authors are GSA members, and 60% are GSA authors! The books in the *Roadside Geology*, *Geology Underfoot*, and *Geology Rocks!* series are natural



extensions of GSA's science with an emphasis on field experiences, and they are well suited for helping fulfill a strategic objective—providing the public with a greater understanding and appreciation of geoscience wonders. Perfect for students, educators, enthusiasts, and families out for a weekend trip, these books, with their lower price points, accessible writing, and wealth of knowledge, are remarkable resources for inspiring future scientists and Earth stewards.

Inspired by the ways in which their works filled in the missing areas in our own publications, we visited Missoula (first Chuck in March, followed by Melanie and me in May) to spend time with the Mountain Press staff and see their operations and inventory. The discussions naturally turned to the potential for GSA to continue Mountain Press's legacy and expand our own by moving into public-science publications. While also enjoying the beauty and local geology of Missoula, which is an amazing destination for enthusiasts, we all came to the same exciting conclusion: Mountain Press was ready for their geology titles to gain a new home, and GSA was ready to provide that home. When considering the change, John Rimel's enthusiasm was contagious and shared by all. He stated, “we are thrilled to partner with GSA, and are confident that they are the perfect organization to continue these beloved and essential series” (Rimel, 2024, pers. comm.).

Over the course of the summer, we completed the due diligence process, relying heavily on insights and guidance from Howard Fisher, Douglas Pfeiffer, and Caroline Cook of The Fisher Company, a boutique mergers and acquisitions advisory firm to the publishing industry; Michael S. Blake of High Score Strategies, an appraisal and valuation firm; and Jonathan Kirsch, a copyright, trademarks, and publishing attorney. This is a strategic fit for both GSA and Mountain Press. Howard commented, “For GSA, this acquisition provides a strong foundation for extending awareness of the organization and its brand through publications that reach both youth and adults. Certainly, this will stimulate more interest in geology for amateurs and potentially careers going forward. For Mountain Press, the partnership with GSA will ensure a strong future for the list of titles and its authors” (Fisher, 2024, pers. comm.).

On 21 September 2024, at GSA Connects in Anaheim, the GSA Council acted decisively—to purchase the offered Mountain Press geology titles, diversify GSA publications, and begin an exciting new journey into public science. The conference room that evening buzzed with excitement, and it was very difficult for us all to remember that the whole topic was confidential! The rest of our time together at Connects was filled with enthusiastic side conversations and thrilled smiles. As Melanie describes it, “GSA leadership recognized the need to be bold and embrace new growth to ensure the Society's sustainability in light of evolving industry-wide membership trends and demographics, shifting dynamics in academic publishing, and the increasing importance of public engagement in science. This acquisition offers an exciting opportunity to attract potential members and future conference attendees, all while enhancing our public outreach and broadening the scope and impact of geoscience” (Brandt, 2024, pers. comm.).

On 30 October 2024, GSA and Mountain Press signed a purchase agreement that serves the best interests of both organizations, and GSA acquired a total of 102 titles, including all books in the *Roadside Geology*, *Geology Underfoot*, and *Geology Rocks!* series, and select titles from the *Earth Science* and *Young Readers* series. The purchase included all associated copyrights, licenses, agreements, saleable inventory, works in progress, pending book orders, original artwork, digital files, distributor and vendor lists, and sales and marketing materials. In essence, Mountain Press transferred all the elements required for GSA to continue effectively publishing these titles. Incoming GSA President Nathan Niemi enthusiastically stated, “I’m thrilled that these highly regarded series will be under the stewardship of GSA. Thematically, these books are a natural fit for GSA and will immediately expand our footprint in public science communication” (Niemi, 2024, pers. comm.).

Mountain Press also agreed to continue distributing these books, ensuring a smooth transition for their long-time vendors, customers, and booksellers. And, GSA welcomed several current Mountain Press employees as contractors, with the strong possibility of joining our publications staff soon. Their experience and expertise are invaluable throughout the transition period and beyond for the continued success and growth of these series as GSA publications. Mountain Press will continue publishing their popular nongeology titles, and John and Rob have assured us that they remain a phone call away for ongoing advice and guidance.

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SCIENCE AT GSA

With this unprecedented acquisition, GSA has taken a giant step forward in the realm of geoscience education through public-facing science. We now have a clear, well-established path to reach so many more readers. Instead of waiting for them to find us, most often after they have already discovered a love of rocks elsewhere, GSA is striving to meet the public where they are—in a bookstore or museum,

at a national park, online shopping as they prepare for a road trip, or in a classroom where they could become geo-curious for life! It is incredibly important to capture the imaginations of students and nonprofessionals and create a sense of excitement about the natural world that will inform their decisions and impact their lives. We plan to do just that by combining the complementary strengths of our newly acquired series with our expertise in scholarly publications, meetings, and membership.

GSA’s members and authors are not only writing these books—they are also reading them and recommending them to their students, family, and friends. With their help and engagement in GSA’s new venture, and with the overall membership’s dedication to GSA’s mission, we have a solid foundation upon which to grow and develop new and revised volumes. We are particularly excited about the prospects of working closely with existing authors; discovering new voices, audiences, and topics; and of course, talking to and hearing from our readers! Thanks to Council’s leadership, GSA is now on a path to engaging and educating the public, nurturing a wider interest in sustainability and Earth stewardship, and giving back to society through advancement of the geosciences. As Chuck’s presidency comes to a close, he leaves us with the perfect summation and the start of a lasting legacy: “Over the past year, GSA’s gone from aspiring to do more public science to a place where that’s a reality—I’m stoked because GSA now has the potential to expand its impact by engaging with the public in tangible and meaningful ways for the betterment of our planet” (Bailey, 2024, pers. comm.).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks go to Chuck Bailey for his full support and infectious enthusiasm for public science; to Melanie Brandt for not only having a transformative idea but actually making it happen every step of the way; to the GSA Council for their vision, trust, and unwavering belief in GSA staff and our shared mission; to Howard, Douglas, and Caroline at The Fisher Company, alongside publishing attorney Jonathan Kirsch, for their incredible patience, wisdom, organizational skills, and willingness to Zoom with little notice; to Jennifer, Chelsea, Jeannie, Adam, and Anne at Mountain Press for their fantastic work in the past, present, and future; to the GSA Publications and Marketing staff for their constant help, excitement, and can-do attitudes; and to John Rimel and Rob Williams for their friendship, years of GSA support, publishing acumen, visionary work in public science, and most of all, for trusting us with their precious books. We promise to make you proud!

REFERENCES CITED

- Feeney, C.M., and Bailey, C.M., 2024, GSA Connects 2024—Southern California Geo-Sites: Geological Society of America and Mountain Press, GSA Maps and Charts MCH107, 24" × 36", 1 2-sided sheet.
- Geological Society of America, 2019, Decadal Strategic Plan: Geological Society of America, <https://rock.geosociety.org/net/documents/gsa/about/2019-strategic-plan.pdf> (accessed 27 October 2024).
- Witherspoon, W., and Rimel, J., 2020, Commercially successful books for place-based geology: Roadside geology covers the US, in Sadry, B.N., ed., *The Geotourism Industry in the 21st Century: The Origin, Principles, and Futuristic Approach*: Apple Academic Press, p. 325–352.



Expected to be available in late December, GSA’s first publication in the series presents a fascinating and accessible look at the well-exposed geology in Arizona’s mountains and deserts. Enjoy a member discount of 20% off GSA’s new public science titles with code **2024GSAMember20**

