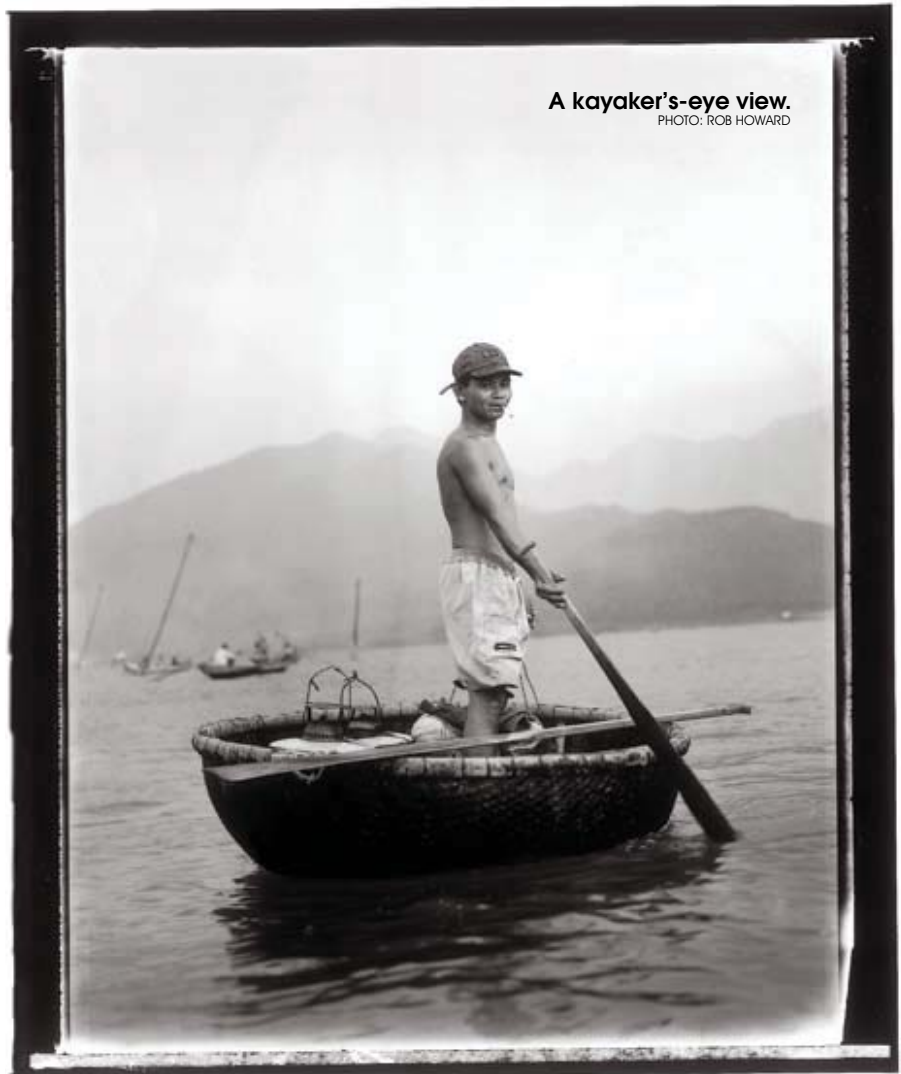


From the seat of a kayak, looking out

Publishers often send us new kayaking books to review. When I got Jon Bowermaster's latest from National Geographic, *Descending the Dragon: My Journey Down the Coast of Vietnam*, I was struck by something very odd. I counted 78 photographs between the covers, exactly six of which showed any sign of the paddlers or their kayaks. That's less than eight per cent of the images in a kayaking book having anything to do with kayaking. What's going on?

The late photographer Galen Rowell wrote about a concept called "image maturity." He said that when a subject is new to the audience, you offer them the photographic equivalent of a two-by-four to the head—obvious photos that are a direct depiction of the subject. In Rowell's example, the popular photo for stories about Nepal trekking in the 1980s was a portrait of a Sherpa. In recent years, editors passed over that image for ones that they previously thought "too subtle." As trekking became more familiar, the maturing audience got the same message out of increasingly abstract pictures while the old images became ho-hum.

By this definition, Rob Howard's photos in the Vietnam book are very mature. Like the one printed above, they are pictures of the world Bowermaster's team saw from the seats of their kayaks. Images of fishermen, streetside merchants, bicycles, fishing nets, floating villages, rowboats, bamboo boats,



A kayaker's-eye view.
PHOTO: ROB HOWARD

dogs, schoolgirls, war memorials, Buddhist monks, sandals, cows, jellyfish and pagodas. Images far more diverse and informative than the so-called lifestyle photos in a kayaking magazine.

In Rowell's terms, this magazine has some growing up to do. Eighty per cent of the photographs in a typical issue of *Adventure Kayak* include kayaks. Rowell points out that image maturity is audience-dependent. Meaning that a subject's enthusiasts, like the readers of a kayaking magazine, should be the most sophisticated audience—in theory the quickest to be turned off by a visual cliché. And yet we usually just bonk readers on the head with pictures of kayaks.

But I'm not just talking about photos. Bowermaster's text, too, focuses on the people, the politics and the culture of Vietnam, not the usual trip details of paddling, eating and weather. Bowermaster sees himself as a journalist first and a paddler second. He calls kayaks floating ambassadors. They're a tool to see a place and meet its people.

I emailed Bowermaster with this obser-

vation and he replied, "I'm glad you got the message." The message is a whole philosophy of travel, a way of being and seeing.

That's a good message for an economically challenging time. A time when we shift our gaze away from the gear we buy to the environments that our kayaks allow us to so richly experience for free—like the backyard waters we are showing our children when we follow the advice of the family kayaking feature on page 35. Or the exotic locales like the Baja Peninsula in our destination guide on page 42. And the far-flung places that inspired Marcus Demuth, page 40, to sell his Brooklyn drum store to go on expeditions.

I'll bet that many of you who read this magazine paddle for some other purpose—to fish, to bird-watch, to be at one with water and nature—and I hope we can speak to that motivation in pictures and in words, celebrating the world you see from your kayaks. Go kayaking. Lift your eyes from the cockpit and take a look around. It's beautiful out there.—*Tim Shuff*