

# Australian Geographic

**A**ustralian Geographic is one of Australia's most successful magazines. Both it and the Australian Geographic Society were founded by Dick Smith. The magazine is one of his proudest achievements.

He is especially proud of the fact that the public's support for the magazine has meant that his company has been able to give more than \$5 million to scientific research, adventure and community projects. This is not bad for a project which many people said would never get off the ground – that Australians simply wouldn't buy an expensive magazine that celebrated the Australian environment. How wrong these critics were.

One of the major aims of the Australian Geographic Society and its magazine, *Australian Geographic*, is to 'foster a love of our environment and natural

heritage and to increase knowledge and understanding of our remarkable country'. This is in keeping with Dick Smith's commitment to conservation and education.

## **The magazine must be first class**

When Dick Smith started his magazine in 1986, he was critical of Australian printers, distributors, newsagents and advertising agencies. He felt that they were all too negative in their approach to their work and that this led to mediocrity. He wanted his magazine to be absolutely first class, with information that was accurate and presented beautifully. This meant that the costs of producing it were high, but the result was a magazine with high-quality photographs and illustrations that people wanted to buy.

Dick was prepared to give the magazine five years to become successful. After that time if it

was losing money, he would consider closing it down. After the first year *Australian Geographic* was a financial success. One of the keys to a good magazine is a good editor. The editor ensures that quality is maintained. More than 120 people applied for the job and Dick interviewed 20 of them. He was not happy with any of the applicants and he was not going to settle for second best. He said, 'The problem was that not one of them gave me any confidence in his or her ability to fulfil my dream.' Finally Howard Whelan, a man who shares Dick Smith's love of adventure, became the editor. Howard Whelan had helped film the first Australian climbing expedition up the north face of Mount Everest.

### **Subscription only**

The rapid success of *Australian Geographic* meant that the company that was distributing the magazine was unable to keep up with the demand from the newsagents which sold it. Dick decided that the best solution would be to sell it by subscription. This means that people pay in advance for a certain number of copies and as each issue is published, it is mailed out to

them. This requires an efficient mailing system and so a computer was installed to deal with the huge number of requests for subscriptions. At the same time the magazine was being sold in newsagents, but Dick discovered something which is normal practice in newsagents but which horrified him. Any copies of magazines which are not sold have their covers ripped off and returned to the publisher as evidence that the copies have not been sold. Seeing the beautiful covers of his magazine ripped apart made him angry. He considered it offensive and wasteful. If this was normal practice, he wanted nothing to do with it. He withdrew his magazine from newsagents and sold it by subscription only. Many people thought this was a risky business decision, but it paid off.

*Australian Geographic* soon had more than 200 000 subscribers in 126 countries. This made Dick Smith the most



### **Hard work**

*'Australian Geographic has proved that if you put hard work into anything it will always work.'*

successful single title publisher in Australian publishing history.

### **Advertising**

*Australian Geographic*, like most other magazines, sells advertising space. The money raised helps cover costs and create a profit. It also funds environmental research and various

expeditions. The difference between Dick Smith's magazine and others is that the advertisements are to be found only at the beginning and at the end of each issue. Dick Smith also controls the kinds of products which are advertised. He will only accept advertisements for products which he would use or



Dick Smith

Money made by *Australian Geographic* is used to fund scientific expeditions and research.

recommend and there are no advertisements for alcohol or cigarettes.

### **Sponsoring science**

*Australian Geographic* sponsors scientific expeditions and scientific research. It also sponsors people who undertake extraordinary adventures; people like Sorrel Wilby, the woman who walked across Tibet. Perhaps the most unusual of the people who have been sponsored by *Australian Geographic* are the Wilderness Couples – couples who have spent a year together, cut off from the outside world, in some of the remotest parts of Australia. These couples had to rely upon their own resourcefulness to survive. The first Wilderness Couple lived for a year in a remote part of the Kimberley. Their experience was a test of their endurance – the year of their adventures was the driest year for 30 years. The

drought, combined with high humidity, made their task doubly difficult. The second Wilderness Couple spent a year in south-west Tasmania where conditions were cold and wet. The third Wilderness Couple were sent to Antarctica, where conditions were almost unimaginably difficult. Each couple also undertook some scientific research in areas of meteorology, geology and zoology. Their adventures were covered in the magazine.

Dick Smith's gamble with his magazine paid off because he had faith in Australians' interest in and love for their country. People picked up on the sense of adventure and challenge in the magazine as well. They responded to its positive view of things. Its beautiful maps, graphics and photographs, it seemed, were well worth the price.