

WHAT'S UP

Magazine says sorry for treating non-white cultures unfairly

For decades, National Geographic published racist stories. Fortunately, it has learnt from its old mistakes.



People may have a culture that is very different and unfamiliar, but that does not mean that they are inferior.

[Photo: PIXABAY]

You have probably heard of *National Geographic*. It is a famous American magazine. It also has television channels that you may have watched. Today, we think *National Geographic* is a good way to learn about the different people and places on our big planet.

Many decades ago, though, *National Geographic* made some big mistakes. It gave readers wrong ideas about people from different cultures. Some of its stories were racist: they talked about some people as if they were lower than others because of their race. Last month, the current bosses of the magazine apologised for these mistakes.

One of the worst examples of racist language was in a *National Geographic* story about Australia that appeared more than a century ago. The article included pictures of Aboriginal people. Aboriginals are the original Australians. They lived in

Australia before Europeans arrived. The description under two of the photographs said, “These savages rank lowest in intelligence of all human beings.”

Today we know this is a horrible and untrue way to describe Aboriginals or any other group of people. But, back then, *National Geographic* writers and editors thought it was all right to talk about others like this.

Those were colonial times. Europeans were trying to persuade themselves that it was not wrong to invade other nations, steal the natives’ lands, and even kill them. So, they told themselves the lie that the natives were not equal to white people. These kinds of racist ideas were spread against Chinese, Indians, Malays, Native Americans, Africans, and others as colonialism spread.

Many of the people who ran *National Geographic* long ago had similar ideas. That is why they produced stories that we now find shocking.

Report on racism



The screenshot shows the top portion of a National Geographic article. At the top left is the National Geographic logo and the word 'MAGAZINE'. To the right are search and menu icons. Below this is a sub-header 'THE RACE ISSUE'. The main title of the article is 'For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist. To Rise Above Our Past, We Must Acknowledge It'. A short introductory paragraph follows: 'We asked a preeminent historian to investigate our coverage of people of color in the U.S. and abroad. Here's what he found.' Below the text are social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest, along with a plus sign for more options. The article features two side-by-side black and white photographs of Aboriginal Australians. The first shows a man with a long, dark beard and hair. The second shows a woman with long, dark hair. Below the photos is a caption: 'In a full-issue article on Australia that ran in 1916, Aboriginal Australians were called "savages" who "rank lowest in intelligence of all human beings." PHOTOGRAPHS BY C.F. SCOTT (MAN), H.E. GREGORY (WOMAN), NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE (BOTB)'. At the bottom of the screenshot, the author is listed as 'By Susan Goldberg, Editor in Chief'.

Editor Susan Goldberg wrote this article admitting National Geographic’s mistakes, including its racist story in 1916 about Aboriginals in Australia.

Susan Goldberg, the magazine’s current editor, said *National Geographic* had a responsibility to describe cultures properly. Most readers will never get to visit all the places described in the magazine. They depend on the magazine to give them an accurate idea of what life is like in those countries.

Ms Goldberg did not want her magazine to hide from its past mistakes. She had nothing to do with those stories. She was not even born when that story about Australian Aboriginals appeared in 1916. Still, she felt it was important to **face up to** its past.

She asked John Edwin Mason, a professor at the University of Virginia, to dig into the old issues of the magazine and give his report card. Professor Mason found that *National Geographic* had a lot of racist stories until the 1970s.

For example, there were many photos showing tribal people acting fascinated by Westerners’ technology, such as the cameras that the explorers brought with

them. Such pictures gave readers the impression that these people were very backward and **uncivilised** compared with the visitors' modern ways. In fact, there are many things that tribal people know about nature that would amaze people living in cities. The magazine should have tried to show how much a reader could learn from these village people, instead of looking down on them.

Prof Mason was also troubled by a 1962 story about South Africa. Back then, a small number of whites ruled South Africa under a cruel system called apartheid. Black people were not treated as equals. Just two years earlier, in 1960, there had been a terrible incident when police killed 69 black South Africans. The killings shocked the world. Yet, the 1962 *National Geographic* article about South Africa did not mention such problems.

"There are no voices of black South Africans," Prof Mason said. He could tell that writers, photographers, and editors at the time suffered from a kind of blindness. They didn't see the problems faced by non-whites in South Africa.

The magazine was even unequal in the way it talked about its own country, the United States. Prof Mason discovered that the magazine mostly ignored non-white people living in the US. Readers would get the impression that only white people mattered.

In 1956, it wrote about a beautiful historic building called Fairfax House in the state of Virginia. It said that "every American is proud to remember" that time in history. This was an insensitive thing to say because houses like these were built by African slaves. For the slaves and their descendants, these buildings were a reminder of a sad time when slavery existed. It is not a memory that "every American" should be "proud" about.

Fortunately, American society has advanced a lot since then. *National Geographic* has changed as well. That is why it now feels bad about the way the magazine used to talk about non-whites. It was bold of the magazine to admit its past mistakes. That is the first step to becoming better people.

VOCAB BUILDER

face up to (say "feis up tu"; phrasal verb) = confront.

uncivilised (say "an-sivi-laiz-d"; adjective) = like barbarians, without culture.

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Thank you. — News For Kid, 5 April 2022