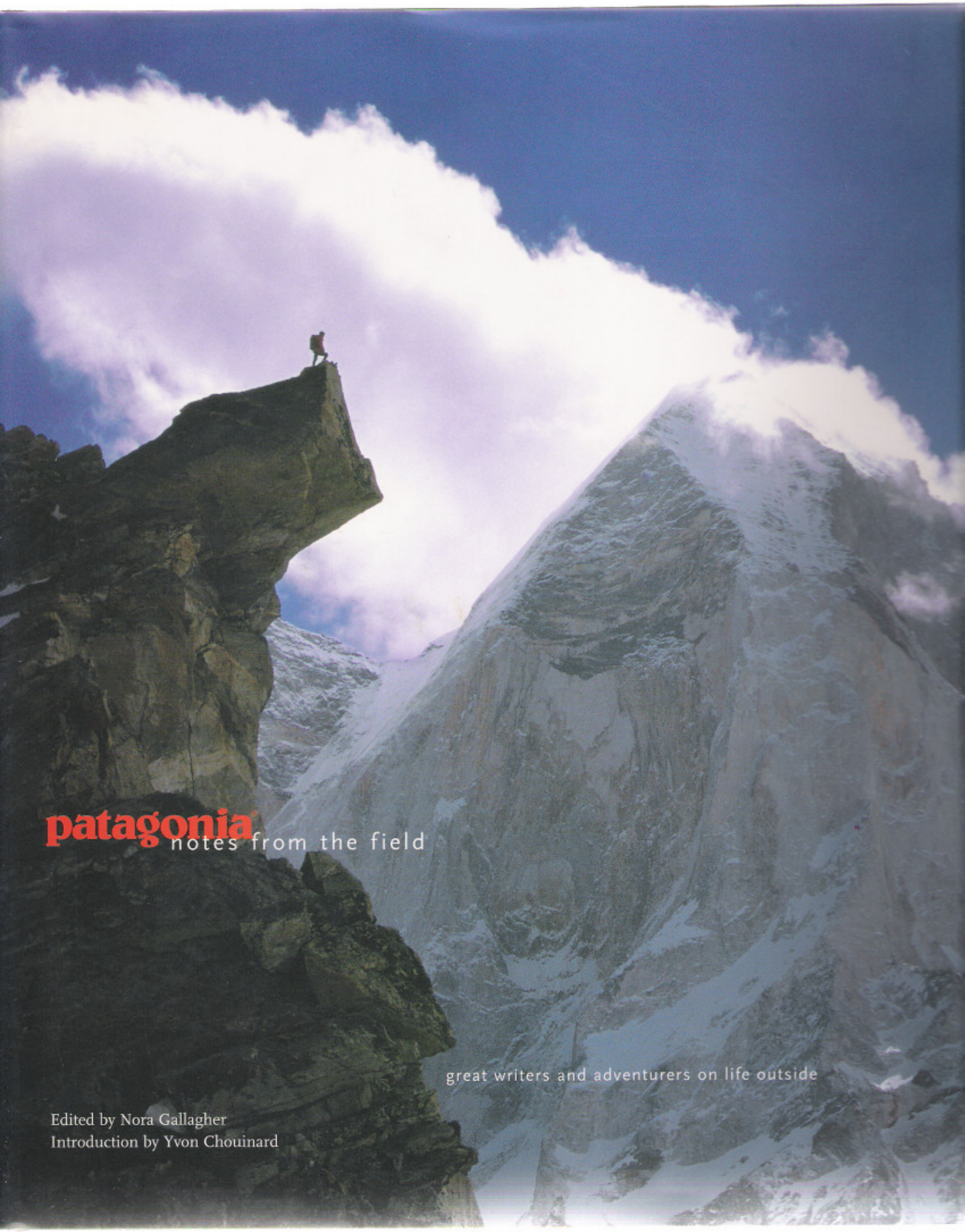

patagonia
notes from the field

great writers and adventurers on life outside

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Little Wild Places

AFTER GRADUATING from an inner-city high school twenty-some years ago, I had an epiphany of sorts as a hood-in-the-woods (as we were known then) on an Outward Bound course. In the exciting, stripped-down version of life on that trip, I was inspired to get the hell out of what seemed a dead-end life in Denver and spend my days in clean, crystalline, uncluttered, wild places. So far I have been very lucky to be able to keep that vow. Today, I work for an organization in northern New Mexico, the land of my three-hundred-year-old family roots, that advocates on behalf of wild, free-flowing, clean rivers and the traditional rural lifestyle that has developed along those rivers over the centuries.

There have been times since my escape that, like an overzealous convert to a new religion, I bad-rapped all things urban. But if working on environmental issues teaches anything, it is the undeniable maxim, cliché as it sometimes sounds, that all things are connected. "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe," said John Muir. Pour your urban sewage into the river and it flows downstream and into a section of "wild" river you might want to float someday. Spew your electricity-producing coal smoke into the air and it obscures the view of the Grand Canyon next time you take your family there on vacation. And it flows both ways. The heavy-metal toxicity seeping out of the Molycorp molybdenum mine just up the road from where I live (one consequence of the lightweight mountain bikes we all like to ride nowadays) flows downstream toward drinking-water supplies for hundreds of thousands of people in Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

The barrier some people see between urban and rural issues, urban and rural lifestyles, is artificial. We can no longer hide from what lies upwind, upstream, or lurks somewhere in the food chain.

As the urban/rural boundary has blurred over the years, I've come to see that growing up in the city had its rewards. The inner-city life has adventures all its own, but I was also lucky to grow up in the city when I did, when there was still some open space around—untended little wild spots, overgrown orchards, vast open fields that seemed to stretch forever without a building, dense arbors in urban parks where we could hide securely from school and cops. We even used to swim without fear in urban lakes or in the abandoned gravel pit down the road that had filled with water. Maybe it was just the innocence and faith of youth, but I think the water was relatively clean back then. There were outdoor adventures—little and urban, but adventures nonetheless—to be had around every corner.

One cold, snowy day my friends and I chose to stay out and confront the elements rather than school. We found ourselves huddling in a cave formed by the

snow-laden limbs of an overhanging pine tree in the park. We were fifty feet from a busy street, the public library was a stone's throw in the other direction, yet we managed to turn the day into a wilderness survival epic. Poorly prepared for the wintry outdoors in our thin cotton Army-surplus jackets, but with plenty of matches for cigarettes (and other things), we gathered up enough dry wood for a small fire. We passed the entire day hunkered like feral humans around the fire, feeling the solid satisfaction of having come to terms with the elements and, I've always thought, each of us imagining ourselves around a campfire of yore in another time out on some remote frontier.

A rudimentary sense of connection with the big wild earth crept into my awareness with this and other experiences: catching crappies, frogs, and crawdads at nearby lakes; exploring the mysterious complexity of life at the wetland fringes; finding shelter among the overgrown vegetation of the old orphanage down the street. That such discoveries take place even in an urban environment gives me heart, and it becomes obvious to me that exploring our place in the natural world must be an extremely powerful and essential human instinct.

These experiences were the seeds of a relationship to the natural world that began flourishing when I first went into the woods. And I've come to realize, all these years later, that they are the seeds of inspiration for the work I do to protect wild places.

Wallace Stegner talked about a "geography of hope" as wild places—out there somewhere—that we might never even get to see. Those places are important for their own sake, if not for ours, but we also need that sort of hope closer to home, accessible to every kid growing up in the city today. Some of us are lucky enough to live in beautiful rural communities or have the means and the time to get to remote wild places and feel connected to the natural world. But even those of us fated by circumstance or economy to cramped urban neighborhoods have a basic right to this quality in our lives.

We can feel a true sense of hope when we all have little wild places to go to, where the earth still works its magic, where we can rekindle our fundamental relationship with the natural world.

Colorado river system.