



Parque Pumalin



By John Loofbourow, MD

Our managing editor treasures the timeless articles that can be held from issue to issue. This one may set a record — it was written two years ago during the author's visit to Chile.

EVERYONE IN CHILE HAS AN OPINION about the Norte-Americanos Douglas and Kristine Tompkins. They reportedly made millions from their top of the line clothing companies, Patagonia and Esprit. Douglas has been a frequent visitor to the south of Chile since 1961.

In 1988 construction was completed on the first major section of the Carretera Austral, only a gravel road, yet a magnificent engineering feat, which for the first time opened up a vast sector of archipelagic and continental rain forest to vehicular traffic.

The Tompkins are aware of a long history of worldwide forest exploitation. In fact, Douglas has written the introduction to a remarkable series of essays, all by Chilean authors,¹ which accompany extensive photographic documentation of deforested Chile from north to south. In 1991, the Tompkins acquired a 17,000 hectare (40,000 acre) remote mountain ranch, Fundo Renihue,² which lies at the blind end of a fiord by that name. Even now, it must be reached by sea, by air or trail.

Fundo Renihue, however, constitutes only a small portion of the exploitable fragile adjacent ecosystem. Through the Conservation Land Trust, based in Sausalito, California, some 300,000 adjacent hectares (750,000 acres) were purchased, creating Parque Pumalin which borders an Argentine National Park on the Eastern slopes of the Andes Mountains. The park was dedicated as a national park, but not given to the Chilean State. Ownership was retained by the Tompkins' non-profit organizations, to protect the park from such use as logging (with the roads required), grazing, the building of dams, etc. It is a privately owned/operated National Park.

The land in mountain and archipelagic Chile at the time Pumalin was purchased was nearly worthless from a commercial standpoint; it could not be exploited without major investment in infrastructure. Though densely forested, the terrain is very irregular, much more inhospitable than our geologically older North American mountains. Annual rainfall is measured in meters, but from the virgin forests, the water still runs clear, with minimal erosion.

So much water flows from the mountains into the fiords that it is possible to drink from the surface of the sea there. Sheltered from the Westerlies (winds) by islands, the lighter rain water floats for a time on the heavier seawater.

In February, I climbed some 1,500 feet from the Carretera Austral to a mountain lake called El Tronador. The "trail" is maintained by Pumalin park for tourists on the Carretera Austral, which traverses the park; although the ascent is not long, it is steep, and wet, and almost one third of it consists of slippery ladders made from small tree trunks.

On the bus ride from the gateway town of Chaiten to Caleta Gonzalo, (a port on the

Renihue fiord, I sat next to Ysabel Jaramillo, who cooks for a Pumalin trail crew. Her brother-in-law, Carlos Alvarado, is a Tompkin's right hand man, and was off somewhere with Douglas in his plane, working on developing a new sector of the park. I had missed the elusive Mr. Tompkins for the second year in a row.

Still, I have always found that one can learn as much, or more, from the arms and legs as from the brain and mouth. Maybe next year I will be able hear the mouth, expressing the ideas of the admirable brain.

In an attempt to extend Parque Pumalin to the North, so that it might abut Horno Piren, another new Chilean National Park, other holdings were acquired by the Tompkins; apparently these purchases were often made through third parties, which offended some, as it seemed sneaky, and land was very cheap.

As the holdings of the planned park extension grew, a strong political and economic reaction developed, and halted the acquisition of a last 100,000 hectare holding. In a bow to political turmoil, the owner (La Universidad Catolica via the Franciscan Order) refused to sell to the highest bidder, which was apparently Tompkins *et. al.* It is now in the hands of a holding company.

For several years the Chilean press has been peppered with arguments on the subject of the Tompkins, chiefly from detractors. Typical of the polemic are a series of letters to the editor in December 1999; an editorial on the same subject appeared in June 2001. They reflect the emotion and rhetoric regarding the Pumalin project.³ In response, the Tompkins and friends have attempted to inform legislators and VIPs by inviting them a few at a time to see for themselves what is being done. In addition, they have improved local public relations and constructed a model park operation that both makes Pumalin accessible to the tourists along the Carretera Austral and informs them about the ideology behind the project. The outcome is still unclear, and the Tompkins recently threatened to pull out.

Pumalin, therefore, is now a still endangered one million acre park, separated from other parks to the north, by Huinay, a 250,000-acre ranch stretching, like Pumalin, from the sea to the Andean crest at the Argentine border. There remain only a very few small islands of private holding in Pumanlin, notably, a 300 hectare seashore ranch just south of the Tompkin's Fundo Rinihue.

The owners there are the only ones in the immediate area who did not sell to Tompkins. They provide tours of the fiord, and I went with them to a sea lion colony on the coast of the park; the operator indicated that his land had been in the family for generations, and they would never sell. Besides, tourism has now, for the very first time, made the ranch a money-making asset, and life there is easier.

It all seemed quite reasonable to me; nonetheless, after we had observed and photographed the large colony of sunning sea lions, the driver solicitously gunned his motor and rushed toward the shore so that we could all enjoy the sight of 300 panicked *lobos de mar* splashing into the sea (They are called "sea wolves" in Spanish). I don't think he took my objection to heart; other tourists often tip him for the extra excitement provided by panicked, barking golden fleeced bulls, cows and calves.

So I admire the Tompkins. I wish I had the resources and tenacity, or passion, or even the strength of character to do something like that, even on a small scale. I don't. I tried in the '80's, and once was the only bidder on a large tract of remote land, but the offer was withdrawn by the government. Yet I can see why some Chilean people object.

There is much of the "Ugly American 2" in the green movement, and in the formation of a park like Pumalin; something about the arrogance, and use of wealth and power, that rankles. Something in the dilemma of those of us who want to preserve and conserve parts of the pristine world. The obvious problem is, "Preserve for whom?"

For if this park, like Yosemite, is accessible to all, then it will no longer remain pristine.

And if it is for a few, who are they? (We, for I will go again and again, life permitting). Pumalin certainly is not at present for the average low wage earner, excepting those who work at the park, where all I encountered were very glad to be in the employ of Tompkins.

But thanks to Mr. Pinochet's road, it is accessed annually by many thousands of backpacking young people and middle income tourists. The guest book at Caleta Gonzalez is filled with comments from Chilean vacationers who visit the area each summer, to trample the moss and mud of a Southern rain forest, or to worship in a grove of 3,000 year old Alerce⁴ trees. As in the USA, however, most don't walk more than a few kilometers from the road.

Should access be reserved for the unborn, who, like Annie's tomorrow, are always a day away? Or the young and agile, (as yet) unproductive members of society? Or the wealthy who can even afford to be carried? Or those with political or economic power? Or for "nature," that mystic and beautiful siren, who periodically morphs into the greatest destroyer of life of all?

A Chilean can clearly understand eco-prophecy, and still ask:

"What about me?"

And, if we Northerners really did believe in democracy (which is prima facie doubtful, despite our soothsaying), if we believed, then who has the democratic mandate to mold a Chilean present, or future? Those backward and ignorant latinos, or wise foreign voters and politicians? Can we, with our more prescient awareness of what is really important, wait for them to come around, or must we intervene, like the Tompkins?

Intervene in the name of the Greater Good, of course. As so many examples in history will attest, that is a risky proposition. We don't need to look to the Inquisition or the Crusades for confirmation; our 20th Century will do just fine.

For myself, this continuing miscegenation between the various Americas, our languages, our cultures, and between several rights or wrongs, is what is most moving, most fascinating, most enlightening about our hemisphere. Characteristic of this colorful and vibrant interaction, is the struggle of the Tompkins to move the South American continent just a little to the north.

1. La Tragedia del Bosque Chileno, Adriana Hoffman, 1998
2. Parque Pumalin Centro de Informacion Caleta Gonzalo, Carretera Austral, Chile
3. El Mercurio Cartas al Editor R.P. Baldo Santi, and Miguel Letelier Valdez December 1999: Report by Juan Andres Quezada and Patricio Alegre, La Segunda, June 2001.
4. Alerce: Fitzroya cupressoides. Young trees look like conifers, but after about 300 years develop into a large slow growing red-barked tree with bare trunk, topped with a broad cumulus top, reminiscent in form, and size, of the Sequoia gigantea. These ancient trees have been exploited extensively so that large individuals are scarce, found mainly in small remote groves.

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