

Environmental Entrepreneurs

By Anna Browne Ribeiro

Doug Tompkins, creator of Parque Pumalín, explains his involvement in environmentalism rather simply. His transformation from clothing magnate to environmental philanthropist had its roots in the realization that he had spent much of his life “producing things people really didn’t need” and contributing to an unsustainable consumerist model. In the late 80s and early 90s, Doug and his wife, Kristine McDivitt Tompkins, sold their shares in Esprit and Patagonia and used the money to fund their environmental activism.

Parque Pumalín, their largest and best-known project, is a privately endowed public park in southern Chile. During the 1990s, the Tompkins amassed over 700,000 acres of private land in order to conserve and protect some of Chile’s most beautiful landscapes. Today, this land — which bisects the country and is roughly the size of Yosemite National Park — is open to the public.

Tompkins chose to focus his energies on the Southern Cone because of his long-standing connection to the region. As a young man, Tompkins traveled to Chile to ski. Over the years, he returned to Patagonia, repeatedly reestablishing his relationship with the landscape and developing lasting friendships with people in this region.

“Seven Projects in the Southern Cone” — a film based on his environmental endeavors — tells the story of the vision he shares with his wife, a vision of environmental conservation, rehabilitation and economically sustainable, locally-based agro-ecology. “Seven Projects” focuses on their work, beginning with the Tompkins’ home, Reñihue Farm, which they have restored from an abandoned, dilapidated and overgrown plot into a sustainable and productive landscape that is preparing for what Tompkins likes to call the “post-petroleum era.” The remaining six projects range from farms to national parks. All were designed to encourage a move away from high-power urban lifestyles and toward low-energy agricultural ones, foregrounding local materials and culture, ecological recovery and sustainability.

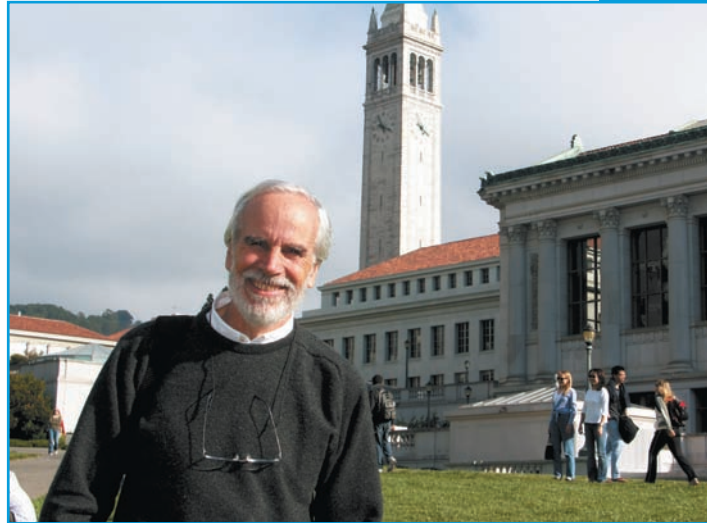


Photo by David R. León Lara.

Doug Tompkins at UC Berkeley.

Tompkins’ model is not without its critics. The harshest among them accuse him of being an imperialist and a colonizer. He has also had run-ins with national governments. Recently, he has been in the Chilean news for opposing a government-funded construction plan that threatens to cut across Parque Pumalín. In Argentina, his efforts to build a similar preserve are under fire from the government which has begun to consider large-scale foreign ownership of Argentine territory a national security risk.

It remains to be seen whether Doug Tompkins is able to translate his vision of entrepreneurial environmentalism across cultural and geographic space to become an enduring force in the global environmental movement. However, there can be no question as to the beauty of the landscapes he has worked to preserve, as the following photos will attest.

Doug Tompkins, American entrepreneur and philanthropist, is the president of the Foundation for Deep Ecology in San Francisco and president of the Conservation Land Trust in Puerto Montt, Chile. His presentation, “Toward Eco-localism,” was held at UC Berkeley, on October 13, 2006

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Overleaf: Scenes from Parque Pumalín.





Photo courtesy of the Foundation for Deep Ecology.



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Parque Pumalín, Chile.

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