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JUNE 1999

EDEN:
A Gated Community

The plot contains elements of* Lost Horizon *and* Heart of Darkness, Fitzcarraldo *and* The Tempest. *After making a fortune as founder of North Face and Esprit, Douglas Tompkins embraced the principles of deep ecology. Then, forsaking civilization, he bought a Yosemite-sized piece of wilderness in Chile, where only he and a like-minded few would live. They intended to show the world how an eco-community could flourish even as the ancient forest was kept pristine. Tompkins ran into one big

problem: other people

by William Langewiesche

(*The online version of this article appears in four parts. Click here to go to parts two, three, and four.*)

IN southern Chile, where the Andes sink into the Pacific, on the cold and rain-soaked coast of Patagonia, lies a province called Palena. It is a mountainous land of virgin valleys and steep-walled fjords, a labyrinthine wilderness inhabited by a scattering of peasant settlers who cling to its shores, fearing the evils of the deeper forest. It is a naturalist's dream. And a big part of it is owned by a Californian, Douglas Tompkins, a rich environmentalist from San Francisco who arrived nine years ago to save the trees and today lives besieged in an isolated fiefdom like a Crusader going down to defeat in a fight for the salvation of the world.

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More on **the environment** in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Atlantic Unbound*.

More on **politics & society** in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Atlantic*

The capital of Palena is a town called Chaitén -- a concentration of bedraggled wooden houses on a stony beach, reachable from greater Chile only by sea or by air. I met the provincial governor at his office there, on the central square. He was a plump, bearded fellow in a rumpled suit, a grandson of Chaitén's earliest settlers, and a man of unabashed resentments. He was angry about the seasonal influx of gringos who fish and kayak in one of the local rivers and leave no wealth behind, but angrier still about Tompkins, who had come and stayed

Unbound.

From *Atlantic Unbound*:

Atlantic Abroad: "On the Ground in Patagonia," by William Langewiesche (March 18, 1998)
"Recently, in a town called Chaitén, I watched an airplane crash."

Related links:

Pumalin Park Project News
A collection of summaries (in English) of Chilean newspaper articles about Tompkins' project. Posted by the Chile Information Project.

Deep Ecology
Essays, recommended resources, and events listings. Posted by the Rainforest Information

and intervened. The governor did not enter into details at first; he wanted me to understand that he could, without explanation, simply hate all foreign interlopers -- and, by the way, he presumed that I was one. Without looking directly at me, he said, "You come down here thinking we are very humble, but you have found your opposition."

Once we got that straight, we could move on to Tompkins, whose thinking the governor said he had studied. I assumed he meant that he had read the summaries being circulated by Tompkins's opponents in Santiago, the nation's capital. Whatever his source of information, he had the basics right. Tompkins believes in "deep ecology," an absolutist version of environmentalism -- which contains little to surprise a North American reader. It is an "ecocentric" view that rejects the idea of inherent human superiority and instead gives equal moral weight to all elements of nature -- from the living to the inanimate. The deep ecologists are purists. The governor understood the importance that they place on trying to live according to their principles, and he even knew about the Norwegian Arne Naess, an academic philosopher, now eighty-seven, whose work launched the movement.

But emotion kept getting the better of the governor. He equated deep ecology with Nazism. And he confused population control with genocide. He implied that Tompkins might be building a dangerous

Center, "a non-profit, volunteer organization dedicated to the protection of the Earth's remaining rainforests and the indigenous people who depend on them."

Brief articles from *Philanthropy News Digest*:

"Douglas Tompkins Suspends Donation of Sanctuary to Chile," (March 26, 1997)
"Upset over what he says is an 'unthinkable slander campaign' against him, American millionaire Douglas Tompkins has frozen plans to donate a large national sanctuary to Chile."

"Doug Tompkins

cult in his forest fastness -- a suspicion just plausible, because of the stories of survival here in the south of the last Nazi fugitives, and the existence farther north of a German-led fascist group that has held off the Chilean authorities for years.

The governor enumerated what he called Tompkins's contradictions. He said, "First, Tompkins does not want our province to grow, but he himself has moved here. Second, he believes our settlers maybe do not need electricity, but he installs generators of his own. Third, he says he wants to save our forest, but what is his house made of?"

"His house is made of wood."

"And what does he heat it with?"

"He heats it with wood."

"So you admit the contradiction!"

I knew that Tompkins was so sincere that he harvested his firewood from dead trees coming down the rivers, but I did not want to quibble with the governor now. I said, "Tompkins disapproves of engines, but he flies his own airplanes. He believes in animal-powered farms, but he works his fields with tractors."

"More contradictions!"

"That's clear. But we all contradict ourselves -- probably even you. Maybe the Pope doesn't -- I don't know. But no other

Reaches Accord with Chile Over Nature Preserve," (July 16, 1997) "Tompkins and the Chilean government signed an agreement setting regulations over control of the 677,000-acre parcel [of land] which Tompkins acquired piece by piece in the early 1990s at a cost of some $18 million."

Catholic is a good Catholic all the time."

The governor refused to budge. He did not need to debate these things. He had the hometown advantage, and was convinced that he would prevail.

I said, "It seems to me you're asking too much. The only way for him to avoid contradictions would be to go off and live in a cave."

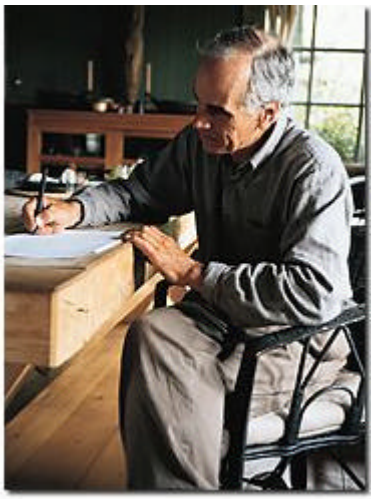
The governor was pleased with the thought. He said, "And that is precisely what he should do."

THE story is full of ironies. Tompkins started his career by dropping out of high school in upstate New York and going off to climb mountains. When he was still very young, he moved to San Francisco, where he founded and then sold the North Face climbing-equipment company. He is rich because he then co-founded Esprit, a clothing company that became very big and did business all over the world. Throughout that time he continued to take off several months a year to run rivers and climb mountains. He was not a faddist; it was obvious to those who knew him that he genuinely loved the outdoors. Nonetheless, it came as a surprise when at the height of his success he embraced the essentially anti-materialistic teachings of another mountaineer, the deep ecologist Arne Naess. His wife and business partner, Susie Tompkins, thought he had lost his mind. He thought he had found it. He was tired of

business, tired of the empty social life of San Francisco, tired of the empty consumerism that Esprit had come to represent to him. He and his wife divorced, and he sold his share of Esprit. In 1990 he endowed the Foundation for Deep Ecology, in San Francisco, and cast around for what to do next. His children were grown. He was not yet fifty. He wanted to live as if his thinking mattered.

He came to Palena on a tourist visa that same year and moved into a candlelit hut on a fjord where the rainfall amounted to eighteen feet a year. He did not mind the rain. The land was like a paradise to him, and it was cheap. For approximately $12 million he assembled a thousand square miles of untouched nature, a tract the size of Yosemite through which rivers flowed with pure drinking water past stands of ancient alerces -- redwood-like trees that grow only in that part of the world. He wanted to lock it away and keep it pristine, not for himself but for nature. After a few years he got married again, to Kristine McDivitt, an old acquaintance from southern California who as a part owner of the company called Patagonia had made a fortune of her own in the clothing business. She quit her job, moved to Palena, and threw herself into the conservation project. She was used to managing things, but it was still very much his show. He thought that he would establish a park and give it to Chile, that Chile would be grateful, and that then perhaps he would leave. He thought he

might be given honorary citizenship. And, of course, he was wrong.



Douglas Tompkins at his home in Reñihué

Chile in effect refused his gift, and in the years since has grown so hostile to Tompkins that strategies against him are openly discussed in the national senate. To his allies in faraway San Francisco, Tompkins appears to be engaged in a struggle against the arrogant, cynical oligarchy of a corrupt nation. But here in this insecure and newly democratic country it is Tompkins -- the righteous Californian, actively backed by the U.S. embassy -- who seems increasingly to represent the arrogance of power. While insisting on his rights as a foreign investor -- in a nation built on foreign investment -- he is spending an apparently unlimited fortune to pursue his surprising ambitions. He has sidestepped the government with plans to create a private Chilean foundation to which he will deed the land to be locked away in perpetuity. He has funded environmentalist groups throughout the country. And he has set about building an eco-community of workers' hamlets, visitors' facilities, and organic demonstration farms on his property -- a dispersed utopia meant to demonstrate a better way of living. The scale of his

generosity in a country with no philanthropic tradition suggests to many Chileans that he anticipates their wholesale conversion.

Over the years I have often heard Tompkins mentioned in Chile, by all sorts of people, and rarely in a positive way. He has become infamous. When the newsweekly *Qué Pasa* wants to boost its sales on the streets of Santiago, it runs him on the cover, because he is so widely distrusted. It is a strange fate for a man who thought he would be loved. He had done business in dozens of countries, and believed therefore that he knew his way around. He thought that the world was shrinking. And he seems to find it hard to change his mind now -- to accept that the world is larger than he realized, and that the people who bought his products will also reject his views. Tompkins continues to live on a tourist visa as if he might not stay, but he has trapped himself in a forest of his own making.

A Missionary in the Rain Forest

HE calls his land Parque Pumalín, after the pumas that roam its forests. The only way there by ground is on a rough dirt road from Chaitén, thirty-five miles north through uninhabited coastal mountains. I paid a man with a truck to take me. It was a grinding ride on a warm late-summer afternoon, up slow-turning valleys, through tall broadleaf trees. The sunlight was speckled and faintly green. Ferns and saplings sprouted through the rubble on the

shoulders of the road in dusty tangles that masked the denser growth of the forest. Now and then a view opened on a conical snow-capped volcano rising to the east: the 9,000-foot Michimahuida, which is the southernmost of Tompkins's mountains, and is cut by a glacier descending in a graceful curve from near its summit.

My driver was a small, fine-featured man, a diesel mechanic with a young family in Chaitén. We stopped for a rest, and drank together from a roadside rivulet. I asked him about Tompkins. He was cautious and said that he did not know him. He was more willing to talk about Tompkins's wife, who has been shielded even by the opposition from serious attack. The driver called her a good woman who cared about the people. He did not know her either. He was repeating what he had heard.

We kept going, and passed two lakes. Eventually we entered Tompkins's land, where nothing changed until suddenly, in the middle of this wilderness, we came upon an incongruous wooden gateway that framed the path to a set of beautifully constructed tent platforms. It was the first of many such projects over the final several miles: picnic areas, viewpoints, carved wooden signs, and an alerce "interpretive" trail, with which Tompkins has tried to make the best of a pre-existing condition -- a public right-of-way through this corner of his preserve.

The road descended into a valley, and ended

on the shore of a fjord, at a ferry landing called Caleta Gonzalo -- a concrete ramp served in the summer by a thirty-car ferry that steams a hundred miles north. *Caleta* means "cove." *Gonzalo* is the name of the river that empties into the sea a short walk from the ramp. To accommodate travelers there, Tompkins built the most incongruous of his tourist facilities -- an exquisite little complex of campground, café, and light-filled cabins, all beige and bare wood in perfect California-country taste, plumbed with pure mountain water, and powered by means of a water-turbine generator. Tompkins awarded the concession to a local settler, the wife of his boatman, who hired two city girls and a baker to work for the summer season. On the evening I got there, only one cabin was occupied -- by a German couple who had arrived by ferry. They liked the baker's whole-grain bread and the fresh vegetables from the organic farm next door, but confided to me that they were disconcerted to find themselves suddenly in a place so unlike South America. We spoke at the café, where a Smith & Hawken clock hung on the wall. In accented English the man murmured, "Ya, it's rather *peculiar* here, do you think?" I said I wasn't sure.

There was to be an outdoor *asado* that night, a celebratory meat roast at the end of a three-day holiday that Kris McDivitt had organized for the children of the families who worked for the preserve. I was expected there. I crossed the Gonzalo River

on a suspended footbridge and walked through a pasture to the cooking fire. Douglas Tompkins sat alone on the ground with his arms around his knees and his back half turned to the flames -- a slight, gray, unshaven man, as spare as a New England farmer, dressed in a homespun sweater, coarse cotton pants, and rubber boots. He had crooked teeth and a gaunt and pensive face. He asked about my trip from Chaitén, and explained that Kris and the children were washing up before the meal, after a hike on one of the nature trails.

I sat beside him, and we talked about the unusually dry weather -- two weeks without rain. His voice was sparse, gravelly, faintly nasal. He said he had just come by boat twelve miles down the fjord from his homestead at Reñihué -- once the site of his candlelit hut, and now the largest and most private of his hamlets, accessible only by small boat or airplane. I thought he looked old for his age but, with his lopsided smile, also fleetingly boyish. His gaze was indirect -- not shy but willfully modest, like that of a man holding himself back and suffering from an abundance of certainties.

I asked him how he passed his time. By the light of the fire he showed me his soil-stained hands. He said he had labored all day in a field at Reñihué, digging out the stumps of old trees. He said he was surprised to find himself doing such work at this stage in his life, and surprised by the satisfaction it gave him. Some of the roots

ran nine feet deep. He insisted that he was not tired. He would have kept digging longer, but had broken off early for the children's *asado*. Kris had told him he had to. He meant that he was an ordinary guy, a regular fellow.

But when I asked how many people he employed, I saw a flash of another Tompkins. Some of his critics had accused him of destroying jobs. He eyed me sharply, as if he weren't sure what to make of my question. He said, "You've been talking to them?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, you need to, you see. And you need to tell them that last I counted, I'm the biggest employer in the whole Goddamned province of Palena. I've got more than a hundred and fifty people here, over a hundred in construction alone. These are jobs that didn't *exist* before."

But his opponents had already pointed out that these jobs were temporary. Their quarrel with Tompkins was about the removal of so much land from the possibility of exploitation; it was about jobs in the future. Tompkins must have understood the argument. I suspected that his anger was in part with himself, for having to talk about jobs in the first place when what he really cared about was preservation. He must have felt the frustration of an environmentalist who heard himself sounding like the very

developers he wanted to stand against. He was in a bind. He might have found it easier to forget his principles, but then he would have lost his reason for being here.

He said, "Everything we *do* here comes down to defense. We try to anticipate the attacks, sure. But mostly we just say, 'Okay, what is it now? How do we deal with this one?'" His tone was ironic. He had accepted the need to accommodate Chile -- to help the surrounding settlers with their lives, and to invest in this public-access part of the preserve -- and he was annoyed that his critics had seized on these accommodations and called them contradictions, as if they had caught him cheating.

But then he laughed, and shook off the mood. He said the governor, poor guy, was suffering from isolation. A similar thought occurred to me in Chaitén, when the governor refused to discuss the possibility that Tompkins might be an honest though misguided man.

Tompkins, too, was suffering from isolation, though more like that of a king. It was probably unavoidable. He remembered his own beginnings clearly, and tried to maintain a connection to ordinary life, but to an extent greater than he realized he had been cut off by his success. Digging roots in a field? The effect of his isolation was a peculiar magnanimity -- for instance, in his unnecessary urging that I find his critics and hear them out. It struck me that within this public attitude of openness lay a private

message of disdain. I heard it again when he laughed off the governor. Thirty-five miles of road separated Caleta Gonzalo from Chaitén, but a still greater distance separated the two men. Tompkins seemed to think that the governor lacked the power to hurt him.

THE project's critics did not usually linger at Caleta Gonzalo, but in the guest book at the café a few had expressed their distrust.

- Mr. Tompkins: I feel like a foreigner in my own country. The cabins are beautiful, done with Chilean hands, but you put your stamp on them: $$$.

- Mr. Tompkins: Americans *always* protect their interests. I don't want a fiefdom within my country. I don't believe anything you say. I hope that my country is also my grandson's. [Someone had answered: "If Tompkins were Chilean he'd be turning these forests into wood chips. Is that what you'd like?"]

- Mr. Tompkins: If you want to create a nature sanctuary, that's good. But if you want to take our land from us, that's bad. Think about it, because one should not play under the hooves of horses. P.S. I am a young man who loves his country, and I am willing to

> give my life for it. Take that well into account.

But Tompkins preferred to focus on the other inscriptions -- conventional words of praise, written by guests who had come to Caleta Gonzalo because they approved of the project already. At the *asado* Tompkins asked me if I had leafed through the guest book. The question struck me as sad. He mentioned a national poll that he believed showed that most Chileans had come to think as he did. I thought, He does not see the trouble he is in.

Sparks from the cooking fire rose into the night above the outlines of black mountains. The employees' children chattered happily over their meal of goat, beans, and organic salad. Tompkins said that because of the severity of the climate and the shortness of the growing season, people here still had to get many of their calories from meat. He put a serving of goat on his plate but did not eat it. He said he hoped to persuade the settlers to build cheap plastic-covered greenhouses, and to improve their diets.

Kris McDivitt finally had a moment free, and came over to sit with us. She was an unadorned woman, not yet fifty, with a square, athletic build, streaked gray hair, and a lively, intelligent face. Her voice was strong and direct. I asked her about the children. She said they had gathered from the farthest reaches of the property for a few days of fun before the start of the school year. Tompkins added that the holiday was

supposed to be educational too -- part of a larger effort, critical to the preserve's survival, to teach future generations of settlers a more caring attitude toward the forest. McDivitt agreed with him in theory, but said that in practice it was not the forest but Caleta Gonzalo that drew these children. It offered them the excitement of a city -- the comings and goings of travelers from far away, and new friends, and a café, and, perhaps most of all, a road leading out into the larger world.

Tompkins let out a scornful laugh. "A road leading out to Chaitén," he said. "Like the world is in Goddamned Chaitén."

"For them it is," McDivitt said.

"How'd the walk go?" he asked.

"We tried to show them something about the trees. We talked about the alerces. But, I don't know, they weren't really into it. Luis said his feet hurt."

Tompkins was incredulous. "His *feet* hurt?"

McDivitt eyed him evenly. "His feet hurt. And the other kids just wanted to play."

She was admirably American, I thought, in the flatness of her delivery, in her pragmatism, in the way she stood her ground. Tompkins seemed to think so too. He looked her over. "Anyway, they're just kids," he said, as if he had not forgotten. I thought, Whether he loves this woman by

choice or by intuition, he must know that she is in some ways what he needs to be.

The conversation drifted to McDivitt's earlier career in California, and to her business partner Yvon Chouinard, who even after becoming very rich continued to drive a ratty old car. In Los Angeles this was considered to be eccentric behavior. But Tompkins called it a natural progression. He said, "First comes the display of wealth -- that's a Cadillac. Then comes the display of style -- that's the BMW. Then comes the mockery of style -- that's Yvon Chouinard. In Chile there's a lot of display of wealth, and a bit of display of style, but you can forget about the mockery." I thought he was about to acknowledge the gulf between Americans and Chileans. But instead he merely said that Chouinard had visited Parque Pumalín and had liked it very much.

McDivitt went off to put the children to bed. The air turned cool, and a group of vacationing Chilean college kids wandered over from the campground and appeared in the fading firelight. One of them added wood to the embers, and with studied nonchalance they watched the little flames that erupted, and stood warming themselves shoulder to shoulder with Tompkins. There were about twenty of them, transient students of the determinedly concerned kind -- sincere, idealistic, and a bit rebellious, but also, ultimately, perhaps too well behaved. They were still awkward with their adulthood, and had to strain to maintain the

pretense of informality with Tompkins, a man whom -- however temporarily -- they seemed to adore.

I had seen adoration for him before -- perhaps more enduring -- in the distant city of Puerto Montt, among the barefoot young women who worked in the preserve's front office. They were serious, dignified, and a little standoffish, but they glowed when they talked about Tompkins. Their office was a sunlit refuge from the strivings of the city -- a remodeled mansion behind high garden walls. It had blond wood floors and an immaculate atrium with a sign that read, in English,

> • WE ARE THE FIRST generation in 100,000 generations of human evolution to have our lives shaped -- not by nature -- but by an electronic mass media environment of our own making.
>
> • LIKE CAGED ANIMALS we have lost our bearings. Our attention spans are flickering near zero, our imaginations are giving out, and we are unable to remember the past.

The students at the campfire now expected to hear just these sorts of ideas. Tompkins stood among them like a penitent priest, slightly stooped, with his head tilted forward and his hands dangling loosely at his sides. Someone asked him a casual question, and he answered it briefly in his

sloppy Spanish; after a silence someone asked another question, and this time his answer took longer. This went on until only Tompkins still stood and spoke, and the students had arranged themselves on the ground and sat listening to him in silence. He had just finished telling me that he never preached. But now he held forth for two hours, expounding on the need for a "new Copernican revolution" in which nature is no longer seen to turn around man, and arguing that capitalism has failed as surely as communism, but that there is a third way, and it is green. The students never once disagreed or asked for practical detail, though Tompkins was the rare man who could have provided it to them. Some nodded their heads in understanding or agreement, and seemed to grow sleepy. Tompkins continued to talk: the gross national product is a measure of the conversion of nature to culture; the techno-industrial juggernaut is a bulldozer unleashed on the world; *The New York Times* is the mouthpiece of transnational corporations; Santiago is an octopus reaching out and devouring the Chilean land.

It was an astonishing performance. Toward midnight a student shyly raised his hand. "*Una pregunta*. How much time do we have?"

Tompkins said, "It may already be too late."

But he, for one, was not ready to quit. He continued to speak, about the ecologist Aldo

Leopold's advice to "save the pieces," and the need to bear witness to the folly of the world's self-destruction. Some of his audience eased away. I wondered if he was still preaching, hoping for conversions, trying to lead Chile to its salvation, or if by now he was just speaking to himself about his day spent digging in the fields. I no longer quite heard his words anyway, but studied him as if he were a reflection of me. I thought, He has my New England taste for the austere, for straight lines and a simplicity that in South America seems impossibly severe. His forest was a forest of symbols he did not see. His voice barely broke the silence of the mountains. I watched him across the fire, this Puritan faced with winter, this Pilgrim, this small hunched man in his fisherman's clothes, so abandoned to his beliefs.

Continued...

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Top illustraton by Kevin Soderlund. Photographs by William Langewiesche.

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Inside an Eco-Compound

IN the morning a dry wind called *puelche* blew through the mountains, and settlers for hundreds of miles set the forest on fire. The sky turned white with smoke. We loaded a wooden skiff with sacks of supplies, shoved off from Caleta Gonzalo, and headed up the fjord for the inner world of Reñihué. Four of us were aboard -- Tompkins, McDivitt, I, and one of the employees, an affable young outdoorsman named Andrés, who had been educated at an expensive school in Santiago and had once tried to form a commune. His job now was to build up the organic farm in Gonzalo, primarily to supply the café with vegetables. He was going to Reñihué today in the hope of catching another ride to the main demonstration farm, which was under construction in the strategic pass between this fjord and the next, a low place called Pillán.

The organic vegetable farm at the Caleta Gonzalo complex

Tompkins sat in the skiff's stern, steering with the outboard motor, looking tense and angry. He had radioed to Reñihué to send his pilot out on a patrol, and he knew that so far the fires had not spread to his preserve. But it was clear that such petty distinctions did not matter to him: none of the wilderness was his, or all of it was, and he suffered personally when damage was done to any part of it. The situation was grave. In southern Chile during the past few days about 50,000 acres had burned. The flames did not kill the biggest trees, but they might as well have. By burning through the walls of undergrowth, they opened the way to settlers who came in and harvested the standing timber and introduced cattle, and so patch by patch continued to consume the forest and wreck its fragile soil -- a band of havoc visible from the air as a brown cancer spreading along the coast and up the valleys into the pristine green of the Andes.

I knew something already about that

pattern, because during the previous two years I had set off with a Chilean friend among the settlers, and had walked along their foot trails and slept in their clearings, and had heard their hostility toward the forests that besieged them. Not even Indians, it is said, were able to penetrate this interior -- which may explain why they completely disappeared, killed off or absorbed by the European peasants who colonized the outlying island called Chiloé in the sixteenth century. Those colonists became Chilotes, a famously poor and isolated people who, as a result of just the sort of environmental exhaustion that Tompkins fears, have over the past hundred years fled by boat to hack holdings into the wild forests of the mainland. It has been a hard exile. I met settlers three generations distant from Chiloé who still regretted the loss of their home. They lived in lonely cabins that, were it not for the plastic litter, would have fit into the Appalachian frontier of two centuries ago. They survived by cutting wood, planting potatoes, and keeping a few animals -- and on the coast by scavenging for shellfish and collecting seaweed to sell to passing boats. They had enough contact with greater Chile to see themselves at times as heroic nation-builders. But in truth they lived here because they had no choice. Even after three generations they still hated this place for its rot, its moss, its fallen trees, and its winters of incessant rain, when they had to get drunk, they said, to keep from going insane. They were like we used to be. They

hated nature.

Tompkins knew about their hatred. The fires today seemed all the worse because they had been allowed to spread onto fragile slopes too steep and denuded to be of use to anyone. From his place in the back of the boat Tompkins pointed to a column of smoke boiling above a ridgeline to the north. Over the roar of the outboard he shouted, "That's a typical stupid guy. He started that burn yesterday. My man goes over there and says, 'Hey, you'd better watch your fire here!' And the guy says no! 'No, nothing's going to happen. This is the way we always do it.' And then he goes to sleep in his little house over there, in the middle of the day, and of course the fire takes right off. Today it's burning up the whole side of the mountain." Tompkins smiled bitterly. "And does anyone care?"

Andrés, the Gonzalo farm manager, wanted to explain. Earlier he had pointed to a school of dolphins, and then to a colony of sea lions along the fjord's rocky shore. At one point he said, "This is the most virgin place in the world, I'm sure of it. They made a study. It's because the woods are so thick. If you go in for a distance, you will know the feeling. There is so much bamboo and underbrush that you can't walk upright, because something will always go into your eyes, so after a week you stand bent over like a prehistoric man. And then when it rains ten days, twenty days, thirty days, there is nothing dry. The humidity is

everywhere. Even if you've got everything in plastic bags, the humidity will get in anyway. I don't know how, but it will do it. So then you start getting crazy. The first thing you start thinking about is Where can I get warmth? How can I make a fire? The fire has to be big, but that's not easy, because everything is wet.

"And then suddenly you've had fifteen days of sun and *puelche,* and this only happens every few years, and so you just go for it. You don't worry about making your land pretty, cleaning it up, maybe saving some trees. You don't worry about whether you really *need* this part of the forest. No. It's the burning season, and burning is in your genes. So you go and put fire to the brush, and you sit down and drink some *maté* and let the world burn."

THE difference from Tompkins's way of living could not then have been clearer. Reñihué first appeared as a gap at the top of the fjord -- a steep-walled valley sweeping down from the wild mountains to the east, cradling a river that pushed a delta into the sea. The valley floor was flat, and about two miles wide. The snow-capped Michimahuida volcano rose beyond it, floating above the haze. Against the scale of that scene our approach was slow. Only at the end could we make out the shore itself, a wide and treeless tidal flat covered with bright salt grass. We threaded past three moored workboats, followed a series of stakes marking the channel, cut the motor,

and drifted in to nose against a gentle embankment. The silence then was absolute, unbroken even by the lapping of water. The hamlet of Reñihué lay on slightly higher ground, just out of sight beyond the first tended pastures, ten minutes by foot up an immaculate gravel trail.

I call Reñihué a hamlet for want of a better word. It was once a pioneering ranch, a slash-and-burn cattle operation that gradually consumed the valley until by the 1980s it had been largely abandoned, leaving a scattering of tenant-settlers and feral cattle to a few miserable cabins and stump-littered fields. Tompkins bought the place -- a 20,000-acre spread at the heart of his future preserve for the price, he told me, of a lousy condominium in San Francisco -- and set about returning the upper valley to its natural state, rounding up all the wild cattle except for one wily cow who hid in the brush. Tompkins moved the settlers out as well, but only from Reñihué's upper valley, and under generous terms: he paid them to dismantle their cabins and haul away their trash, and he offered them permanent jobs in lower Reñihué at the 1,000-acre farm that he would keep for himself once he gave the surrounding land to Chile. Those who took him up on the offer moved to a place very different from anything they could have imagined.

I call it a hamlet because it was more compact than a settlement and more

intimate than a village -- a colony of gray-shingled houses, connected by slatted wooden walkways, set among greenhouses and gardens bursting with vegetables and flowers. Tompkins is a furiously creative man, and he designed it alone, building a place so unexpected on the Chilean frontier that it seemed at times to be a fantasy. But it was more than that. Forty people lived there year-round. At one end stood an elegant schoolhouse, with a big kitchen and a single large classroom on the ground floor, and quarters above for guests and the two teachers. At the other end, among trees, was a dormitory capable of lodging a dozen people. Most of the houses were in between; with spare wooden floors and natural light Tompkins had made of each one an exercise in the aesthetics of simplicity. To the extent possible he had used existing structures and recycled materials, but his work was not a casual thing. His tenants were his employees. He did not charge them rent, but he expected them to remove their shoes indoors, as he did, and to respect the beauty that surrounded them.

He and McDivitt lived in a house at the center, in the semi-privacy of a garden, facing north across the main pathway toward a grass landing strip and a wooden hangar in which two small airplanes were kept. The house was a two-story structure, a remake of the original farmhouse. Its typically uncluttered interior was centered on an open kitchen and illuminated by large

windows looking out onto grass and trees. The cooking was done on an efficient wood-burning stove, which also provided hot running water and, by means of a gravity-siphon system, heated radiators throughout the house. There was no refrigeration, and during the day there was no electric power, here or anywhere in Reñihué. There was no telephone, computer, satellite connection, or fax machine. There was not even a typewriter. There was a ground-floor office with crowded bookshelves. But it was primarily the long, rough-hewn dining table in the main room that served as a desk. Tompkins sat there in profound concentration while he read and answered his correspondence and wrote orders to the staff in fluid longhand. In her matter-of-fact way McDivitt did the same.

Their purpose remained the preservation of the wild forest, but it was the detailed peripheral work of building the farms and communities that had come to consume their time. I had the impression that there were moments when they would have preferred to be alone and far away: during the few hours each night that the Reñihué generator ran, they turned on electric lights and prepared delicate salads and perfect pasta, or lounged on the sofas by the fireplace and listened to opera. But even then they were often interrupted by people coming to discuss the day's residual problems: Two chickens were dead. A cow looked sick. A pipe had burst at a badly

welded seam. A trespasser had been spotted twenty miles away. Oh, and Alfonso was shirking his school-cleaning duties again, while Carolina was going around saying someone took her sweater. This was very specific stuff for a generalist like Tompkins, who managed nonetheless to keep thinking in global terms.

One evening he said to me, "We want people to be able to look over here and see that somehow our little community thrives. When people realize that you're trying to make things thrive, and that if things thrive it will be good for everybody, it's not all that hard to get them interested in what you're doing, you see. We've got the big honeybee project starting up over at Pillán, and we're telling people, 'Hey, if you're interested in bees, come over any time and talk to our beekeepers, and see if they can help you.' People like that. We also try to get involved in areas where the macro-economy is going against people anyway, which is what's happening here with cows. I go to cow auctions now, and I've learned a lot about cows and the market, and what the problems are. So we sit around with the farmers and talk about our cows. I never thought I was going to talk about cows! There are too many cows, and the cows are put in the wrong places. These people are burning up the sides of the mountains, and running their cattle up on rocky terrain, and they're biting into the forest. But if they could learn that there's value in the hills with flowering trees, and they could make

an income between fishing on the coast and making knitwear and finding an outlet for it like the café in Gonzalo, and then they could have bees and honey instead of running cattle up the sides of mountains -- maybe this would be *helpful*. What we're doing here is intimately integrating a social program with an environmental program. I think about this every day, all day, even while I'm working in the fields. How to make our little local community work. It's about the preservation of the agrarian mind."

During another of Tompkins's musings, about Nestlé's dominance in the Chilean milk market, Kris McDivitt smiled and said to me, "Please, wait, just a moment, that's lecture two-eighty-seven-C-three. Remember the file and you won't have to *hear* what he thinks about Nestlé. You'll know it's in there somewhere."

Tompkins said, "She's got them numbered."

She was too sharp to philosophize, and too experienced. It surprised me that such a woman could fall as much in love with an old acquaintance as she clearly had with Tompkins. A Santiagan who knows them both said to me, "Poor lady, I pity her, she has had to put up with a lot." But in Reñihué I got the impression that she puts up with what she chooses to.

One afternoon, while walking with me through the upper pastures, she got annoyed when I called Reñihué a utopia, because she

associated the word with impracticality. She said, "It's a word that completely misses the point of what we're doing here." I understood her to mean that utopias lie beyond her concerns. She never talked to me about Reñihué's purpose. She preferred simply to describe the workings of what she called the community.

Aside from the two Americans, the community at Reñihué included three beekeepers, two gardeners, two teachers, a farm manager, a bulldozer driver, a backhoe driver, a tractor driver, a housekeeper, a boatman, a pilot, a slew of girlfriends, wives, and children, and variable numbers of seasonal farmhands and overnight visitors from other parts of the project. The pay was on the high side of normal for the area. The employees worked six days a week, with Sundays off. They rarely went to town, because town was too far away. They rarely even went to Caleto Gonzalo. Fifteen typewritten pages spelled out the code of conduct. The first section began, "*Honesty*. We hope that all employees will be honest. We will not accept dishonest acts like thefts and lies. There are no grades to dishonesty. Either you lie or you don't lie, either you steal or you don't steal. There is no such thing as partial dishonesty."

There were also rules against drunkenness, drug use, violent behavior, and the possession of firearms. Of course there was no television. Garbage had to be separated and appropriately recycled, burned in the

household stoves, or, if it was organic matter, turned over to the community compost collector. A housing inspector made regular rounds with a checklist, and when necessary ordered the chimneys to be cleaned. There was an emergency plan for lighting the runway's edges with flashlights in case an airplane got caught out after dark.

The list went on. Each employee had the right to graze one cow, to breed it with the Reñihué bull, and to keep the calf for six months. The alternative was to keep five sheep, but this was risky, because of the pumas in the forest. Every family had to buy two chickens and pay a nominal monthly fee toward the chicken operation, in return for which it received six to fifteen eggs a week. In addition, every family received produce from the garden, including lettuce, garlic, squash, peas, beans, cucumbers, tomatoes, and huge numbers of potatoes. The planting and harvesting of the potatoes had become communal events in which even the children got involved. Other communal events included communions and baptisms, religious and national holidays, various celebratory *asados* associated with the farm work, and an annual folk-music weekend that attracted settlers from a hundred miles around.

The most sensitive part of Reñihué was the school, which had seventeen students, in kindergarten through sixth grade. In order to allay suspicions that Tompkins was indoctrinating the children, or running a

cult, the school was strictly maintained as a public institution, checked by government inspectors, and led by a government-salaried teacher who adhered closely to the national standards. Tompkins paid the salary of the second teacher, and discreetly supplemented the classes with offerings of folk music, organic gardening, sports, and (at the parents' request) English. The regulation lunches were quietly "augmented" with fresh milk, whole-grain bread, and vegetables from the garden.

All that, and the ordinary functioning of the far-flung operation, was overseen by McDivitt, who during my stay walked every morning before breakfast to the boatman's house for scheduled radio calls -- to outposts around the fjord, and to Puerto Montt, Chaitén, and beyond. She listened to weather reports, responded to the first of the morning's problems, amended her earlier instructions for the day's work, and began again the regular task of juggling the necessary movements of people, airplanes, and boats. She said she liked the sense of its all coming together. "Caleta, Caleta, Reñihué," she would call. Crammed into a corner under theboatman's stairway, the radio crackled and squealed and often did not respond. "Caleta, Caleta, Reñihué." It was just as well that she did not dream about utopia.

The truth was, since moving to the forest she had become something of a radio buff. In a system parallel to the big fixed-station

units, she had equipped the key people throughout the fjord with hand-held VHF transceivers, which she bought by the dozen from a store in Los Angeles, and which, she believed, had drawn the community closer together by keeping people in touch during the day.

She liked all radios, including the little AM receivers that the employees carried around for listening to soccer games and personal news. When I asked about this, she told me that personal messages were broadcast during the regional news hour, from twelve to one. "'Here is a message for Francisco Pérez in Reñihué: your mother sends her love; she was in Puerto Montt yesterday. Happy birthday Carlos Chamat in Chaitén from your cousin Hector. Make sure you're on the bus tomorrow: your parents will be waiting for you.' It's all done by radio! It's very interesting, when you listen to it. And it's a formal system."

I said, "You know, we have it in the U.S., too, on the border. Some of the *norteño* stations in Mexico broadcast messages."

"Is that right? I really like it. I like everything it implies -- that there are still places where you can't get, where there's no phone, where you can't call, where you can't send a letter."

I said, "There are a lot of places like that. Like here. In the world."

"Fine by me."

Fine by Tompkins, too, I imagined, though he was so caught up in his thinking about global problems that he probably found it hard to appreciate such practical details of daily life. That was the difference between this husband and this wife. It surfaced again one evening during a tussle about the school curriculum. Reñihué had recently been presented with a choice between a new national "rural" curriculum emphasizing carpentry and manual skills and a "modern" curriculum intended to prepare children for high school -- in this case at one of the boarding schools in Puerto Montt or in a town on Chiloé. Tompkins was pleased with the idea of a rural curriculum, which he took as a vindication of his beliefs. But it was up to the parents to decide on the school's direction, and it seemed likely that they would opt for modernity. McDivitt understood why.

She said, "There's a split, because there are some kids here who will be farmers. But many are going to go on to high school outside, and their parents are concerned that they'll be behind when they hit the urban setting. It's baloney, because the town schools are terrible -- forty-five students in a class, and teachers who are worn out, sort of whipped. But it's also understandable. The parents don't want to worry that somehow they're hanging up their kids. They want their kids to prepare themselves for what they see will be the necessary skills in the future, which are *not* shop and farming and fishing and gardening but

rather ... "

"Computer operating," Tompkins said scornfully.

" ... English, computer operating, and stuff. And they're not wrong, necessarily, in the culture that they see. They're not wrong!"

Tompkins said, "Well, that's another story. I disagree with you about whether they're right or wrong. Because the right or wrong of it depends on what kind of a world you think your children should go into."

"No, Doug. That is not the statement. These parents are rural" -- she hesitated -- "*agricultural* workers. And what they see -- let's take Magali and Vincente specifically, then we can take Juan and Amalia separately. They think that to prepare their kids . . ."

"I know," Tompkins interrupted. "But when you say they're not wrong, what do you mean they're not wrong about?"

She spoke emphatically. "In the culture that they are encouraging their kids to move *toward,* and that they hope their kids will participate *in*, those are the skills that people are looking for. In that sense I'm not wrong."

"I'll tell you where you're wrong. They want the best for their kids, agreed?"

"They do."

"Now, you have to find out what's best for their kids! I don't agree that they're right from their point of view, because I don't think they've got the point of view right."

"You're taking it to the second step. I'm taking it to the first."

They were dancing, turning around each other, not needing to agree. He was an authentic missionary, and she was his necessarily practical wife. A century ago they would have struggled like this for the conversion of Africa. I had the impression I was watching a modern version of an old theater piece. The script required McDivitt to grow silent after a while. Tompkins began to talk about the burning of the Black Sea.

Continued...

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William Langewiesche is a correspondent for *The Atlantic* and the author of *Inside the Sky: A Meditation on Flight* (1998).

Top illustration by Kevin Soderlund. Photographs by William Langewiesche.

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JUNE 1999

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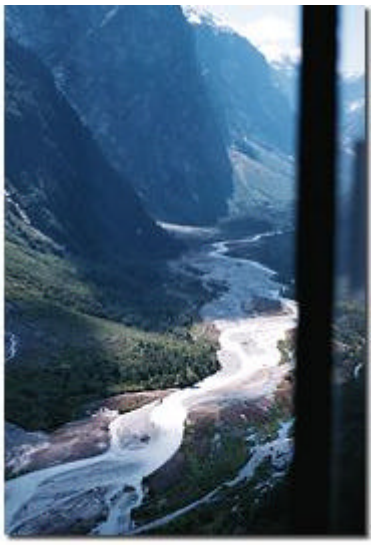
HERE in the Chilean forest the fires had ended. A rain fell on Reñihué in heavy sheets that deepened the night. The generator switched off on schedule, at 11:30. I went outside with a flashlight and walked up the trail toward the upper pastures, feeling as alone and exposed to the weather as any animal in a storm. Tompkins would have understood that walk. A Chilean who had known him for years had said to me, "He had such an easy life, traveling the world in pursuit of beauty, that he started to think of everything in those terms -- started to think that the whole world can be beautiful, or that it should be." But Tompkins described a different start -- a mountain climber's pursuit not of extravagant beauty but of just the sort of primordial darkness that surrounded me now. He said, "I'd go back somewhere, and I'd be hanging off the wall in my hammock and I'd look out and suddenly I'd see lights I'd never seen before: shit, they'd built something here, too. This went on for years. I saw the wilderness disappearing."

He saw the darkness disappearing. In public

he insisted that his goals were limited to creating Parque Pumalín -- the nicest national park in Chile -- but in private his thoughts were grim and determinedly apocalyptic. He was convinced that a global collapse was already well under way -- a catastrophic unraveling that was so much a part of our time that people had trouble recognizing it. His own employees wanted to turn their kids into computer operators. Tompkins was fighting here at the end of the world for nothing less than the last perfect nights.

He was not exactly a survivalist. He assumed that he and his grown children in California would share the fate of society. But he understood Parque Pumalín in a desperate, post-apocalyptic way, as a place that might demonstrate to future generations what the earth had lost, along with, perhaps, holding the seeds for what it might be again.

I saw the park through his eyes in the morning, when we went for a flight in a tandem-seat Husky -- a small bush airplane, which Tompkins flew at extremely low altitudes -- away from the tourist facilities at Gonzalo, away from the demonstration farms



Glacial runoff, linking the Andes and the sea

on the Reñihué fjord, past the scorched mountainside of that "stupid guy" to the north, and on into the wild and untouched core. Tompkins was an excellent pilot, with a fluid backcountry style. We flew lower than the forest top up violent rivers and over gravel banks and boulders, and then climbed the sides of V-shaped valleys past soaring condors and precarious stands of trees, and squeezed through barren passes, and wandered in high mountain air among the snowy peaks and the rock-soiled glaciers of the Argentine border.

Across the far northern border of the property we descended into a forested valley where a family of settlers stood in a clearing and waved. They lived in a cluster of cabins by a split-rail corral, three days upriver by horse from the nearest boat landing. Tompkins was giving them money and technical assistance to improve their farm. His purpose was to keep them off the preserve and to sustain them here against the incursions of other settlers who, like agents of the apocalypse, were filtering into the valley below. They served as his sentinels. He was paying them to build a runway in one of their pastures. Their greeting pleased him.

We ranged again through the park, and came eventually to its upper coast, which we followed south toward Reñihué, past strings of settlers' cabins along the gravel beaches. Tompkins knew the people here by name, and had reached agreements --

however expensive -- with most of them. He suggested in his ironic way that the price was right if it meant that somehow the wilderness might yet survive. But a problem remained, and it was a big one. He gestured toward a cluster of cabins by the mouth of a river, and to the valleys and mountains that lay beyond.

Douglas Tompkins at the controls of his Husky

This land was called Huinay, an inholding of 125 square miles that belonged to the Catholic University of Valparaíso and sliced through the wildest part of Tompkins's land, dividing Parque Pumalín in two. Huinay contained a fortune in unexploited forests, and possibly also in hydroelectric power and minerals; though it was still wild, it was unlikely to remain so if it fell into the wrong hands. Moreover, because of Huinay's potential to disrupt the watersheds and divide the preserve into biologically undersized units, Tompkins believed that any development there would weaken or even kill the entire project. It was crucial, he said, that he acquire Huinay.

He came close in 1997, agreeing with the university on a price of $2 million, but the deal was blocked by his opponents in Santiago, who claimed that they were in part concerned about the fate of the Huinay settlers, and who indeed probably were.

They disliked Tompkins in principle as well as in practice, and wanted Huinay to represent the Chilean wilderness as they saw it, not as he did. Backed by the U.S. embassy (which made noises about free trade), Tompkins argued that his rights had been trampled. The Chilean President intervened and the government imposed a cooling-off period of one year, during which Tompkins was to make no major purchases. Tompkins quietly promised the university that he would beat any serious offers that were made during that time. He had faith in the power of his money. But now, not quite a year later, it seemed that perhaps he had misjudged. *Qué Pasa* had again run his face on its cover, and in the story inside had attacked him over the standoff on Huinay. Something new was afoot. As we flew overhead, Tompkins admitted that he was worried.

Word came by radio to Reñihué that same afternoon, and it was worse than he had feared. McDivitt was the first to hear. She walked into the house looking angry, and handed Tompkins a note. He read it, glanced at her, and passed it on to me. The deal was done: Huinay had just been sold for about $2 million -- to Endesa, a voracious Chilean energy company that had recently been thwarted on a major dam-building project by environmentalist groups funded in part by Tompkins. The symbolism of Endesa's move was immediately clear. This was a neatly reciprocative attack. Tompkins had split

Chile's territory, and now Chile had returned to split his preserve. Tompkins had fought to protect the darkness of the Patagonian night, and the people chosen to fight him back were precisely the bringers of light. They did not need to dam up the rivers of Huinay to achieve their purpose. In fact it was better that they did not try: the mere possibility of such hydroelectric projects could diminish Tompkins's plans in his own mind for the rest of his life. I did not expect Tompkins to appreciate the perfection of the attack. I asked him what he thought. He smiled grimly and said, "We'll have to see if this is real." He had the calm of a man with a knife in his gut. He did not feel the pain yet because he was in shock.

The End of Darkness

TOMPKINS had a smart attorney in Santiago, an influential conservative named Pedro Pablo Gutiérrez, who disagreed with his politics but worried about Chile's. Soon after the fall of Huinay, Gutiérrez told me, "We are about to throw away a man simply because we do not share his beliefs. This we must not do." He was right, of course. He also said, "Tompkins is not a bad man, and even his enemies must know it. If anything he has shamed them with his generosity. He is honest, and honorable, and well-intentioned. But, please excuse me, he is also a typical innocent gringo." He was right about that, too.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, Tompkins kept insisting that people

everywhere are the same. Depending on his mood, this could be a bad or a good thing. On the one hand, he worried about the "monoculturing of the world." On the other hand, he was persuaded that reasonable Chileans would come around to his ways. That conviction made their apathy -- or glee -- after Endesa's acquisition of Huinay all the more perplexing. For a few days he held out hope for a student strike at the Catholic University of Valparaíso, but unfortunately for Tompkins nothing of significance occurred. The students were busy with their studies.

In the final analysis, the opposition to Parque Pumalín seemed to be a mystery to Tompkins. He could shrug off the attacks of the ultranationalists, the little fascist groups that had put up threatening TOMPKINS OUT OF CHILE! posters in Puerto Montt. He could puzzle out the politics of power in Santiago. He could see through the greed of the various commercial interests. No doubt after a while he would be able again to eye Endesa evenly. But he could not understand the deepest of all the problems that he faced here -- the widespread Chilean discomfort with the way he had treated the local settlers. These were the very people with whom he believed he had been most fair. He recalled every detail of his dealings with them, and was very sure of his position. He retained his sense of irony, and never whined. Nonetheless, even before the fall of Huinay there had been a certain tone of bewilderment and hurt in his stories.

It lay just beneath the surface, for instance, of a story he told me of a patrol he had made with his boatman, Juan, up the preserve's northern coast, during which they had spotted a wooden fishing boat nestled against the shore by a tree that had been cut down. "Right on our property!" Tompkins said. "We get out our little binoculars, and my God, these guys are there in broad daylight with their axes. The tree is already down, and the crown has fallen in the water, and the rest of it is on shore, and there they are, chopping away, shaping this thing. Jeez, we steam up there, and Juan is outraged, so I figure I'll stay back and let him deal with it. Juan doesn't like to trifle with these guys. So he goes over and says, 'You're on private land. This tree doesn't belong to you. You're stealing it. So you'd better get out of here!'

"The other guy's a fisherman. Juan gets his name, and the boat's name and identity number, and so forth. The fisherman's from sixty miles away, across the gulf. He says, 'What do I do with the tree?'

"Juan says, 'What the hell do you mean?'

"'Well, it's already cut down.'

"'Are you joking? You can't take that tree! *Forget* that tree! Get the hell out of here!'

"So Juan and I go on inside the little fjord there to see what else is going on, because at the time another guy was renting a little piece of land there, and what do we find?

He's in there shooting birds! He's got a shotgun! We go up to him and say, 'Hey, you can't shoot these birds! It's illegal to shoot wild birds in Chile!' So we got *that* sorted out, and now we're steaming around the inner fjord, and all of a sudden we see the fisherman's boat coming toward us.

"I say, 'Well, here he comes, Juan. What's he gonna ask?'

"'He's gonna ask for the tree.'

"Sure enough! We slow down, the guy jumps out of his boat, he gets in his little rowboat, he rows over to us, he climbs up onto our boat, he throws out his hand, shakes hands with me. I say, 'You know you cut that tree on our land.'

"'Oh, I know,' he says. He's got his hat in his hands. 'I didn't think the land was owned by anybody.'

"'Not *owned*?'

"'I thought it was government land.'

"'Fine, but you're not allowed to cut down government trees either.'

"'Well ... '

"So I say, 'You know, I gotta tell you, we own a lot of land here. It goes all the way down the Comau fjord and almost to Chaitén.' I say, 'You know, the native forests of Chile are disappearing at an ever faster rate, and, ah, we're kind of in the

business of saving the trees.'

"The fisherman's standing there saying, 'Yes, sir, yes, sir,' and he's looking around, and I *know* what he's thinking. He's looking around, and everywhere he can *see* it's solid trees! And he's thinking, 'If you ask me, this guy's crazy. He's got five hundred million trees here, and he's hassling me about this one tree I need.'"

They negotiated. It was not just any tree the fisherman had cut down but one with a curved trunk that could be made into a replacement sternpost for his boat. Tompkins asked him how much it would have cost him at his local boatyard. The fisherman tried 7,000 pesos, about twenty dollars, and when Tompkins laughed, he immediately doubled the figure, which was still too low.

"I say, 'Well, how much money do you have on you?'

"'None, señor. I came over here without a peso in my pocket.'

"'Is that right? What do you do?'

"'I'm a fisherman.'

"'Well, then, you got any fish?'

"'No, no, we haven't fished at all. We just came over here to get this tree.'

"'Oh, well, geez, you don't have fish, you don't have money -- I mean, what can we do

here? How can we settle the score?'

"'But the tree's already down. And we've been working on it all day.'

"It's like he's got squatter's rights to it. I say, 'You know, you're lucky. We've got a caretaker up here, and Jesus, if he'd caught you and we didn't happen to come along -- I mean, that guy's tough. He's under orders to take no prisoners.'

"'Oh, yeah.'

"I'm kind of joking with him in a way, but he's not sure exactly how much. I say, 'But you're lucky you ran into a gringo. We're a little easier.'

"'Yes, *sir*!' he says. 'Yes, *sir*!'"

Tompkins finally gave the fisherman his sternpost in return for a promise to tell his friends about the new deal in Palena -- never again come to this forest to spoil a tree. When he told me the story, it still amused him. But I understood now that in some ways it upset him, too. He saw the sale of Huinay as an undeserved attack. Despite what his enemies were saying, he believed absolutely in his own goodness.

Continued...

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William Langewiesche is a correspondent for *The Atlantic* and the author of *Inside the Sky: A Meditation on Flight* (1998).

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JUNE 1999

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OF course, the fisherman was merely a transient woodcutter. A greater challenge had been posed by the permanent settlers, most of whom were squatters. Although Chilean law in theory allowed them to acquire their land, few of them had bothered with the required paperwork. Why should they have? They respected one another's homesteads, and cut wood and grazed their cattle where they pleased. They hated nature because there was so much of it to go around. Five hundred million trees? The forest was big enough for everyone until Tompkins came and took it away.

He was friendly while he did it. He offered to buy any small properties that the settlers were willing to sell, whether they held those properties informally or by law. In the cases where people lived on land that was already his, he offered to buy their "improvements." And because he paid well, some settlers did sell out and, thanking their good fortune, bought houses in town or simply drifted on. But many settlers chose stubbornly to stay, and that is how the complications began.

The hamlet at Reñihué, the heart of Tompkins's wilderness domain

At the start there were abuses by Tompkins's men, who bullied the holdouts by exploiting their legal uncertainties and threatening to expropriate their land. When Tompkins found out, he fired the offenders and set to work, case by case and at great expense, to repair the damage. But there was another kind of bullying going on, which Tompkins was less able to stop. It was his own presence in the neighborhood, his intention to buy land, the mere proximity of his wealth. His money was a fright. The settlers started scrambling to secure clear titles, only to discover that the legal process was more difficult than they had thought -- that it required documents they lacked and advice they could not afford, and that for technical reasons some might have no claim to the land at all. It was their own fault, of course, but they were right to blame Tompkins, too. He was a good man who was doing them wrong.

In typical fashion, Tompkins responded to the problem directly by launching a team of property specialists whose job was to roam the forest and help the settlers to secure their titles. By the time Iarrived, the project had grown to involve dozens of claims and official surveys. Where ambiguities existed along the preserve's boundaries, Tompkins was ceding strips of land to his neighbors in order to avoid any quarrels. And in at least one case he had simply given away a piece of land in order to help a family. His purpose, of course, was to settle the settlers. But he also believed in the principles here -- that the clear delineation of property was in everyone's interest, and that the settlers must be given the full protection of Chilean law. This left the settlers with the problem of having no obvious reason to disagree with him. While Tompkins had gone about earnestly respecting their rights, they sensed that he was hemming them in, and they resented it. Despite the fall of Huinay, Tompkins believed he would continue to win over at least these local people, and that ultimately this would save the project. But they were aware of Endesa's victory, and it had encouraged them. They were small people, but their resistance to Tompkins had quietly grown stronger.

I got a ride up the coast in a wooden cargo boat operated by a man named Lolo Méndez, who did business with Tompkins and thought of him as a friend. He was angry about the upsurge in the settlers' opposition, which he saw as the betrayal of

an honorable man. He said, "Now it's even those who work at Reñihué! The moment they leave, they turn against him."

"Why, do you think?"

Lolo Méndez spat derisively. "Why?" He used the characterization that Tompkins tended to use. He said, "Because they are stupid people -- you will see."

On the remote coast beyond Caleta Gonzalo I met two brothers so ornery that they had to beat off their own dogs with sticks. They lived in a clearing in primitive cabins, on land that backed onto the preserve. Tompkins had sent out a surveyor to measure an additional strip of forest for them, but they had pulled up the stakes and thrown them into the sea.

One brother said to me, "I don't believe any man will just give away his land."

I said, "But if Tompkins did, would you still have a problem with him?"

"Yes, still. Tompkins will always be a problem for us. The rich man will always take advantage of the poor."

I walked a mile up the coast and met their neighbor, a mostly toothless woman named Clementina, whose husband had drowned while returning on horseback from filing a claim against Tompkins in Chaitén. Clementina lived with her three grown sons in a cabin above a stone beach. The family

survived by cutting trees on a mountainside deep inside Tompkins's land, in a patch of virgin forest which they insisted belonged to them. They dragged the heavy logs with oxen and chains to the cabin, where they sawed them into rough planks for shipment twice a year to Puerto Montt.

Clementina said, "Tompkins *acts* nice, but I know he's not. He dresses the way we do, but he has to, because he's an *ecologista*. Once he came over here and tried to buy my property. He stood where you are standing, in his wool cap, and he said, 'I can give you a house somewhere.' He waved his hand around, so I figured it would be a shitty house. Plus, he waved his hand toward Chiloé, and I don't want to live on Chiloé. I told him to go away."

I walked away thinking that Lolo Méndez was perhaps right about the intelligence of these people. Certainly there was stupidity in the opposition, especially among the provincial fascist groups, who over the years had propounded any number of theories to explain Tompkins's hidden intent: he was an Israeli agent sent to create a new Jewish state, an Argentine agent sent to acquire a path to the Pacific, a CIA agent sent for God knows what, a drug lord, a lumber lord, an oil lord, a miner, an abortionist, an anarchist, or perhaps the Antichrist himself. This was the stuff of comedy, and it would not have posed a problem for Tompkins except that it had one unexpected consequence: it had

encouraged him to underestimate the validity, and therefore the strength and endurance, of the more serious opposition in Santiago.

His confusion was in part linguistic. In the mid-1990s, as concern about Tompkins's presence deepened and matured, the issue was taken up by senior military officers -- a rigidly traditionalist group of men who, despite civilian rule, remained unapologetically involved in overseeing all aspects of the nation's affairs. Whether this was good or bad is beside the point -- they simply did not share the U.S. military's shyness about such things. And when they discovered that Tompkins had acquired a large part of Palena province in order to block development there, they voiced their objection to him in the language of "strategic interests" and "national security." To Tompkins, this sounded so outlandish that it could be laughed away. He tended already to picture South American soldiers as cartoonish. To me he said, "Hey, if they want to run their tanks through here, I sure can't stop them!" That was true. But he misunderstood the language that they used. As a North American, he thought they were speaking only about war.

In fact they were expressing legitimate civil concerns as well. Tompkins thought he should not get involved in Chilean politics, but with his disproportionate wealth and his development-blocking Parque Pumalín, he inevitably had. Was it outlandish to believe

that he might pose a threat to Chile's future -- if only by Chilean standards, and in one part of the country? Was it outlandish to be concerned that as a perpetual visitor on a tourist visa, he was operating outside the Chilean democratic process? Tompkins was indeed a foreign agent, though less intentionally than the fascists supposed. He represented a nation of such concentrated wealth that one of its worries was the very excess of success. And that nation was not Chile.

In Santiago I mentioned Tompkins's foreignness to a venerable senator named Gabriel Valdés, who is widely respected for his integrity and the imprisonment that he suffered under the Pinochet dictatorship. Valdés said, "We must find a way not to attack him personally, it is true. But that does not mean we must agree to his plans. There must be limits to foreign investment. Look, we are Catholics. Now comes this idea that humanity has to be controlled, that the earth has been overpopulated, that people are the moral equivalents of animals, plants, and even stone. I admit that this philosophy shocks us, our culture, ourselves, *my*self. Its criticism of the Occident is very strong.

"It can be discussed at the university, and it should be, but when you make a link in practice between the theory and a certain person who owns so much of your territory, you must ask yourself, 'What will happen to us now?' This idea does not come from

Norway, as they say, but from the United States, a great power! What is our country compared with that? Look at the map. It is narrow and fragile, and very uncertain. Put yourself in our place. Is it not understandable that we would feel our sovereignty has been threatened? Tompkins says that only *he* will decide how the land is used. But what does he know? We don't want a desert in Palena either. But we will not be shoved aside."

The arguments Gabriel Valdéz made were strong, because they were considered. Tompkins had confused Palena with a human void, when in truth it was a nation's "empty place," not a wilderness but a mystical frontier that was heroic and hopeful, and into which any Chilean could flee, if only in the imagination. In that sense the settlers, however mindlessly, represented a national freedom. And Tompkins, with his global concerns and his reasonings and delineations, represented that freedom's end.

Valdés put it this way: He had a friend in the Department of Forestry who returned from a visit to Reñihué and said, "I was so much impressed, it's true. Everything there was so nice, so perfect, so beautiful. But after a while I realized I was horrified, too. It was so ... *uniform*. It was *overwhelming*. I thought, 'Is *this* how we must be protected against our crazy civilization?'"

Antonio Horvath, a powerful senator from the south, said to me, "Palena is Patagonia,

and Patagonia is a dreamland." Horvath was the settlers' defender, an ex-engineer and road builder with the soul and voice of a poet. He lovingly described a 400-year parade of dreamers in these forests, and he generously included Tompkins in it, although Tompkins was his opponent. He called the parade the search for El Dorado. He said that he himself dreamed of populating Patagonia with a million people -- not, I sensed, because he thought he could, but because the number sounded good. He was a very South American man.

Horvath savored the idea that Tompkins unwittingly had helped him. "Before Douglas Tompkins arrived here, Chile really had no development policy for Palena. The settlers there were neglected. The property lines were uncertain. And the province was slowly losing population -- the young people were leaving the forest for the cities. But Tompkins will have changed all that. By sticking his finger in the wound, he will finally have made Palena a part of Chile."

He was glad that Endesa had acquired Huinay, because the company had promised to support a pet project of his there -- an eccentric nation-building scheme that had been under way since 1987, three years before Tompkins's arrival. It consisted of regular visits by a group of idealistic architects who had built a station by the river and were now working with the Huinay settlers to construct a "research"

boat for the symbolic "re-exploration" of the Patagonian coast. These architects were known throughout Chile as the Locos of Valparaíso. They came from the same Catholic University that had betrayed Tompkins, where they inhabited a free "town" of temporary structures whose explicit purpose was to work out the balance between man and nature. Their boatbuilding project in Huinay was part of a larger, long-term effort to undo the brutality of the Spanish Conquest and symbolically to refound America according to a new geographic sensitivity. For forty years the Locos had left Valparaíso and wandered from Tierra del Fuego to the Caribbean Sea, following roughly the pattern of the Southern Cross, erecting small structures and crosses, and performing spontaneous readings and ceremonies whose purpose was the "recolonization" of the continent in purely poetic terms. This sort of thing was of course difficult for North Americans to understand. It is said that when the Locos encountered Tompkins at Huinay, he cut short their explanation with a curt "I don't know anything about poetry." And as a result, they, too, had turned against him.

AFTER the fall of Huinay, Tompkins continued furiously to construct his defenses. His focus now was necessarily on building the demonstration farms -- the second half of his struggle to settle the settlers within the confines of property lines. The future he envisioned involved intelligent little subsistence farms of the sort

one might expect to see in the valleys of coastal Oregon: well-composted, animal-powered, happy-to-barter organic produce, milk, and honeybee operations. To make it even tidier, there was the long-term payoff: if the right formula could be found, the very agents of the preserve's destruction might be converted into its defenders -- a ring of satisfied families facing outward to keep the apocalypse at bay. It was classic Tompkins. Parque Pumalín was perhaps not a utopia, but it offered the appeal of a perpetual-motion machine.

But Tompkins had made a crucial mistake. In 1997, having seen the need for the demonstration farms, he had decided to build them in a rush, with an army of men and machinery. The problem this posed was not philosophical but practical: the way he was building his farms had nothing to do with the way the settlers would have to build theirs. Tompkins promised that later, for the actual operation of the farms, no machinery would be needed.

To me he said, "Having some capital, we can afford to invest in making this farm, which would take a family fifty years of blood, sweat, and tears -- we can make it in two years! You know, just *get* one, so we've got something to show that acts as the demonstration point within this small community. We can say, 'Well, look, this is what we learned here. Let's try this.'"

His implication, of course, was that the settlers would forget how the demonstration

farms had been built. But they were among the men doing the work.

I asked one of the original Reñihué farmers about old times, before Tompkins arrived. We sat in his cabin at Pillán, above the main demonstration farm, on a typical day of driving rain. He said, "We had only shovels. In all the years, through all that time, we had only one tractor on this whole fjord."

I said, "When you look at what Tompkins has done here, what do you think?"

He said brightly, "Money came."

"Sure, but do you think he has something to teach people about farming?"

"Oh, yes. He has tractors and bulldozers, so people can learn from that! Look down there -- all those machines!"

I sloshed through the mud and overflowing creeks to the big new barn at Pillán -- the place where the honey will be gathered. The farm manager there was an athletic, black-bearded agronomist with long hair in ringlets and a gold earring. He was a tough, hard worker, used to speaking his mind. He distrusted the word "demonstration," because he had heard too many of the settlers' frank appraisals of the project. He said he wanted to call the farm "experimental," if anything, and to use less equipment, and to bother less with the aesthetics, and to plant the first crops. He was worried about Tompkins. He said he

found it hard to take Tompkins's environmentalism seriously. I assured him that he should. He said if this farm was truly meant to be the preserve's defense, it was going in too fast and too late.

McDivitt had left on a business trip to Los Angeles. I said good-bye to Tompkins with regret. Huinay now stood within his project like a Trojan horse. He had written a bitter public denunciation of his enemies, threatening to take back the promised gift of a park -- which his attorney Gutiérrez had wisely managed to kill before its release. The good that had come out of Huinay was that Tompkins perhaps had a better sense of his opposition. But he rejected the idea that he needed an image cleanup, a public-relations campaign. He preferred to argue the issues. His disagreement with the Chileans was genuine. He remained an absolute idealist.

The opposition, meanwhile, was feeding on itself in reinforcing cycles among the settlers, the governor, and Santiago. The pressure was beginning to cause cracks inside the project. McDivitt might have noticed them; I assumed that Tompkins had not. A sullen rebellion had broken out over at Pillán, where the workers insulted Tompkins when he was not there. The details are not important: they threw the word "stupid" back at him, and laughed about his sense of beauty, and cursed his selfishness for having ploughed over their soccer field -- small things, it's true, but in

an atmosphere that had gone wrong. Rather than preparing to learn from this farm, they were mentally tearing it down. And even at Reñihué, beneath its beautiful calm façades, a sly resistance had sprung up. I had seen it here and there in discreet mockery of the rules, the use of boots on clean floors, the late-night whiff of marijuana, the sheen of waste oil dumped into a creek, the small, unexpected looks of defiance, as if people had been caught in a lie.

I left Reñihué in the evening, in a little boat that motored through the rain to Caleta Gonzalo. The rain stopped, and clouds broke open on a trace of dry sky. The ferry landing felt like a half step back to Chile. On a mound of landscaped ground above the concrete ramp, a tall wooden flagpole stood bare. I knew the story. The pole was made from the straight trunk of a tree. Tompkins had erected it as a gesture of his good will, but then the governor had forbidden him to fly the national flag there. "It's not a matter of putting our flag just anywhere," the governor had said. "There are places where the flag should not be."

I sat at the base of the flagpole and watched the coming of night. A north wind stirred the fjord, and entered the forest, and died there among the trees. The governor was, after all, a man of power. It was unlikely that Tompkins would ever leave, but over time the terms of his possession would have to change. His wealth would protect him from the need ever quite to face failure. But

for the settlers who came by boat to Gonzalo and took the road to Chaitén, the flagpole, if it was still bare, would stand for the opposition to a stranger's presence. Travelers might admire the trappings of Tompkins's park. But the symbolism would be obvious to those who counted: a single perfectly shorn tree calling for a renewed assault on the forest -- if not immediately, then someday. The forest might survive if other Chileans came to disagree. But it hardly mattered whether Tompkins planned it that way.

The online version of this article appears in four parts. Click here to go to parts one, two, and three.

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