

## **Private Land Ownership as a Means of Rainforest Protection:**

*Conflict Over Parque Pumalin in Chile*

Jared Margolis, 2001

This paper was prepared as part of a seminar on Environmental Conflict Resolution, led by Dr. Saleem H. Ali ([saleem@alum.mit.edu](mailto:saleem@alum.mit.edu))  
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### **Introduction**

The rapid loss of South American rainforest within the past two decades has spawned a plethora of organizations and conservation minded millionaires to buy up large amounts of wild lands for preservation. Due to groups such as [BuyTheRainforest.net](#) and individuals like fashion industry tycoon and philanthropist Doug Tompkins, millions of acres have been saved through private and NGO holdings. This paper will focus on the conflict that arises between these private land holdings (Specifically Parque Pumalin located in central Chile) and the local people, as well as national governments in the rainforest regions.

I am studying this topic in order to analyze and determine the effectiveness of private landholdings as a means of rainforest preservation. Why do governments in South America feel threatened by foreign private landowners interested in preservation? How can the conflict that arises from private land holdings be mitigated through economic development? What are the opportunities for land preservation, and is private

ownership creating too much conflict to be effective? These questions are important in determining the course of effective preservation efforts in South America. Through understanding the dynamics and political theology behind this conflict, we can decide how to establish a better relationship between private landowners and government, and work to preserve land more effectively.

The Parque Pumalin project, a 700,000-acre park established by Doug Tompkins in Chile, is the perfect case study for this topic. This case will allow me to study the relationship that exists between a private reserve and the Chilean government, which denounced Tompkins as a mad man when he attempted to give the reserve to the government as a National Park. This project came under incredible governmental scrutiny because of how the preserved land has effected local economies, the people in the region of Pumalin, and regional geography. I want to find out why the Chilean government sees Tompkins as a threat, and how he was able to mitigate that through economic development and public support. I want to analyze how this approach to preservation can be applied to the topic of land conservation in general, and what this example means to large conservation organizations and private parties interested in working with South American governments to preserve land.

### **Doug Tompkins and Parque Pumalin**

Philanthropist, outdoorsman, and millionaire Doug Tompkins made his fortune as the “Image Director” of Esprit de Corp. a women’s clothing company based in San Francisco. “Image Director”, a self appointed title taking the place of CEO, does not quite describe Doug’s role as the co-founder of Esprit with his wife Suzy. (Hamilton, 2)

It was here that Doug would make his millions, and upon leaving Esprit he decided to put his money to use by creating the Foundation for Deep Ecology, a preservation and environmental science foundation that sponsors research and works to preserve the natural world. FDE has a \$34 million in assets, and dispenses around \$2.5 million in grants per year. (Henwood, 4)

As an accomplished white water kayaker and mountain climber, Doug developed a deep love for the outdoors. After dropping out of high school, Doug spent a good amount of time traveling, especially to one of his favorite regions – Chilean Patagonia. (Langewiesche, 7) After making his fortune, and working within the philanthropist and environmentalist communities, Doug decided that he had the ability to affect serious change, and conserve a large area of land by simply purchasing it. He focused his efforts on what had become the land closest to his heart, deep in the rainforest of the Palena Province in Chile.

His intention was to give the land to the Chilean government, but as we shall see the conflict that was created by a foreigner purchasing such a large amount of land made this a difficult process. Still, Doug worked hard to put together a park encompassing a thousand square miles of land which Darwin described as a green desert; a remote, pristine, and very inaccessible mountain and forest region. (Hamilton, 2)

The Palena Province sits at the northern most edge of the region known as Patagonia. An extremely wet and dense forest region, this sizable piece of the rare temperate rainforest (colder and denser even than tropical rainforest) is home to one of the most diverse collections of species of any ecosystem on earth. (Hamilton, 1) It is also

the home to many settlers, who have made their living by slashing and burning forest areas for timber extraction, agriculture and grazing. (Langewiesche, 4)

Parque Pumalin encompasses almost 20% of the Palena province. The original 20,000-acre spread, on which Doug built his current house, was bought for about the price of a condominium in San Francisco. (Langewiesche, 9) The rest of the 700,000-acre park took many years to accumulate, and came with a price tag of fifteen million dollars. (Hamilton, 1) While most of the park is inaccessible due to the dense forest and steep slopes, the eco-tourist complex “Caleta” greets visitors on the southern shore of the Renihue Fjord.



Caleta, as we will see later, has become very important in the struggle to gain acceptance from both the local community, as well as international interest in the park. With a restaurant, information center, organic farm, trails, lodges, and camping grounds, Caleta is a center for jobs and economic growth in the region. In fact, Parque Pumalin is the largest employer in the region, with over 150 personnel working within the visitor center, farms, and in managing the thousand square miles of parkland. (Langman, 3)

Tompkins has brought more to the region than just jobs. He has created a school, which is overseen by the Chilean government (in order to avoid claims of his trying to brainwash the children with American ideals), as well as infrastructure such as boats and roads. (Langewiesche, 10) He has re-built farms, helped with land claims, and personally worked to establish what he hopes will be a jewel that will exist in perpetuity.

### **The Conflict**

The controversy that arose from the purchase and management of Parque Pumalin as a sanctuary took many forms. From local to national, spatial, moral, economic and political issues were all present within this conflict. Many of these were legitimate concerns on the part of the Chilean government. Many of the claims that the Chilean government made within the media, however, were not only blown out of proportion they were outright lies.

The basis for the attack on Doug Tompkins was many-fold, and as we will see somewhat legitimate. First of all, the size of the reserve and the fact that Doug Tompkins is an American created controversy concerning foreign control of natural resources. This economic concern is legitimate, as the reserve will in fact limit the current form of “growth” that Chile is experiencing; frontier expansion for the exploitation of timber, agricultural, and mining resources. (Langewiesche, 14)

Adriana Delpiano, Chile’s Minister of National Properties, summed up the Chilean government’s view. “Chile does not want to be told what to do with its land. Chile already has 2.5 million acres of National Parks, and we don’t need any more. Tompkins owns 50% of Palena Province, land that could be used for development.”

(Langman, 2) She goes on to discuss a law that the government is considering to limit the amount of land foreigners can buy. In this case, as we will see in many instances of media coverage on this subject, the government officials were not telling the entire truth. Doug Tompkins admits that he is the primary landowner in the province, but that he owns only 19% of the province, much of which is undevelopable high mountains. (Hamilton, 1)

Besides the economic concerns associated with keeping Parque Pumalin in suspension from development, there exist economic issues involving taxes and exemptions. Tompkins land holdings are in fact controlled by his California based Foundation for Deep Ecology, which allows for tax exemptions on his Chilean property. (Oyarzun, 1) The Chilean press attacked him on many occasions, claiming “The most curious thing is that while the Chilean government has given Tompkins a number of exemptions, including taxes, this North American millionaire, despite being only a tourist, takes the luxury of belonging to groups that cause millions of dollars in losses for Chilean companies.” (Oyarzun (in La Tercera), 2)

The second issue of concern to the National Government is the fact that Parque Pumalin actually splits Chile in two, as it stretches from the Pacific Ocean to the border of Argentina. This has created possible National Security concerns, and has played a major role in the backlash that has occurred in the media and on the part of the government.

Parque Pumalin experienced this backlash from the Chilean government and a private university when a sizable piece of land within the parks borders, which was owned by a university in Valaipariso, was sold to a Chilean energy company, Endesa, for

exploitation. (La Nacion - 3 Jul 97, 1) This is the point at which the Chilean governments' anti-Tompkins sentiments actually affected Parque Pumalin directly. As we discussed, Parque Pumalin stretches from the coast to the mountains, effectively splitting the country in two. The piece of land in question splits Parque Pumalin in two, and thus having this land belong to an energy concern is the governments way of saying 'cut us in half and we cut you in half,' – not a friendly grounding on which to establish a relationship.

### Doug Tompkins in the News

Doug Tompkins took a good deal of heat from the Chilean government within the national media. Rumors and accusation ran rampant; some of which were directed at his ownership of the land, while others were personal attacks on his ideals. In an attempt to turn the people of Chile against this foreign “invasion”, Parque Pumalin was referred to as a possible nuclear base, that he was planning a Jewish colony, or developing a secret gold mine. (Langman, 1) More realistic accusations were that he was pressuring locals to sell their land, and that he was backing the socialist party in a political chess game. Tompkins says that his phones were tapped, and that his life has been threatened by a group of Chilean Nazis. (El Mercurio – 24 Mar 97, 2)

The most well-targeted attack appeared as an op-ed piece in La Tercera, Chile's most widely circulated newspaper. Columnist Maria Eugenia Oyarzun accuses Tompkins of intentionally trying to harm Chilean enterprise in her article entitled “Headline: Tompkins behind Chilean trade troubles”. (Oyarzun (in La Tercera), 1) Obviously a very specific claim, she goes on to say that there is, “abundant proof that he has acted to

undermine Chilean companies, especially those in the timber and salmon exports”. (Ibid) The only proof given in the article is unconfirmed links between Tompkins and environmental groups, which are fighting to protect forests.

Claims that Tompkins was pressuring local landowners into selling their land are a very sensitive issue for Parque Pumalin. One news article suggests that a local Inter-Ministerial commission analyzing the Tompkins case was finding cause for alarm on this subject. (El Mercurio – 24 Mar 97, 2) If any issue could turn Chile against Tompkins, this was the most likely, because it represents the fear that any nation might have of foreign investors using money to interfere with the daily lives of its people.

This topic obtained an even more heated level when Belisario Velasco, Chile’s minister of the interior made a claim that legal action was actually being sought against Tompkins to stop him from putting pressure on local landowners. (Ibid) Tompkins countered this claim by citing the fact that he is the largest employer in the area, and that he is fully compensating local people who are willing to move off the reserve, even those whose claim to their land is tenuous at best. (Langewiesche, 8) More on this will be discussed later when I analyze the conflict mitigation efforts that Tompkins employed.

Ideological attacks were also a major part of this smear campaign. Christian Democrat Sen. Gabriel Valdes blasted Tompkins in El Mercurio, saying that he was looking into legislation to assure that certain strategic frontier properties remain in State control. “As a Chilean I cannot accept that a foreigner own part of my country from the mountains to the ocean, especially when it is still unclear what he intends to do with it and when the area is a strategically important part of the country,” said Valdes in an interview appearing in El Mercurio. “Chile is not a garden for just a few to play in...



(Tompkins and his followers) believe that humans are just another part of the biosphere, and have no greater attributes than plants and animals. They propose fundamental rights for plants and animals, just as we have fundamental human rights for people. This pantheistic notion has taken hold with many well-off people, who have publications proposing that the size of the human species should be reduced in favor of nature.” (El Mercurio – 20 Mar 97, 1)

This blatant misrepresentation of the tenants of deep ecology implies that Tompkins is not only anti-humans, but that he may be hiding away and plotting means by which to reduce the human species, a threatening concept to the people of Chile.

The ideological attack on Tompkins did not stop with his affinity for natural areas. Political tension became a prominent issue when Tompkins made the mistake of making clear his intention to wait out the Frei presidential term in order to work with a more preservation minded government. The press jumped on this statement and ran stories concerning Tompkins plans to back Socialist party member and Public Works minister Ricardo Lagos as the next presidential candidate. (El Mercurio - 24 Mar 97, 1)

As we can see, Tompkins faced a myriad of opposition, and complex set of conflict issues which needed to be overcome in order to establish Pumalin as a national park. In the following sections I will discuss the means by which these issues were dealt with, and how we can use this case to establish some possible guidelines and tools for the future of rainforest preservation efforts.

### **Conflict Mitigation**

Preserving tropical rainforest is inherently an intrusive endeavor. It requires the “taking” of land from the traditional economic uses, and as we have seen has the potential to anger local people, and the government of the area. As a philanthropist, Doug Tompkins is in an interesting position in regards to how he can mitigate these problems. Having no stockholders to report to, no responsibility to answer to the NGO community, and yet millions of dollars to work with, allows for creativity in the mitigation process. As we will see, the same factors that allow for controversy and conflict can be sources of relief if used properly; and Doug Tompkins is a man who believes not only in preserving rainforest, but also in doing it right.

There are two distinct avenues that Doug Tompkins sought to mitigate the conflict between Parque Pumalin and Chile. Economic tools were utilized to gain both local and national support, while a public relations campaign and continued visitors gave Doug the backing he needed from the international community.

### Economic Incentives

While Tompkins did not concede any economic aspects of his reserve to the Chilean government, he used his money to work with and gain the support of locals in the Palena province. One of the accusations that that Tompkins faced concerned the bullying of locals into giving up their land. In fact, this did occur to some degree, but without Tompkins knowledge. When Tompkins learned of people on his staff having verbal confrontations with local landowners, he set out to do the only thing that could save his project; fire the workers creating the problem, and visit every landowner in the area and work with them to figure out the best course of action. (Langewiesche, 16)

Participation by local landowners is a common form of alternative dispute resolution, and in this scenario is easily undertaken using the most obvious means of persuasion; money. Tompkins bought the locals land, paid to help them move, and even more to haul away garbage. For those people who had no official title to their land, Tompkins did what only a man of his caliber would do – he hired people to go around and help local landowners do the paperwork so that they could have a title to sell to him. He was also more than fair in his payments for land, paying well above average for landholdings, and making sure that the people living within his preserve had a place to move to. (Langewiesche, 9)

In a region such as the Palena Province, borders mean very little, as is exemplified by the large number of squatters that had to be compensated in order to clear the park of settlers. The social situation, which was pitting marginal land exploiters against Tompkins, had the potential to come to a serious head at the park boundaries, which could become contested property. In a brilliant and very generous display of community involvement, Tompkins decided to create what were to be called “demonstration farms” along the park boundary.

Demonstration farms are areas of land along the park boundary that have been re-invigorated, as it were, into useable agricultural land. Using sustainable agriculture methods, and holistic planning, these farms may be able to overcome many of the issues facing agricultural land in rainforest areas – increased runoff and a loss of too many nutrients from the removal of the vegetation. The farms are then given away to local people. Philanthropic community involvement at its best. The farms are restored so that

local people will be able to maintain a healthy way of life, and to create a boundary for the park itself. (John Davis, personal communication)

Tompkins took this one step further, and made the people whom he gave these farms to, Rangers for his park. (Ibid) Who better to have guarding the park than the stakeholders themselves who live along the park boundary, and whose lives have been changed for the better by the park itself? Now there existed an interested group of stakeholders, who cared about the land and wanted to protect it, and who represented a large part of the local population. Tompkins had created a local voice to stand behind him, and all it took was the time to care, the money to make it happen, and the effort to work the land.

Which brings me to another important point. Tompkins himself lives and works at Parque Pumalin. His continued partnership with the local people could only be possible through constant contact and a true effort to show his commitment to what he says he holds dear. This is a very important point, because when one looks at the literature that exists on risk, it is clear that people do not trust what they do not grasp, and the ability to feel safe relies on participation. Doug is not high up on a pedestal preaching to these people. He is too busy clearing stumps from land to create demonstration farms, and visiting locals to discuss their role in what may very well be the Chile's largest and most magnificent National Park.

### International Support

As discussed earlier, Parque Pumalin contains a very well maintained and comfortable visitor center, with trails, lodges and even a restaurant. Caleta has become

not only a center of activity for the community and an entirely new job market, it is also a place for foreigners to come and learn of the struggle to protect this wonderful area. (Langewiesche, 7) This facility has played a very important role by gaining international support. When one looks up Parque Pumalin on the Internet, a stream of visitor articles and comments on its beauty, and the important work that Doug Tompkins has undertaken are found. This has put pressure on the Chilean government to accept Tompkins invitation to have the park become a National entity.

### What Now?

Tompkins is slowly winning the hearts and minds of Chileans. “It is an uphill battle to convince the people and Chilean government that caring for the soil, water, forests, and marine ecology is essential for sustainable development,” he says. (Tompkins, 1) In 1997, after years of bitter conflict, Secretary General of the Government of Chile signed a series of mutual voluntary obligations which will guarantee the creation of the ecological reserve. President Eduardo Frei, and Interior Minister Carlos Figueroa, as well as undersecretary Belisario Velasco, all approved the agreement on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1997. (El Mercurio – 8 Jul 97, 1)

The agreement, while not legally binding, decrees that 270,000 hectares of land will be managed by the Pumalin Foundation as a nature preserve. Should the foundation dissolve, the land would pass into the hands of Austral University (the university which sold land dividing the park to an energy consortium). The board of the foundation will be composed of seven members, four of them nominated by Tompkins, and one each by Austral University, the Chilean Science Academy, and the Bishop of Ancud. One

additional member will be nominated by local residents, and will participate via a rotating, six-month term. (Ibid)

Part of resolving this conflict lies within the make up of the agreement itself. While the foundation members encompass all of the interested parties, thus resolving many participation related matters, it is the further economic concessions that Tompkins made to satisfy the Chilean government which silenced opposition from groups such as Endesa, the Chilean power company. The agreement requires Tompkins to facilitate the execution of infrastructure construction and maintenance within the territory, and the installation of power lines, and fishing, aquaculture, and mining activities in coastal and contiguous park areas. (Ibid)

## **Conclusions**

From this case study we can see that there exist a variety of benefits as well as a myriad of hindrances that occur from private individual efforts to preserve rainforest areas. Hopefully by laying these out, and discussing the potential for possible mitigation efforts, we can make assumptions about the possible future and effectiveness of this means of preservation.

## **Benefits**

Doug Tompkins is in an unusual position. The economic means at his disposal are quite large, and his moral fiber is such that he is one of the few individuals who is willing to selflessly use his money for ecosystem protection. He asks very little in return – only

that the land be held in perpetuity for the benefit of its natural inherent right to exist, and the ecosystem services it provides.

Being unrelated to any organization that depends on public funds, and thus must answer to “stockholders” as they might be referred to as, Doug is free to use his money as he sees fit. Buying land is only one of the aspects of how this money can be utilized, and other projects undertaken in Australia and Brazil have had issues concerning the use of funds for ADR, when the money is donated or comes from public funds. (Dettmann, 6; Curtis, 4; Alston, 10) Providing services to landowners, such as helping them with title claims, is an expense that is easier to fund when the money is not attached to a board of trustees that must decide on what the most effective use of funds may be.

The relationship that Doug has developed over many years with the local people in Palena is an invaluable aspect of the Pumalin project. It was through his personal interaction that he learned of the possibility of developing the farms that I discussed surrounding his reserve. Working with the locals, listening to their needs, and in the end being there to actually do the work creates a bond that simply purchasing the land could never come by. Trust is something earned, and while certain NGO’s have the international influence and legitimacy to gain the trust of governments, the locals need that personal touch that only someone in Tompkins position can provide.

The final benefit, and what may even be considered a means of conflict mitigation, is that Tompkins was able to withstand the attacks by the media and local government by simply ignoring them. In a situation that had the possibility to explode, Tompkins was able to keep his cool, and thus not be brought into the fray. This may not be possible in many situations where larger groups are involved. NGO’s and the people

they rely on for funding would be much more hindered by the coverage and National response that Pumalin endured. Tompkins knew he was doing something good, and thus was able to sit back and have patience on his side.

### Hindrances

While the economic potential of individual land ownership and the possibility of involvement in the community makes private preservation efforts desirable, there are many obstacles that only time (and a bit of PR work) can overcome. These include distrust on the part of both locals and national government, and backlash in the media as well as in legislature.

The media barrage that Tompkins endured would never have occurred had his efforts been undertaken by a “reputable” NGO. Accusations against his person seriously undermined any support that Chilean people may have lent to the project on simply ecological or moral grounds. Likewise, it allowed the government and the media to make claims concerning foreign owned land rights, and economic liability.

While the size and nature of this project distinguish it from most other preservation efforts, the fact remains that other projects throughout the world have never received the media attention and international concern that Pumalin faced. Maybe it is because of the sheer size of the project, or the fact that it is a foreigner splitting their country in two, but it seems to have created controversy like no other project of this sort. While the effort overcame these odds, it is a lesson that all others working within the preservation field must look to in order to achieve effective solutions.



## **Implications**

This case study has introduced several implications for the future of preservation efforts. Both private land purchasers, as well as NGO's interested in preservation can glean lessons from the conflict that arose in Chile. From community participation efforts to public involvement, Parque Pumalin succeeded because Doug Tompkins took the time to make it happen, and in doing so he laid the groundwork for others.

The first lesson, and one that is an integral part of Alternative Conflict Resolution theory, is community participation. The creation of jobs and the addition of infrastructure mean little if the local population will not benefit in the ways they necessitate. The creation of the demonstration farms provided the local community with what they needed, by creating viable land to pursue what many of them had been doing in the region, however in a very unsustainable manner; farming.

Giving the local community what they need (schools, infrastructure, etc...) will only appease them. Getting them to believe in the project, and defend it even against outside or government attack is much harder. Providing the people in Palena with services such as helping them gain title to their land, as well as giving them the farmland and having them participate as park rangers, are tools that were utilized in this case to gain local support. Other agencies or individuals should look to this as going beyond compensation – it is only through the support that Doug engendered that this project was made possible.

Studies concerning land management and protection in Norway have come to similar conclusions concerning local participation. “Public involvement is a complex concept, and embraces very different tasks,” says Bjorn Kaltenborn, “ranging from

simply letting people voice their concerns to actually distributing power and authority. It generally requires some leadership from professionals with diverse skills, more than average support from the political system, and it tends to be quite resource intensive.” (Kaltenborn, 3) I would argue that in the case of Pumalin, where political support was non-existent, the leadership involvement and resources that Tompkins brought to the project were the key to gaining public support.

The next lesson is the personal touch that Tompkins gave this project. NGO’s and philanthropists who are not able to themselves be a part of the area being preserved should think about a Peace Corps type program, which would allow individuals to work with the community on behalf of the project. This allows for any political problems to be nipped in the bud, because people working as “mediators” would be able to address any issues that arise.

Such a program would also allow for outside assistance in the building of infrastructure which as we saw in this case, became one of the important points the government insisted on in order to reach an agreement with Tompkins over Pumalin. Developing infrastructure in the area allows for claims that the preservation effort will halt economic growth to be overcome.

Another important aspect of this is the creation of, however limited, visitor areas and eco-tourism. Eco-tourism has been shown to be an important economic commodity to rainforest regions, and thus careful planning can create revenue from visitation, without harming the environment. It was also seen to create an international support network that backed Doug Tompkins, and added legitimacy to the project. I would recommend that other philanthropists look to this as an important option, however

NGO's may not be able to overcome the criticism they would receive from donators over the use of these regions as "playgrounds" in nature. While I understand this argument, I think that this case study has shown the value of visitation, and the money and support it brings into this type of project.

People like Doug Tompkins, and NGO's working in this field, are attempting to preserve something that they hold dear. The means by which to do this are not clear cut, and as we have seen in this case, can often make private ownership as a means of preservation a difficult endeavor. By taking a step back and looking at this case as a hard fought, and thus lesson ridden, battle which eventually reached a successful end we have learned some valuable tools which I feel can be applied to any preservation effort. We must learn to work with, and not against local communities and national governments so that rainforest areas can be effectively managed, and economic and ecological interests maintained. Doug Tompkins is a man to look up to, and his efforts are an important step on the road to continued preservation and philanthropic, community based work.

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