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EDEN: A Gated Community



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*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 peopleby [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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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."

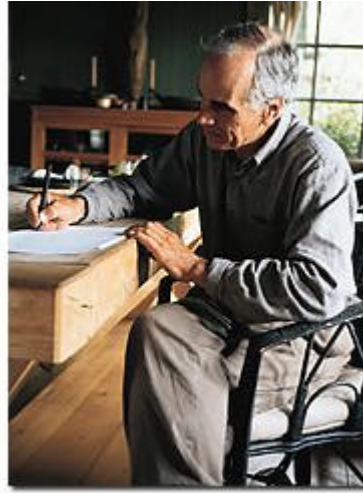
THE story is full of ironies. Tompkins started his career by dropping out of high school in upstate New York and going off to climb mountains. When he was still very young, he moved to San Francisco, where he founded and then sold the North Face climbing-equipment company. He is rich because he then 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.

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



Douglas Tompkins at his home in Reñihué

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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