

# ICWA LETTERS

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THE AMERICAS

*Peter Keller is a Forest & Society Fellow of the Institute, studying and writing about national and private parks in Chile and Argentina.*

## The Futaleufú River Still Dam-Free and Wild in Chile

By Peter Keller

JANUARY 6, 2001

FUTALEUFÚ, Chile —What's the message? Save the river from hydro-projects! What's the controversy? Nothing imminent. So, what's the deal? Just the sheer thought of damned dams activates a congregation of adrenalin-seeking river rats.

If you are like most newsletter readers, you are probably reading this in bed. Hopefully you are relaxed, but for a moment think of an activity that scares you most. Maybe it is giving a speech, driving in large cities, skiing steep terrain or rafting through thundering rapids – all of which happen to frighten me. Nevertheless, for some reason I keep returning to rapids, even after I tell myself this was the last time. But then somehow, I find myself back in a boat – pushing the envelope once again.

In my third newsletter I talked about a controversy surrounding a phantom proposal to build a hydroelectric project on the Futaleufú River. After researching water rights and conducting several interviews, I came to the conclusion that no hydro-projects were slated for the river's development — at least in Chile. To make sure, I made a call recently to Endesa, the largest energy company in Chile. Their public relations office reiterated the same word, as before — they have no plans to develop hydroelectric projects on the river. However, the possibility still exists, because Endesa holds various water rights along the Futaleufú. When asked why they keep these rights when they have no plans for them, a company spokeswoman gave a predictable answer, "It is better to have these rights now before someone else gets them." Perhaps this is a future investment or at least a shrewd way of blocking any competition.

In that third newsletter, I proposed a follow-up story — a transparent ploy to enable me to raft the river — that more research was needed to understand what the fuss was all about. Thus, this latest journey begins in Argentina, at the Futaleufú headwaters, now just a reservoir where once a free river flowed. I came to see a massive hydroelectric project built in the early 1970's by the Argentinean company, *Hidroeléctrica Futaleufú*. Whereas the Chilean side is still dam-free, the Argentinean side sports an earthen dam and reservoir, plus a Herculean water duct and turbines, all within the Los Alerces National Park. The four-turbine generators produce 418,000 kilowatts of energy and an annual average of 2,700 gigawatts. This is a large amount of energy when compared to energy consumption by the 43,000 residents of Chile's southernmost region, who use only 155 gigawatts annually (energy produced on the Argentine side is destined only for Argentinean communities).

After seeing what environmentalists and whitewater junkies were fighting against in Argentina, I made my way to the Chilean town of Futaleufú with Steve Martin, a college friend who joined me for this once-in-a-lifetime adventure. We prepared for our rafting trip with Bio-Bio Expeditions, a California-based rafting company. This guide-owned company, known for short as Bio-Bio (after a river of the same name in central Chile), organizes trips to some of the wildest rivers in



*The Argentina-based Hidroeléctrica Futaleufú Inc. generator house, where the Futaleufú River now begins its free-flowing state toward Chile and into the Pacific Ocean-*

the world, including the Zambezi in Zimbabwe, the Marsyangdi in Nepal and the Apurimac in Peru.

Our first evening we drove to the Bio Bio camps where they have a kitchen, hot tub, sauna and tent platforms located some 25 kilometers downstream from town on a river bank. We arrived in darkness and parked in a muddy field. Laurence Alvarez-Roos, the camp manager and former U.S. Men's Rafting Team Captain, showed us to our tent platform and told us it had been raining more than usual this summer. As we slipped into our sleeping bags we could hear the river's roar in what he said was a "flat section." Recent rain had caused water levels to rise, increasing the volume of water rushing past us.

We awoke to a light rain and ate breakfast in camp, where our guide Chris Old told us straight out he had never rafted the river at this height. Neither had anyone else. Two other rafting companies offering Futa trips canceled their runs for the day — citing high water as the reason. However, with five years of experience on the Futaleufú, Chris was willing to give it a shot if we were. After hearing all the safety precautions that would be taken, our crew — Steve, James from Scotland and I — decided to give it a go. One element of security was a safety-net posse of five kayakers, easily outnumbering our crew. The safety net included Alex Nicks from England, arguably one of the world's best kayakers. Along with Alex, a quartet of professional kayakers from Peru, Chile and North America would be circling us in case any of us went swimming — unwillingly. This kind of exercise is not advised in rapids

with bottom holes the size of semi-trailers and powerful hydraulics that can keep you under water for tens of seconds that seem like minutes.

Our trip this day was along a section the guides call "bridge to bridge," normally a three-hour float including a lunch break. This day our trip was scheduled for only two hours, with little rest between rapids.

After the post-lunch rest we reached the most challenging rapids of the run, the Class-V Mundoca rapids. For rafting purposes rivers are classified in six different categories, from Class I (flat water) to Class VI (generally non-navigable waterfalls and narrow gorges — although some kayakers attempt the latter and succeed). Since lunch, my arms had felt like Jell-O, as if my paddle were a concrete mixer rather

than a tool to propel us forward. Upstream of Mundoca we paddled to a bank and got out to see what was ahead.

Although it is possible to "read" a section of rapids for the safest route, rivers are still unpredictable and a successful outcome is never a sure thing — especially on a river that has never been rafted at extremely high levels, such as Futa this day. The notion and practice of tempting fate naturally produces an adrenalin rush — but is this thrill worth the risk of a worst-case scenario such as death by drowning? This can happen to those who fall overboard and are held underwater by powerful currents or wedged between rocks. I think we were all pretty nervous looking at these rapids and hearing the roar of 20,000 cubic-feet-per-second of water rushing past us. Although none of us admitted fear, it was apparent, and only accentuated when James rushed off into the woods to relieve himself. "Better on the shore than in your wetsuit," was his comment.

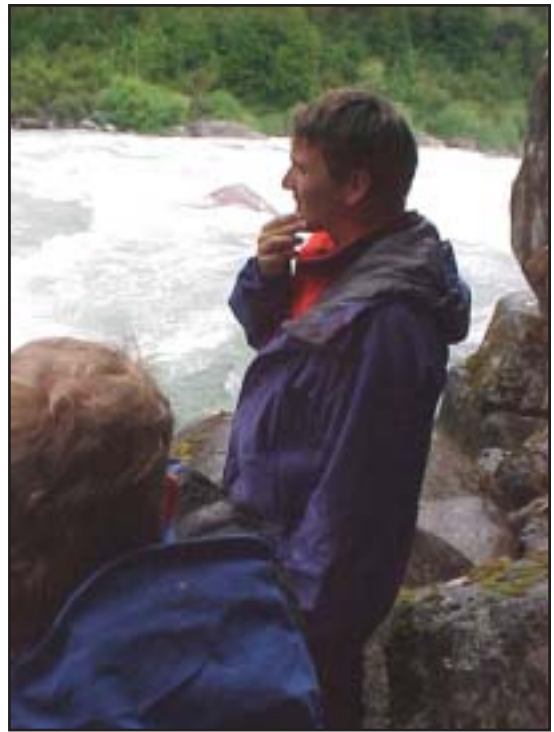
Shooting rapids has long been a part of my life, whether canoeing tributaries of the Mississippi River with my father, summer-long canoe expeditions in Manitoba and Ontario, or rafting on various western U.S. rivers. Nevertheless it still scares me, and before each rapid I wonder why I torture myself. Mundoca pushed me to the limits of self-scaring. As we climbed back in our raft I wedged my left foot under the center tube and my right in a foothold. As an offering to the river gods, or simply superstition, Chris recommended we each scoop up river water with our hands and splash it on the back of our necks. Now we were ready. We pushed off from shore and Chris gave a

command, "paddle forward, dig in!" But, I could barely hear him as tunnel vision took hold.

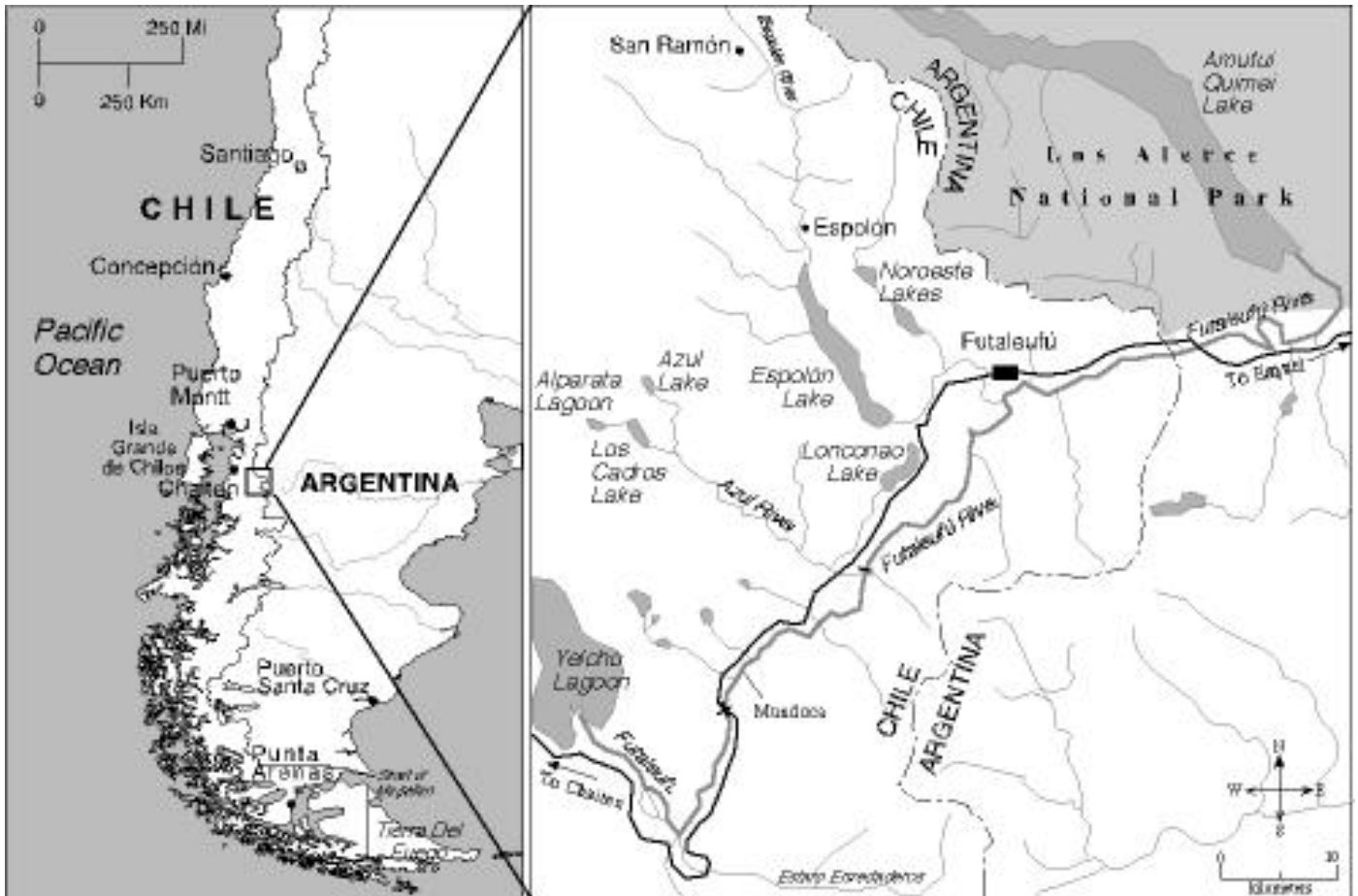
All I could see was the immediate whitewater, splashing onto my face. It felt as if I were sitting still and the river was crashing past me. At one point a large standing wave bucked us sideways and James slid across the raft and landed on me. Afraid we might flip over I pushed him back. Returning to my position on the front-left side I dipped my paddle down to grab a bite of water, but whisked only air as our raft rocketed over the trough of a ten-foot wave. In a matter of seconds, which seemed more like viewing an entire movie in slow motion, we popped out the other end of the rapids right side up and with everyone still on board.

I had maxed -out on adrenalin as we reached our take-out point several minutes later. Safe on shore, the high of surviving subsided. I was exhausted and could feel sore muscles I never knew existed. We had an option to raft the rapids again the next day, but I chose just to look at them, not wanting to push my luck and blessings of the river gods.

Will I raft again ? Yes, risk is a part of life and makes it exciting, reminding us how precious life is. Should the river be saved from any more hydro-projects? A whole-hearted yes! Other rivers can be harnessed but some — including the Fu — should remain free flowing to provoke a sense of freeing the human spirit from the sedation of civilization.□



*Our rafting guide Chris Old scouting a Class V section of the Futaleufú on our second day, thankful we wouldn't be shooting it this day after a week of heavy rains."*



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**Shelly Renae Browning** (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

**Wendy Call** (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as a communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

**Martha Farmelo** (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine doctoral candidate and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

**Gregory Feifer** (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. Greg sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

**Curt Gabrielson** (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing M.I.T. in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

**Peter Keller** (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds

a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

**Leena Khan** (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A lawyer dealing with immigration and international-business law with a firm in the Washington, DC area, Leena will study the status of women under the "islamization" of Pakistani law that began in the 1980s and continues to this day. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she is a Muslim herself and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

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