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Hippies, Ballots and I Ching: Connecting with the Land in Argentine Patagonia

By Peter Keller

OCTOBER, 2001

EPUYÉN, Argentina—"I thought we were on the verge of a nuclear disaster," said Danny Olivet, nonchalantly. "Our idea was to train ourselves to be self-sufficient for food, shelter, etcetera — the basic necessities." For Olivet, who was 24 at the time, preparing himself meant moving from Buenos Aires to the countryside. In 1975, Olivet, his wife and their first child arrived in a quiet Patagonian valley under the shadows of the Andes. Here, in Epuayén, they began to put their self-sufficiency ideas to work. They purchased a *chacra* (farm) and began working the land. A half dozen other families arrived in the mid-70s with similar purposes and perspectives. They were characterized by their VW kombi vans, long hair and earrings, and were proponents of a "back to the land" ethic. For lack of a better word, locals acceptingly called these newcomers 'hippies.'

Arrival of the hippie movement in Argentina centered itself in the *Comarca Andina* area, which includes the Andean communities of El Bolsón (pop. 15,000), El Hoyo (3,000) and Epuayén (1,200). It was not necessarily an invasion, but the new influx of residents provided some unexpected consequences. The new residents, looking for refuge from city life, had no idea they would become the center of a controversy that would spark social, political and environmental change in a country ruled by a military dictatorship.

The impetus began in 1981 when a small group of snoopy outsiders began poking around the Epuayén Valley taking pictures and notes, paying particular attention to Lake Epuayén and a river of the same name flowing from it. Epuayén Valley is surrounded by mountains and is only several kilometers in width. In all respects it is a beautiful valley, quiet and tranquil, a good place to relax — as Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid and Etta Place often did during their trips through the Valley between 1901 and 1905 on the way to their ranch, located 40 kilometers south in Cholila Valley. Although the snowy mountain peaks reach over 2,000 meters, the Valley at 300 meters possesses a warm microclimate well suited for growing fine fruits, such as strawberries and raspberries. Valley residents cultivating the land and producing handcrafts included indigenous Mapuches, homesteaders and the new "hippie" generation.

The snoopers were consultants from Interconsul, ADE (*Análisis y Desarrollo Económico*) and Technoproyectos. SADE and Techint, two of the largest Argentine companies specializing in public works projects, sent them. Consultants studied the Valley for over three years and developed a report analyzing 30 sites suitable for building a hydroelectricity project. They recommended building a dam at the site where *Río Epuayén* flows into a narrow canyon. Estimated at \$62 million, the hydro project was designed to raise the water level 33 meters and transport water, *via* a tunnel, from Lake Epuayén to the lower-elevation Lake Puelo. Water plummeting through the tunnel would be used to produce electricity, up to 153 gigawatts per year destined for use along the Atlantic Coast, some 700 kilometers east.¹

¹"Dique para la discordia," *Clarín*, August 19, 1985, p.36.]

“This was the point of no return in my life,” said Lucas Chiappe, a photographer and environmental activist who moved to Epuyén in 1976 with his wife Jillian. “I thought it was economic speculation more than anything else. I did as much as I could to research the issue and find out about the threat to our valley.” Chiappe lives only 50 meters from the Epuyén River; if the Valley were to be flooded for a water project he would surely lose his land. With the information he and others obtained, they held a community assembly to inform others of the threat. “This was the first public meeting held in a community during the epoch of the military dictatorship,” Chiappe said, waving his hand in a cupped form to accentuate that these were difficult times. During the assembly they formed *La Comisión de Defensa del Valle Epuyén (La Comisión)*. Fifty people joined and ten were selected to move the effort forward. Members were persecuted by SIDE (the Argentine intelligence agency), the police and the army. At one point, Lucas, Jillian and her sister Kati Webb were followed by another truck while driving down the highway. The truck came up to their side and the driver put a video camera up to the window and drove away quickly. The group held boycotts, but never did anything violent. With raised eyebrows and a look of concern in his eyes, Chiappe told me, “We were lucky to not disappear during that time.”

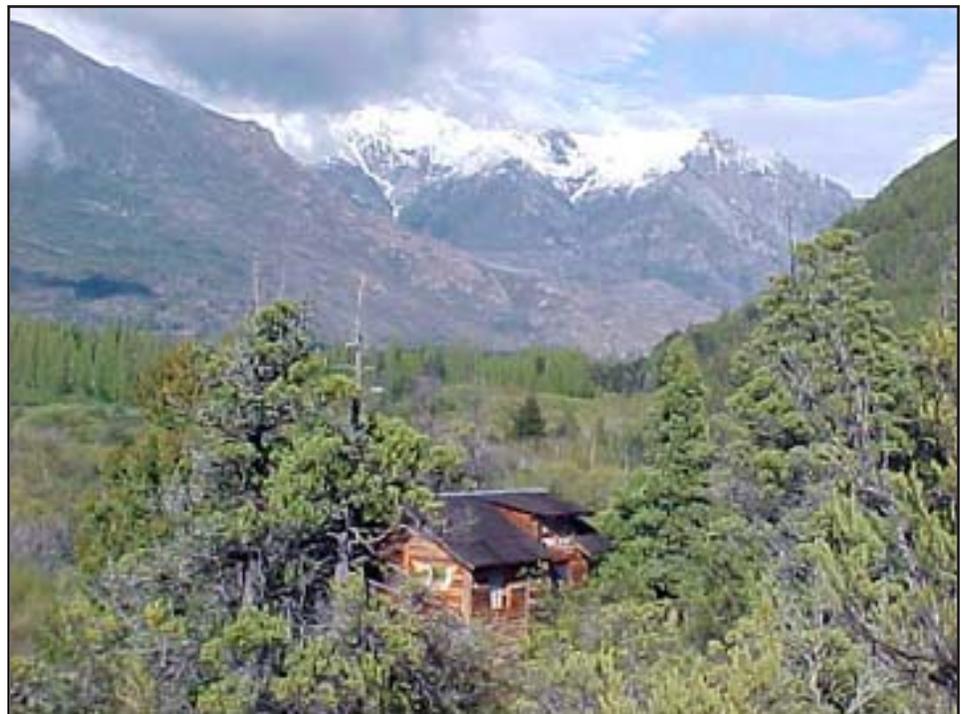
Appointed by party leaders of the provincial government, Epuyén town mayor Nidya Abraham had to decide which side to support — for or against the hydro project. To help her make this crucial decision, several members of *La Comisión* convinced Abraham to use the ancient *I Ching* “Book of Changes” as a means of divining the answer. *I Ching* was composed almost three thousand years ago during the Chinese Bronze Age. Shamans used this book of wisdom to tell ambitious noblemen how to deal with concrete situations in their lives. Three coins are tossed six times, which leads to a mathematical exercise landing the question on one of 64 hexagrams. Danny Olivet was present at the divining and told me, “*I Ching* is a language of metaphors that pushes you to make a decision based on your subconsciousness.” Abraham tossed the coins and received an answer of “Be with the people.” The Oracle spoke and her interpretation was to defend Epuyén Valley.

As the fight continued between *La Comisión* on one side and provincial government officials and business leaders looking to make a windfall on the other, Abraham was ultimately fired from her post by Provincial Governor Atilio Viglione. *La Comisión* members knew they had to make contact with high-level government officials and national

media to stop the project. In May, June and July of 1985, Olivet recalls that local newspapers ran a nasty contra-campaign with headlines such as, “Hippie Community Fond of Nature, Sowing Panic in Chubut [Province],” “Hippies and Drugs in Río Negro [Province]” and “Epuyén: Village of Terror.” This undermining campaign made it difficult to gain support at the local level. However, at the national level, *La Comisión* had several successes getting its position published in *Clarín*, the country’s leading newspaper. Its members also traveled to Buenos Aires to meet with a presidential aide and once made a road trip to the Atlantic Coast town of Puerto Madryn to gain the attention of President Raúl Alfonsín who was inaugurating a fisheries project there.

Around October of 1986, officials were reconsidering the Epuyén hydro project based on political, economic and ecological costs. Then in November, Governor Viglione went to Epuyén to speak with the community. He surprised them all by saying that “for technical reasons” the hydroelectric project would not be constructed. The Valley was saved! Or was it? Many opponents were suspicious and believed this was just a delay tactic until the government could find sufficient funds for the project.

Wanting to control the fate of their valley, community activists looked toward the elections of 1987. This would be the first time Epuyén could select a town mayor by popular vote (the military dictatorship was replaced by democracy in 1983). A census was conducted and they had more than the 600 voters needed to hold their own election. The two major party candidates from the Radical and Peronist Parties were in favor of the hydroelectric project. *La Comisión* formed its own political party, *El Frente de Epuyén* (Epuyén Front), and nominated Jorge Caprano as candidate for



Epuyén Valley as it looked before the hydroelectricity project — and thankfully how it looks today after the project was shelved, in part due to community opposition.



Danny Olivet at his farm in Epuyén Valley. He came to the Valley in 1975 with his family as part of the "back to the land" movement in Argentina.

mayor, as well as six city-council members. Danny Olivet was one of the council candidates for Epuyén Front.

Sitting in Olivet's front yard overlooking the barn and strawberry fields, I accepted an offer of *Mate* before diving into the details of the election. "The Peronists and Radical Party candidates ignored us, not considering Epuyén Front a threat," Olivet commented. One week before the election, the 12 members of Epuyén Front mounted their horses and visited each and every house in the Valley. During this three-day campaign they spoke to their neighbors about the weather, about what they were planting this spring — and asked all to vote on election day for Epuyén Front. Olivet recalled, "It was an exciting time, this union of people with different ideologies that came together to protect their homesteads. People were united to do something. It was an epochal era."

Election Day finally arrived. It was rainy and bleak; the rural roads were filled with mud. Many feared turnout would be low. However, 95 percent of eligible voters came out to cast their ballots. At this point in time, the Argentine election system stipulated that men, women and foreigners each had to vote at separate balloting locations. When the polls closed at 6 p.m., the men tallied their votes and the Peronists won by eight. Downcast, the men of Epuyén Front left the building — but were greeted by cheers from the women, who elected Epuyén Front by eight votes. It was a tie at 256 votes.² Attention turned to the foreigner-voting booth; eight were eligible to vote after having resided in Argentina for several years. When the votes were finally counted, the party that won — *by two votes* — was Epuyén Front. The Valley was saved — at least from hydro projects.

The Next Battle

"It was an important lesson in democracy for us to vote," Chiappe said, "If two people from our side didn't vote, we would have lost." Epuyén Front took advantage

of this surprise victory and put in motion many policies based on the theme of self-sufficiency. Not wanting to depend on national or provincial governments for subsidies, they acquired their own tractors, seeds, water tanks and other equipment to grow crops in the fields. They even installed a stone mill to make their own flour from wheat and polenta from corn. High-profile policies were also adopted. "In Epuyén, we were the second community in the country to declare our village nuclear-free, and we were the first community in the world to prohibit the use of the 'dirty dozen' [the 12 most toxic pesticides]," Chiappe proudly reported. The pesticide ordinance prohibits the sale, use and transportation of these pesticides in the community. Chiappe continued, "This was very advanced for the moment and we went on to other political victories, like overcoming the desire by Provincial authorities to form a central housing area in Epuyén Valley. We fought this because we believed living on the farm was better, because this type of life provides a closer connection with the land."

Four years later, during the next election, two of the three main political parties in Chubut Province joined together to beat Epuyén Front. In the meantime, Epuyén Front set many precedents as the first independent party to win an election. Also, through a court petition, they were able to separate election ballots from different parties, instead of just choosing candidates on a one-party ballot. "When the rest of the country heard about it, all the focus was set on this 'voting test'," Chiappe noted.

After this experience, Chiappe began Project Lemu. Since its inception in 1990, the objectives of Project Lemu have been dedicated exclusively to protecting Andean native forests of northern Argentine Patagonia. *Lemu* means forest in the aboriginal Mapuche language. Chiappe set out to find support for his goal: to offer lectures that would stimulate other people to form groups for protecting native forests. His philosophy was to "have others examine their own problems and develop their own solutions. My idea is not to export truths, because they don't exist — it's all relative to the economy, ecology and society of each community. So this has been my mission in Patagonia, to create a network of supporters to protect native forests."

Before he arrived in Patagonia, one could say his mission was to explore the world. He met his wife-to-be, Jillian, when she was 15 and he was 17. Five years later they married and asked for money at their wedding instead of gifts. Why? So they could travel. For four years they toured such places as Europe, India, Nepal and Afghanistan. When they returned in 1974 they took two more years to explore Latin America. Finally, upon return from their world tour, they wanted to find a tranquil place they could call home. They choose Epuyén. Twenty-five years later, all three of their children, Surya, Nahuel and Rocio, and two grandchildren, still live in Epuyén Valley.

"To do something such as this, from the heart and with

² "Salvemos el Valle." 1988. By Joseph Richey
Institute of Current World Affairs

much energy, would be absolutely impossible without my family's support," Chiappe said. Citing an example of this support Chiappe told me, "Their advice has been invaluable. Jillian is more logical than I and has an ability to work with the media in accomplishing long-term goals. She is an ideal complement to what we are doing." An underlying philosophy in all his work is to speak in the plural form about Project Lemu, because as he says, "We are all working together."

Project Lemu focuses on three basic programs. The first is education. Through the promotion of workshops, provision of manuals for teachers and outdoor education experiences, local school children are developing appreciation for their native forests.

The second program is to raise awareness by publishing materials such as Project Lemu's magazine, *Hoja por Hoja* (leaf by leaf; it can also mean page by page), cassettes, calendars, documentaries, TV spots, stickers, T-shirts and postcards of native forests — plus two picture books authored by Chiappe about his beloved Patagonia. "We soon realized that getting the word out, by calling attention to the danger of native-forest extinction, was crucial to our mission," Chiappe said. "Our challenge is to not have an overhead budget, but use funds received directly for projects." For example, if they receive a grant of \$5,000 to produce a calendar, Chiappe will subcontract this to a local vendor and not take any off the top as overhead. He does not receive a salary. Making the best use of available resources is essential, like using their house as the Project-Lemu office. The project has received support from organizations such as the Deep Ecology Foundation (founded by Doug Tompkins), The Turner Foundation, Unicef Argentina Patagonia, the World Wildlife Fund, The Tides Foundation and Land Ethic Action Foundation, among others.

Project Lemu's third program is to promote a network of protected areas in the northern Patagonian Andean bioregion. If this initiative is accomplished, thousands of hectares of native forests will be protected. Stretching 400 kilometers from Lanín National Park in the north, including Nahuel Huapi National Park and Lago Puelo National Park and on to Los Alerces National Park in the south will be a linkup of protected areas. Several gaps still exist in the continuous corridor of protected areas, which could include as much as 1.5 million hectares when completed. Slowly, they're being filled. The first victory was achieved in 1993, when Chubut government officials established *Cerro Pirque* Provincial Park. This helped protect the mountains surrounding Lake Epuyén. The following year another piece of valuable land was protected when *Río Turbio* Provincial Park in Chubut was established. This provincial park set aside 70,000 hectares surrounding the already-protected 20,000-hectare Lake Puelo National Park.

"The political process is intense," said Chiappe, "Just to create a new national park takes many years to pass a



Lucas and Jillian Chiappe at their home in Epuyén Valley.

law through the national Congress. So the idea was to create a provincial park, which is much easier and protects the land just the same. This has an added feature in that the people of Patagonia don't want any more land controlled by the national government. A provincial park meets this demand because land stays under provincial government control." A third success took place in 1995 when *Río Negro* Province (located directly north of Chubut Province) created *Río Azul* Protected Natural Area.

Now, just three gaps remain. The first is protection for the Manso River area just south of Nahuel Huapi National Park. A second task is to raise the protection status of Blue River Municipal Park to that of a provincial park. The final, and perhaps most difficult gap, is to designate the Tiger River area a provincial park. Tiger River is north of Los Alerces National Park is most controversial because proponents, such as Chiappe, have opened up the idea of a land exchange between provincial and national governments. The southern end of Los Alerces National Park includes the Futaleufú dam, which provides electricity for an aluminum plant in Puerto Madryn. "The idea is to develop a bargain, an exchange in which the Province would create a park to the north of Los Alerces, in the *Río Tigre* watershed, and the National Park Administration would release the Futaleufú hydro project zone to the Province," suggested Chiappe, who has been working on this idea for over half a decade. "Who knows how long it will take? With the political process one can never tell. The laws are ready. They just need to be passed. When is the question? Six months, a year, maybe longer?"

The stakes can be high for supporting such a proposal. In June 1996 the provincial forester was fired for "poor management of funds." However, many saw this as a political move because the then-General Director of Provincial Forests, Arnaldo Diaz, supported the creation of a network of protected areas. Political higher-ups in Chubut Province realized that this initiative, if enacted, would cut into their

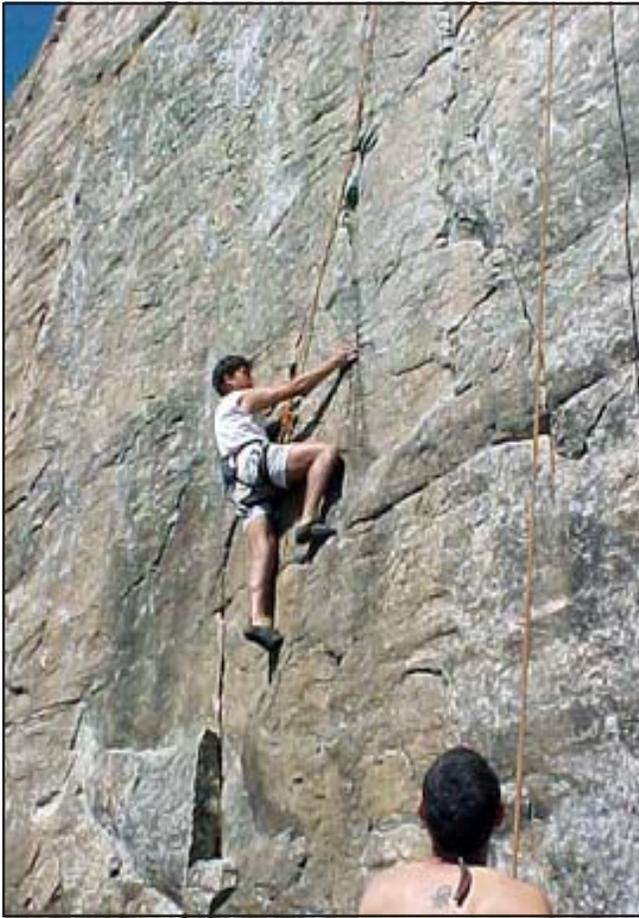


political bag of perks — namely the handing out of timber-cutting concessions to influential businessmen. The current provincial forester has maintained a low profile and does not support the proposal.

Argentine National Park Administration has presented its own proposal for a biological corridor in the Patagonian Andes. Building upon previous and current initiatives, the proposal, introduced at the National Park Rangers Asso-

ciation meeting in April 2000, seeks to establish legal mechanisms and administrative support to create a formal coordinating entity. This initiative covers nearly the same geographical area as the corridor promoted by Project Lemu. One difference is the title. Proponents have dubbed their project “*Corredor Eco Regional Nor Andino Patagónico (CERNAP)*.” With support from the Wildlife Conservation Society³, CERNAP promoters such as Nahuel Huapi National Park manager Víctor Arrechea are seeking more ef-

³ Formerly known as the New York Zoological Society before 1994, the Society is most noted for managing the Bronx Zoo and New York Aquarium



Rock climbers in Lago Puelo National Park. As one of a series of national parks separated by provincial land, Lago Puelo has received added protection in recent years. Project Lemu proponents count this as an early success in efforts to create a 400-kilometer long interconnected corridor of provincial and national parks.

fective conservation of biodiversity in the region.

Why, might you ask, are two initiatives vying for the same objective? Biological corridors are in fashion these days, and funding follows fashion — or vice versa. Three corridors are being created in Argentina: *Corredor Verde Misionero* (described in PK-17), *Corredor de Las Yungas*, and CERNAP. In Latin America, at least ten biological corridor initiatives are in the works in countries such as Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú and Venezuela, with some of these efforts bi-national. In North America, similar initiatives are taking place, such as the Yellowstone-to-Yukon corridor, known as Y2Y. On an even larger scale, which involves many of the corridors already mentioned, several conservationists and the Wildlife Conservation Society are promoting a corridor from the Bering Strait to Tierra del Fuego, known as “Corridor of the Americas.” Besides the biological benefits of connecting protected areas, the corridor “boom” fosters coordina-

tion and better communication at the bureaucratic level.

Chiappe broadened his own vision of biological corridors while participating in a 1994 conference in Missoula, Montana. “I realized the idea was to create corridors at the small-, medium- and large-project levels. We lacked the large project; that is when discussions began about Gondwana⁴ — a movement to create an intercontinental sanctuary of sub-Antarctica forests.” A plethora of environmental groups have joined to promote the creation of a sanctuary south of the 40th parallel — in Argentina, Chile, Australia and New Zealand — to protect native forests in these countries. “This is very simple. It is a race against time to protect native forests, especially due to pressure from the wood industry globally, and the privatization of forests,” Chiappe said.

The highest probabilities of Gondwana occurring are in Argentina and New Zealand. Opposition, in Tasmania (Australia), due to Japanese wood demand, and in Chile because of pressure from the wood-products industry, has kept the Gondwana idea from gaining broader support. Activists in Argentina have been the first and only country to establish a foundation dedicated solely to Gondwana. This was achieved in 1999. “What we have in our favor is that we created awareness from the bottom up in Argentina. Thus we are getting a firm base of local community support. In Chile, even though the initiative is coming from some very well known and effective non-governmental organizations, they are based in Santiago and this top-down approach does not always work best.”

Because it started as a grassroots-supported initiative in Argentina, legislators have taken note, and now are beginning to show support through declarations. In the Na-



With a smooth red bark, Arrayán grows along water courses and can reach a height of 15 meters, but they are generally found in the form of small, shrubby trees.”

⁴ Gondwana is a reference to earth science and plate tectonics. Around 250 million years ago one mass of land existed called Pangea, along with one ocean, referred to as Panthalassa. About 200 million years ago Pangea broke in two. The northern half is referred to as Laurasia and the southern half as Gondwana. Starting 135 million years ago, Gondwana divided into Africa and South America, with the Atlantic Ocean forming between them.

tional House of Deputies, the Commission focusing on Exterior Relations, Culture, Natural Resources and Conservation of Human Environment passed a declaration in July 2001 supporting the Gondwana Project, stating it “will avoid the indiscriminate cutting of trees.” Also in May 2001, the Santa Cruz Provincial Legislature passed a resolution in support of a Gondwana Intercontinental Sanctuary. Furthermore, they “stand by the intent to stop the destruction of the most southern forests in the planet by promoting sustainable development of regional economies based on preservation of nature.” This is an encouraging statement, coming as it does from a generally conservative Province.

These declarations came after a Gondwana meeting was held in Epuýén in mid-April 2001. This was the third international Gondwana meeting. The first was held in April 1998 in Santiago and the second in December 2000 on New Zealand’s South Island. Due to Chiappe’s ability to raise high-level support, the meeting —“The Forest Calls”— was sponsored by Ashoka. Founded in Arlington, Virginia by Bill Drayton, a former EPA management consultant, Ashoka gives fellowships to “social entrepreneurs.” Chiappe was a Fellow from 1996 to 1999 for his work to establish a chain of protected natural areas in the region. He used his monthly stipend to support his environmental activism and his frequent travels to spread the word of community-based bioregionalism.

While spreading the word, Chiappe lectures about the leading threats to native-forest protection. In the last 100 years, Argentina has lost 74 percent of its native forests.⁵ In southern Argentina, below the 40th parallel (the area proposed for protection under the Gondwana initiative), forests of *lenga*, *ñirre*, *roble pellín*, *coihue* and *raulí* (all Nothofagus species, similar to beech and oak trees) and *arrayán* are threatened primarily by fires, livestock use and wood extraction. Chiappe explained, “South of Bariloche, the storm systems from the Pacific Ocean generally do not have lightning due to high-moisture content and lack of warm air masses. The findings show that natural fires do not exist in this zone — and if there ever were fires, they occurred about every 300 years, on average. Of all fires that occur, 97 percent are caused by humans and 96 percent of these are not accidental, but intentional.”

To control these threats, efforts are underway in Chubut Province to develop a new forestry law that would replace



In parts of Patagonia, fires are not a natural element of native forest ecology. Human-caused fires are catastrophic events that are the leading threat to native forest extinction in central and southern Patagonia.

forestry articles 105 and 106 in the Provincial Constitution. A public debate was held in early October, sponsored by the forestry students’ association at the *Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia* in Esquel. Seven panelists were invited to give their perspectives on current and future forestry policies. Project Lemu, represented by Chiappe, was the only non-governmental organization invited to participate. The billing may have been “debate,” but what happened was more a cordial discussion among people who agree that something should be done to conserve native forests.

The surroundings of the “debate” were not what I expected. Having lived in timber communities in western Montana and northern California, I thought the conference room would be filled with timber-company executives in suits and loggers with suspenders and big bellies. The situation is different in Argentina. Native-forest loss is mostly due to fires and livestock use, followed by timber felling. Foresters weren’t pleading to maintain their life style; rather it was a rancher, Juan Carlos Goya. In his position as President of the Rural Society, he made a passionate plea to the audience by saying, “We have to continue forward and maintain respect for ranchers.” As he held back tears, the crowd of nearly 150 responded with applause of support. Traditional ranching is slowly dying and Goya fears further loss of a culture. However, the decline is more a by-product of the current economy than an unintended result of saving native forests.

Chiappe’s presentation was well received by forestry

⁵ Public presentation by Enrique Schaljo. National Park Administration Coordinator for the Native Forests Project. Esquel, October 5, 2001.

students, but I had to wonder how many really understood his focus on **re-valuing** native forests. He referred to these forests as *bienes naturales* (natural wealth) rather than natural resources, as many forestry students are taught to regard trees. Chiappe makes this distinction because resources denote a market use, in which trees, minerals, oil, etc. are used without end — an infinite supply. Whereas natural wealth indicates something to be cherished, something in limited quantity. Current law from the Provincial Constitution clearly states native forests are a dominion of the province, but how these forests should be used is not clear. “We have to cultivate native trees, not introduced species,” Chiappe continued in his inspirational tone, “If I want to eat lettuce in the summer, I have to plant it in the spring. We have to plan ahead. This idea is not in the forestry laws we have today.”



Two trekkers overlooking El Bolsón Valley, an area known for its “hippie” history.

Two new forestry-law proposals are being developed at the provincial level, one by the Peronista Party and the other by the Radical Party. (Coincidentally, neither party opted to attend the debate.) Many strong interests are trying to influence the process, which is why a common theme at this “debate” was to open discussions to the public. The hope is that any new laws will define a common and integrated strategy for future forest plans, while allowing for more public involvement in decision-making. As Chiappe often stated at the debate, “With everyone involved, a solution can be found.”

I have known for a while that locally derived solutions

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to environmental challenges are by far the most productive. Each of my field trips reinforces this sentiment. One other point has become clear to me: communities need to cultivate environmental leaders from within. This is one of the goals of Project Lemu: To inspire other communities to foster environmental leaders who will be involved in local decision-making processes. Chiappe serves as a fine example of this breed. He is well organized and has a blend of spirituality, common sense and desire to work hard for his goals. He’s no spacey tree hugger in the stereotypical sense of the word — not in the least, especially with his marketing and business sense. One doesn’t become a “Rolex Award for Enterprise” winner and an Ashoka Fellow by laying back. He exudes passion that is not just an element of promotion and image making. For these reasons, the Project Lemu network has experienced success in reaching positive outcomes through public discourse. Or, to put it simply, in a riddle: What do a dozen hippies, two votes and I Ching have in common? Each has made a difference.

Here and Now

Patagonia may seem like the end of the world, and you might think that the consequences of September 11th wouldn’t reach this far. However, residents of Epuyén Valley are paying close attention. Chiappe told me that for weeks following the terrorist attacks, sales of green-house materials and seeds surged upward. In a world of lesser certainty, locals look to themselves to become more dependent on what they produce. Back at his farm, Danny Olivet reflected on the tragic events of September 11th as, “a breaking point, at which to critically review our economic system. But instead, it seems to be going the other way.” Olivet paused as he stared toward distant fields of strawberries, perhaps recollecting his reasons for leaving the city some 26 years ago. “September 11th has reminded people that we need to go back to the land,” he said. □