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LETTERS

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PK-20
THE AMERICAS

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Landscape that Inspired Patagonia, Inc., Slated for Protection by its Former CEO

By Peter Keller

JANUARY 2002

Patagonia, Argentina —“I love the Patagonia area. Since I came here for the first time in 1990, I’ve had my eyes on the drier grasslands of the east side of the Andes. It reminds me of the western United States with wide open spaces.” So began Kristine McDivitt Tompkins on the subject of her newest project, The Patagonia Land Trust. After eight years of developing Pumalín Park in Patagonian Chile with her husband Douglas Tompkins (*see* PK-8 for details), she next wanted to become involved in protecting wildlands in Argentine Patagonia. Geographically different from Chilean Patagonia, the steppe grasslands of this part of Argentina can devour one’s perception in a seemingly endless, pale-brown horizon. Constant wind pounds against the body and head creating the sensation of hair being unwillingly pulled. As one approaches the Andes from the Atlantic coast, the monotonous prairies give way to dry, sparsely forested foothills and jagged, snow-covered mountain peaks — creating a mirage of suspended clouds from a distance. The landscape of Argentine Patagonia poses a stark contrast to the steep green fiords and impenetrable wet forest of Pumalín.

In the year 2000, opportunity knocked for Kris Tompkins when Argentina’s National Park Administration inquired whether the Tompkins would be interested in establishing several national parks. Further discussions led to the idea of buying Monte León, a 155,000-acre ranch along Argentina’s southern Atlantic Coast. However, instead of dealing directly with ranch owners, Tompkins wisely worked through the Argentine Wildlife Foundation (*Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina* - FVSA) to negotiate the purchase. In the meantime, Ms. Tompkins, once the longtime Chief Executive Officer at Patagonia clothing company, and Debbie Ryker, former Chief Financial Officer at *Esprit* clothing, quickly established the Patagonia Land Trust (PLT) as a legal entity. Subsequently, in May 2001, PLT donated \$1.7 million to FVSA for purchasing this critter-rich ranch of penguins, sea lions, elephant seals, guanacos, foxes and pumas.

Eventually, FVSA will transfer Monte León, Argentina’s first coastal national park, to the National Park Administration (APN). “The idea is not to hold [land title to] purchased areas, but develop the facilities and then turn over to national parks,” Kris Tompkins told me over breakfast one morning at their home in Pumalín Park. Conservation easements, a legal method of acquiring specific property rights without owning the land, do not exist under Argentine law. Outright land purchases are, therefore, seen as the primary tool for land conservation. Tompkins continued: “We see our role as ‘real estate brokers,’ purchasing land for protection or helping others achieve this goal.” Using what she termed a “shift in finances,” i.e. the sale of her shares in Patagonia clothing company, Ms. Tompkins was able to close the deal for Monte León.

Currently, PLT is working with FVSA, APN and the local Santa Cruz provin-

cial government in creating a management plan that will restore damaged lands and develop visitor facilities. At the height of sheep ranching at Monte León, 70,000 head were overgrazing the land. When PLT purchased the ranch, only 6,000 sheep remained as a result of a general economic decline in the wool industry. Some of the ranch lands took a beating from previous overgrazing, evidenced by excessive erosion and a lack of native wildlife. Economically, these remote ranches are becoming more difficult to maintain because of lower wool profits and distance to market. Ms. Tompkins noted that she had seen some abandoned ranches in southern Argentina. "We've taken the sheep off the land and now we just need to step out of the way so the grasslands can recover," she said about the general topic of grassland restoration. In addition, the PLT will remove 400 miles of fencing to facilitate wildlife movement.



(Above) An elephant seal protecting her pups on the beach. (Left) Magellanic penguin. In the spring, these shore-nesting penguins lay two eggs requiring an incubation period of 40 days. Monte León coastline is home to one of the largest Magellanic penguin rookeries on the Atlantic coast.

The Monte León management plan is setting a precedent in Argentina; never before have a provincial government, the federal government and two non-governmental organizations joined together to design a future national park. Priority number one for the committee is the conservation of biodiversity, which will require regional sustainable development. One aspect of the plan is to convert a 2,000-square-meter sheep shed into a visitor center that will educate visitors about local fauna and flora, indigenous Tehuelche culture and sheep-ranching history. Fortunately, money is available from a five-year Global-Environmental-Facility project authorized in 1997 to assist new or expanded parks; the funding, however, must be utilized by this year.

Inland from Monte León, another ranch has been pur-



Kristine McDivitt Tompkins, former CEO of Patagonia Clothing Company and current President of the newly-formed Patagonia Land Trust, at her Chilean home in Pumalín Park.

chased by the PLT. The 82,500-acre Dor-Aike Ranch will protect riparian habitat (vegetation along waterways), including 13 miles of the Santa Cruz River. In the future, this may expand the national park to be established at Monte León. An initial project at Dor-Aike has been to remove livestock to allow the overgrazed and eroded prairie time to recover. Two other projects are planned by PLT— one at El Rincón Ranch and the other based at Sol de Mayo Ranch.

El Rincón and Sol de Mayo are both snuggled up against the Andes mountain range in Argentina's Chubut Province. Doug Tompkins purchased the 35,000-acre *Estancia El Rincón*, with its windswept grasslands and majestic mountains, nearly a decade ago. PLT would like to use El Rincón as a fundraising opportunity, purchasing the ranch from Mr. Tompkins who could then use the money for other land protection projects. Eventually, the intention is to transfer the ranch to the Argentine park service as an addition to adjacent Perito Moreno National Park.

Sol de Mayo is situated on a high plateau of grasslands, lakes and streams. This will be a long-term project over the next 10-20 years as negotiations begin with a number of



ranch owners. The Sol de Mayo ranch includes 54,000 acres, but the area has the potential to become a new national park reaching a size of 600,000 to 700,000 acres. This area will be the focus of future fundraising activities by PLT when it officially launches a fundraising drive in March of 2002.

Inauguration ceremonies for PLT fundraising were set for October 3rd of last year to be hosted by Tom Brokaw at the Explorers Club in New York City. The tragic events of Institute of Current World Affairs

9/11 cancelled that, however. Now, PLT's directors have had more time to prepare their fundraising strategy for this spring's (2002) rescheduled kick-off. The four directors of PLT have a wealth of knowledge about Patagonia and the outdoor industry. Besides Kris Tompkins and Debbie Ryker, the other PLT Directors are Yvon Chouinard and Rick Ridgeway. In 1968 Yvon Chouinard, the legendary founder of Patagonia, Inc., climbed Mount Fitz Roy, a 3,441-meter-high granite tower in southern Argentina, with Doug Tompkins.



Two hikers crossing a stream in Estancia El Rincón, another ranch that the Patagonia Land Trust is working to acquire

The silhouette of Fitz Roy has become the symbol on the Patagonia, Inc. label. The Fitz Roy name comes from Charles Darwin's exploration of Patagonia in 1834. Robert Fitzroy captained his exploring vessel, the *Beagle*.

Coincidentally, I met Mr. Ridgeway, a mountaineer, photographer and author, with his family on a ferry, crossing Lake General Carrera in southern Chile. Up to that moment, I had thought some voodoo hex had been placed upon me regarding boats. Weeks before, just as I was about to drive my truck onto a ferry to begin a planned Chilean Patagonia trip, a tractor-trailer crashed into it, breaking the driver's side window and denting the door. Repairs and insurance company bureaucracy delayed my departure for a week. Two weeks later, I was reaching the end of Chile's

Southern Highway when I came to a river passable only by ferry. The captain of the boat dashed my hopes of seeing the highway's terminus when he decided that day was to be his vacation. My luck quickly turned for the better several days later when I met Rick Ridgeway and his family on a ferry crossing the second largest lake in South America. Shortly after that, my luck continued to improve, as I crossed a fiord by boat in Pumalín Park to see a hiking trail I had worked on last year. Surprisingly, Kris Tompkins, whom I'd met several times over the last year, was on board. I asked her for an interview

regarding the Patagonia Land Trust; she kindly invited me to her house the next day. Mr. Ridgeway, his wife and three children had been visiting Monte León with the Tompkins for the holidays. He was in the process of writing a story for *National Geographic Traveler* magazine about their family road trip through Patagonia. Ridgeway, a member of the American Bicentennial Mt. Everest Expedition, was one of the first Americans to reach the summit of K2 — and the first ever to complete the ascent without the aid of bottled oxygen. He has produced 15 documentary films and written five books; his most recent is "Under Another Sky," about crossing Tibet from one side to the other.

Mr. Ridgeway told me that when the PLT fundraising campaign is launched, they will be focusing on three sources



*Grasslands of Sol de Mayo, the upcoming focus of Patagonia Land Trust conservation efforts.
Photo Courtesy of Patagonia Land Trust/Rick Ridgeway*



Weather-worn coastline along the Monte León Ranch, a future Argentine national park purchased with funds from the Patagonia Land Trust and under current control of the Argentine Wildlife Foundation.

Photo courtesy of Kris Tompkins/PLT

of income: Other foundations, one-time large donations and individual donors such as customers of Patagonia clothing company. Marketing the PLT program to the customer base will begin this coming summer (2002) and “will take an enormous effort to achieve our land-protection goals, as there are hurdles ahead we don’t even see yet,” predicted Ridgeway.

At the moment, the PLT is dedicated exclusively to buying land in Argentine Patagonia. However, an idea in the infancy stage is to develop an international peace park or some type of transnational protected area, combining the potential of Sol de Mayo expansion with Chilean national reserves Lake General Carrera and Lake Jeinimeni. The Chilean reserves, totaling nearly 840,000 acres, are not adjacent to the Argentine border, but are close enough so they could logistically be expanded. Whether Chilean officials and politicians are open to the idea is still unknown because no one has yet developed or presented a detailed proposal.

In any event, the current economic crisis in Argentina has all PLT promoters wondering whether potential donors will be attracted to buying land considering the economic instability. Joining PLT directors on the holiday tour of project sites was Brad Meiklejohn, PLT’s newly hired development director, formerly employed by The Conservation Fund. With his experience in attracting donors to conservation projects and knowledge of the land-trust movement in the United States (there are nearly 2,000 land trusts nationwide), his task has been to prepare PLT members for possible questions from prospective donors. Meiklejohn acknowledged, “the Argentine economic crisis

is a cloud on PLT prospects that will slow down the process of acquiring funds.” Kris Tompkins added, “It will make it tougher, but not impossible.”

Considering the fact Argentina has had three presidents and two stand-ins over the last month, the crisis has provoked a strong ripple effect on all PLT work. Recent changes in administrations have resulted in park-service contacts that are no longer in place. This has, in effect, stalled any discussion of land donations to the national parks. It could be years before a stable government is in a position to accept a land transfer. Will the economic instability dissuade North American investors from joining PLT efforts? Or could peso devaluation and hungry property sellers lower land prices? Would this be perceived as vulture tactic, taking advantage of an economic crash?

Argentina’s economic crisis, on top of a worldwide recession, will make the job of attracting donations for PLT projects even more difficult. Communication efforts by PLT will need to be focused and protracted to assure potential donors that this is a wise investment. Several land developers have told me they believe land prices will begin to fall in coming months as the crisis continues and cash in U.S. dollars is at a premium. Given this and a resultant buyers’ market, land purchases need to be tactful and respectful of current market value so as not to cause tainted public relations that may hinder the achievement of PLT goals.

Luckily for PLT, it is still possible to buy large tracts of land in Argentine Patagonia. Ranch owners, for the most part, have not subdivided their lands into smaller parcels.

This is a considerable advantage when buying keystone pieces to protect biodiversity on a large scale, because fewer title searches and negotiations are needed. Even though just one family owned Monte León, internal conflicts complicated negotiations for years until a deal was finally brokered when Ms. Tompkins stepped forward.

“The Monte León purchase was well received by Argentine press and the public,” said Ms. Tompkins. “We even met then-President Fernando De la Rúa, who thanked us personally.” Discussions about the ranch purchase involved Santa Cruz provincial-government officials and federal officials, plus the crucial link of FVSA involvement. Ms. Tompkins summed up the situation in one simple phrase, “It was a slam dunk.” This is something the Tompkins’ have not been able to say about land deals in Chile, where land purchases have been followed by criticism in the national and local press. This is mainly because the process and outcome have been fundamentally different.

In Chile, purchased lands have been kept in the hands of Doug Tompkins’ Conservation Land Trust, and local governmental officials are rarely involved in the process. On the other hand, the Argentine model has been successful thus far because PLT worked with a full spectrum of governmental and environmental leaders in addition to playing the role of financier and leaving title ownership with Argentine-based entities.¹ During the Monte León press conference, FVSA Executive Director Javier Corcuera stressed the importance of conservation initiatives coming from within the community and involving locals in protection and control. He continued, “If protected just by the authorities, this scheme doesn’t work — not in Argentina or elsewhere.”

Another factor that explains the difference between Chilean and Argentine experiences is the attitude citizens have toward “gringos” buying land here. Argentines seem to accept wildlands philanthropy as an opportunity for the country to acquire lands for protection without relying upon scarce public funding. On the other hand, some Chileans, even those I’ve met with a higher education, tend to focus attention on rumors rather than the simple rationale, or concept, of land protection. In the case of Pumalín, I’ve heard wild rumors from several people that Tompkins will turn the land over to the Argentine military, that a Jewish state

is being planned, that the airstrips are for flying in abortion patients, and that the park is closed to the public. All these stories are, of course, completely false.

Why do these rumors exist? My personal theory is two-fold. The Chilean military, in part through former dictator General Pinochet and his geopolitical theory that the state must grow or die, has been effective at all levels in creating a paranoia out of a fear of foreign invasion and a strong sense of nationalism. One conversation with a schoolteacher went as follows:

“Look what happened when we fought Peru and Bolivia in the War of the Pacific,” she said.

I responded, “Well, you won that war, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but Argentina took most of Patagonia.” It didn’t help to remind her that was in 1879.

The second part of my theory is that Pumalín is losing the PR battle. Local politicians opposed to Pumalín use the park as a whipping boy to rally support for their causes. Even though the Tompkins invite political opponents on “show-me” tours, which these politicians never accept, their promotion efforts are not indicated in popular media. They have thrown up their hands in frustration, but continue to be transparent in their work and hope, that with time, Chileans will accept Pumalín as their own. I’ve found that skeptics only believe the project is real after they come to visit Pumalín. In this case, seeing is believing. But it is a long process that seems to require conversion one person at a time.

In Argentina the Tompkins have learned from past setbacks and figured out the winning formula — to work through local citizens and establish ownership within the country. This is especially important now, when land-conservation efforts can’t afford to lose opportunities or political support. As Brad Meiklejohn of The Patagonia Land Trust told me, “Looking out one hundred to two hundred years from now, they’ll still be making more people — but not more land.” Every day, wildlands — the gene pool of life — become more scarce as natural resources are used to support an expanding world population. It’s not too late, though, and many opportunities still exist to conserve the natural heritage of Argentine Patagonia. □

¹Mr. Tompkins has purchased nearly 110,000 hectares of private lands within *Esteros del Iberá*, a provincial reserve in the wetlands of northeast Argentina. During my visit to this wildlife mecca, locals had a positive and welcoming attitude toward his work. Even though he still owns the land, he has indicated that someday he will donate it to the government.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and Their Activities

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 economist 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.

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 MIT 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 U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

Andrew D. Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the New York Observer and a reporter for the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Washington Bureau of Newsday, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for Velvet magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **Southern Africa**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the New Republic and Washington Business Journal before his six years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

Author: Keller, Peter
Title: ICWA Letters - The Americas
ISSN: 1083-4303
Imprint: Institute of Current World
Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia; South Asia;
Europe/Russia; Mideast/North
Africa;Sub-Saharan Africa

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ICWA Letters (**ISSN 1083-4303**) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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