ICWA
LETTERS

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

PK-9
THE AMERICAS

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Torres del Paine National Park
"El Parque de Los Parques"

By Peter Keller

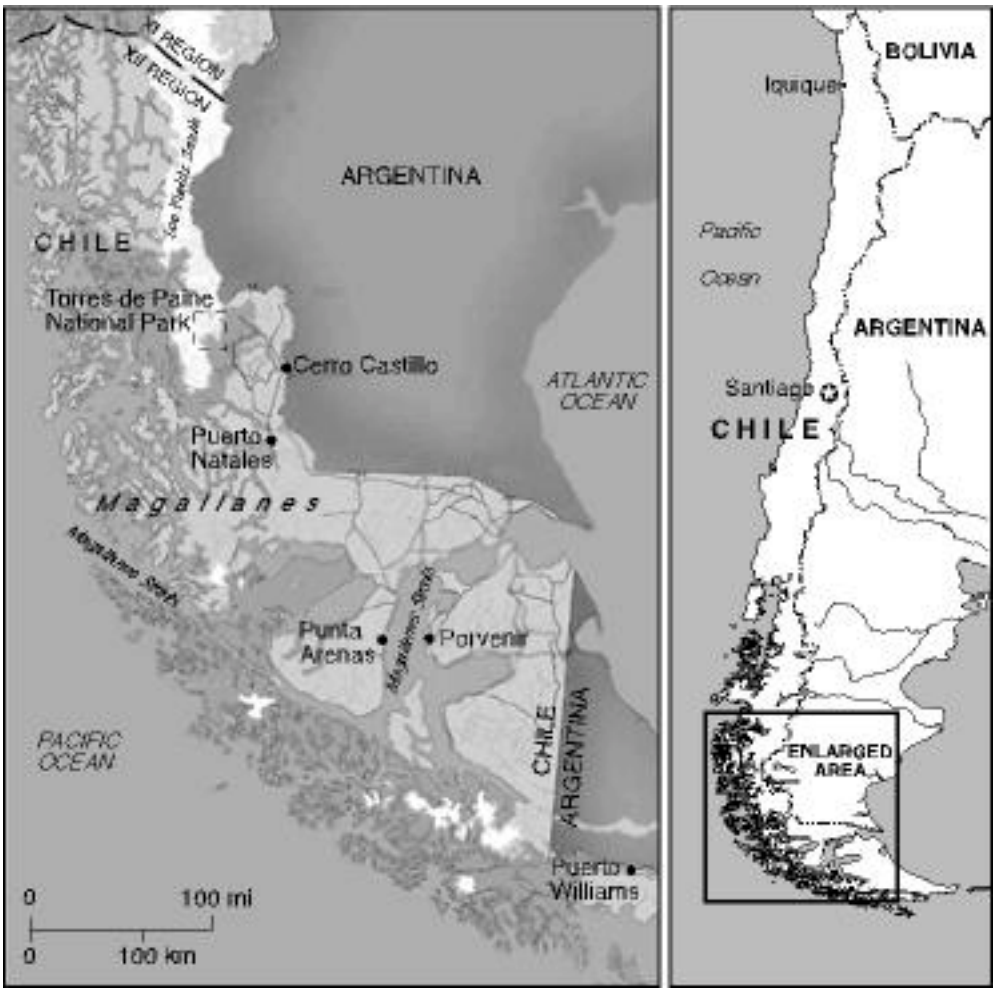
DECEMBER, 2000

PUERTO NATALES, Chile– Some landscape photographs have the ability to capture your imagination and provoke a journey, without reason other than to see it with your own eyes. For me, this happened ten years ago when I first saw a picture of Chile's Torres del Paine National Park. It was a calendar photo, which I cut out and posted near my desk wherever I worked during the past decade. This photo of granite towers stretching toward the sky and a milky, aqua-blue lake in the foreground, provided a window of inspiration so I wouldn't lose sight of my dream (going to South America) and be swallowed up by daily tasks. Recently, I finally did see the towers with my own eyes while visiting Torres del Paine in December. I discovered the landscape was even more captivating than the pictures — but to be honest, something was missing. Perhaps I expected too much, as if I were making a pilgrimage to the "holy land" looking for a greater meaning of life, while not anticipating that other simpler lessons would be learned.

Why Unique?

For orientation purposes, it is best to start off with why and where this majestic scenery exists. The geological origin of the towers is a phenomenon apart from the Andes. Twelve million years ago a granite intrusion emerged between strata of sedimentary rocks in an area known as the Magellan Basin, swelling up in a tabular formation extending 12 kilometers from east to west. Covering the horizontal intrusion was a five-kilometer layer of stratified soil. The last glacial

A classic view of Cuernos del Paine, the Horns of Paine in Torres del Paine National Park.



park is right next to the third-largest ice mass in the world and the wind has been building up strength for thousands of kilometers without anything to stop it. No wonder it's bloody cold and windy up there." The ice mass is the Patagonian Ice Field, ranked third size behind Antarctica and Greenland. The unrelenting wind, strongest in November and December, are westerly trade winds that roll across the South Pacific Ocean with nothing to slow them down.

The area is also characterized by abundant wildlife, which Simon knows well after three summers of photographing animals. His favorite subjects are pumas (mountain lions - *Felix concolor*). He is something of a puma fanatic now, and spends nearly all his time in search of the elusive cat. Other popular megafauna includes *guanacos* (a type of llama), fox, *ñandu* or rhea (a large flightless bird), black-neck swans, Chilean flamingos and condors.

period of 9,000 years ago left its mark by eroding softer rock and leaving what is now known as Torres del Paine — the Towers of Paine.

The origins of the park's name are in doubt, although the more popular explanation is that *paine* (pronounced pie-nee), meaning 'pale blue' in Tehuelche (the language of the indigenous people of this area), probably refers to the color of glacial lakes in the park. The other theory is that Paine was the name of an early Welsh climber.

The Massif Torres are independent of the Andes mountain chain located to the east of this divide and west of the Argentine pampas and nearly 300 miles north of Cape Horn. Torres del Paine is within Chile's 12th region, also known as Magallanes and Antarctica Region. It is an area sparsely populated, with only one inhabitant per square kilometer, compared to nearly ten inhabitants per square kilometer on average throughout the nation. The region represents only one percent of Chile's population, which is no surprise considering the rain, snow (1.5 to 4.5 meters per year), cool temperatures (average of 44°F) and ferocious winds that characterize the climate.

During my first evening in Puerto Natales (population 15,116; two hours south of the park) I met Simon Littlejohn, a wildlife photographer from England. "What people don't realize," he told me in his strong British accent, "is that the

About 50 pumas have their home range in the park; they feed on hares (an introduced species), *guanacos* (over 3,500 inhabit the park) and domestic sheep on ranches that surround the park. Hunting mountain lions is prohibited, but ranchers have been known to poach mountain lions that have been feeding on their sheep. Luckily, poaching incidents have been reduced over the last decade. The reason, according to Chief Naturalist Carlos Barria, is that ranchers have been replacing sheep herds with cattle. As Carlos explained to me, when neighboring ranchers made this switch, it put added pressure on the remaining sheep herds and an increase in predation upon them. This domino effect focused the attention of the pumas on the remaining sheep and park-ranger attention on the remaining sheep ranchers. As a result, sheep-raising is steadily declining near the park.

The qualities of wildlife-diversity and geological formation led to international recognition of the park as a Biosphere Reserve (not to be confused with a World Heritage Site, which I wrote about in PK-1, regarding Machu Picchu). In 1978, UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program accepted the Chilean government's nomination of Torres del Paine National Park for Biosphere Reserve status. In General, Biosphere Reserves are areas of terrestrial and coastal ecosystems constituting a world network of protected areas. They are intended to fulfill three basic functions: conservation (maintain biological diversity), development (eco-

nomic development that is ecologically sustainable) and logistics (research, monitoring, education and information exchange related to issues of conservation and development). Currently, 391 sites have been established in 94 countries. Seven are located in Chile and 47 in the United States (e.g. Glacier, Olympic and Yellowstone National Parks).

Private Lands and Businesses; Public Fees

On May 13, 1959, the Chilean government established the park beginning with 4,442 hectares and naming it *Parque Nacional de Turismo Lago Grey*. In 1961 it was expanded by 24,532 hectares and then again in 1970 by 11,000 hectares and was renamed what it is called today. Two more expansions were added in 1975 and 1979 for a total of 181,414 hectares. In a rare gesture of wildland philanthropy within South America, ranch owner Guido Monsino donated his 12,534-hectare *Estancia Río Paine* (Paine River Ranch) to the park in 1977. The former ranch buildings are now the park's administrative center. Today only one part of the park remains under private ownership, but its location and size (4,400 hectares) give it a large presence.

The private land is Cerro Paine Ranch, owned by the Kusanovic family, early pioneers in the region. Ideally located at the foot of the granite towers on the leeward side, the ranch is a mix of cattle ranching and tourism services. A 70-bed hosteria (motel), restaurant, campground and souvenir shop exist at the center of the ranch and three *refugios* (shelters that provide lodging and food) are located along the trails that radiate from the base of operations.

The center of Estancia Cerro Paine, Hosteria Las Torres.

Other private businesses exist in the park, although they are on parklands in association with the concession program at Torres del Paine. This program is more complex than that in any national park in Chile. Currently eleven contracts exist for service providers within the park. These range from boat transportation, camping sites, hotels, motels, kiosks, trekking shelters to horse rides. Contracts range in length from two to 15 years. Terms for renewing contracts differ for each one. Concession fees are paid to the government in exchange for the opportunity of operating a business on parkland in a nearly competition-free environment. Annual payments are set within each contract and range from U.S.$150 (for a kiosk) to U.S.$30,000 (for a hotel). In accordance with the park's management plan, the current level of services will not be increased. That means any further demands for lodging or food services, for example, will be located either outside the park boundary or on the private Cerro Paine Ranch within the park.

I asked park employee Jovito González, the second-in-command and Chief Ranger, about his opinion regarding the future of the park in 20 years. Like each ranger I have met at Torres, Jovito exudes pride in being stationed here — where he has spent all 24 years of his career. His no-nonsense attitude is most evident when he refers to Torres as *"el parque de los parques,"* the park of parks. He predicts in 20 years private land within the park will be like a city because Conaf (the Chilean park service) has no control over the level of development at Cerro Paine Ranch.

In addition to concession fees for businesses, entrance fees are charged for all visitors. Unlike large U.S. national parks that charge an entrance fee by vehicle, Torres has selected a per-person system where fees differ for Chileans and foreigners. A Chilean citizen or resident (I finally found a reason for becoming a resident of Chile and completing the torturous visa process) has to pay $2,500 pesos (U.S.$5) and all others must ante up $6,500 pesos (U.S.$13). Fee revenues are divided between the central government and Conaf, 75 percent goes to the state and 25 percent stays with Conaf for use by the four agencies within Conaf.

In the United States, user-fee programs have changed over the last few years. Legislation within the 1996 Appropriations Bill changed the system at a select number of National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish and Wildlife Service sites. This legislation authorized a "Recreation Fee Demonstration Program" that began as a three-year pilot project and was extended in 1999 through fiscal year 2001. By law, up to 100 sites may be selected for the program from each of the

four federal land-management agencies. Entrance fees have increased from $5 to $10 and $20 depending on the park, but now the revenue stays with the agency instead of going directly to the Treasury Department general fund. Of this revenue, 80 percent stays at the area where it was collected and 20 percent returns to the agency. The money from the fee-demonstration program is used to tackle the enormous backlog of infrastructure repairs. Thus, most projects are related to improvement and repairs of campgrounds, trails, visitor centers, sewage systems and park roads.

View of the infamous Torres del Paine from Laguna Amarga.

The millions of dollars of revenue generated have made the program relatively successful thus far and it may soon become permanent legislation. However, many public-land managers fear that when the program becomes permanent, chances are great that Congress will offset or reduce budget allocations to individual parks by the amount they receive in entrance fees. On the other hand, several environmental groups have expressed concern that park managers have and will become more development focused — rather than preservation focused — now that they have the money to improve infrastructure.

Besides an entrance fee, managers at Torres del Paine charge a climbing fee for those attempting to scale one of the towers. Fees are structured at two different levels, one for foreigners (U.S.$90 per person) and another for nationals (U.S.$50 per person). The fees collected are sent to the central government in Santiago. If a climbing party runs into trouble and park rangers perform a rescue, Conaf does not recover this money in particular. Starting this year park rangers will have assistance in rescue operations from four Carabineros (national police) that are stationed in the park. By comparison, a "Climbing Cost Recovery Fee" charged at U.S. parks such as Mount Rainier ($15 per-person-per climb) remains at the park and is used for Search and Rescue operations.

Transportation and Visitor Profiles

Three different companies operating out of Puerto Natales provide daily transportation to and from the park on a regular schedule. No internal transportation system exists within the park, except for hailing one of the regularly scheduled buses or using the Hosteria Las Torres shuttle to Cerro Paine Ranch from the park entrance at *Laguna Amarga*. In either case the ride costs U.S.$3 each way.

In comparison to transportation systems in parks from other local communities in Chile, this system is well coordinated. A North American friend of mine, Kate Hackett, who has been living in Santiago for the past year, visited the park recently using the bus system. She was so impressed by the ease of travel and the well-coordinated bus connections that she raved, "Peter, you must try visiting the park by bus." On my second visit to the park I took her advice. She was right about the ease of travel, although the transportation system at Denali National Park in Alaska is by far the best I have experienced due to the frequency of buses, information and interpretation provided by bus drivers — and low cost.

Once visitors arrive at the park their use patterns generally fall into one of seven different categories. Foreign visitors dominate the backpackers' group (70 percent). A Chilean friend of mine, Cristián Landero, hiked the Torres Circuit once (also known as the Circuit of Pain to those who complete the trail) and was amazed and partially irritated that he felt like a foreigner in his own country. Most backpackers he met during the eight-day trip were foreigners and he told me they were all surprised and delighted to meet a Chilean — for that week he was a novelty within his own country.

In 1999 people using the trails totaled 14,000, of which 10,000 were foreigners. The two most popular hiking trips are the Circuit — a seven-to-eight-day journey around the massif towers — and the "W", a three-to-four-day trek up and down the three main valleys cutting into the granite towers. To reduce backpacking impacts along trails the park has adopted the "Leave No Trace" ethic promoted by U.S.-based National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). These rules are common-sense, but are necessary to limit any further impacts on park resources. Some rules: prepare and organize your trip in advance, hike and camp on resistant ground, carry out what you carry in, leave nature

as you find it and minimize use of campfires.

Other user groups range from car campers, and mountain climbers to boaters and researchers. The two remaining use-categories of park-hotel users and day visitors are steadily increasing in numbers. Hotel patrons stay an average of two days and day visitors find lodging in Puerto Natales before and after their visits.

In 1995 tourists traveling to the 12th region totaled 133,000 foreigners and 115,000 nationals. That same year the region generated U.S.$70 million in tourism revenue, which was eight percent of the national tourism total. In particular, visitation statistics taken at the park since 1986 show visitation steadily rising. In 1986 nearly 8,000 people visited the park; in 1995 over 41,000 came. In 1999 over 63,000 people visited Torres (65 percent foreigners, 35 percent Chileans). That is nearly an eight-fold increase over a 13-year period. Of the 1999 visitation total it surprised me that only 15,000 visitors (it seems like more) arrived by public transportation through one of the three bus lines that services the park from Puerto Natales. The rest arrive by specialized bus tours, rental car or private car. No studies have been done on how much money visitors spend at the park or other socioeconomic indicators, but a student from the University of Chile, Pablo Canazza, will soon be completing such a study.

An Eye To the Future

An interdisciplinary group of Conaf employees, representatives of other governmental agencies and the local chamber of tourism developed the current management plan, approved in 1996. The planning process began with a development-perspective seminar. Participants were invited from regional, provincial and community governments, along with regional tourist service providers.

The park's first management plan was written in 1974 by a team of Conaf and U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization staff. In 1985 Conaf employees updated the plan. Torres is the only park in Chile to have gone through three planning revisions. Park planners generally call this "job security," but in this case I think it is prudent to update the plan with changing conditions in a high-profile park such as this one.

The plan divides the park into seven different management zones, which generally correlate closely to zoning categories used in the United States. These zones include primitive, extensive use, intensive use, natural recovery, special use, intangible and regulated use. However, the extensive-use and intangible zones are new to me and I still find them — well, intangible. The intensive-use zone is divided into eight subzones centered on developed areas. With each zone the plan establishes a definition, description, objectives and standards.

Besides the management zones the plan describes seven program areas in their current condition and desired future condition. Program areas include administrative support, resource protection, environmental education, maintenance, recreation, research and protection against forest fires.

The current ten-year plan, valid until year 2005, lists 21 full-time staff with 15 to 25 additional people during the summer season, including temporary park rangers, firefighters, researchers and volunteers. The plan requests 43 additional staff including nine more park rangers to add to the current eight.

It may be hard to convince concessionaire employees and tourism operators that the park needs more rangers because a common complaint I heard was that they feel the park rangers do little in the sense of proactive management. One local guide was eager to tell me that she rarely sees rangers in the field and that she encounters them only at the entrance station. While waiting for a bus at the park-entrance station one day, I saw what she was talking about as I noticed four park rangers chatting together near the

The Amarga Lagoon entrance station with food kiosk in foreground, information and fee collection trailer to the right and bus parking to the left. Buses commonly have a wire cage surrounding the windscreen to prevent cracked windows caused by rocks kicked up by the wind or passing vehicles.

gate. This is often called a ranger cluster — something to be avoided in public while in uniform. Impressions are sometimes stronger than reality and greatly influence public perception.

The management plan also lists regional projects Conaf supports on a policy level and would like to see the regional community accomplish. Construction of a much-needed central bus terminal in Puerto Natales is at the top of this list. If implemented, the project would concentrate tourism services such as transportation, travel agencies, artisan workshops and telephone services in one location.

The main visitor center at Torres del Paine National Park

At Torres del Paine the park's visitor center and administration building are on the other end of the park from the entrance station. Usually, these two facilities are near the entrance to provide information as soon possible to visitors and reduce impact on park resources (e.g. it would not be necessary for those conducting business transactions to drive to the middle of the park if the administrative office was at the park entrance or, better yet, in a nearby community). For weeks I was confused about why the park was laid out this way logistically. I asked park rangers and others knowledgeable about the park. However, none of them had the answer until one day I asked Jovito González (the Chief Ranger), who told me a new road from Puerto Natales to the park would be completed in the next several years providing a new access route. The terminus of this new road will be the park's visitor center. Whether this brilliance was planned or just plain quirk-of-fate is still a mystery to me. The new route will decrease the distance from Puerto Natales to the park by 60 kilometers from the current 150 kilometers to the Laguna Amarga entrance station.

Within the management plan park officials cite a series of limitations to achieving their objectives. Along the border of the text I noticed someone had penciled in his or her comments on the status of each limitation. A large "NO" was marked next to an entry describing the serious problems of maintaining a communications network for visitors on how to gain access to information about the park and current conditions. They have overcome this limitation by working with Puerto Natales business leaders, mostly in the area of transportation.

This bridge, which limits access across Paine River due to its narrow features, is the focus of a current conflict between Conaf and Cerro Paine Ranch.

A second entry to note was the theme of private land in the park and "...efforts by the Cerro Paine Ranch of exploiting cattle and tourists, which negatively affects the objectives and management of the park." One current sticking point is a bridge over the Paine River that provides the only vehicle access to Cerro Paine Ranch. This park-owned bridge is very narrow and any vehicles larger than a full-size pickup truck are too wide to fit between the bridge railings. The ranch owners have asked Conaf to build a new bridge to better serve the visitors, but Conaf refuses to do so, maintaining the only ones to benefit are the ranch owners. Resolution of the issue will probably be fought out in the political arena

with little concern for impacts on natural resources, but rather with far greater concern about economic opportunities — as often happens in high-profile parks.

Pilgrimage of Sorts

More than likely, the top three places to visit on a South American journey are Machu Picchu, Torres del Paine and Iguazú Falls (along the Brazil-Argentine border). Each captivates the imagination and provokes a greater sense of appreciation for the power of nature and awe of past cultures. For me a simple photo set off a ten-year obsession for seeing towers of granite in a park halfway around the world. However, as it turned out, the scenery provoked more than appreciation, but also provided a lesson. So what did I learn? That to be happy you have to do what *you* want (sometimes it is easier to know it than to actually say or do it) and not what others tell you to do or make you feel you should do. In the end it is you who has to live with the decision and either regret it or experience the joy and happiness of following your own path. ❑

Icebergs in Grey Lake broken off from the Patagonian Ice Field.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITITES

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 2001-2002) • **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.

Whitney Mason (January 1999-2001) • **TURKEY**

A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the Vladivostok News and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.

Jean Benoît Nadeau (December 1999-2000) • **FRANCE**

A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."

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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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; Sub-Saharan Africa; Mideast/North Africa; South Asia; Europe/Russia

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