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HEADLINE: Rain Forest Gift Raises Suspicions; Rich American Wants to Build Public Refuge; Chileans Fear the Worst

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BODY:

The Ugly American, the implacable foe whose environmental schemes so imperil the Chilean economy, does not make a grand entrance. Emerging unannounced from a field, wearing a green corduroy shirt and chinos, he could be one of his laborers breaking for lunch.

Slight and bearded, Douglas Tompkins seems about as threatening as Thoreau. So much has been said about his controversial conservation efforts here that one's first impression is that this American multimillionaire, the great menace to Chilean nationalists, is smaller than life. "We have been 'over-dimensionalized,'" Tompkins explains, almost apologizing for not living up to his infamy.

Six years ago, Tompkins, the founder of the Esprit clothing chain, bought a large ranch in this remote corner of the world, 600 miles south of the capital, Santiago, with no other intention than to spend six months a year in an agreeable, open place. But the sale of Esprit had provided him with deep pockets, and Tompkins soon realized that the area he had chosen provided a rare combination for a well-to-do preservationist: It had large tracts of available land, often at modest prices, and it was in the middle of one of the world's great remaining temperate rain forests.

Slowly and with little publicity, Tompkins began purchasing land. He eventually set up a foundation, the first step in what he hoped would be creation of a national park, presented free of charge to the Chileans with the proviso that it be declared a natural sanctuary. But two years ago, when news of his plan began circulating, Tompkins and his park became the focus of a national debate so heated that a calm discussion of its merits is all but impossible.

His project, which is known as Pumalin Park, would extend from the Argentine border westward to the Gulf of Ancud, which empties into the Pacific Ocean -- in effect dividing the country north to south. Even though he has promised to donate the park to a private foundation administered by Chileans, the fact that he was buying enough land to split the narrow country in two proved so contentious that the sale of the last parcel has been blocked since March.

In the heat of the debate, Tompkins has been accused, improbably, of razing forests, setting up a nuclear dump, promoting abortion and even importing Israeli commandos. He has angered priests, spooked generals and been converted to Judaism by Chile's neo-Nazis.

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How could philanthropy produce such a colossal misunderstanding? Why is Chile rejecting a gift from Tompkins of such magnitude, a 741,000-acre project that aims to preserve one of the world's few temperate coastal rain forests, at no cost to the state?

Who is demonizing Douglas Tompkins?

The questions loom over this misty landscape like the volcano Michimahida, part of which Tompkins now owns, along with the rivers, peaks, valleys, forests and everything else in sight.

The most common answer, especially in international environmental circles where the saga is closely followed, is that the project has stalled because powerful business groups and their allies in government fear large-scale land preservation. It is the response Tompkins favors.

"Some ministers are just torpedoing this project, and that's all there is to it," said Tompkins, 53, a life-long adventurer who now dedicates part of his fortune to preservation. "They don't want it because there is an anti-green element in Chile."

But part of the problem, even according to some of his associates, is that Tompkins seems to court enemies in the business community. In an early and telling battle, he attacked the salmon industry, which employs 17,000 Chileans and is held up as one of the country's great success stories. Tompkins offered a reward to anyone who could prove salmon fisheries were killing sea lions and even commissioned a private study on the matter.

He is now producing a book on deforestation in Chile, a sensitive and seldom examined issue because forestry is the country's second most important industry, after mining.

But even if business interests are behind the proposed park's problems -- as some senior government officials privately acknowledge -- the Tompkins misadventure in Chile is more than just a story about a good deed punished by mighty, anonymous men in suits. If his reception has been hostile, it is also because Tompkins's vision clashes with the country's successful economic model and even its moral underpinnings, because his methods seemed secretive and fed the paranoia of nationalists, and because the very qualities that made him a successful businessman in the United States became liabilities in the Southern Cone.

His idea, to Chilean eyes, is too new, too big, too strange.

"This kind of philanthropy doesn't exist in Latin America -- giving without getting something in return. And that has created enormous suspicions," said Miguel Stutzin, the president of the National Committee for the Defense of Fauna and Flora, Chile's oldest and most organized environmental group.

"This was a controversy before it was a project," said a senior government official who, like others in the administration of President Eduardo Frei, requested anonymity when discussing Tompkins. "Any political analyst would have said this is too sophisticated, too avant-garde. Tompkins Inc. did not come here and say, 'I am buying this land.' It was all diffuse. It was all complex. It was, 'What is this?'"

Even ardent supporters say Tompkins undermined the project with his behavior. "He acted with Yankee innocence," one close associate said. "The principal obstacle for Douglas Tompkins has been Douglas Tompkins. His strength is his perseverance and his force of will, but that sometimes becomes arrogance. And in Latin America, arrogance is not looked upon kindly, especially if it comes from an American."

An astute businessman, Tompkins believed his project would sell itself. But that ignored the inevitable political consequences of a project that was bound to unsettle a lot of important people, including industrialists who were alarmed at the growing influence of the environmental movement and nationalists who were anxious about a division of the country.

"He thought that people would open doors," said Guido Girardi, a congressman and leading environmentalist, "but he didn't realize that he was at the center of a political hurricane."

In a country where exploiting natural resources is the principal industry and where a sparse population has always been a national security issue, Tompkins represents an environmental doctrine that argues in favor of depopulating land so it can be preserved in its natural state. That not only challenges private industry and military doctrine here, but also the government and its development programs.

"We look at the environmental side, but we are definitely not on the track of conservation," said Vivianne Blanlot, Chile's environmental commissioner. "We are not interested in preserving biodiversity to the point of

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saying we are going to have a large segment of the territory unpopulated."

And that, in effect, is what Tompkins stands for. He is an adherent of Deep Ecology -- that is the name of his foundation in the United States -- which views the biosphere as a single, integrated creation in which humans are just one of many interdependent creatures. Deep Ecology has been easy to caricature in a conservative country where the Judeo-Christian tradition -- which places man above animals, not to mention trees -- is protected by the constitution.

This nationalist and even Christian argument against Tompkins has been quietly and effectively promoted by the lumber, mining, energy and fishing interests. The engines of Chile's economy, these conglomerates tend to view the growing environmental movement as an increasingly powerful enemy.

"Lumber companies are cutting from the south to the north, and he has placed a barrier in between," said Manuel Baquedano, president of the Institute for Political Ecology and one of the country's most outspoken environmentalists.

What little support Tompkins had in Congress has now disappeared. "He is a little arrogant, so what happens?" said another senior government official. The business class "start seeing him as the financial backer of fundamentalist environmentalists. He is seen as the rooster crowing behind everything."

Here in Renihue, Tompkins seems removed from the crisis. If there is a hurricane, he is in the eye. With his wife, Kris McDivitt Tompkins -- the former chief executive of the Patagonia Inc. outdoor clothing chain -- the couple live a seemingly idyllic life, constructing their compound on the lush coast, working on infrastructure at the preserve, developing the park and trying their best to ignore the rumblings from Santiago. Renihue has a school for employees' children, with two full-time teachers, and the plan is to make it a self-sustaining colony.

Tompkins has accepted that buying the last parcel, which would join the north and south tracts, is now a remote possibility. He is considering several options, including using boats to link the two properties. Chile still has no law on the management of private parks -- the proposed legislation is another victim of the saga -- and legally Tompkins can do what he wishes with his private property.

The irony, Tompkins said, is that his project is an attempt to bring the land closer to the Chilean people, not take it away, as his foes claim. He does not excuse any of his actions, including the attack on the salmon industry or the book in progress, although he acknowledged that things got out of hand.

"I'm sure there were hundreds of options," he said of his tactics. "We could have done a little of this or a little of that. But it just kind of turned out this way. We ended up being at the center of a national polemic over environment and development."

GRAPHIC: Map, larry fogel; Photo, gabriel escobar, Americans Douglas and Kris Tompkins have met powerful resistance to their plan for a nature preserve. Tompkins's proposed Pumalin nature preserve would include huge tracts of land in a region of fjords and mountains.

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