

The Legacy of Doug Tompkins

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We have to know the story behind each thing we use. Each log we burn. Each cup we drink from. Each fence we build. Each sweater we wear. Each brick we lay.¹

—Douglas R. Tompkins (1943—2015)

Doug Tompkins was first and foremost a conservationist, yet he emphasized the importance of thinking deeply about every aspect of human life and of engaging in activism on every front. His life's work was devoted to saving Earth's biodiversity—its breathtaking variety of life-forms and places—by buying vast tracts of land and creating strictly protected areas. He was also committed to ecological restoration and rewilding, by means of healing degraded grasslands and deforested places, repatriating species, and reintroducing natural processes to the land. As well, Doug was immersed in agroecology projects in the vicinity of protected landscapes: he supported farming initiatives that work in respectful interface with wild nature, raise farm animals with care, and sustain pure water and robust soils in order to grow, in his words, “organic, tasty, and healthy food.”² He was also steeped in citizen activism and public education—fighting destructive development and producing remarkable books that feature essays by some of the staunchest environmental thinkers and activists of our time. Even in the midst of such intense, time-consuming engagements, Doug remained an ardent reader of ecological and eco-philosophical literature. And he was a keen outdoorsman—rock climber, skier, mountaineer, hiker, and kayaker—from his teenage years to the day of his death.

Doug was the founder of the renowned company North Face and co-founder of the clothes-and-accessory outfit Esprit. After two decades in the business world, he recognized that his heart was not in it. “My zeal for business began to fade away,” he wrote. “I came to realize that the production and promotion of consumer products not vital to anyone's needs were as much part of the eco-social crisis as anything.”³ In 1990 he left that world with a lot more money than the average retiree. His mission became to use his fortune for a higher purpose, for he believed that wealthy people have a special obligation to give back.⁴ Over the course of the next 25

¹ Douglas R. Tompkins, “The Next Economy: Transitions from Globalization to Eco-Localism,” last modified 3 February 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nz2OSye6PMU&noredirect=1>.

² *Ibid.*

³ Quoted in Edward Humes, *Eco Barons: The New Heroes of Environmental Activism* (New York: Ecco, 2009), 47.

⁴ Tompkins Conservation Fund, “A Capital Campaign for Creating New National Parks and Restoring Wildlife” (brochure).

years, Doug and his wife, Kristine McDivitt Tompkins, acquired and placed in permanent conservation well over two million acres in their beloved Patagonia. Through the nonprofits they established, and working with many other partners and three different presidents, the Tompkinses helped create five new national parks in Chile and Argentina—an ongoing endeavor with the aspiration to double the number of parks that will be donated, in the near future, to the people of those nations. Doug was fond of calling national parks “the gold-standard of conservation,” because of the strict level of protection they provide for flora and fauna, ecologies, and natural processes. The sheer acreage, regional variety, and biological treasures of the national parks that Doug and Kris Tompkins have created stand as an unprecedented accomplishment in the history of conservation.

During the course of their conservation work, the Tompkinses had to overcome enormous resistance from some South American politicians, businessmen, and pundits who eyed them suspiciously as foreigners with a hidden agenda. It took years of perseverance and consistent public communication through the media about the value of parks for preserving biodiversity to turn the tide and convince the public that conserving land harboured no ulterior motive—it was all about giving away everything for the sake of the Earth, human well-being, and future generations.⁵ “Why do you give all your money away?” Doug was asked in an interview. “What would you do with it?” he replied with a smile, “Fiddle while Rome burns?”⁶

Doug’s environmental philanthropy reached beyond buying and protecting land from development to include the complementary long-term tasks of restoration and rewilding. The Tompkins Conservation team of biologists, veterinarians, farmers, laborers, rangers, administrators, and volunteers established native and endangered plant nurseries to restock degraded landscapes; undertook reforestation and grasslands restoration projects; removed livestock from acquired lands to allow the land to heal; removed hundreds of miles of fences so wildlife can move freely; and built nature centers, campgrounds, and trails for park visitors. The heart of the Tompkins-led rewilding program are initiatives to replenish and reintroduce endangered and rare species, including giant anteaters, pampas deer, collared peccaries, green-winged macaws, huemul deer, Darwin’s rheas, and maned wolves, among others. There is also hope that through a captive breeding program (now in its early stages), the regionally extirpated jaguar might be repatriated to the Iberá marshlands of northern Argentina.

Activism necessarily included two components for Doug: on-the-ground battles against the destruction of nature and changing people’s minds and hearts through education about the root causes of the ecological crisis. Regarding the first type of activism, Doug and his allies

⁵ For the fascinating details of that history, see Humes, *Eco Barons*, 17-91.

⁶ Journeyman Pictures, “Buying-Up Eden,” 1999, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnE51selzAQ>.

fought for more than seven years to stop a massive proposed hydroelectric development that would have dammed wild rivers in Chilean Patagonia. He also did not shy away from opposing practices of industrial forestry and industrial agriculture, or legally challenging the degradation of seas and land by factory farms. To stimulate and revitalize local economies, Doug supported organic farming, ecotourism, local crafts, and locally produced energy. On the front of intellectual activism, through his Foundation for Deep Ecology (FDE), Doug financed and actively participated in the creation of 25 environmental books—many of them large, photo-format works—that educate about environmental challenges, agitate for social change, and advance the conservation cause through pictures of and stories about the national parks he helped establish.

Doug argued that without sustained systemic analysis there will be no fundamental social change and historical redirection—just shallow, piecemeal, technologically-mediated “Band-aid reforms.”⁷ The FDE books reflect Doug’s holistic worldview: they couple world-class photography with inspiring essays, and are dedicated both to revealing the beauty of the natural world and showing the ugliness of industrial carnage. The published works “document various ecological outrages,”⁸ as he put it, such as deforestation, industrial agriculture, confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs), mega-scale dam building, public lands livestock grazing, motorized recreation, mountaintop removal mining, and overpopulation, and they were linked with activist campaigns on these issues. Others of these books acclaim the lush beauty of wilderness by showcasing the created parks. For Doug the beauty of this Earth was the bottom line—not a gateway into otherworldly religion but the tangible manifestation of the divine.

Through book publishing, as well as his generous support of public forums, teach-ins and workshops, and South and North American environmental organizations, Doug sought to spread the philosophy of “biospherical egalitarianism”—viz., the self-evident, inherent goodness of all life co-flourishing. He was profoundly influenced by the thought of Arne Naess, who would also become a close friend of the Tompkinses. Through FDE and an editorial team of leading deep ecological scholars, Doug saw through the publication of *The Selected Works of Arne Naess*.⁹ As a deep ecologist, he was a relentless critic of the domination of nature entrenched by an arrogant techno-industrial civilization. “Wherever we look closely at the most egregious assaults on the Earth’s beauty and integrity,” he wrote, “we find that the abusive

⁷ Douglas R. Tompkins, “Foreword,” *The Energy Reader: Overdevelopment and the Delusion of Endless Growth*, eds. Tom Butler, Daniel Lerch, and George Wuerthner (Watershed Media, 2012), x.

⁸ Douglas R. Tompkins, “Foreword,” *The CAFO Reader: The Tragedy of Industrial Animal Factories*, ed. Daniel Imhoff (Watershed Media, 2010), ix.

⁹ Harold Glasser and Alan Drengson, eds., *The Selected Works of Arne Naess*, 10 vols. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005).

behavior flows from the same cause: a technological and industrial approach to production, land management, recreation, and other economic activity. Time and again we are struck by the fact that this reductionist, narrow, techno-industrial paradigm when applied to a production system ends up diminishing nature, accelerating its demise, and unbalancing ecosystems.”¹⁰

He advocated that every industrial incursion should be confronted where it occurs, but in our analysis we must “connect the dots,” seeing clearly the ways in which the huge challenges of our time are entirely connected. In this vein, Doug repeatedly called to all activists to apply themselves to diligent study and thinking. He was adamant about the need for a revolution in worldview toward ecocentrism, and for restructuring civilization in its entirety. He argued that we must “reshape all of our social, environmental, political, cultural, and educational ethics under an umbrella which values richness and diversity of all life forms.”¹¹ Thus, he was also uncompromising in his opposition to certain contemporary environmental fads to monetize nature in the name of “saving” it and to recast the ecological crisis—which Doug diagnosed as fundamentally an *ethical* crisis—as a loss of so-called ecosystem services and natural capital. “If our species is causing other species to go extinct,” he pointed out, “then we can say for certain our culture is not ‘sustainable’ and our activities not ethical.”¹²

What underlies Doug’s remarkable contribution was his refusal to parcel the world into separate silos—championing protected natural areas, on the one hand, while conceding other landscapes and seascapes as sacrifice zones for industrial agriculture, fishing, or forestry, on the other. Nor did he believe that while biodiversity merits protection, it is permissible to reduce farm animals to production units.¹³ Doug never approached nature’s flourishing in disconnection from human wellness and involvement. Rather, he supported local economies through conservation and farming projects and valorized artisanal and handmade products. He advocated the importance of rallying the support of communities for the greatest imperative of our time: to stop the extinction crisis, which he called “the Mother of All Crises” because of the patent immorality and irreversible finality of destroying life-forms. “Everyone is needed,” he urged, for the great work of ending extinction. And he astutely noted that “if there ever was a growth industry, *restoration is it.*” Indeed, to open our eyes to the destruction and degradation of life underway is to agree with him that “centuries of meaningful work lie ahead for people

¹⁰ Tompkins, “Foreword,” *CAFO Reader*, ix.

¹¹ Douglas R. Tompkins, interview by Jan van Boeckel, Berkley, California, 1997.

¹² Douglas R. Tompkins, “Afterword,” *Protecting the Wild: Parks and Wilderness, The Foundation for Conservation*, ed. George Wuerthner, Eileen Crist, and Tom Butler (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2015), 280.

¹³ In his Foreword to *The CAFO Reader*, Doug wrote that applying the logic of industrialism to farm animals produces “the kind of atrocity for which the word *evil* seems too meek and mild” (x, original emphasis original).

who love restoration and love the Earth.”¹⁴ Everywhere around the planet human beings are awakening to this possibility. Douglas Tompkins’ legacy on every front is groundwork for planetary awakening.

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¹⁴ Tompkins, “The Next Economy,” 2014.