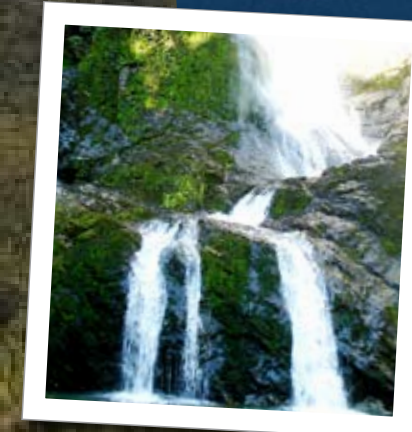


Save The World Buy It!

BILLIONAIRES WORLDWIDE ARE BUYING UP ENTIRE ECOSYSTEMS AND TURNING THEM INTO CONSERVATION AREAS AND NATIONAL PARKS. THEIR GOAL? TO SLOW GLOBAL WARMING AND ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHE. **JONATHAN FRANKLIN** LOOKS AT THE GROWING HERD OF "ECO BARONS."

THIS IS AFRICA

THIS PAGE: Cruising into the vast expanse of the Kalahari
OPPOSITE:
FROM TOP: Breakfast at Vumbura Plains; An African elephant; A scorpion poised for attack on the palm of a Bushman

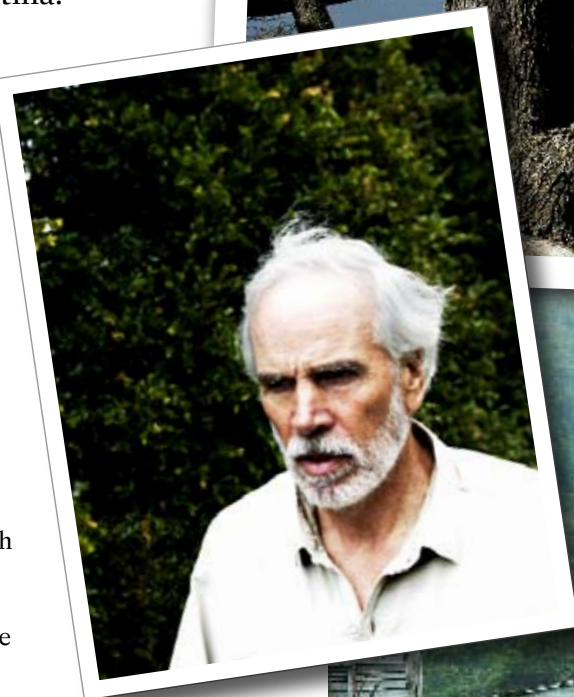


SEBASTIAN PIÑERA IS ONE OF the richest men in Chile. The man responsible for introducing credit cards to Chile, he owns South America's most successful airline, as well as large-scale real estate developments. Now, he has added what every chic billionaire needs to his haul: a private ecosystem. ¶

Parque Tantauco, which Piñera created last year, is 120,000 windswept hectares on Chiloé Island, near Patagonia. Piñera has pledged to make the conservation of offshore blue whales and inland virgin forests a major priority. ¶ Piñera is not alone. Millions of acres worldwide are being bought by business leaders and placed in private charities, conservation trusts, or handed over to governments as a gift. ¶ "It is pretty hard for a country to turn down a gift of 300,000 hectares," explains Douglas Tompkins, 64, the "dean" of the new eco barons, who has spent the last decade and US\$200 million spearheading a new movement called Wildlands Philanthropy. Tompkins has bought or organised the purchase of about 25 properties covering 890,000 hectares of Chile and Argentina.

He earned his fortune with outdoor retailer The North Face and fashion label Esprit. He was cruising in the top levels of the jetset, with a huge estate in San Francisco's Pacific Heights and a world-renowned art collection. Then he came across the concept of "deep ecology," the philosophy pioneered by Norwegian Arne Naess that calls for a radical re-evaluation of man's relationship with the planet. Tompkins was an instant convert: he sold the estate, the art and went to live in Southern Chile in a rough wooden cabin. For a year he lived simply, with no electricity and no modern interference.

Today, Tompkins combines these two worlds. He and his wife, Kristi McDivitt, former CEO of outdoor clothing company Patagonia, have focused their efforts on building coalitions of funders, environmentalists and governments to



"I asked what was out there. Nothing, they said, only idiots go there"

JACK'S CAMP

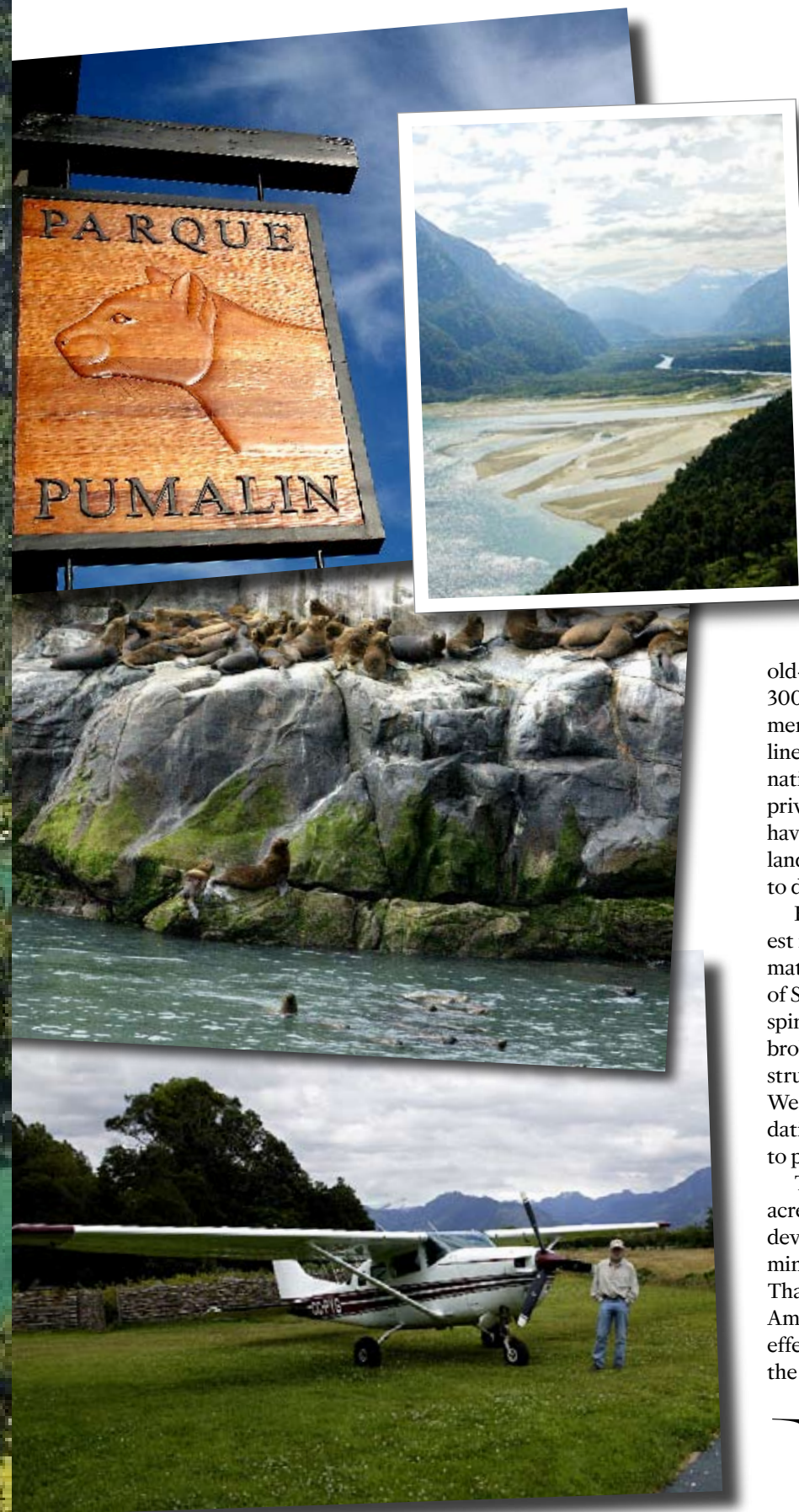
OPPOSITE: Walking with the Bushmen

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP:

Super, the lead guide at Jack's Camp; Lamp-lit dinner; Owners Ralph and Catherine Bousfield; The traditional safari tents in an oasis of palm trees



*Breakfast for the
meerkats is
scorpions and grubs*



create national parks. “There are more and more of these projects,” says McDivitt. “People are very interested in leaving something more permanent than a wing on a museum. And, really, how many Citation jets can you own?”

The couple have created the Parque Nacional Corcovado in Chile and Parque Nacional Monte Leon in Argentina (www.patagonialandtrust.org). Plans for two additional parks are nearing completion. “In Argentina, we had a big blow-up

over the purchase of conservation lands,” explains Tompkins. “Then we pointed out, to the ministries and to the president [Nestor Kirchner], saying, ‘Hey, look guys. We are taking land from the private sector – sometimes buying it from foreigners – and giving it back to the state.’ That has a tendency to quell a lot of waters.”

Tompkins describes Swiss art magnate and philanthropist Ernst Beyeler as a key ally in these land purchases. “Ernst helped my wife buy Chacabuco (part of the next Chilean national park) in Patagonia,” says Tompkins. “He organised fundraisers in Switzerland and I consider him the one of the best Swiss conservation philanthropists that I know.”

At the centre of the Tompkins’ conservation efforts is Parque Pumalin (www.parquepumalin.cl), a pristine wooded ecosystem that includes volcanoes, old-growth forests and hot springs. The parks 300,000 hectares are off limits to all development except small scale enterprises like Pillan, a line of organic honey. “I fundamentally believe in national parks,” says Tompkins. “I don’t believe in private parks. I believe that nations do best and have done best when they really value their parklands and areas that are off limits/out of bounds to development.”

Hansjörg Wyss, one of Switzerland’s richest men, agrees. After amassing a fortune estimated at US\$8 billion from his position as CEO of Synthes – a company that produces artificial spinal discs and specialised nails for repairing broken bones – Wyss tackled a far larger reconstructive project: the wild areas of the American West. Through his foundation (www.wyssfoundation.org), Wyss has donated millions of dollars to preserve wild lands in Utah and Montana.

The Wyss Foundation saved thousands of acres in the Rocky Mountains of Montana from development by simply offering to buy up the mineral rights from the mining companies. Thanks to Wyss’ understanding of corporate America, the foundation discovered a strategy to effectively pay the oil and gas companies to leave the area.

EVEN INVESTMENT BANKERS Goldman Sachs have caught the bug. In 2003, Goldman Sachs received 270,000 hectares of forests in Southern Chile and Argentina as a result of a bankruptcy settlement. “It was part of a large package of distressed debt. Of course, we knew about it when we bought it. Then we started asking, ‘What do we do with a million acres of forest at the end of the earth?’ We had to get out an atlas,” says Lawrence Linden, an advisory director at the bank, with a laugh. “Goldman Sachs in an

**MEET THE
NEIGHBOURS**
**CLOCKWISE
FROM BOTTOM
LEFT:** A Bushman
smokes some
home-grown
tobacco; A
woodland
kingfisher; Hippo
heaven; Off road
is the only way
to go; A bird’s-eye
view of the
Kalahari;
A meerkat colony
rises early for
breakfast

investment bank, so we know what to do with shopping malls and apartment complexes. But an ecosystem down in Tierra del Fuego? So we called in the Nature Conservancy to study the land and they came back with the conclusion that it was actually a very valuable piece of land from an environmental point of view.”

TODAY, THE GOLDMAN Sachs land is one of the last remaining pieces of alpine and coastal beech or lenga – the largest intact stands in South America – and home to the guanaco, a llama-like animal that roams the forest. With winds that regularly gust to 100km per hour, the forest is particularly fragile. Due to the low temperatures, the lenga grows slowly, reaching 20 metres only after 200 years. Industrial forestry projects or clear cutting would be like stripping away thousands of years of evolution. Linden spoke passionately about the forests of Tasmania and New Zealand’s South Island, more like an inveterate backpacker than a suit-and-tie banker. “If you look at it,” he said. “There are very few old-growth forests in the southern hemisphere.”

Goldman Sachs raised an US\$18 million endowment for the park and works closely with the parks manager, the Wildlife Conservation Society. “We didn’t want this to be a burden on the taxpayers,” says Pete Rose of Goldman Sachs. “This is not a question of preserving pristine wilderness; this is about using 21st-century science to maintain it.”

The Goldman Sachs decision was the latest example of a long tradition of land conservation in the US, of which Tompkins considers himself the modern heir. “Despite my great disappointment in US foreign policy, I am very proud of the American tradition of wild land conservation,” says Tompkins. “It is the best tradition and example of land conservation in the world. It goes back a long way. Every single national park had some component of private philanthropy.”

In Europe, eco barons are also spending millions on land conservation. Dutch businessman Paul Fentener van Vlissingen, who died in 2006, was a leading figure in the European eco baron movement. From his 33,000-hectare estate in Scotland, which he proudly advertised as perpetually open to the public, Van Vlissingen managed supermarket chains, energy companies and investment trusts. However, his passion was Africa’s beleaguered national parks.

In barely two years, Vlissingen poured million’s of dollars into the then-incomplete Marakele National Park in South Africa, a job what would likely have taken over a decade without his backing. Today, Marakele is part of a far bigger park system and healthy home to classic African wildlife,

including elephant, white and black rhinoceros, buffalo, hyena, cheetah, wild dog, giraffe and eland. To consolidate his philosophy Van Vlissingen helped create the African Parks Foundation (www.africanparks-conservation.com), an NGO that continues to reinforce the infrastructure and funding for national parks in Africa.

Before his death from cancer last year, Van Vlissingen was widely considered the richest man in Scotland, and the nation’s largest landowner. But, he refused the latter title. “You can’t own a place like this,” he said. “It belongs to the planet. I’m only the guardian.” **T**



HEADLINE

WHAT DOES AN ECOSYSTEM COST?

Prices are skyrocketing in Patagonia. When conservationists bought 70,000 hectares several years ago, they paid about US\$10 million. Current listings include 2,000 hectares on the waterfront for US\$1.7 million and 9,000 hectares for US\$12 million.

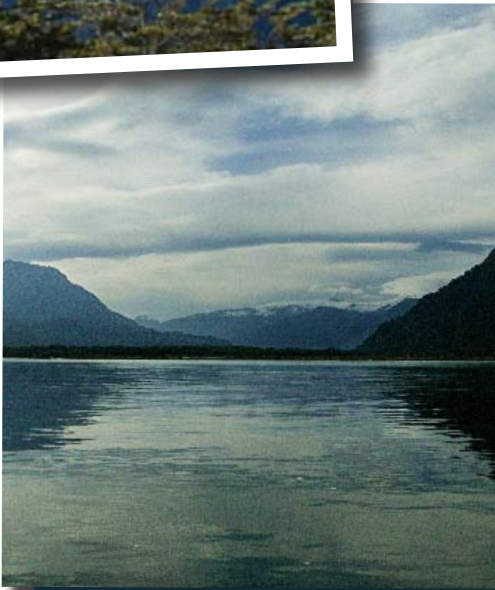
WHO SELLS ECOSYSTEMS?

Want to fantasise about your own eco preservation park? Browse these three websites, where you can find Central Park-sized chunks of virgin land for the price of a new BMW or Porsche. www.allsouthernchile.com www.patagoniarealestate.com www.patagonias.net/real-estate

HOW TO VOLUNTEER

IN CHILE Calling students, professionals and retirees to Patagonia. Parque Pumalin and other Douglas Tompkins’ projects are looking for volunteers info@theconservationlandtrust.org

IN AFRICA If you are interested in volunteering for African Parks Foundation for a minimum of three months, send your CV with a letter volunteer@ubmc.nl.



Breakfast for the meerkats is scorpions and grubs



BACK-TO-BASE
CLOCKWISE,
FROM FAR

RIGHT: Returning to camp – and watching for hungry lions; Gourmet food; The quaint lounge is full of books and artefacts