



Moneyed eco-warriors are buying up great swathes of wilderness to leave an environmental legacy for future generations. But are their actions causing more harm than good?

WHEN DOUGLAS TOMPKINS STEPS

into his garden, mowing the lawn is probably the furthest thing from his mind. His private backyard – a whopping 670,000 acres of untouched Chilean rainforest – stretches deep into the distance.

The multi-millionaire founder of the Esprit clothing chain sold his stake in the company and promptly started buying up huge areas of unspoiled Chilean wilderness. Once a management plan is firmly in place, he plans to endow the people of Chile with the land conserved forever as a national park.

Tompkins is part of a growing trend of western philanthropists who use their personal fortunes to buy enormous tracts of land in countries where they feel that governments are failing to safeguard their natural heritage.

It's a popular trend. Celebrity benefactors like Jane Fonda and Michael Douglas have all jetted down to South America to do their bit for the planet, and UK Conservative Party deputy treasurer Johan Eliasch has bagged himself some prime Amazon rainforest in Brazil. Multi-millionaire owner of Makro and Calor Gas, Paul van Vlissingen, presides over a large chunk of Scotland in addition to being the driving force behind African Parks Foundation (APF), which oversees the running of several of the continent's national parks.

But there is trouble brewing in privately owned paradise, where a growing voice of dissent is questioning the implications of big money conservation, particularly its impact on local people. Eliasch, for example, purchased a 400,000-acre plot of Amazonian rainforest in Brazil from a

logging company. A noble way, perhaps, to divest yourself of a few million dollars, but to the 1,000 or so impoverished loggers who have just lost their livelihoods, his benevolence might smack of 'green imperialism'. So how best to balance the needs of local and indigenous peoples with the long-term aims of conservationists?

IN A CULTURE where preserving natural resources is something of an alien concept, Douglas Tompkins has gathered a storm of controversy along with his acres, with outraged leaders saying he has turfed people off their land and that his park, Pumalin, constitutes a national security threat (it borders Argentina). Admittedly, Chile's view of environmental do-gooders is arguably skewed by the country's incredible, post-Pinochet commercial development rush and few in government appear to be stepping back to consider what this boom means for the country's vast natural resources.

Tompkins denies the notion that he might have forced anyone from their

homes, arguing that impoverished landowners rushed to sell him their unworkable farmland. When the Chilean government bought the remaining tract of rainforest that separated the two divisions of Tompkin's park, it seemed that a communication breakdown might ensue between opposing parties, but an accord has finally been reached with Tompkins putting a plan in place to give the land to a Chilean foundation, which in turn will be directed by a board made up of Chileans and Tompkins.

Paul van Vlissingen is a billionaire businessman and part of one of The Netherlands' wealthiest families. He is also terminally ill with cancer, which hastened



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his decision to leave behind protected land areas, or “museums of the planet” as he calls them, after he is gone.

Van Vlissingen is seeking to do this by managing several national parks in Africa, a continent where governments often struggle to meet people's basic everyday needs. One of the African Park Foundation's recent projects is the Omo National Park in Ethiopia's southwest, near the border with Sudan and Kenya.

APF TOOK over the running of the park in 2005. Its 4,062-square-kilometre area spans mountains, grassland and acacia forests. It is the home of buffalo, giraffe, elephant and cheetah. But it is also the centuries-old tribal land of the Mursi people.

According to estimates by Conservation Refugees and Survival International (CRSI), a human rights organisation dedicated to helping tribal people under threat defend their lives and lands, around

50,000 Mursi are in danger of being forcibly displaced. CRSI's Miriam Ross says that van Vlissingen's foundation has consistently refused to recognise and guarantee the land rights of the Mursi, saying it would not “interfere in the policies of a sovereign government”.

“But it's not good enough for APF to say that the matter is up to the government,” argues Ross.

WILL HURD agrees. He is the director of a small non-profit group called Native Solutions to Conservation Refugees, which was established in response to a plea for help from the Mursi. “As soon as the park boundary legalisation process is finished, the tribal people will become illegal squatters on their own land.”

“We have no intention of asking them to leave” responds APF's Richard Burge, who looks after long-term financing for the organisation. “The Mursi have got the short end of life's stick for 50 or 60 years

now and, quite rightly, they are suspicious of anyone coming in as an authority figure. We're working with them to slowly produce a long-term strategy, but that takes time.”

He points out that their work in Zambia has kept tribes as part of the “biological fabric” of the landscape. “If people were part of it, they stay a part of it. The needs of local people are crucial to us. Without them we can not work and the parks will die.”

Hurd is dismissive of their promises. “APF's standard response is that all these matters so crucial to the Mursi will be negotiated. But what kind of ‘negotiation’ is it in which one side has all the financial and political power and the other has no legally enforceable rights at all?”

Some suggest that the trend towards environmental philanthropy is nothing more than colonialism under a green flag. “If local people's land rights are not respected and control of decisions over their lives are taken away from them, then green imperialism is an appropriate term,” says Ross.

“This idea of protected areas without people is an American model, based on the romantic idea of wilderness as a place without people,” adds Hurd. “But indigenous people can help maintain bio-diversity. Where they have been removed, the bio-diversity has declined.”

THE CONCEPT of wilderness untouched by human hands is often showcased as an environmental ideal. What it doesn't address is the fact that the western world has contributed so heavily to its destruction in the first place.

“It is odd that a people who are also the primary players in climate change, the biggest threat to biodiversity,” says Hurd, “have channelled their worries about the environment into saving particular areas and plant and animal species, but seem unwilling collectively to do something about the real problem they are creating: climate change.” ■