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# PROTECTING THE WILD

## PARKS AND WILDERNESS, THE FOUNDATION FOR CONSERVATION

## AFTERWORD

DOUGLAS R. TOMPKINS

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### PROTECTING THE WILD: PARKS AND WILDERNESS, THE FOUNDATION FOR CONSERVATION

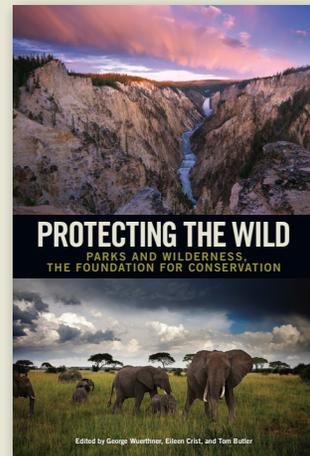
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**DOUGLAS R. TOMPKINS** is a wilderness advocate, mountaineer, organic farmer, and conservationist. For more than two decades, he has worked alongside his wife, Kristine Tompkins, to restore degraded farms and to establish large-scale protected areas, including new national parks in Argentina and Chile. Through a family foundation, Tompkins supports environmental activism in North and South America and has published numerous conservation activism-related books and a series of photo-format books focused on parklands, the most recent of which is *Iberá: The Great Wetlands of Argentina*.



**T**HE TWISTS AND TURNS in the road of most everyone's destiny seem to me to be random and totally unpredictable, at least as I look back on my own formation. As a twelve-year-old kid living in a rural environment on a back road four miles from a village of 600 people, I was invited to go rock climbing with a woman friend of my parents. One seemingly insignificant decision to go that day changed the trajectory of my life forever.

Once I got to the climbing area I immediately caught on to the athletics of rock climbing and that was it, I was hooked. As it turned out, I was being introduced to what might be called "the Nature Tradition," which is populated by conservation heroes such as John Muir, Bob Marshall, David Brower, and Arne Naess—people whose love for wild nature had been honed in the mountains. And so the course of my life as a conservationist began, although at the time I had no perspective on where I might be headed or what the factors were that pointed me there—toward a life dedicated to environmental activism and helping create new national parks.

Rock climbing and mountaineering eventually led me to found The North Face, now perhaps the leading outdoor clothing and equipment supplier in the world (something I could never have imagined before that day when the name first occurred to me as I worked my way, down on my knees with a chain saw, along the length of a fallen tree while working for a landscaping company at Lake Tahoe in California). After nearly ten years of building up The North Face, I sold it and started the Esprit company in San Francisco along with my former wife, Susie Tompkins, and another friend of ours. Those years in business distracted me from activism, although I spent at least four or five months each year somewhere in the world on climbing expeditions, white-water kayaking, or ski racing. Mountain sports took me to some of the wildest, most remote places on Earth and deepened my appreciation for wild nature. While I got to see many of the last great places on Earth—landscapes where beauty and diversity still flourished—international travel opened my eyes to the fact that everywhere nature was being whittled away by techno-industrial expansion. Essentially every place not formally protected (and some of those ostensibly "protected areas" too) were at risk of being destroyed by economic and population growth.

In the mid-1980s, after making a pointed analysis of the clothing industry and the role our own business had in furthering fashion-related consumerism, it became apparent to me that we were simply producing stuff that no one

really needed. It was an exercise both in producing things that were unnecessary but also in creating, through clever advertising, consumer desires that had not existed before. It was, in fact, nothing more than needless consumption only adding to the ever-expanding ecological crisis that we all were ensnared in. Slowly, over time, I realized that I had to change my life and work toward reversing rather than exacerbating the crisis.

Incidentally, with the Esprit company at that time we were doing some interesting things in the then budding field of "sustainability" and corporate social responsibility; those initiatives turned out to be way ahead of their time. But my interest in these kinds of "green business" measures soon faded. All profit-oriented corporations, as much their owners may try to make them responsible, are stuck in their own ditch of contradictions. Ultimately it was too paradoxical to reconcile running a successful company with my motivation to help nature stave off the very impacts of commerce. I could not see anything better to do than to direct my energy toward full-time conservation, and I sold my interests in our businesses.

Since then people have often asked me why I threw in the towel completely on the business world despite having been for years and years working with a great group of people, many of whom had grown to be close friends. At the time, perhaps, I had less perspective, but in looking back it has become clear to me that the primary motivation behind the kind of large-scale conservation work that my wife, Kristine Tompkins, and I are engaged in—creating parklands, supporting environmental activism, restoring degraded landscapes, and establishing organic farms based on agroecology principles—is simply that we *worry about the future*.

This nagging sense of insecurity can feel constant, fed by the undoing of both nature and culture that we see going on around us day by day. Anyone who opens their eyes to look at the present state of the world will see the scars of overdevelopment in a thousand forms—industrial forestry clear-cuts that seem like war zones, industrial agriculture monocultures displacing natural habitat, industrial aquaculture fouling coastlines, urban sprawl and transport networks fragmenting landscapes, toxic waste sites, expanding oil and gas fields, the devastation caused by tar sands exploitation in Alberta, and so on.

Besides worrying about the future, I cannot stand to see beauty defiled, and things done badly. Aesthetics have always figured into my thinking as a guiding principle. The imposition of human artifacts into the landscape can

either appear harmonious, if done thoughtfully, or be a disjunctive to our sense of beauty if executed badly. The saying “If it looks bad, it is bad, and if it looks good, it (*most likely*) is good” has become my foundation for any quick analysis of whether a landscape is healthy or not.

After leaving the business world, I knew that I needed to do more homework—real and substantive scholarship—to better inform my activism and conservation work. I read voraciously. If there is one thing I recommend to everyone who seeks to be a more effective conservationist or environmentalist, it is to sit down and read, and I mean read books, not “tweets.” This requires time and discipline and, of course, the desire to consider the deep systemic questions confronting civilization. Digging into these worldview issues, the deep epistemological roots that undergird the “Myth of Progress,” to understand how industrial growth based on megatechnologies is accelerating the extinction crisis (and climate change) is the first step toward developing effective strategies to reverse what some are calling the “Mother of All Crises.” After all, with the richness and diversity of life and even Earth’s atmospheric chemistry now being wrecked by overdevelopment associated with the Human Project, it’s clear that activists have no time to waste on ineffective tactics and half measures.

I often argue with my friends in the social justice movement that *nature has to come first* if we hope to have even *the possibility* for building a healthy and equitable society. The glories of civilization will be totally irrelevant on a dead planet. For that reason, I put achieving social justice behind that of protecting nature, although it need be only a step behind and at the shoulder of the global environmental movement. As laudable and as important as social justice is, nature’s laws are immutable and human aspirations can never be realized over the long term unless we have a healthy ecosphere.

Thus, within my circle of colleagues and thinkers whom I most respect are what I call The Wild Bunch—those philosophers, thinkers, writers, and activists focused on preserving *wildness*. Unless that intrinsic quality is present and ubiquitous in our human development schemes, we are doomed to failure. Without an explicit focus on maintaining wildness (and therefore the health and integrity of ecosystems), human activity typically degrades nature and exacerbates the extinction crisis, leading to an impoverishment of the very planet on which we depend to realize all of humanity’s aspirations. If our species is causing other species to go extinct, then we can say for certain our culture is not “sustainable” and our activities not ethical. Thus

I personally use *biodiversity health* as the ultimate metric to measure the real “March of Progress.” I know of no other measure that is as fundamental as this. If someone has a better metric, I would love to know what it is.

Integrating that consciousness of what *wildness* means and that it is essential to inform virtually every action we take—from the most mundane and routine actions of our daily lives to how we collectively regulate the behavior of civilization itself—is a crucial first step on the path toward achieving “sustainability” on Earth. The growth of the environmental movement is evidence that this kind of thinking has begun slowly sinking into the body politic of humanity in the broad sense. I maintain that the environmental movement and its twin, the conservation movement, are unstoppable in the long run. Will the environmental movement be able to resist the forces of the global economy and development in the near term? Perhaps not; there is plenty of evidence to suggest it is losing the battle quite decisively at present, but in my view the movement is unstoppable in the long run. No one who is working for the health of wild nature, and therefore the health of humanity, should question whether they are on the right path. Win or lose, what could be better than dedicating one’s life to trying to stop the advance of the biodiversity crisis, and then reverse it? It is righteous work, in simple terms.

There are both practical and ethical reasons for taking up a position along the long front of environmentalism. The practical part is simply the many benefits for reversing the ecological crisis that flow to us as individuals, and to society as a whole. Natural beauty, productive and healthy agriculture, clean water and air, healthy forests, abundant fish in the oceans, and more. Without these things humanity will suffer.

From an ethical position, it is a matter of simply accepting that we are bound *to share the planet with other creatures*. This is essentially a “religious” point of view. In practice it means that through the diffuse labyrinths of human economic activity, our moral stance dictates that we must not diminish the ecosphere in richness and diversity, quality or function. Although we know we will make honest mistakes, we need to acculturate society to this fundamental principle. It is no different than the simple mandate that says “we do not kill another human being” to say that we do not “kill” biodiversity or stifle the unfolding of evolution itself.

It is a hard reality to understand that the present global extinction crisis stems directly from human overdevelopment and overshoot. Yet until we understand that,

and until we “get religion,” civilization is destined for the dustbin of history.

Thus my wife, Kris, and I are dedicating our time and resources toward efforts to arrest the extinction crisis, and we have chosen to work on the formation of new national parks. Along with dedicated conservation colleagues (for park making is a collaborative activity), we have helped conserve well over 2 million acres and have worked with the Argentine and Chilean national park systems to expand or create anew five national parks thus far. We hope to more than double that number of new national parks before our conservation work is done.

Land conservation is at the top of the many strategies we must employ to help put the world back in balance, and national parks are the gold standard of conservation in these days of severe ecological crisis. In almost all countries, national parks represent the best-protected landscapes under that particular society’s national laws. Although the statutes vary, the regulations vary, the funding and management standards by national governments vary—overall, national parks are the strongest and most broadly supported type of conservation designation.

Now with nearly a century and a half since the first parks were created, the world has seen an impressive growth in national park systems. We see that citizens in country after country around the world value their national parks and, in many instances, are actively working to expand their park systems.

Although national parks are not a panacea to reverse the ecological crisis, they are a crucial and proven conserva-

tion strategy that needs to be continued and expanded. The benefits are many and great. In simple terms, national parks and other strictly protected natural areas can be the anchors in large-scale, interconnected systems of conservation lands, which are frequently referred to as “wildlands networks” or “wildways.” Protecting such systems is the central task of conservation. Only in sufficiently large, protected landscapes may evolutionary processes continue to unfold normally, sustaining the full diversity of life and the essence of wildness discussed in both this book and its companion, *Keeping the Wild* (Island Press 2014).<sup>1</sup> This is the life spirit that gives birth to evolution itself. Wildness is the breath and heartbeat of Nature herself. When one understands this, it becomes a lot easier to devise strategies and adjust habits and behaviors that will lead to *biological* sustainability, which is the foundation of any true “sustainability.”

Land and marine conservation, ecological restoration and rewilding, activism, and the reform of agriculture are the cornerstones of a strategy to help get the world back in balance, the climate stabilized, and a future in which we share the planet with all the other creatures, the results of four billion years of evolution. Upon reflection it seems so simple, but in practice we have a great challenge ahead of us. The question is: Are you ready to do your part? Everyone is capable of taking up their position across that long front, to use their energy, political influence, financial or other resources, and talents of all kinds to be part of a global movement for ecological and cultural health. All will be useful. There is important and meaningful work to be done. To change everything, everyone is needed.

## NOTES

1. See G. Wuerthner, E. Crist, and T. Butler, eds., *Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2014).