

Argentine Land Fight Divides Environmentalists, Rights Advocates

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CONCEPCIÓN, Argentina -- From a flat patch of tree-studded savannah, the gaze stretches for miles: across a small pond where a marsh deer stops to drink, and over swampy wetlands where herons gingerly high-step.

Above it all, a small airplane drones. At the controls is Douglas Tompkins, an American who owns everything underneath him, paid for from the millions he earned as the founder of the North Face and Esprit clothing lines.

"It's an amazing piece of land," Tompkins said shortly after landing. "Extremely rich with biological diversity."

Now, many Argentine officials and social activists want to confiscate the property he says he bought to create an ecological preserve. They think that he and other wealthy foreigners who have bought enormous swaths of the Argentine and Chilean countryside are trying to wrest control of a continent under the guise of environmental preservation.

"We believe this is a new way of trying to dominate the South American countries," said Araceli Mendez, a congresswoman who represents this region and sponsored legislation last month that would expropriate Tompkins's land. "It is dangerous for the defense of our national security to have the concentration of so much land in the hands of foreigners."

Since the 1990s, the relatively cheap and expansive acreage of Argentina has attracted millionaires in search of unspoiled estates, including household names such as Ted Turner and Sylvester Stallone. But last month, Argentina's undersecretary for land and social habitat declared war on such land purchases with one highly symbolic act: He marched onto Tompkins's land, cut down a fence and called for the expropriation of the property.

Days later, he stood alongside the ambassadors of Venezuela and Bolivia -- two countries that recently have implemented measures to redistribute land from wealthy estate owners to the poor -- and made his intentions even clearer.

"We want to tell everyone: We're going to continue cutting down fences," said Luis D'Elia, the government secretary. "What is more important, the private property of a few, or the sovereignty of everyone?"

D'Elia, a former protest leader who recently joined President Nestor Kirchner's government, this month identified another target he plans to go after: Italy's Luciano Benetton, a clothing magnate who owns more Argentine land than any other single private landowner and who also espouses strict environmental stewardship.

Not only do these battles pit South American nationalism against foreign investors, they are drawing a bold line between two activist movements -- environmentalists and social justice advocates -- that are often grouped together under the same "progressive" label.

When Mendez presented to the National Congress the legislation to expropriate Tompkins's land, she was backed by some of the country's best-known human rights advocates, including the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and other groups that famously fought against Argentina's dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Catholic Church joined the chorus this month, issuing a 128-page document that warned against the "foreign-ization" of Argentine territory. Environmental groups, such as the Argentina Wildlife Foundation, have generally backed Tompkins.

"The social justice movements have been extremely poor at understanding ecological effects of their actions -- they're not green movements," said Tompkins, 67. "Concern about things like topsoil, which is the most valuable part of the land and often suffers under agrarian reform, is not being heard through the din of the need for the social redistribution of land. But that redistribution, for those who are not capable of handling it, will be a terrible blow to the future."

Since 1990, Tompkins and his wife -- Kristine McDivitt, the former chief executive of the Patagonia outdoor clothing company -- have bought about 4.7 million acres in Chile and Argentina. Their strategy is to identify properties in danger of ecologically damaging development, buy them, then create private parks that they eventually turn over to the local governments.

In Chile, they bought a large swath of land on the southern coast, creating a private park that they eventually turned over to the Chilean government to create the Parque Pumalin, which is roughly the size of Yosemite National Park. They did the same thing with the Monte Leon National Park on Argentina's side of Patagonia. Last year, they donated about 210,000 acres to Chile to form part of the Corcovado National Park.

Tompkins said he eventually hopes to do the same thing with his 741,000 acres in this species-rich wetland region. So when he hears D'Elia and others calling for his land, he sees an irony so thick that it appears nonsensical to him.

"They're shooting at the guy -- the only guy, practically, from the private sector -- who is buying land and then nationalizing it!" said a fired-up Tompkins, eating a bowl of granola for breakfast in the living room of the ranch house he keeps on the property.

Argentines, he said, don't understand his style of philanthropy. When he talks about eventually donating the land to the government, they suspect a catch. D'Elia has publicly hinted that he believes Tompkins is an agent of the U.S. government. That his property sits near the Guaraní aquifer -- the third largest source of fresh water in the world -- has raised suspicions that he is trying to gain control of South America's water supply. Some say that a U.S. military base about 450 miles away in Paraguay is indirect evidence that Tompkins and the U.S. government might be working together.

The Benetton expropriation effort, meanwhile, centers on two families of Mapuche Indians who say that parts of his vast land holdings are ancestral property that belongs to them. Though Benetton offered to donate a portion of land to the Mapuche groups, the offer was rejected.

"The Benettons can't donate land that isn't theirs," Rosa Chiquichano, a representative of the Chubut province government, told Clarín newspaper.

A spokeswoman for the Benetton family, which owns 2.2 million acres in various provinces of Argentina, said a judge had previously ruled that the Mapuche groups have no legal rights to the land.

Such hectoring points to cultural differences that separate the American and European landowners from the residents who have lived in the region for centuries and want to hold on to traditional practices -- not legal rulings and fine print.

Tompkins traces the beginnings of the discontent to an American style of land management that is resented here -- specifically, his efforts to hold his neighboring landowners to environmental standards.

He recently financed a legal case against a local forestry company trying to build a dike through wetlands. It was the kind of environmental complaint that is made every day in the United States, but not in a region of Argentina where private ranch owners -- or *estancieros* -- have held most of the political power for centuries.

"Suddenly they see someone come in and say, 'Hey, what about the rules?' " Tompkins said. "That sort of galvanized people into action against me."

Kirchner's position on the issue remains cloudy. Though Mendez is the local representative of Kirchner's wing of the Peronist party and D'Elia is a longtime ally, Kirchner and other high-level government officials have tried to distance themselves from the controversy.

They label it a local dispute requiring a local solution. Kirchner hasn't publicly supported D'Elia's actions, but he hasn't condemned them, either. Last week, Kirchner was in New York for the U.N. General Assembly, where he was trying to woo foreign investment; on Wednesday, he rang the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange.

Tompkins, meanwhile, continued working on his property, overseeing projects such as the clearing of eucalyptus trees -- a non-native species that he is trying to replace with vegetation naturally found in the area.

"The Argentine government should look very carefully not at what passport someone carries," Tompkins said, "but at how they behave economically and ecologically."