A park for the people

Chile is full of stunning landscapes, but its people can't always gain access to them. Now, a bold campaign to create a breathtaking national park on the outskirts of Santiago could become the biggest conservation story in Chilean history

Words and images by Matt Maynard

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We've come in the blue light of dawn, hoping to catch the private security personnel off guard. Tomás idles the truck over the Rio Colorado towards the mountain hamlet of Alfalfal. The once-sleepy settlement of herdsmen and homesteaders is today obscured behind the great orange wall of the monstrous 531MW Alto Maipo hydropower construction project.

Our cab is stuffed with Chilean mountain guides, conservationists and activists. The bed is packed with ice axes, crampons, five days' mountain food, camera equipment and an inflatable kayak. 'Over there,' says Tomás pointing to a stadium-sized concrete paved pool. 'That's where I use to play football in the grass.' We sink low in our seats, bracing against the cold shadow of the cliffs above us as much as to remain out of sight of the checkpoint. Tomás, Vivi, Felipe and I have spent the past ten years trespassing in the central Chilean Andes to gain access to its privatised and prohibited mountains. But the plan for this expedition is by far the most outrageous.

Our objective is to explore a small slice of the 1,420 square kilometres of public land known as the Fundo Rio Colorado (Rio Colorado Estate), located in the Cajon del Maipo valleys, just 60 kilometres east of Santiago and stretching a further 60 kilometres to the border with Argentina. Since April 2019, the Queremos Parque (We Want a Park) campaign has gathered 191,797 signatures from citizens seeking to convince the government to protect this Peak District-sized area of unclimbed mountains, rivers and strategic glacial-water reserves. They want the land to become a national park, one that Santiago's seven million citizens can easily reach and explore over a weekend.

OFFICIALLY OPEN

It's late October 2020. A year has passed since protests erupted across the nation calling for socio-economic equality. Forty years of nefarious neoliberal policies have rendered the nation the most unequal in the OECD. Santiago's recently renamed Dignity Plaza has become a monument to the oppressed and maimed, where more than a million Chileans took a collective stand against the threat of tear gas and rubber bullets. Three days ago, the nation resoundingly voted to overthrow its Pinochet-era constitution. Now, the people will write their own Magna Carta. But the memo doesn't seem to have reached Alfalfal. This one-street town, converted into a billion-dollar construction site on the back of promises that wealth will trickle down, is emblematic of everything the Chilean people have risen up against.

'When protocols prohibit us from going to the mountains, you have to find another way to get it done'

The four of us unload the truck and don our disguises. Nobody finds it funny having to sneak past a multinational's guard-post to gain access to public land that belongs to each and every Chilean. We're being helped by a family of local ranchers, whose names have been changed to protect their identity as well as future access to the Rio Colorado Estate for recreationalists. 'This was my father's,' Pablo says, pointing east to the entire Rio Colorado Estate. 'It was taken from him in 1973.' He is referring to Pinochet's military appropriation of people's grazing lands, which was followed by demands for a tithe for access to forage. Only in March 2019 did the Chilean army return the lands for public use. By then, however, they had sold a great swathe to cement manufacturers. Cementos Bío Bío continues to operate a mine inside the proposed national park. Mining concessions have been granted in areas throughout the Rio Colorado Estate by the Chilean government, with the potential for the state to receive royalties if projects are approved following environmental impact studies.

Officially, the area is open. The Ministry of National Resources can issue recreational permits for the Rio Colorado Estate (upon the completion of Kafkaesque paperwork). Our enquiries went unanswered, however. 'When protocols prohibit us from going to the mountains,' says Felipe the mountain guide, 'you have to find another way to get it done.'

We travel 20 kilometres upriver, following the sinuous slot canyon of the Rio Colorado beneath impenetrable 200-metre-high granite cliffs. This is the

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keyhole entrance to the heart of the central Chilean Andes. Slowly, these walls subside into monstrous scree slopes pocked with yellow-flowering heath barberry, leading to 5,000-metre peaks dusted with overnight snow. Our mules snort through frosty air. The awe and wonder inspired is akin to the 'stern, immovable majesty' encountered by John Muir when he travelled to the Yosemite Valley in 1869. Yet today, the annual visitor numbers to this Chilean wilderness are comparable to the capacity of the California national park's giftshop alone. And it's not just the physical-access issue that's keeping numbers so low.

DEMOCRATISATION OF THE MOUNTAINS

In 2020, the World Travel Awards presented its World's Leading Adventure Tourism Destination Award to Chile. Remarkably, the country had already won the prize every year since 2016. The international image is of a country that looks either like Patagonia or the Atacama Desert. A quarter of the nation's landmass, equivalent in size to the whole of Turkey, has some kind of protected status. Yet in Chile's Metropolitan Region, where more than a third of the population live in a territory only marginally bigger than the Bahamas, this figure falls to just 1.4 per cent.

The World Health Organization recommends a minimum of nine square metres of green space per person. In Santiago's wealthiest commune, Vitacura, each person has 56. Yet in one of the poorest boroughs, Quinta Normal, it's 1.1 and the average Santiaguino gets just 3.9. Sitting in an Uber leaving the capital and heading towards the Rio Colorado Estate, the driver explained that he had always dreamed of taking his family to Chile's flagship Patagonia park, Torres del Paine, but it was too expensive. They went to Machu Picchu in Peru instead.

Making a park where the people are is a rallying cry with strong social currency in the emergent Chile. Kristine Tompkins, the UN Environment patron of protected areas, and her late husband Douglas have been restoring and protecting land in Chile since 1992. Their enormous privately funded projects have been concentrated in relatively remote parts of southern Chile. Tompkins describes the citizen-led vision of the Rio Colorado Estate as a national park as 'a lifeline' for Santiago's citizens, 'especially during Covid times'.

James Hardcastle, project manager for the IUCN Global Protected Areas Programme, agrees that the proposed national park has huge social importance. 'They need it,' he says. 'Santiago has so many problems of air quality, extreme temperatures and water shortage.' The park would put the 'just' into the just transition, he adds, referring to the land's potential to help meet Chile's ambitious climate change and sustainable-development goals, while also improving the lives of working-class communities.

Another prominent advocate of the park is the Chilean senator Alfonso de Urresti. 'In the collective imagination,' he says of Chileans' relationship with their geography, 'the sea is conjured before the mountains.' The latter, he explains are 'principally reserved as a place of work and for mining'. A staggering 63 per cent of national territory is mountainous, yet Pilar Valenzuela, the Queremos Parque coordinator, believes that only five per cent of Chile's population have ever had the chance to venture into the Andes for pleasure. To declare the national park in the Metropolitan Region would be, in Valenzuela's words, nothing short of a 'democratisation of the mountains'.

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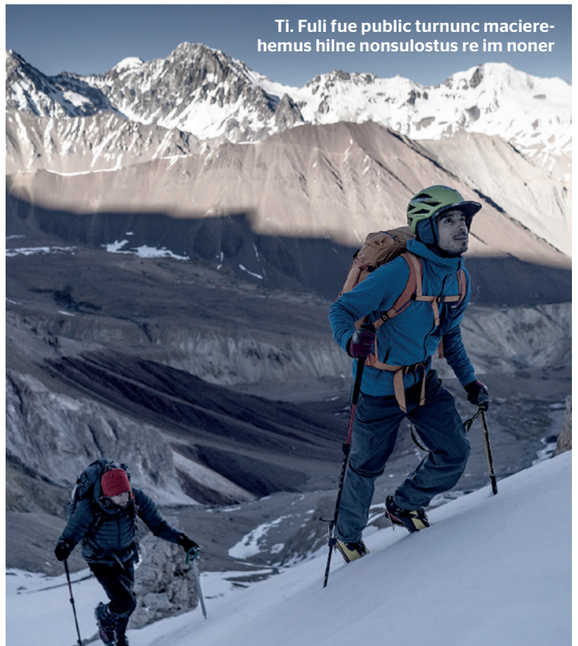
VICIOUS CYCLES

Over the next two days, Pablo drives the mules deep into the Rio Colorado Valley. He then leads us south into the Cajon del Museo tributary valley, towards the base camp we've located via satellite imagery, the starting point for our attempt to scale the unclimbed peak known by local herdsmen as Cerro El Barco. We hike in the dust, in the wake of people who've worked these grazing lands since a time before the oral stories of Pablo's family begin. An old cowboy lollops down the trail. His trusted horse navigates between the scarlet, yellow-lipped trumpets of Chilean nasturtium and 1,000-year-old hillocks of *Azorella*. The man's elbow is cocked from the hip. His forearm, with pinched fingers, sways back and forth, towards his face; a smouldering cigarette is cupped against the wind.



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We pass turquoise bathing pools and yellow sulphur-streaked rivers. We brush through hardy green blades of pingo pingo. We camp on grassy plains at sunset, our grazing animals silhouetted against the pink glaciers of 6,000-metre peaks. 'There's a sea of mountains out here,' says Tomás one night as we inflate our sleeping mattresses beneath the Southern Cross. He's lived almost his entire life in the Cajon del Maipo valleys, and despite working as a conservationist, he's never

been into the great wilderness beyond the Alto Maipo barrier. 'The only thing they say to you,' he says of these mountains, 'is come and explore me.'

During our trip, Vivi and Felipe become the first people to reach the summit of 4,547-metre Cerro El Barco, just three days hike from Alfalfal. 'Ship Mountain' is a beautiful and bristling galleon of a peak. We watch them pick their way back down through the gundeck, amid wind-shaped ice spires known as *penitentes*, then descend through the stern, with its ice-caked couloir to where we meet them on a lower ridge. 'I'm in favour of the park,' reflects Vivi, laying down her climbing tools, 'but there need to be some restrictions.' Both of these Chilean mountain guides usually spend several months each year camped on the Patagonian ice fields, teaching students mountain craft, leadership skills and the principles of 'leave no trace'. But this Covid-winter they've been at home in the Cajon del Maipo valleys. 'I've never seen so many people in the mountains and I've never seen so much rubbish,' Vivi says. 'Access needs to go hand in hand with education.'

Felipe identifies a vicious cycle whereby 'prohibited mountains' mean people have forgotten the essential link between the glaciers in their remaining pristine landscapes and the water that comes out of their taps. An incredible 82 per cent of South America's ice is located in this long, thin country. Chile's people may have successfully protested for a better standard of living in the streets, but in the wake of global climate change, a ten-year drought in the nation's central valley and an aggressively expanding mining industry, perhaps the greatest threat to life remains out of sight and out of mind in the mountains.

Together, the kayaker and the herdsmen read the river, looking for submerged rocks and safe eddies

The Queremos Parque campaign hasn't yet given a name to this potential national park, preferring to wait and let the people decide. Defining who these users will be, and the kind of interaction they will have with the park, is a make-or-break issue for the campaign. Not all the herdsmen of the Rio Colorado Estate are onboard. 'Right now, we are on the side of the mines,' says Miguel Fajardo. He's let us into his frontier-style cabin to cook eggs and coffee over a metal-barrel stove. Fajardo pays rent to Cementos Bío Bío, living within the 160-square-kilometre L-shaped polygon of the Pearl Mine site located in the centre of the estate. The

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Chilean army sold this land to Hernán Briones, one of Pinochet's intimate business partners, for just £25.30 a hectare in 1996. From then on, the herdsmen had to pay a double tithe, to both the army and the mine, as they drove their animals up the valley. But Fajardo seems to prefer the devil he knows, saying he's worried about the rewilding of the valley: 'Why should we have to feed our animals to the pumas?' His chief concern is that livestock will be completely evicted from any national park, bringing his way of life to an end.

MOVING FORWARD

On our final day in the Rio Colorado Estate, Tomás pulls an inflatable whitewater packraft from deep within Pablo's saddle bags. Together, the kayaker and the herdsmen read the river, looking for submerged rocks and safe eddies. Invisible obstacles abound for the wildly ambitious Queremos Parque campaign, but things are looking relatively positive. One hundred and ten of the nation's 155 parliamentarians, and more than half of the senators, have voted in favour of creating the park, arguing that Chileans should have the right to know and enjoy their country and that setting aside the land will protect the capital's water supply.

The IUCN's Hardcastle is confident that a zonified agreement to accommodate livestock, recreation and conservation in the Rio Colorado Estate could be established with no-one being disenfranchised, citing case studies at the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya and Gran Paradiso National Park in Italy. 'The proximity of this park to millions of potential users,' he says, 'combined with the protection of glaciers, means its creation could be the greatest accomplishment in the history of Chilean conservation.'

The government holds all the power to create this national park on public land and will seek advice from its ministries of the environment and national assets. A separate initiative, representing the entire Cajon del Maipo valleys, is in the advanced stages of presenting plans to UNESCO in the hope of achieving global geopark status. Valuing lands for the ecosystem, cultural and tourist services they provide, rather than the resources that can be extracted, will be a key issue as the Chilean people decide on a new constitution. 'We need to be thinking for seven generations' time,' says Tomás, ready now to push off. 'It's a time for solidarity.' Pablo caterwauls a herding call as Tomás paddles out into the raging Rio Colorado. ●