

Wild Life

This superb new documentary traces one couples' sustained commitment to preserving wild lands against the encroachment and expansion of urban growth. It follows that commitment from Doug and Kris Tompkins—both mountaineers and entrepreneurs—to their eventual creation of the largest privately protected swaths of nature on the planet in the Patagonian sections of Chile and Argentina

We know from the film's beginning that Doug Tompkins died in late 2015 (the picture opens with his funeral), but, since he was a public person for decades, there is plenty of archive interview and media material to show him as a striking presence and an articulate advocate for environmental views. Kris, still alive, is on screen much more in "Wild Life," relating their backstories, common interests, and tribulations and triumphs. She comes to preside over the culmination of their dreams, when national parks in Chile are graced with Doug's name.

Tompkins combined a climbing passion with creating landmark outdoor fashion companies, including The North Face and Esprit. He was so thoroughly committed to mountain climbing, especially in the Chilean Andes, that he gave up his businesses to more fully focus on purchasing land there to establish national parks. Simultaneously, his eventual partner (and wife) Kris McDivitt, led a somewhat parallel life, with a similar interest in climbing and outdoors fashion. She pursued the latter until she ascended to CEO of the environmentally conscious company Patagonia, though she left the firm in the early 1990's.

The Tompkins connection came together in the early 1990's when both were single and available. For some time, Doug pursued Kris, and they truly clicked during a European sojourn. By then, they had decided to take on their future lives' work: to purchase tracts of available Patagonian land with their ample resources and convert them into a national nature preserve for the Chilean people.

Over 25 years, these ecologists carefully but doggedly extended their holdings—with periodic and understandable pushback from skeptical Chilean authorities along the way—to establish a grand nature preserve of almost 2 million acres over several parcels. As part of their efforts, they also began "rewilding" their parklands by introducing wild species to populate areas where they had disappeared. At one point, Kris Tompkins, feeling down perhaps, states that, despite their efforts: "On any scorecard, Nature is losing," but she is doing her best to counter that.

The Tompkins' saga is told in fascinating detail by the esteemed team of climbing documentarians, Jimmy Chin and his wife Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi.

The quality of their work is more than proven by their Oscar win in 2019 for “Free Solo” and their earlier films “Meru” and “The Rescue, “ about the Thai soccer kids’ cave rescue in 2018. First and foremost, they have an eye for regal landscapes, vistas of terrain and skies that dazzle, and the ability to capture delicate details of stone and snow. They have also exhibited a daredevil skill by filming close-up and right in line with daring climbers doing their business (see: “Free Solo”).

“Wild Life” adds another pearl to their growing necklace of vivid documentaries.

(The film is 93 minutes, rated PG-13 and now running in local cinemas.)

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