

The former CEO of Patagonia is rewilding 15M hectares of land

Maddyness is partnering with environmental publication Ours to Save to bring readers fresh perspectives on sustainability. Today, we look into how Kristine Tompkins and her team are rewilding ecosystems in Chile and Argentina.

Kristine Tompkins is a pioneer of rewilding and large-scale conservation. After working as the CEO for Patagonia, she and her future husband, Doug Tompkins (1943-2015), the founder of North Face and Esprit, decided to pursue a life of nature and wildlife conservation.

Fast forward to now, and three million acres of land for national parks have been acquired and donated in Chile and Argentina. Through the partnership between Tompkins Conservation, other philanthropists and the governments of Chile and Argentina 15 million acres have been protected over the last three decades.

The fight against ecosystem collapse started in 1991, when Doug bought his first ranch in Chile. In 1994, the couple made a second purchase. Eventually, this would – alongside other purchases – form part of Pumalín Park. Now owned by the Chilean state, the park is dotted with rainforest, mountains, volcanoes and glaciers and home to wildlife ranging from penguins and dolphins to pumas and *monitos del monte*.

It should be noted that these land acquisitions were made through the Conservation Land Trust (founded by Doug) and largely purchased from absentee landowners.

“Conservationists have nothing to lose. Pushing too far is exactly what we should be doing.” – Kristine Tompkins

The first steps were taken towards the formation of Iberá Park back in 1997. Kristine and Doug acquired a large cattle ranch in the centre of the Argentine wetlands. Several years later, Kristine founded the Patagonia Land Trust (now Conservation Patagonia) – a public charity dedicated to preserving biodiversity and the creation of parklands. Eventually, this funded the purchase of 165,000 acres of land to be donated to the Argentine National Parks.

Several of the Tompkins properties, including the cattle ranch within Iberá Park, were transformed to sustainable, organic production. However, the Tompkins saw the potential for a new form of restoration: rewilding.

Rather than conserving an area in its current state, the native keystone species are re-introduced with the aim of encouraging natural succession, thus aiding the return of effective ecosystem function and *trophic cascades* – whereby impact on one or several species can positively impact ecosystems in their entirety.

Iberá is an exceptional project; it is the largest national park in Argentina (1,700,000 acres) where seven keystone species are being reintroduced in order to re-establish a stable ecosystem.

The first giant anteaters were translocated to Iberá Park in 2007 – decades after the disappearance of local populations. *Jaguars were reintroduced* this year, following 70 years of absence.

Reintroducing a native top predator allows natural management of the populations of grazers, in this case, *pampas* deer. However, it is these selective grazers that accelerate natural succession by removing the slow-growing vegetation from the landscape. This allows fast-growing vegetation to take over and regenerate the landscape more quickly.

Iberá also provides a range of job opportunities for the local community, from the biologists and zoologists who work in the park to providing the services required for the ecotourism the Park will attract.

Locals take pride in the success and recognition this project has brought to the area, which helps to fight the urban pull for younger generations.

If you're interested in seeing a rewilding project first hand, take a look at [Journeys With Purpose](#) and [Satopia Travel](#). If Iberá interests you in particular, there is an [eight-day immersive trip](#) where you can join the teams on the ground and get involved. For more information on Tompkins Conservation, click [here](#).

Article by ELLIE ROXBURGH