WILDLANDS
PHILANTHROPY
THE GREAT AMERICAN TRADITION

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As a child of the Great Plains of North America I began life with the notion that the footprint of man was small and the land was vast. Just beyond the doorstep of my working-class home the prairie unfolded in great waves of tall grass or small grain, interrupted only occasionally by a small town or tiny collection of farm and ranch structures. The mighty Missouri River—that long, meandering drainage out of the mountains of Montana, through the Dakotas, and along the borders of Iowa and Nebraska—was rich with wildlife beneath its surface and along its shores. These were the images that took shape on the canvas of my formative memories. They have stayed with me through my odyssey to bright lights and big cities, to every corner of North America, those still wild and those crowded with population and development; to rainforests, coastlines, and mountaintops on other continents; to urban majesty and city slums in every hemisphere.

So now, even though I am years and miles beyond that prairie childhood, I still constantly seek the thrill of open spaces and untamed nature. But I am also constantly in despair at the alarming erosion of America’s natural heritage, the thoughtless—even reckless—invasion of land and forest, beach and swamp, desert and mountain range with roads and homes, malls, and make-believe resorts.

Nonetheless, even in my most discouraging moments, I am heartened by the quickening pace of private efforts to protect the natural glories, however large or small a space they may occupy. In the years our family has been a part of the Rocky Mountain West we have been witness to the rise of conservation easements—deed restrictions on private property that assure perpetual conservation, now routinely considered by local ranchers and out-of-state newcomers.

When my wife, Meredith, and I moved on from a corner of rural New England, we were comforted by the presence of a local land trust that was happy to receive from us a substantial tract of wetlands and old-growth trees. I miss my friends and our nest on a wooded hillside there, but I treasure the fact that no bulldozer, carpenter, or mason will disturb the wild turkeys, coyotes, bears, frogs, raccoons, and deer or land of cobble and meadow we left forever protected.

I detect among my friends a growing consciousness to treat the land as they would a piece of rare art. That is, something not just to be collected but to be conserved and shared in its original, undiminished state. The rewards go well beyond whatever tax benefits are to be realized. A protected piece of nature is a legacy of deeply satisfying proportions.

Moreover, private initiative to conserve, protect, and restore nature is a moral calling without borders. Just as citizens respond to natural catastrophes or plagues in far-off places, so should we be willing to export the imperative of private land preservation in distant nations. Nature and the foundation of life it provides are priorities without borders.

In this book you will come to know the priceless gifts of the visionaries who came before and showed the way with land-based philanthropy. We honor them by recognizing their selfless contributions and, most of all, by continuing their honorable ways.
**INTRODUCTION**

Generous Nature

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**W**hat did I hear, walking among giants? Silence. Then the trickling waters of Redwood Creek, a little wisp of a stream that flows through Muir Woods National Monument. I heard the burbling song of a winter wren. And mixed with the sounds of nature I heard voices: A little girl chattering to her parents in Korean. An elderly Hispanic couple offering the occasional remark (“¡Que bonito!”) to each other as they strolled past. Two boys, fascinated by a banana slug that oozed along a downed log, exchanging enthusiasms in Mandarin. College kids speaking German, their heads craned upward to view the trees, coast redwoods, whose kind stretch higher toward the heavens than any other creature affixed to Earth.

No doubt many of the people sauntering through Muir Woods that day were, like me, visitors to San Francisco. But with our upturned faces, with hands that reached out to touch furrowed bark, we seemed less like tourists than reverent pilgrims, entering a redwood cathedral. Is that day etched also in the memory of the boys who watched the slug? Do other visitors to Muir Woods remember their time among its towering trees the same way they might, say, a visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or St. Peter’s Square? Perhaps they do. It is sacred space.

The trees in Muir Woods’ Cathedral Grove stand today because of a charitable act a century ago. In 1905, William and Elizabeth Thatcher Kent bought the last tract of virgin redwoods in the San Francisco Bay Area to save it from logging. Two years later, a private water utility hoping to build a reservoir attempted to seize the property through eminent domain, fell the giant trees, and dam Redwood Creek. Countering this threat, William Kent offered the land as a gift to the American people, asking President Teddy Roosevelt to declare it a national monument. Roosevelt obliged, agreeing to Kent’s request that the new monument be named for John Muir, the leading conservationist of his day and founder of the Sierra Club.

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*Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed; if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books and plastic cigarette cases; if we drive the few remaining members of the wild species into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clear air and dirty the last clean streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence.*

—Wallace Stegner
Thus, Muir Woods was saved, like all the natural areas portrayed in this book, by private conservation funding and initiative—that is, by wildlands philanthropy—a vital yet little known tradition that has profoundly enriched the American experience.

My visit to Muir Woods came just after the September 2001 terrorist attacks. Politicians and pundits declared, as they did after each World War and the dropping of the atom bomb, that the world was fundamentally changed. Among the ancient redwoods, though, the world appeared as it ever was. Great trees lived and died on wild time. They fell, not at the whim of a corporate bottom line, but when wind, disease, or age decreed. Their massive boles then moldered on the forest floor, slowly releasing nutrients back to the soil. On these “nurse logs” young trees often sprouted. The cycles of nature continued, oblivious to human grief.

Nature goes on.

In Muir Woods I experienced the peace of wild things, which apparently was a common response to national tragedy. A Park Service employee told me that visitation at the monument dropped immediately after 9/11, then rebounded. In those unsettling days, people across North America sought out quiet places—parks and nature sanctuaries—where they might be immersed in wild beauty.

Nature heals.

Since 1864, when Abraham Lincoln signed legislation that secured Yosemite Valley’s future as a park, Americans have been formally protecting examples of what John Muir called “the great, fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness.” While the initial focus was on scenic wonders such as Yosemite and Yellowstone, the rationale for land conservation has evolved beyond aesthetics and recreation to also include biological diversity and the intrinsic value of nature. Preserving our natural heritage has become a bedrock American value, transcending ideological or partisan divisions. Protected natural areas—state and federal parks, wilderness areas, wildlife refuges, private nature preserves, and other conserved lands—have come to embody our idea of America the Beautiful. The National Park System alone receives more than 250 million visits annually. Few people, however, have any idea how these places came to be preserved. Was it mere chance that the juggernaut of industrial expansion sweeping over the continent spared them?

No, it was not luck, but the intentional actions of people who worked to save wild country. Some of these visionaries, like John Muir and Aldo Leopold, helped set aside specific areas from exploitation while also laying the intellectual foundation of the American conservation movement. Countless other individuals, with names unrecorded by historians, have been the “spirited people,” in the words of Wilderness Society founder Bob Marshall, “who will fight for the freedom of the wilderness.” Writing in the 1930s, Marshall believed that an organized band of committed activists (“we want no stragglers”) to be the “one hope of repulsing the tyrannical ambition of civilization to conquer every niche on the whole earth.”

Marshall’s phrase “freedom of the wilderness” is notable, for freedom—not the absence of human history—is the defining attribute of wilderness. The etymological roots of the word wilderness mean “will-of-the-land.” Wilderness, then, is self-willed land, a place apart from human settlement and control where nature directs the ebb and flow of life. Howard Zahniser, the primary author of the Wilderness Act of 1964, which created our National Wilderness Preservation System, intentionally chose to use the obscure word untrammeled in the law’s definition of wilderness: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is
a visitor who does not remain.” A trammel is something that impedes free movement. Untrammeled lands are not necessarily pristine, but are free, unyoked from human dominion.

The wing of the conservation movement that sprang up to defend self-willed land shares commonalities with other social change movements but moves beyond an exclusive focus on human welfare. The movement to abolish slavery, the fight for women’s suffrage, the civil rights movement—all represented great advances in extending rights to marginalized people. The wilderness movement, in asserting that wild places and creatures have a right to exist regardless of their usefulness to humans, expands the sphere of ethical concern to other members of the land community. This is a remarkable idea to emerge from a society that sees the natural world almost exclusively through the lens of economic utility.

Why this digression into history and etymology? Because none of the natural areas profiled in this book could have been saved without the philosophical and legal framework that came out of the conservation movement. Moreover, land conservation is a broadly inclusive activity. Its orientation may be to support human communities with a sustainable supply of forest and agricultural products. Or its focus may be to secure areas for ecological processes and wildlife to flourish un molested—self-willed lands. These two realms of conservation action are essential and complementary, but our focus here is on the latter, particularly on how extraordinary Americans have used their personal resources to pass along the gift of wildness to future generations.

To be sure, private philanthropy as a mechanism to protect natural areas is a minority stream in our conservation history. The bulk of lands administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and other agencies came out of the preexisting federal domain. Most western national parks were designated, and legislatively separated, from this original American commons after conservationists pushed Congress to act. But on thousands of occasions when public means for conservation were unavailable, inadequate, or too slow in coming, private initiative has saved wildlife habitat.

Wildlands philanthropy is not exclusively, but is certainly overwhelmingly, an American phenomenon because of our cultural and constitutional dedication to private property. Buying land to exploit it is a foundation of the modern economy; buying land to protect it from exploitation is an adaptive conservation tool with a rich history and promising future. It is not, however, a tool that is universally applicable. In many parts of the world, including some of the most biologically diverse and wildest remaining places on Earth, the opportunity for individuals or nongovernmental organizations to purchase private land for conservation is unavailable. Where such opportunities do exist, however, some Americans have not only exported the idea of national parks, which Wallace Stegner called the best idea America ever had, but have also invested private capital to help establish new protected areas.

The cumulative effect of wildlands philanthropy by individual Americans is extraordinary, yet has gone mostly unstudied, and uncelebrated. Environmental historians have focused primarily on milestones in public policy. Conservation movement heroes include champions of wildlife protection (William Hornaday), forest conservation (Theodore Roosevelt), wilderness areas (Aldo Leopold), and a nontoxic environment (Rachel Carson), but nature-oriented philanthropists, with the exception of John D. Rockefeller Jr., are little noted.

The ethnic collage of visitors I saw at Muir Woods represents but one day in the century since that national treasure was saved. Millions of people have benefited
from William and Elizabeth Kent’s generosity, but few remember their names. Their gift was an early landmark in a tradition that would continue throughout the twentieth century, when some of America’s most prominent families—Rockefellers, McCormicks, Mellons, and Du Ponts—used private wealth to create or expand public natural areas.

Acadia, Grand Teton, Guadalupe Mountains, Virgin Islands, and various other national parks and seashores would not exist in their current form if not for the largesse of conservation donors. The preserves maintained by the Nature Conservancy and the National Audubon Society similarly reflect private initiative. In every region of the country, one can find wildlife sanctuaries whose genesis was an individual or group of conservationists committed to their protection. Places grand and modest, well-known and obscure, are part of this great land legacy bequeathed to future generations.

In this book we have space to highlight but a few of the visionary Americans who built that legacy. Some, like Katharine Ordway, were born into wealth and chose to give it away. An heiress to the 3M fortune, Ordway found her passion for protecting natural areas late in life. Before her death in 1979, and through a foundation that subsequently dispersed her assets, Ordway gave well over $60 million to preserve remnant prairies and other outstanding habitats across the United States.

Isaac Bernheim’s roots were decidedly more humble. After emigrating to America from Germany in 1867, he initially made his living as a peddler, carrying a pack basket through the countryside, before opening a liquor sales firm. His industriousness, and a growing nation’s thirst for good Kentucky bourbon, eventually made Bernheim’s distillery a prominent Louisville business. In the 1920s he bought thirteen thousand acres south of the city for a natural park where all would be welcome, rich and poor of every race, without distinction, and where, Bernheim wrote, “there will be in profusion all things which gladden the soul.”

The landscape that gladdened Percival Baxter’s soul was the Maine woods, most especially the wild country lorded over by the state’s highest peak. As Maine governor in the 1920s, Baxter tried and failed to convince the state legislature to buy Mount Katahdin and the surrounding timberlands from the paper company that owned them. And so, after leaving politics, he bought the land himself. Through dozens of transactions over the course of thirty-two years, he assembled the largest wilderness area in New England, some two hundred thousand acres, which he donated to become Baxter State Park.

These and the other philanthropists, whose stories are collected here reflect different eras, religions, geographic regions, and social strata. Persons of every socioeconomic class have helped protect America’s wild nature, but parks-related giving before World War II was disproportionately the province of the rich. Some readers may quibble that the wealth amassed by Gilded Age robber barons, even if partially used for noble ends, was squeezed both from the poor and from the earth. A substantive discussion of that question would take another book. Certainly one may acknowledge the irony that in our current economic system wealth comes from converting natural capital to private capital, even while admiring the laudable decision of some individuals to return part of their riches to nature.

What common traits tend to characterize people engaged in wildlands philanthropy? Regardless of background, it seems many are attuned to wild beauty. Besides having a deep aesthetic connection to natural landscapes, they share a desire to be socially useful in a way that transcends a brief human life span. Surely this was the motivation for Percival Baxter when he wrote: “Man is born to die. His works are short lived. Buildings crumble, monuments decay, wealth vanishes, but Katahdin in all its glory forever shall remain the mountain of the people of Maine.”
At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the need for wildlands philanthropy has never been greater—not to supplant, but to complement, strong public funding for conservation. As in 1928, when the dream of a Great Smoky Mountains National Park became a real possibility because John D. Rockefeller Jr. pledged $5 million to match the collected contributions of schoolchildren, individuals, businesses, and state legislatures, most large conservation projects today depend on a mix of public and private dollars. Very often the private conservation donors catalyze the effort.

Conservation-related philanthropy by foundations, corporations, and individuals is a tiny percentage of overall charitable giving, dwarfed by donations to religious, educational, medical, and cultural institutions. Relative funding levels may change in the future as societal priorities shift. Conservation biologists generally agree that human action has precipitated a global extinction spasm, a contraction in life’s diversity unprecedented since the age of dinosaurs ended sixty-five million years ago. Global climate change is expected to exacerbate this ecological cataclysm. As the unraveling of nature becomes more apparent to persons outside academia and the conservation community, donors might choose to endow an endangered species or wild forest rather than a university chair or museum. Even philanthropists with a long-established charitable focus may redirect part of their giving to protect the ecological systems on which life depends, anticipating that there will be no going to the ballet on a dead planet.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that a wildlands philanthropy resurgence is underway. Examples on a grand scale include the huge investments in biodiversity conservation made by Intel cofounder Gordon Moore; the purchase and transfer to public ownership of more than six hundred thousand acres of southern California desert habitat, largely funded by an anonymous wilderness lover; the successful efforts of expatriate Americans Kristine and Douglas Tompkins to create multiple new national parks in South America; and the Yosemite-sized wildlife preserve in Tierra del Fuego donated to the Wildlife Conservation Society by the Goldman Sachs Group, an act of corporate philanthropy that also included significant personal gifts from Goldman Sachs executives.

Wildlands philanthropy is not, however, limited to successful entrepreneurs and Wall Street titans. Two related developments in the final decades of the twentieth century have effectively democratized the phenomenon. National and international conservation organizations have collectively made millions of their members into land protection funders. Of course it is one thing to write an annual membership check, and quite another to know and love a place personally, see it threatened with destruction, and commit body, soul, and wallet to saving it.

The burgeoning land trust movement offers such a means of engagement. Through local and regional land trusts, thousands of citizens are working to preserve natural areas in their own communities. The scrappy prairie dog defenders who founded the Southern Plains Land Trust, for example, represent the grassroots spirit of the land trust movement. They initially used personal loans, and strong-armed friends and family for donations, to scrape together a down payment on land that became the Fresh Tracks Nature Preserve. The cattle were removed, native plants began to recover, and the wildlife returned. Thus a handful of individuals with more moxie than money turned a tract of overgrazed ranchland into a sanctuary for burrowing owls, swift foxes, and pronghorn antelope in eastern Colorado.

Nicole Rosmarino, one of the activists who launched the effort, served for several years as the Fresh Tracks land steward. She described to me a night when she sat on the prairie in the darkness, listening to the grasses rustle, waiting for a lunar eclipse to commence. “Just as the Earth’s shadow hit the moon,” she recalled,
“coyotes burst into song.” While researching for this book I heard many such accounts of experiences that were deeply personal, and often fortuitous. M. C. Davis showed me around the expansive wildlife corridor he’s preserved in the Florida Panhandle, pointing out the spot where he once came across more than a dozen young alligators lounging in a blackwater creek. In the Maine woods, Roxanne Quimby shared her hope that the former industrial timberlands she has purchased might someday, given time and nature’s resilience, be a wild forest as beautiful as before the loggers came.

Marc Evans, a botanist who discovered the largest tract of unlogged forest left in Kentucky, recalled a day of frustration in the midst of the campaign to buy and save Blanton Forest. He was leading a hike for potential donors and inadvertently kicked up a swarm of ground-nesting wasps that stung and scattered the party. Evans went home depressed, but two young girls on the outing had a different take on the day’s adventure. They later visited their grandmother and described trees with leaves ablaze in fall color. “It was like walking through a rainbow,” they said, and could she help save the forest? With a $500,000 donation, that anonymous grandmother helped assure that kids will forevermore have the opportunity to experience Blanton Forest in all its buzzing, blossoming splendor.

Whenever I spoke to individuals working to protect natural areas, their stories spilled out—of interactions with wildlife, of obstacles overcome, of chance encounters that led to a major gift. The people and the land intersect in ways that enrich both, that suggest a kind of reciprocity between humans and nature that modern peoples have mostly lost.

There is no other way to say it: These stories give me hope.

To be sure, the trend of habitat loss driven by human population growth and rapacious consumption bodes ill for wilderness and wildlife. But if one looks across the broad sweep of American conservation history, it is impressive—miraculous even—to see how much has been accomplished by a relative small number of people who simply loved the land, and were willing to back up affection with action.

It may sometimes seem a distant dream to achieve a society where every species, whether wildflower or warbler or wolf, is accorded space enough to thrive. If that day does come, I believe it will be from the accumulated actions of individuals whose lives reflect the land ethic articulated by Aldo Leopold, that “a thing is right when it tends to support the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

Measured by this standard, William and Elizabeth Kent’s gift of a primeval redwood grove to the American people could not be more right. Standing among silent giants in Muir Woods National Monument, I was grateful for the Kents’ generous nature. If you’ve never been to Muir Woods, or to Acadia National Park in Maine, or to Beidler Forest Sanctuary in South Carolina, you may enter them through Antonio Vizcaino’s photographs in this book. But someday soon, go visit in person. Take the kids, and look for banana slugs among the redwoods. Watch the sunrise from Acadia’s Cadillac Mountain. Dip your toes into the dark waters of Beidler’s Four Holes Swamp (check first for gators). Let your children get really, really muddy.

If you find the experience meaningful, consider what actions you could take, large or small, to help create a wilder, more beautiful America. Is there a place—a forest, grassland, or marsh—where wild creatures are today at home, but with no protections from the bulldozers of tomorrow? Do you know a piece of abused land that might be healed if someone were to buy it, and offer it kindly care? What could you do to pass along the gift of wildness?
In 1926, a girl from Knoxville named Grace Wright pledged five cents to help purchase private lands for a new national park along the Tennessee–North Carolina border. Two years later, John D. Rockefeller Jr. would pledge $5 million to the fundraising drive. While her name is lost to history and his contributions to American conservation are rightfully celebrated, both individuals were caught up in the excitement of the early parks movement. During the 1920s the National Park Service was a hotbed of activity as conservationists petitioned the young agency on behalf of their favorite natural areas. Civic leaders from around the country were busy garnering political support for the scenic lands they favored, a phenomenon that reflected both pride of place and a desire to seize market share in the nascent leisure travel industry. Henry Ford's Model T had made automobile-based tourism a possibility for working people, whetting the wanderlust of millions of Americans.

Anne Davis of Knoxville, Tennessee, is credited with launching one such park campaign in 1923, when after a summer trip to the West with her husband, Willis, she asked, “Why can't we have a national park in the Great Smokies?” The Davises, who were socially prominent, began proselytizing for their idea. Anne Davis was later elected to the Tennessee state legislature, where she helped pass legislation authorizing state funding for the first major land acquisition toward a future park, seventy-eight thousand acres from the Little River Lumber Company. By the following year, Willis Davis had recruited a local pharmacist, Colonel David Chapman, who soon became a leading figure in the park effort, and other area businessmen to form the Great Smoky Mountains Conservation Association.

Several individuals from across the mountains in North Carolina also became prominent park supporters, including state senator Mark Squires and the famous outdoor writer Horace Kephart. Kephart was a Pennsylvania-born librarian and frontier history buff who became so enthralled with the adventurous life that he retreated—leaving both family and profession—to the Smokies in 1903. He lived there among the mountain people for the rest of his life, drinking (and recovering from drinking), tramping the backcountry, and writing popular books, including Our Southern Highlanders. Kephart thought a national park could best counter the rapacious logging then denuding the Smoky Mountains.

“One or two large lumber companies own practically all the virgin forest that I have been featuring as one of the chief attractions of this majestic region,” he wrote. “They aim to destroy it: to cut down those gigantic trees and cut them into so many board feet of lumber, leaving a desert of stumps and briers in their place.” Through his writings Kephart promoted the Smokies, highlighted the threat that large timberland owners posed to the Southern Appalachians' last virgin forests, and helped counter park opponents, mostly in the timber industry, who favored creating a national forest in which commercial logging would continue.

After much lobbying by conservationists, Congress passed legislation in 1925 authorizing the secretary of the interior to study the boundaries for three new parks—the Smokies on the Tennessee–North Carolina border, Shenandoah in Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains, and Mammoth Cave in Kentucky—and to accept land, or money for the purchase of land, within them. The act did not officially authorize the parks—that would come later—or provide any federal funds for land acquisition, but it settled the question of where the first national parks in the Southern Appalachians...
would be established. Thus began a flurry of fundraising activity in Tennessee and North Carolina for the Smokies site. The two state legislatures made appropriations, the municipal governments of Asheville and Knoxville, which anticipated becoming gateway communities to the future park, made timely financial contributions, and private fundraising began in earnest.

This was the context in which Grace Wright and her Central High School classmates offered their pocket change for the park in 1926. Some 4,500 schoolchildren from four east Tennessee counties made gifts totaling $1,391.72, an inconsequential sum relative to the estimated $10-million cost for the park lands, but the kids’ enthusiasm gave a big psychological boost to the funding drive in Tennessee, which soon exceeded its statewide goal. It was a high point, but several obstacles loomed. Park foes, led by large timberland owners, bitterly fought the park idea. Buying more than 6,600 separate tracts of private land and assembling them into a contiguous conservation area posed a gargantuan logistical and legal challenge. Sustaining fundraising momentum proved difficult.

A low point came in 1928, when contributions to the park initiative waned. The situation seemed dire, and the national park service’s assistant director, Arno Cammerer, was tapped to solicit John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s support for the Smokies. Cammerer had a friendly relationship with Rockefeller, who was already deeply engaged in parks-related philanthropy, having made notable contributions to Grand Teton and Acadia national parks, among others. With Colonel Chapman’s assistance, Cammerer made a successful pitch, and Rockefeller pledged $5 million, on a matching basis, from a family philanthropy set up by his father. When the gift was announced publicly on March 6, 1928, bells pealed throughout Knoxville as the news spread.

Many years of work were required to assemble a vast public natural area from formerly private land. These labors were recognized when twenty-five thousand people gathered in September 1940 at Newfound Gap in the heart of Great Smoky Mountains National Park to celebrate its birth. Perhaps Grace Wright and some of the other schoolchildren who contributed their pocket change to the park were among them. The governors of Tennessee and North Carolina were there, and National Park Service officials, and the “mother” of the park idea, Anne Davis. John D. Rockefeller Jr., without whom the Smokies preservation movement would surely have foundered, sent his regrets, but the president himself, Franklin D. Roosevelt, came to formally dedicate the park.

That so many worked so hard for a national park in the Smokies—and even during the Great Depression gave of their own dollars to advance the project—is a historical wonder. Just as the steep-sided, sheltered valleys of the Southern Appalachians, “coves” in the local vernacular, are a biological wonder. From their deep, rich soils springs a frenzy of life. In the remote coves of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, where the logger’s ax never rang, tracts of primeval forest survive that are living relics of the pre-settlement landscape. The trees here may not rival the West’s sequoias for size, but they are giants of their kind. The tallest recorded tree in the East, a statuesque white pine along the Smokies’ Caldwell Fork Trail, measured 207 feet high before Hurricane Opal lopped off its top 21 feet in 1995. A yellow buckeye in the Gabes Creek area is more than 19 feet in circumference. For people who have never seen an old-growth forest, little of which survives in the East, these places seem almost magical, a bit like stumbling into Tolkien’s Middle Earth. The park’s arboreal diversity is also notable; a savvy dendrologist might identify some 130 tree species within this five-hundred-thousand-acre protected area, nearly as many as grow in all of Europe.

The trees watch over a profusion of life nearly unmatched in North America. More than four thousand plant species, two hundred species of birds, and sixty mammal species have been identified in the park. Innumerable reptiles and amphibians, gastropods, and insects also call these mountains home. The present-day diversity is partly due to the region’s glacial history. Twenty thousand years ago, during the most recent ice age, the Laurentide ice sheet covering much of eastern North America didn’t quite reach the Southern Appalachians, which became a sanctuary and mixing ground for all manner of species. For a time, plants from north and south were thrust together like kids at recess into the gym when a thunderstorm kicks up. After the storm, they disperse again to their favorite spots on the playground. In the case of the Smokies, the more northerly plants that had fled south during the ice age ascended the mountains, looking for a cooler spot to settle when things warmed up. Thus a hiker on the Appalachian Trail today will find on Mount LeConte and some of the park’s other high mountains a forest of spruce and fir, a natural community they will see again a thousand miles later in northern New England, if their legs hold out.

While the park’s ecology makes it a mecca for scientific research, it’s safe to assume that few visitors, with the exception of an occasional arachnologist, come to see or study the handsome spruce-fir moss spider, a minuscule tarantula that lives only in the park. (The species now teeters on the edge of extinction because air pollution and exotic insects are killing the spruce-fir forest, damaging the spider’s mossy hunting grounds.) Rather, the nearly ten million people who enjoy Great Smoky Mountains National Park every year—ironically, mostly in cars—are drawn by its wild grandeur, by the sight of something so different from most Americans’ sprawling suburban experience. Here in the midst of a long-settled landscape, a big, wild, beautiful place still exists.

For better or worse, the Smokies are highly accessible, within six hundred miles of half the American population, and gorgeous. (Notwithstanding Gatlinburg, Tennessee, that quintessence of commercialism and eyesore on the park’s northern boundary.) The park embodies the paradox facing the National Park Service: how to save extraordinary places both for and from people. This is the conflict codified in the 1916 legislation that created the National Park Service, and which enjoined it to manage the public lands under its purview to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” It’s a tall order, made all the more difficult by the relative paucity of public funding and respect accorded our national park system, an incongruous neglect, given the parks’ tremendous popularity with the American people.

Despite the air pollution and other negative effects of human activity, Great Smoky Mountains National Park remains wildly attractive. The folds and twists of the landscape, the sparkling waters, even the smell—a rich, earthy odor—suggest life afoot with possibility. Each season offers its own pleasures, but on an early summer’s day, with the mists still hanging in the valleys and birdsong echoing in the forest canopy, there may be no better place to experience what Horace Kephart called “a real forest, a real wildwood, a real unimproved work of God.”
This day I shot a condor. It measured from tip to tip of the wings, eight and a half feet," wrote a young Charles Darwin on April 27, 1834. Darwin was on the multiyear expedition chronicled in The Voyage of the Beagle, collecting specimens and impressions that would launch an intellectual revolution. Following the convention of the day, he had killed the gigantic Andean condor, product of a giant land, in the name of science.

Surveying the vast expanse of Argentine Patagonia, he wrote: “Everything in this southern continent has been effected on a grand scale.”

At the mouth of the Santa Cruz River, the Beagle anchored, and Captain Robert Fitzroy led an exploratory party upriver, passing by lands that many decades after would be settled as a private ranch, the Estancia Monte León. But during Darwin’s visit, the semiarid Patagonian steppe was home only to wildlife and the indigenous peoples who lived from the land. Darwin thought the country “extremely uninteresting,” seeing everywhere “the same stunted and dwarf plants” covering “level plains.” The wildlife was more remarkable—herds of guanacos, the wild camelids from which llamas were domesticated, and pumas, whose tracks “were to be seen almost everywhere on the banks of the river.”

Farther north, Darwin had observed the common rhea, a large, flightless bird native to the region, which he called an ostrich. In southern Patagonia, he sought out the smaller, rarer species of rhea called avestruz petise (“petite ostrich”) in Spanish. He saw several bands of the “excessively wary” fowl, and in an uncharacteristic lapse, even ate one when a colleague shot what Darwin initially thought was a juvenile bird of the common sort. “It was cooked and eaten before my memory returned,” he wrote. He quickly collected the remains and reported, “From these a very nearly perfect specimen has been put together, and is now exhibited in the museum of the Zoological Society.” Back in England, ornithologist John Gould named the species Rhea darwinii after Darwin.

Similar in appearance and habit to African ostriches, rheas have been proposed as an example of parallel, or “convergent,” evolution, in which similar physical traits arise independently in response to comparable environmental pressures. Whether rheas and ostriches are truly unrelated remains a subject of taxonomic debate (the fossil evidence is spotty, and genetic analysis suggests a common ancestor), but the notion of parallel evolution is a handy metaphor for considering the striking similarities between Patagonia and the American West.

A newcomer to this country is struck by how much the Patagonian steppe resembles Wyoming—open prairie covered by bunchgrasses and low shrubs, canyons carved by wind and water, jagged mountains capped with snow. Beyond a comparable geography and climate, the recent human history of the two regions has strong parallels. European immigrants settled a harsh frontier, eliminated the local peoples through introduced disease and systematic violence, developed a pastoral economy based on sheep and cattle, and fostered a cult of nostalgia around the horse-borne men who tended the livestock.

The North American cowboy and South American gaucho became cultural icons. To make way for domestic livestock, great populations of wild grazing animals—bison and guanacos, respectively—were eliminated. Native carnivores were persecuted. Overgrazing wore out the land.

Perhaps these similar histories are unsurprising given that Europeans settled the Wild West and the wild south during roughly the same era, and in both regions perceived the landscape as underutilized. The worldview of the newcomers begat land use practices that greatly diminished ecological health; in the United States the resulting destruction also spawned a countercurrent, a movement to conserve
wildlife, soil, forests, and unmarred scenery. The national park idea was soon exported, and the foundation of Argentina’s national parks system was laid early in the twentieth century, even as the young parks movement in the United States was gaining strength.

Argentine parks showcase some of the planet’s most spectacular alpine terrain, but until recently, the Patagonian steppe ecosystem was barely represented in the national park system, and no protected area captured the singular beauty where the Patagonian grasslands reach the Atlantic Ocean. That changed in 2002, when Monte León, the country’s first Patagonian coastal national park, was designated. The new park, encompassing 155,000 acres and twenty-five miles of shoreline, resulted from a collaboration between North and South American conservationists, and the generosity of the woman who once ran a clothing company named for this wind-scoured region at the bottom of the Earth.

K

Kristine McDivitt Tompkins grew up in a much warmer landscape, but one that also offered grasslands and mountains, a rocky coast, and skies where condors formerly soared. She was raised on a family ranch in southern California. An adventurous spirit, Kristine went off to Idaho in the 1960s to the Argentine parks administration. A new national park was born.

A master plan for the future park was developed, and the following year the land was formally transferred to Conservación Patagonica, all of the funding provided by Krist Tompkins from the sale of her Patagonia stock. Over the next eighteen months a sheep estancia for $1.7 million provided by Krist Tompkins, who, like Chouinard, had been a climber-turned-fashion-entrepreneur, and moved to Chile. In South America, Doug and Krist Tompkins began doing conservation work full-time, helping create several new protected areas, including a 740,000-acre wilderness park in Chile called Pumalín. In the late 1990s, Krist Tompkins decided to sell her stock in Patagonia the company and reinvest the money in Patagonia the place. Along with her old friend Yvon Chouinard and a few associates, she founded the non-profit land trust, Conservacion Patagonica, that would help expand conservation lands in the region. That decision happened to coincide with an economic crisis in Argentina and a sustained decline in the rural economy. A century of overgrazing and a collapse in the global wool market had left the large sheep estancias generally unprofitable.

“We had heard about this property on the coast that the park service had been trying to buy for years,” says Tompkins. For various reasons, the deal had never been consummated, so she asked the head of a leading Argentine environmental group to negotiate with the owners about purchasing the land. An agreement was struck in 2001, and the organization, the Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina, bought the Estancia Monte León for $1.7 million provided by Conservacion Patagonica, all of the funding provided by Krist Tompkins from the sale of her Patagonia stock. Over the next eighteen months a master plan for the future park was developed, and the following year the land was formally transferred to the Argentine parks administration. A new national park was born.

But no birth is easy. Here was an extraordinary place that the park service wanted to save. It was private property with a willing seller—one of Patagonia’s most influential families, whose roots stretched back to the 1890s, when siblings Mauricio and Sara Braun began building a sheep ranching empire in the region. A nonprofit organization stood ready to take title and then donate the estancia to the government. Best of all, a private conservationist was offering to foot the bill. It should have been simple. It wasn’t, due to opposition from some provincial politicians and ranchers.

As in rural parts of the American West, antifederal sentiment in Patagonia can run strong. “We had a very tough go getting the jurisdiction passed from the province to the national parks because the provinces don’t like to cede land back to the federal government,” says Tompkins. To do so required a unanimous vote of the provincial legislature. For a former corporate executive accustomed to making things happen quickly, it surprised Tompkins that conservation could be so tough: “I was new to this and had no idea how contentious it would be,” she says. “Land use issues hit at the heart of human beings and can cause irrational behavior. I was pretty down about that until a friend told me how long it took to create Grand Teton National Park” (more than fifty years). “Of course, now that Monte León is a national park, it was all their idea and our role is mostly forgotten. Which is fine,” she concludes. “Saving the land is what matters.”

W

When Charles Darwin wrote, “The plains of Patagonia are boundless,” the country was unexplored by Europeans, and his imagination was free to drift across the land unfettered. Soon after his visit, however, the wilderness Darwin saw would begin to be bound up in the minds and legal documents of men. More than 170 years later, at Monte León, that tradition of conquest and containment is being reversed as the land is unshackled from human dominion to follow its own course.

Where the salty spray meets land, Monte León’s beaches are a busy place. Male sea lions roar and tussle, defending their harems. Fabulous numbers of Magellanic penguins crowd the shoreline; their colonies, comprised of tens of thousands of individuals, emit an overpowering fishy aroma. When Kris Tompkins first visited Monte León, she was astounded at the scene: “It’s an unbelievable coastline. We had been concerned about protecting the sea lions and penguin rookeries, but the physical nature of the place is so extraordinary. It is truly national park caliber.”

While it will take time for the vegetation to heal from past livestock grazing, wildlife populations already seem to be rebounding. The land now belongs to Darwin’s rheas, armadillos, and eagles. And it seems fitting that a park named for a mountain shaped like a lion should be a safe haven for pumas, who roam the grasslands in search of the occasional unwary guanaco. Southern right whales cruise by offshore, elephant seals haul out on the rocks, and shoebirds wade in the surf. Most of the plants and animals Darwin recorded on his visit to the area are still present. One exception is the Andean condor, and there is talk about reintroducing the species to Monte León, which would be a proper capstone to the park’s creation story. For Kris Tompkins and Conservacion Patagonica, however, the successful conservation project here is merely an opening chapter in the land trust’s work to help preserve habitat for penguins and rheas—and all other wild creatures at home in the remote reaches of Patagonia.

Land conservation is often slow and discouraging, but at the end, if you can pull it off, it’s exhilarating and a source of deep satisfaction.

—Kristine McDivitt Tompkins
Nokuse Plantation, Florida

Corcovado National Park, Chile
Growing up in Mexico in the 1960s, I was fortunate to explore numerous wild places. My parents regularly took our family to remote sites where we would camp out and experience moments of intimate contact with nature. In contrast, the educational system in which I was schooled prepared young minds to believe that human beings are separate from nature—that this living planet is merely a collection of resources for us to control and possess without limit.

With the passage of time, I can say that such teachings failed to take root in my innermost being, which feels a deep kinship with all of nature. I am privileged to feel a profound connection with the diversity of life in its myriad forms. This connection grew during the years I lived in India, working as a diplomat for the Mexican government. From 1977 to 1980 I traveled widely throughout Asia, visiting natural wonders.

Unfortunately, whenever I have returned to the magical places I discovered with my parents as a child, and to those I visited as a young man in Asia, I have found only devastation and misery caused by human activity. Revisiting these landscapes of memory and loss has moved me to take action, to use landscape photography as the language through which I communicate concern for the Earth’s diminishing biodiversity.

Photography is a powerful tool that can be used to educate the public, and help strengthen a new conservationist awareness and ethic. When spectators contemplate natural beauty, their inner beauty and sensitivity are awakened. Through beauty, I seek to foster cultural change, for I am convinced that if we wish to preserve the continuity of life as we know it, we must create a new culture that acknowledges and respects the value of nature. The survival of future generations of humans and all other species on the planet depends on such a new culture. Nature conservation and restoration is a mission we all must pursue.

Twenty-five years ago, I took up photography as a way to share my life experiences with other people. At first, my subjects were indigenous groups, and I came to know and enjoy their daily lives, ceremonies, and rituals. Most importantly, they introduced me to a collective vision of nature as a vast family, changing my perception of the world forever. Once I had experienced this familial closeness with the wild life around me, the next logical step was my decision to devote my energies solely to photographing nature.

In 2000, I founded the organization America Natural and launched an ongoing expedition from Tierra del Fuego to Alaska to photograph the Americas’ most outstanding protected natural areas. By sharing these images, I hope to help conserve this hemisphere’s beauty, integrity, and biodiversity.

In this book we present the stories of American conservationists who set an example in this regard, having succeeded, through their generosity and vision, in preserving areas that otherwise would have been completely destroyed. To take the photographs included here, I traveled during a period of three years through eight different countries, although primarily in the United States. For me, the most enriching part of this project has been learning about the outstanding positive actions taken by individuals who, despite the tendencies exhibited by society, have not forgotten the intrinsic value of nature. Through their work to save wildness, they have demonstrated that the love of the Earth has the power to transform us all.
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