

Patagonia on a Collision Course

Dams on the Rio Baker and Rio Pascua would inundate wilderness trout streams and impact a proposed national park

JONATHAN LEE WRIGHT



From an industrial and political standpoint, rivers such as the Rio Baker (above) and Rio Pascua are untapped resources.

PATAGONIA, the geographical term for the southern tip of South America occupied by both Chile and Argentina, is an iconic place on many levels. Charles Darwin explored Patagonia's coastline (and some of the interior) during his voyage aboard the HMS *Beagle*. Patagonia is also the name of a popular outdoor clothing brand, and the company uses a graphic silhouette of the region's Mt. Fitzroy as its logo. Environmentalists today view Patagonia as a potential battleground for important ecological, economic, and political issues.

Chile is the world's chief producer of copper and is famous for its world-class wines. The radically inclined east-to-west topography of Chile—a country with a maximum overall width of less than 150 miles from the Andes to the Pacific—coupled with some of the highest rates of maritime precipitation on the planet, combine to produce spectacular river drainages in the southern regions, unequaled for speed and power.

From an environmental perspective, the rivers are an irreplaceable natural resource. From an industrial and political standpoint, the potential for hydroelectric power generation and subsequent economic benefit makes the topography of Chile an untapped resource.

Spanish energy giant Endesa and the Chilean corporation Colbun have proposed the construction of five major hydroelectric dams in the southern province of Aysen. The dams would create reservoirs on two of Chile's largest and wildest rivers, the Rio Baker and the Rio Pascua.

The HydroAysen project is a 2,355-megawatt, \$4 billion hydroelectric plan similar in scale to North America's Columbia River hydroelectric system, with four major dams and similar associated environmental impacts.

To bring the electricity to market, Endesa/Colbun would require high-voltage power lines stretching approximately 1,500 miles from the power source, cutting across existing and proposed wilderness lands—a potential windfall for the Chilean logging companies enthusiastically endorsing the project.

While no one denies the right of the Chilean people to an autonomous economic ascendancy, what is

Continued on page 14

JONATHAN LEE WRIGHT PHOTO

Continued from page 12

in question is whether the long-term interests of that country would be ill served by the loss of a world-class environmental resource, and whether the realistic benefits of this project are being accurately represented in public debate.

President Michelle Bachelet was elected in 2006, partially under a campaign platform of sustainable green policies for the country. However, as reported in the San Francisco Chronicle in March 2008, senior members of her cabinet—Energy Minister Marcelo Tokman and Interior Minister Edmundo Perez—have recently voiced support for the HydroAysen project, signaling that the Bachelet administration is bending under predictable commercial pressure.

Environmental advocacy groups have analyzed the proposed project and its alternatives. They suggest that widespread use of hydroturbine microgeneration stations could meet the energy needs of the regional economy. These generators, installed in-line in current structures and entailing no impoundments, would be owned and operated by local landowners, who could then potentially sell energy directly to the national grid, as is currently done in the U.S. with private solar and wind generators. The discussion of wind generators, powered by Patagonia's continuous zephyrs, adds another logical, greener alternative to the massive HydroAysen project.

Of course, while these solutions may potentially meet the energy needs of Chile, they hold little interest for mammoth industrial corporations that are in the business of building dams, roads, and power lines.

Rio of Economics

THE RIO BAKER is a world-renowned fly-fishing destination with numerous lodges and guide operations centered around the river's steelhead and large resident rainbow trout. The Rio Pascua is, for practical purposes, unknown to most fly fishers. A recent expedition sponsored by the environmental advocacy group International Rivers (internationalrivers.org) reported that fewer than 100 foreigners have ever visited the river's interior waterfalls, which would be inundated by the reservoirs of the proposed dams.

On a two-month trip through Aysen in early 2006, I caught a 10-pound Rio Baker steelhead and was immediately

struck, not only by the powerful nature of these fish, but by the habitat-blocking implications posed by the proposed dams.

While the local government recognizes the growing sport-fishing industry and its associated economic spin-offs, there is a strong value placed on insular economic policy across the Chilean frontier. Recent legislation requires all new outfitting operations to be Chilean-owned, despite the fact that the current tourism and guide services industry was predominantly developed by North Americans more than 20 years ago. These pioneering business owners have participated in the debate over the dams, but this sticks in the craw of some Chilean policy makers.



DAVID DEIS/GRAPHIC

“It should be no surprise that anything sounding like foreign sports fishers telling locals what to do would be badly received,” says Tim Kingston, public relations director for International Rivers. “The point is not to preserve the Baker and Pascua for sport fishing. The point is to preserve the Baker and Pascua for Chile’s patrimony—as evidenced by the large Chilean coalition working to save the rivers with International Rivers.”

“There are other ways that Chile’s energy needs can be met without destroying these globally important rivers,” Kingston adds, “such as energy conservation, increased energy efficiency, and alternative energy. If this

Continued on page 16

Continued from page 14

helps sports fishing, that is icing on the cake.”

While visiting the lower Rio Baker near the town of Cochrane, I had the opportunity to meet Kris McDivitt Tompkins, who along with Yvon Chouinard was one of the founders of the Patagonia clothing company in the 1970s. Kris and her husband Doug Tompkins (founder of the companies North Face and Esprit) have spearheaded the ecological conservation movement in Patagonia for more than 15 years. Kris and Doug—who live in Aysen—were the primary force in the coordination and creation of Chile’s Parque Pumalín, the first private national park in the world.

Pumalín, situated among the fjords of the Chiaten area of northern Aysen, encompasses nearly 650,000 acres of rainforest and watersheds that were purchased from individual landowners, dedicated as a national park, and donated to the country of Chile in perpetuity, with the requirement that management be conducted by a non-partisan board of directors.

Carolina Morgado of Parque Pumalín sums up the impact of the park project: “Pumalín opened a possibility and prompted a new discussion among the Chilean public, and has not only given hope to those who care about the environment, but has strengthened the movement in general.

“Protecting the Baker and Pascua rivers from being dammed is like protecting native forests from being clear-cut. Pumalín has served as inspiration to thousands of Chileans—particularly the young—to stand up against private interests and the government, seeking to maximize the exploitation of Chile’s natural resources with little concern for local communities and the surrounding environments upon which they depend.”

While most Chileans now consider Pumalín a national treasure, this success did not come without struggle. Throughout the negotiation and acquisition process, Kris and Doug were vilified in the press as North American opportunists with a suspect private commercial agenda.

Now Kris and Doug have visualized an even bigger project, the proposed Patagonia National Park, which would bundle the existing and largely unmanaged national forest holdings of the Chacabuco, Tamango, and Jenimiene reservas into a park larger



Lago Bertrand (above) near the town of Cochrane is the source of the Rio Baker. The Cochrane area could soon be the site of a \$4 billion hydroelectric project.

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than Yosemite, stretching across half of Aysen province.

Patagonia National Park would lie almost immediately in the path of the HydroAysen project, with the entrance to the Valle Chacabuco section sitting adjacent to the Rio Baker and the outflow of one of the larger proposed dams.

When I was in Cochrane, Kris and Doug organized a well-attended local meeting to help raise awareness and resistance to HydroAysen. With media present, Doug addressed the crowd and succinctly advised them that the eyes of the world would be carefully watching, weighing in on the tough decisions they would soon have to make.


Cochrane would undoubtedly become a center of operations for the Rio Baker segment of the project—an instant boomtown—but at the almost certain cost of a long-term tourist economy. These are hard choices for Chileans in outlying areas, who live by ranching and small-scale subsistence farming.

What can concerned American fly fishers do? Stay current on the proposed Aysen project and the opposition to it. The following web sites offer up-to-date information on the project and direct readers to petitions or other avenues of public commentary.

- internationalrivers.org
- patagonia.com/web/us/patagonia.go?assetid=17500

- conservacionpatagonica.org
- ecosistemas.cl/1776/channel.html
- defensapatagonia.cl
- savebiogems.org/patagonia

Rio Baker and Rio Pascua, two of the last great wild rivers on earth, now face the same fate that befell many of America’s waterways in the first part of the 20th century. While it is not our place to interfere in the business of another country’s natural resources management, it could well be time that we share the hard-learned lessons of our own development.

Chile does not need to reenact what crushed many of the best native fisheries habitats in the United States. Sharing lessons is different from telling others what to do, and one immediate example that comes to mind is the collapse of many of the West Coast salmon runs, with economic consequences that have reverberated throughout California, Oregon, and Washington. 

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THE EDITOR.]