Honorary Membership Nomination

Nominee: Doug Tompkins, eco-philanthropist
Nominating Trustee: Michael P. Scheele, ASLA – California Northern Chapter

It is an honor to nominate Doug Tompkins, businessman, designer, Olympic athlete, environmental activist, and conservationist, for honorary membership in the American Society of Landscape Architects. He has founded several successful businesses, of which The North Face and Esprit are best known, and has used the proceeds to purchase millions of acres of land, protecting it from development and preserving it for public use.

A leading figure in both entrepreneurial and conservation circles, Doug Tompkins built a small clothing operation into the global retail powerhouse Esprit de Corp. In the late 1980s, he established the Foundation for Deep Ecology and the Conservation Land Trust, both located in California. In 1990, Mr. Tompkins sold his half of Esprit and began purchasing wildlands in Chile. Since then, he and his wife have worked tirelessly and invested more than $150 million to acquire parts of volcanoes, glaciers, and 1,000-year-old stands of alerce trees, a species that Chile declared national monuments in 1976.

To date, Mr. Tompkins has purchased more than two million acres of varied terrain in South America, protecting the natural landscape and wildlife from development. His signature effort has been creating Pumalin Park, the largest non-government-operated publicly accessible park in the world. Located in southern Chile, the park sprawls across 762,000 acres--as extensive as Yosemite National Park in California. The park has been declared a Nature Sanctuary by the Chilean government, granting it additional environmental protection. Mr. Tompkins has signed an accord with the Chilean government that will eventually transfer ownership of their lands to the people of Chile to become the country's newest—and arguably most spectacular—national park.

Besides Pumalin, Tompkins has helped create Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica and Monte León National Park, site of a penguin rookery, along the coast of Argentine Patagonia. In dozens of other conservation undertakings, he has also contributed personal funds, advice, or both.

Mr. Tompkins sees himself in the tradition of the Rockefellers and other eco-philanthropists who faced down developers and bought lands that were eventually incorporated into U.S. national parks. He focuses his efforts on a part of the world with no tradition of private citizens buying land for conservation. His efforts are both acclaimed and reviled, but he is in it for the long haul, not for immediate gratitude of local residents.

“Parks generate tremendous local opposition at first; it’s a given,” he says. “Then, after a while, once the thing gets established, the locals are the fiercest defenders. Sometimes it takes 20 years.”

These days, Mr. Tompkins is focusing his energy in northeastern Argentina, where he has bought 600,000 acres of ranches, forests, farmland — even a sawmill — in threatened wetlands known as Esteros del Iberá. His plans include the reintroduction of species that were wiped out in the region, including the giant river otter, the giant anteater, and the jaguar.

Mr. Tompkins has worked diligently and spent his personal wealth to preserve and protect the environment in parts of the world that need it the most and that offer the greatest opportunity to make a difference. His stewardship of the land is entirely in keeping with our Society’s mission statement. It is with great respect and admiration that I nominate Doug Tompkins for honorary membership in ASLA.