

Chile is destined to be one of the most important green focus points on the planet



An interview with James N. Levitt of the Harvard Forest, Harvard University and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy¹



James Levitt, director of the Program on Conservation Innovation at the Harvard Forest, says that Chile, in the short term, can develop an image similar to that of New Zealand, thanks to a new law that allows private landowners to designate their land to the State for conservation in perpetuity. In visiting Chile this September, Levitt also celebrates the initiatives of Douglas and Kristine Tompkins in the south of the country, and says that there is still time to combat global warming.

In the late 1970s, a young American named James Levitt completed his degree in Anthropology from Yale University, and got a job with the United States National Park Service to work on one of the projects which, at the time, was of great interest to President Jimmy Carter: to protect the lands of Alaska in the context of ongoing negotiations to settle native land claims and build the Alaska oil pipeline – a huge system of steel piping, stretching from Alaska's North Slope to the Prince William Sound that eventually enabled the extraction and transportation of oil to customers around the world.

Levitt was hired as the Assistant to the Special Assistant to the Director of the National Park Service. He served as a member of a team that at the time was given the difficult task of providing information to the United States Congress regarding the proposed creation of a network of protected areas in Alaska – a mosaic of protected places that would comprise over 40 million hectares of national parks, forests and wildlife refuges. Thus, Levitt became a privileged witness to the historic achievement that

¹ This is an adaptation of an interview with James Levitt by Javier Rodriguez, published in *Que Pasa* magazine in Santiago, Chile on September 30, 2016. This adaptation and update is based on the original Spanish language publication, available online at www.quepasa.cl. Photographs by Marcelo Segura.

changed the history of land conservation: the creation of, at the time, the largest area of protected land in the world.

This week Levitt was in Chile, as a primary organizer of the workshop on “Emerging Innovations in Conservation Finance,” held at Las Majadas de Pirque. He came in his dual role as Director of the Program on Conservation Innovation at the Harvard Forest, Harvard University and as Manager of Land Conservation Programs at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. In these positions, he has closely followed the status of land protection in Chile -- particularly after President Bachelet signed, on the 13th of June, the decree that made official the Derecho Real de Conservacion (DRC). The DRC allows private landowners to designate their land for conservation in perpetuity. Such a designation cannot be broken or revised in the future. In addition, of course, he has closely followed the conservation initiatives of the late Douglas Tompkins and his wife, Kristine.

Que Pasa: *What did you do to inform policy makers regarding the proposed project in Alaska?”*

- **Levitt:** We built off of the realization that people in the United States saw the Alaska initiative as an important milestone in human history. We believed, as President Lyndon Johnson had said: “If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt, we must leave them more than the miracles of technology. We must leave them a glimpse of the world as it was in the beginning, not just after we got through with it.” Today, particularly in the context of climate change, it is urgent for us to protect the maximum amount of natural capital that we can, because that natural capital is the foundation of life on earth. We have to do this not only for ourselves, but also for generations to come.

How did you negotiate with indigenous people?

- In Alaska, Indian tribes are organized in what are called “Native Corporations” that hold land and property for the benefit of their people. The Native Corporations participated in the conversations about the construction for oil pipelines and establishment of national parks and other protected areas. In general, the majority of native peoples were in agreement with us. The majority of them wanted to protect their lands.

What was the impact of this project on the way in which Americans view the protection of land?

- Americans today see Alaska as part of our shared national heritage. We define ourselves in some ways through this shared identity. It is important to note that the conservation of land in my country has a history that is nearly 400 years old. The United States, as a democratic society, has for many decades protected open spaces, for local community use, as well as in the form of national parks and forests. I believe the effort to protect open spaces in Alaska reflects our national interest in protecting our most beautiful and important places.

Why do they say that land conservation is by necessity a multidisciplinary job? For you, it’s very important to include the actions of NGOs, private landowners, the State, academics, and also to include writers and artists, correct?

- Because in the last two centuries, we realized that in order to protect the “fabric of life on earth,” we needed to create grand conservation areas, with corridors that span

thousands and thousands of kilometers. And for this to happen, we need to engage all of these sectors, as well as landowners, as protectors of our land. People respond to arguments that are scientific and economic, as well as those that involve the arts, music and religion. We need to use the appropriate language in order to allow conservation to resonate with as many people as possible.

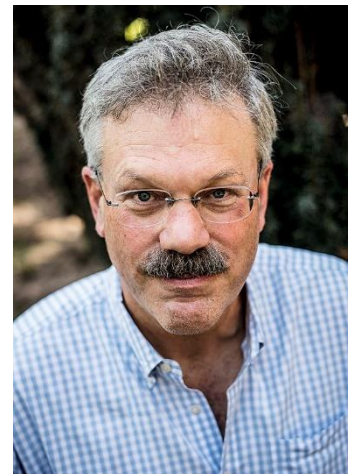
The Uninformed Donald Trump

Do you believe that Chile is a leader in this field?

- Yes, Chile is set to become one of the most important green places on the planet. Indeed, it is already famous at the global level: visitors to Chile are often aware that you can come here if you want to see spectacularly beautiful mountains, snow, and green parks. You know that you will find it all here.

Why do you think that Chile is so strong as a center for conservation?

- For various reasons. Chile has a strong rule of law and a good land title system. You know who owns each parcel of land and if it is or is not protected. It also has a healthy economy, which permits the Chilean people to begin to consider philanthropy. Before these elements were in place, it was much more difficult. And no less important, it is because Chileans are proud of their country. I've been here six or seven times in the last decade. It is impressive that, in each place that I have visited, the guides want to show and tell me everything. And it is clear that none of these people want to see their place destroyed. All of these factors lead me to believe that Chile has everything to develop a national identity and brand similar to that of New Zealand.



You mentioned climate change. How can we respond to this phenomenon?

- This is one of the greatest challenges of our time. There is a study by the Global Commission on the Economy and Climate that estimates that in the next 15 years, we will have to invest, as a global community, something like 90 trillion dollars in infrastructure in order to continue our economic activities and to respond to climate change -- to combat sea level rise, to respond to the increase of average temperatures, to cope with the increased intensity of storms, and to discover forms of energy production that do not pollute the air and contribute to the effects of climate change. It is urgent that we create appropriate green and gray infrastructures that include the protection of open spaces, coastal zones and coral reefs. We have the scientific knowledge. What we need is the political and cultural will before it is too late.

For Levitt, the signing of the derecho real de conservacion was a giant step that puts the country at the forefront and can transform Chile into a world leader in the conservation of land.

It's not too late?

- No, technology is advancing by leaps and bounds. When I was in college, the cost of solar cells was above one hundred dollars per kilowatt. Today, bids to build new solar systems are coming in with solar cell costs at less than one dollar. It gives me hope to see that this is, for example, happening in countries like Chile.

In what sense?

- A decade ago, Chile was considering the creation of hydroelectric centers in the south of your country that would have disrupted massive river ecosystems. Much of the power that would have been produced by those dams would have been sent over a massive transmission network to Santiago. Today, those massive hydro projects are no longer being actively considered. This is because, in Chile there exists the political will and the forum to discuss and debate these issues. And Chile is already realizing that wind and solar, in places such as the Atacama desert, are important sources of energy. That is, Chile has changed its way of looking at how to face the challenges of a country that is undergoing development. It has decided to continue its growth, while protecting natural resources. Chile is trimming its demand for large volumes of fossil fuels that must be imported from a foreign country at a high cost. The nation is seeking ways to replace these fuels with self-sustaining options obtained from within Chile. In this sense, Chile again has the opportunity to become a leader, setting a good example for the rest of the world.

Donald Trump, presidential candidate in your country, has denied the existence of climate change.

- I am in complete disagreement with Trump. His point of view is entirely uninformed. I don't want to make a grand political statement, but I am not very enthusiastic about Trump's candidacy.

A Pathway for the Parks

One of the first times Jim Levitt visited Chile was 8 years ago, when he helped to organize a conference at Universidad Austral, in Valdivia. He still recalls the grand Alerce trees, whose name he continues to struggle to pronounce. And it was at this venue that Jim also met with Douglas Tompkins' wife and partner in conservation, Kristine.

Levitt celebrates the Tompkins' legacy, particularly at Pumalin Park, and applauds the over 400,000 hectares that their foundation, Tompkins Conservation, is offering to the government, with the commitment that they will become part of a new network of national parks in the south. Together with land dedicated to the National Park system by the State, this would become an historic donation of land by a private landowner to a State. The new group of parks will tentatively be known as the "The Route of Parks."

In June of this year President Bachelet signed the law that formalized the right of a private landowner to donate their land for conservation in perpetuity. Do you think that this method of conservation is a step in the right direction?

- This advance in Chilean law has become one of the most important achievements in conservation worldwide. In fact, I know that many countries are beginning to look to how Chile made this happen and are wondering how they might replicate something similar elsewhere.

For example?

- I would prefer not to say, but they are other governments in South America and Europe.

How can we motivate some of the largest Chilean to donate their lands, similar to Tompkins?

- Well, the case of Doug Tompkins is a special one. He did not need added motivation, in fact he motivated the rest. He and his wife are exceptional examples, recognized worldwide. Now, I believe that for the average homeowner, who has a small farm or a large piece of land, the key is to sit with them in the kitchen and to talk face to face and build confidence. To make the landowner understand that their lands can remain the property of their family and that they will be able to continue to live off of the land, but that they are also securing Chile's natural heritage for the next generation. To help them understand that this is a part of the world that they are giving as a gift to their grandchildren.

Tompkins said that in order for conservation to be effective, it has to be "big, wild, and connected." Do you agree?

- I believe that yes, in many cases, it needs to be big, wild, and connected. But it also, in some cases, conservation needs to include working landscapes. In the United States, we have many protected forests, including some that are also in production. We have to arrive at a level of production where landowners profit, but also protect biodiversity, cultural treasures, and use protected lands for economic purposes beyond tourism. In fact, several of the largest tract of private land protected with conservation easement in the United States are forests currently in production in places like Maine and California. The landowner families can continue to selectively harvest trees on these properties, but will, at the same time, perpetually safeguard the diversity of life in the forest.