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Back to nature

By Sarah Murray



The Bushman's river in South Africa

The super-wealthy often achieve notoriety for buying up tropical islands as private resorts or turning wilderness into exclusive golf courses. Some rich individuals, however, are acquiring land with other purposes in mind – to conserve the wilderness or to foster wildlife and biodiversity. Yet, as these benefactors have discovered, this form of philanthropy goes far beyond simply writing a large cheque.

Certainly, the idea of becoming the guardian of a pristine, natural part of the planet has its appeal. “There is something enormously romantic and tangible about saving a place you can walk on, touch and feel,” says Bruce Boyd, principal at Arabella Advisors, a US philanthropic investment advisory firm.

For Ian Gowrie-Smith, an Australian entrepreneur who has founded and developed pharmaceutical and mining companies, the impetus to become a steward of land came as a surprise. In 2005, he bought 14km of the Bushman's river in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, on the edge of the Drakensberg National Park, so that he could indulge in his passion for trout fishing.

On exploring his land, which came with two abandoned cattle farms, he was horrified to find it bereft of wildlife, with about 20 per cent of the property covered by alien species of scrub and bushes, mostly introduced from Australia. “It was clearly extraordinarily good land and should have been covered in animals,” he says.

That was when he came up with the idea of using economies of scale to create a wildlife reserve. He purchased four adjoining properties, giving him a total of about 4,000ha, and set about enclosing, protecting and restocking the land.

Gowrie-Smith – who says he was the first male in his family in five generations not to work the land – found his involvement in natural conservation unexpectedly took him back to his roots in the Australian outback.

“I didn't realise the farming gene was still in me from my childhood, having previously thought I'd had a genetic bypass,” he says.

Doug Tompkins, founder of clothing companies the North Face and Esprit, started his ambitious land acquisition strategy closer to home. “Oddly enough, it began in San Francisco, when I bought a city block and restored the land under an old galvanising plant,” he explains. “It was a big job, but it was so satisfying to see the end result that notion stuck with me.”

Since then, Tompkins and his wife Kristine have acquired hundreds of thousands of hectares of land with the aim of healing damaged landscapes so that they can return to being habitat suitable for wildlife.

Much of their land is in Chile and Argentina. “Latin America probably provides the best area of the world for good opportunities, given private property laws,” Tompkins explains.

However, even when property legislation is favourable, land acquisition does not come without controversy, particularly when outsiders are the ones buying it. “Naturally, ultranationalists are up in arms over foreigners buying land,” says Tompkins.

He explains that all the land he and his wife acquire is bought through their non-profit foundations with a goal of donating it back to national governments in the form of national parks.

“We have done this in Argentina and Chile and so that polemic has more or less disappeared,” he says.

Conservation philanthropists can also encounter opposition to their purchases at a local level, from the communities that live on or use the land.

This means philanthropists need to think about how other people use the land when considering a purchase, says Mark Burget, managing director of the North America conservation region at the Nature Conservancy, the US non-profit organisation.

“Does the public have access to the property and, if so, what rules might you set in managing the property?” asks Burget, who has been involved with many philanthropic land deals. “These are things a lot of people don’t think about before they buy.”

Gowrie-Smith admits he has found it a challenge to strike a balance between natural conservation and community engagement, with locals often simply seeing him as “the big guy with money”.

So on the atoll he purchased four years ago off the northeast coast of Australia, he employed a “native relations” specialist to live there to learn about the communities, to find out what languages they spoke and to make them aware that the island had a new owner.

While some conservation philanthropists want to own land, others argue that making a significant impact on natural conservation means going beyond property purchases and working on advocacy initiatives with governments and others.

This is the approach taken by Larry Linden. A former partner at Goldman Sachs, Linden has used what he describes as the “huge windfall of money” he acquired when the firm went public in 1999 to promote large-scale ocean and forest conservation initiatives.



The Amazon basin

Linden is nothing if not ambitious. He is working with the Brazilian government and other donors to secure protection for some 15 per cent of the Brazilian Amazon basin.

Rather than buying land, he helps governments develop national parks. “The benefit of this approach is that you can save much larger tracts of land,” he says.

However, whether they are purchasing land or working with governments, conservationists stress that these kinds of investments demand long-term commitment.

“One thing that is often overlooked is that it is not enough just to protect a place,” says Arabella Advisors’ Boyd, who was formerly a senior manager at the Nature Conservancy. “These places no longer survive on their own – they require constant attention.”

Linden agrees. “This takes enormous personal effort and time,” he says. “It’s not chequebook philanthropy.”

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