

Interview with Doug Tompkins

ONLY A BEAUTIFUL FARM IS A GOOD FARM

Doug Tompkins is much more than a household name in the world of fashion. He is the founder of the brands North Face and ESPRIT. He developed the latter into a billion dollar company and then sold his majority shares over 20 years ago.



His passion for nature and the outdoors dates back to his youth, when he began rock climbing at the age of 12. This led him to the mountains and to wild places, and exposed him to a circle of people immersed in what one could describe as the 'nature traditions', which stimulated his love for wild places, wilderness and

wildlife. A combination of early activism in the anti-war movement (especially during the Vietnam War era) formed the activist side of his personality. He retains his environmentalist activism and conservation ethic alongside his good business sense, making him an example for others.

BERNWARD GEIER







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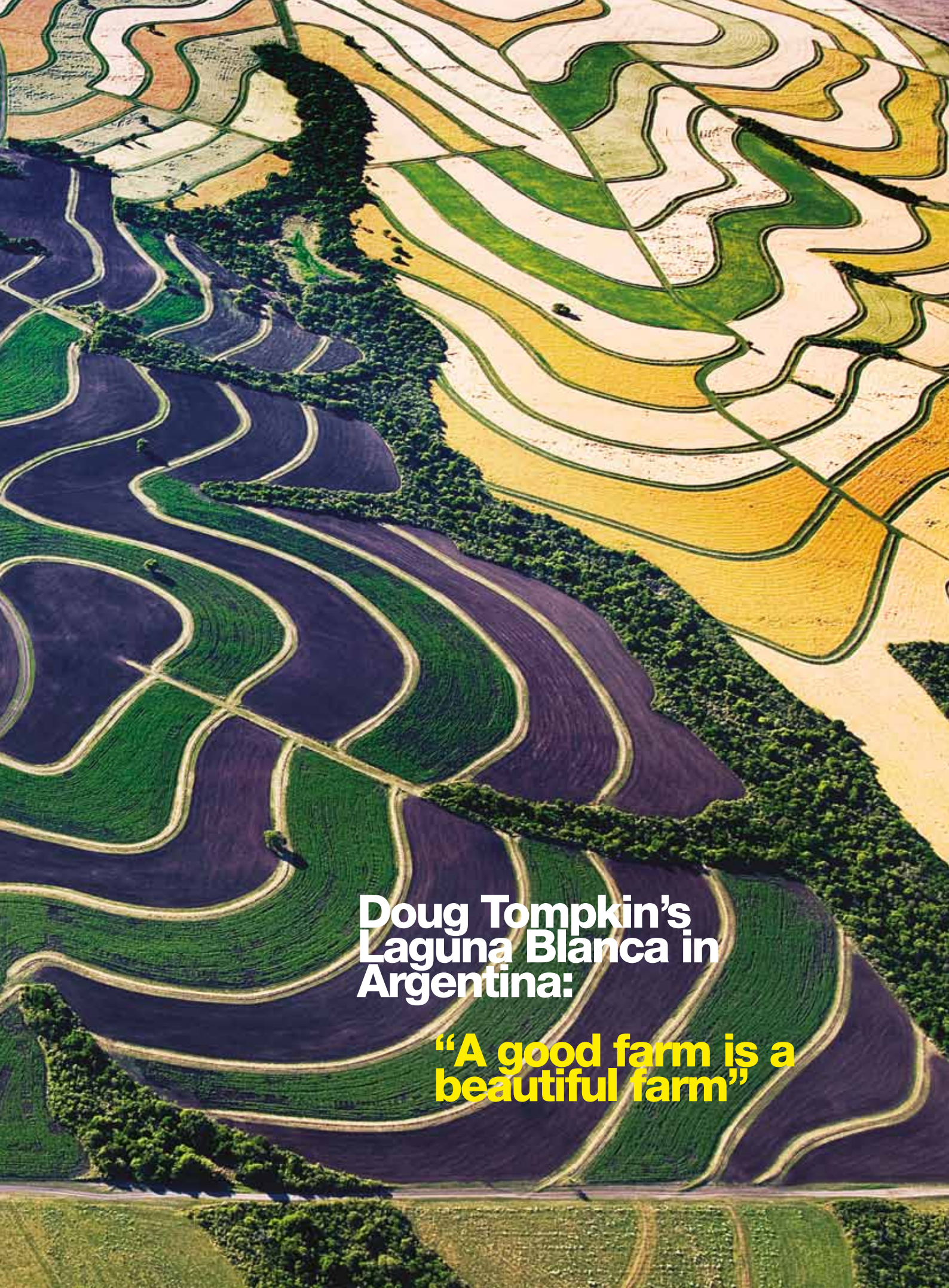
Many years ago he moved to Patagonia, and is now focuses his engagement and activities on Chile and Argentina. He has become part of what one can consider the ‘Patagonian mythology’. Never really interested in owning land he has become probably the world’s biggest landowner of nature conservation land. Starting with close to 300,000 hectares of volcanoes, mountains, rainforest and rivers, that make up Pumalin Park, he and his wife Kris, have now bought up over a million hectares in Chile and Argentina to put it into conservation so as to protect the fast-disappearing biodiversity and wilderness. Doug and Kris invest a lot of effort, time and money in setting up the parks and infrastructure for eco-tourism. Then, with top quality public access infrastructure in place they turn over the parks to the national government as ‘ready to go’ national parks. Kris and Doug have beco-

me world famous for these philanthropic nature conservation activities.

Yet the public hardly knows about Doug’s activities and projects in organic agriculture. When I met Doug a few years ago he told me “Listen, Bernward, the last big thing I plan to do in my life is going to be in organic agriculture”, my immediate reaction was that I better keep a close eye on what Doug gets up to. Such a statement from a person who has made it big and became very rich in the fashion sector and then went on to become one of the world’s leading nature conservationists raised my expectations. But I just did not imagine what I would see and learn during my visits to some of Doug’s organic farms. Over the past 35 years I have had the privilege of seeing many impressive and beautiful organic projects

around the world, but nothing prepared me for what I saw on Doug’s farms in Chile and Argentina, which are not only extraordinary but unrivalled – especially in terms of the beauty and the aesthetics of the agriculture landscapes. After the fashion business and nature conservation Doug has now successfully reinvented himself as a ‘land healer’. Together with his business partner Eduardo Choren, he is buying completely run down and ruined farms which he brings to a new and prosperous life by converting them to organic agriculture. Through the support of a very dedicated team they are healing the land with soil conservation strategies, contour farming, crop rotation and biodiversity management that gives perhaps the highest agricultural diversity anywhere at this scale. They are also restoring, with an extraordinary sense of aesthetics, old





**Doug Tompkin's
Laguna Blanca in
Argentina:**

**"A good farm is a
beautiful farm"**

farm buildings or building new infrastructure on each farm. And all this is being done within a with a clear business plan of making these farms economically viable.

The pictures along with this article and interview are taken from the 'flagship' farm Laguna Blanca in Argentina. What you don't see but can imagine is that this ecological paradise is surrounded by the sheer madness of monoculture farming based on GMOs and Round Up. There is no better way than Laguna Blanca to confront the failed experiment known as the 'Green Revolution', which was born from technological arrogance and hubris and is one of the biggest components of the global environmental crisis. Intentionally Doug, Kris and their team have kept quite quiet up to now about what they are up to, as they felt that were in the learning process. But now they feel that the time has come to show what is happening on these farms, not only to the organic world but also to the proponents of industrial agriculture.

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What triggered your enthusiasm for environmentalism?

I joined the Sierra Club (the USA's leading nature conservation group) as a teenager but at this time I was only at best, 'light green'. I didn't really know the deeper issues and complexities of what we now might call the 'eco-social crisis'. It took years of scholarship and engagement in campaigns and projects to get myself up to speed and to develop a deep and systemic understanding of what was driving the crisis of nature and culture. I read and studied a lot and was certainly helped by my activism. Slowly over time, I realised that the business I was an owner of the, then quite large, ESPRIT company (operating in 60 countries) was not right thing for me to be doing. My interest had changed to environmental work. I was spending my mornings totally immersed

in activism then jolted back to reality by noon and having to concentrate on running the business. Something had to change. I set about extricating myself from the business with the aim of dedi-



cating my life to conservation and environmental work. Since then that is what I have been doing, working twice as hard as I did when I was in business!

Why did you make such a radical change in your life 20 year ago, and not just stay at ESPRIT making lots of money?

My parents showed me how important it is to get pleasure out of what you are doing. If this is not the case, then don't do it. I realised that I was much happier, got much more satisfaction and most importantly had more fun in my activities outside of business. So I left that world of making stuff that nobody really needed because I realised that all this needless over-consumption is one of the driving forces of the extinction crisis, the mother of all crises.

Do you see a certain logic in your change: moving from fashion to nature conservation and then organic agriculture?

I grew up on a small farm in a rural part of New York State. My father taught me many of my guiding principles. He had a brilliant eye for design, for proportion, for good lines, for workmanship and for quality in all things. He instructed me at a very young age to train my eye. That has helped me all my life in whatever I was involved in. I have applied this to farms

and agriculture, to architecture and to landscaping. The technical agronomy of agro-ecological management is something that will take centuries to develop. We are only going to make a small contribution towards that pool of knowledge, helping to develop and evolve a new model of agriculture. My hope is that we can make substantial progress in developing a no-till organic grain agriculture, but the end of the line I see the need to return to a perennial polyculture, but that may still be several decades away in the future.

Where do you see the greatest problem or most likely disaster in conventional agriculture?

It's widely known that today's conventional agriculture takes the machine rather than nature as its model. This leads to all kinds of serious problems. The unfortunate inheritance of the Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution and Cartesian reductionism has led us into the technological trap that the world finds itself in today. Agriculture is only one area, but the problem runs throughout all our civilization: from medicine, to architecture, communications and to economic models such as capitalism itself, which is no more than an economic technology. This has led to the massive environmental crisis we are all ensnared in. The demographic explosion, global climate change, and the extinction crisis (remember: the mother of all crises) are all manifestations of this. So I see this firstly as a problem of epistemology and world view, even in the macro-sense of cosmology.

It remains to be seen if there are exit routes from this trap. For agriculture I see the first step as a complete rethinking and evolution towards a smaller scale and away from the large industrial model. This implies a shift towards ecological management which uses an organic model rather than the machine model. This is already underway of course in various forms. BioFach is an annual expression of this, where we can see this evolution underway. Yet a long term paradigm shift will need to involve more

than just the land and actual techniques, it will require a radical social, political and economic shift. These changes will, of course, come slowly.

Is the needed radical paradigm shift in agriculture really still possible?

Well, I believe that to accumulate the needed body of knowledge and to refine the techniques for a radical shift in the agricultural paradigm we first need a major cultural shift. Restructuring the calculation of internal costs, leading to a new economic paradigm, will encourage more and more farmers to shift into organic or better yet agroecological management. The paradigm shift is without question a possibility, but more so a necessity. It requires a bit of imagination and then getting out there and doing it. But it will take time and hard work. The techniques will have to be custom made for each ecosystem, each farm, and each crop. If I could have another lifetime, I would become a farmer right away and devote 100% of my time to this endeavour. This is simply because I realise that there is no way out of the whole eco-social crisis if we don't come to a serious paradigm shift in agriculture. Farming has more impact than anything else on landscapes, water, climate and biodiversity. As such we need to convert worldwide to a 'new', highly and locally customised, organic model of agriculture and food production. What you might describe as a wholly integrated food system.

How does your way of organic farming look in practice?

First I see the need for a higher level of agricultural diversity than the current monocultural model offers. What we do is break down our bigger farms into smaller farming units. These might be orchards, or focus on animal husbandry, grains, apiculture, horticulture, or culinary and achromatic/medicinal herbs. But, there is also always space for wild biodiversity reserves. My passion is to build healthy soil and I love the challenge of holistic organic management. Nutrient recycling and the health of the soil are where it all

begins and where it all ends.

You are working 'broad acres'. What is the special challenge for organic agriculture on a large-scale?

Well, as I see it agriculture, at any scale has to be rethought. It is already being rethought now of course - as we see it in the impressive rise of many movements such as organic agriculture, CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), Slow Food, the Localvores and Permaculture. All of this can be practiced much more easily on a small scale than on a large scale. I believe that ultimately all agriculture will have to be small-scale. Simply said we need 'more eyes per hectare', it is as simple as that. Yet today's economic structure in most nations and the now recognised failure of the globalisation model still continue to prolong the agony of industrial agriculture. Our farms may appear to be medium/ large scale, but they are really multiple farms layered onto one property. They contain a high level of agricultural diversity, in separate entities that are intertwined on one piece of land. In the long run farms should never be as large as our large farms. We just are at a moment of time when we think it is strategically best to work at this scale. This requires making compromises though, and maybe in twenty to thirty years time these may not have to made.

From a landscape and especially aesthetic point of view the farm you have created at Laguna Blanca is the most beautiful farm I have ever visited. What does it take to create such beauty?

Many people, in fact, most everyone who visits Laguna Blanca and also Laguna Blanca's sister farm, Malambo, say the same thing, and I even think so myself. But of course, I am partial and biased! Really it is simple to make a beautiful farm. We have made twenty of them now in Chile and Argentina. You have to start with the idea that a good farm is a beautiful farm. That everything you do and you think about doing should add beauty to the farm. That does not mean for a moment that you neglect all the

practical and functional qualities. But if you are putting up a fence, harvesting a crop, building a shed or a barn, laying out an orchard, designing a garden, putting in a road, planting crops, or choosing the colours of the buildings, each and all those things can be done with thought to the aesthetics of the whole. Then there is the issue of maintenance. Nothing is nicer than a well-kept house or farm. These things bring pride to the farm. With pride comes care and with care comes good results. Life itself becomes a pleasure and 'work' becomes changed into pleasure. The soils will feel this affection and this pleasure and will become healthy. We find this of course with affection for our family and our friends. It is not something that can be calculated but when do we calculate love? Or think that we needed to?

Where will be agriculture be when you celebrate your 90th birthday?

Well that is only 20 years away! There is a lot I hope I can do to contribute in that time to improving agriculture. Yet, I think I will see a huge change for I see that the agroecological movement is unstoppable. It may surprise people when I say this, but just looking backwards over the last fifty years we can see the evolution of the organic agriculture movement, which certainly has not been getting any smaller or weaker. Of course there may have been an occasional step backwards but then followed by two forwards. In the long view it is moving forward rapidly, and doing that for a number of reasons. Among them is the failure of chemical industrial agriculture and the likelihood that environmental regulations will become stricter in the future. These are just two reasons why organic agriculture will one day eclipse techno-industrial and chemical agriculture. For that reason, whether I make it to 90 or not, this agroecological movement is simply UNSTOPPABLE! So, let's enjoy that thought, and take hope from it that we will give us strength along the way. ■

For more information see www.tompkinsconservation.org

