

# Endangered PATAGONIA

## SKIING CHILE'S RIO BAKER VALLEY, PART ONE



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY BRIAN MOHR

Hector Soto reached around his horse to cinch a loose line. With his face streaked in mud, he cracked a suspicious smile.

"There's a good chance we'll have to swim with the horses," he said.

Overnight, winds strong enough to tear the canogas off the cabin roof, and heavy rain and sleet made a real mess of our valley. We spent the morning hoping for a break in the weather, and although it came, it didn't last.

"The river's too deep and too swift to cross," announced Soto, after leaving camp. "Let's stick to this side, where we can cross several smaller rivers instead. If we are lucky, we'll be able to cross the Soler down low, where it runs slow and wide."

For the next several hours, our crew of five humans and six horses bushwhacked through flooded forests, forded streams choked with rain and snowmelt, and tried our best to laugh. Alone in a wild glacial tributary of Chile's Rio Baker Valley (Baker River Valley), we were in the final days of a month-long ski adventure. And although we were determined to make it to the mouth of the Soler by sunset, our optimism was fading fast. Skis were snagging on tree limbs, our hands and feet were numb, and if the wind and rain wasn't in our faces, it was steadily soaking us from behind.

"Welcome to the real Patagonia," said Soto.

The Rio Baker Valley is the ecological mainstay of Chilean Patagonia's Aysen region and home to a Patagonia few people know. Flanked on one side by the Northern Patagonia Ice Sheet, and on the other by the Andes Mountains along the Argentine border, Chile's untamed Rio Baker is one of the last great rivers on the planet that is still free-flowing from its source to the ocean. Glaciers, ancient forests, fjords, and undiscovered mountains are in abundance here. And everything from golondrinas (a beautiful river swallow) to Patagon gauchos (residents) make their home in this now-endangered watershed.

Recently, the Rio Baker has taken center stage in debates over Chile's energy future. An ill-conceived plan to construct several monster dams has pitted an unlikely coalition of ranchers, salmon farmers, and conservationists against the European-owned energy giant ENDESA.

"If the dams get built, they will destroy the river and the wildness that makes Patagonia so special," explains Soto. In addition to the four major dams proposed for the region's Baker and Pascua rivers, Soto was referring to the



2000-kilometer swath that ENDESA and its Chilean partner, Colbun, aim to construct through five national parks to make room for a transmission line. "The damming of the Baker would be a terrible tragedy."

My wife, Emily Johnson, and I had traveled to the Rio Baker Valley twice before—in 2000 by bicycle and in 2004 to backcountry ski. It was in 2004 that we discovered ENDESA's plans to dam the Rio Baker. We were saddened and stunned. The region's wild nature had affected us deeply. We soon discovered that it was in the final days of Augustus Pinochet's infamous dictatorship that ENDESA, once Chile's largest energy utility, was handed the water rights to 90 percent of Patagonia's rivers. Now ENDESA is trying to cash in.

By October 2006, thanks in part to a grant from Patagonia, Inc., and an assignment from Backcountry Magazine, we were on our way to the region once again. Joining us were Vermonters Vicki Beaudoin and Craig Augustinsky.

Within seconds of stepping off the plane onto a high-desert runway near the humble Patagonian city of Coyhaique, a feisty springtime squall of sleet and snow greeted us. We planned to spend a day in Coyhaique and then head south to the Rio Baker Valley for a week of camping and a week of skiing in the mountains that comprise it, including the Cordón Chacabuco, the Reserva Nacional Jeinimeni and the Cordón Soler. Between our three camps, we would venture into villages along the river and spend time with local people.

Curious about the public perception of ENDESA and the proposed dams, we asked locals on the streets of Coyhaique to share their thoughts.

"ENDESA's plans? It's a crime against Chile, and it's a crime against nature," said Raul Parada, a gas station manager in the town's center. Not surprisingly, we quickly discovered widespread opposition to ENDESA's plans, but also that most people felt powerless, as if their voices didn't matter.

"Tourism is just getting off the ground here, and the dams would unravel all the progress we've made," said Patricia Chible, a realtor and tourism operator. "There are many, many sensible alternatives to damming the Baker," Chible continued, referring to localized hydro-projects, geothermal energy (Chile is home to nearly 25 percent of the world's volcanoes) and increased energy efficiency.

It wasn't until after hearing many voices of opposition that we finally ran into someone who could show some support. "The region needs development, it needs jobs," said Hugo Gonzalez, who runs a seafood business in Coyhaique. "Any progress is good progress."

Itching to ski, we set our sites for Camp 1. Traveling south along the shores of the region's pristine Lago General Carrera, the second largest lake South America, Coyhaique was a day's drive to the lake's outlet and the nascimiento (birthplace) of the Rio Baker. Stopping farther downstream in view of the canyon that ENDESA hopes to flood, we shared a moment of silent hope for the river.

Below the canyon, the Chacabuco River pours into the Baker. Formerly a large ranch, and recently acquired by the organization Conservacion Patagonica, the Chacabuco Valley—along with two

adjacent wilderness reserves—is destined to become a new Chilean national park. Decades of overgrazing and fence building have done great ecological harm. But now, the sheep and cattle are being sold off to smaller farms, fence lines are coming down, and the valley is healing. Chile has made it a national priority to protect its most endangered species, including the huemule deer, the southern river otter, and the ever elusive puma. The Chacabuco project is an essential ingredient in this recipe.

"But if they build the dams, everything could change," said Christian Saucedo, the Chilean-born wildlife man-

ager for the Chacabuco project. "My fear is that the dams will keep tourists away, and without a tourism economy, encourage even greater exploitation of the natural environment."

Traveling up the Chacabuco Valley in search of a cluster of mountains known as the Cordón Chacabuco, we spotted pink flamingos, recovering herds of wild, llama-like guanaco, and giant Andean condors. Although it was obvious the old ranch had left its scars, an incredible diversity of life and landscape had managed to survive. We shouldered our packs and by sunset that evening were nearly one thousand meters off the valley floor, camping just below snow line in the shelter of an ancient lenga (southern beech) forest.

Camp 1 in the Cordón Chacabuco was a gem. Views during our mostly clear days unfolded down the lower Chacabuco Valley and across the Rio Baker Valley to the heights of Northern Patagonia Ice Sheet (our destination for Camp 3) and east over the pampa (high desert) of western Argentina. Good potential for Camp 2 was in plain view directly across the Chacabuco Valley, within the remote

mountains of the Reserva Jeinimeni. We would walk there next week. We could spot Patagonia's highest peak, Monte San Valentin (4058 meters), the outlines of fjords along the Pacific coast, and the temperate rainforests that cloak them. The fact that a place like this still exists is reason enough to protect it.

Breakfast was followed by an easy stroll toward tree and snow line, and we spent our days skiing high above camp in a world of wind and springtime snow. When the wind calmed, a certain wildness permeated our existence. Our senses had entered new territory. Any evidence of human life was overwhelmed by the unfettered nature of the world around us.

To be continued...

Brian Mohr can be reached through his website at [www.emberphoto.com](http://www.emberphoto.com). A multi-media show about this trip and several others will be featured in Mohr and Johnson's *Wild People, Wild Places* program (see the Calendar of Events on page \_\_ for details). A version of this story was originally published in Backcountry Magazine, February, 2007.

