



# Who owns the rain?

With its pristine, rugged beauty, deliciously pure water and easygoing, friendly way of life, the Aisén region of Chilean Patagonia is not just a hiker's dream, it's pretty close to paradise on Earth, says **Graeme Green**. But plans to build five new dams as part of a new hydro-electric project are threatening to plunge the region into chaos

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GRAEME GREEN

**ABOVE:** the gaucho tradition of travel on horseback is still alive in Patagonia; **ABOVE RIGHT:** the Glacier Nef ice field. Campaigners fear that Aisén's landscape will be devastated and pure water systems polluted if a controversial project to build five hydro-electric dams in the area goes ahead. Locals also fear that their traditional way of life will be lost and local wildlife devastated



The growing opposition argues that the dams will irrevocably damage the area's landscape and culture, pollute its water and disrupt its hydrological systems

**ABOVE:** crampons are necessary to hike across the Glacier Nef ice field; **BELOW:** trekking in Aysen offers the chance to enjoy the region's rugged beauty



Halfway across the vast blue-white expanse of Glacier Nef, we take a rest. We're three days into a trek along the Aysen Glacier Trail, hiking through the mountainous river valleys of Chilean Patagonia, and have spent the past few hours leaping across vertigo-inducing crevasses in the ice. It's here that John, a fellow hiker, pulls out a bottle of good Scotch he has been carrying. It's perfect timing and the perfect location.

Our expedition leader Zac Creager hacks a few chunks of ice out of the ground with an axe and fills a tin cup. I'm not normally a whisky drinker, but there are times for exceptions and this, without doubt, is one of them. 'Whisky on the rocks,' says Creager. 'On the cleanest "rocks" in the world.'

The ice and water in the Aisén region of Chile is, like the landscape, fantastically pure. Challenging days of hiking along the 100-kilometre trail through San Rafael National Park are made easier by the fact that we're not carrying a heavy supply of water; whenever we're thirsty, we simply top up bottles from waterfalls, lakes, streams and rivers.

However, the purity of the water and Aisén's natural environment are at risk from a proposed project to build five hydro-electric dams - two on the Rio Baker and three on the Rio Pascua.

Rios Baker and Pascua are Chile's two biggest rivers by volume, and play a significant role in draining the Patagonian Ice Sheet, the world's third-largest ice sheet; the Northern, Southern and Darwin ice caps together cover 19,200 square kilometres. The plan is to send the energy produced by the dams 2,400 kilometres north to the capital, Santiago, and then beyond that, to mining operations located in the Atacama Desert.

On one side, the energy company Hidro Aysen, seemingly with the support of Chile's president and the energy minister, promises jobs, prosperity and development in the region, and a valuable energy source to support the country's rapid development. On the other, a growing voice of opposition argues that the dams will irrevocably damage the landscape and culture of the area, pollute the water, disrupt the hydrological systems and be the first step in opening up Chilean Patagonia to other commercial interests, such as mining and logging.

The strength of feeling that surrounds the issue was immediately apparent during the drive down from Balmaceda

airport in roadside-billboard propaganda battles and anti-dam graffiti in the towns and villages through which we passed.

#### WILDERNESS ADVENTURE

My journey began in the quiet town of Puerto Bertrand, where I climbed aboard a rubber raft to motor up the Rio Baker. As well as Creager and several other hikers, I'm accompanied by Hector Soto and Analicio Cadagan Arratia (known as 'Gringo' in reference to his fair skin and green eyes), who led a 3,000-strong protest against the dams in May last year.

After a few hours, we leave the river and climb a series of rocky pathways, occasionally crossing streams, where tiny frogs scatter at our approach. Walking along the river valley, the vegetation we pass is lush and green, the path often cutting through shaded forest.

As evening approaches, we reach the top of a ridge and the view opens out. A winding river cuts through the valley, framed on either side by giant granite walls and peaks. Between them is a mountaintop covered in enough ice for all the world's cocktails. 'This is the entrance to the Northern Patagonian Ice Sheet,' says Creager.

We set up camp and during the long twilight hours, we sit around a fire, passing around gourd of *mate*. I ask Soto and Gringo about the dams. 'The people who live above the dam (about 14 families) won't be able to live there any more because it'll be flooded,' Gringo tells me.

The changes wrought on the immediate landscape by the dams will also extend out across Chile, as power lines are built to distribute the electricity they produce. 'Most of the energy will go up north, especially to the mines,' says Soto. 'They're going to put 2,400 kilometres of electric lines right across the country, cutting down old forests and building on mountains. It'll mean the destruction of an absolutely beautiful place.'

Both men work in the tourism industry and worry that visitors who come here for the pristine wilderness will be put off. They also fear that the water will be polluted. Their greatest concern, however, is of changes to the local culture. 'It's a very friendly community,' Soto says. 'Everyone has their door open for each other, everyone drinks *mate* together. People coming down will bring the threat of crime. Doors won't be open like they are now.'

#### MIXED REACTION

Some locals are in favour of the dams - particularly those who've been able to sell poorly functioning ranches to Hidro

Aysen for inflated prices, and those who think the dams will bring opportunities for work and economic improvement. But according to Soto, Hidro Aysen will bring in specialised employees from outside, rather than hire locally. 'The majority of people will undoubtedly come from the north because of low education levels here,' he says. 'And when the dams are constructed, they'll take off and leave the people how they were before.'

At present, there's a little mining here, but Soto believes that the dams would be the first step in industrialising the area, bringing larger-scale mining, industrial fishing, logging and more. 'If the system in power can put five dams in here, there will be plenty of other things that will come in afterwards,' he says. 'It will be the beginning of the complete destruction of this pristine area of Patagonia.'

Opposition to the dams currently comes from non-profit and political groups organising protests and applying pressure. But Soto fears that local protests could escalate into something more violent. 'There's a crew of people who could become more extreme in terms of defending their territory, people who, in their minds, will absolutely not let the dams be constructed here,' he says. 'If the dams are built here, it's pretty much the end of this region.'

#### RURAL IDYLL

The next day we walk on from the confluence of the Rios Norte and Soler, following the Soler valley. The hiking is diverse and fun; we scramble along cliffs, wade through marshes, balance on shaky bridges over rivers. We eventually arrive at a barn with sun-whitened cow skulls hanging on the door, owned by local gaucho Don Ramon. As we set up our camp, Don Ramon, his wife Martha and their son Gustavo arrive on horseback.

During a lazy afternoon, I bathe in the river's refreshingly cold water, marvelling at the fantastic view of Cerro Isolado (Isolation Mountain).

As we eat dinner, three condors fly over the mountain's ridge. There's more *mate* around the fire and more talk of the dams. 'It's going to change the whole tranquil lifestyle down here,' says Martha. 'We don't want to see that happen.'

Don Ramon has lived in Aisén for 57 years and sees a very different future for Gustavo compared to his and Martha's lives. 'Life will change, definitely,' he says. 'I feel bad about it. Life here is very simple. Everyone knows each other. There's no crime. Our fear is that bringing 3,000



Don Ramon, who has lived in Aisén for 57 years, with his wife Martha and son Gustavo, thinks the dams will destroy the area's peaceful way of life

construction workers down here to build the dams will bring the violence of Santiago and the world, which hasn't touched us down here yet.'

### UP ON THE ICE

We make an early start next morning and, after a steady uphill climb, reach the 50-metre outer walls of Glacier Nef. There are huge sculpted 'boulders' of ice around the edge where the lake forms and then drains away. Shadows move across the ice field, but when the sun hits it, it glows. Distant avalanches rumble as we put on our crampons. Clear blue streams run through the ice. We walk with the sound of water trickling, the ice crunching and creaking with each step.

The glacier takes some navigating. We jump across crevasses that drop down into the deep blue. At other times, they're too wide and we spend time making our way around them.

John's whisky is an aperitif for a big lunch on the ice, after which the weather turns; the afternoon is challenging, hiking in hard rain and strong wind. We reach the moraine on the other side of the glacier, where small stones cover the ice, making it easy to lose one's footing.

Beyond the glacier, the terrain is still tough, with slippery boulders to climb, shallow rivers to cross and two hours of

solid hiking in soaked clothes and waterlogged boots. Eventually, we reach the camp in the woods, where a quickly built fire, a pot of hot, thick soup and the last of John's whisky all help to warm us up and make us feel human again.

### FLOOD WARNING

During another day of adventurous hiking, we walk with a view of ice chunks floating out on Lago Cachet Dos. This is one of many areas susceptible to glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs), Soto tells me. 'One of the big arguments against the dams is that they won't be able to cope with GLOFs,' he says. 'In Hidro Aysén's environmental-impact analysis, they didn't take into account the fact that, with a strong rain and an opening in the glacier, the dams could collapse. And then Tortel, the town at the end of the fjord, could just disappear.'

On the way to camp, Soto motions for us to be quiet and points out a Huemel deer, a horned male, standing perfectly still up ahead. There are fears for these rare animals, too, if the landscape changes.

After condor sightings and an icy swim in a glacial pool, the day ends, like most here, with the group gathered to watch the sun set over a scene of natural beauty, then a meal and Soto singing around the campfire. 'Emotionally, I can't bear to think of the dams being built,' Soto tells me,

when I raise the subject. 'I want to be able to walk through these mountains with my kids just as I do with you. If the dams are constructed, my kids will ask why we didn't do everything we could to stop these dams being built here.'

Chile is developing rapidly and growing economically, and it's difficult to see Aisén's valuable resources going unused. I ask Soto what he would say to someone who sees the water here as an energy source to be exploited. 'I'd say, "We don't need more energy." It's the other end of it that needs to be analysed more - the consumption of energy. We have plenty of energy. And as far as the mines go, they should find their own way to supply the energy they need.'

Are people here resigned to the dams? 'The people have hope and we are going to fight until the end,' he continues. 'But we're going up against a huge company that has a lot of money and political influence. We're very concerned. It's not hopeless, but we're going up against a massive wall.'

### COMPLEX HISTORY

After another night in the wilderness, we sail across Lago Colonia's smooth waters, condors soaring above. Jonathan Leidich, a local tour operator, meets us on the other side. Originally from the USA, he has lived down here for 14 years.

We spend the day at Sol de Mayo, Leidich's 154-hectare ranch on the Rio Claro, where horses graze, giant turkeys cluck and gobble, and dogs laze on the porch steps. Soto plays guitar in a kitchen filled with gauchos, while Gringo fries dough in a pan to make *sopapaillas*.

Leidich fills me in on the history of Chile's water. 'Endesa is the energy company of Chile,' he says. 'In 1989, Pinochet sold the entire water company, its infrastructure and the water rights to a Spanish holdings company that had been compiling water rights all over South America.' The Spanish company has since sold part of the rights to an Italian company.

The dams could potentially be built at any time, but Leidich believes that there are gaps in the environmental-impact studies. He argues that the dams will disrupt the hydrological system. 'Hydro is a great source of power,' he says. 'But there's a time and a place to do it. And this isn't it. We're talking about free-flowing, mega rivers that play a huge role in the hydrological system of the planet, and there aren't many of these mega rivers left. We have to have places such as this in the world. And the water's drinkable, but it won't be after the dams are built.'

'There's no option for going back if you build the dams,' he continues. 'But you have so many options for producing power in Chile. Geothermal, wind, solar - the Atacama Desert has awesome potential for solar power.'

Not only does he think the dams are stoppable, he suggests that rising costs for the companies in Spain and Italy, both countries hit by the current economic crisis, could see the project flounder. But if an energy giant is throwing such resources at a project of this size, it's usually because it has done its homework and there are large profits to be made. The families directly affected, Leidich says, have been offered multi-million dollar deals, which 12 of the 14 have accepted.

### A QUESTION OF OWNERSHIP

On the hike out, we stop at the home of Don Julio, an 81-year-old who has lived in the Colonia Valley all his life. Sheepskins hang over wire fences to dry as we pass the *mate* around.

When asked about the dams, Don Julio's immediate concerns are for the animals that will be affected if the land is flooded. But he also has a wider perspective. 'How do you measure water?' he asks. 'When a company owns the water system of Chile, what do they own? Do they own the glaciers? Do they own the rain?'



Hiking up to Glacier Nef, a popular route among visitors. Opponents to the hydro project fear that the dams could destroy the local tourism industry

## CO-ORDINATES PATAGONIA



### Getting there

Graeme Green travelled with Wilderness Journeys ([www.wildernessjourneys.com](http://www.wildernessjourneys.com)), whose 11-night Last Frontier trip in Aysén costs £2,495, including transport, meals, guides and accommodation. Return flights to Buenos Aires with British Airways start at £875. Onward flights to Balmaceda, via Santiago, with LAN Chile start at around £360.

### When to go

The best time to visit is during the Southern Hemisphere summer (late November to April). However, it's best to avoid January and February - the Chilean holiday season.

### Further information

Patagonia Sin Represas:  
[www.patagoniasinrepresas.cl](http://www.patagoniasinrepresas.cl)  
Chile travel guide: [www.chile.travel](http://www.chile.travel)

