



AAC Publications

Doug Tompkins, 1943 – 2015

Doug Tompkins was my friend for almost 60 years. We first met while climbing in the Shawangunks of New York. He was only 15 and had either dropped out or been kicked out of school. In any case, he probably thought the teachers had nothing important to teach him. If you want to understand the entrepreneur, study the juvenile delinquent. That was Doug.

Over the years, I taught him to surf. He taught me to kayak. We learned to climb mountains together. We boldly broke the rules of business and made it work. Doug didn't like anyone telling him what to do, but he didn't hesitate in lecturing others.

Doug was good at many "do" sports: skiing, fencing, tennis, squash and, of course, climbing. Together we did an early ascent of the Salathé Wall of El Capitan, which, at the time, was considered one of the most difficult rock climbs in the world. We climbed in Canada, Scotland in winter, the Karakoram, Bhutan, Antarctica, and, of course, Patagonia, where we climbed Fitz Roy. We fell in love with the area, and later I built a company around that mysterious name and Doug spent a fortune to protect its natural beauty.

From so many days living among mountains and rivers, we expanded our love of nature to include the whole of this lovely planet. Doug was especially influenced by the Norwegian climber Arne Næss and his philosophy of Deep Ecology. Early on, we recognized that we humans were destroying our home planet, and that each of us, in our own way, was responsible to protect and restore the wild nature that we loved.

We were always looking for an adventure, but there is no possibility of adventure without risk. Sometimes you have to purposely leave a crack open in the door—for the opportunity of a good fight or possible serendipity. We loved life and were not afraid of death, but did not wish to die. On a Do-Boys kayaking trip to the Russian Far East, our only maps went flying out the window of the helicopter. We all exchanged high-fives. We were on our way to an adventure!

Another time we made the first descent of the Maipo River outside of Santiago. We eddied out before a blind turn and Doug got out to scout. Two soldiers came up from behind, with guns pointed, and demanded to see his papers. Basically, he told them to "Get stuffed!" ran down the hill, jumped into his boat, and took off around the bend. Later we found out the river flowed through the dictator Augusto Pinochet's summer grounds.

On our fateful trip last December, I was a little shocked to see how frail the old fig looked. But then he probably thought the same of me. Doug was dressed in his signature pressed chinos, his Brooks Brothers shirt, a light wool sweater, and a light rain jacket. This was the same outfit he wore to climb the last mountain we did together, Cerro Kristine, named for his wife. On the lake we ran into a perfect trap: a 40-knot wind at our back and an equally strong wind from the side, making for large, confused waves. We could not miss even one paddle stroke for fear of going over. The boys made a valiant effort, but we lost Doug. We lost the Chief.

By his actions, Doug became the teacher we all needed—and he still is.

– Yvon Chouinard

Images



Doug Tompkins.



Doug Tompkins battling spindrift at Hell's Lum in Scotland.



Doug and Kris Tompkins in Patagonia.



Doug Tompkins climbing Fitz Roy, 1968.

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