

# Sojourn in the Wild

## NRDC and the Bio Bio

AS PEOPLE HAVE LEARNED TO HARNESS the tremendous power of rivers, hydroelectric dams have proliferated. Today there are very few major waterways that still flow unimpeded from their source to their culmination in the sea. Those untamed rivers that do remain are not only majestic, but also environmentally vital as aquatic and terrestrial habitat for countless threatened species. A year ago, NRDC's International Program began work to save one such wild river, Chile's Rio Bio Bio, which is slated for massive hydroelectric development.

"Chilean environmentalists contacted us for help in their fight to save the river," explains NRDC International Program Director Jacob Scherr, "and we decided to investigate." Senior Research Associate Glenn Prickett spent hundreds of hours studying the proposed project, traveling to Chile in January 1992. Scherr and Prickett worked in concert with the Grupo de Accion por el Bio-Bio (GABB), a coalition of Chilean environmental and human rights groups opposing the project. GABB had experienced great difficulty getting their message heard. To draw attention to the river's plight, NRDC decided to organize a rafting trip down the tumultuous Bio Bio.

"To the decision-makers, the remote upper Bio Bio is an abstraction," say Scherr. "To be an effective advocate for it, there's no substitute for going there." NRDC had recently joined a group down the Great Whale River in Northern Quebec, also threatened by massive hydropower development. The group joined forces with Eric Hertz, founder of Earth River Expeditions, who donated his time and equipment to the venture. In addition to NRDC experts, the trip contingent included Chileans representing a range of political and cultural dispositions, from environmentalists to leading businessmen. A total of 49 people joined in the privately financed convoy, one of the largest rafting expeditions ever to brave the Bio.

The Bio Bio rises out of the Andes, near the Argentine border, and makes its way clear across the country to the city of Concepcion, on the Pacific coast. Its length, volume, and the enormous size of its watershed, make the Bio Bio Chile's most important river. In its upper reaches, the river surges through spectacular canyons, gorges, and

steep, forested valleys—complex ecosystems that support a multitude of threatened plant and animal species. Further to the west, the river flows through rich agricultural lowlands, finally culminating in the estuaries of Concepcion and the Gulf of Arauco, where its nutrients feed the nation's richest fishery.

Like many of the remote, undeveloped places left on Earth, the valleys of the upper Bio Bio are indigenous lands. The region has long been inhabited by Pehuenche Indians. Approximately 9000 Pehuenche still live on their ancestral lands, descendants of the skilled mounted warriors who managed to arrest the Spanish Conquest at the banks of the Bio Bio. The

Pehuenche continue to live sustainably by traditional methods of farming, to speak a unique language, and to observe their own religion, closely bound to the environment.

The Bio Bio occupies a central place in Chile's geography and its history. It has also come to figure prominently in the economic plans of this rapidly-growing nation. To power its economic growth, Chile has increasingly sought to develop plentiful, domestic sources of energy. In the 1950s, the government began exploring the possibility of hydropower development on the upper Bio Bio. Technical and economic feasibility studies were carried out in the 60s and 70s by ENDESA, a state-owned utility privatized during the regime of General Pinochet.

By the late 1970s, ENDESA had laid out plans to build six large dams, which would generate some 2700 megawatts of electricity, a 128% increase in the nation's generating capacity. The company has now completed construction of preliminary works for the first dam, Pangué. It was not until late in 1990, however, that a study of the project's environmental impacts was commissioned. And despite extensive study of the area over the course of two decades, ENDESA did not acknowledge the existence of the Pehuenche communities until 1986 and then did not notify Pehuenche leaders of its plans until 1990.

If carried out, these plans will have a profound and devastating impact on both the Bio Bio's complex ecology and its unique human communities. The project's dams and reservoirs would convert the entire extent of the wild, upper river into a series of artificial lakes, inundating temperate forests rich in rare and endangered species.

