The path less

As dam building threatens the last free-flowing rivers in South America, an international team of kayakers sets out to ride these remote wonders before their magnificence is transformed.
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SHADOW OF A DOUBT  A lone paddler scouts the whitewater freight train that is the Rio Baker in southern Patagonia, Chile. From this vantage, the ground trembles. Although unimpeded now, the future of this mighty river is in jeopardy, as international mega-corporations line up to harness the Baker’s might for hydroelectricity.
I had seen photos of Patagonia’s fabled Rio Baker, and in them the river did indeed appear as immense as its reputation. But pictures give no tactile sense of the Baker’s prodigious power. Now, looking into the canyon through which it flows, a continuous earthquake trembles beneath my feet as millions of gallons of water pummel the rocks below. The river’s voice is a booming, nonstop admonition from the gods, above which human conversation is nearly impossible. The spray rises more than 100 feet to dampen my face, inducing an involuntary shiver.

“Whitewater” is a term used to describe boulder-strewn, fast-moving sections of a river. For the Baker, the word is completely inadequate. This is a roiling, thundering, ice-blue torrent. Scouting the river revealed standing waves and whirlpools the size of small apartment buildings.

Once a paddler enters the Rio Baker Gorge, he is totally committed. It’s ride or die. Sheer walls climb on either side, and hiking out is more dangerous than running the chaotic melee. Exiting your boat and trying to swim to shore could be a fatal mistake: life jackets, buoyant in less turbid conditions, are useless in these erupting waters and currents. Even whitewater kayaks, with more than 70 gallons of air sealed in flotation compartments, could be dragged into the tumultuous depths of the Rio Baker and captured in swirling “holes” indefinitely.
As I took my first strokes in the Baker, a rush of excitement was followed by a cold chill of realization: With my companions, an international team of professional kayakers, I was about to paddle some of the biggest rapids on earth. Aside from the sound of our hearts pounding, I think it was the quietest we’d been in five months of paddling the endangered rivers of South America.

I looked ahead to my teammates, and with a brief nod we were off, flying into the first of four rapids in the first gorge. Immediately we were traveling at more than 20 miles per hour, but time seemed to stand still. I saw a wave larger than a semi-truck folding off the right wall as I charged into the current, narrowly avoiding the crashing beast. One of my teammates wasn’t so lucky and was swallowed up by this monster, disappearing for a few seconds before surfacing 20 feet downstream and rolling up, only to be clobbered by another wave. At the bottom of the first rapid, we regrouped our team and let our heart rates and adrenaline calm to normal levels. Then, once more into the fray. It was the culmination of an idea that had been many years in the making, as we formed our lifestyles around traveling the world in search of wild, remote, unpaddled, and epic whitewater adventures.

The concept was simple. Go to South America and paddle the best whitewater the continent had to offer. But what we discovered in the process was startling: The most beautiful rivers in South America are earmarked for extinction. They are threatened to imprisonment behind millions of tons of concrete and steel, forever changing the topography of the region and destroying a culture that has been built around the existence of free-flowing rivers.

Most of these dam projects are being sold to international mega-corporations such as ENDESA of Spain and AES Gener of the U.S. Our growing understanding of this threat elevated our trip from one that was only about adventure to one centered on awareness of what might be lost.

Eight months after our first team meeting, I found myself coughing through the smog and airborne grit of Lima, Peru, preparing to paddle the great river canyons of that country. These included the Colca and Cotahuasi canyons, the two deepest in the world, and the Apurimac, the true headwaters of the Amazon. At more than twice the depth of the Grand Canyon, the Colca and Cotahuasi have remained largely unexplored. Both are high-desert canyons with harsh climates and
lunar rockscapes. Each river has seen only a handful of paddlers since first descents in the 1990s. Running these behemoths gives you a feeling of isolation that has only been known by the few expert paddlers who have ventured into these barren places. The upper Colca River has already been dammed, drowning a section of canyon that was never kayaked and now can only be imagined.

After the great canyons, we moved on to one of the most challenging multiday trips in Peru, the Paucartambo River. At the takeout, the confluence of the Paucartambo and Urubamba rivers (the Urubamba flows by the ancient Inca city Machu Picchu), we were waiting for a water taxi to take us 30 km up the Urubamba to the nearest town. A boy approached us out of the jungle and offered a place to stay and plantains and potatoes to share. We surprised him with an invitation to join us for a meal of packaged pasta, something he had never tasted. Eating plantains and pasta, we communicated in Spanish and with gestures, while delighting in each other’s company, fending off the persistent mosquitoes of the lowland Peruvian jungle, and hearing the history of his family.

Everywhere we traveled in remote river locations, we were charmed by the endless generosity and beauty of the local people and their simple lifestyles. They were shocked and surprised to learn that our group would travel halfway around the world to stuff themselves into brightly colored plastic boats and bounce through rivers they believed to be impassable. Most of the people we met live in mud huts high in the Andes. Few have ventured outside their small villages, let alone outside their country. To them, the river is a highway and a resource. The dams will devastate their way of life.

Heading South, following the spine of the Andes, we paddled some of the rivers of central Chile and Argentina. We crossed the Bio Bio River, a once world-famous whitewater destination that was sentenced to death with the completion of the Panguella and Ralco dams. Reaching Patagonia, we followed a trail of endangered rivers. Most will generate electricity for use in cities far away from the rural farmers who live without power, and they will generate revenue for the government and overseas corporations but not for the people whose heritage and culture will be erased by the rising waters.

The most famous of the rivers we paddled in Patagonia was the Futaleufu River. The “Futa,” or simply “The Fu” as it is known in paddling circles, is regarded by many as one of the most beautiful rivers in the world. It is situated in a lush, green valley, in a landscape not unlike the Pacific Northwest, and it is blessed with miles of spectacular rapids and a splendid isolation that is idyllic for outdoor adventurers, whitewater rafters and kayakers, fly fishermen, and solitude seekers.

Since 1996, the crystal clear waters of the Futaleufu have been challenged with proposed hydroelectric projects. Fortunately for the river, the area has developed a strong community and a whitewater tourism industry and has many powerful allies protecting it from the fate of other rivers in Patagonia. Despite this apparent reprieve, we heard that a mining company, the Kinross Gold Corporation of Canada, has received permits to put a cyanide leach mine into the upper reaches of the Futaleufu watershed. While we were in the area, the small gravel roads that connect the local communities were being widened to accommodate colossal earth-moving
machines. We were beginning to see that our trip was more important than simply descending amazing rivers. It was about journeying through a disappearing wilderness and experiencing what is left before it is all destroyed.

With that in mind, and a further push south, we arrived finally at the Rio Baker. The Baker is the southernmost paddled river in the world. It flows out of the heart of Patagonia, originating from Lake General Carrera, the second deepest lake in South America. The lake glows an iridescent blue, taking on the colors of glacial ice and sunlight diffracted by millions of tons of glacial till suspended in the icy water.

Traveling to the headwaters of the Rio Baker is a journey extending most of the length of the Carretera Austral, the Southern Highway, the only road for all of southern Chile. In many places the Carretera barely constitutes a road, but those who brave it witness some of the last pristine wilderness on earth. Driving it is the world’s ultimate road trip.

This entire region of Patagonia is threatened by the proposed HydroAysen Project, which would construct three dams on the Rio Baker and run 2,000 km of high-voltage power lines between the river and Santiago. The Baker is the most significant river in the battle to keep dams out of Patagonia because it is the farthest south. Once power lines cut through the area there will be nothing to stop the damming of all of the rivers in between; they will likely fall like dominoes to political and economic pressures.

I lament that what I experienced in the canyons of the endangered rivers of South America may not be possible for the next generation. With global energy needs rising, it is only through smart development and responsible energy use that we will be able to preserve some of the few untouched places left on earth. These gems can also be saved through the development of new technologies and increased use of other energy resources, such as solar and wind power that will diversify the energy resources we consume.

I recognize now more than ever that the few remaining pristine places need to remain that way. No amount of hydroelectricity, nor gold or diamonds, nor quantities of fossil fuel can equal the sum value of these untouched lands and the cultural histories that develop along the banks of the last free-flowing rivers.