Fed by lakes high in the Andes of Argentina, the Rio Futaleufú crosses the Andes—and into Patagonia, Chile—before it finally empties into Yelcho Lake. Along its journey, it creates some of the most breathtaking scenery and whitewater experience to be found in the world. Unfortunately at the same time it is a potential resource for hydroelectric power that governments and power companies find completely irresistible.

For the moment—and hopefully well into the future—the river is being preserved through the efforts of whitewater experts Eric Hertz and Robert Currie, who have created a Land Trust and have facilitated the private purchases of key properties along the river that provide solid political resistance to its damming and any other adverse development. Through their company Earth River Expeditions, some of these purchases have also allowed Hertz and Currie to create a totally unique experience for visitors from all over the world.

In an effort to promote the river and it's conservation value, Hertz recently had acclaimed nature photographer Carr Clifton spend a month photographing the Futaleufu. The results, like the river itself, are spectacular.

"There's just something about this river," says Eric Hertz. "It's very intimate and very dramatic in the same view; snow-capped mountains, clear turquoise water and smooth, river carved white boulders. The water color is mesmerizing and constantly changing from shades of teal to turquoise, depending upon the depth, cloud cover and aeration from the rapids. It's a big river, like the Colorado in the Grand Canyon, but it's crystal clear and you can see trout swimming 20 feet below."

"The color of the water is phenomenal," agrees Carr Clifton. "If that river were muddy water you'd be scared to death of it—it would look so mean. But it's so beautiful with its glacial turquoise waters that it catches you off guard. Your guard isn't as high as it would be if it were muddy like Grand Canyon flood-type water. This river just looks so gorgeous that it disarms you."

But it wasn't only the color of the water that attracted Hertz: the river's whitewater challenge is quite significant. Especially at the time. "I was on a road trip in Patagonia in 1990 and as we drove along the bottom part of the river," Hertz recounts. "I said to my partner, 'This thing looks runnable. If it is, it would be an amazing raft trip.' We planned to come back the following year. The river had been attempted in rafts in 1986 but they had problems halfway down in a rapid called Terminador. They flipped a boat, lost it and abandoned the trip, which is how the rapid got it's name. The following Robert and I came back. On the 1986 attempt they had full baggage with people holding on, so their heavy boats were pretty unwieldy. We used oar-paddle combination boats with guides rowing and people paddling and had very little gear. Being light and agile allowed us to negotiate the more demanding, technical rapids like Terminador and we were able do the entire river without incident."

For someone like Hertz, who has been a river guide since his teenage years, navigating this river has a particular appeal. "It's very different from other rivers because every time you turn a bend it looks like you're on a different river," Hertz says. "It changes a lot that way, and I'm not used to seeing that. You're floating down and you go around a bend and there's a rapid and it doesn't look like the rapid before. The rapids have quite distinct characteristics, and there are different kinds: there are technical rapids* and there are bigger water rapids with waves, and then there are rapids that involve walls, and some are technical with giant boulders. The scenery changes dramatically as you go downriver."

Photographing the River

For Carr Clifton, who was charged with capturing the river in pictures, the stress was a bit different than it might have been for a passenger or even a guide—although Clifton was no stranger to running rivers. "I was apprehensive," he recalls. "You've got $20,000 worth of camera gear in a Pelican waterproof box, and you've tested it to be waterproof, but there's always that chance it could leak. I also worried about having to swim any of those rapids—you really don't want to do that if you can help it. But after a few days on the water I was a lot calmer. I knew how safe the guides were and I knew their capabilities to row these rapids, so I was far less apprehensive. No one swam. In two trips nobody went in the river—nothing. Totally smooth ride."

Yet there were still tense moments. "Every day was just a rush going down the river," Clifton says. "We'd go ahead of the group to photograph the whitewater action. Simply holding a $10,000 camera above the water or climbing on boulders holding the cameras was quite nerve-racking for me."

Clifton found the beauty of the place well worth the anxiety. “It’s got to be one of the more beautiful rivers in the world,” he continues. “Especially if you’re considering whitewater rivers, it’s probably the most beautiful whitewater river in the world to raft down. The color of the water and the boulders—it’s all unbelievable. There is also incredible forest, with huge trees, two to three feet in diameter—kind of a cross between a jungle and a big deciduous forest.”

Since Hertz and his partner have figured out how to make it safely down the Futaleufú, it has become a prime whitewater destination. But due to the unique nature of the surrounding valley, it has also become a unique multi-sport destination for just about anyone else as well.

“The amount of people who want to run very hard rapids, is actually fairly limited,” ” Hertz says. “Many people prefer to skip the class 5 rapids and mix the rafting with other multi-sport activities. The Futaleufu lends itself to that. The river has a beautiful trail that follows it, which opens the trip up to a whole host of activities, including any level of river rafting, from beginner to expert. We’ve taken people from 6 years old right up to 86 years old down the river—there are really no limits. Canyoning, horseback riding, inflatable kayaking, rock climbing, repelling, fly fishing, mountain biking, and trekking are all part of the experience. I don’t know of a river location anywhere in the world that rivals the Futaleufú in terms of variety of world class of multi-sport activities and in the case of our case, all these activities are actually in our private camps as you journey down the river.”

This series of camps means that the craft used to navigate the river do not have to be loaded up with supplies and visitors don’t need to return to the same location every night. “Normally with multi-sport locations such as Costa Rica, you come back to the same place every night.” Hertz explains. “Once you put in at the top of this river with us and come down, you don’t see roads, motorized vehicles, internet or electricity the entire time. “

Like the river itself, the camps that Hertz has installed are quite unique and varied. “If you look at Carr’s pictures, you’ll see that the Terminador Camp looks nothing like the Mapu Leufu Cliff Camp which looks nothing like the Cave Camp. It gives our guests the feeling of being on a different river every day.” Says, Hertz. The camps also have numerous amenities, including handmade hot tubs, wood stoves where meals are cooked by staff, and even flush toilets and hot showers.

Providing a world-class tourist destination was but part of what prompted Hertz and Currie to purchase the land. “Earth River Expeditions is not a nonprofit,” Hertz points out. “We have volunteered our time and resources over the years to subsidize our conservation work.”

The Chilean government, along with an Italian power company called Endesa, has been eyeing the Futaleufú as a source of hydroelectric power for a number of years. Another river—the Bio bío, further north—was dammed up for this purpose before Hertz and his team could stop them. He wasn’t going to let that happen again. “We originally purchased a bunch of properties along the Futaleufú to stop the dam,” Hertz says. “We bought them in different strategic areas of the river where the dams were planned. We wanted to make sure they couldn’t destroy this river like they did the Biobío, which was one of the greatest whitewater rivers in the world. The only way you can do that is by owning the land.”

“When they try and build the dams they’re going to meet some stiff resistance. Every year the river gains more notoriety around the world. It keeps making these “top rafting river” lists. I’ve actually never seen one of those lists that the Futaleufu wasn’t included in.” Hertz says.

“Basically there are other rivers down there and Chile is going full steam ahead to dam everything,” says Clifton. “With companies from other countries, including Italy and Spain, there are interests coming in from everywhere. They want to string huge power lines to, I believe, to power the mining industry. So it’s really crazy. They dammed the Biobío without any idea of what they had and so Eric just keeps fighting to try to make sure everybody knows what kind of a resource the Chilean people have here.”

“If those guys weren’t down there, nobody would know about this river,” Clifton concludes. “It would probably be dammed already. The crazy part is there are other places like that right now that are disappearing and nobody knows about them. So you’ve got to find those jewels and you have to bring people down there and show them what there is to lose; otherwise these places are going to be lost, and nobody will know what they were.”

To view Carr Clifton’s Futaleufu photographs go to: http://organicconnectmag.com/wp/complete-issue-november-december-2011/#.UFnlYhzwCmQ