Earth River shares river running and a passion for conservation

By: Joseph Carberry
April, 2006

Seventeen years ago at a dusty train station in Temuco, Chile, Eric Hertz squeezed into an open seat across from a young Chilean farmer named Robert Currie. Currie was traveling the country collecting supplies for his farm. Hertz was an American artist-cumraft bum, an aspiring playwright who had traded Manhattan for a drama featuring rubber and oars on a stage moving water. Call it a cosmic coincidence. Two wandering thespians in search of life roles meet on a crowded train and hit it off like an Oscar-bound actor and director. They talked all day, and Currie invited Hertz to stay at his home. “I don’t think he though I would take him up on it,” Hertz recalls. “After traveling around a bit I showed up at his place and stayed with his wife and kids. He wasn’t due home for another week.”Hertz was guiding on the Bio-Bio at the time and offered to take Currie on a trip. It would be the first of many. A year later they formed Earth River Expeditions, now one of the most prolific rafting outfitters in the world, offering trips to South America, Asia, the Unites State and Canada. “It was the smartest thing I ever did,” says Hertz. Earth River guides more than 500 clients a year, but numbers don’t mean much to these two globetrotters. “It’s not just about rapids,” says Currie. “We are blessed to guide several gems and there are very few left in the world. We have a responsibility to protect them.” Currie and Hertz are adamant about protecting the cultural and environmental legacy of the places they work.

Together they helped fight the damming of the Bio Bio, which was lost to hydropower in 1998. Currie has headed the Futaleufu Trust, a movement to buy land around the river and fight unwanted development in the drainage. Instead of displacing people, as hydro-development would, Currie encourages people living on the Futaleufu to dig deeper roots. “If the people leave, the place changes,” he says. “Unfortunately, most of the young people in the surrounding countryside leave to find work. Rafting gives them a reason to be proud of their homes. Today all the young kids want to grow up and be raft guides.” Hertz grew up in Hartsdale, New York, and spent his summers exploring the Housatonic and Delaware rivers in a canoe. In 1970, at 15, he took a cross-country bicycling trip. When he reached Oregon he met Dory Schwab, a guide who offered to take Hertz down the Rogue River. “I couldn’t get to the main put-in when I needed to, so I hitched a ride to the upper section and floated with a cheap life jacket and an inner tube down to meet Dory,” says Hertz. “I guess I impressed him because at the end of the trip, he asked me to come back and work on the Salmon the next summer.” The seed was planted. Hertz would guide on the Salmon, the Tuolumme and the Grand Canyon before traveling to Chile.

Hertz has always sought out new places to live, work and run rafts. “It’s about exploration,” he says. “I love finding new places and Robert and I try to offer our clients new and different trips.” Recent Earth River destinations include the Great Bend of the Yangtze in China and the Magpie River in Quebec. The more rivers Hertz explored, the more environmental hazards he found threatening their banks. In the late eighties, Hertz stumbled across the Great Whale River in northern Quebec while on a family trip. The Great Whale tumbles 225 miles towards James Bay, and was scheduled to be dammed before Hertz found it. With the help of a $5 billion investment from New York State, Hydro Quebec planned to dam the river, turning it and its tributaries into artificial lakes and displacing most of the Cree Nation living in the area. In 1992, Hertz invited a group of New York state legislators to raft the river and meet the people the damn would displace.

“We were on the river a week and every night we slept in teepees, ate moose meat and talked with the Cree,” says Hertz’s close friend Robert Kennedy Jr., who was on the trip. “The legislators saw how important it was to save the area.” New York Sen. Bill Hoyt eventually killed the investment contract with the help of other politicians who rafted the Great Whale with Hertz, essentially putting a halt to the hydro project. Hertz is currently working to save the Magpie from similar peril, a river that features over 50 rapids rated higher than Class III. “Eric Hertz is my personal hero,” Kennedy says. Hertz is used to hearing this kind of praise. He appreciates it but doesn’t feel it’s deserved. “Our role is to be baton-passers,” he says. “Earth River doesn’t try to have an opinion when we show environmentalists or clients these beautiful places. We just want people to see and appreciate for themselves.” Just call it a river thespian sharing his stage.