"Bobby's Big Adventure"

By Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

For the .pdf article with pictures click here

Last spring my wife, Mary, our nine-year-old daughter, Kyra, and I assembled with thirty-three friends who had arrived at Chile's Santiago Airport following overnight flights from various places. Our group included tennis star John McEnroe and his wife, rock singer Patty Smyth; comedian-writer Dan Aykroyd and his wife, actress Donna Dixon; and Seinfeld star Julia Louis-Dreyfus and her husband, Saturday Night Live comic; Brad Hall, all with children in tow. All together, there were sixteen kids and twenty adults determined to tackle the Futaleufu – one of the world's finest and yet least known white-water rivers- with American outfitter Earth River Expeditions. But our ten-day trip involved more then just adventure. Earlier in the year, Chile's largest hydropower company, Endesa, had announced its intent to dam the Fu in 2013. Part of our groups mission was to bring the publics attention to this wilderness gem so that the Chilean people would be less inclined to tolerate its destruction.

From Santiago, we flew 1,000 miles south to Puerto Montt, a maritime city that serves as the gateway to Chilean Patagonia. The next day, dolphins surfed our bow as we rode a ferry south to the tiny port of Chaiten. A three-hour bus trip over a dirt road introduced us to the region's beautiful landscape. We stopped at our put-in, El Chiquito, just before the Fu's confluence with

the Azul River. There we donned wet suits, helmets and life jackets, grabbed our paddles and listened to a safety briefing by Earth River's founder, Eric Hertz, and his partner Robert Currie. Our trip would include easy Class III rapids, invigorating Class IVs and extremely challenging Class Vs. White-water rafting is, of course, an inherently risky activity, but Earth River is famous for its commitment to safety. Its guides have studied the best routes down the river and safety catarafts accompany all its trips on the Fu, taking strategic positions at each rapid. (A cataraft is a sturdy rowing platform mounted on two pontoons that glide easily atop the water, making the craft stable and maneuverable even in the most ferocious rapids.) After the briefing, Eric coached the mostly neophyte crew in paddling techniques.

There was a loud gasp when we emerged from the jungle onto the riverbank and people took in the brilliant teal blue of the sun-struck Futaleufu."Oh, this is b.s.!" Said Julia. "It's like the Disney World ride with the blue dye. It's gotta be fake!"

We split up, six paddlers to a raft, each with a guide wielding long oars from a perch on a raised platform. Mary and I boarded Roberto's boat with Julia and Brad; their thirteen-year-old Henry; Anne Hearst (whose family owns the company that published this magazine); and Senator Antonio Horvath, a powerful Chilean politician. The Aykroyds and McEnroes went with Sam Payne and Sandra Feusi; two former Cirque de Doleil acrobats, and Abner, the most guapo of the handsome guides. On a previous trip, Kyra had dubbed Abner "Cutie-pie" and tortured him by braiding his hair into porcupine spikes tied fast with colorful bits of cloth. The name stuck.

In the pool below the put-in, each crew practiced flipping its boat and scrambling back in. Mary asked Julia how she still looked so gorgeous after two dunkings in the river. "I have someone to do my makeup and hair. They're following in a van," she said earnestly. "Keep it under wraps. I'd rather not share." Brad observed that her makeup squad might have problems getting access to the remote campsites. "They'd better figure it out," she said sharply, "if they want to keep their jobs."Brad worried that Cutie-Pie would need a winch to lift Dan Aykroyd back into the raft. But despite his size, Dan is strong, athletic and shockingly agile, as he demonstrates with acrobatic dancing in his Blue Brothers stage act. He sprang back into the boat with grace.

We ran a series of Class IIIs and IVs and finished the day at Mandaca, a Class V with an eight-foot drop that dumped PGA pro Denis Watson and Belle Aykroyd into the river. Belle floated by with a big smile on her face. She patted her helmet, signifying "I'm okay," as one of the guided plucked her from the water. Brad asked Roberto, "What's the hand signal for "don't tell your parents'?"

Dan had been somewhat reluctant to make the long trip to Chile, but he was suddenly at home on the river. “This is the best,” he told me. Donna nodded and gave me a gleeful grin.

Our first camp, Mapu Leufu, was situated on a cliff nestled between glaciers and rugged mountains reminiscent of the Tetons. We arrived at nightfall and the McEnroe clan was somewhat disconcerted. Patty- already nicknamed Patty Packin’-Roe by Julia for the hours she had spent packing for her children - got lost briefly in the woods, and nine-year-old Anna couldn’t find her shoes. Sean, a teenager, missed his girlfriend and tile showers and frankly seemed pretty miserable.

Arturo Carvallo, the mayor of the town Futaleufu, hiked up to our campsite for dinner and to ask for our help in stopping the dams, which the local community strongly opposes. In 1990 Eric Hertz and I, working with the Natural Resources Defense Council, local environmental groups and Pehuenche Indians, fought Endesa’s plans to dam the Bio-Bio, Chile’s other great white-water treasure. We ultimately lost that battle.

The first of the Bio-Bio dams was already under construction, and Chile’s burgeoning white-water community thoroughly demoralized, when Eric discovered the Futaleufu, in 1991. His first descent by raft that year opened up the possibility of running commercial trips on the FU, and this reinvigorated Chile’s paddlers. Now the Fu is also threatened. In the meantime, however, Endesa has been privatized, so it no longer enjoys the local popularity it once claimed as Chile’s national power company. Its constitutional right to condemn land is also less clear. With construction not scheduled to commence for several years, river lovers have more time to organize and inform the public.

The biggest hurdle to overcome is the Fu’s beauties are largely unknown to the Chilean people, who rarely venture south of Puerto Montt except to visit Torres del Paine, the country’s famous national park. But the Fu’s rich beauty dwarfs the stark majesty of Torres. Its unusual color, spectacular scenery, endless series of formidable Class IV and V rapids and extraordinary fishing combine to offer adventurers one of the world’s finest white-water experiences.

My father took my nine siblings and me on most of the great rivers in the western United States, including the Salmon and the Snake. After he died, my brothers and I ran a Maine-based rafting company and paddled first descents in Peru, Colombia and Venezuela. As a river advocate, I’ve continued to kayak and raft white-water rivers at every opportunity. Since 1988, I’ve working alongside Earth River, fighting to protect some of the best remaining white-water rivers on the

planet. The Fu is on the short list.

We could see the river from our cliff-side campsite that night. A full moon lit the landscape, illuminating a blanket of low-lying clouds spilling down the Fu, below us. In the morning we would watch the blanket withdraw. Annie Costner, a battle-scarred river activist and the daughter of actor Kevin Costner, marveled at the way the clouds, like a divine force, tucked the river in.

John McEnroe said he slept nine hours - and it was his first night in a tent ever. Dan had a rough night. “I finally relaxed when the motorcycle drove into my tent,” he said, “because I knew I must be dreaming.”

As we took to the water, Eric told us that the previous day had been practice for today’s run of Inferno Canyon, a series of four Class V rapids in a narrow gorge that compresses the cast energy of the Fu. The first rapid is a string of standing waves (known as a wave train) with a granite wall on one side. Cute-Pie and his crew aced it, making the ride look effortless. Another boat, paddled mainly by hormone-crazed teenagers, took a less conservative approach and hit the wall, but it spun off safely.

We ran the other rapids smoothly while the smaller kids rode horses around the canyon (young children skip all the roughest rapids). We spotted them above the river on a narrow trail cut into the ravine wall just as we were entering one of the Class Vs. Time seemed to slow in the tumult of these giant rapids, and I notices little things of beauty. Cormorants and geese basked on sunlit rocks; a king-fisher undulated by with a trout still flapping in its beak.

Between the rapids, I fished from the bow, quickly hooking a six- pound trout. I’ve fished in Canada, Latin America and most of the States, but I’ve never seen a waterway with such an abundance of consistently large trout. The small bays and pockets of still water along the FU’s banks almost always yield trout. It was pure joy to entice them from their hiding places under the willow branches and watch them follow the lure from great distances in the gin-clear water.

Trout are not native to Chile. In 1903, a botanist brought 400,000 trout eggs from Germany and founded fish farms to stock Chile’s rivers and streams with browns and Rocky Mountain rainbows. The trout thrived on the small indigenous freshwater crustaceans and mollusks; many

grew to record sized. (The Fu also has Atlantic and Chinook salmon that grow to upwards of sixty pounds.)

We fished and took in the scenery. Around every bend was another breathtaking view; lush rain forests fringed by white beaches and sawtooth peaks protruding from glaciers. Mid-afternoon we arrived at Cave Camp, which straddles Zeta rapid, an unrunnable Class VI that agonizes its way through a narrow stone canyon. As the guides lined the empty rafts through Zeta, the children jumped from cliffs into the frothing plume, then climbed into a stone hot tub (ingeniously heated by a submerged wood stove) to warm up. When I heard a barking noise like seals fighting and a huge splash, I knew that Dad Aykroyd had leaped from the cliff.

Cave Camp is surrounded by intertwining trails leading to magical hideouts. Over the years Earth River has constructed dozens of trails and twelve cliff dwellings, each with beautiful views yet expertly concealed and invisible from the river. We crossed a series of wooden bridges over huge boulders and made our way to the candle lit cavern with a roaring fire. There we devoured chicken soup, bologna, cheese, gorp, fresh fruit and crab cake. Senator Horvath toasted Earth River.

“We owe Eric a big thanks for showing this treasure to the Chilean people,” he said. “We must figure out a way to preserve this place.

Dan showcased his esoteric knowledge of weaponry and metallurgy, peppering the senator, a former transportation engineer, with challenging questions about road construction and stress specifications for Andean bridges, and then drew on his expertise in the paranormal, entertaining us with ghost stories around the Cave Camp chimney.

We were up with the sun to rock climb the 300-foot granite spire that towers over the campsite. (All Earth River guides are certified in mountaineering and technical climbing.) “This is all new for the McEnroes,” John told me. When Kyra expresses some reluctance to rappel off a sixty-foot cliff, John comforted her, saying, “If you want to see someone who is really scared, just watch me. I’m terrified now.” He backed off the cliff in plaid New York Mets pajamas, adding, “But if I make it to the bottom, I’ll never admit it.”

Sam and Sandra, the acrobats, did handstands on the Knife’s Edge, a narrow walkway that

protrudes from the tower's top like a flying buttress. After safely descending the spire, we hiked to Tree House Camp, crossing the cliffs above Zeta rapid via Tyrolean traverse, a web of ropes and pulleys that we used to pull ourselves over the gorge, high above the churning water.

At Tree House Camp, we climbed up into the Andes through rain forests of fern and cypress, ducking into tunnels of feathery bamboo. As we gained altitude, we entered old-growth forests of southern beech. Hummingbirds suckled on red fuchsia bells. Birdsongs reverberated: the chatter of parrots and parakeets, the loud knocking of giant Magellanic woodpeckers and the sweet twitter of tiny finches and nuthatches. Condors climbed overhead. We hiked past steep waterfalls, pausing every so often to look down on the azure Fu.

I walked with Julia and her charming children. "I would marry Henry if he weren't my son," she confided of her thirteen-year-old. Eight-year-old Charlie, who liked to make everything into a contest that he had to win, raced ahead to be first to the camp. The next day, he would be first to breakfast, first to the river and first asleep. We came at last to an alpine lake ever more palatable after the long hike. We talked about the Fu.

In 1991, the year after Endesa dammed the Bio-Bio Eric and Roberto made the first raft descent of the Fu. They had heard about the river from American kayakers who raved about its wild rapids. The river is born in the vast ice fields and glacial lakes on Argentina's border with Chile and flows to the Pacific. The volume of water collected by the river during its steep drop from the Andes can exceed 20,000 cubic feet a second- the same as that of the Colorado River as it flows through the Grand Canyon, the gold standard of white-water adventures. Eric and Roberto knew from the start that its volume and steep canyons would make the Fu a tempting target for the hydro industry.

Earth River Expeditions is part white-water outfitter and part conservation group. Eric and Roberto have devoted their lives and their company's resources to saving some of the world's last great white-water wilderness rivers. Earth River often partners in these endeavors with my environmental advocacy groups, Natural Resources Defence Council and Waterkeeper Alliance. I met Eric in 1988, when he almost single-handedly stopped the Great Whale Hydro Project, which would have destroyed eleven major rivers in northern Quebec. I worked with him to save the Headwall Canyon, in British Columbia, and the Magpie, in Quebec. He is my neighbor and friend, and we've done white water together all over the globe. Today most of the great rivers on our planet are dammed and many of the rest slated for dams.

“Rivers are the best way to experience the wilderness without destroying it,” Eric says. “And we all need the wilderness to renew ourselves.”
On our way down the hill to the river, I stopped to watch a beautiful rofous-breasted Chucao bird with purple stripes. To my surprise, the bird seemed as interested in me as I was with him. Julia, Henry and I held our breath as the little fellow approached us. He hopped to the tip of a branch inches from my face and sized me up. He hopped again to eyeball Julia and then landed on Henry’s shoulder, stayed a moment and flickered away.

We crossed the river back to Cave Camp on a zip line, taking a running leap off a cliff and then releasing and dropped into the foamy water, where the catarafts waited to scoop us out. Later that afternoon, we ran a steady succession of rapids before making camp. In the evening, gauchos roasted a goat on spits as we watched the sunset. Ibis and spoonbills flew beneath us in the twilight. Dan toasted the local guides and the Chilean people, thanked them for “the greatest trip in my life” and volunteered himself and his family in the battle to save the Fu. At the senator’s suggestion, we all agreed to hold a press conference on our way back through Santiago.

We ended the night with a fireside talent contest that had river-songs theme. Julia and Brad, performing an Everly Brothers tune, tied for first place with Patty Smyth, who sang “Ode to Billy Joe,” the ditty about jumping off the Tallahassee Bridge.

All our training over the past five days was preparation for this day’s Terminator rapid, a highly technical Class V that is as challenging as any rapid run by a commercial rafting outfit anywhere in the world. After scouting it from its boulder-strewn shore, we entered on the right side of the river, paddling vigorously to avoid the rapid’s unrunnable center. Next we ran a series of chutes and slides through a boneyard of boulders and ledges. We charged right and back-paddled off a rock, then turned hard toward the center of the river, fighting to get momentum in the current, drive into the final chute and ease the raft into an eddy.

We had only a short interval to cheer before turning the boat and charging toward the center of the river into Himalaya, the largest rapid. Its three big standing waves tower sixteen to twenty feet high, depending on water levels. Although they often flip rafts, Eric reckons Himalaya a mere Class IV because it empties into a large, flat pond and the swim is safe and fun.

Dan caused a minor sensation at our picnic lunch by falling sound asleep while standing straight up, braced against a tall tree- a useful skill, he later explained, the he learned in his teens while

working the graveyard shift as a freight handler at an Ontario rail yard.

After lunch we ventured back into a seemingly endless progression of Class V rapids. Everybody's favorite was Magic Carpet, a rollicking wave train. After five days of high-energy white water and having aced Terminator, we were getting blasé about the river. So as we entered our final Class IV rapid, Casa de Piedra, Roberto was rather urgently and somewhat vainly shouting that we should paddle vigorously. We accelerated into a chute toward a wall of water, then looked up to find a gigantic wave looming above us. I heard Anne Hearst say "Oh, my."

As we emerged from the violent dunking, Brad surveyed the roaring chaos before us and shouted, "Stay away from the right side! It looks dark and foreboding!" I glanced at him. The left lens of his sunglasses had been knocked out by the wave. Roberto had lost an oar, and we were heading toward another monstrous wave without the vital momentum we would need to punch through it. As we hit it, our raft went vertical, causing a classic "dump truck" that left only the oarsman, Roberto, in the raft. Our entire crew swam.

Most of us clambered quickly back in the boat, but Julia became separated. When one of the guides pulled her onto his cataraft, she greeted him matter-of-factly: "I'm so happy to see you." Cutie-Pie's boat also flipped. Dan swam the rapid and had so much fun in the big waves he was reluctant to leave the water. He had to be hauled into one of the boats against his will- in his words, "like a giant tuna."

We left the Fu and rode the bus back to Chaiten. That night we dined in a charming pensione and listened to toasts from happy rafters. John told the group that he had never been camping or slept in a sleeping bag before and that even after traveling to nearly every corner of the globe during his long tennis career, he considered this the most memorable trip of his life.

Patty "Packin'-Roe" Smyth revealed that she had been shocked by how safe she had felt and that her children had experienced a kind of freedom they had never known before. "The kids wandered the woods and wilderness trails on their own and paddled these giant rapids, and I actually felt they were safer here than when were are in New York," she said. "And the guides were so loving." Sean told us he had loved the trip and that it had really made him appreciate simple things, "like living in a house with windows and doorknobs."

The next day, Dan boarded the ferry with his hair neatly slicked and a thin tie showing beneath a black leather motorcycle jacket. “When you travel,” he advised, “you need to inspire instant respect.”

Our press conference in Santiago was a great success. John enjoys enormous popularity in Chile. As does Julia: a reporter told us that Seinfeld is as treasured in Chile as it is in the United States. And Dan charmed the press corps with a sentimental rhapsody to Chile and her people. His fame was confirmed by the Blues Brothers posters advertising the local phone company that adorned every square inch of the wall space in the airport. As we headed to the plane, Dan ordered his children to snap a photograph of one for a copyright-infringement lawsuit.

As we spoke to the press, we were careful not to appear to be interfering with the decisions that are more appropriately left to the Chilean people. We simply praised the Futalefu for what it is - one of the world’s greatest biological, geological and aesthetic gems. Senator Horvath did the rest, declaring that this river must be protected in a national park. Since our trip, many Chileans, including prominent political figures and journalists, have taken trips with Earth River. This is a good sign, because you can’t experience the Fu without falling in love with it. With luck, it’s the beginning of a movement.