

# The Iconoclast

Corporate environmentalist and Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard shares his thoughts with BC-based moviemaker Jon Long on fighting power with power, medieval dirtbagging and the complexity of living simply

By Darren Davidson



Legend and a tin shack: A recent photo of Yvon Chouinard outside his first shop in Ventura, California. Photo: Jon Long

**RIDE LIFE**  
**RIDE GIANT**

In the adventure sport cosmos, there are few stars as extraordinary as Yvon Chouinard. At 68, the maverick California business magnate heads Patagonia, one of the world's most successful outdoor apparel and gear companies, a corporate iconoclast as famous for its environmental crusade as for its mass-produced wares. Founded in 1973, two years after Chouinard made his first pair of corduroy climbing shorts, Patagonia crept along for more than a decade

before experiencing a mercurial financial ascent. Sales shot from \$20 million in the mid 1980s to \$100 million in 1990. By 2004, the company and its 1,000 employees grossed \$240 million.

Along the road to success, Chouinard has directed Patagonia to donate over \$22 million to environmental groups and government watchdogs. In 1996, the company pledged to gift one per cent of total sales to green-minded causes, and in 2001 founded the

One Percent For The Planet project—an alliance of over 150 companies committed to giving at least one per cent of their sales to saving the planet's natural places, plants and animal life.

Not surprisingly, Chouinard's extraordinary persona and professional achievements have caught the eye of media around the world, most recently Canadian filmmakers Jon and Karen Long. Mavericks in their own right, the Nelson, BC-based, producer-director



Film cuts from *The Next Step*

team has created numerous internationally screened TV programs and feature films, including Disney's *Sacred Planet* and *IMAX Extreme*, heralded by *Spin* magazine as "one of the most visually impressive pieces of film ever assembled."

The Longs' latest project, *The Next Step*, is billed "a social/cultural documentary exploring the evolution and culture of action sports." The film interviews dozens of the planet's greatest names in pastimes notoriously dubbed "extreme", including skateboard legend Tony Hawk, world surf king Kelly Slater, X Games godfather Ron Semiao and Chouinard himself. KMC Deputy Editor Darren Davidson had a chance to cull through Long's 90-minute interview with Patagonia's founding soul. The following are excerpts from their conversation.

**Jon Long: Define adventure.**

Yvon Chouinard: Well, you can't plan an adventure. It just happens, and it usually happens when you screw up. You run out of food. You get caught in a storm, something or another. You know? That's when an adventure happens.

**What is the "adventure spirit" and why is it important?**

Well, every definition of "adventure" in Webster's [Dictionary] has an element of risk. Whether it's a financial venture, or whatever, it has to be risky. If you take the risk out of climbing—like sport climbing

does—it's not climbing. If you take the risk out, you also take out a lot of the values that you get out of it.

**Has the real meaning of "adventure" changed in this age of information and convenience?**

You see people climbing Everest and stuff... They don't have to be carrying a pack. There are ladders across the crevasses. There are thousands and thousands of fixed ropes. The camps are set up. There's a little chocolate mint on your sleeping bag... You don't have to think. It's like watching television. Your mind shuts off and you plod behind... I mean, why not just take a helicopter to the top?

**Do you see humanity becoming more or less disconnected with nature?**

I think most people don't consider themselves part of nature. In fact, I'm getting hundreds of letters opposing our stances on voting for the environment. Some are saying, "You know, God gave us this earth to have dominion over, and the sooner we use it up Jesus is coming back" and "When you worship nature you're worshipping an idol" or "We're going to have villages on Mars soon, so forget about this earth." It's so bizarre. [Some people] really think that it's a dark force that worships nature.

**What was your most memorable adventure?**

*(Chouinard details his 1968 trip to South*

*America's southern tip where he attempted the summit of 11,073-foot Mount Fitz Roy in Argentina's Patagonia, with a group that included Doug Tompkins, founder of The North Face.)*

The whole trip was six months long and there were all kinds of adventures...waking up in Guatemala with guns at our heads. Climbing Fitz Roy was quite a deal. There's no road to the base camp. There's no bridge across the river. It was a wild place. Out of 60 days we spent trying to climb it, we had only five days of actual climbing. We spent 31 days in an ice cave. Try that sometime. With down sleeping bags that after the first few days were soaking wet. It was pretty miserable. We ran out of food. We had to go down and catch sheep and slit their throats and roast them up and take them up to the ice cave. We'd be eating a haunch of sheep. I mean, it was a really great dirtbag adventure.

**Do the reasons we participate in adventure sport change over time?**

Well, it's different, depending on how old you are. When I was young, climbing saved our lives. We were kind of disenfranchised from society—I mean this is the 60s and stuff. We had nothing to do with corporate America. We had totally different lifestyles than our parents. We were really proud of the fact that climbing had no economic value in society, and nobody tried to make a living out of climbing. You climbed for the sake of proving yourself.

**I'M TRYING TO RUN THIS COMPANY AS IF IT'S GOING TO BE HERE A HUNDRED YEARS FROM NOW. AND WE CAN'T BE HERE A HUNDRED YEARS FROM NOW UNLESS WE INFLUENCE A LOT OF OTHER COMPANIES TO DO THE SAME THING. BECAUSE THIS SOCIETY—THIS CIVILIZATION—IS IN COLLAPSE MODE.**

**On raw, unmedicated dirtbag adventure travel:**

When I was 16 years old, I'd take trips to Mexico, and in those days Mexico was a very primitive place. I would get so sick you wouldn't believe it. I mean just horribly, horribly sick. I've had giardia so many times that it doesn't bother me anymore. [But] I decided long ago that I was going to spend the rest of my life doing this. Whether I was eating out of bazaars in Pakistan or Afghanistan or travelling all over the world, I was not going to be an American traveller. I'm going to fit into the culture. Now I've become immune to all those viruses.

**What's the best part of owning your own company?**

I can do what I want.

**What's Patagonia's mission?**

[The first part of] our mission statement is to make the best product. The second part of the mission statement is to cause no unnecessary harm—it doesn't say "cause no harm" because we can't do that. There's no such thing as sustainable business. So we cause the least amount of harm. The third part of our statement just kind of happens, which is to use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crises. We use this company to influence other companies to do the right thing. I'm trying to run this company as if it's going to be here a hundred years from now. And we

can't be here a hundred years from now unless we influence a lot of other companies to do the same thing. Because this society—this civilization—is in collapse mode.

**Can you overpromote outdoor adventure to the detriment of our natural surroundings?**

We can over-love a particular area. I mean, look at Yosemite on Memorial Day. Yosemite Valley becomes, I don't know, the seventh or eighth largest city in California. That's absurd.

**What do you get out of interacting with nature that you can apply to everyday life?**

When you're doing these risk sports you try to live right on the edge, and you try to push that envelope all the time, push the edge away all the time. But you never go over. Because if you go over you're dead... One lesson is you don't go over the edge. And you live within your means.

**How important is the pursuit of simplicity in our lifestyles—and how can we achieve that?**

Your average product that's bought in the mall is discarded; 90 per cent of it is discarded within 90 days... So it's buying and discarding and consuming and just trying to be happy. But you realize that's just not the way. It was just a few hundred years ago we were hunters and gatherers and warriors and whatever. We weren't meant to be business-

men saying, "Oh God, I got another paper cut." It's just not human.

**On evil and good:**

You know what? It's so easy to go from simplicity to complexity. It's so easy to do. But it's so hard to go from complexity to simplicity. Oh, it's a constant battle. I really believe that evil is stronger than good. I really do. Because if you just sit on your ass and do nothing, evil will happen. Evil wills out. To actually create good, you have to work at it. And if you want a simple lifestyle you really, really have to work at it.

**Thinking back to when you started Patagonia, could you ever have imagined it would come to this?**

No. No way. I thought I'd be retired by now in the South Pacific with my surfboard, sailing around. Bone fishing. No, I didn't know I'd be doing this.

**What are you going to do when you grow up?**

You never know what you're going to do when you grow up. I still don't. (Laughing) No, you never wanna. You want to stay a sub-adult all your life, that's for sure. They say when your house is finished, you die. So never finish your house.