

# BE THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE IN THE WORLD

EVERY YEAR IMMENSE EXTENSIONS OF ICE MELT AND FREEZE AROUND ANTARCTICA IN A PULSE THAT WE COULD EASILY PERCEIVE AS THE PALPITATING HEART OF THE EARTH. WHAT HAPPENS TO ANTARCTICA AFFECTS THE WHOLE WORLD AND VICE-VERSA



# RODRIGO JORDAN

Explorer, mountaineer  
and management Professor

Rodrigo Jordan is founding director of Vertical in Chile, an organization devoted to using the mountains as classroom for groups ranging from company managers to school children.

He holds a doctorate in organizational administration from Oxford University, and he teaches Leadership and Decision Making on the MBA programme at the Universidad Católica de Chile. He also directs Fundación Vertical, the not-for-profit arm of Vertical which serves the underprivileged students of the poorest schools in Chile. Due to his long involvement (more than twenty years) with social development and poverty issues, Rodrigo was chosen to become the present Chairman of the *Chilean National Foundation for the Overcoming of Poverty*, the most important NGO dealing with poverty and social development today in Chile. The Foundation runs various programmes throughout the country involving more than four hundred professionals and one thousand volunteers.

*Time* magazine identified him in 1995 as one of the leaders of the "new millennium." In 2004 he received the highest honour given by the Chilean Ministry of Education – *The Order of Gabriela Mistral* – for his contribution to Chilean education.

Rodrigo is an accomplished mountaineer. He took a course to specialize as a mountain-climbing instructor at the *British National School of Outdoors Activities*. He won the *Irvine Travel Award* in 1987, given by Oxford University to the best expedition of the year, for his trip to Mount Kenya and Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa. Since then, he has climbed throughout the Andes. In 1992, he led the successful Chilean expedition to Mount Everest, the first ever from Latin America to reach the top and the second in the world to climb the difficult East Face. He also led a Chilean team in 1996 in a successful ascent of K2, ascending the southeast ridge. In 2002, he led a four-person team in an unsupported 250-mile traverse, much of it unexplored, of the Ellsworth Mountains in Antarctica. In 2006, he led a national team of 15 members to the summit of Lhotse, the world's fourth highest mountain. He has just come back from his last expedition in January 2008 to Antarctica as part of a *National Geographic* kayaking team to explore the impact of climate change on the melting of the Larsen Ice Shelf. Rodrigo is the author of *Everest: The Challenge of a Dream* and *K2: The Ultimate Challenge*, and his ascent of K2 was featured in 2001 in

the *National Geographic* television series on the *Quest for K2*. Rodrigo Jordan brings his experience to *sdVision*.

Rodrigo, you are known all over the world as an explorer, an educator and an activist against poverty in Chilean society.

What links one experience to the other and on which do you place your priorities?

I believe that present explorers are not necessarily discovering uncharted territories but revisiting them with a profound desire for understanding them with a more holistic perspective. This means not just opening new vistas but fully understanding the natural and human environment as an interacting whole.

Quite quickly you realize that the earth's future depends on understanding the relation between the natural environment and the human population living and depending on it. Answers and choices are not at all easy as often further protecting nature restricts the possibility for people living in poverty to achieve their development. On the other hand obtaining social and economic improvements for poverty stricken sectors of the population is often done without concern for the environment buying only short-term alleviation rather than long-term sustainability.

Our success should be

*Rodrigo documenting Gentoo penguins moving south as Antarctica warms up*



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*Rodrigo Jordan*

measured in considering both sides of the equation, which of course is extremely complex and difficult. There are no easy answers. In this sense this difficulty can only be approached if the communities themselves are involved in the decisions affecting their future. Serious efforts must be made in education to ensure that everybody involved fully understands and is aware of the outcome of the decisions taken. Thus, environment, education, and poverty are tightly linked.

**Which are the human values involved in an expedition?**

Non-climbers usually think that expeditions involve strong and technically very competent people. Although this is generally true, successful expeditions need, above all, good people.

Nowadays I am more concerned with including integral individuals that have not only good technical skills but



also excellent social abilities – leadership, effective communication, conflict management, teamwork – as well as personal capacities – perseverance, sense of humor, self-motivation, discipline.

However, to me, the most important issue is that every member of the team should share a common set of values we are all agreed upon. For us concepts like excellence, humility, respect, generosity and friendship are embedded at the core of our expeditions.

**Mt. Everest and Antarctica: what contribution in terms of knowledge, inspiration and spirituality did you bring back from these experiences?**

We climbed Mt. Everest by ascending the very difficult East or Kangshung Face. It is an extremely technical and dangerous climb.

Everest was a kind of epiphany in many ways. It is here that I learnt about how crucial “soft” skills are in



putting together a successful team. We had failed twice before and were only successful when we considered these skills in selecting and training the team. It was here as well that I had my first thoughts about the relationship between environment, people and development. As we trekked out from Everest through the almost untouched Kangshung valley, and shared with the local population of Tibetans who have seen very little of the outside world, I was confronted with the question of their future.

How can we strike a balance between environment and culture conservation, and economic and social development?

Antarctica was probably the toughest and hardest expedition we have undertaken. Just four of us made an unsupported trek across 400 kilometres of unexplored territory on the eastern side of the Ellsworth Mountains at the heart of the Antarctic.

Again expeditions provided me with an unmatched opportunity for learning. It was here where I realized that values are at the core of an accomplished team. A successful team is formed not only by individuals who counterbalance each other’s strengths and weaknesses, but, most crucially, by each and every one fully committing to those shared values at the heart of the team.

However, it was here that I also realized the true global dimension of the environmental issues. It was not only a matter of preserving this unique and spectacular natural environment as the magnificent vision of Jacques Cousteau had proposed, but also realizing the consequences that Antarctic changes are having on the health of the Earth as a whole.

Every year immense extensions of ice melt and freeze around Antarctica in a pulse that can easily be perceived as the palpating heart of the earth. What happens to Antarctica affects the whole world and vice-versa. As we explored this most beautiful mountain terrain, I realized that James Lovelock’s notion of Gaia was not a theoretical concept to be understood but an experience I was feeling.

**What is your personal point of view on the present effects of global warming?**

In discussing global warming it seems that sometimes issues of a different kind are mixed together. Science, economics, politics and ethics are all different aspects that need to be discussed in relation to climate change. From a scientific point of view the fact of global warming is undeniable. Its effects are recognizable all around the world. From an economic point of view, these effects are not always negative.

The fact that land is being opened for agriculture in the northern countries, and the opening of the Northwest Passage through the Arctic Ocean for the first time in 2007 could both have very positive economic consequences. This is not to deny the fact that other effects may have disastrous economic consequences. Sudden sea level rises just to mention one. To come up with a good economic analysis that incorporates the

benefits and costs of all these consequences and compares them with the cost of investing in changes to human patterns of development, keeping in mind the consequences on the improvement of the poor, is certainly very difficult.

This brings us to the political consequences or, I prefer to say, "actions". Taking political action under these circumstances is easier said than done.

A totally different reality is confronted by the government of a developed European country than that of an underdeveloped country rich in natural resources such as tropical forest in Africa.

**Did you experience or verify the impacts of global warming on the different natural environments that you explored?**

Indeed. It was precisely these experiences that motivated me to go deeper into understanding climate change.

I've been going back to Patagonia for climbing and exploring expeditions for the last thirty years, and the increase in speed of retreat of the glaciers is so severe that it can be sensed with just your eyes. This increase has been thoroughly documented by glaciologists using sophisticated instruments. The risk of sea level rise has increased. The IPCC (UN's International Panel on Climate Change) report of February 2007 predicted that sea levels would rise "between 18 and 59 centimetres" by 2100. Mounting evidence of the unsteadiness of major ice sheets on Greenland and Antarctica, and a recent doubling in the rate of sea-level rise, have made this an improbably low estimate.

A new report published by the IPCC in November of 2007, brought their predictions up to date. In my most recent kayaking expedition to Antarctica, just a few months ago, I was amazed by the situation at Biscoe Bay where Palmer Station, a US research base, is located. In

this remote area of Antarctica, land, sea and the creatures that depend on them are involved in a crazy eddy of change as a consequence of some of the fastest warming on Earth: scientists have registered a rise in average winter temperatures of 9 degrees fahrenheit in the past half century.

Fen Montaigne in the September 2004 issue of *National Geographic* reported that twenty five years ago Biscoe was home to 2,800 breeding pairs of Adélies, one of only two ice-dependent polar penguin species (the other is the Emperor) in Antarctica.

In 2004 the number of Adélie breeding pairs on Biscoe had dropped to about a third of that. Gentoo penguins, a sub-Antarctic species that had begun migrating toward the Pole from more temperate climes, were then replacing Adélies. Scientists in Palmer reported then that "this whole area used to be Adélie colonies. Now the Gentoos are using the same nesting sites. I think Biscoe will soon be Adélie free. These birds are doomed."

This is exactly what I saw four years later. The nearby Chilean base Gabriel Gonzáles Videla, which in the fifties, when it was built, was a huge nesting ground for Chinstrap penguins, is now home to only Gentoos. Nobody knows where the Chinstraps have gone.

**Do you believe that world governments and organisations are properly facing global warming?**

As I said before, confronting climate change and global warming is a very hard and complex task and facing it is a very different issue for different countries. The approaches taken by China and India in relation to greenhouse gases emissions could be poles apart from those available for the US or the EU taken as a whole. And these again may be far removed from what a small country in Latin America can or is willing to do.

Rodrigo Jordan descending from Everest high camps in a storm at 7,200 meters. Himalayas 2006





Children should have the opportunity of experiencing and enjoying nature

Having said this though, and going back to my initial comments I think that much more could be done in many fields. My personal choice has been education. Through our *Fundación Vertical*, we deliver outdoor education and training services to schools and individuals, particularly children from inner-city areas. By involving children in nature understanding, appreciation and conservation, we hope to raise future generations of environmentally conscious people. This may not have consequences in the short run, but it will hopefully create a sustainable base for future generations.

**Do you believe that people living in different areas of the planet are sufficiently aware and informed about the present state of carbon emissions and their environmental impacts?**

This is precisely my point. I am not sure that the large

part of the populations living in such big cities as Mumbai, Sao Paulo, Lagos, Seoul or Istanbul are as aware of the relevance of carbon emissions and its impact on world climate as, maybe, citizens in New York are. Again, the choices they confront are widely different and immediate needs all but prevent them from understanding, much less taking action regarding these issues.

I think we explorers have a role to play in documenting as thoroughly as we can the consequences of climate change in the most diverse world landscapes. And to bring back as much material as we can to make a thorough and continuous effort to educate people in these matters. Children especially. Those who have not had the opportunity of experiencing and enjoying nature as children will not understand the ethical and economic reasons for protecting it as adults. ■