Once upon a time, the land mass known as Patagonia existed only in an unknown corner of the world, where blue icebergs mingled with penguins in the raging seas and massive glaciers scraped the rugged skin off towering mountains. Then, as the globe grew smaller thanks to airplanes (and later, the Internet), the natural beauty of land came to be appreciated near and far. These days, however, as the Earth warms, the region is at the melting forefront of climate change. Patagonia, as we know it, is in grave danger.

But there's hope for the Patagonias of the world, and the most promising seedling for positive change comes via a California clothing and outdoor-gear company whose name is eponymous with that remote land. The Ventura-based Patagonia, Inc. is the progressive and environmentally minded, highly successful product of four decades of triumphs and tribulations endured by the company's founder: a climber, surfer, and adventurer for the ages named Yvon Chouinard.

At 66 years old—and compelled by a sense of responsibility for saving the Earth from our destructive species—Chouinard is finally sharing his story with the world. Over the past 15 years, he's been working on the recently published *Let My People Go Surfing: The Education of a Reluctant Businessman*, an occasionally autobiographical book aimed at giving entrepreneurs young and old a viable option to the multinational corporate schemes usually presented in business schools. This fall, he's embarking on a cross-country series of talks discussing why the Patagonia model should be emulated, for the sake of both long-term profits and the planet. When asked why he's subjecting himself to such an arduous task—which includes a stop at UCSB's Campbell Hall on Wednesday, October 19—when he could be out surfing the break in front of his Faria Beach home, Chouinard simply responded, "It's something I have to do."

The World that Yvon Built

The Patagonia headquarters near the Ventura River just off of Highway 101 feels more like a highly functioning hippie commune than a $230-million-a-year international business hub. On any given weekday, the parking lot is engulfed with barbecue smoke, while people chat at picnic tables, children frolic on a playground, and workers return from lunchtime jogs.
‘I CAN’T SAY WE’RE GONNA BE HERE 20 YEARS FROM NOW BECAUSE THINGS ARE CHANGING SO QUICKLY. IT MAY BE THAT THE ONLY STORES LEFT IN AMERICA ARE GONNA BE COSTCO AND WAL-MART. THEY’RE GONNA BE COPYING EVERYTHING WE MAKE AND MAKING IT CHEAPER … AND THEY’LL DRIVE US OUT OF BUSINESS. IT MAY WELL BE.’ — YVON CHOUINARD

The signs on the buildings announce everything from a retail store and daycare center to surfboard shapers and environmental activists. Inside the main office, a shaggy-haired dude known as Chipper Bro is routing phone calls from Tokyo and Paris while the cafeteria is a buzz with smells of organic food and talk of the previous weekend’s outdoor excursions.

Inside the lunchroom on a recent Tuesday was the man who built this place, Yvon Chouinard. He is short and stout, in a solidly built, muscular way, a trait that carries to his work, selling his products to friends as a means of support. Chouinard taught himself blacksmithing in order to make the tools for his climbing passion. He specialized first in pitons, the spikes climbers use to attach themselves to rock walls; then he also began making clips called carabin to clip onto your pants. Intrigued, Chouinard and his buddies were soon traveling from Yosemite to the Tetons climbing related clothing as well.

As an individual but it doesn’t have much effect. But we have over 1,000 employees worldwide, and if we all work collectively, we might have an effect.

The desired effect is, in short, a better world, one in which businesspeople care for their employees, protect the environment, and still reap a healthy though managed level of profits. To do this, Chouinard is advocating a paradigm shift away from traditional American capitalism, toward a more sustainable model. Not surprisingly, it’s a stance he’s taken mostly alone.

“There are very few businesses I respect, so we kinda do our own thing,” Chouinard said. “We broke a lot of the rules. That’s one reason it took so long to write the book, because … I wanted to make sure that what I’m saying in the book has proven to really work.”

While the book features a synopsis of Chouinard’s path from adventurer to entrepreneur, Let My People Go Surfing is really a self-help tale for budding businesspeople. It offers technical advice for such specifics as mail-order and catalog copywriting alongside broad philosophies about the transparency of management decisions and value-driven architecture. It’s really an autobiography of Patagonia, Inc., and one that’s sure to ruffle feathers of the traditional business types because it strays from the usual grow-fast-and-sell-out practice that dominates the American model. Rather, Chouinard challenges entrepreneurs to choose a managed growth strategy that will ensure the life of a business for a century while placing environmentally sound policies and the welfare of the employees at a higher priority than profits.

Chouinard, who is described by at least one friend as being “douc,” admitted that it might already be too late, that the traditional types might win. He said pessimistically, “I can’t say we’re gonna be here 20 years from now because things are changing so quickly. It may be that the only stores left in America are gonna be Costco and Wal-Mart. They’re gonna be copying everything we make and making it cheaper … and they’ll drive us out of business. It may well be.”

So how does Patagonia achieve both sustainability and profitability? “It’s a balancing act,” Chouinard said. “We’re not turning away customers. … But I don’t create an artificial demand for [products] by advertising in Vanity Fair or Town & Country magazine, or putting billboards up on inner-city buses so that gang kids buy our down jackets instead of Timberland or North Face. That’s unsustainable, that goes in and out of fashion. We’re really trying to run it like we’re gonna be here 100 years, and to do that, you can’t grow 10 or 15 percent a year. … Even at 10 percent growth, over a certain number of years, you’re a trillion-dollar company. Of course, that’s impossible, but that’s what everyone wants to do.”

From Adventurer to Entrepreneur

So how did the wayfaring, authority-despising son of a hard-scrabble French Canadian laborer become the model for a new sort of business, one that balances quantifiable success with qualified responsibility?

Chouinard’s story begins in Lisbon, Maine, where he was born and attended French-speaking Catholic schools until age 7. In 1946, his family moved to Burbank, California, where he was made fun of in school for having a girl’s name. No good at school or organized sports, Chouinard looked to the outdoors for acceptance, and helped found the Southern California Falconry Club with some “fellow misfits.” One of their activities was to rappel down cliff faces to find the falcons they would train. One day, while rappelling off of Stony Point in the San Fernando Valley, they noticed someone coming up the cliff face. Intrigued, Chouinard and his buddies were soon traveling from Yosemite to the Tetons climbing cliff face after cliff face.

Chouinard taught himself blacksmithing in order to make the tools for his climbing passion. He specialized first in pitons, the spikes climbers use to attach themselves to rock walls; then he also began making clips called carabiners. Following high school graduation, Chouinard, an avid surfer, traveled the West Coast chasing waves. After sessions he would sit on the beach and hammer out some metal work, selling his products to friends as a means of support.

His designs became popular in the small but exponentially expanding climbing community. After a short stint in the military, Chouinard and his friends made the first 10-day ascent of Yosemite’s El Capitan. In 1965, Chouinard moved to Ventura to be closer to the surf, set up shop in a slaughterhouse, and kept making equipment as the demand exploded.

In his first real business move, Chouinard partnered with the Frost family, perfected his climbing gear, and started selling his wares under the name Chouinard Equipment. At this time, he also switched from making pitons, the permanent stakes that left indelible marks on the rock faces where they were used, to chocks, wedges that could be taken in and out of cracks to serve the same purpose, a move that is considered the birth of his environmentalism. “It’s kind of wishful thinking saying we did it because of an environmental reason;” he
said. "We also did it because it's a more efficient way of climbing. It was a win/win deal really." Partially because Chouinard Equipment took up 75 percent of the gear market, the rest of the climbing world followed suit and pitons became a thing of the past.

In the early 1970s, Chouinard also began producing climbing-related clothing, such as heavy-duty rugby shirts and double-seated corduroy shorts. Not wanting to undermine the gear company with a clothing line, Chouinard and his associates determined that they would need an umbrella name; "Patagonia" was chosen, a catchy name, pronounceable in every language, and one that, especially back in 1973, carried a marketable mystique.

At this time, Chouinard had his second foray into the environmental movement, instigated by the proposal to channelize the Ventura River. Again, Chouinard claimed that his motivations weren’t necessarily green. "All we were concerned about was that it would screw up the rivermouth," he said. "Less sand would go out there to the point and it would screw up the surf. There wasn't much concern about environmental aspects."

But the Ventura River battle—which was spearheaded and won by a young activist named Mark Capelli—opened up Chouinard’s eyes to "the power of one person." He saw the effect of grassroots activism, and realized that with a growing company—and an employee roster of folks who cared about the outdoors—he had the unique opportunity to effect change. And so he did. Capelli was given an office and Friends of the Ventura River was born. Thanks to Patagonia’s involvement, the Ventura River remains relatively intact compared to other big watersheds in Southern California. The activism spirit still runs strong at Patagonia: These days, the company will pick up your bail if you get arrested protesting.

While Chouinard honed his chops within the growing environmental movement of the 1970s, it wasn’t until Patagonia suffered a crisis in the early ‘90s that he began rethinking aspects of the traditional American business model. Throughout the 1980s, Chouinard led the way with numerous innovations and designs that set Patagonia apart from all other outdoor clothing lines. Then, in 1991, following consecutive annual postings of 30 to 50 percent growth, the company fell victim to the national recession. "We were growing way too fast," said Chouinard. "We were growing in all the traditional ways. We thought it was gonna go on forever. That was before I really got a grip on what I wanted to do, what was important to us."

"Black Wednesday," the darkest day ever for the company, was July 31, 1991, when 120 employees—many of them friends and family—were let go. The event proved enlightening to Chouinard, who recalled realizing: "Endless growth in a finite world? It’s ridiculous." It seemed that the environmental crisis he had noticed years before was now dovetailing with the business side of his life.

He began reading business books from Japan and Scandinavia, two places where quality of life is high and the business climate is good. However, no matter what he read, nothing could be applied to the American system. "I had to put together my own method of management," Chouinard said, "my own philosophy of doing business."

He took his managers on a trip to the real Patagonia for a sort of vision quest. From that meeting emerged the first board of directors and a mission statement—authored by ecologist, author, and friend, Jerry Mander—that has since shaped the company’s path. The statement’s underlying tenet is sustainability, but a sustainability that goes beyond environmentally sound decision making. Patagonia’s brand of sustainability also accounts for healthy communities, happy employees, and a thriving business.

Is Anybody Out There?

The Patagonia creation story is a good yarn, full of ups, downs, and discovery. But does anyone in today’s fiercely competitive business world want to hear that they should be diverting profits to activist organizations, that they should be growing at a managed rate, that they should make every decision with the environmental crisis in mind?

"All I can do is talk about a garment company and a climbing
equipment company,” Chouinard said. He argues that there is an objective notion of quality and that must be determined by any business before carrying forth. Based on that, Chouinard said, “We decided that part of our mission statement was to make the best product. Not among the best, but the very best. We had to define what is quality in clothing.”

That way of thinking, said Chouinard, “can be applied to any business. In fact, that's why I wrote this book. I'm hoping it gets used by young people who are interested in business. The biggest complaint of young people going to business school is that they give them case models of multinational corporations, which a lot of them have a hard time relating to. Some don't want to go work for a multinational — they want to start their own little business. So I'm giving them examples of a business that started from scratch, broke the rules, and made it work.”

The first critique of his book, by the publishing industry-respected Kirkus Reviews, got the message. “They saw the book as what I hoped it would be viewed as,” Chouinard said. “They saw it as a serious business book.”

But what do others think about the Patagonia model? According to Rick Ridgeway, Chouinard’s longtime fellow adventurier and currently the head of the company's international marketing and environmental programs, business schools are taking note.

“There’s a definite fire among young people to learn from the Patagonia example,” Ridgeway said. According to a recent survey, a “measurable percentage” of case studies in business schools were about Patagonia, a finding that Ridgeway has also heard anecdotally. “The current generation of young businesspeople is paying attention to what Patagonia has done and what Yvon has created,” said Ridgeway the other day during a break from a company conference at El Capitan Canyon. “They want to incorporate our lessons into their own careers … and we take a considerable amount of

‘ENDLESS GROWTH IN A FINITE WORLD? IT'S RIDICULOUS.’

— YVON CHOUMANARD

satisfaction in knowing that.”

Chouinard does admit that the Patagonia model can’t be immediately implemented by a new business: “You can’t start off the blocks and put in a childcare center the first year of business. You can’t have a cafeteria, you can’t have a pleasant working space.”

As well, given that 900 people apply for each new job posted by Patagonia — and that there’s little room for advancement in a company whose growth is managed tightly — there’s a dream-versus-reality ratio that’s not unlike the skyrocketing home prices of Santa Barbara.

But to some extent, the Patagonia way doesn’t need any more recruits to be an effective method for change. That’s thanks to One Percent for the Planet, a program co-founded by Chouinard whereby companies give 1 percent of their annual profits to non-governmental organizations of their choice.

“That'll be my biggest accomplishment,” said Chouinard, explaining that since rockstar Jack Johnson announced his involvement, there have been three companies joining the cause every week. The total, so far, is more than 175, which is no small chunk of change going to NGOs worldwide.

Furthermore, Chouinard and his associates fund Conservación Patagonica, a land trust in Patagonia that’s buying up large swaths of property to turn into national parks in Chile and Argentina. And Chouinard is still actively traveling the world to seek out environment-friendly technologies and practices that his company can integrate. He was just in Japan, where a factory is ready to “close the circle” on the clothing that Patagonia makes from recycled soda-pop bottles. The factory can recycle the already-recycled shirts when they get old and worn.

“The Japanese are still kicking our ass,” said Chouinard. “They have long-term goals. Ours [in America] are very short-term … They see the end of oil coming real soon. We’re slow. We always go west whenever we need more resources. Free trade and globalism is the new West. The Japanese, they live on islands, they understand. Plus, Buddhists understand that there’s a beginning and an end, whereas a lot of Americans can’t accept the fact that they’re gonna die.”

Let’s just hope that, for the world’s sake, more American businesses accept the fact that they need to start thinking globally for change. For if Chouinard’s message falls on too many deaf ears, the future of American business — not to mention the fate of such remarkable locales as Patagonia the place — might be grim.