

Takeoff

INCONVENIENT TRUTH:
(From left) The flow-altered Missouri River; clear-cut landscape in Washington state; keeping tabs on Mexico's flamingo population



EARNED WINGS

ABOVE THE FRAY

Environmental watchdog LightHawk spots eco-crime from above. By Cristina Velocci

In early 30 years ago, pilot Michael Stewartt was flying over the Pacific Northwest's glorious Cascade Mountains when he spotted something unsettling. What should have been a bird's-eye view of pristine snowcapped mountains and a verdant landscape was interrupted by huge expanses of clear-cut slopes that, from the highway, couldn't be seen. Concerned about the condition of our national lands, Stewartt decided to draw on his experience as a professional pilot and share the disturbing truth he witnessed from the air.

In 1979 Stewartt founded LightHawk, a flying organization that uses light aircraft as a conservation tool. Though he has since moved on to other pursuits, LightHawk continues to carry out his mission — from 500 to 1,000 feet above the ground — of providing perspective on the consequences of unsound environmental practices. A base of 140 volunteer pilots donate their time, skills and aircraft to provide flights to journalists, politicians, scientists, researchers, law-enforcement officials and others positioned to effect change.

LightHawk partners with more than 600 nonprofit and small community groups

in 23 states and 10 countries throughout North and Central America, acting as a catalyst to make their work more effective. While LightHawk was once an activist organization, executive director Rick Durden says it currently “doesn’t take sides. Instead, we’re out saying, ‘Look, we have a vehicle and skill set that allow people working on issues to get the truth.’”

In southern Missouri, LightHawk conducted several flights over the Mark Twain National Forest to investigate why this rural area had the highest level of lead poisoning in the United States. Aerial photography revealed that as streams passed lead mines on forestland leased by the government, they turned black. The same streams later became people’s drinking water. Additional photos showed 55-gallon drums sitting on a hill where all the vegetation had vanished. This evidence landed in the hands of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, which then fined the mine \$300,000 for dumping toxic chemicals and heavy metals. “Half the money went to the local school sys-

FROM LEFT: JOE RIIS/LIGHTHAWK; ADAM SEDGLEY, SEATTLE AUDUBON/LIGHTHAWK; DAVID KUNKEL/LIGHTHAWK

tem,” Durden says. “That’s a result we were proud of.”

Over its 28 years, the organization has accomplished plenty more. Evidence gleaned from LightHawk’s flights has been used to enact legislation in California to protect coastal waters, fight illegal logging and rainforest incursions and help track Belize’s Manatee population. A volunteer pilot even caught one Chicago politician dumping recycled materials on his farm instead of at a recycling facility — an act that couldn’t otherwise be documented from land because of tall trees and fences.

In cases like these, “people know something is going on but can’t find it,” Durden says. “In a couple hours of flying we can

find it and photograph it.” Plus, he adds, “We can cover the entire coast of Costa Rica in three days. It would take weeks

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to do that on the ground.”

LightHawk doesn’t charge for flights, relying instead on charitable donations. The

group owns two airplanes — a single-engine Cessna 206 and a single-engine Cessna 185 — that do most of its Central America flying. For the rest of its estimated 800 annual flights LightHawk relies on volunteers, who fly their own helicopters, single-engines and twin-engines on missions.

More volunteers are always welcome. “We’re constantly looking to add pilots and raise the necessary funds to expand,” says Durden, noting that LightHawk is unable to keep pace with the growing demand for its services. The upside is that this is due in part to LightHawk’s success; the downside is that it also reflects the alarming condition of the environment. ■

SEEING HAWKEYES

→ Want to become an eco-Hawk and patrol the planet? LightHawk is seeking volunteers in all operating regions. All LightHawk pilots must have a minimum 1,000 hours pilot-in-command time, maintain currency with all FAA regulations, hold and maintain a current medical certificate and possess insurance coverage for aircraft and passengers. For more information contact Kennan Knudson (307-332-3242; kknudson@lighthawk.org) or visit lighthawk.org.



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