

Circling Back to Jump-start Conservation over the Great Bear Rainforest



The rugged coast of British Columbia has been heavily logged throughout the years. Felled trees were often brought down to the coast and floated out to meet ships to transport them for milling. *photo: Neil Ever Osborne/iLCP with aerial support from LightHawk*



This LightHawk donated flight provided access to the hard to reach tracts of land and illuminated logging activities that continue without agreed upon "lighter touch logging" standards in place. *photo: Garth Lenz/iLCP with aerial support from LightHawk*

After the Great Bear Rainforest Agreements were implemented in March 2009, many thought the remote British Columbia coastline would be safe from clear-cutting. This type of destructive logging endangered ancient trees and remarkable wildlife like the rare white Kermode spirit bear. But two years after a landmark agreement between conservationists, First Nations, and the timber industry that put an end to contentious bickering which saw activists chaining themselves across logging roads, a roadmap toward sustainable logging is still not in place. To help restart momentum for the stalled conservation plan, LightHawk volunteer pilot Greg Bedinger flew his Maule to the coastal area he knew so well.

The Great Bear Rainforest (GBR) lies just north of Vancouver Island and encompasses an area one and a half times as large as Switzerland. This vast territory contains the largest coastal temperate rainforest on earth. Its primeval forests provide habitat for 1500-year-old trees as well as a rich diversity of wildlife including northern goshawks (*Accipiter gentilis*), salmon, shellfish-eating wolves, and black, grizzly and the iconic spirit bear (*Ursus americanus kermodei*). It has also been home to intensive logging for many years.

In 2009 environmental groups, logging companies, First Nations, and the BC government announced implementation of the landmark collaborative Great Bear Rainforest Agreements (see [*Big Win for the Great Bear Rainforest*](#), LightHawk summer 2009 newsletter). Key provisions put one-third of the almost 16-million-acre GBR off limits to logging outright, and established a commitment over the following five years to modulate logging in the remaining two-thirds. But important milestones in this process - plans dictating where logging can and cannot take place in the Great Bear Rainforest - were overdue and environmental groups were becoming concerned.



Greg Bedinger, LightHawk's pilot outreach manager, also donates missions around the Pacific Northwest as a volunteer pilot in his Maule airplane. *photo Katie Jennings with aerial support from LightHawk*



Inside the Great Bear Rainforest the white Kermode bear (*Ursus americanus kermodei*) thrives. *Photo: Ian McAllister/iLCP*



International League of Conservation Photographers Fellow Garth Lenz (left) with Sierra Club BC's Jens Wieting with Bedinger's Maule. *Photo: Greg Bedinger*

A Six-hour Trip to go "Home" Again

Sierra Club BC, ForestEthics and Greenpeace, which together comprise Rainforest Solutions Project, contacted Pacific program manager Christine Steele to help bring attention to the lagging implementation. They knew that a flight over active logging sites within the unprotected portions of the GBR would create urgency for stakeholders and government decision makers by showing them the consequences of their inaction. Across Puget Sound from Seattle on Bainbridge Island, longtime LightHawk volunteer pilot and current pilot outreach manager Greg Bedinger jumped at the chance to fly the Great Bear Rainforest once more.

"It wasn't until this flight came up that I realized I had been flying air taxi floatplanes over a part of the Great Bear Rainforest for more than 23 years," recalled Bedinger. "To me it had just been the most spectacular mix of islands, channels, inlets, and glaciated peaks I'd ever seen, not knowing it had a name. Taking this flight gave me an opportunity to be back up there and to look at it through the partners' eyes to focus more on the issues. I could also share what I knew about the area and what it looked like 20-30 years ago when we flew around. It was almost like a reunion in some sense. How could I say no?"

In planning the flight, Sierra Club BC tapped photographer Garth Lenz, a Fellow with the International League of Conservation Photographers (iLCP) to focus his lens on logging operations by a company that had not signed on to implement "lighter touch" logging in the region. These operations, though currently legal, highlight the type of logging that occurs every day while government standards for off-limits timber harvesting areas languish. The aerial perspective provided by Bedinger allowed Lenz to bring back images highlighting the true "costs" of the delay while two-thirds of the Great Bear Rainforest remains open to conventional logging.

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

After the flight, Lenz's photography was released to media to put the spotlight back on the Great Bear Rainforest. "We got the attention of the government, companies and other parties that there remains an important conservation step outstanding in the Great Bear Rainforest. We are now very confident that we can follow through with the conservation model, thanks to your support," said Jens Wieting, Forest Campaigner, Sierra Club BC.

"The assistance from LightHawk was critical in documenting the need to speed up the implementation of the Great Bear Rainforest Agreements. It resulted in a series of articles," said Chris Allnutt, Project Director for



The Great Bear Rainforest is home to towering trees, like this giant cedar, which date back as far as 1500 years ago. *Photo: Cristina Mittermeier/iLCP*

Hungry for more?

Check out this [ABC News dispatch](http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video/hunt-rare-spirit-bears-11942952) from the Great Bear Rainforest including footage of the rare white spirit bear.
(<http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video/hunt-rare-spirit-bears-11942952>)

Rainforest Solutions Project, which included a response from the timber company that had not signed on to the GBR agreements, "getting their spokesperson to publicly state for the first time that the company supports the model of ecosystem based management in the region." And remarkably, another article quoted a forestry industry representative calling on the new Provincial Premier to provide the leadership necessary to protect the region. Since Bedinger's donated flight allowed Lenz to capture the current stalemate within the Great Bear Rainforest, there has been a greater understanding of the issues at stake in the public's minds and a renewed sense of urgency to fully protect the Great Bear Rainforest. And that's no coincidence: avoiding a stall, whether at the controls of a plane or when a unique and irreplaceable landscape is at stake, is second nature to a pilot.

About LightHawk

What started in 1979 with one man, a borrowed plane and a vision for making a difference in the western U.S. has grown to over 200 volunteer pilots flying for conservation across the North and Central America. LightHawk leverages the capacity of more than 300 conservation partners each year by providing an unbiased view of the intersection of land, water, wildlife and the human footprint.

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