

Big Win for California Oceans Boosted by Donated Flights



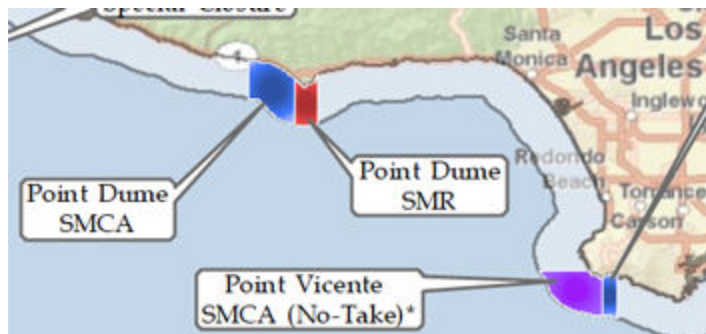
Portions of the ocean off La Jolla north of San Diego are now protected to help fish stocks rebound and marine life flourish. Photo: Meagan Wylie/San Diego Coastkeeper aerial support by LightHawk

Last week, after years of stakeholder meetings, negotiations, heated discussions and scientific study, the members of California's Fish and Game Commission voted to set aside small swaths of the ocean between Point Conception, near Santa Barbara, and the Mexico border as sanctuaries protected from human interference. Once implemented, these protected areas will join an existing network that stretches north to Mendocino. If sea otters could applaud this historic victory for ocean conservation, they would.

LightHawk volunteer pilot and advisory council member, Mike Sutton (a person many suspect of secretly having gills because of his lifelong dedication to marine conservation) is one of five commissioners hand-picked by California's governor to rule on spots along California's coast that will be totally or partially restricted protected, among other things. This protection will allow sea life to recover and thrive, for the benefit of both the ocean and humans. In order to protect these areas, activities such as fishing, recreation and research will be controlled. The decisions Mike and his fellow commissioners made (and continue to make along other regions of California's coastline) may cause grousing around boatyards and bait shops, but their actions promise increased fish stocks and healthier marine life. Just as game preserves mean more wildlife for hunting outside the protected area, there is proof that Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) help boost fish populations that spill over from those safe havens to the ocean at large.

Leveling with the Land

Before the state of California embarked on this process, less than 1% of California's state and federal waters were protected; a poor percentage considering about 10% of California's land is protected in one way or another, and 80% of California's residents live within 31 miles of the shoreline. California holds jurisdiction over waters from the shore to three nautical miles offshore. On December



Protected areas off the coastline of California (Los Angeles portion shown here) float offshore like a string of pearls that will eventually extend from the Oregon border to Mexico. Map: California Department of Fish and Game



Point Dume's coastline is now a State Marine Reserve under the December 15, 2010 ruling. *Photo: Kip Evan Photography with aerial support by LightHawk*



LightHawk's owned Cessna 207 has flown countless survey flight missions to help quantify and map current usage patterns along the coast. This unique aircraft was donated by the family of the late Greg Gund. *Photo: Kevin Steele Photography*



A tanker ship recorded during a survey flight. *Photo: Santa Monica Baykeeper with aerial support by LightHawk*

15th, as commissioners settled in for a final round of public input and deliberation at a hotel in Santa Barbara surrounded by palm trees and red tile roofs, across town a woman who had spent many hours up in the air for the ocean excitedly waited for news of the Commission's decision.

Jo Duffy is one of many LightHawk volunteer pilots who have volunteered their aircraft and time for the Marine Protected Areas effort. Shouting out the window, "clear prop!" before taxiing to takeoff, these pilots used their flying to rise above the controversy surrounding of the process to establish MPAs along California's coastline and bring the marine environment into clear perspective.

A Considerable Contribution

LightHawk volunteer pilots Jo Duffy (Santa Barbara, CA), Ralph Britton (Palo Alto, CA), Michael Baum (Palo Alto, CA), Randy Henry (Northridge, CA), Mike Jesch (Anaheim, CA), David Kunkel (Meeker, CO), John-Michael Lee (Van Nuys, CA), Lew Nash (Ashland, OR), Kevin Roache (San Diego, CA), Bill Rush (Boulder Creek, CA), Chuck Schroll (Tucson, AZ), Mark Shelley (Monterey, CA), Skip Slyfield (Park City, UT), Ed Steinman (Ann Arbor, MI), Mike Sutton (Monterey, CA), Brian Williams (Boone, NC), Brent Witters (Guadalupe, CA), and Will Worthington (Carefree, AZ) have collectively donated over 350 hours of flight time over the past five years to share the unique view of the California coastline from a thousand feet above the whitecaps. These pilots have delivered their pre-flight safety briefings to a diverse collection of passengers over the years: fishermen reluctant to lose their favorite fishing sites, media looking for a new angle and stunning images to tell the story, community members seeing their favorite dive or surf spots with new eyes, and researchers methodically mapping boat traffic to find the best places to situate the Marine Protected Areas for the least impact on commerce and recreation.

It may seem strange to meet at the airport to understand the ocean, but flying above the coast is one of the best ways to see the whole picture of unique marine environments. From above, blue water yields its secrets to show kelp beds that harbor rich marine life, rocky reefs that provide safe haven for juvenile fish, and the special confluences where freshwater mixes with salt and marine life booms. To survey the entire scope of coastal waters from Santa Barbara to the Mexico border by boat instead of aircraft, you would become one sun-burnt salty dog to say the least.

Finding compromise in the decision on where to situate the MPAs has not been easy. While some say the restrictions will harm already diminished commercial and recreational fishing industries, others contend that making



Santa Monica Baykeeper staff (middle) prepare for a survey flight while volunteer pilots Luke Irwin (left) and Chuck Schroll (right) perform a pre-flight safety check. *Photo: Santa Monica Baykeeper*

a sacrifice now is necessary to increase fish stocks for future generations. Sutton contends that 85% of California's waters will still remain open to commercial and recreational activities after the MPAs are established. And like any true compromise, the final decision reflected both sides conceding some of what they wanted.

Several months ago, LightHawk pilots, board, staff and partners met for the annual Fly-In in San Diego to highlight and discuss how the aerial perspective was being used to help implement MPAs sensibly. Tom Ford, a former East Coast fisherman and Executive Director of Santa Monica Baykeeper, now with the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission, spoke of how LightHawk flights helped build support for the MPAs. "Many fishermen flew with us [during our surveys] and because of this the conversation changed. Now they're helping put back the resource they need for their extraction to occur," Ford explained. "Because of LightHawk, we found that common ground from the sky."

About LightHawk

What started in 1979 with one man and a vision has grown to over 185 volunteer pilots flying missions across the U.S., into Canada, through Mexico and down to Panama. Today, LightHawk is the oldest and largest nonprofit, volunteer pilot-based organization flying environmental missions in collaboration with hundreds of partner organizations.

At LightHawk we believe the view from the window of a small airplane provides a powerful and effective platform for research, ground-truthing, environmental awareness, and education.

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