

Showing What's at Stake for Canada's Remote Sacred Headwaters



The Sacred Headwaters, British Columbia is known as the "Serengeti of the North" as it supports one of the largest intact predator-prey systems in North America. Photo: Paul Colangelo with aerial support by LightHawk

There is a special place in the remote northern reaches of British Columbia where the Yellowstone to Yukon region meets the boreal forest. Home to caribou, stone sheep, moose, mountain goats, grizzlies and wolves, this is also the birthplace of three of British Columbia's great salmon-bearing rivers: the Skeena, Nass and Stikine. This vast alpine landscape is known as the Sacred Headwaters, the traditional grounds of the Tahltan Nation. Rich in wildlife and majestic beauty, the Sacred Headwaters, approximately 200 miles south of Watson Lake, Yukon and 150 miles east of Juneau, Alaska, is also rich in energy and minerals.

To bring the aerial perspective to bear in the fight to protect the Sacred Headwaters wouldn't take luck or divine intervention, but the dedication of two generous LightHawk volunteer pilots. One travels the country in his trusty Red Plane with one eye on the instrument panel and the other looking for the next great photograph. The other makes time for LightHawk missions between deployments to the wilds of Antarctica and Alaska.

Sacred to Some, Resource Rich to Others

The remote Sacred Headwaters region escaped the pressure of resource extraction for many years, but in 2004, the British Columbia government granted Shell a tenure for coal bed methane development on a million acres in the region. About that same time Fortune Minerals began exploring the possibility of a mountaintop removal coal mine, and Vancouver mining company Imperial Metals proposed a copper-gold mine, all within the Sacred Headwaters.

Reacting to these plans to develop the Sacred Headwaters, people of the Tahltan Nation said, "NO." They blockaded roads to prevent Fortune Minerals and Imperial Metals from accessing the areas targeted for mining. Fifteen Tahltans were arrested by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in the Fortune Minerals blockade and a 67-year-old Tahltan grandmother was arrested after a two-month blockade of access to the Togadin Plateau where Imperial Metals planned their mine.

At that same time, the Skeena Watershed Conservation





Peripatetic volunteer pilot Andy Young flew photographer Paul Colangelo over the Sacred Headwaters in his Bellanca 8GCBC Scout aircraft. Photo: Paul Colangelo with aerial support by LightHawk



Tahltan Elder, Henry Quock, outside his fishing camp. The Sacred Headwaters has been the territory of the Tahltan Nation for thousands of years. Photo courtesy of Paul Colangelo.



The Spectrum Range in the Sacred Headwaters, B.C. Photo: Paul Colangelo with aerial support by LightHawk

Coalition (SWCC), a diverse group of people living and working in the Skeena river watershed, formed. They believed that short term industrial development plans would not yield long-term benefits in the region if they came at the expense of the social and environmental fabric that holds the watershed and its communities together. With that in mind, SWCC began conducting public outreach and education and mobilizing residents of the Skeena watershed to oppose development of the Sacred Headwaters.

New Focus and Perspectives

Photographer Paul Colangelo learned all of this in 2009 when *British Columbia* magazine sent him to cover one of SWCC's education projects, a 28-day, 610-km swim of the Skeena River by local resident Ali Howard. The strength of the people and the beauty of the area compelled Paul to join the efforts of the Tahltans and SWCC, so he began his [Sacred Headwaters, Sacred Journey](#) photographic documentary project.

While picking up the North American Nature Photography Association (NANPA) Foundation's prestigious Phillip Hyde Grant in Reno, Paul ran into LightHawk volunteer pilot and photographer Chris Boyer and learned about LightHawk. The idea of adding aerial imagery to his collection of images of people, wildlife and spectacular landscapes of the Headwaters area excited Paul, and he was amazed to learn that through LightHawk, pilots might donate their skills and resources to make that possible.

Human population is sparse in northern British Columbia and the Sacred Headwaters are hundreds of miles from the nearest of LightHawk's volunteer pilots. So when Paul contacted LightHawk to request help getting aerial images that would convey the unique qualities of the Sacred Headwaters landscape, Northern Rockies Program Manager Shannon Rochelle could only offer an unequivocal "maybe." LightHawk volunteer pilots often ferry themselves and their aircraft many miles from their home airport to fly donated missions, but the Sacred Headwaters would be quite a "hop" and quite a lot to ask. Paul's request for aerial support was not looking good.

Going Above and Beyond

Then Volunteer Pilot Andy Young stepped in. A peripatetic pilot who is more likely to be found working in Alaska or Antarctica than near his Colorado home, Andy offered to stop by the Sacred Headwaters as he returned to Colorado following a summer of flying for Kantishna Air Taxi in Denali National Park. Andy picked up Paul for a September flight, which allowed him to capture spectacular, multi-hued imagery that conveys the grandeur of the landscape as only the aerial perspective can.

The next thing that Paul and his compatriots needed was imagery demonstrating what the area might look like if the proposed projects were carried out. So in November, Chris Boyer met up with his new photographer friend to donate flights over the coal bed methane fields of



Stone sheep on Todagin Mountain where the planned gold and copper mine would be located. *Photo courtesy of Paul Colangelo.*



Volunteer pilot Chris Boyer who provided flights for Colangelo to capture images of coal bed methane fields and open pit mines: what the Sacred Headwaters could become if energy extraction gets the green light. *Photo: Paul Colangelo with aerial support by LightHawk.*

northeastern Wyoming and Butte, Montana's open pit mine. The week after these flights, Paul returned to the Sacred Headwaters and showed his images of coal bed methane wells and open pit mining to the Tahltan elders. He relayed the stories he had heard from local people in Wyoming. *He says those images and stories made the biggest difference of all the work he has done so far, reenergizing many of those who have been engaged in this effort for years.*

As of this writing, the Sacred Headwaters have received a temporary reprieve. The British Columbia government has placed a moratorium on coal bed methane development in the area until December 2012. The coal and copper-gold mines are still in exploratory stages. The next step in efforts to protect the Headwaters permanently is a media campaign, the centerpiece of which will be a coffee table book with narrative by Tahltan elders and photographs by Paul and other conservation photographers.

Meanwhile Paul is using the images he captured during his LightHawk flights to educate Canadians and Americans about this area. He has taken his photographs on tour and will have a show at Telluride's Mountainfilm Festival in May 2011, where thousands of people will be exposed to the majesty of the Sacred Headwaters.



Photographer Paul Colangelo over northeastern Wyoming capturing early morning light. *Photo: Chris Boyer*

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.

Contact Information:

International Headquarters
LightHawk
304 Main Street, Suite 14
PO Box 653
Lander, WY 82520

Tel.: (307) 332-3242
Fax: (888) 297-0156

To subscribe please email us: info@lighthawk.org