

Flight an Important Tool to Protect Belize's Largest Nature Reserve



The large, unbroken swath of rainforest that is the Bladen Forest Reserve in Belize is home to big carnivores and small herbivores alike. Photo courtesy: John P. Kennedy



LightHawk provided a landscape level perspective on an existing hydroelectric dam. Images from the flight are being used to educate officials on what a dam in the pristine Bladen Reserve could mean. Photo: Bridget Barry/Ya'axche Conservation Trust/LightHawk

Twenty-five years ago the aerial perspective helped change hearts and minds and a remarkable 100,000-acre pristine jungle in Belize was protected. Those donated LightHawk flights allowed key government officials to see this rugged area from the air, a key factor in the decision to create the strictly protected Bladen Forest Reserve. The importance of such a large intact rainforest cannot be understated; jaguars roam the sunlight dappled forest paths, harpy eagles nest here and communities of people and scores of animal species depend on this forest for their well-being. Today this remarkable forest - one of the largest and most diverse wild spaces in Central America – continues to face challenges and threats despite having "protected" status for 25 years.

Since those first flights above the magnificent Bladen rainforest 25 years ago, LightHawk continues to fly groups working to protect it from harmful incursions. One such group is Ya'axche Conservation Trust (YCT). YCT is a Swiss Army knife of a conservation group. They utilize a number of creative tools and approaches to tackle the numerous issues that threaten the Bladen. This partially explains why YCT's partnership with LightHawk works so well: flight is a tool that can support a variety of efforts from land management, to monitoring, to education.

A Dam in Bladen?

YCT's community-based conservation initiatives depend on the community members living adjacent to the Reserve to understand and support YCT's work. This year members from four different communities flew with LightHawk to see and photograph an area where a hydropower dam has been proposed. Flights over the highly controversial Chalillo dam far to the north illustrated firsthand how a dam in protected Bladen forest might impact the river and the water that communities rely on for drinking and as a source for food.

Already the specter of a dam is having an enormous impact on wildlife and the communities. "We have been able to monitor the damage caused by the recent illegal 'feasibility study' for a hydroelectric dam in the pristine Bladen Nature Reserve, and to get aerial photographs of the cleared helicopter landing sites," said Lee McLoughlin



YCT ranger, Apolonio Kus patrols the Bladen Reserve on foot, but LightHawk flights allow rangers like him access to views of inaccessible areas. Flights also supplement their on-the-ground knowledge of the dense forest to help battle poachers and other illegal incursions. *Photo: Ya'axche Conservation Trust*



An illegally cleared area is easily spotted from the air. By contrast, rangers could be 50 yards away on foot without knowing of the illegal clearcuts. *Photo: Alejandro Ical/Ya'axche Conservation Trust/LightHawk*



YCT relies on donated LightHawk flights to help protect the Bladen Reserve. *Photo: LightHawk*

of YCT. Images from these flights are currently being used to inform the leadership in Belize about what it would mean to dam the river and change the ecology of this unique region forever.

LightHawk's Cessna 206 aircraft, flown by volunteer pilots approximately 5-6 months a year throughout Mexico and Central America, provides the perfect tool for monitoring the forest for illegal incursions. "We have been able to monitor disturbances and illegal incursions from the highly damaging actions of xaté (palm leaf) harvesters, illegal loggers and hunters," explains McLoughlin. Areas that would take days to reach or that would be virtually inaccessible from the ground are monitored from the air within just a couple of hours. Rangers who spend most of their time on the ground have a remarkable ability to search over the same landscape from the air. As one ranger noted, the two views are very complimentary and he would not want to rely on only one of them for all his information.

River to Reef from Above

Belize's barrier reef is the second-largest in the world and is renowned for its diversity and beauty, but most people do not realize the impact that freshwater streams have on the reef. Belize is a narrow country, and the major rainforest rivers flow only a few dozen miles before they reach the sea. When the rainforests upstream are destroyed or pesticides are used on nearby plantations, the eroded dirt and chemicals enter the rivers and flow onto the living coral reefs. YCT relies on LightHawk flights to protect the forests in the Golden Stream Corridor by spotting and halting potentially harmful activities and thereby reducing harmful impacts on the reef. Aerial footage was instrumental in creating a documentary called River to Reef which, as McLoughlin explains "helps builds awareness of river users in Toledo of the connectedness of the inland rivers and the coastal reefs." The film is currently being shown on Belizean television, in schools and communities, and is available [online](#).

"The flights provided by LightHawk continue to provide us with a means of keeping the communities, on which our conservation work so heavily depends, well informed and provide support to our mission. Seeing the whole of the Maya Golden Landscape, Ya'axché's area of operation, often provides a powerful perspective on the finite nature of our natural resources," says McLoughlin. As long as the Bladen Reserve faces challenges, LightHawk will continue to support the efforts of YCT and other conservation groups that help protect these finite resources and wild places from those who seek to harm them.

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