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## Pilots flying high for the environment

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You've probably heard about **Doctors Without Borders**, and maybe even **Angel Flight**, professional doctors and pilots who donate their services to help the poor with medical issues. But **Lighthawk** was a new one even for me.

Turns out there's a group of pilots in the country who volunteer their time, planes and gas to run flights over lands at risk of mining, logging or urban sprawl. With headquarters in Wyoming, they take politicians, environmental groups and media folks like me on bird's eye tours.

"I feel passionate about it," said Merry Schroeder, a pilot who lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and has been flying for Lighthawk since 1987. "You can see things from the air you can't see any other way."

Spry at 70, Schroeder was taking local politicians and other folks out of the Palm Springs International Airport this week to see nearby terrain that is proposed as federal wilderness in a bill sponsored by Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., and U.S. Rep. Mary Bono Mack, R-Palm Springs. **[You can find a map and details about the proposed wilderness areas here.](#)**

As for Schroeder, she's flown over the Rio Grande and down to the Mexican Border for the Smithsonian Museum to monitor snow geese. Nearly half of the flights by Lighthawk are over Central America, she said. In places like Belize and Costa Rica, they fly over rain forest and the coast, help monitor endangered sea turtles and other species and look for intrusions into protected parks, said Schroeder's affable husband, John, 71. He calls himself her ground crew.

How did Schroeder get involved? As a flight instructor and commercial pilot, she's had the opportunity to see damage wrought to the ground from up above. She recalled the first time she noticed what she called environmental devastation.

"I looked down and saw a riparian area that was devastated by overgrazing," she said.

Posted by **Jennifer Bowles** at 8:53 AM, February 27

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Merry Schroeder, 70, of Santa Fe, New Mexico, flies over the Coachella Valley after viewing proposed wilderness areas in the surrounding mountains. (The Press-Enterprise/Jennifer Bowles)