



Summer 2009 Newsletter

LightHawk Celebrates 30 Years of Flying for the Environment

The Battle for America's Lands and Waters from 2,000 Feet

Sometimes the view from on high isn't all that pretty. Ask any of the thousands of LightHawk volunteer pilots who have flown over some of the Western hemisphere's most beautiful and threatened land- and seascapes over the past 30 years.

Ask them where's the harm in drilling a nine-inch hole in the ground, and the answer might be the four acres of accompanying settling ponds, parking lots, slag and equipment storage, and the roads cutting across pristine habitat and vital wildlife corridors. Ask them why they fly over clearcutting operations and their answer might have to do with the destruction of old-growth forests and the erosion that destroys soil and stream over tens of thousands of acres. Ask them about point-source pollution in our waters and they may tell you about the toxic and very visible effects it has downstream in our rivers, communities, and coasts.

What they all agree on is that the full picture can only be seen one way: from the air, and that LightHawk enables them to use their skills and planes on behalf of conservation in a way no other organization can or does.

This year LightHawk, the nation's oldest and largest volunteer-based aviation organization in North America, celebrates its 30th birthday.

In three decades, LightHawk has flown thousands of flights on behalf of environmental causes. Its corps of veteran, volunteer pilots working with environmental partner organizations has helped shut down some of America's worst polluters; documented damage done by irresponsible oil and gas drilling; used aerial photography to bring to light logging and road-building practices from Maine to Alaska; helped researchers track the decline of imperiled coral reefs; counted manatee populations by air; traced pollutant flows into rivers, lakes, and seashores; aided crocodile researchers; documented sea-turtle nesting sites; mapped long-term changes to offshore islands; and tracked radio-collared jaguars in Guatemala.

In the process, LightHawk has helped change the course and the face of environmentalism.

A lot of great ideas are born in a flash of inspiration, an "aha!" moment that makes everything clear. Michael Stewart's came in 1974.

Stewartt, then 24, a former miner, bush pilot, and budding environmentalist, joined activists fighting the construction of a coal-fired power plant near the Grand Canyon. As they planned a press conference to highlight the damage the pollution would do, Stewartt asked: "Why not fly folks over the Plateau and nearby lands that would be impacted?"

Using four borrowed planes and three volunteer pilots, the group flew reporters, legislators, and local citizens over the affected area. The plant was never built.

"That experience bore out my gut feeling that environmentalism needed high-caliber flying," Stewartt later said. More importantly, he knew it was often the only way to see the damage caused by polluters, developers, and by mining, logging, and drilling interests.

Stewartt sought support for his vision. In 1979, Wyoming rancher Emily Stevens donated a Cessna-Turbo-210 and LightHawk was born, a one-man, one-plane operation based out of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Stewartt named LightHawk

after a mythical bird whose purpose is to shed light.

LightHawk initially ferried environmentalists, scientists, reporters, and politicians to key meetings and conferences. But being a glorified taxi service wasn't what Stewart had in mind.

In the late '80s, LightHawk had begun to hit its stride as a true "environmental air force." Stewart expanded LightHawk, creating a network of volunteer pilots across the country who donated their time and their planes.

By the '90s, LightHawk had become a truly international success. LightHawk flights helped stop mining development outside Yellowstone National Park; supported the establishment of a 97,000-acre nature reserve in Belize (LightHawk had begun flying in Mexico and Central America); helped crack down on illegal logging in Costa Rica; and performed high-profile surveys of endangered gray whale and harbor porpoise populations in Mexico with LightHawk Advisory Board members John Denver and Jean-Michel Cousteau.

Entering the new century, LightHawk maintained a corps of more than 100 volunteer pilots flying more than 400 missions a year on behalf of a truly impressive roster of issues and environmental partner organizations.

Rudy Engholm, 58, has been the executive director since 2007. Like many LightHawk staff and pilots, he came to the organization after a successful career elsewhere. After graduating from the University of Michigan Law School in 1976, Engholm worked in a Connecticut law firm. Five years in, he decided it was not for him. In 1981, he returned to Ann Arbor, joining a start-up software firm as its vice president and general counsel.

But by the late '80s, he knew he wanted to do something else, something he felt passionate about. He informed his business partners that he was going to "fire himself," move to Maine, and work for an environmental organization.

The trigger for this life-changing decision came when he and his wife returned home after a vacation. The 50-acre woods bordering their property had been clear-cut while they were away. Wood slash was stacked 25-feet high. Also gone was his favorite tree, a wonderful, old oak--his "thinking tree"--reduced to a four-foot stump, surrounded by the chain marks where the developers had tried, and failed, to uproot and remove it.

"I sat there and wept," Engholm says. "I thought, 'Something is wrong with this picture, that the developers would not--could not--value this extraordinary tree that had the misfortune to grow in the middle of this staked-out area.' I decided right then and there that I was going to spend the rest of my life working on a second draft of America and try and correct the typos from the first draft."

During this same period, he earned his pilot's license ("I knew I wanted to fly since I was five.")

In Maine, he combined his passions--flying and the environment--volunteering with The Nature Conservancy, and flying on behalf of several environmental organizations in the area. In the mid-'90s he formed Northern Wings, a flying service based on the LightHawk model. In 2003, he merged Northern Wings with LightHawk and joined its board of directors; four years later, he became LightHawk's executive director.

Based in Lander, Wyoming, LightHawk is actually the combined efforts of an 11-member staff scattered--literally--from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, who manage the flights of more than 165 volunteer pilots around the country and coordinate a fleet of small planes. LightHawk maintains program managers in the regions it flies most in: the Rockies, the Pacific, and the Eastern United States. Its Mesoamerican flights (about half of all LightHawk flights now take place in Mexico and Central America) are run out of its office in Sarasota, Florida.

While LightHawk is a non-profit operation--roughly a third of its budget comes from foundation funding, the rest from individual donations--Engholm is quick to point out that the flights are not "free."

In fact, donated flights are typically worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. However, every flight is donated at no charge to LightHawk's partner organizations--an impressive roster reading like a Who's Who of American and international environmental groups, ranging from the "giants" like The Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund, Ocean Conservancy, and the Sierra Club, to many smaller local and regional organizations.

Bare-bone flight costs come to roughly \$600-\$800 per hour of flying time, roughly the same as a commercial air service. The difference is that LightHawk charts the most effective aerial routes, conducts education, and provides expert assistance to scientists, photographers, policymakers, and others, as part of their service.

"We bring the pilots, planes, the partners, and the issue together," says Engholm.

This is particularly evident in its Mesoamerican flights. Hundreds of staff hours are spent on advance work, securing permits, translating documents, working with foreign governments, agencies, and environmental and citizen groups--in general, handling all the technical considerations needed to make each flight successful.

In the end, it comes down to the pilots and their dedication. LightHawk's pilot corps is an eclectic group, a cross section that includes working and retired airline pilots, physicians, homemakers, retirees, and more. According to Engholm, LightHawk has a particular attraction for successful entrepreneurs who fly. And it's a group that spans social and political spectrums, from wealthy to working class, from liberal to conservative, and everything in between.

"They're united by the passionate belief that they can use this special talent of theirs to make a difference on this Earth," Engholm says.

This October, LightHawk will celebrate its 30th anniversary with a three-day fly-in to Santa Fe, New Mexico, back where it all started.

And after all these years, LightHawk, created in the socially and environmentally aware '70s, remains just as relevant, says Engholm.

"It's a powerful idea that refuses to go away. The world in 2009 is very different than 1979. But today, if anything, the problems involving clean water, wildlife habitat, and climate change are bigger and more intractable," he notes. "And it's not just single spots anymore, it's the whole system. In many places, we have paid a steep price--a price we're not totally aware of yet."

Three decades on, LightHawk remains in what Engholm calls the reality business.

"When you get into the air, you don't see political boundaries. You can see the good, the bad, and the ugly--amazing places with beauty and grandeur worth protecting, and other places where you have to ask how we let it get to this point. Reality sweeps away ideological differences."

Ultimately, says Engholm, "What you see you can understand. What you understand you can love. And what you love you will protect."

For more on LightHawk, the 30th anniversary, its pilots, and its missions, visit www.lighthawk.org.

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