

April 2008, Issue 16

LightHawk's monthly update, WayPoint, was created to share some of the good news we on staff learn about daily. These success stories illustrate the critical role we play in conservation efforts throughout North and Central America through the unique perspective of flight. We hope you enjoy WayPoint and will share with others our success stories from above.

One Flight... Two Successful "Pilots"

It's often said that environmental work is not for those with short attention spans: it's more of a marathon than a sprint. But sometimes we have a chance to engage in efforts that provide immediate gains for ecosystems and the wildlife they support.

On March 13th, LightHawk volunteer pilot Alan Kinback helped several south Florida groups, led by the South Atlantic Regional Office of the Ocean Conservancy, launch a pilot program to protect the lives of countless marine animals from an offshore menace.

Old crab traps, torn from their moorings and floating in the Gulf of Mexico might sound more like trash than a significant environmental problem. However, according to the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, 250,000 derelict crab traps enter the Gulf of Mexico annually. Derelict traps can easily ensnare blue crabs, stone crabs, fish, diamond back terrapin, and even raccoons. In addition, the trap lines pose a threat to marine wildlife like manatees, sea turtles, and dolphins who can become injured and even die as a result of being tangled in the lines.

Blue crabs are harvested year-round using large, heavy wire traps in shallow water. The traps become abandoned when the owner can no longer find the trap because either the float has been lost in a storm or the trap has been blown from the area. When the trap line and float have been lost, crab traps are difficult to see from the water's surface. The protective coating on the traps allows them to remain active in the environment for years.



Ocean Conservancy Biologist Jessica Koelsch and Nicole Adimey of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, pull derelict crab traps on board. If not removed from coastal waters the traps continue drift and to kill wildlife. *Photo: Ocean Conservancy*

Removing derelict traps is an obvious solution to a growing problem, but it is far from simple. It is illegal to remove traps without specific and prior approval from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and finding wayward traps is complicated by weather, tide, wind, visibility, and myriad other factors.

Learning of LightHawk's interest in south Florida and the Gulf, Ocean Conservancy staff requested an initial aerial survey of potential derelict crab trap clean-up locations on the Collier County coast. Our joint goal was to allow a trained observer to locate derelict crab traps, collect GPS locations, identify priority areas for conducting clean-ups, and facilitate the clean-ups by passing on coordinates of derelict traps to colleagues on the ground and in boats. The pilot program was also intended as training for local groups to facilitate broader efforts in the future. The success of the flight was critical to effective training and to maintaining enthusiasm and

momentum among participants in the clean-up effort.

Local crabbers who learned of the clean-up efforts were also able to collect another dozen of



A LightHawk flight allowed accurate identification of trap locations for biologists, federal and state agency personnel, and volunteers who were able to successfully remove 22 derelict crab traps from Gulf Coast waters near Naples Florida. More removal missions are planned. *Photo: Jeff Lovett/USFWS.*

their own traps that were derelict. Thanks to LightHawk, Alan Kinback's successful flight in support of this pilot project has created a growing local movement to remove derelict crab traps and protect thousands of marine wildlife from an avoidable threat

"I can't imagine what it would have been like if we had ventured out 'blind.' But because we conducted the LightHawk aerial survey the week prior, I knew exactly where to send the boats to look for traps. In spite of the horrible weather conditions, we were able to recover 22 derelict crab traps. I was hoping for a dozen!"

- Jessica Koelsch, Program Manager, Ocean Conservancy



LightHawk Volunteer Pilot, Alan Kinback flying his Cessna 172 provided aerial support to The Ocean Conservancy's effort to locate and clean up derelict crab traps in the Gulf of Mexico. *Photo: Alan Kinback*

About LightHawk

Founded in 1979, LightHawk is a nonprofit, volunteer pilot-based organization that flies environmental missions in collaboration with with a large network of pilots and hundreds of partner organizations throughout Central and North America. LightHawk flights provide a powerful and effective platform for research, groundtruthing, environmental awareness, and education. Receive this from a friend? Subscribe by sending an email to info@lighthawk.org.

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