

April 2009, Issue 28

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.

## LightHawk Missions Help Partners Make News



The iconic western landscapes of the Superstition Vista area. LightHawk partner, The Sonoran Institute along with others is working to create a smart growth model for sustainable desert communities. Photo: *The Sonoran Institute*



Looking west from the Superstition Vistas parcel. Superstition Mountains are on the right. Photo: *Courtesy of Superstition Vistas Steering Committee*

For thirty years, LightHawk volunteer pilots have flown the media – from local newspaper reporters to national television broadcasters – to publicize our conservation partners' efforts. Building on that history, LightHawk recently flew journalists from *High Country News* on behalf of The Sonoran Institute in Arizona, and *Newsweek Magazine* at the request of the Montana Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. This is the story of the flights behind the news.

### A Voice for the West

As volunteer pilot Dan Meyer pilots his Cessna 172 heading southeast out of Phoenix, the glittering city quickly gives way to open desert, punctuated by emblematic saguaro and cholla cacti; the Superstition Mountains presiding in the distance. Small communities trickle toward the mountains – a hodgepodge of buildings, pink and white against a classic desert backdrop. Within minutes, the Cessna 172 and its passengers reach Superstition Vistas, a 275-square-mile parcel of State Trust land that could be home to more than a million people by 2060.

When Dan Meyer started flying with LightHawk nine years ago, his commitment to the environment was already well established. Even before the National Park Service in Washington DC tapped him as a river conservationist, his forestry background had turned toward conservation and he helped establish 80 civilian conservation centers around the country for the U.S. Job Corps. He was even selected to lead an Outward Bound Wilderness School in North Carolina, one of only five that existed nationwide at the time. But on this day, as he flew the Sonoran Institute and the High Country News, Dan let the view from his Cessna speak for itself.

As western states joined the union in the late 1800s and early 1900s, they were given millions of acres of land to hold in trust for the economic benefit of the people. Some states sold their lands long ago, but nine western states still hold a collective 46 million acres of trust lands, including nine million acres in Arizona. According to State Land Commissioner Mark Winkleman, "Superstition Vistas is the jewel among Arizona's trust lands. Not only is it situated in the path of metro Phoenix growth, it borders thousands of acres of federal land. Estimates of its value run well into



The 275-square-mile Superstition Vista area could be home to more than a million people by 2060. LightHawk is providing donated flights to showcase this special landscape to media representatives to inform communities about the need for smart growth practices. Photo: The Sonoran Institute



Checkmate: This view of southern Swan Range, about five miles northwest of Seeley Lake, illustrates the checkerboard pattern of logged private lands and forested public lands that is prevalent in the Crown of the Continent. Photo: Chris Boyer



Newsweek correspondent, Lily Huang and The Nature Conservancy of Montana's chief scientist M. Sanjayan post-safety briefing, pre-flight. Photo: Chris Boyer/LightHawk

the billions of dollars." The State Land Board must strategically lease or sell trust lands to maximize profits, primarily for the benefit of public schools.

The Sonoran Institute, a longtime LightHawk partner, is advocating for a collaborative planning effort for Superstition Vistas, envisioning a model for sustainability that can assist other growing communities in the West. They feel this long-term, large-scale approach will encourage sustainable land-use, energy efficiency and water conservation while creating attractive communities that provide a high quality of life for the residents, at the same time maximizing the state's financial gain.

On board the Cessna, passengers collected information and photographs for a feature article about the future of Superstition Vistas for *High Country News*, a bi-weekly news magazine that is dedicated to informing the nation about issues affecting the West. Following the flight, freelance journalist John Dougherty said, "The flight was a crucial tool in my reporting," and photographer Michael McNamara echoed the sentiment saying, "I flew to photograph the area, to give visual context to the article. Without the LightHawk flight, the photos would have been impossible to accomplish."

### **Nationwide Exposure**

Nine hundred miles to the north, volunteer pilot Chris Boyer flew a correspondent from *Newsweek Magazine*, and a scientist from The Nature Conservancy of Montana over the Crown of the Continent ecosystem. Boyer is famous within LightHawk for becoming a volunteer pilot about fifteen minutes after he achieved LightHawk's 1000-hour pilot-in-command requirement mark. He put off unpacking from a recent trip to Chile and attending to his aerial conservation photography business in order to fly for this group.

The Crown of the Continent, which spans 16,000 square miles in northern Montana, southern British Columbia and Alberta, is a largely intact and wild ecosystem and vital wildlife corridor, still home to all of the native plants and animals – such as grizzly bears, lynx, and wolves – documented by Lewis and Clark two hundred years ago. This diverse landscape reaches from the rocky peaks and forests of Glacier National Park to the expansive lowland ranches of the Rocky Mountain Front, where the mountains meet the plains.

Like much of the west, this region is a checkerboard of public and private ownership, and is increasingly threatened by creeping rural development. In 2008, The Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land partnered to purchase 310,000 acres from the Plum Creek Timber Company in an effort to prevent unchecked subdivision of private lands, protect wildlife habitat, maintain public recreational access to the area, and encourage sustainable logging on portions of the land to support the local timber industry.

The Conservancy hopes that the resultant *Newsweek* article will increase public understanding of this complex

**Look for the articles that came after the flights:**

High Country News: [www.hcn.org](http://www.hcn.org)  
Newsweek Magazine: [www.newsweek.com](http://www.newsweek.com)

will increase public understanding of this complex collaborative effort – the long-term success of which requires the continued support of local communities and residents. Bebe Crouse, Director of Communications for The Nature Conservancy of Montana said, "We wanted to show the reporter the diversity of the geography by giving her an aerial overview. It wouldn't have been the same simply showing this country on a map."



***Celebrate 30 Years***  
**On the Wings of LightHawk**

Come join us where it all started 30 years ago and meet a shuttle astronaut, an adventurer who traveled the entire length of the Colorado River by boat and local experts who will illuminate what's at stake in this part of the West and how LightHawk missions make a difference. You'll also hear stories about the early days of LightHawk and a plane named, "Emily," reconnect with fellow flyers and enjoy the beauty of Santa Fe, New Mexico a city celebrating its 400th anniversary.

**October 9-11, 2009. Santa Fe, New Mexico**

~Call Bev at 207-699-4145 or email [bgabe@lighthawk.org](mailto:bgabe@lighthawk.org) to reserve your spot today.~

**About LightHawk**

What started in 1979 with one man and a vision has grown to almost 150 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, groundtruthing, 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  
Email: [info@lighthawk.org](mailto:info@lighthawk.org)

Copyright 1998-2009 LightHawk  
All Rights Reserved