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LightHawk's monthly update, WayPoint, was created to highlight the impact of our work. Each edition covers one specific flight, or series of flights, and illustrates how LightHawk advances 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.

Tourist Developments Changing the Face of Wild Baja



Cabo Pulmo National Park along Baja's East Cape. A mega-development project adjacent to the park threatens this marine protected area. *photo: Ralph Lee Hopkins/LightHawk*



Construction that has already begun on nearby Cabo Riviera shows heavy equipment and dredges working in the estuary at the mouth of the San Dionisio wash, the town of La Ribera's freshwater source. This is one of the windiest sections of the Baja coast and erosion is already taking its toll. *photo: Ralph Lee Hopkins/LightHawk*

For the past 16 years Ralph Lee Hopkins has led expeditions from the Arctic to the Antarctic and points in between as founder and director of Lindblad Photo Expeditions, a tour provider for National Geographic that promises to "turn vacationers into informed and engaged explorers". Concerned with the rapid development he saw along the coast of Baja California, this past January Ralph, an iLCP (International League of Conservation Photographers) Associate, partnered with LightHawk to gain the aerial perspective in his effort to document and bring attention to the consequences of this construction. This WayPoint shares some of the observations he made from the seat of LightHawk's Cessna 206.

January 5, 2010

What impresses me most from the air is how vast and wild Baja California still is. My LightHawk volunteer pilot Chuck Heywood and I are here to fly and photograph the coast from Loreto to La Paz and onward to Cabo San Lucas. With the plane gassed up and ready to go, Chuck fits me in the harness with my camera mounted on a gyrostabilizer for extra stability. It's wheels up two hours before sundown. Perfect timing.

Our first target is the development at Loreto Bay. Touted as "green" and "sustainable," the high-density construction looks like a slice of Disneyland from the air. At first glance, the colorful buildings and golf course look inviting. But the impact of development of this scale is huge: construction in a wetland ecosystem, lack of adequate infrastructure (limited freshwater resources and inadequate sewage treatment facilities), and the influx of workers from the poorest parts of mainland Mexico. Offshore is Loreto Bay National Park [which lies within the UNESCO Sea of Cortez Islands World Heritage Site], home to a third of the whale species on earth. The Loreto Bay project is now bankrupt. The legacy of boom and bust continues. [Update: As of February, plans for a new developer to purchase the project are moving ahead.]



Evidence of heavy machinery on the ground at the Cabo Riviera development site. photo: Ralph Lee Hopkins/LightHawk



Southernmost Baja California Sur.



Construction of the Cabo Riviera development continues while the public beach at La Ribera, where local fishermen launch their panga boats, is disappearing. photo: Ralph Lee Hopkins/LightHawk

As the sun nears the horizon, La Paz comes into view. Our approach takes us directly over the El Mogote peninsula where another development is occurring. Once public land, El Mogote is another example of a project that should have never received permits. The peninsula is a barrier beach, dune, and wetland ecosystem that protects the inner La Paz harbor from storm surges and close to shore is a known whale shark congregation area. What should have been preserved for future generations to enjoy is now being carved up for short-term profit. While the condos are reportedly sinking into the sand, their foundations cracking, lawsuits are pending to stop the continued destruction.

On the ground in La Paz, I'm exhausted. Baja California from the air is breathtaking. If this peninsula were part of the US, much of it would look like southern California today. South of the border everything changes. A lack of freshwater and infrastructure has protected Baja from the fate of other desirable coastlines, but things are changing fast: developers have Baja in their cross hairs. "Baja is for the taking," a corporate pilot tells me, before firing up his turboprop at the La Paz Airport.

January 6, 2010

This morning we take off and head south for the Cape region. The mission is to photograph the rampant development along the tourist corridor from Cabo San Lucas to San Jose del Cabo, then continue on to the East Cape where Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park is located and the next phase of mega-development has already begun.

Following the coastline from Cabo San Lucas to San Jose del Cabo, we pass hotel after hotel and more than a dozen golf courses strung out like carpets in the sand. One patch of coastline catches my eye as it has been scraped clean of all vegetation for nearly a mile. The project looks dormant, maybe waiting for better economic times. No doubt the summer rains and fall hurricanes will cause severe erosion.

It's a huge relief as we leave Los Cabos behind and follow the coast north to Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park, one of the jewels of the Baja California. We fly above the coast road that is slated to be paved and will no doubt open up this more remote area to development. Ahead of us now is the small town of Cabo Pulmo. Chuck circles LightHawk's 206 a couple of times so we can photograph the only true coral reef in the Sea of Cortez.

Surrounded by as-of-yet undeveloped desert and a stunning mountain range, the pristine beaches of Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park give way to a shallow bay that is home to one of only three hard coral reefs that exist in North America. Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park was established in 1995 after commercial and recreational over fishing caused an alarming decline in marine life. Today, it is an important marine protected area that provides safe haven



Sunset on Espiritu Santo Island - a conservation success story for Baja California. At one time it was slated for development, but thanks to the efforts of local and international conservation groups, it is now a protected national park. *photo: Ralph Lee Hopkins/LightHawk*

and a regenerative area for hundreds of species including five of the seven species of sea turtles that arrive there to nest on its beaches, or breed and forage in its seas. In the 15 years since Cabo Pulmo was protected, the fish community has recovered and is now considered among the most healthy in the Sea of Cortez making a case for the importance of marine protected areas

Not far from Cabo Pulmo is the site of Cabo Cortes, the largest of all the proposed developments in the Cape region. It's hard to imagine the scale of what is planned here along this pristine beach so close to Cabo Pulmo National Park. The development includes a marina dug into the coast, golf courses, homes, hotels and condos, a new airport for private jets, plus a commercial center and a small city to house workers. Future projections include upward of 20,000 people spread across the desert and sandy coast. It's a depressing thought for those who come to Baja for its wild coast and marine life.

Large-scale onshore development of the Cabo Cortes project now threatens the rich marine habitat of Cabo Pulmo National Park. The main objective of these LightHawk missions was to photograph and call immediate attention to the onshore threat in hopes of halting or delaying construction until a review and public hearing about potential impacts can be evaluated. Ralph hoped his photographs would also bring attention to major developments along Baja's wild coast.

We touch down in La Paz just before dark. On approach, we detour to photograph Espiritu Santo Island, a conservation success story. Once threatened by development, local and international conservation groups stepped in to protect the island as a national park. Painted golden in the warm rays of the setting sun, Espiritu Island restores a glimmer of hope [for Wild Baja] among all the current and proposed developments along the Baja peninsula.

Construction activities for the Cabo Cortes development onshore from Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park were originally set to begin in January, but as of the time of this writing, the construction machines had not yet rumbled to life.

About LightHawk

What started in 1979 with one man and a vision has grown to over 170 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.

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