

ECOFLIGHT NEWS

education and advocacy for the environment

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Broken Promises/Broken Landscapes: EcoFlight's First Flight Across America a Huge Success

As the sun came over the horizon on Saturday morning, 19th September, we assembled at the Aspen Airport – the EcoFlight staff, Bruce Gordon and Jane Hatem, 2 volunteer pilots for EcoFlight, Murray Cunningham and Gary Kraft, six incredible high school students and our accomplished photographer and reporter, Peter McBride and a videographer, Zachary Fink.

Our journey would take us from New Mexico north through Colorado, to Wyoming and Montana. Our objective: to view the land in each state from the pristine wilderness areas to the proposed oil and gas development sites in our beautiful and unprotected wild land areas to the intensively developed and currently operating energy fields. Our hope: to enlighten the students' and thereby the public's knowledge of appropriate oil and gas development and to learn about western wild land areas that are threatened by this development.



Raton Basin and Spanish Peaks. © Bruce Gordon /EcoFlight 2004

Students were chosen from each state we were flying over, from Jemez Pueblo in New Mexico to Choteau in Montana. The purpose of this series of flights was to survey the broken promises of environmental protection of the Bush administration that has served to create



Flight Across America students from left: Justin Johnson, CO; Monica DeGraffenreid, WY; Cameron Tafoya, NM; Holly Baker, MT; Natalie Johnson, CO and Alex McDonough, NM. © Jane Hatem/EcoFlight 2004.

broken landscapes up the length and breadth of the Rocky Mountains. We amassed information and had speakers and guides join us from the conservation partners representing the areas we were to fly over, many of whom are members of the Rocky Mountain Energy Campaign (RMEC). We then flew the students over the threatened and developed lands. The aerial perspective brought lucidity to the information they had just gleaned from the conservation partners. After each flight we encouraged and facilitated discussion among the students. These students are our future, they are our future leaders and as such they have a tremendous stake in how our country's remaining wild lands are preserved and utilized.

The students initially took to the air to fly over the Valle Vidal, the Vermejo Ranch and the Raton Basin guided by the expert commentary of Bill Brown. The sight, although common to all of the proposed flyover areas – that of pristine landscapes and nearby broken landscapes, fragmented and scarred by oil and gas rigs - was new to the students and their writings portrayed their horror at what has been done to the landscapes:

Alex McDonough, 18, from Santa Fe, New Mexico: "My first impression upon seeing the coalbed methane drilling and mining was that the

effect it had on the landscape was not unlike that of bark beetles or termites. The wavy roads and patches where the actual mining take place look like the small grooves that you find under the bark of dead trees.”

Holly Baker, 18, from Choteau, Montana: “Flying over the Valle Vidal was like flying over Mars. There were oil rigs bunched together – like spider webs. The destruction and abuse of that place is unnerving. “

We progressed north, via the HD Mountains in Colorado to the Roan Plateau. The Plateau is one of the four most bio-diverse areas in Colorado and the only one of the four that is still lacking some sort of protection. The flights also showed the drilling occurring on the private ranch lands of grassy mesa to the south of the Rifle airport.



Participants getting briefed by Tweeti Blancett and Brad Bartlett in New Mexico. © Jane Hatem 2004

Inclement weather halted our northward progress on the third day of the trip. However, later in the week, we took to the air again to complete the Wyoming portion of the trip, accompanied by McBride and Monica DeGraffenreid, – our student from Wyoming, and flew over the Red Desert and then on to the very developed oil and gas fields of the Jonah Fields and Pinedale Anticline and to meet with the press in Pinedale, Wyoming.

The project has already garnered regional press and we are looking forward to articles in High Country News and National Geographic Kids. With the success of this pilot project, EcoFlight is developing plans now for 2005, when we will apply this model to other areas of the West where America’s public lands face industrial development. We will continue to encourage young adults to advocate for the protection of their wild natural heritage. Accompanied by the press, their voices will be heard.



John Denver flying with Bruce Gordon. ©EcoFlight; Timeless.

Letter from The President

On a recent fall weekend, people gathered in Aspen, Colorado to celebrate the life of John Denver. For me, it was a time of reflection as I thought about this summer’s busy flying schedule and past conservation flying with my good friend John. This summer, we flew almost every day (182 hours) carrying important decision makers and media (280 pax) and flying with over 30 other organizations who are working hard to bring back an environmental ethic that should be beyond the touch of politics.

John’s love for the wild lands of the west prompted him to use his fame to be a voice for the environment. He worked diligently to understand the issues and advocate for positive change. In the late 80’s I invited John to bring his passion and skill to Conservation Flying. John used his Lear Jet to provide politicians an aerial educational tour over the old growth forests of the Pacific Northwest, with another good friend, Jay Hair of the National Wildlife Federation and me on board to provide information.

The flying we did together created a close bond and a mutual commitment to our endangered national heritage. His famous song “Rocky Mountain High” was conceived in this spirit and it is in this spirit that EcoFlight continues to fight for a healthy environment, a sustainable future and the remaining wildlands of the West. Today more than ever we must learn about the issues and make our voices heard. It is in this spirit that EcoFlight soars and it is in this spirit that all our work with dedicated conservation organizations will prevail.

Best,
Bruce Gordon

**More Flight Across America Students
Speak Out**

“I have found myself more motivated than ever to take a stand against the increasingly active and persistent companies in my home of Pinedale. Hopefully the other students are going to take away similar feelings from this experience and be able to educate more members of their communities, which I believe is the first step towards preserving these areas.”

Monica DeGraffenreid, 17, Pinedale, Wyoming

“To see what damage has been done,
It is devastating to see this
Cause if you look on the other side of the
airplane
You see that the land has been untouched,
It is beautiful,
It is exhilarating,
Look on the other side,
You see the oilrigs
And they are stopping
The Animals from migrating”

Cameron Tafoya, 16 from Jemez Pueblo, New Mexico

“I am very motivated now to do what I can to build awareness about what is happening, with oil and gas in the American West.”

Holly Baker, 18, Choteau, Montana

“Throughout this trip I learned many more factual things that will help me explain our problem better to people, and I gained more perspectives...it’s also great to know that there are quite a few people working together to help stop this process. I will participate in my community to stop this.”

Natalie Johnson, 18, Glenwood Springs, Colorado

**Starting at Home: A Human Rights
and Business Field Trip Flies with
EcoFlight**

On Sunday evening October 03, a group of dedicated professionals met at the Oxford Hotel in Denver to tour oil, gas, and mining communities in 4 states and the Navajo Nation. Representatives from the Fund for Peace, Public Health Institute, World Monitors, Sierra Club, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Western Colorado Congress, Amnesty International, Menas Associates, Industry and Equity, and industry spent 7 days meeting with landowners and citizens affected (in ways both good and ill) by oil and gas development, public health and the environmental scientists, and local organizations dedicated to finding constructive, feasible local solutions.

EcoFlight provided morning flyovers which demonstrated not only the extent of development in the Four Corners Region – power plants new and proposed, coal mines, an ever growing number of drill pads with roads in every direction—but also the magnificent terrain of Navajo country, the meandering rivers, the homes and farmlands of a diverse and independent Navajo people. Seeing first hand the cumulative effects of development - expected to accelerate in the near future - coupled with case studies by the Navajo grassroots organization, Dine’ CARE (Citizens Against Ruining our Environment), was transformative for many. One participant, a former VP with a large multinational oil company captured the sentiments of many: “...Being exposed to the starkness of development impacts (in a way that is not that intrusive to the impacted communities), allows/encourages citizens the opportunity to move beyond complacency. Humans do have epiphany moments...It is like a tipping point – after you see the impacts, the truth, how can you be complacent any longer?”

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