

Protecting the Environment From 1,000 Feet Up

Jan Collins

SouthWings uses volunteer pilots and small planes to affect public policy regarding endangered ecosystems throughout the Southeast.

The sky is deep blue and cloudless, the winds are light, and we are soaring with SouthWings 1,000 feet above the Broad River in Columbia, South Carolina, heading northwest. A nonprofit conservation organization based in Asheville, North Carolina, SouthWings (www.southwings.org) uses small planes and volunteer pilots to give passengers a bird's-eye view of imperiled ecosystems throughout the Southeast.

Soon we are flying over Laurens and Newberry counties, heading toward South Carolina's Sumter National Forest. Suddenly a carpet of green – a massive pine plantation – comes into view, with a rectangular swath of about 20 acres hacked out in clear-cut fashion. Silt and debris from the clear-cutting operation are clogging a sparkling, serpentine stream that flows through the area.

There are laws against that.

In the Catbird Seat

"We sit in the catbird seat, literally and figuratively," says Hume Davenport, our 45-year-old pilot. He founded SouthWings in 1996 after flying for a similar outfit out west called LightHawk. A few years ago, Daven-

Jan Collins is editor of the *Business & Economic Review*. She is also a freelance writer and syndicated columnist.

port took an old high school buddy flying over some ruined Tennessee forests. Soon after, the friend, who happened to be a Tennessee legislator, introduced important legislation to protect the trees.

"A lot of times you don't have to say a word," says Davenport, who is piloting SouthWings' single-engine, red-and-white Cessna 180 that is carrying me and a second passenger,

Jennifer Rennicks. She is project coordinator for the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium managed by Upstate Forever, a Greenville, South Carolina-based conservation organization.

Sometimes, says Davenport, passengers – even hardbitten journalists – weep when they see the environmental devastation from the air.

The passengers are usually



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community leaders, politicians, journalists, scientists, and occasional celebrities (such as Kevin Richardson of the Backstreet Boys) -- people who can affect public policy and public opinion. “Our motto,” says Davenport, “is ‘Let’s fly people who can make a difference.’”

Foundations and donors underwrite the cost of the flights. SouthWings uses no taxpayer dollars.

An environmental air force of sorts, during the past ten years SouthWings has flown representatives of more than 450 organizations over imperiled areas in ten southeastern states. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Wildlife Federation, the Dogwood Alliance, the North Carolina Smart-Growth Alliance, the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League, and South Carolina Forest Watch are but a few of the scores of governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations whose representatives have taken flight.

“Media education flights” have also been taken by dozens of representatives of local and national media, including CBS’s “60 Minutes,” Agence France-Presse, CNN, Fox News, ABC News, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Harper’s*, and *Audubon* and *Sierra* magazines.

Journalists say the view from above gives them invaluable photos and perspectives about environmental degradation. “We could not write authoritatively about this without this flight,” said an Associated Press reporter who took a SouthWings flight two years ago to see mountaintop removal coal mining in West Virginia. (In order to extract the coal, companies are allowed to remove the top portion of a mountain – and these are mine sites of thousands of acres.)

Then there was the reporter for the

Chattanooga Times, who wrote in March 2004:

Last fall, a private pilot was cruising above the Cumberland Plateau [on a SouthWings flight] when he saw something that disturbed him. “It is appalling what is...[happening] on the plateau right now,” he said, recalling the sight of swaths of land denuded in one of the area’s clear-cutting operations. The pilot isn’t the first observer upset by logging in what environmentalists claim is one of the most diverse ecosystems in North America. He is, however, the governor of Tennessee. “I’ve already asked our state forestry people to talk to me,” Governor Phil Bredesen said. “There have been examples of logging right up to the borders of state parks.”

A Generation Behind

The Southeast is a “generation behind in its environmental work” and receives the least amount of funding for the environment of all areas in the United States, says Taylor Barnhill, the executive director of SouthWings. A former architect and planner, Barnhill says that “sprawl and uncontrolled development” is the “most pressing” environmental issue across the Southeast, particularly in the Carolinas and Georgia.

Water quality and many other things “are now being impacted by uncontrolled development,” according to Barnhill. Such development is helped along by the current Bush administration, he asserts. “This is an industry-friendly administration that has weakened most of the environmental laws and the labor laws. And industry knows that enforcement through the judicial and/or regulatory

system is not going to happen, and if it does, the penalties are negligible.”

Barnhill points to huge new developments on St. Simons Island, Georgia, where some developers are “draining wetlands illegally and building new lakes and ponds immediately. They’re stockpiling mounds and mounds of dirt, allowing incredible erosion all across the landscape because they’re leaving them exposed, and then the rain comes along and washes it back into the Sound and the river.”

St. Simons, Barnhill adds, at one time had rare maritime forests with huge live oaks and other large, mature trees. Many of these have been clear-cut to provide space to build new homes.

Coastal areas of South Carolina are similarly threatened, as are the Upstate regions of South Carolina and the mountainous areas of North Carolina. “A lot of second homes are being built in these areas,” Barnhill says, “and what previously were unbroken tracts of forestland that could accommodate a certain ecology – certain wildlife, certain birds – are now being fragmented, eliminating healthy habitat.”

Urban areas like Charlotte are also under the gun. Barnhill flew above the suburbs of Charlotte recently to see how sprawl is impacting the private forestlands in the area that has been privately managed for generations for timber production. He was



SouthWings pilots Susan Lapis and Hume Davenport

Photo courtesy of SouthWings

downhearted at what he saw, because “now we’re losing productive forests because of big subdivisions.”

Environmental organizations such as SouthWings can’t always stop the sprawl, but their flights can have an important impact. Aerial photos taken a few years ago on a flight with Hume Davenport, for example, showed what was happening to the municipal watershed of Mars Hill, North Carolina, when its trees were suddenly logged. (The definition for “municipal watershed” is a valley of forested land that is protected and undeveloped. Its water is drained into a catchment facility for use by nearby cities and towns. The broader definition of a watershed, however, is “all the land that drains to a specific body of water.”)

“It’s hard to see what’s happening to municipal watersheds except from the air,” explains Barnhill, but “they [small towns] were desperate for cash, and timber sales can bring a lot of money.” Davenport’s photos had such an effect, says Barnhill, that nearby towns and cities -- not wanting to degrade their water supplies -- decided not to put their watersheds at risk.

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Partners

SouthWings collaborates with hundreds of conservation and environmental groups in an effort to provide undeniable visual evidence of environmental degradation.

The Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition (SAFC), based in Asheville, is one of those longtime partners. SAFC is dedicated to protecting southern forests and challenging “misguided forest management practices, policies, and projects.” It also aims to secure more forest wilderness for Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, and to “defend the ecological integrity of 553,000 acres of

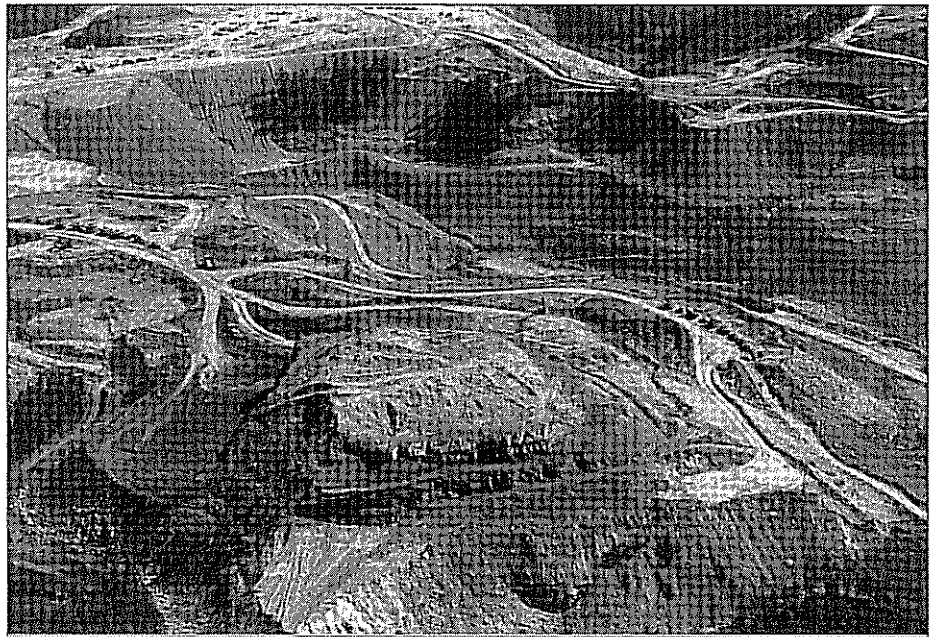


Photo by Christina Wulf, Courtesy of SouthWings

Mountain top removal in West Virginia, but typical of Kentucky, southwest Virginia, and northeast Tennessee, as well.

the last remaining wild forests in the Southern Appalachians through roadless area protection.”

SAFC has used SouthWings over the years to snap numerous aerial photos, which the organization later uses in its research and presentations on the Southern Appalachians. “The pictures are powerful,” says Mark Shelley, SAFC’s executive

was able to buy the development rights from one of the last working dairies in Macon County under a federal farm land protection grant. Aerial photographs are especially helpful when applying for grants and funding, Martin says.

Generous Pilots

The heart and soul of SouthWings are the volunteer pilots. The organization currently has ten; the long-term goal is 110 – or one for every river basin in the Southeast. (Assigning the areas according to river basins is a manageable strategy because development affects rivers, and rivers are a way to break down the region into working chunks, environmentalists say.)

Robert L. Kuehlthau, who lives in Huntsville, Alabama, is one of those volunteer pilots. Retired from the computer graphics business, he recently performed an aerial damage assessment of the marshlands and islands protecting New Orleans both before and after Hurricane Katrina.

“It’s difficult to get a perspective of the scale of environmental problems such as monoculture forestry [Editor’s note: in this kind of forestry, trees are grown in single-species stands that are easy to harvest, meaning more profit for the owners.

director. “When you want somebody to ‘get’ it, you take them up in the air.” He adds: “Whatever the topic, a from-the-air perspective is just incredible.”

The Franklin, North Carolina-based Land Trust for the Little Tennessee is another partner of SouthWings. Aerial views, says Associate Director Brent Martin, “can be a pretty powerful thing. You never realize what all is going on until you get up there [in the air].” His organization’s mission is to protect the rural lands, forests, and water of the upper Little Tennessee Valley.

As a result of some recent aerial photographs, Martin’s organization

These stands are generally clear-cut, eliminating the habitat for animals, water pollution, the effects of strip mining, and the recession of coastal barrier islands without observing large areas from aircraft," says Kuehlthau. Organizations like SouthWings and LightHawk, he says, "provide an affordable vehicle by which environmental advocates can confirm and document environmental problems which may not be significant in individual instances but which may have disastrous consequences collectively.

"I believe the destruction of the Gulf Coast marshlands and barrier islands is a clear example. Traveling in a boat, one could never appreciate the scale of the problem because you could only see a small area at a time. But from an airplane on a clear day, one could easily see that 50 miles of marshland can no longer offer protection."

Another active volunteer pilot for SouthWings is Susan Lapis of Bristol, Virginia. Lapis has flown her plane (a four-seater Cessna 182) for the organization since 1998. It is, she says,

"one of the most wonderful things I have ever done."

"The thing people say after a flight, *all the time*," says Lapis, is that "there is absolutely no other way to see this – 'this' being whatever: the clear-cutting of the national forests, urban sprawl, the horrendous mountaintop

"A healthy environment is better for business, which shouldn't be driven by short-term returns, anyway."

removal mining, the polluting hog farm, the paper mills illegally pumping waste into the rivers."

The volunteer pilots for SouthWings not only offer their own planes, time, and skills. They also fill up their aircrafts' gasoline tanks for the flights. The value of a flight approximates \$200 an hour, donated by the pilots as an in-kind contribution.

Chip Mills

Back in South Carolina in SouthWings' Cessna 180 (which is outfitted with GPS navigation equipment to locate and document specific conditions on the ground), we spot a chip mill bordering a pine plantation on private land near the Sumter National Forest. "Today, what doesn't go to the sawmill goes to the chipper," Davenport explains.

During the last few decades, thousands of acres of native hardwood forest in southeastern states have been clear-cut and replaced with pine plantations. (Pine trees are full-grown in 15 to 20 years, compared to the 50 years it takes for most hardwoods to come to full maturity.) But when logging and paper companies cut down the native hardwood forests, the wildlife can't adapt quickly enough, and so they run off or die.

Then, says Taylor Barnhill, the companies often spray herbicides "so it kills all existing plant life and also might burn off the tops of the trees and the brush that resulted from the logging. This creates mas-



A clear-cut area near Greenwood, South Carolina

Who Are the “Riverkeepers”?

“Riverkeeper” is a registered term of riverkeeper.org, an organization whose mission is to “safeguard the ecological integrity of the Hudson River, its tributaries, and the watershed of New York City (protecting the city’s drinking water supply) by tracking down and stopping polluters.” Since 1983, according to the group’s Web site, Riverkeeper has investigated and brought to justice more than 300 environmental lawbreakers. “Riverkeeper believes in the rights of every citizen to enjoy and defend our nation’s water resources,” the site says.

Although the Hudson River group coined the term, it is now used by other cities and states for the keepers of their own rivers. And the word “riverkeeper” has evolved into a more general definition: “An environmental ‘neighborhood watch’ program, a citizens’ patrol to protect the nation’s waters.”

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sive fires and air pollution and scorched earth.”

It gets worse. The companies then come back and plant large areas with nonnative pine trees. “The area then supports no wildlife or other plants,” explains Barnhill. “The entire ecology is suddenly a monoculture. It’s sterile, and the soil is depleted. [Pine] is a crop put there to grow fast and then to cut into chips, which are made into paper or exported.”

This is an increasing problem in the Southeast, experts say, where most states have very few regulations about timbering on private land. The result? When hundreds of contiguous acres are clear-cut, the soil becomes bare, and when it rains, tons of soil are washed into local rivers and streams.

When SouthWings pilots and passengers see obvious violations of federal or state law, they document the illegalities and report them, usu-

ally to appropriate conservation organizations or the local “riverkeeper,” who is charged with watching over that particular area’s rivers. (See sidebar at left.) The majority of laws needed to control illegal clear-cutting and other actions “are already there,” says Barnhill. “They’re just not being enforced.”

Better for Business

Why should the business community be supportive of groups like SouthWings? Because a healthy environment is better for business, which shouldn’t be driven by short-term returns, anyway. “Clean air and clean water and healthy people are good for business,” says Barnhill. “And it’s good for government, too. It costs business less and it costs government less if people are healthy and the air is clean.”

He adds: “The concept of sustainable development is about protecting the resource to assure its availability for future generations, with less wasted product and a healthier population. And that’s a direct business dynamic.”

Sustainable development and sustainable economic development, it seems, work for everyone. □