

ECOFLIGHT NEWS

education and advocacy for the environment

Spring 2003



Jack Morrow Hills country ©Sallie DeanShatz.com/
EcoFlight 2003.

OUR MISSION

EcoFlight advocates for the protection of remaining wilderness and wildlife habitat through the use of small aircraft, and provides educational programs designed to encourage an environmental stewardship ethic among citizens of all ages.

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America's Red Desert to be traded for Oil and Gas

As EcoFlight's program flights involving oil and gas drilling in the Rockies accelerates, we have found ourselves on many occasions traveling up to the Green River Valley of Wyoming. We have been documenting the many gas wells that have been sprouting up in and around the Pinedale area and joining forces with those groups monitoring this process. This and many other parts of the West are now targeted for aggressive resource extraction. Little known and critically vital areas such as the Jack Morrow Hills east of Rock Springs, Wyoming are areas worth protecting.

Wyoming's Upper Green River Valley is a spectacular landscape of vast sagebrush plains surrounded by towering snowcapped peaks. It is Greater Yellowstone's crucial link, connecting the stunning mountain ranges that spill out of Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks with one of the most unique and spectacular landscapes in North America – the Red Desert.

The Jack Morrow Hills area is the 620,000-acre heart of Wyoming's Red Desert and is home to some 350 wildlife species, including mountain lions, coyotes, golden eagles, wild horses, the largest desert elk in America, and 50,000 pronghorn antelope (the largest migratory game herd in the lower 48 states). The increasingly rare sage grouse also continues to flourish in this huge mountain valley.

Recently, the Bush administration announced that it will allow several hundred new oil and

gas wells to be drilled in sensitive wildlife habitats of the Jack Morrow Hills area. The administration's plan would build miles of new roads and utility lines, and bring in drilling rigs and support structures, destroying forever the wild character of this remarkable American desert. These are ancestral lands of the Shoshone and the planned development would destroy at least one significant site sacred to them.

In a sad twist of irony that serves to illustrate the lack of long term thinking by the current administration, all oil and gas expected to be recoverable from Jack Morrow Hills would provide United States consumers with only nine weeks of natural gas and 39 minutes of oil. This fact alone should be proof enough that loss of such a place is not worth the limited value of the expected resources.

In response to the administration's plan, a coalition of national and state-wide conservation groups, hunting groups, businesses, and ranchers have developed the Citizens' Wildlife and Wildlands Alternative. This alternative would allow many existing uses such as responsible hunting and grazing to continue, while increasing protections for potential wilderness areas, Native American sacred areas, and pioneer trails. It would also protect the long-term survival of wildlife by prohibiting further oil and gas development and large-scale mining, and trading or buying out of mineral leases.

The program flights EcoFlight provides show clearly from the air that the Jack Morrow Hills is roadless wilderness, with fragile desert stretching out for miles. From this vantage point it is also apparent that current wells in the valley can form bottlenecks in places like the Green River at Trappers Point. EcoFlight strongly supports the Citizens Wildlife and Wildlands Alternative and has recently completed several flight missions to help expose the travesty of the administration's plan for this magnificent and threatened ecosystem. More such flights are planned for the summer.



Letter from the President

It's hard to believe that EcoFlight has been in operation now for just over one year. I am extremely proud to report that the organization is slowly establishing itself as a leader in bringing educational and advocacy flight to many of the environmental challenges faced by our region and its communities. I continue to thank and admire the many generous supporters who recognize the value and power of flight-based education and action. And I continue to marvel and be inspired by the dedicated resolve of the conservation community in the face of unprecedented threats to our natural world.

In this first year of operations, EcoFlight initiated over 90% of our flights, working directly with local citizen activists and educators, as well as highly respected regional and national organizations, to provide aerial missions where they are needed most. We have successfully flown political leaders, activists, educators and perhaps most importantly for their ability to reach others, many members of the press. Our photo-documentation of current and threatened impacts on America's private lands have appeared in numerous articles. And our concept of having a dedicated, experienced pilot and the best type of aircraft available has proven to be the key to rapid response that makes the difference.

Having flown these Rocky Mountains for almost 2 decades I find myself remarking that "haven't we been here before? Wasn't the Rocky Mountain Front in Montana put off limits to Drilling? Weren't the roadless areas in the White River National Forest to stay roadless? Didn't we have countless citizens proposals for Wilderness patiently waiting for Wilderness designation? Déjà vu all over again. Given the current administration's resource and public lands agenda we all need to be more informed and more proactive than ever. The airplane through the years has proven a most effective tool to help inspire and educate the public and through EcoFlight's educational efforts we are bringing the important issues to the forefront as often as possible. EcoFlight is dedicated to making sure that on every flight we fly the media, targeting the most salient threats and involving and informing citizens so that their voices are can be heard.

In the past few weeks Dennis Weaver and his Institute of Ecolonomics held the *Ride to Survive*

cross the United States, featuring alternative fuel system vehicles that help to demonstrate that the technology is here to lessen our dependence on fossil fuels. EcoFlight provided aerial photography as the procession worked its way past the proliferation of wells on the Roan Plateau outside Rifle, Colorado. These images will be utilized to build press coverage that further extends the educational impact about why the administration is not concentrating more of its efforts on conservation rather than drilling.

With plenty of moisture now in the Rockies, I am optimistic that this spring and summer will bring real health to our forests and streams and with plenty of attention and hard work the conservation community will bring a healthy environment and a sustainable future back to the forefront of politics and the hearts and minds of our citizens. Given the current climate there are only three things I know. 1) Never give up. 2) Never, never give up and 3) You guessed it!

Best:

Bruce Gordon,
Founder and President

Kestrel Students, Our Next Decision Makers, Study Energy Extraction on Public Lands

In April, EcoFlight's innovative Kestrel Project launched another of its ground and air educational forums, this time studying our nations need and use of natural energy resources and the impacts of oil and gas development on public lands in the West. Held at the Yampah Mountain High School in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, students attended from all over the Roaring Fork Valley. The event was modeled after last year's successful forum that studied fire and its impacts on local ecosystems and economies.

Energy is a subject that is currently being debated in many communities throughout the West. EcoFlight organizers took the opportunity to put together a panel representing all sides of the issue. Presenters included local representatives from industry, the BLM and Grand Mesa Citizens Alliance. Local ranchers, media, and politicians were also invited to attend and participate. Following an open and lively

discussion between the students and these local constituents, students and teachers gathered at the Glenwood Airport where EcoFlight pilots took each participant on a twenty-minute flight that provided a first-hand, bird's eye view of the oil and gas wells located around Rifle, Colorado. Local press covered the event, and 3 newspapers helped to bring the issue of energy development to the attention of those being affected by the projects proposed.

EcoFlight believes the success of our Kestrel Project Forums lies in allowing the land to speak for itself through first-hand observation. As we have seen time and again, experiential learning leaves a lasting awareness. Such awareness helps our future leaders understand the complexities of important conservation issues and challenges them to respond with insightful commentary, thoughtful remedial ideas and a life long passion for the betterment of their world.

ORV Heaven... or is it Hell?

For many years now I have been involved in flying over BLM land to seek and document the tracks of the elusive ORV. The tracks have shown up in a myriad of places they shouldn't be, like the Coral Dunes National Monument, Wilderness Study areas in Colorado, and of course one of the favorite haunts of the ORV, the Utah desert. On a recent flight mission we were out to catch the rascals in the act of riding in closed areas in and around these protected places. Armed with video cameras, we surrounded the Factory Butte and Mango Shale areas and hovered waiting for the next arrival. Our intent was to document on video the perpetrators and show BLM officials where more enforcement was needed. No better way to see these tracks but from the air. While videoing we

discussed the latest in a series of setbacks that have struck the environmental community.



ORV scars near Factory Butte in S. Utah © Bruce Gordon /EcoFlight.2003

Recently, the federal government gave only 48 hours of public notice before moving to settle a long standing lawsuit with the state of Utah over the BLM's wilderness inventory process. The settlement provided for new policy which suspends review of additional lands proposed for wilderness designation by citizens around the country. Senators Allard and Campbell from Colorado signed onto a letter to US Interior Secretary Gale Norton, a former Colorado Attorney General, calling for the policy which caps the amount of BLM land eligible for wilderness nationwide at 22.8 million acres. The Interior Department, which oversees the BLM, announced the new policy April 11.

While the damaging tracks of ORV use are clearly evident from the air, the machinations of the current administration are not. Being a regime not known for its transparency, ORV users and others that misuse our public lands will need to be corralled if we are to keep vulnerable ecosystems intact. And better "fences" that provide enforcement will need to be erected to prevent the further erosion of both our wild lands and the laws that protect them.

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