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Oceans Unmanned Launches ECO-Drone™ Education and Outreach Program

Scientists and resource managers are increasingly concerned that the proliferation of affordable drones can be disruptive to wildlife if not used safely, appropriately, and responsibly. Acute or chronic disturbances can significantly impact a variety of species health and fitness by disrupting migratory patterns, breeding, feeding, or sheltering. Oceans Unmanned, Inc. is unveiling a new initiative designed to address concerns regarding these systems' potential to disturb wildlife in a variety of remote habitats. The new program, termed ECO-Drone, for Environmentally Conscious Operations, partners with federal and state agencies, industry, and education institutions to develop and communicate "best practices" to minimize or eliminate resource disturbance issues due to scientific or recreational drone operations.

The program has three primary goals: Increase public awareness of existing marine resource protection regulations and policies that apply to research and recreational drone use; Engage and educate recreational drone operators to respect ocean wildlife; and Encourage federal and state marine resource management agencies to modernize and refine existing policies and regulations to address the potential disturbance of drone use. While initially focused on coastal and marine resources, the program will soon expand to address terrestrial disturbance issues.

"These inexpensive, off-the-shelf drones have the potential to revolutionize biological monitoring and inspire a whole new generation to research, explore and photograph our ocean coastlines and marine environment," said Matt Pickett, Director of Oceans Unmanned. "but they also pose a challenge to wildlife, as previously inaccessible habitats are exposed to new disturbances. ECO-Drone will engage and educate the user community to ensure all wildlife and their habitats are respected and protected."

While the disturbance potential for manned aircraft and helicopters has been well documented and studied, the research on drone and wildlife interaction is just beginning. Scientists and resource managers are concerned that this new technology will expose previously inaccessible habitats to aerial disturbance with real consequences. As an example, just one flushing event of a bird off a nest can cause the loss off eggs or chicks and significantly impact a colony.

"We are thrilled with ECO-Drone's efforts to develop best practices for drone operators," said Paul Hobi, Seabird Protection Network Program Manager, "Seabirds are especially sensitive to drones, and operators can be good stewards of nature by avoiding sensitive wildlife colonies."

The first two projects underway are a direct outreach campaign and an education partnership. Oceans Unmanned is working with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to distribute informational postcards about drone etiquette at coastal access points along the central California coast. In addition, Oceans Unmanned has partnered with DARTdrones, the national leader in drone training and consultation, in development of an ECO-Drone training module to educate drone operators at the beginning of their careers and businesses. "DARTdrones is focused on training drone pilots to become safe, effective, and smart sUAS operators. Beyond understanding a drone's capabilities, pilots need to be aware of their surrounds and their impact on local wildlife and various eco-systems," stated Ellen Clauss, Innovation Manager for DARTdrones. "We are delighted to partner with Oceans Unmanned on the ECO-Drone program to promote and uphold these values and foster respect for the environments in which sUAS are flying."

Oceans Unmanned, Inc., a 501(C)(3) non-profit organization, facilitates the use of unmanned technologies and promotes their safe and environmentally conscious operation to protect the ocean and coastal marine environment.

MEDIA: Images and video

On the web:

Oceans Unmanned: http://oceansunmanned.org

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