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Techie protects coastline: A conversation with Ken Adelman of CaliforniaCoastline.org

By Dana Greenlee, Technology Columnist

I have a passion for technology and a love of nature. Whenever I find a way to marry the two, it's a good idea. A kindred spirit is Silicon Valley entrepreneur Ken Adelman. After he founded and sold two very successful technology companies, he decided to embark on the environmental project of a lifetime ? The California Coastal Records Project detailed at <http://www.californiacoastline.org>.

Adelman is photographing the entire California coastline from a helicopter piloted by his wife Gabrielle, and posting the images on CaliforniaCoastline.org. Their goal is to keep track of all development by snapping high-resolution photos every 500 feet along California's 1,100-mile coastline

The Sierra Club's Coastal Program calls Adelman?s work ?one of the greatest high tech projects to protect the California coast in all time."

Adelman recently talked about his work keeping the public eye tuned in to preserving our West Coast -? as well as some controversy over a photo that includes a certain celebrity?s house.

DANA GREENLEE: How did you come to start CaliforniaCoastline.org?

KEN ADELMAN: My wife and I have been doing environmental photography for a Sierra Club attorney for many years. We started in 1997 when we volunteered the use of our helicopter to take photographs to help fight the Hearst Corp. from developing a huge resort complex at San Simeon Point. Since then, we've done a lot of photography for the Sierra Club, where we took a picture of something after it had been destroyed -- and wished we had ?before" picture.

We were joking once over dinner that the only way to get a ?before" picture would be to photograph the entire coast. At the time, it seemed daunting, but eventually the technology of digital photography advanced to meet the idea.

GREENLEE: What bad things have you discovered while photographing the California coast?

ADELMAN: We discovered an illegal seawall being built at the Ritz-Carlton at Half Moon Bay.

GREENLEE: How did you actually accomplish getting the 12,000 images from your camera to CaliforniaCoastline.org?

ADELMAN: Our first idea was to shoot it in film. We thought it would be 10,000 slides and we'd store them in shoeboxes. That just didn?t seem appealing. It was when we decided that using film was really stupid that we finally started the project. Our camera was a Nikon D1x. It's about a 5 megapixel digital camera. There were a couple of features it had which were critical to the project. The camera can connect directly to a GPS receiver, so this allowed each file that was produced by the camera to capture the GPS position of the helicopter in the frame. Everything you ever wanted was right there: altitude, longitude, latitude. That allowed us to extract the data and build all the indices for the web site automatically.

GREENLEE: What kind of feedback are you getting from your efforts along the coast?

ADELMAN: We see our role as providing the data. We don't necessarily know how it's being used. We know environmentalists think it's the most exciting thing since sliced bread, primarily because they had a need for aerial photography all along but had never been able to afford it.

GREENLEE: Since you have been very successful financially from founding two software companies during the dot-com heyday, your philanthropic efforts have given them this gift.

ADELMAN: I think it's important to recognize that we photographed the entire California coast for very little cost. We think we did the whole project for about \$50,000 -- the helicopter operating costs being the largest part of it. It also includes six servers that are serving the Web site and the camera. I don't think a government organization could have done a job like this for 10 times that cost.

GREENLEE: Tell us about your challenge with a certain celebrity's home on the coast.

ADELMAN: The celebrity is Barbra Streisand. She has tried to sue me, my Internet service provider, and Pictopia -- which is the company that offers reprints off our site, claiming that we've infringed on her privacy under a California anti-paparazzi law. The law is about taking pictures of people, not places or buildings. There are satellite photos of her house if you go to Terraserver or MapQuest. It turns out there are some people in the very right-hand side of our picture on the beach. You can go to see the picture for yourself on our Web site and look at those people, and you can barely tell if they are male or female. We were about 540 feet in the air, about a half a mile away horizontally. Prior to her filing the lawsuit, there might have been some months where there were nine to 15 people looking at that photo. That photo didn't attract any more attention than any others. The day the news of her lawsuit broke, we got over 100,000 hits that day. There are some ways to protect your anonymity, but suing is not one of them.

For more information about Kenneth and Gabrielle Adelman's California Coastal Records Project and their legal situation with Barbra Streisand, visit <http://www.californiacoastline.org>.

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