

Peaceful role for drones explored at TED conference (Update)

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A Sumatran orangutan in a private zoo on the outskirts of Kandang town in Aceh province on Sumatra island, June 9, 2013. Biologist and science-fiction fan Lian Pin Koh told the TEDGlobal conference about his fleet of environmental drones which have been used to monitor the Orangutan population in the remote Indonesian forest of northern Sumatra.

Unmanned drones, instead of being harbingers of death, should become a vital technological tool in the conservation fight and in delivering vital goods to remote areas, the TEDGlobal conference in Edinburgh heard

Wednesday.

Biologist and science-fiction fan Lian Pin Koh told the conference about his fleet of environmental drones which have been used to monitor the Orangutan population in the remote Indonesian forest of northern Sumatra.

The aircraft have a two-metre wingspan, weigh less than two kilogrammes and cost just \$4,000.

Equipped with a mini-computer, a GPS, a compass and an altimeter, they can be easily programmed using Google Maps and are able to fly autonomously for between 40 and 60 minutes, travelling up to 50 kilometres.

Their high resolution cameras can "establish a map of the forest", generate 3D images of the site and "monitor illegal activities harmful to nature," explained the speaker.

Since January, 200 vehicles have been built and are being used by environmental protection groups in Switzerland, Indonesia, Madagascar, Congo, the United States and Greenland.

"We believe that the drones have a huge potential not only to fight crimes against nature but also for studying biodiversity and animal life," said Lian Pin Koh.

TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) is a global set of conferences that presents speakers with an 18-minute window to promote their "ideas worth spreading".



A self or remote-guided drone overflies a beach in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat and Villefranche harbour, southern France on July 30, 2009. Instead of being harbingers of death, drones should become a vital technological tool in the conservation fight and in delivering vital goods to remote areas, the TEDGlobal conference in Edinburgh heard Wednesday.

Greek businessman, Andreas Raptopoulos, now settled in Silicon Valley, saw another role for drones in delivering essential goods such as drugs and vaccines to otherwise inaccessible areas.

He hopes a network of drones will help the "one billion people" who are completely cut off for part of the year due to impassable roads and conducted a test mission into a Haitian refugee camp in 2012.

But Raptopoulos also envisages drones having "a significant impact" in bottle-necked "megacities", saying they could deliver packages across town for as little as 24 US cents.

But drones today are seen almost exclusively as a weapon of war, a theme explored by science fiction author Daniel Suarez.

"I'm not here to talk about fiction but real robot-killers," he said, citing robot-snipers located on the border of the two Koreas which are able to "automatically identify a human target and shoot him from over a mile away.

"Currently, there are still men in the loop but they are not required technically, it is a choice," he explained, adding that 70 nations are currently on the path to developing similar weapons.

He called for the establishment of an international treaty and a "ban the manufacture of robots-killers."

"There are tonnes of great uses for unmanned drones but we need a framework for robotic weapons as it puts too much power into too few hands," he said.

Suarez also warned that amount of footage currently being produced by surveillance drones was "outstripping the human ability to review it all".

Previous TED speakers include U2 singer Bono, Microsoft mastermind Bill Gates and former US president Bill Clinton.

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