

Technology and outdoor sports converge at drone conference

26 April 2015, by Martha Mendoza



The Inspire 1, a drone manufactured by DJI, is flown Tuesday, March 10, 2015, in Davenport, Calif. Top drone-makers, along with investors, regulators and inventors, are gathering in one of the most popular regions for outdoor activity in the U.S., California's Central Coast, to show off their devices, hear about new uses for airborne robots, and hit the waves and trails at the Drones Data X Conference in Santa Cruz, Calif., from May 1 to 3, 2015. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

Surfers catching waves and mountain bikers pedaling through forests are used to the occasional low flying pelican or diving hawk, but these days outdoor recreationalists can find what's up in the air isn't a bird at all, it's a drone.

This week top drone-makers, along with investors, regulators and inventors, are gathering in one of the most popular regions for outdoor activity in the U.S., California's Central Coast, to show off their devices, hear about new uses for airborne robots, and hit the waves and trails.

Drones Data X Conference Santa Cruz, from May 1 to 3, will also feature experts explaining how unmanned-aerial vehicles can map remote areas or rescue hikers or swimmers.

Federal regulators, who are still sorting out drone rules, will be on hand with updates on regulations about whether operators need to keep a drone within their line of sight, how high they can go and whether they can fly directly above a person.

"Drones are in a bit of their Wild West period right now, but in the future they'll be used to transport people, medicine, goods; anything done on a highway will just as well be done by air," conference organizer Philip McNamara said.

Spending on [unmanned aerial vehicles](#) is projected to double over the next decade, from about \$6.4 billion a year to \$11.5 billion a year, according to industry analyst Teal Group.

McNamara said about 90 percent of the venture capital flowing toward drone technologies comes from the nation's high tech hub, Silicon Valley, about 30 miles from the conference. Santa Cruz economic development director Bonnie Lipscomb said the city hopes some firms will like what they see, from sandy beaches to redwood forests, as well as a university and tech startups.



Romeo Durscher, director of education for drone-maker DJI, flies one of his company's products Tuesday, March 10, 2015, in Davenport, Calif. Top drone-makers, along

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"It was a great opportunity to showcase not only our burgeoning tech scene but also our outdoor enthusiast paradise," she said.

Local mountain bike and kite surfing companies are loaning gear and expertise to the conference.

Sergio Capozzi at the Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals said there is both crossover and conflict between outdoor recreationalists and drone enthusiasts.

"There is likely an appropriate time and place for drones in nature. The challenge comes in finding the right balance of when and where drones are appropriate," he said.

As prices go down and drone technology advances, park and wilderness visitors who want to use drones also need to make sure that everyone is having a safe and enjoyable experience, he said. He noted that, on the plus side, drones can be used to gather photos and videos that wouldn't be accessible otherwise.

"Sharing these experiences encourages others to seek out similar experiences, in particular on public landscapes," he said.

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But Richard Dolesh, a vice president at the National Recreation and Park Association, said park managers aren't paying enough attention to increased [drone](#) use.

"Drones are going to be everywhere and people who are managing outdoor land and [outdoor recreation](#) are pretty clueless right now about what it's going to take to effectively manage them," he said.

Dolesh noted that national parks banned drones after visitors complained about their noise.

"People travel long distances," he said, "for peace and solitude."

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