

HOBBIES

FOUL WEATHER FRIEND

You don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows—but it doesn't hurt to have a state-of-the-art balloon

BY GELI BERNCRUST

ONCE UPON A TIME, WEATHER BALLOONS were just large bags of government-issue mil-spec plastic—bulky, flimsy floating litter. But that was before the greenhouse effect. Nowadays, those using old-fashioned hardware would not only get poor results; they'd mess up their companies' Environment Rating big-time!

Weather balloons have had to evolve,

not only to keep up with new, more extreme weather patterns, but to keep pace with the exploding popularity of recreational meteorology. The mercurial weather caused by massive environmental damage in the 20th century has one unexpected upside: it's fun to watch. When Houston had its first monsoon in 2011, the Weather Channel's ratings went through the roof. And when Viacom bought the station and merged it with MTV, its future was assured.

There's no thrill quite like being the first on your weathernet to detect a dra-

matic weather anomaly, and that's where Topy-Stokk's new Distributed Dirigible (\$14,525) floats gracefully into play. This ultrathin, fully biodegradable bubble can saturate the sky with barometric readings, wind speed, particulate maps, CO₂ and Freon levels, Doppler radar and satellite-linked full-motion video—everything the pros use—while posing no detectable hazard to air flights or wildlife. Log its movements day by day on your website; choose the top-end Jellyhead model, and you can even sell CPU power to airborne computing nets. Its power-management system is so sophisticated that it remains aloft for a year or more, running on the same solar power that eventually degrades it to harmless organic dust.

These balloons are a hit with young people of all demographics, from jocks to eggheads. Some even say they're a great way to get parents interested in science! ■

The Distributed Dirigible flies friendly skies—and not-so-friendly ones too



3-D RENDERING BY CHRIS ORILEY FOR TIME DIGITAL