

Seri Indian Conservation Collaboration Receives International Award For World Oceans Day

June 7th, 2006

In a press conference and World Oceans Day banquet in Washington, D.C. on June 7th, six prominent environmental organizations honored a grassroots effort of Native American youth for their protection and monitoring of endangered sea turtles that has been facilitated by Dr. Laurie Monti and Dr. Gary Nabhan from Northern Arizona University's Center for Sustainable Environments and Applied Indigenous Studies. This year's Ocean Revolution Native Oceans Award went to the Grupo Tortuguero Comcaac of Sonora, Mexico -- a coalition of Seri Indian youth trained and supported as "para-ecologists" over nine years by conservation biologists from NAU, the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. During the last decade, their efforts have led to a reduced mortality of sea turtles, mapping and protection of their foraging habitats, and a return to their former nesting grounds on the Sonoran coast of Mexico.

Three of the Seri youth--Erika Molina, Mayra Estrella, and Fernando Morales--were accompanied by NAU researchers Dr. Monti and Dr. Gary Nabhan to accept the award, given in recognition for their unique blending of conservation science and traditional ecological knowledge as means to recover endangered wildlife. Their effort in the Gulf of California was one of two honored for their outstanding contributions to global marine conservation by a consortium of World Wildlife Fund, Ocean Revolution, Conservation International, Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Marine Conservation Biology Institute.

"The Seri Indians have long been stewards to a unique array of marine and coastal biodiversity in Mexico," explained Timothy Dykman of Oceans Revolution, who nominated the project for this award. "Grupo Tortuguero Comcaac is the marine component of a community-wide plan created by a team of Seri Indian elders and youth that uses traditional teaching and modern science to respond to 21st century economic pressures..." The community-based plan of conservation and traditional use has been funded by grants to the Center for Sustainable Environments from the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, the Overbrook Foundation, the Christenen Fund, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

In recognizing the successes of this marine conservation project and its capacity-building among indigenous youth, California Congressman Sam Farr offered these words:

"We are honoring native peoples for showing us that all politics is local, and for what they see of value there---not only as a natural value but a cultural value--to help the oceans and all living creatures in the oceans. That lesson is being brought to us from 'off shore' from Mexico by people who are actually doing something to protect ocean life."

The efforts to build capacity among the Seri Indians to manage their own natural resources began about a decade ago, with Northern Arizona University facilitating the

training of more than two dozen paraecologists who now work as wildlife technicians, ecotourist guides, sustainable harvesters of heritage foods, and habitat monitors. These efforts are documented in a new film, called *Seri Songs of Survival*, produced by Monti and Flagstaff film-maker Peter Blystone, available on DVD. The project's results are also documented in more technical detail in Nabhan's recent book from the University of California Press, *Singing the Turtles to Sea*. The Seri themselves have published research papers in the *Southwestern Naturalist* and *Marine Turtle Conservation Newsletter*, in addition to making oral presentations at many international conservation conferences.

"The fate of the oceans affects us all, so that it is not surprising that most lasting conservation solutions will have to be cross-cultural, building multi-ethnic constituencies," noted Nabhan, CSE's director, who helped initiate the effort in 1995. "Dr. Monti, Ms. Molina, Ms. Estrella and Mr. Morales deserve credit in forging and fine-tuning a model for conservation collaborations across cultural and national boundaries, one that has applicability in other marine and coastal ecosystems as well."