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THE LITTLE NATION THAT COULD, AND DID

Kiribati's Phoenix Islands Protected Area earns global spotlight as largest World Heritage site on Earth

Brasilia, Brazil (August 1, 2010) – A pristine island chain and marine wilderness in the tiny Central Pacific nation of Kiribati has received international recognition as one of the most unique and environmentally significant places on Earth by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and has ushered in a new era of large-scale ocean protection.

That is according to Conservation International (CI) and the New England Aquarium, who partnered with the Republic of Kiribati in creating the Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA), which recently earned inscription by UNESCO as one of five new, natural World Heritage sites for its “pristine nature and importance as a migration route and reservoir”.

“This is the direct result of a phenomenal commitment by a tiny country, and deft diplomatic skill in building alliances to make it a reality. Kiribati deserves major recognition and support from the rest of the world,” said Dr. Russ Mittermeier, CI’s President who attended the World Heritage meeting in Brazil, and was among those advocating for World Heritage status.

Bud Ris, President and CEO of the New England Aquarium added, “The UNESCO designation of the Phoenix Islands as a World Heritage site only confirms the experience of all those that have visited there, which is that its coral reef ecosystems are among the most pristine and awe-inspiring on the planet.”

Delegates representing the Phoenix Islands Protected Area received notice of the prestigious designation from the World Heritage Committee on Sunday in Brasilia, Brazil, during its 34th session. The affirmative decision makes PIPA the largest and deepest World Heritage site in the world, covering an ocean territory more than 408,000 km² (more than 150,000 mi², roughly the size of California) and 6000 meters deep.

Kiribati President Anote Tong, celebrated the listing, and explained why his country pursued World Heritage status. “For millennia, we have been an ocean people, depending on its many gifts and resources for our survival, but we believe its treasures are to be protected and shared for the long-term benefit of people everywhere. In this regard the Phoenix Islands Protected Area is our gift to humanity.”

Located about half way between Australia and Hawaii and just south of the equator, the nearly uninhabited Phoenix Islands form an archipelago several hundred miles long. They are part of the Republic of Kiribati, which comprises three low-lying island groups (the Gilbert, Phoenix, and Line Islands) which together cover a land area of only 811 km² spread over 33 islands, but an ocean territory of over 3.5 million km², making it the largest atoll nation in the world.

Within the Phoenix Islands Protected Area lie eight of these atolls, two submerged reef systems, approximately 14 submerged seamounts (underwater mountains) as well as deep-sea and open-ocean environments which have been described as among the most isolated and free from human impact left on the planet, resembling what the ocean might have looked like a thousand years ago. The area is teeming with healthy and endemic marine life, which includes more than 200 types of coral, 500 unique fish species, 18 marine mammals and 44 bird species, identified so far. Among them are numerous species of apex predators such as sharks, tens of thousands of nesting seabirds, and threatened species in record numbers, like the Napoleon wrasse.

Developed after several years of joint scientific research and collaboration by the Republic of Kiribati in partnership with the New England Aquarium and CI, the Phoenix Islands Protected Area receives funding and technical assistance from the Global Conservation Fund (GCF) at CI, the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), and other donors. It stands as the largest marine protected area in the entire Pacific Ocean and the second largest in the world.

“Kiribati has led the way and created the momentum globally for the creation of several more large marine protected areas,” Ris added. “The whole world owes them our thanks for their vision and commitment.”

Also inscribed to the World Heritage List was PIPA’s sister site and American territory, the Papahānauoʻe Marine National Monument in the Hawaiian Islands, the first U.S. site added to World Heritage List in 15 years. Their tandem designation by UNESCO represents a long-awaited international recognition of the value of marine protected areas.

“The fact that we have two mega-marine areas, one in a tiny developing country and one in the world biggest economy, working side-by-side to conserve their collective marine treasures is phenomenally important,” said Dr. Mittermeier. “It demonstrates that marine protected areas are finally getting their day in the sun as a tool for ocean management, and a new chapter of hope and human cooperation for the ocean’s health.”

Management and enforcement of the marine protected area will be financed through Kiribati’s own resources, secured grants and a new endowment system which will cover recurring management costs for the area and compensate the government for lost commercial fishing revenue, in perpetuity.

“With threats that include global climate change accelerating a rise in sea levels and ocean acidification, our way of life, our culture, our people and our nation are under threat,” said President Tong. “With World Heritage inscription, PIPA can now remain a natural laboratory where scientists can study the impact of climate change in the absence of other man-made factors like pollution and urbanization, and that may help us all in adapting to the impacts of global change.”

For Conservation International’s Senior Vice President of Marine Conservation Dr. Greg Stone, it’s an unprecedented scientific opportunity.

“I have explored the Phoenix Islands area three times in the past ten years, and discovered some of its incredible biodiversity. But as CI’s Chief Ocean Scientist, I can confidently say that we have only scratched the tip of the surface in terms of our understanding of its biological treasures. There is so much more still to uncover, which is what makes this World Heritage designation so valuable and so exciting.”

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PHOTOS available for the Media: <http://bit.ly/cNcGsN>

B-ROLL VIDEO available for the media: <ftp://ftp.conservation.org/Guest/>
username: mediaguest
password: paris0405!

folder: Guest
Subfolder: ___PIPA Video (at top of the list)
file: PIPA montage

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Note to editors:

Conservation International (CI): Building upon a strong foundation of science, partnership and field demonstration, CI empowers societies to responsibly and sustainably care for nature for the well-being of humanity. With headquarters in Washington, DC, CI works in more than 40 countries on four continents. For more information, visit www.conservation.org

New England Aquarium: Located on the Boston waterfront, the New England Aquarium is one of the most prominent and popular aquariums in the United States. Beyond its exhibit halls, the Aquarium is also a leading ocean conservation organization with research scientists working around the globe, biologists rescuing stranded marine animals in New England and staff consulting with the major seafood businesses to promote sustainable fisheries. For more information: www.neaq.org

Global Conservation Fund (GCF): The Global Conservation Fund finances the creation, expansion and long-term management of protected areas in the world's biodiversity hotspots, high-biodiversity wilderness areas and important marine regions. The Fund has enabled CI regional programs and more than 49 partners to help protect nearly 80 million hectares of the world's biologically richest land and seascapes.
www.conservation.org/gcf

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund is a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement, Conservation International, the Global Environment Facility, the Government of Japan, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the World Bank. A fundamental goal is to ensure civil society is engaged in biodiversity conservation. www.cepf.net

Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA): for more information, visit: <http://www.phoenixislands.org/index.php>