



Embargoed until 4:30 p.m. EST (U.S. East Coast Time) on Tuesday, March 28, 2006

Pacific Islands Paradise Protected

Kiribati Conserves Archipelago of Coral Atolls, Submerged Reefs

Curitiba, Brazil (March 28, 2006) – A small Pacific Islands nation has distinguished itself on the global conservation map with the declaration today that it is creating the third largest marine protected area in the world, conserving an archipelago of some of the planet’s most pristine coral reefs.

Martin Puta Tofinga, Minister of Environment, Lands and Agricultural Development of the Republic of Kiribati, announced the establishment of the Phoenix Islands Protected Area at the 8th Conference of the Parties (COP8) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), being held in Curitiba, Brazil.

With eight atolls and two submerged reef systems, the nearly uninhabited Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA) is the largest marine protected area in the Pacific Islands at 184,700 square kilometers (73,800 square miles), twice the size of Portugal. It contains a near pristine coral archipelago with abundant marine and bird life, and is the first marine protected area in the region with deep-sea habitat, including underwater mountains.

Located near the equator in the Central Pacific between Hawaii and Fiji, the Phoenix Islands form an archipelago several hundred miles long. They are part of the Republic of Kiribati, which comprises three distinct island groups (Gilbert Islands, Phoenix Islands and Line Islands) with a total of 33 islands to make it the largest atoll nation in the world.

President Anote Tong said establishing the Phoenix Islands Protected Area ensures that the people of Kiribati can always benefit from the rich ocean life of their home.

“If the coral and reefs are protected, then the fish will thrive and grow and bring us benefit,” President Tong said. “In this way all species of fish can be protected so none become depleted or extinct.”

The Republic of Kiribati and the New England Aquarium developed the Phoenix Islands project over several years of joint scientific research and discussions, with funding and technical assistance from the Global Conservation Fund at Conservation International (CI) and, more recently, CI’s Pacific Islands Program.

Three New England Aquarium research expeditions since 2000 found great marine biodiversity, including more than 120 species of coral and 520 species of fish, some new to science. Nesting seabird populations, as well as healthy fish populations and the presence of sea turtles and other species, demonstrated the pristine nature of the area and its importance as a migration route.

“It’s a remarkable atoll marine wilderness area, the most magnificent I have ever seen. The Phoenix Islands have experienced little human impact and this important conservation action by Kiribati will protect the area from future threats including over fishing and help mitigate the effects of climate change,” said Greg Stone, Vice-President of Global Marine Programs at the New England Aquarium in Boston.

Protecting the Phoenix Islands means restricting commercial fishing in the area, resulting in a loss of revenue that the Kiribati government would normally receive from issuing foreign commercial fishing licenses. However, an innovative plan will compensate Kiribati for these lost revenues.

Under a memorandum of understanding signed by the Republic of Kiribati, the New England Aquarium and Conservation International, management and enforcement of the Phoenix Islands Protection Area will be financed through an endowment system that will cover the core recurring management costs and compensate the Kiribati government for the foregone commercial fishing license revenues. The plan allows for subsistence fishing by resident communities and other sustainable economic development in designated zones of the protected area.

In creating the protected area, the Republic of Kiribati took a significant step toward meeting protected area commitments for 2010/12 under the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Island Biodiversity Program of Work.

“This is a major milestone for marine conservation efforts in the Pacific and for island biodiversity,” said CI President Russell A. Mittermeier. “The Republic of Kiribati has shown unprecedented vision for long-term conservation of its precious marine biodiversity. We are proud to be associated with this effort.”

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PHOTOS: Can be downloaded at www.neaq.org/phoenix.

Additional images are available at the following link by providing the username and password below:

http://images.conservation.org/search/results.bhtml?collection_id=10233

Username: Phoenix Password: Islands

Images are for one-time use only with this story. Please credit according to the information provided with the images.

VIDEO: Underwater B-roll of the Phoenix Island and sound bites with the Kiribati President Anote Tong and New England Aquarium scientist Greg Stone are available on Beta SP upon request to the New England Aquarium.

INTERVIEWS: The principals are in Brazil at the Convention on Biological Diversity. Phone interviews can be arranged.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND IMAGES: The Phoenix Islands were featured in a major article in National Geographic in February 2004. A PDF or link to the article is available at <http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0402/feature3/>

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CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

Conservation International (CI) applies innovations in science, economics, policy and community participation to protect the Earth's richest regions of plant and animal diversity and demonstrate that human societies can live harmoniously with nature. Founded in 1987, CI works in more than 40 countries on four continents to help people find economic alternatives without harming their natural environments. For more information about CI, visit www.conservation.org.

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. www.conservation.org/xp/gcf/



New England Aquarium

The New England Aquarium is one of the most prominent and popular aquariums in the United States. Its mission is to present, promote, and protect the world of water" Beyond its exhibit halls, the Aquarium is also a leading ocean conservation organization with research scientists working around the globe and biologists rescuing stranded marine animals in New England.