Seacology Establishes Tsunami Relief Fund for Island Communities Involved in Environmental Projects

by Katherine Purcell

Seacology, an environmental nonprofit organization based in Berkeley, California, has established a Tsunami Relief Fund to aid four island communities directly affected by the recent tsunami.1 The tsunami that struck south Asia on December 26, 2004, had a devastating impact. A recent Health and Situation Report from the World Health Organization (WHO) gives grim updates about the aftermath of the tsunami. As of February 22, 2005, 169,296 people are reported dead, 127,418 reported missing, and 40,160 injured.2

Seacology is an environmental organization that works to preserve the cultures and the endangered biodiversity of island communities. To this end, the environmental group has constructed and maintains 100 different island projects around the world.1 For more on Seacology’s work, visit their Web site (www.seacology.org) or see the article in HerbalGram 65.3

“Seacology is not traditionally a relief organization, but when we fully understood the scope of the human tragedy in the villages where we had existing projects, we realized it was imperative to make an exception and help these wonderful people recover from the tsunami,” Seacology’s Executive Director Duane Silverstein told HerbalGram.

Four different villages with ties to Seacology’s ongoing environmental conservation projects were either damaged or destroyed by the recent tsunami. Thus, all proceeds from the Seacology Tsunami Relief fund will be directly applied to relief efforts in these four villages including Kiralakele, Sri Lanka; Kendhoo Island, The Maldives; Trang Province, Thailand; and Kadachang Village, Andaman Islands.1 The Seacology Relief Fund aims to use the finances to rebuild the local economies and infrastructures of these four villages.1

“The only thing I ask for is a fishing net,” says A.G. Nuwan of Sri Lanka. “We are poor people living for the day. We have no savings and need to get back to making money.”1

WHO figures indicate that 553,287 people in Sri Lanka were directly affected by the tsunami. In total, 30,974 people were killed, 4,698 still missing, and 23,176 injured.2 There are 26 villages in the Hambantota district of Sri Lanka, with four villages situated around the Kiralakele Mangrove Resource Center. Eight of these villages have been completely destroyed, leaving no homes, infrastructures, or livelihoods for these people.4 According to Anuradha Wickramasinghe, the Seacology Island Advisory Board Member living in Kiralakele, Sri Lanka, 108 females, 48 fishermen, 12 youngsters, and 102 children from these villages died during the tsunami.4

“I visited the village in Sri Lanka a little over two years ago for the dedication of the Mangrove Resource Center. We gave out certificates to about 50 students who took the Mangrove Conservation course. They were mostly fourth to ninth graders, and I understand about half of them perished,” said Mr. Silverstein, as he recalled his most recent visit to one of Seacology’s programs in Sri Lanka.

In addition, the four villages situated in and around Kiralakele have also been affected. However, due to mangrove vegetation, the damage to these villages was not as severe as it was in other villages.
in areas where there is an ideal mix of fresh and salt water, i.e., near the mouths of rivers and tidal creeks, and in areas where floodwaters have deposited enough materials to build up banks for growth.3

There are many different kinds of mangrove plants, including 65 recognized species from 20 different families. Some of the more common mangroves include gray mangroves (Avicennia marina [Forsk.] Viehr., Verbenaceae), mangrove apple (Sonneratia alba J.E. Smith, Sonneratiaceae), red mangrove (Rhizophora stylosa Griff., Rhizophoraceae), yellow mangrove (Ceriops spp., Rhizophoraceae), and orange mangrove (Bruguiera spp., Rhizophoraceae).5

Mangroves serve many important functions. First, they help protect the coastline from damage because they can absorb energy from waves and wind in bad weather. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency/Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service of Australia Web site states that in 1974, two yachts survived Cyclone Tracy undamaged because they were sheltered in a mangrove creek. Second, mangrove roots trap sediments that might otherwise cloud water and harm coral growth. Third, the mangrove plants and sediments have been shown to absorb pollution, including heavy metals. Finally, the mangroves have historically been used to provide food, shelter, medicine, and tools.5

Following are brief descriptions of Seacology Island projects that were damaged or destroyed and will be rebuilt using the proceeds from the Seacology Tsunami Relief Fund.

In Sri Lanka, Seacology has three main projects with the Small Fishers Federation of Lanka (SFFL) including a Mangrove Resource Center with a Biological Garden and library,1, 6 a sales center at the Kiralakele Mangrove Center,5, 7 and an ongoing Kiralakele mangrove conservation program.9 The Mangrove Resource Center survived the tsunami with damage to the roof and cracks in the wall. However, all of the computers, copiers, library material, and furniture were destroyed with the flooding.6

On Kendhoo Island, in the Maldives Islands, Seacology has created a project to protect endangered sea turtles. The project entailed the construction of a kindergarten in exchange for the village’s commitment to ban the harvest of turtle eggs. The government does have laws banning turtle catching, but it does not cover villagers themselves indicate are the most needed. There will be no organization or government middlemen. The funds will go directly to the villages to provide fishing equipment, water supply systems, and other critical needs to help get these villages back on their feet,” says Seacology’s Silverstein.1

Seacology works to minimize incidents in which indigenous people are forced to choose between economic development and protecting the natural resources of their island homes. To this end, Seacology looks for win-win situations where island economies can receive some kind of benefit from protecting their local environment. Seacology has 100 island projects, including projects in the North Atlantic, the Pacific Northwest, the eastern Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean and Latin America, the Pacific Ocean, Southeast Asia, and Polynesia and Melanesia.1, 12

References