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For Further Information:

Todd McLeish 401-874-7892

URI Coastal Resources Center helps countries hit by tsunami learn better coastal management practices

Three-week course uses cases studies, strategies developed in Rhode Island

NARRAGANSETT, R.I. – September 24, 2007 – The devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 was a tragedy that created a unique shared experience for residents of many countries in Asia and Africa. It also created an opportunity for community leaders in those countries to better plan coastal development and resource use that is resilient to future natural disasters and that can provide local communities with long term benefits.

How to proceed with appropriate planning and coastal management was the subject of a three-week workshop in Thailand in July and August led by staff from the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Resources Center (CRC), who have provided similar advice to coastal countries around the globe.

“The regional nature of the tsunami allowed us to focus the workshop on this common experience that all the participants shared,” said Virginia Lee, associate coastal resources manager at CRC. “For these people, planning for a disaster isn't a ‘what if’ scenario. They've all been through it. Having seen the devastation caused by the tsunami, they recognize the need for management of their coastlines that includes economic and social impacts as well as environmental concerns, and for more sustainable development.”

Most of the countries bordering the Indian Ocean also share similar economic levels, ecosystems, and community structures, so they could easily relate to each other and to the issues raised in the workshops, according to Pam Rubinoff, a CRC coastal management specialist who co-led the workshops with Lee, CRC colleague Brian Crawford and Wenresti Gallardo of the Asian Institute of Technology, the Bangkok-based hosting institution.

The three-week workshop graduated 27 participants from 12 countries, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Seychelles and Tanzania. They represented government agencies, universities, small non-governmental

organizations, and international groups like Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy and the World Wide Fund for Nature. The event was supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and co-sponsored by the World Conservation Union.

“We’ve offered a similar training in Rhode Island every other year since 1991, and in the interim years we have led intensive courses in other countries, but this was the first time we’ve held it in Asia,” said Lee.

The course uses field trips, case studies and group projects to examine a wide range of coastal zone management issues, including fisheries, erosion, pollution, tourism, public access and development. Participants also developed their leadership skills while learning about ecosystem management, disaster management, and policy development.

This isn’t the first time the Coastal Resources Center has offered its expertise in Southeast Asia. The Center has worked in the region in collaboration with USAID since 1985. Most recently, it conducted an impact assessment in Thailand immediately following the tsunami, and later it developed demonstration projects in the region for rebuilding livelihoods for residents in the tsunami’s aftermath.

Many of the strategies and tools that the workshop leaders taught participants in Thailand were developed and first used in Rhode Island. “We developed a Special Area Management Program here in 1985, a concept which focuses tightly on one important site with unique problems, and we’ve been exporting it for use elsewhere for years,” said Rubinoff, who spent two years in Thailand as a Peace Corps volunteer in the 1980s. “At this year’s workshop we used a coastal case study from Sri Lanka that is based on an original project carried out in Rhode Island’s south shore salt ponds.”

In addition, many of the key coastal management processes, policies, enforcement methods and public education programs developed by CRC for use in Rhode Island are pertinent in Asia as well. And, said Lee, “it’s just as important for the community to be involved in decision making there as it is here.”

“The pace of change in Asia is much faster than it is here in Rhode Island,” she concluded, “but we all need to plan appropriately so our coastal communities are resilient in the face of the next natural disaster.”

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