



Major Gift Launches Visibility, Global Monitoring Of Seagrass

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DURHAM, N.H. – Thanks to international efforts centered at the University of New Hampshire, “Save the Seagrass” might be the next rage in conservation-minded T-shirts and bumper stickers.

SeagrassNet, a global monitoring program founded and directed by UNH research professor Fred Short, aims to provide a global assessment of coastal marine seagrasses while increasing government and public awareness of the importance of seagrass habitat.

Now a multi-million dollar gift from the Otto Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation is forging an innovative partnership between SeagrassNet and Conservation International, expanding SeagrassNet’s worldwide reach as well as funding a series of workshops globally, to evaluate seagrasses for possible “red listing” as threatened or endangered.

“The university greatly appreciates the support for SeagrassNet by the Otto Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation,” said UNH President Mark Huddleston, “and we share Dr. Short’s enthusiasm for this expansion of his global seagrass initiative.”

“Seagrasses are a barometer of the health of the coastal system,” said Short. “Although they’re mostly submerged, they require light. And most things we do to the ocean decrease the amount of light that reaches them. Seagrasses are an indicator of how things are doing in the coastal zone.”

Among the most productive plant communities on the planet, seagrass beds serve as protective nurseries for juvenile fish and shellfish, a habitat for many marine species, and a feeding ground for predatory fish, waterfowl and large sea creatures like manatees and sea turtles. The root and rhizome system of these flowering plants stabilizes sediments, protecting the coastline from currents and weather-related erosion. Seagrass is an effective filter of nutrients and particulates, and it is the basis of a detrital food chain that feeds fish and shellfish.

Providing tools and training to local teams at 70 monitoring sites in 23 countries, SeagrassNet has evaluated two-thirds of the global species of seagrass and compiled a global report card reflecting the health of seagrass worldwide. With SeagrassNet and other data, seagrasses are now being considered for red-listing by the Global Marine Species Assessment, a joint initiative of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) and Conservation International.

Short hopes that the SeagrassNet program will bring to seagrasses the attention that whales, manatees, or even coral reefs have enjoyed. "Lack of visibility has been a real problem for seagrass," said Short. "Yet seagrasses are equally or maybe more important and more widely distributed than coral reefs."

The gift has been crucial to expanding SeagrassNet's global reach. "When you start working globally, there is no federal funding available, only private," said Short. "The beauty of this gift is that there are no geographic restrictions." Indeed, the gift has allowed SeagrassNet to expand its work into the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Middle East.

Short also credits the partnership between The New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and the Otto Fund with bringing SeagrassNet and Conservation International together in what has become a fruitful collaboration. "That's an impressive thing for a benefactor to do," said Short.

For more information on SeagrassNet global monitoring, go to www.SeagrassNet.org.

The New Hampshire Charitable Foundation has been improving the quality of life in our communities since 1962. It builds and manages a collection of charitable funds, totaling more than \$400 million, created by individuals, families and corporations. In 2006, the Foundation awarded \$30 million in grants and scholarships. For more information, visit www.nhcf.org.

Conservation International is a non-profit organization whose mission is to conserve the Earth's living heritage -- our global biodiversity -- and to demonstrate that human societies are able to live harmoniously with nature. CI applies innovative science, economics and policy and develops partnerships with like-minded institutions and local and national governments. For more information, go to www.conservation.org.

