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**Philippine seas recognized as “heart of the ocean”
by world’s underwater luminaries**

Divers, filmmakers, nature lovers and marine enthusiasts from all over the world converged in the Philippines from June 12 to June 15, 2009 for the wildly successful 8th *Celebrate the Sea Festival*. This is the record-breaking third consecutive year that the country, known as the “heart of the ocean” for being at the center of the Coral Triangle and home of the most diverse marine ecosystem in the planet, has hosted the prestigious international event.

Thousands trooped to the Manila Ocean Park to be part of the festival, which featured a wide variety of activities—from exhibits and film screenings to seminars and an underwater-themed Mardi Gras. A gala dinner was also held, honoring the awardees of the festival’s numerous competitions and attended by members of the diplomatic community.

During the gala dinner, Undersecretary Cynthia Carrion of the Department of Tourism’s Office of Sports and Wellness Tourism was conferred the title “Ambassador of the Sea” by Michael Aw, founding director of OceaNEnvironment. Carrion was lauded for her untiring efforts in promoting the cause of marine conservation, putting it at the forefront of public consciousness.

“*Celebrate the Sea Festival* is one big move towards generating awareness about the need to protect and preserve not just the Philippines’ marine resources but also the whole world’s. All of us share only one planet, one big ocean—and we need to make sure that future generations will still be able to enjoy the world we live in,” Carrion said.

Aw mentioned that the festival’s art and imagery competition attracted over 5,000 entries from 39 countries, proof of the overwhelming interest and support sparked by the event being held in the Philippines.

A highlight of the festival was the world premiere of *Into the Abyss*, a National Geographic documentary that provided viewers with the first look of previously unseen deep sea creatures of the Celebes Sea, an area that only a few scientists have had a chance to explore.

According to Aw’s book *Philippines: Heart of the Ocean* that was likewise launched in the festival, the Celebes Sea contains the deepest troughs of water in the world and harbors a unique marine biosphere which rivals tropical rainforests in terms of species richness, more than 20,000 feet underwater. His ground-breaking book includes vivid images of the country’s wealth of marine species in various dive spots around the country, such as Verde Island, Puerto Galera, Malapascua, Tubbataha and other exceptional locations.

Because of the extraordinary diversity of marine life in the Philippines, scientists and experts in the festival recognize the country's standing as the world's heart of the ocean. "The Philippines is at the epicenter of our planet's richest genetic province, home to over 550 species of corals, compared to only 60 in the entire Caribbean," said Aw.

Various groups and artists hailing from different provinces paraded in the underwater Mardi Gras and performed in a concert that underscored the importance of caring for the world's seas. Guests were also entertained by the breath-taking mermaid shows at the venue's oceanarium.

Luminaries in marine biology and underwater photography made key presentations, enlightening the general public about fascinating phenomena that happen in the depths of the sea.

Dr. Phil Nuytten, a world-renowned deep sea explorer, discussed Vent-Base Alpha, an undersea habitat complex constructed around a heat vent at the bottom of the ocean. Peter Scoones of the BBC tackled the intricacies of underwater wildlife filming, while David Doubilet gave a colorful talk about the "evolution" of his career as a leading photographer for the National Geographic.

"As stewards of our natural resources, we should make it a point to know more about our seas and oceans. Being knowledgeable about our planet and appreciating our environment are the first steps in protecting our world," says Juris Soliman, Advisor of the Public Relations Society of the Philippines' (PRSP) CSR Committee.

Celebrate the Sea Festival was the highlight of the *Celebrate the Sea* month, officially proclaimed by President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo for the month of June. The non-profit event was produced by OceaNEnvironment Australia, sponsored by the Department of Tourism, PCSSD, Rolex and Manila Ocean Park, and supported by the Public Relations Society of the Philippines and HIM Communications.

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