



PRESS RELEASE

**The Dugong, Seagrass & Coastal Communities Initiative Launched at the
S.O.S: “Save Our Sirenians” Event in Abu Dhabi**

Abu Dhabi, 26 February 2012 – A program to improve livelihoods and create economic opportunity in exchange for the conservation of dugongs and their seagrass habitat was officially launched in Abu Dhabi today. *The Dugong, Seagrass and Coastal Communities Initiative* aims to attract funding partners whose investment in rural coastal communities and local partnerships will return financial and environmental benefits to communities in developing nations. The initiative will provide incentives for conservation activities and environmental safeguarding across the dugong’s range using innovative financial, educational and knowledge transfer tools.

The initiative was launched at the *S.O.S: Save Our Sirenians – Dugongs and West African Manatees* event in Abu Dhabi, which opened with an address from Dr. Thabit Z. Al Abdessalaam, Executive Director of the Marine and Terrestrial Biodiversity Sector, Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi followed by an introduction to the initiative from Dr. Donna Kwan, Programme Officer for the UNEP/CMS Dugong MoU.

Dr. Nicolas J. Pilcher, Technical Advisor for the UNEP/CMS Dugong MoU Secretariat, went on to explain that this approach addresses the joint challenges of 21st century environmental conservation and sustainable development, while maximising the impact of investors’ funding by combining investment with conservation and development tools. The initiative’s flagship species is the dugong, but its broader contribution will be to show how pioneering partnerships among investors, local communities, conservationists and scientists can combine conservation efforts, sustainable development and financial investment to the benefit of all.

Prof. Helene Marsh, Technical Advisor for the UNEP/CMS Dugong MoU Secretariat and internationally recognised expert on sirenians, gave presentations entitled ‘The West African Manatee in Crisis’ and ‘Dugongs at the Edge’. The presentations highlighted the need for coordinated effort in preserving the existence of both of these species, remembering that the dugong’s closest modern relative, the Steller’s sea cow, was hunted to extinction in the 18th century.

The event was organized by the UNEP/CMS Office - Abu Dhabi which services two Memoranda of Understanding (MoU): the Dugong MoU and the African Eurasian Birds of Prey MoU. They operate under the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). The UNEP/CMS Office - Abu Dhabi is funded and hosted by the Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi on behalf of the Government of the United Arab Emirates.



Notes to Editors:

The dugong and the West African manatee are closely related members of the Order Sirenia. The dugong is a strictly herbivorous marine mammal with a dolphin-like tail, whereas the West African manatee lives in freshwater river systems, has paddle-like tail, and may also eat small amounts of fish in addition to vegetation. Key threats to the dugong are incidental catch in artisanal fisheries as well as illegal poaching, while the West African manatee is threatened primarily by the increase in bushmeat consumption. Both species suffer greatly from habitat loss caused by coastal development and climate change, and both species are subject to hunting.

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) works for the conservation of a wide array of endangered migratory animals worldwide through the negotiation and implementation of agreements and action plans. CMS, which acts under the auspices of United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), is a rapidly expanding global biodiversity convention with special expertise in the field of migratory species. At present, 116 countries are Parties to the Convention.

For more information please visit: <http://www.cms.int>

The UNEP/CMS Office - Abu Dhabi oversees the implementation of two agreements – the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Dugongs and their Habitats throughout their Range, and the MOU on African-Eurasian Migratory Birds of Prey. The Dugong MOU came into force on 31 October, 2007 and has already been signed by 21 states.

Current signatories to the UNEP/CMS Dugong MOU are: Australia, Bahrain, Comoros, Eritrea, France (incl. Mayotte and New Caledonia), India, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Myanmar, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, United Republic of Tanzania, Vanuatu, and Yemen.

For more information on the UNEP/CMS Dugong MOU, please visit:
<http://www.cms.int/species/dugong/index.htm>

For more information please contact:

Dr. Donna Kwan
Officer-in-Charge & Programme Officer - Dugongs
UNEP/CMS Office - Abu Dhabi
dkwan@cms.int +971 56 6987830 / +61 428729049

Ms. Jenny Renell
Associate Programme Officer
UNEP/CMS Office - Abu Dhabi
jrenell@cms.int +971 2 6934523