

## **South Asia Coral Reef Task Force (SACRTF) Meeting held on 21<sup>st</sup> December 2007**

21<sup>st</sup> December 2007 was a red letter day in the history of SACEP and the South Asian Seas Programme. It saw the inauguration of a ground breaking activity – Launch of the South Asia Coral Reef Task Force, which is the 2<sup>nd</sup> in the world and the first in the South Asian Region. It also marks the beginning of a new era of activity in the management of Coral Reefs in South Asia which at present is facing severe environmental threats, mainly man made

The Inaugural Meeting of the South Asia Coral Reef Task Force (SACRTF) was held on 21<sup>st</sup> December 2007 in Colombo. The Chief Guest on this occasion was **Hon. Mr. Ahmed Abdullah, Minister of Environment, Energy and Water, Republic of Maldives** and **Hon. Mr. Patali Champika Ranawaka, Minister of Environment & Natural Resources, Government of Sri Lanka** was the Guest of Honour.

The Mission Statement of the Coral Reef Task Force is as follows

***“To actively participate in, and support, the effective implementation of existing national regulations, action plans and strategies for the management of coral reefs and associated ecosystems, and to promote the development of strategic linkages for enhanced regional cooperation, and the establishment of an effective, networked system of marine and coastal protected areas in the South Asia region”.***

Its primary task is to formulate an action plan within existing management frameworks to improve the co-operative management of critical marine habitats. The inclusion of key coral reef stakeholders in the SACRTF will facilitate the exchange of site-based realities to governments, donor organisations, and other relevant fora alike, and will provide environmental information to support policy makers and politicians on a national and regional level, in the development or review of policy. The SACRTF will also undertake focused action to assist countries in transboundary matters and in the attainment of commitments to Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs).

The welcome address was delivered by **Dr. A. A. Boaz**, Director General of South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) who said that SACEP is honoured to host this Task Force at the SACEP Secretariat and pledged its fullest support to ensure the meeting of the objectives of this Task Force

The Patron of the Task Force **H. E. Judge C. G. Weeramantry** Former Vice President of the International Court of Justice was unable to be present as he was overseas and he had sent a message for this meeting which was read by **Mr. Neshan Gunasekera**, Deputy Director, Weeramantry International Centre for Peace, Education & Research. In his speech he praised the efforts of SACEP for launching the SACRTF and highlighted that all this calls for a dissemination of information throughout the region both on the importance of coral reefs and on the dangers to which they are currently exposed, for very often they are damaged unthinkingly without a proper awareness of the irreparable nature of the damage that is being done.

**Hon. Mr. Patali Champika Ranawaka**, Minister of Environment & Natural Resources, Government of Sri Lanka speaking on this occasion said that the Government of Sri Lanka considers this project a timely initiative undertaken by SACEP and are pleased to note the support provided by UNEP through its ICRAN Programme. He also said that the region is also thankful to the European Union for providing financial support.

**Hon. Mr. Ahmed Abdullah**, Minister of Environment Minister of Environment, Energy and Water, Republic of Maldives delivering the keynote address briefed the meeting on the importance of preserving this fragile ecosystem and went on to speak at length on the outcome of the recently concluded Bali Meeting on Climate Change. He said that the outcome of this meeting was very encouraging and that the decisions taken saw new hope for the preservation of the climate for future generations. He commended on the decision taken by the Government of Australia in ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and praised the efforts of the Former Vice President of the USA Mr. Al Gore for his efforts in the field of Climate Change.

He praised the role that SACEP was playing for the conservation and protection of the coral reef in the region and elaborated that the SACRTF was established through extensive consultation with key regional stakeholders. The resulting constitution document endorsed by the participants of the second regional resource coordination workshop held on the 25-27<sup>th</sup> July 2007, in Colombo, Sri Lanka. SACRTF representatives have been selected in accordance with the constitution document and regional nominations.

The establishment of the South Asia Coral Reef Task Force (SACRTF) to facilitate the implementation of regional and international initiatives in the management of coral reefs and associated ecosystems, and to promote collaborative action, and transboundary responses to shared environmental challenges, was endorsed by the country governments of the 5 maritime nations of South Asia, at the SACEP Governing Council Meeting in Nepal, in January 2007.

SACRTF has brought together a vast array of expertise and personnel in the region to guide and meet its objectives. Following major objectives were successfully achieved at the meeting.

- Identify specific activities under each of the SACRTF priority implementation areas and develop a robust work plan
- Inform and update the SACRTF on the Sustainable Livelihoods Enhancement and Diversification (SLED) activities and outcomes in the South Asia MCPA Project
- Identify profile-raising materials required by the SACRTF and the process for their development
- Finalise SACRTF administration issues

The meeting was attended by the national members of the South Asia Coral Reef Task Force from Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Representatives from IMM and IUCN were also represented at the meeting.