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Ecology Project International Alumni Awards Cite Two Student Conservation Projects:

Grants to Fund Study of Fisheries in Mexico and Use of Palm Oil in Borneo

February 3, 2010 Missoula, MT – Ecology Project International (EPI) gave two awards to two of its past participants to help fund projects that seek to protect biodiversity and educate the public, as the first round of its new Alumni Award Program, which provides incentives for its former participants to continue conservation work, rewards them for their efforts, and stimulates conservation work or research that would not be possible otherwise.

Alexis Jackson, a graduate student from University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC), received the \$500 first prize to fund her research on grouper populations and fisheries management in the Gulf of California. The second-place winner, receiving a \$250 award, is a Bishop O'Dowd high school student from Oakland, CA, Elise Zarri. Zarri will be completing her Gold Award from Girl Scouts, with her project to establish a citizen education exhibit at the Oakland Zoo to inform the public of the effects of palm oil harvesting in Borneo, which results in loss of habitat for endangered species like the orangutan, sun bear, and hornbill.

Award winners were selected based on numerous criteria, including their ability to explore creative and innovative concepts, opportunity to develop leadership, and addressing the three goals of EPI: conservation, education, and cultural exchange.

Both Jackson and Zarri were participants in EPI's Costa Rica program. Zarri went on the trip in 2008, which she says "was an amazing experience, because we got to work directly with the Leatherback turtles."

Jackson, who went to Costa Rica with EPI in 2002, is now a PhD candidate in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. She received numerous awards during her undergraduate studies at Yale, and has established herself as a top student at UCSC.

"Alexis is a very special and talented student who holds tremendous promise as a marine scientist," says Jackson's professor Paul Barber, who recommended Jackson for the award.

Executive Director of the Oakland Zoo and Zarri's nominator, Joel Parrott, says Zarri's project "is an excellent example of how an individual can get involved in conservation issues and make

a difference” – which is exactly what EPI strives to do, through its experiential education programs.

Missoula-based EPI currently operates in Costa Rica, Ecuador’s Galapagos Islands, Mexico’s Sea of Cortez and in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem of Montana and Wyoming, engaging students in hands-on learning to explore the ecology of these biodiversity hotspots, and help address critical conservation issues threatening indigenous animals and habitat.

Most EPI participants are local, joined by others drawn from around the world to collaborate with their peers in cultural activities and science research. This cultural exchange is often the most powerful experience of the course, as local students discover and learn to cherish the unique aspects of their environment, and international participants see first-hand how they can impact people around the world.

Students are partnered with working scientists, and contribute to scientific projects focused on improving conservation, such as protecting and monitoring Leatherback sea turtles; restoring native habitat for the giant Galapagos tortoise; collecting data on whales and other marine mammals to create a conservation zone; and restoring migratory corridors for wildlife and surveying whitebark trees for blister rust and pine beetle infection. Teachers, both local to the field site and also visiting (accompanying their students), also learn experiential teaching methods, to enhance scientific learning and literacy in their classrooms.

While living in Costa Rica during the 1990s, EPI co-founders Scott Pankratz and Julie Osborn recognized that despite the ample presence of international research teams and prolific scientific studies, many critical habitats and species continued to decline. The gulf between local people and the scientific community was extensive: sea turtle eggs were sold at local markets and piles of trash washed up on the beach. Most researchers they interacted with were foreigners, and few spoke any Spanish.

Scott had recently finished a graduate program in experiential education at the Teton Science School in Wyoming, and Julie had completed her Master’s in biology at Stanford University. They combined their education and science expertise in 1998 and launched the first EPI course in 2000, involving 61 local Costa Rica youth and their teachers.

To date, more than 6,000 people have participated in EPI’s programs. EPI’s unique approach to environmental education enhances conservation through the creation of a scientifically literate public with direct experience in nature, and a populace that is better equipped to make informed decisions about natural resources important to their community’s economic and environmental health.

For more information about EPI’s work in Missoula and abroad, visit <http://www.ecologyproject.org>, call (406) 721-8784 or email info@ecologyproject.org.

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