

2007 Peter Benchley Shark Conservation Awards

New York, NY, May 11, 2007

The Shark Research Institute created the Peter Benchley Shark Conservation Awards to honor the memory of the late Peter Benchley, and spotlight those who are working internationally to protect sharks as valuable ocean resources.

The Peter Benchley Shark Conservation Awards, sponsored by Rolex and Kandy Kendall, were presented on May 8, 2007, at the famed Explorers Club in New York. The gala event was attended by celebrities and marine conservationists from around the world. The winners of these prestigious awards are Jason Holmberg, Science; Sonja Fordham, Ocean Conservancy; and Rob Stewart, Media.



(left to right) Jason Holmberg, Sonja Fordham, Rob Stewart, Wendy Benchley, and SRI President Stan Waterman

Jason Holmberg — Ecocean, a web-based project, utilizes a pattern-recognition algorithm to identify individual whale sharks based on their body patterns, much like fingerprints. Winner of the Rolex Award for Enterprise, this non-invasive, yet highly accurate and unique research tool monitors the global movements and population size of these highly-migratory and threatened sharks, and encourages public participation. The Ecocean Whale Shark Photo-identification Library is a joint project developed by programmer Jason Holmberg, marine biologist Brad Norman, and NASA scientist Zaven Arzoumanian.

Sonja Fordham, Shark Conservation Program Director for the Ocean Conservancy, Policy Director of the Brussels-based Shark Alliance and Deputy Chair for the IUCN (World Conservation Union) Shark Specialist Group, works to bridge the gap between shark scientists and policy makers. A tireless advocate of shark conservation for the past 15 years, Fordham serves as an advisor to state and federal governments and has led efforts to ban finning and limit shark catch in US waters and adjacent seas.

Rob Stewart — Sharkwater, an internationally-acclaimed documentary film by Rob Stewart, is visually stunning. The film takes viewers into the most shark rich waters of the ocean, exposing the exploitation and corruption surrounding the world's shark populations in the marine reserves of Cocos Island, and the Galapagos Islands. To protect sharks, Stewart teams up with conservationist Paul Watson of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, and the two men risk their lives to show viewers that what is happening in the world's oceans can no longer be ignored. *Sharkwater*, which has been compared to *An Inconvenient Truth*, will open in theaters throughout the USA in September 2007.

“Peter Benchley was much more than the Shark Research Institute’s benefactor, a colleague and friend, he was an eloquent advocate for shark conservation,” said Stan Waterman. In the 1970s, Benchley’s fictional best-seller, "Jaws" -- which Spielberg made into a blockbuster movie -- generated a fear of sharks simply because so little was known about them. By the 1980s, that fear had given away to curiosity, resulting in an unprecedented amount of research on sharks. “In the 1990s, as sharks became target species for Asian markets, scientific data were available to combat threats to sharks — data which existed because of the fascination in sharks that Peter had sparked,” said Marie Levine, Executive Director of the Shark Research Institute. Throughout his life, Peter remained a spokesman for sharks and an ardent shark conservationist.”

Shark Research Institute (SRI) is an international multidisciplinary non-profit organization headquartered in Princeton that sponsors and conducts research on sharks and promotes the conservation of sharks. SRI works to correct misperceptions about sharks and halt the slaughter of up to 100 million sharks annually. One conservation method used by SRI is creating value for sharks as sustainable natural resources for the tourism industry, particularly in developing countries. By so doing, steady revenue streams are generated for local fishers that might otherwise slaughter the sharks for immediate gain. SRI has the oldest and largest whale shark tracking program in the world. Other programs include satellite and radio telemetry, behavioral and DNA studies of sharks, environmental advocacy, publications and public education.

www.sharks.org