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## **Environmental Leaders Announce Whale Shark Festival**

### **A Five-Day Celebration of Culture in Isla Mujeres, Mexico; Preserving a Fragile Marine Ecosystem**

**ISLA MUJERES, MEXICO -- January 13, 2009** – Celebrating the beauty and culture of Isla Mujeres, Mexico, and championing the need to preserve a fragile marine ecosystem, environmental leaders Ceviche Tours, an eco-tourism company; ECOCEAN, a renown nonprofit marine conservation organization; and the Department of Tourism for Isla Mujeres, Mexico, have partnered to announce the Whale Shark Festival, a five-day community extravaganza that showcases the achievements, the traditions and the environmental splendor of Isla Mujeres.

The Festival will be held July 15-19, 2009 in Isla Mujeres, Quintana Roo, Mexico.

The family-friendly Whale Shark Festival will showcase the time-honored dances, local cuisine, nearby businesses and works from local artisans. Guests can also participate in some of the water activities that have made Isla Mujeres a favorite vacation spot: sport fishing, diving and snorkeling tours of the pristine reefs and of course swimming with whale sharks, the largest fish in the world and an endangered species.

A portion of the proceeds from the Whale Shark Festival will be donated to several not-for-profit organizations. They include: ECOCEAN, to further their marine conservation efforts; Amigos de Isla Contoy, which promotes the conservation of Isla Contoy, nature areas and regional projects of the Yucatan peninsula through the sustainable development of local communities and educational programs for the youth of Isla Mujeres; the Isla Mujeres Department of Tourism's educational and sustainable eco-tourism programs.

“The Whale Shark Festival is a true celebration of the islands’ culture, heritage and the beautiful marine habitat that make Isla Mujeres the Jewel of The Yucatan Peninsula,” said Eyder Jahil Hoth Pérez, director of tourism for Isla Mujeres. “We are proud to be partnering with environmental



leaders ECOCEAN, an organization that has been a ferocious advocate for marine life; Ceviche Tours, a crusader for sustainable eco-tourism; Project Domino, a conservation program implemented by the Mexican government; marine researchers based on Isla Contoy and Amigos de Isla Contoy A.C., a non profit organization. All have given so much to our community.”

### Sustainable Eco-Tourism

In addition to celebrating the beauty of Isla Mujeres, the Whale Shark Festival is a concerted effort to raise awareness of the need to preserve the area’s marine ecosystem. It is part of the second largest barrier reef on the planet, and serves as the nursery of the Caribbean and the migratory path of whale sharks as well as sea turtles, water fowl and game fishes.

“Sustainable eco-tourism engages guests in the effort to preserve the indigenous culture of Isla Mujeres, their way of life and the marine environment,” said John Vater, who co-founded Ceviche Tours with his wife, Adriana, and longtime friend and Isla Mujeres native Louis “Cuco” Refugo and his family. “Fishing was the key industry for local Islanders; it’s how they eat, how they make money. We work with them helping to promote environmental preservation and sustainable eco-tourism as the future for the Island’s people and the economy to sustain Isla Mujeres for generations to come.”

### Getting Kids Involved in Saving the Planet

The Whale Shark Festival will include several fun activities for children geared toward getting the kids excited about environmentalism. “Educating children about the importance of recycling, showing them how they can get involved -- with beach cleanups, and just the choices they make every day – is vital to our future,” said Catalina Galindo de Prince, executive director of Amigos de Isla Contoy, A.C. “We are proud to be involved in the Whale Shark Festival and are planning great activities to get kids involved and learn more.”

### Tourists as “Citizen Scientists”

Attendees of the Whale Shark Festival can join the worldwide effort to protect and preserve the whale sharks. Guests participating in Ceviche Tours whale shark excursions can add their photos to ECOCEAN’s growing Whale Shark Photo-Identification Library Project, which can be found at [www.whaleshark.org](http://www.whaleshark.org). The Project is a visual database of the unique markings that allow scientists to indentify – and track – individual whale sharks. The Project incorporates a worldwide network of eco-tourism sites, with regional databases connected to the global Photo Identification Library

By contributing their excursion photos of whale sharks to the Library, guests take part in the important efforts to identify, track and protect this endangered species as “Citizen Scientists.”

“This is one of the best locations in the world to research this shark and learn more about the species to help ensure their long-term conservation,” said Brad Norman, ECOCEAN founder and noted marine conservationist. “Importantly, we can engage members of the public (especially eco-tourists) in this program, by employing the goodwill of people to become involved in a conservation project that is easy, inexpensive, and has already shown a great level of success i.e. via the ECOCEAN Whale Shark photo-identification Library project.”

### Isla Mujeres: An Environmental and Archaeological Treasure

The Island of Isla Mujeres is a small municipality located north of the State of Quintana Roo, Mexico. Nearby Isla Contoy is home to a National Park with more than 152 species of local and migratory birds, 14 reptile species, 234 species of fish and 98 plant species.

Mayan antiquities, including ceramics, utensils made from conch shells, are frequently found in Isla Mujeres. The Mayan archaeological site “El Meco” and the Ixchell Mayan temple can be found here, dating from 200-300 A.D. Isla Mujeres was also the site of many sea battles between colonial ships

and pirates. Shipwrecks abound for exploration.

#### A Celebration of Life and Culture

The Whale Shark Festival will showcase local businesses and the variety of beauty, the wide array of activities that can be found in Isla Mujeres.

For more information about the Whale Shark Festival, visit [www.whalesharkfest.com](http://www.whalesharkfest.com), [www.mexicowhalesharkfest.com](http://www.mexicowhalesharkfest.com), or contact Eyder Jahil Hoth Pérez, director of tourism for Isla Mujeres, at [eyder\\_jahil@hotmail.com](mailto:eyder_jahil@hotmail.com). Information about Isla Mujeres can be found at [www.islamujeres.gob.mx](http://www.islamujeres.gob.mx).

#### About ECOCEAN

ECOCEAN Inc. is a not-for-profit association working to generate public awareness for marine conservation issues. ECOCEAN also encourages and facilitates quality research to provide important information (data) to assist with 'best practice' management for the future conservation of the marine ecosystem.

At present, the primary interests of ECOCEAN include increased protection for the threatened whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*) and the biodiversity of Ningaloo Marine Park in Western Australia. For more information please visit [www.ecocean.org](http://www.ecocean.org).

#### About Amigos de Isla Contoy

Amigos de Isla Contoy was founded on October of 1994 to promote the conservation of Isla Contoy, nature areas and regional projects of the Yucatan peninsula through the sustainable development of local communities in collaboration with the National Commission of Nature Protected Areas. Amigos de Isla Contoy develops environmental education programs for the entire community, including workshops to the 2,800 students (Kindergarten through high school) of the Island, their parents, staff from hotels, restaurants, tourist coops, and stores.

With a special focus on educating children, Amigos de Isla Contoy has also initiated a successful Conservation of Coral Reefs program for all students, beach cleanups, plays that teach about recycling and an elementary program on the environment with materials for teachers.

Their new Community Environmental Education Center in Isla Mujeres offers workshops for adults and children to further their mission of environmental education. For more information, visit [www.amigosdeislacontoy.org](http://www.amigosdeislacontoy.org).

#### About Ceviche Tours

Ceviche Tours provides sustainable eco-tourism to the indigenous peoples of Isla Mujeres, Mexico. Founded by John and Adriana Vater of Spa Adriana in Huntington Village, NY, with longtime friend and Isla Mujeres native Luis Refugio "Cuco" Sanchez and his family, Ceviche Tours works with the indigenous islanders of Isla Mujeres to help preserve their culture and maintain the integrity and beauty of the surrounding marine environment.

Through education and photo identification efforts, Ceviche Tours joins the worldwide effort to protect and preserve whale sharks. As participants on our whale shark tours, guests are invited to be part of those identification and tracking efforts.

For more information, please contact [www.cevichetours.com](http://www.cevichetours.com).

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