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Press Release

For Immediate Release

Protected Buffer Zone Annulled in Brazil's Abrolhos Marine Park *Southern Atlantic's richest marine biodiversity at risk*

Brazil, June 19, 2007— A Brazilian judge has annulled the Abrolhos National Marine Park Buffer Zone, just one year after its creation. The decision ruled in favor of the municipalities of Caravelas and Nova Viçosa, which had petitioned the court to eliminate the zone on behalf of economic interests in the region. As a result of losing its protected status, Abrolhos's rich and unique ecosystems are threatened by environmental destructive activities, such as industrial shrimp farming and oil and gas production. The Abrolhos archipelago, located off-shore of the coastal town of Caravelas in the far south of Bahia, NE Brazil, comprises five islands of volcanic origin

The creation of the Abrolhos Marine National Park Buffer Zone was officially decreed by the Brazilian Federal Institute of Environment and Renewable Resources (IBAMA) on May 18, 2006. Under Brazilian law, federal protected area buffer zones require a special permit from environmental authorities for any economic use. Covering an area of nearly 95,000 sq. km (36,680.705 sq.mi.), the creation of the buffer zone was celebrated by scientists and environmental activists as a great conservation achievement in the region.

In addition to the complex of small islands and coral and algal reefs, the buffer zone included *restingas* (a uniquely Brazilian ecosystem of sparsely vegetated sand ridges) and mangrove forests that are important nursery areas for Abrolhos' aquatic fauna. The protective limitations within the buffer zone stimulated opposition from some groups, such as shrimp farmers from the COOPEX Cooperative, who have acquired 1,517 hectares (3,750 acres) of mangrove and *restingas* in the area and are trying to develop the largest shrimp farm yet planned for Brazil.

"It's important to note that the judge's decision is about how the buffer zone was created. He concluded that buffer zones must be created by a presidential decree or by a resolution from CONAMA (the Brazilian Environmental Council). In fact, neither the size of the buffer zone nor its limitations were mentioned as problematic by the judge," said Marcello Lourenço, Abrolhos Park manager. "Abrolhos buffer zone limitations were defined after years of discussion with members of the government, NGOs and local communities. They were established based on very detailed studies and assessments of potential impacts of oil spills in the region," he recalled.

According to Guilherme Dutra, Marine Program Director of Conservation International–Brazil, it's important to understand marine environment dynamics. "Marine ecosystems are very complex due to the influence of winds, marine currents and other processes. There are numerous species that complete their life cycles in different marine habitats, demonstrating the importance of conservation policies for interdependent ecosystems, such as coral reefs and mangroves. That's why the Abrolhos buffer zone covers around 95,000 sq. km (36,680.705 sq.mi.)."

Despite its importance, the buffer zone has been facing strong opposition from certain political sectors linked to economic interests in the region. In May 2006, six senators from the states of Bahia and Espírito Santo proposed a Legislative Decree to annul the buffer zone. The Decree's author was Senator Joao Batista Motta (PSDB/ES), who has been accused of acting in his own and his family's interests. According to a report published by a notable Brazilian magazine (Carta Capital), João Batista Motta, his wife, two of his sons and two of his granddaughters bought into a part of the COOPEX shrimp farming project.

Environmental activists expect the Brazilian government to take a stand on this issue and to find the appropriate legal means to reestablish the buffer zone in order to ensure Abrolhos' protection. They are also seeking the rapid creation of the Cassurubá Extractive Reserve in the mangroves of the Abrolhos region.

Notes to Editor:

About the Abrolhos Region: At approximately 56,000 sq. km (36,680.705 sq.mi.), Abrolhos is comprised of a mosaic of marine and coastal environments bordered by remnants of Atlantic rainforest, including coral reefs, algal banks, mangroves, beaches and *restingas*. The region has the largest concentration of coral reefs in the South Atlantic, with various endemic species, including brain coral, crustaceans and mollusks, as well as marine turtles and mammals threatened by extinction. In addition, it is the location preferred by humpback whales for reproduction and nursing their young.

In 2002, the Abrolhos region was declared an area of Extreme Biological Importance by the Brazilian Ministry of Environment, based on the Brazilian commitment to the Convention on Biodiversity. Brazil's first National Marine Park was created exactly in this region in 1983, along the islands which compose the Abrolhos Archipelago, where some of the most important colonies of marine birds in the country are encountered.

The area not only holds conservation significance, but its natural resources directly support approximately 20,000 people who are involved in artisanal fishing and tourism, activities which depend on a healthy environment.

About Buffer Zones in Brazil: A buffer zone constitutes "the area surrounding a conservation unit, where human activities are subject to specific norms and restrictions, with the intent of minimizing negative impacts on the unit" (law no. 9.985/00 of the National System of Conservation Units). Human activities proposed for any Buffer Zone must pass through stringent permitting by the Environmental Institutes at the Federal level.

Photos and map of Abrolhos Marine Park and Buffer Zone are available at http://downloads.conservation.org.br/rmoura/abrolhos_photos_english.zip.

Suggested sources:

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