

The Peter Benchley Shark Conservation Awards 2007



Left to right: The Award winners: Jason Holmberg, Sonja Forham, and Rob Stewart. Also pictured are Wendy Benchley and SRI president Stan Waterman.

SRI 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 Awards were presented on May 8, 2007, at the famed Explorers Club in New York. The gala event was attended by the Benchley family, Explorer Club and SRI members, marine conservationists, celebrities, and friends.

The Awards were presented in three divisions: Science, Advocacy and Media, and included grants totaling \$4,500.

- **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 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.

- ***Sharkwater***, an internationally-acclaimed documentary film by Rob Stewart, is visually stunning. The film exposes the exploitation and corruption surrounding shark populations in the marine reserves of Cocos Island, Costa Rica 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 premiere in theaters across 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. 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. Throughout his life, Peter remained a spokesman for sharks and an ardent shark conservationist.

The 2007 Peter Benchley Shark Conservation Award Ceremony was sponsored, in part, by Kandy Kendall and Rolex Watch USA.

