Press release: Friday 21st July 2017

Supporting coastal communities in Southeast Asia

A group of UK researchers have been awarded funding from the Research Councils UK’s £225 million Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) [http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/media/news/170721/] to help support coastal communities in East and South East (E/SE) Asia that depend on healthy and diverse marine ecosystems for food, livelihoods, their health and well-being.

The Blue Communities project, led by Plymouth Marine Laboratory in collaboration with the University of Plymouth, the University of Exeter, international partners, UK non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local stakeholders (please see notes for full partner list), will help build long-term research capability for marine planning over the next 4 years in E/SE Asia and, in doing so, support local coastal communities.

 Millions of people across the globe rely on marine and coastal ecosystems for food, employment and their general well-being. However, the marine environment is under immense pressure from the multiple, and often conflicting, needs of the people that use it. In E/SE Asia, where marine activities are important contributors of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), marine spatial planning involving coordinated decision-making has been highlighted as a key requirement for a sustainable future.

Through academic-stakeholder collaborations and community co-creation, Blue Communities will support the development, implementation and ongoing management of initiatives that promote the sustainable use of marine resources. One of the most important aspects of this project is effective and culturally-sensitive relationship building with the wide-ranging stakeholders to engender trust between all parties and to underpin up-take of the marine management strategies developed over the course of the project.

The Blue Communities team will focus their work on case study areas in Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, China and Malaysia. These identified areas are already designated as ‘UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Reserves’ [http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/biosphere-reserves/] or marine parks and there will be strong links forged between them and the North Devon Biosphere Reserve. These ‘science for sustainability’ support sites provide an established, collaborative infrastructure in which initiatives can be developed and tested alongside the local stakeholders, with an aim to then promote and trial with surrounding communities.
Professor Mel Austen, Blue Communities Principal Investigator and a Head of Science at Plymouth Marine Laboratory, comments: ‘We are excited to have been awarded the GCRF funding and we look forward to working and sharing knowledge with our South East Asian partners. We aim to compare the unique features, existing management strategies and local challenges for each of the case study sites, and then identify successful initiatives and best-practice that may also be beneficial in other areas.’

Professor Hoang Tri, chair of Vietnam’s National Committee for Man and Biosphere Program and Director of Center for Environmental Research and Education at the Hanoi National University of Education, noted: ‘This fund will be valuable to do research and study for global and national priorities for sustainability science, in both methodological development and good practices.’

Dr Jito Sugardjito, Blue Communities partner and Director of the Centre for Sustainable Energy and Resources Management (CSERM) at Universitas Nasional in Indonesia, remarked: ‘As a maritime nation, the action research to be conducted in our area will produce a great net benefit to the country’s effort in mitigating climate change and establishing community resilience towards natural and social challenges through sustainable livelihood and resources management. It will also become a springboard for continuous capacity building and knowledge exchange between researchers and practitioners in Indonesia and the United Kingdom.’

Professor Goh, Hong Ching, Blue Communities partner and senior lecturer at the University of Malaya, continued: ‘We look forward to a productive collaboration and effective knowledge sharing with our UK and regional counterparts. Heartfelt thanks to RCUK for granting our proposal, and to our UK research partners for initiating and leading this project.’

Professor Lora Fleming, Co-Investigator of Blue Communities and Director of the European Centre for Environment & Human Health at the University of Exeter Medical School, stated: ‘The scientific and policy communities are really starting to appreciate how important the health of our seas and oceans are for human health and wellbeing in terms of both risks and opportunities. This is a new and exciting opportunity for us to work closely with partners in South East Asia to explore these issues in a region where so many people’s health is connected to marine ecosystems.’

Dr Sabine Pahl, Co-Investigator of Blue Communities and scientist at the University of Plymouth, concluded: ‘The human dimension is crucial in marine planning, in terms of decisions, perceptions and behaviours that affect the health of ecosystems and the people attached to them. Blue Communities will include behavioural science theory and methods to develop powerful communication and engagement methods and outputs.’

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Notes to Editors

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Plymouth Marine Laboratory (www.pml.ac.uk, @PlymouthMarine)
PML is an independent, impartial provider of scientific research and contract services relating to the marine environment. PML focuses on understanding how marine ecosystems function, their role in the Earth system and how we can protect this important environment for the prosperity of future generations.

A truly interdisciplinary marine research centre, PML delivers highly innovative research and solutions for national and international marine and coastal programmes. PML’s research is timely, highly relevant to UK and international societal needs and has at its core the mission to contribute to issues concerned with understanding global change and the health and sustainability of marine ecosystems.

University of Plymouth (www.plymouth.ac.uk)
The University of Plymouth is renowned for high quality, internationally-leading education, research and innovation.

With a mission to Advance Knowledge and Transform Lives, Plymouth is a *top 50 research university with clusters of world class research across a wide range of disciplines including marine science and engineering, medicine, robotics and psychology. A twice winner of the Queen’s Anniversary Prize for Higher Education, the University of Plymouth continues to grow in stature and reputation.

It has a strong track record for teaching and learning excellence, and has one of the highest numbers of National Teaching Fellows of any UK university. With 21,000 students, and a further 17,000 studying for a Plymouth degree at partner institutions in the UK and around the world, and over 100,000 alumni pursuing their chosen careers globally, it has a growing global presence.

*Research Fortnight Research Power League Table 2014.
University of Exeter (www.exeter.ac.uk)
The University of Exeter is a Russell Group university that combines world-class research with very high levels of student satisfaction. Exeter has over 21,000 students and is in the top one per cent of universities worldwide. Exeter is also ranked 9th in The Times and The Sunday Times Good University Guide 2017 and 13th in the Guardian University Guide 2018. In the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), the University ranked 16th nationally, with 98% of its research rated as being of international quality, while in 2017, Exeter was awarded a Gold rating in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) assessment. Exeter was named The Times and The Sunday Times Sports University of the Year 2015-16, in recognition of excellence in performance, education and research. Exeter was The Sunday Times University of the Year 2012-13.

The University launched its flagship Living Systems Institute in 2016, a world-class, interdisciplinary research community that will revolutionise the diagnosis and treatment of diseases. This follows recent investments of more than £350 million worth of new facilities across its campuses in recent years; including landmark new student services centres - the Forum in Exeter and The Exchange on the Penryn Campus in Cornwall, together with world-class new facilities for Biosciences, the Business School and the Environment and Sustainability Institute.

Full project partners list

- Plymouth Marine Laboratory
- Plymouth University
- University of Exeter
- Center for Environmental Research and Education (CERE), Hanoi National University of Education
- The Centre for Sustainable Energy and Resources Management Universitas Nasional (CSERM-UNAS)
- Western Philippines University College of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences
- University of Malaya’s Sustainability Science Research Cluster
- Blue Ventures Conservation
- International Pole and Line Foundation
- North Devon Biosphere Reserve