

Case Studies of the 2005 Seed Award Recipients

Elisabeth Heid

Harvesting Seabuckthorn at the Top of the World

Full Version



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About the author

Elisabeth Heid is a Research Associate with the Global Public Policy Institute. Her current research interests include public-private partnerships and transparency initiatives in the extractive industries. Elisabeth is also completing a two year graduate program in international relations offered jointly by Humboldt University Berlin, the Free University Berlin and the University of Potsdam (M.A. expected August 2006). She previously studied political science, sociology and law at the University of Freiburg and at St. Hilda's College, Oxford University. Elisabeth receives a fellowship from the German National Merit Foundation. She can be contacted at ehaid@gppi.net.

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For a short version of this case study, please consult the Seed Initiative Partnership Report 2006 "Partnerships for Sustainable Development: On the Road to Implementation" at www.gppi.net/partnershipreport.

Harvesting Seabuckthorn at the Top of the World

Harvesting Seabuckthorn at the Top of the World is a partnership committed to combatting land degradation and securing income-generation for the local population in Upper and Lower Mustang, Nepal. An NGO, a hospital, and a Nepali university have joined forces with local communities to grow and collect the seabuckthorn berry, to research seabuckthorn's medicinal and cosmetic purposes, and to sell seabuckthorn products on national and international markets.

BACKGROUND

Since 1996, the Kingdom of Nepal finds itself caught in a civil war; a dispute pitting the monarchist government, headed by King Gyanendra, against Maoist insurgent groups. More than 11,500 people have been killed in the ongoing conflict. As a result of the war, most rural development activities have ceased. This has further impaired the livelihoods of Nepalese rural communities, already debilitated by a deeply-entrenched caste system that affords little opportunity for social mobility.

Bordering on Tibet and surrounded by 6000 metre high mountain range lies the former Kingdom of Mustang, now a part of Nepal. Though Mustang is not directly affected by the ongoing hostilities in Nepal, it is a particularly poor area. Partly, this is because of its harsh climate: The local population resides in the mountain areas for six months during the summer and migrates down to the lowlands during the winter, when the mountains are inaccessible. The Mustang region compensates for its socio-economic poverty with its natural and cultural wealth. The area is home to many indigenous grasses and herbs, wild animals as well as numerous 14th, 15th and 16th century

monasteries, many of them intact. Its capital, Lo Manthang, houses a medieval palace. The Upper Mustang plateau was closed to foreigners until 1992, when a limited number of tourists – a thousand per year – were granted access. This presents great potential for economic development to the local population.

Susanne von der Heide, a German national, has spent a large amount of time, both privately and professionally, in Nepal's Mustang area for the past two decades. Her NGO, HimalAsia, had been working on securing income-generation for the local population by supporting local schools and promoting the traditional craftsmanship of the indigenous people.

During her stays in Lower and Upper Mustang, Susanne saw how fond tourists were of the seabuckthorn juice that was offered to visitors by locals at a few trekking lodges. Seabuckthorn, also known as Sea Berry, is a deciduous shrub that produces edible and nutritious berries. Unlike the Common seabuckthorn, which grows throughout Europe and Asia, two varieties are restricted to the Himalaya region: *Hippophae salicifolia* (Willow-leaved seabuckthorn) grows at high altitudes in dry

valleys. *Hippophae tibetana* (Tibetan seabuckthorn) occurs in the same area, but at even higher altitudes in the alpine zone.

In recent years, seabuckthorn has been receiving attention from both the academic community and business for its medicinal and cosmetic properties. The International seabuckthorn Association (ISA) was founded in February 2001 at the International Workshop on seabuckthorn, held in New Delhi, India. Its goal is to improve coordination amongst researchers and practitioners studying seabuckthorn in Europe, Asia, and America. The first international congress on seabuckthorn took place in Berlin in 2003, and a further one was held in Beijing in 2005.

This interest in seabuckthorn is promising for the Mustang area, where the shrub grows wildly. Danida, the Danish International Development Agency, had briefly conducted a seabuckthorn project which included teaching locals how to use preservatives in seabuckthorn juice. However, this project was not continued. Indeed, no international development organisation sought to develop a sustainable seabuckthorn project.

Yet there are several benefits to promoting commercial seabuckthorn production in the Mustang region. First, seabuckthorn promises to counteract the high level of land degradation, soil erosion, and desertification from which the Mustang region, and other areas of Nepal, suffer. As seabuckthorn plants exhibit vigorous root growth, they could play a significant role in ecological rehabilitation. Moreover,

seabuckthorn might provide the rural population in the Mustang region with a sustainable source of income, thus combating poverty.

CREATING THE PARTNERSHIP

When aid agencies took no action to commercialise seabuckthorn production in Nepal, Susanne von der Heide took matters into her own hands. In 2000, Susanne became Coordinator for Capacity Building and Management for HimalAsia. She used her new position to begin establishing a partnership for promoting and commercialising seabuckthorn production in Mustang.

However, the project encountered a number of obstacles:

The natural population of Seabuckthorn does not suffice for commercialisation. A solution is to artificially cultivate seabuckthorn with a view to planting the shrub in the wild in order to combat land degradation. This endeavour requires that the partnership first grows seabuckthorn in nurseries. The few previous trials at artificial cultivation had yielded mixed results: 50 to 70% of the plants died. Even so, finding a more rigorous and successful technique necessitates further attempts at growing seabuckthorn.

In addition to possible degradation, a second obstacle exists in selling seabuckthorn juice on national and international markets. The remoteness of the Mustang region prevents such efforts from becoming commercially viable: Transporting the juice to a larger market requires a five to six day walk; the alternative, transport by helicopter, is too costly.

Susanne began exploring other uses of seabuckthorn: First, dried seabuckthorn can be used to make tea. Second, the juice and trestler of the berry can be used to produce seed and pulp oil. Studies had shown that the high altitude at which Himalayan seabuckthorn grows makes its oil amongst the highest-quality in the world, with high concentrations of beta-carotene, omega-3 fatty acids, and vitamins A, C, D, E, and K.

Susanne von der Heide decided that launching a pilot project with a select number of partners would be worthwhile. She approached three community-based cooperatives in Upper Mustang about the prospects of growing seabuckthorn in nurseries. Susanne had previously worked with these groups on capacity-building projects. Susanne further collaborated with Meena Rajbhandari, Assistant for Natural Heritage Projects at RECAST, the Tribhuvan University of Nepal's Research Centre for Applied Science and Technology. RECAST is an important partner because it has the oil presses and expertise needed to extract oil from seabuckthorn berries and trestler. Moreover, Meena support for the partnership is essential in that she is able to oversee harvests and could coordinate partnership activities in the long-run.

The partnership's objective is to create small and medium-sized enterprises in Nepal that grow and harvest seabuckthorn. Initially, this produce will be sold as juice and oil on the local market. Eventually, the partnership hopes to sell seabuckthorn oil and tea to international pharmaceutical and cosmetics companies. Successful

marketing will require that the partnership encourage research on the ecological, medicinal, and cosmetic benefits of seabuckthorn. Finally, planting seabuckthorn shrubs should promote ecological rehabilitation in the Mustang area by combating soil erosion and desertification.

DEVELOPING THE PARTNERSHIP

Growing and Harvesting Seabuckthorn

The pilot project was launched with a view to realising the partnership's first objective: creating SMEs that will grow and/or harvest seabuckthorn. In 2003, two cooperatives based in Upper Mustang and a further cooperative in Lower Mustang set up three seabuckthorn nurseries. HimalAsia provided assistance by supplying each cooperative with 3,000 polybags of seabuckthorn seed. It also offered training on how to plant and how to take care of the seeds and plants. The nurseries were established in cooperation with officers from the Forest Department/Annapurna Conservation Area Project, as is required by Nepalese law.

The harvest of the seabuckthorn berries planted in the nurseries will take some time yet: the first harvest will be possible five years after planting (in 2008/9). In order to bridge this period and to teach the local population about the harvest and uses of seabuckthorn, the partners decided to also harvest wild-growing seabuckthorn. A priority is to convey sustainable harvesting techniques that prevent the depletion of seabuckthorn in Nepal.

To do so, HimalAsia formed three Women's Biodiversity Conservation Committees in three villages in Mustang. Members of these cooperatives are women from predominantly low-income groups who find it particularly hard to secure sustainable livelihoods.

The cooperatives began forest-harvesting in summer and autumn 2004, with the cooperation of local authorities. HimalAsia purchased berry trester, seed, and pulp from the women's cooperatives. The process of collecting, weighing, and selling was documented carefully, in view of the fact that such transparency will be necessary for future international certification of seabuckthorn products.

The seabuckthorn was transported by HimalAsia to Kathmandu, where RECAST used them to extract pulp oil from juice and trester and seed oil. HimalAsia taught nursery gardeners and forest harvesters how to dry seabuckthorn trester and leaves for tea and how to prepare seabuckthorn juice. HimalAsia also engaged in an awareness raising campaign in villages in Mustang, introducing seabuckthorn and drawing attention to its uses and commercial prospects.

Villages elsewhere in the Mustang region have expressed an interest in joining the partnership. HimalAsia and the Ama Sama (Mother) Group established a further seabuckthorn nursery in a lower Mustang village in 2005. This complements the existent wild seabuckthorn forest in the area, which is relatively small. The creation of further seabuckthorn nurseries will be delayed until further funding is secured and the pilot studies have proven to be successful.

Developing local and international markets for Seabuckthorn

In order to provide local communities in Lower and Upper Mustang with a source of income, sustainable markets – both local and international – need to be developed for seabuckthorn. Locally, the women's cooperatives are selling juice from seabuckthorn berries to lodge owners in Upper Mustang, as was done in the past. One litre of unrefined, thick seabuckthorn syrup (which can be produced within half an hour by harvesting one seabuckthorn tree) can be sold to lodge owners at a price of 100 Nepali Rupee (NR).¹ 15 to 20 litres of syrup can then be produced from a single litre of unrefined seabuckthorn juice, amounting to sales bringing in approximately 5000,- to 5500,- NR.

However, the partnership is keen to develop further local markets for seabuckthorn: Seabuckthorn oil produced by RECAST has been given to the Interplast Hospital. The Sushma Koirala/Interplast Hospital for Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Nepal's only hospital for reconstructive surgery, uses the seabuckthorn oil to test its effectiveness for treating scars and burns. This cooperation was expanded in spring 2005, by means of a joint HimalAsia-Interplast research programme to scientifically determine the effectiveness of seabuckthorn seed oil for treating burns and scars.

HimalAsia is also collaborating with the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), Nepal's first and

¹ 1 US Dollar is approximately 70 to 75 Nepali Rupee.

largest conservation area. One idea is to create a herbal Amchi clinic at the site of one of the three pilot nurseries. The local Amchi and his two sons are doctors of traditional Sowaigpa, or Himalayan Amchi, medicine. Such a traditional herbal medicine clinic would act as a centre for cultivating, storing, and supplying traditional herbs, including seabuckthorn. Nepalese amchis have 84 different medicinal uses for seabuckthorn.

Susanne von der Heide has further contacted MUSE, a seabuckthorn cooperative situated in Spiti, Himachal Pradesh (North India), on the part of the Nepalese cooperatives. The groups are currently discussing a cooperation that would bring together producers in order to exchange expertise and to stabilise the price of seabuckthorn on the local and regional markets.

Due to the high costs of transporting seabuckthorn juice, the partnership's international marketing efforts focus on tea and oil. Work on establishing an international market for these products is just beginning. Susanne will be presenting the seabuckthorn tea, mixed with local rosehip or wild apricot tea, at Germany's *Biofachmesse*, a natural food fair, in February 2006.

Susanne von der Heide has created small samples of a cosmetic cream, which includes seabuckthorn oil and apricot oil. She has approached several cosmetics firms with her products. However, both companies need to see the product before purchase, so as to ensure that quality-standards are met.

An obstacle to company investment is that it is still too early to make

predictions on the quantity of seabuckthorn the partnership can produce. The first nursery-grown seabuckthorn won't be harvested until 2008 and it is uncertain how many of the plants will survive and how many produce berries yearly or only every other year. Making predictions about the amount of wild seabuckthorn is also difficult; though the size of forests could be measured using GPS, here too there is no way of knowing "from afar" whether trees produce berries annually or biannually. This makes it difficult for Susanne von der Heide to present a reliable business plan of the type companies require for investments.

A further impediment to more extensive international marketing of the seabuckthorn partnership is the unstable political environment in Nepal, particularly since the 1996 Maoist insurgency. The Mustang region, in which the partnership operates, is currently fully under government control. Even so, the political instability in the country is unattractive to investors "Even though Mustang is fully controlled and not directly affected by Maoist rebels", Vijaya Singh of UNDP comments, "investors fear that the insurgency may spread. In districts of Nepal occupied by the Maoists, such as Dolpa, Maoists fully control the medicinal plant trade, demanding taxes of harvesters and middlemen."

Encouraging Research on Seabuckthorn

The seabuckthorn partnership's third stand of activity – encouraging research on the medicinal, health, and environmental qualities of seabuckthorn – goes hand in hand with its efforts at developing international markets for the

product. The partnership cooperates with a number of university institutes for this purpose:

Tribhuvan University's RECAST Institute (Kathmandu, Nepal) and HimalAsia are researching centrifugal and cold oil pressing methods that would meet quality standards required on the international market. They are also testing oil extraction methods appropriate to the local market, and are working on creating soap from seabuckthorn oil.

HimalAsia, RECAST, and the Tribhuvan University's Department of Botany are researching the medicinal qualities of herbal plants, including seabuckthorn. The partnership also benefits from research conducted by the Hill Agricultural Research and Extension Centre in North India on how to simplify seabuckthorn harvesting.

Finally, HimalAsia is cooperating with the Institute for Technology in the Tropics (ITT) at Cologne's University of Applied Sciences (Germany). The ITT's climate change programme studies how seabuckthorn, with its vigorous root growth, can be used to prevent landslides. Through this contact, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) has financed the post-graduate studies of a RECAST engineer at the ITT. In the future, the ITT may be able to send researchers from Germany to Nepal to carry out on-site research.

Plans for Developing the Partnership

Preliminary testing of the seabuckthorn oil produced by RECAST shows that it is of a very high quality, in part due to the high altitude at which Nepalese

seabuckthorn grows. The seabuckthorn oil contains high quantities of beta-carotene, omega-3 fatty acids, and the vitamins, C, D, E, and K.

However, researchers have pointed out to HimalAsia that in order to meet the high quality standards needed to export seabuckthorn on the international market, the berries must not be exposed to direct sunlight when they are drying – sunlight can destroy many of the fruit's nutrients. Once the partnership harvests larger amounts of seabuckthorn, they might have to invest in awnings or tunnel dryers to dry the seabuckthorn properly.

One problem is that the seabuckthorn oil produced by RECAST is not cold-pressed. Cold-pressing will be necessary for oil to be attractive on the international market. The partnership would therefore like to purchase two cold-pressing machines. This would also allow local communities to benefit from the direct sale of oil. It would also forgo current costs of transporting berries and trestler to RECAST for pressing, allowing the local communities to make a larger profit.

However, purchasing such an oil-pressing machine presents a major challenge: one cold-pressing oil machine costs US\$ 9,000. HimalAsia and RECAST continue to explore the possibility of developing their own cold-pressing machines; but initially, they will have to be purchased on the international market.

Once the partners have successfully produced properly dried and cold-pressed seabuckthorn oil, RECAST will conduct another round of quality

testing. This feasibility study will allow the partnership to make more concrete predictions on the quality and quantity of oil produced by the seabuckthorn.

Growing seabuckthorn on a larger piece of land in the Annapurna Conservation Area Project would enable the seabuckthorn partnership to expand once the nurseries begin to really flourish. Doing so would require securing the approval of government as well as sufficient funding. In order to grow, the partnership also requires more skilled gardeners to train locals in setting up and taking care of nurseries. The training of gardeners is a further field that may soon be supported by the Seed Initiative.

Originally, Susanne presented the seabuckthorn project to Vijaya Singh of UNDP Nepal. UNDP subsequently recommended the partnership to the Seed Awards. In Nepal, UNDP is managing the Upper Mustang Biodiversity Conservation Project, which aims at conserving local monasteries, ensuring a favourable balance between wild and grazing animals, and skills-training for the local population. As the seabuckthorn partnership expands, UNDP may be able to support the project, either financially or in-kind, within the framework of its activities in Upper Mustang.

INSTITUTIONALIZING THE PARTNERSHIP

Structures

The governance structures of the partnership are largely informal. There exist no formal agreements between HimalAsia, as the primary project partner, and the individual

cooperatives creating seabuckthorn nurseries or collecting wild seabuckthorn. However, HimalAsia has memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and prepares annual reports for its donor organisations. Moreover, HimalAsia has an MOU with its local partner RECAST at the Tribhuvan University. These MOUs are not specific to the partnership, but are rather more general cooperation agreements. Donors transfer money to HimalAsia, who in turn pass the fund on to participating cooperatives according to legal and transparent processes that comply with German law.

All partner institutions are legal entities in their own right: HimalAsia is a German-registered charity; RECAST is a research institute at Tribhuvan University. The individual nursery projects are supervised by local communities. Local government officials have been invited to inspect the nurseries and supervise forest harvesting.

Procedures

Much of the coordination amongst project partners occurs via HimalAsia, particularly its Coordinator for Capacity Building and Management, Susanne von der Heide. Communication between the participating cooperatives is relatively limited, due to the geographic distance between them.

Susanne von der Heide sees one advantage in her taking the lead in parts of the partnership governance: Lower and Upper Mustang's population comprises several ethnic groups (Thakali, Baragaunle, and Lopa), origins (Nepalese and Tibetan), and languages (Tibetan, Thakali and Nepali), which can cause

frictions. "As a foreigner well acquainted with Mustang's various ethnic groups", she says, "I am able to bridge differences and promote understanding." For example, Susanne von der Heide invited Baragaunle from the Tiri village to visit and learn from the experiences of the Thakali from the Ku Tsap Ter Nga monastery – who had been the first to establish seabuckthorn nurseries.

Susanne von der Heide also largely conducts the task of finding new partners, particularly international ones,. She looks for partners with the individual strands of the project in mind – developing local or international markets, and supporting research on seabuckthorn. Her contacts within ministries, pharmacies, and the donor community, particularly in Germany, have been helpful in this regards.

Finances

Currently, the partnership relies on financial contributions from donors: HimalAsia and its donor *Zukunftstiftung Entwicklungshilfe* covered costs of establishing the nurseries and providing training, estimated at US\$ 3,000-4,200 per nursery (nurseries in Upper Mustang are more expensive to establish). The *Zukunftstiftung* also provided some of the funding for HimalAsia to purchase wild seabuckthorn berries and tresters from the women's groups.

The SEED Initiative has supported the partnership by facilitating continued funding of HimalAsia by the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development. The local cooperatives have contributed

to the partnership by means of their labour and other in-kind support.

As the project expands, larger amounts of funding will be necessary to establish larger nurseries, to purchase oil presses and awnings or tunnel dryers, and to expand local and international marketing efforts. Funding is also needed to support research on the medicinal, environmental, and cosmetic properties of seabuckthorn.

In February 2006, the SEED Initiative was able to support the partnership with a donation of US\$ 13,700, of which US\$ 9,000 will go towards the purchase of an oil and filter machine. HimalAsia and the SEED Initiative will agree on use of the remaining US\$4,700 by April 2006.

Plans for securing future funding are still in their very early phases: Funding could come either from donors or companies interested in providing venture capital. For the former, Susanne von der Heide is also exploring the possibility supporting the partnership by means of the European Union's Asia Invest II programme². The Programme provides assistance to intermediary business organisations to facilitate mutually beneficial partnerships between companies, in particular SMEs, in the EU and South and South-East Asia and China. However, to qualify, the partnership must secure the commitment of two to three European companies willing to buy seabuckthorn.

The SEED Initiative has also facilitated contacts to a number of

²

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/europeaid/projects/asia-invest/html2002/main.htm>

potential international donors, including the Asian Development Bank, who visited the project in May 2005. Attracting private companies who might be willing to invest in the partnership is complicated, as a business plan with details on the quantities of seabuckthorn oil that will be produced is currently not feasible.

DEFINING AND MEASURING SUCCESS

The success of the partnership will figure on enabling the seabuckthorn cooperatives to become self-sustainable in their work. They will consider their goal accomplished when training or building seabuckthorn nurseries and collecting seabuckthorn in the wild occurs without assistance from HimalAsia, and when domestic and international markets for seabuckthorn products have been secured.

Regarding training, the project can become self-sustainable, when knowledge on growing, collecting, and processing seabuckthorn is passed on within and between communities. On the matter of markets, it is hoped that the nurseries will become self-sustainable after the first harvest through the sale of seabuckthorn products.

One question pertaining to self-sustainability will have to be resolved: Currently, HimalAsia buys seabuckthorn juice, tresters, and oils from its partner cooperatives. HimalAsia then gives these products free-of-charge to organisations such as the Sushma Koirala/Interplast Hospital. In the future, the partners hope to sell their products to local and international firms in order to develop a sustainable income base.

The seabuckthorn partnership has attracted attention in the region and beyond. In a few cases, the partnership's idea of establishing seabuckthorn nurseries has been emulated. In the long run, the seabuckthorn project may serve as a model for commercialising the production of other herbal plants native to the Himalayas. Yew (*Taxus baccata*) and Mugwort (*Artemisa vulgaris*) are two prospective medicinal plants for cash cropping that would help generate income for poor communities in Nepal and which would also help safeguard the biodiversity of the region. Nepal has potential for becoming one of the major suppliers of plant-based products to the world. Public-private partnerships present a means by which to develop infrastructure and markets to pursue precisely such an ambitious goal.

(Information as of April 2006)

About GPPi

The Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) is an independent, non-profit think tank located in Berlin focusing on global governance. We receive project funding from foundations as well as our project partners from the public and private sectors.

GPPi engages in three lines of work:

Research. GPPi explores new approaches to effective and accountable governance. Our topics include the reform of international organizations and public-private partnerships.

Consulting. GPPi advises governments, international organizations, foundations, NGOs, and companies. We assist them in developing effective strategies for operating in the new governance environment.

Debate. GPPi engages the broader public in a debate on new governance approaches through workshops, conferences, and publications.

For more information about our work, please visit our website at www.gppi.net.

Contact Us:

Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi)
Reinhardtstr. 15
10117 Berlin
Germany

General: +49-30-2759 59 75 - 0
Fax: +49-30-690 88 200
Email: gppi@gppi.net

About the Seed Initiative

The Seed Initiative (Supporting Entrepreneurs for Environment and Development) is a global network for action on sustainable development partnerships. The Initiative aims to inspire, promote and develop the capacity of locally driven entrepreneurial partnerships that contribute to the agreed goals contained in the Millennium Declaration (MD) and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI).

The Seed Initiative responds to the challenges that many sustainable development partnerships face, including the need for both technical and financial support in the early stages of developing and building partnership until it enters into implementation, a need to focus on the wide variety of small initiatives, driven by local actors, in addition to large-scale partnerships, and the need for effective "communities of practice and knowledge" that allow mutual learning, support and collaboration.

In order to accomplish its goal, the Seed Initiative has chosen three main areas of focus:

- Promote partnerships (through a biennial international award scheme; events and publications): Encourage small scale partnerships that exist on the ground and that directly benefit local communities; mobilize collective action that provides practical interventions in environmental, social and economic development in developing countries; and demonstrate that the wide variety of small partnerships driven by local actors make a positive contribution to sustainable development;
- Support nascent partnerships (through offering tailor-made support services for winners of the Seed Awards): Deliver bottom-up demand driven partnership support by responding strategically to the need of locally driven partnerships for

technical and financial support in early stages of development, mitigating the potential risk of failure;

- Increase the understanding of partnerships (through research activities and developing learning tools): Capture, profile and disseminate information on exemplary partnerships that could be used for sustainable development elsewhere; advocate the need for effective communities of practice and knowledge that allow mutual learning, support and collaboration; and integrate best practice examples of successful local partnerships into high level decision making processes.

The Seed Initiative delivers these actions through a lean operational structure that aims to deliver this focus by coordinating and partnering with likeminded organizations and networks that are delivering - or are willing to engage in - promoting, supporting and understanding of sustainable development partnerships.

Since its launch in January 2004, the Initiative has broken ground in revealing the wealth of entrepreneurial partnership activity taking place on the ground. During the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) of the United Nations in New York held during April 2005, five winners were announced that were selected by an international jury to be the recipients of the first cycle of Seed Awards, awarded biennially by the Seed Initiative. The award scheme provides dedicated institutional capacity and support to partnerships in the alpha stage of development – focusing on maximizing the opportunity for these partnerships to succeed during the more difficult development and early implementation phases.

Furthermore, it has effectively publicized the partnership approach to sustainable development, given advice to over

seventy new partnerships and extensive support to twelve, supported five winning partnerships on the ground and engaged in a cutting-edge programme of

research and learning to track the evolution of new partnerships to assist both policy makers and practitioners.

Seed Initiative Secretariat

Mr Francois Rogers, Project Coordinator

World Conservation Union (IUCN), World Headquarters

28 Rue de Mauverney, CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland

Tel: +41 (0) 22 999 00 00/01, Fax: +41 (0) 22 999 00 02

E-mail: francois.rogers@iucn.org

Website: <http://seedinit.org>

Implementing Partners:

UNDP: Mr. Arun Kyshap, arun.kyshap@undp.org

UNEP: Dr. Cornis van der Lugt, cornis.lugt@unep.org

IUCN – World Conservation Union: Dr. Gabriel Lopez, gabriel.lopez@iucn.org

Supporting Organizations and Members of the Board:

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