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## UN hands out awards for innovative tourism projects



UN World Tourism Organization Headquarters

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An initiative that has made hotels in Slovenia more accessible for people with disabilities and a project in Australia that allows people to volunteer to protect biodiversity are among the winners of United Nations awards aimed at encouraging innovation in tourism.

The 2011 Ulysses Awards – handed out last night in a ceremony in Vilamoura, Portugal – were given by the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) to a series of State institutions, private enterprises and non-profit organizations.

For innovation in governance, the winners were: China's Tourism Academy for a tourist satisfaction index; Peru's foreign trade and tourism ministry for a discovery trail of the ancient Moche civilization; and the Madeira Regional Secretariat for Tourism and Transport in Portugal for its environmental work.

Three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were rewarded: Conservation Volunteers Australia, for its project recruiting local and international tourists to serve as volunteers in the cleaning up and restoration of a nature reserve; the Slovenian Association for Mental Health (SENT) for its initiative promoting accessible tourism for those with special needs; and Kéroul of Canada, a company which offers guided tours for people with disabilities.

In the enterprises category, the winners were: Ingelia of Spain, for a project transforming organic waste into biofuel for more sustainable tourism; OHL Desarrollos of Mexico, for sustainable and

responsible tourism development at a resort; and TCI Research of Belgium, for a global survey measuring tourist satisfaction and trip quality.

Special jury awards were also given to the Alghat Cooperative Association of Saudi Arabia, Uruguay's tourism and sports ministry; and the Association of Significant Cemeteries in Europe.

Kaye Chon, Chair Professor of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, won the UNWTO Ulysses Prize for his overall contribution.

Dolores Kores, a project manager for SENT, told the UN News Centre that since 2006 her organization – through research, training programmes and the establishment of industry standards and a certification system – has been working to make hotels, travel agencies, tour guides and tourism sites more accessible for people with disabilities.

Ms. Kores said a common misunderstanding among tourism operators was that it was expensive and time-consuming to improve accessibility to people with disabilities.

“They think it’s only about investment in changing the physical environment,” she said. “But the solutions can be simple and don’t have to be expensive.”

SENT has arranged for people with disabilities to educate staff at hotels, restaurants and other facilities about how to treat a guest if they have a disability and what measures they can take to ensure the guests enjoy the experience.

“People with disabilities don’t want pity... but they want to be treated well, and they will remember,” Ms. Kores noted.

“They say: ‘If we are satisfied when we travel, we will be sure to come back, because there are not a lot of places that are accessible’.”

Conservation Volunteers Australia has been operating since 1982 and brings together more than 12,500 volunteers each year to take part in environmental projects, including this year’s award-winning project at the W. James Whyte Island Reserve west of Melbourne.

Madeline Townsend, the director of volunteer and membership services for the NGO, described the Island Reserve as “a flagship project – a place where we can continue involving community volunteers and showing them the long-term restoration of a landscape back to environmental health.”

Nearly 5,000 volunteers, a mixture of locals and international tourists, have planted trees, cleared weeds, built walking trails and collected native seed for future propagation.

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