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PRESS RELEASE

RASA ISLAND WILDLIFE SANCTUARY SECURES SURVIVAL OF THE PHILIPPINE COCKATOO

Pres. Arroyo signs Presidential Proclamation 1000

March 03, 2006 (Puerto Princesa City, Palawan) – Presidential Proclamation 1000 declaring Rasa Island in the Municipality of Narra, Palawan as **Wildlife Sanctuary** was signed by Her Excellency President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo on February 15, 2006 pursuant to RA 7586 otherwise known as the NIPAS Act of 1992. The much needed declaration is a good insurance for the survival of the critically endangered Red-vented cockatoo or the Philippine cockatoo *Cacatua haematuropygia* in the wild and other threatened species. The protected area totals to 1,983 hectares.

“Pres. Proclamation 1000 is a milestone for the conservation of the species and the local authorities and communities will be highly motivated to intensify their efforts to conserve the species”, says Peter Widmann, Program Leader of the Philippine Cockatoo Conservation Program (PCCP).

Rasa Island is situated in the Sulu Sea, offshore the coast of Brgy. Panacan in the Municipality of Narra, Palawan. It is a shallow coral island of which only about one third is permanently dry and two thirds are at least occasionally exposed to the tides. The island is bordered by extensive tidal flats and pristine mangroves. The island holds one of the last remaining coastal forests in the Philippines. It is the pilot site of the PCCP and since 8 years was it proposed to become a protected area under the NIPAS Act.

Known locally as the “Katala,” the cockatoo serves as the flagship species of the PCCP. The world population of Philippine cockatoo was earlier estimated to range between 1,000 to 4,000 individuals (Lambert, 1994)¹. More recent estimates put the world population at about 1,000 individuals surviving in the wild (Widmann, 2001)². The tiny coral island of Rasa holds the highest population density of Philippine cockatoo that remains in the wild! This makes Rasa a high priority area for the protection of this species on a global scale.

¹ Lambert, Frank. 1994: The Status of the Philippine cockatoo *Cacatua haematuropygia* in Palawan and the Sulu Islands, Philippines. IUCN Species Survival Commission. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, UK.

² Widmann, P. 2001: Distribution and status of the Philippine cockatoo *Cacatua haematuropygia* in the wild. Unpubl. review and discussion paper. 32pp.

It is remarkable that Rasa holds as well a high number of globally threatened bird and plant species according to the Red List of globally threatened species published by IUCN in 2004. For example more globally threatened bird species are recorded on and around Rasa, than in any country of Central Europe. Among these are the Blue-headed racquet tail *Prioniturus platenae*, Chinese egret *Egretta eulophotes*, Grey imperial pigeon *Ducula pickeringii*, Mantanani scops owl *Otus mantananensis*, Hawksbill turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata*, Green turtle *Chelonia mydas*, Dugong *Dugong dugon*, and Ipil *Intsia bijuga*.

Endemic to the Philippines, the Katala was widely distributed all over the archipelago in the last 50 years. Now, it is restricted to the Sulu and Palawan archipelagos. The latter being the stronghold of the species. The cockatoo's survival has been jeopardized by the demanding pet trade and the rapid deforestation of lowland forests – its primary habitat. This parrot species is an extreme lowland specialist, sharing the coastal plains where most of the people live in the Philippines; like coastal, riparian, swamp, and lowland dipterocarp forests. Poaching for the pet trade is a major threat to the survival of the species. The domestic demand for cockatoos is high enough to put the remaining cockatoo populations at acute risk.

The PCCP uses an ecosystemic and participatory approach for conservation where people are greatly involved in the process. On Rasa, former poachers have been successfully recruited to serve as active deputized wildlife wardens. The wardening scheme proves very efficient and effective for protecting nest trees particularly during breeding season and patrolling against illegal activities. Most of these wardens belong to the Tagbanua community in the area. The conservation likewise invokes the active involvement of the local government through an organized protected area management committee where issues and concerns are deliberated regularly.

With the presence of the Philippine cockatoos and other globally threatened species on and around the island, eco-tourists, local and foreign alike, are attracted to the intrinsic beauty of this little haven for wildlife.

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For more information about the PCCP, please contact Indira Widmann, Katala Foundation, P.O. Box 390, Puerto Princesa City, Palawan or at idlacerna@yahoo.com or www.philippinecockatoo.org.

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Notes for the Editor:

- A map of Rasa Island and a picture of the critically endangered Philippine cockatoo are provided herewith.
- Katala Foundation (KF) is based in Puerto Princesa City, Palawan. It implements the Philippine Cockatoo Conservation Program in the Philippines with target sites in Palawan, the stronghold of the species. KF uses the Katala or the Philippine cockatoo as its flagship species but employs an ecosystemic and participatory approach for conservation where people are given important roles in the entirety of the program implementation.
- The PCCP implements nest protection, livelihood, habitat protection and restoration and conservation education mostly in Palawan and in Polillo Island. We conduct distribution surveys in areas with historical cockatoo records where surviving populations are to be expected. And we also conduct habitat assessments for possible translocation of cockatoos.