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The 'million dollar manta' being killed worldwide for unproven health tonics

SAN FRANCISCO, CA and NEW YORK, NY **(January 14, 2012)** - Manta rays are so popular with divers and snorkelers that a single animal can 'earn' more than US\$ 1 million over its lifetime for local eco-tourism, according to a new report issued by the Manta Ray of Hope Project. Despite their popularity and lucrative tourism value, the report provides shocking evidence that these graceful and gentle giants are rapidly disappearing due to extreme fishing pressure that is largely unknown by the general public or conservationists.

The Manta Ray of Hope Project, a joint effort of two conservation organizations, Shark Savers and WildAid, released a comprehensive report documenting worldwide manta and mobula declines due to the trade in their gills. The report, entitled "*Manta Ray of Hope: The Global Threat to Manta and Mobula Rays*" provides the most far-reaching research ever conducted into both the intensive overfishing of mantas and mobulas as well as the trade in their gill rakers that are driving mantas and mobulas to the point of population collapse.

The destruction of ray populations is the result of demand for their gill rakers, with an estimated market value of \$11 million annually. That is a fraction of the value of manta and mobula ray tourism, which is estimated at over \$100 million per year, globally.

Shawn Heinrichs, Manta Ray of Hope team leader, explains, "While the gills are valuable for this trade, it is also robbing local economies and the environment of one of the most charismatic creatures in the ocean that could draw millions of dollars each year for those communities."

Lead investigator Paul Hilton added, "We first came across manta and mobula ray gills in Asian markets several years ago and followed the trail to the dried seafood markets of Southern China. It's sad to see these animals follow the same path to extinction as sharks."

Manta and mobula ray populations are severely impacted by any kind of targeted fishing because they have extremely limited reproductive biology. These rays can take ten or more years to reach sexual maturity and typically produce only one pup every two to three years. In comparison, even the Great White shark which is listed under CITES Appendix II and widely considered to be one of the world's most vulnerable species, may produce as many pups in one litter as a manta ray does over its entire lifetime.

As a result, every area with active fisheries directed against manta and mobula rays reports devastating and rapid declines in populations of these rays. In certain regions, such as the Sea of Cortez, the oceanic manta ray (*M. birostris*) has largely disappeared. The aggressive trade in gill rakers continues in several of the key range states for mobulids with the largest landings documented in Sri Lanka, India, and Indonesia.

"If action is not taken quickly, manta and mobula rays will likely face regional extinctions because of unregulated fisheries", said Michael Skoletsky, Executive Director of Shark Savers. "Anyone who has gone diving with mantas knows them to be intelligent, graceful, and engaging animals. It would be a tragedy to lose them."

Executive Director of WildAid, Peter Knights, adds that "Mantas can generate tens of millions of dollars of long term sustainable tourism revenue for less wealthy nations, or for a few million we can let them go extinct for an obscure and dubious folk cure. The economics and the moral imperative are clear - we need

an immediate moratorium on gill raker trade and measures for complete protection to some populations and to reduce fishing pressure for others."

The gills of manta and mobula rays are dried and boiled for preparation as a health tonic that is purported to treat a wide range of ailments. Yet the report's researchers did not find the gill raker remedy listed in the official Traditional Chinese Medicine manual. However, that has not prevented its use as a pseudo-medicinal tonic, driven by direct marketing to consumers by importers in Guangzhou, China, the primary destination for this trade.

The report, *Manta Ray of Hope: The Global Threat to Manta and Mobula Rays* highlights what is known about the remarkable biology and ecology of manta and mobula rays, explains the extreme threats they face, describes the fisheries and trade that target these rays, and offers some solutions via alternative, non-consumptive uses for communities to profit from them, sustainably. The information provided in the report will enable decision-makers to move swiftly in enacting critical protections for manta and mobula rays.

Manta Ray of Hope received support from the Silvercrest Foundation, Hrothgar Investments Ltd, and private donors. *Manta Ray of Hope: The Global Threat to Manta and Mobula Rays* received additional guidance and data from many of the foremost manta researchers and scientists throughout the world.

About Shark Savers: Shark Savers was founded in 2007 by six long-time divers driven by a shared passion – to save the world's dwindling shark and ray populations. Today, more than 20,000 members from 99 nations share that passion. Focusing on action and results, Shark Savers programs result in saving the lives of sharks and rays. By leveraging professional experience and expertise, Shark Savers brings this important issue to the masses in many compelling forms, motivating people to stop consuming sharks and shark fin soup, and working for the creation of shark sanctuaries and other protections. For more information, please visit www.sharksavers.org

About WildAid: WildAid focuses on addressing the human threat to wildlife. Our comprehensive approach includes public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives to reduce consumer demand for wildlife products, and working with communities to support and enforce key protected habitats around the world. For more information, please visit www.wildaid.org.

About Manta Ray of Hope Project: The Manta Ray of Hope Project is a joint initiative that includes top field investigators, leading scientists and researchers, all working together to further the conservation of manta and mobula rays. The project was founded by Shark Savers and WildAid, with support from the Silvercrest Foundation, Hrothgar Investments, and private donors. Manta Ray of Hope is developing global conservation campaigns based on sound science, including:

- *Manta Ray of Hope: The Global Threat to Manta and Mobula Rays*, a comprehensive study of the destructive fishing and consumption of Mobulids.
- Establishment of trade bans and sanctuaries.
- Education and awareness campaigns for consumers.
- Ecotourism development in fishing communities.

For more information, visit: <http://www.mantarayofhope.com>

For photos, and more information, visit www.wildaid.org/mantas .