

## Belize ranks top in region for marine ecotourism, says scientists Cisneros and Sumaila

(Posted: 05/07/11) Belize played host to 20 scientists for a two-day conference dubbed: "Too Precious to Drill: The Marine Biodiversity of Belize," which was convened at the Belize Biltmore Plaza from Wednesday, June 29, to Thursday, June 30, 2011, and organized by Oceana in Belize in partnership with the University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre and its Sea Around Us Project.

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Towards the end of the conference, it was revealed that Belize ranks highest in Central America in terms of socioeconomic importance of its marine tourism industry, with potential earnings over two decades being US\$2 billion.

Andres Cisneros and Rashid Sumaila of the University of British Columbia compiled a presentation titled, "*The Economic Value and Future of Marine Ecotourism in Belize*".

Cisneros, the Mexican scientist who gave the presentation near the conclusion of the Oceana conference, underscored that Belize ranks the highest, followed by Costa Rica, for the value of its marine ecosystem.

The net present value of Belize's marine ecotourism, he said, is US\$1.1 billion based on a 10-year time line, enough to pay the Government's outstanding super-bond.

He also said that shark watching has earned Belize US\$40 million over the last 10 years and dolphin watching has earned another US\$5 million over the same period.

In looking at the oil spill effects, Cisneros said that it would cost Belize US\$625 million over 10 years, including tourism losses.

By contrast, he said, potential annual revenues from petroleum are estimated at US\$65 million a year.

At the close of the conference, a letter was signed from visiting scientists to the Belizean public, saying: "Given the enormous importance of the diversity of marine life to the Belizean economy, way of life and national pride, notably through its contributions to fisheries, tourism and coastal protection, we urge Belizeans to fully acquaint themselves with this wealth of marine life along their coastline, and to protect it when developments such as oil drilling are proposed, as these endanger this foundation of Belize's natural wealth."

The organizers will issue a final report of the presented papers, which will be available shortly.

Niall Gillett, PR representative for Oceana, said that we have about 50% of the total Caribbean diversity in Belize.

"If you wanted to see all [the biodiversity in the region], you can come to Belize and see half," he added.

Gillett said that the scientists have demonstrated how there could be sustainable economic benefits, including pharmaceutical benefits, from the Belize Barrier Reef.

According to Sealifebase.org, Belize has over 3,000 marine species, including at least 641 species of fish.