

RELEASE

NISHANTA RAJAKARUNA RETURNS TO COLLEGE OF THE ATLANTIC

1994 graduate to take botany faculty position

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BAR HARBOR—Nishanta “Nishi” Rajakaruna, a 1994 graduate of College of the Atlantic, is returning to the college as faculty member in botany. After receiving his Bachelor of Arts in Human Ecology from COA, Rajakaruna earned his M.Sc. and Ph.D. from the University of British Columbia and was awarded a post-doctoral fellowship at Stanford University. He began teaching at COA in 2004, but in 2008 left to take an assistant professorship in plant biology at San José State University, so as to continue his research of western plants and direct the university’s Carl W. Sharsmith Herbarium.

His decision to return to Maine, he says, is based on the deep connection he feels to College of the Atlantic, the first place he came when leaving his native Sri Lanka.

“My life dream is to build a strong undergraduate program in botany and natural history at COA while maintaining our core focus in human ecology. That’s what I know I am supposed to do,” Rajakaruna says. “I have loved every minute at San José State University, but COA is where I belong; I am coming back with a little extra time to devote to activities that will help me build on where I left off in 2008.” Besides, he adds, “there is nothing more satisfying and exciting than to be able to build on the work begun by Craig Greene, my mentor and former COA botany professor.” Rajakaruna is taking the position held by Greene before his death in 2003.

Says COA President David Hales, “Dr. Rajakaruna is a world-class scientist who is as committed to teaching as he is to the generation of knowledge. We are very pleased that he is rejoining one of the finest faculties in the world.”

Rajakaruna has done extensive research on the ecological, physiological and genetic factors playing in adaptive evolution, particularly the response of plant species and races to extreme habitats, such as soils that have high content of heavy metals, salts or organic compounds. Even after taking the position at San José, he has continued to mentor COA students and alumni, encouraging their publications and at times co-authoring research with them.

When he returns in the fall of 2010, he will be offering the popular Edible Botany class, along with a course on the trees and shrubs of Mount Desert Island, where COA is located. He will also be bringing a special gift for COA students—new cricket equipment. Though COA does not have athletic teams, students thoroughly enjoy afternoon cricket games.

College of the Atlantic was founded in 1969 on the premise that education should go beyond understanding the world as it is, to enabling students to actively shape its future. A leader in environmental stewardship and experiential education, COA has pioneered a distinctive interdisciplinary approach to learning—human ecology—that develops the kinds of creative thinkers and doers who can lead all sectors of society to promote sustainable ecosystems while meeting compelling and growing human needs.