

RELEASE

SERPENTINE ECOLOGY CONFERENCE COMING TO COLLEGE OF THE ATLANTIC

Nishanta Rajakaruna to head up international conference at COA

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BAR HARBOR — Nishanta Rajakaruna, Ph.D., a member of College of the Atlantic's faculty in botany, will be the chief organizer of the Sixth International Conference on Serpentine Ecology which will be held at COA in June 2008.

Rajakaruna, a 1994 graduate of COA, specializes in research into plants in marginal locations, especially areas rich in heavy metals. He was selected as the organizer of the 2008 conference earlier this month during the Fifth International Conference on Serpentine Ecology in Sienna, Italy. Serpentine soils derived from heavy metal-rich mantle rocks, are found along continental margins and frequently harbor rare plant species. Serpentine habitats have long provided a model habitat for ecological and evolutionary studies.

At the Italian conference, Rajakaruna, a member of the scientific advisory committee, presented two papers on serpentine plants of California and Sri Lanka as well as two posters on the plant-soil relations within the serpentine outcrops of an abandoned peridotite quarry on Little Deer Isle. The research highlighted in the two posters was conducted by COA students Eva Dannenberg a first-year student from Huntington, VT, senior Tanner Harris of Walnut Creek, CA, junior Peter Pavicevic of Mount Vernon, NY, senior Nathaniel Pope of Corwallis, OR, junior Andrew Thrall of North Yarmouth, ME and sophomore Kathleen Tompkins of Willow Grove, PA.

One of the key findings presented in the poster is a rare serpentine fern, *Adiantum aleuticum* (Pteridaceae), restricted to several outcroppings on the island. Earlier this spring, the Island Heritage Trust of Deer Isle purchased the area to preserve the rare plants and the unique geochemical feature of that area.

Additionally, Harris presented a poster on lichens in serpentine areas: "Terricolous Lichens of a Peridotite Outcrop in the Northeastern United States: A baseline study exploring the lichen-substrate relationship." Harris used this research for his COA senior project.

The conference was attended by more than 70 scientists from around the world, says Rajakaruna, but COA students were the only undergraduates to present work. Rajakaruna was pleased at the attention given to the poster elaborating Harris' research into lichens, a subject that has seldom been investigated. Only one study has previously examined lichens on serpentine soil in eastern North America says Rajakaruna.

The conference to be held in June 2008 will highlight four days of talks on geology, soil science, botany, evolution, plant-insect-microbe interactions, and green technologies such as phytoremediation. The delegates will visit the serpentinized areas of Deer Isle on a mid-conference tour and will embark on a four-day post-conference excursion to the Gaspé Provincial Park in Quebec, Canada to explore the serpentine-rich areas including the famous Mount Albert of Gaspé Peninsula, home to many rare serpentine plants.

photo captions:

Nishanta Rajakaruna of COA, chief organizer of the upcoming Sixth International Conference on Serpentine Ecology with Professor Alessandro Chiarucci, the organizer of the Fifth International Conference, in Sienna, Italy.

Eva Dannenberg, a first-year student at COA, investigates the ecology of Pine Hill's serpentine outcrops on Little Deer Isle.