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(New Orleans, LA) – Today the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas, one of the country’s pre-eminent Aquariums, was designated the 22<sup>nd</sup> Coastal Ecosystem Learning Center (CELC) by Coastal America, an office of the White House charged with protecting the Nation’s vulnerable coastal ecosystems. The designation was presented by the Honorable John Paul Woodley, Jr., the Assistant Secretary of the Army (Civil Works).

The Learning Centers are selected to serve as regional educational centers that work closely with the United States’ federal partners to educate the public about the value of coastal resources. The Audubon Aquarium of the Americas, located on the Mississippi River in downtown New Orleans, was devastated by Hurricane Katrina, with severe damage to the roof, and Entergy IMAX Theatre. Many of the animals were lost, and those that survived were evacuated to other aquariums until the facilities could be restored. With the help of other Aquariums around the country, and hundreds of volunteers, donations, and tremendous support from other marine centers around the country, it reopened on Memorial Day in 2006 as a world-class public attraction. In addition to its unique marine exhibits, the Aquarium offers education with a conservation message, encouraging the public to preserve and protect Louisiana’s – and the Nation’s – precious natural resources.

Bryon Griffith, Director, Gulf of Mexico Program, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Chair of the Gulf of Mexico Governors’ Alliance Federal Working Group led the effort to designate the Aquarium as a CELC. “As a Coastal Ecosystem Learning Center, the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas will join a network of aquariums delivering a strong public message about the importance of our coastal resources. The Coastal America Partnership created this innovative network so that younger citizens, as future stewards of our coasts, can better understand how human activities affect the environment along our shorelines,” stated Griffith.

The Gulf of Mexico Alliance is a collaboration among the Gulf Coast States and federal partners to take concerted action protecting Gulf ecosystems. In the Alliance Action Plan published in 2006, the Gulf State Governors committed to designating six CELCs across the Gulf and in the Mexican State of Veracruz, by 2008. With today’s event celebrating the CELC status of the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas, that goal is fulfilled, allowing for even greater collaboration in the region to work towards preserving the Gulf’s ecosystems through coastal marine education.

The Honorable John Paul Woodley, Jr., welcomed the Audubon Aquarium into the Coastal America family and applauded the work of the Gulf of Mexico Alliance. "Today marks a significant milestone in our joint efforts to preserve, protect and restore the coastal and marine environment of the Gulf of Mexico. I am pleased with the addition of the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas into the Coastal Ecosystem Learning Center network, and I appreciate the efforts of the Gulf of Mexico Alliance in achieving this important milestone," Woodley said. "Lifelong education remains an essential component to maintaining healthy ecosystems in the Gulf Region. Coastal America, through its CELC program, seeks to encourage and support community efforts that promote good stewardship of our coastal resources, and we are thrilled that the CELC network now includes the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas."

The Coastal Ecosystem Learning Centers network is committed to providing support for the Aquarium's new and existing programs. Representing the CELC network at the event was Tom Schmid, President and CEO of the Texas State Aquarium located in Corpus Christi, Texas. Mr. Schmid welcomed the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas into the Learning Center network, noting that "As key centers for education and conservation, aquariums in the Coastal Ecosystem Learning Center network serve to connect communities to the ocean and inspire respect and stewardship. We must all work together to protect our one ocean and one planet. We are especially excited that with the addition of the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas, we now have a Gulf-wide network that can work collaboratively to promote awareness of Gulf of Mexico issues."

Ron Forman, President and CEO of the Audubon Nature Institute, was very pleased to accept the official designation from Coastal America. "By engaging our visitors with animals and habitats that replicate coastal and ocean areas, and special programs focused on these areas, we open their eyes to the wonders of these ecosystems and help them understand that everyone, regardless of where they live, benefits from the vast resources they hold," says Audubon Nature Institute President and CEO Ron Forman. "By fostering appreciation and understanding in this way, we help power conservation."

Virginia K. Tippie, Director of Coastal America, stated, "The Coastal America partners look forward to working with the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas in sharing information and technical expertise about our coasts and oceans. The Learning Center network provides a tremendous opportunity for us to transform national and regional information into effective messages and programs which the aquariums and museum network do so adeptly."

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About the organizations:

**Audubon Aquarium of the Americas-** Audubon Aquarium of the Americas is one of the country's pre-eminent Aquariums, housing over 110,000 feet of exhibit space, including displays holding one million gallons of fresh and salt water combined, touching pools, research labs, classroom and meeting areas, and an IMAX theater. The Aquarium is an institution accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. Audubon Nature Institute is a New Orleans-based not-for-profit organization which operates ten parks and museums dedicated to *Celebrating the Wonders of Nature*: Audubon Zoo, Audubon Aquarium of the Americas, Entergy IMAX® Theatre, Audubon Center for Research of Endangered Species, Freeport-McMoRan Audubon Species Survival Center, Wilderness Park, Woldenberg Riverfront Park and Audubon Park. Audubon Louisiana Nature Center, located in New Orleans East, remains closed due to hurricane damage. Audubon Nature Institute's newest museum, Audubon Insectarium, opened earlier this year.

The Aquarium's facilities were devastated by Hurricane Katrina, with severe damage to the roof, and Entergy IMAX Theatre. Many of the animals were lost, and those that survived were evacuated to other aquariums until the facilities could be restored. After a nine-month rebuilding effort, with the help of hundreds of volunteers, donations, and with a tremendous amount of support from many other marine centers and AZA institutions, the Aquarium re-opened on Memorial Day in 2006, and currently welcomes approximately 600,000 visitors annually.

**Coastal America-** Coastal America is a partnership among federal, state and local governments and private alliances to address environmental problems along our nation's coasts. The federal partners are: The Executive Office of the President, Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Justice, Labor, State, Transportation, Environmental Protection Agency, National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the National Science Foundation. To learn more about Coastal America, call 202-401-9928 or visit [www.coastalamerica.gov](http://www.coastalamerica.gov).