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**JOINT ACTION LAUNCHED TO KEEP THE MEDITERRANEAN BLUE
14 countries to participate in the UN-backed
“Clean Up the Mediterranean” campaign**

Athens, Greece, 13 September 2006 --- – From scout groups to diving associations, volunteers across 14 countries in Europe, Africa and the Middle East are taking part in a new region-wide campaign to clean up the Mediterranean, as announced today in Athens during a joint Press Conference by the NGO Clean Up the World, Helmepea and UNEP/MAP, the Mediterranean Action Plan of the United Nations Environmental Programme.

The flagship event of the campaign is Clean Up the World weekend celebrated globally on 15-17 September 2006. The Mediterranean countries that have joined the initiative so far include Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, France, Israel, Morocco, Palestine, Portugal, Serbia & Montenegro, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and Gibraltar. In Greece, clean ups will be held in Attika, Athens, Volos, Kos, Syros, Crete and Pyrgos.

UNEP/MAP estimates that 650 million tonnes of sewage, 129,000 tonnes of mineral oil, 60,000 tonnes of mercury, 3,800 tonnes of lead and 36,000 tonnes of phosphates are dumped into the Mediterranean each year. Meanwhile, only about 60% of coastal cities with over 100,000 inhabitants possess a sewage system (1).

Clean Up – Greece Carla Baer Manolopoulou said: *“Pollution, tourism and other pressures are threatening to change the Mediterranean as we know it. Clean Up the Mediterranean is about taking concrete steps – no matter how big or small – to address the environmental problems of this iconic region.”*

Clean Up the Mediterranean seeks to mobilise community action at the local and national levels to address the region’s environmental problems (2). Activities range from removing rubbish from streets, parks, waterways and beaches to underwater clean ups, tree planting,

water and energy conservation projects. Many communities also implement recycling and educational programmes.

HELMEPA, the initiative of the Greek maritime community for Safe Ships in Clean Seas, actively supports efforts aiming to address the problem of Marine Litter in the Mediterranean (3). Within the framework of the International Coastal Cleanup Day on Saturday 16th September 2006, the Association has invited local and port authorities, schoolchildren and teachers, sailing and yacht clubs, diving societies and the wider public throughout Greece to organize and implement voluntary beach cleanups.

Costas Triantafyllou of HELMEPA said: *“The aim of beach cleanups is to determine the degree of environmental awareness of the public when asked to actively display their respect towards their marine environment. Our experience from coordinating such activities in Greece has shown that it is mainly the children that are receptive to these environmental messages and extensively participate in such voluntary activities.”* Statistics for Greece indicate that two out of three litter items found on Greek beaches originate from leisure activities on the coast.

The problem of Marine Litter in the Mediterranean will be extensively addressed by a Medium-Term Public Awareness Campaign jointly implemented by the three NGOs HELMEPA, MIO-ECSDE and CLEAN-UP GREECE in cooperation with UNEP/MAP and will involve all major stakeholders in the region.

“It takes up to 1 million years for a glass bottle to dissolve at sea, and 450 years for a plastic bottle. Behind each single piece of polluting garbage there is a person’s ignorance or indifference. We can help solving this problem by changing our attitude and learning to respect nature”, said Paul Mifsud, UNEP/MAP Coordinator.

The protection of the environment constitutes an important element of prosperity. UNEP/MAP gets different sectors of Mediterranean society involved in protecting the marine environment and preserving the region's human and natural resources that have been eroded by rapid development, not always planned with a view to the future.

MAP focuses on reversing the current situation in several Mediterranean countries where environmental concern still has little impact on development policies, which are unsustainable.

Notes to Editors:

(1)

- UNEP/MAP estimates that 650 million tonnes of sewage, 129,000 tonnes of mineral oil, 60,000 tonnes of mercury, 3,800 tonnes of lead and 36,000 tonnes of phosphates are dumped into the Mediterranean each year. Meanwhile, only about 60% of coastal cities with over 100,000 inhabitants possess a sewage system.
- The sea is also a major oil transportation route.
- The recent oil spill off the Lebanese coast has resulted in about 13,000 tonnes of heating oil leaking into the Mediterranean.
- Air pollution and smog conditions are worsening in the Mediterranean due to coastal industries as well as funnel emissions from busy maritime traffic.
- According to WWF, currently some 220 million tourists visit the Mediterranean annually, and the number is expected to rise to 350 million by 2020.

- Unsustainable fishing practices are also impacting heavily on the biodiversity in the Mediterranean. A WWF report found that overfishing and by-catch in the transitional zone between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean threaten to wipe out species such as common and striped dolphin, turtles, blue sharks, swordfish and shortfin makos.
- Mediterranean countries have already experienced a reduction of up to 20 per cent of rainfall while water demand has doubled in the last 50 years.
- In France alone, over 8 million cigarette butts are dumped every day in the streets, parks, beaches and mountain areas.

(2) Clean Up the Mediterranean is the latest initiative of Clean Up the World, a global environmental campaign held in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which mobilizes an estimated 30 million volunteers from over 100 countries each year to “clean up, fix up and conserve the environment”. The Clean Up the World Weekend held in September each year has the highest participation of all.

The Clean Up campaign started in 1989 when an Australian solo-yachtsman and builder Ian Kiernan, appalled by the amount of rubbish he came across while sailing, organized a clean up of the Sydney Harbour, during which some 40,000 volunteers removed rusted car bodies, plastics, glass bottles and cigarette butts from the water. The campaign went global in 1993, with Sydney becoming Clean Up the World’s headquarters.

Groups, organisations, businesses and communities are encouraged to join Clean Up the Mediterranean campaign by registering online at www.cleanuptheworld.org.

(3) The Hellenic Marine Environment Protection Association – HELMEPA is a voluntary non-governmental, non-profit organization founded jointly by Greek seafarers and shipowners in 1982. The Association’s mission is to motivate the human element in shipping “from shipowner to seafarer” through proper information, education and training, so that a spirit of pollution prevention and maritime safety prevails throughout the industry.

“HELMEPA Junior” is an environmental education program for schoolchildren an environmental education program offered every year to 4,000 schoolchildren, aged 5 to 13, from all parts of Greece. Through their participation, which is free, the children obtain a hands-on environmental experience by performing a wide range of activities related to the protection of the marine environment.

Within the framework of the Association’s public awareness campaigns, HELMEPA is coordinating on Saturday 16 September in Greece the International Coastal Cleanup Day, which takes place simultaneously in over 100 countries around the world.