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## NEWS Makers

### Kayak king

*John Gray receives recognition for his SeaCanoe, a well-known feature of eco-tourism in Phuket*

KRISSIE NA KLONGTOEY



John Gray (right), MD, Sea Kayak Thailand, receives his award from Phil Sims, president, Skal Intl.

Thailand scored well during the recent Skal Club International Ecotourism Awards at the 2008 Skal World Congress in Taipei, Taiwan, with John Gray's SeaCanoe receiving recognition in the transportation category.

Skal, founded as an international association in 1934, is the largest organisation of travel and tourism professionals in the world. It aims at quality in tourism and values sustainable development in tourism as the key to the industry's future success. The primary criteria for the evaluation of the ecotourism award is based on contribution to the conservation of nature and cultural

heritage, as well as community involvement.

Gray's SeaCanoe is a well-known eco-tourism feature in Phuket. In 1983, Gray selected human-powered sea kayaks with which to explore tidal sea caves and remote tropical coastlines, promoting alternative non-polluting marine locomotion.

The award was even more meaningful to Gray since he did not propose his own name to the committee. Skal's international councillor for Thailand, Andrew Wood, put forward his name due to feedback from numerous Skal members who actually experienced the SeaCanoe trips since the company was formed in 2001.

"Our guides, many with 12 years or more seniority, are the true winners," said Gray, also known as Caveman. "They capture our guests' hearts and imagination day in and day out. Guest comments praising our guides fill my inbox," he added.

Gray works from a broad-based environmental commitment. The University of Leeds recently published his case study about Puerto Princesa, Palawan, the Philippines. John lectures at Prince of Songkla University, Phuket, writes feature stories/photos, promotes conservation in on-going video appearances, writes a Phuket Gazette environmental column and constantly collects marine rubbish from his kayak.

In 1976, the environmentalist co-founded and named "Keep The Country COUNTRY", a Honolulu,

Hawai'i NGO promoting citizen-based planning on O'ahu's North Shore.

In 1983, he founded Natural History By Sea Kayak, in Hawaii, to promote nature conservation via local enfranchisement. Over the next five years Gray explored Fiji, Tahiti, Samoa, Rarotonga, Vanuatu and New Caledonia by sea kayak. He then looked to Asia. Thailand's official timeline lists "1989 - John Gray formed SeaCanoe, an ecotourism venture, to show tourists the southwestern limestone caves known as hongs". Gray went on to explore Vietnam's Halong Bay in 1992 and Palawan, Philippines in 1995.

For his 25th anniversary, the lifelong waterman plans expeditions to most countries in which he pioneered commercial sea kayaking with local people. The schedule starts with a Phang Nga Bay Clean-up trip on his 64th birthday - January 14, 2009. Reunion Island is the one new "wild card". Gray says "it's time for the Indian Ocean".

Awards are nothing new to the Caveman. 1961 brought the Junior Achievement President of the Year and New York Stock Exchange Annual Report awards. Caveman conceived and hosted the documentary Molokai's Forgotten Frontier, produced by Honolulu news anchor Gary Sprinkle and videographer Mike May. The show won a 1985 Regional Emmy and a Teddy from the US National Outdoor Writers Council for Best Environmental Education Production. In Thailand, Gray's former experimental ecotourism company won six major awards in five years.

Just for the record, other winners this year include Northern Soul Wilderness Adventures, Canada (Tour Operators and Travel Agents), Pefkos Beach Hotel, Greece (Urban Accommodation), Building Livelihood and Eco Taj, India (Rural Accommodation), Lesvos Petrified Forest Geopark, Greece (General Countryside), The Orange Flag Programme, Italy (City and Villages), Education Programmes of the Geopark Naturtejo Meseta Meridional Unesco European and Global Geopark, Portugal (Education Programmes) and Global Tourism Business, Kenya, and Livelihood and Eco Taj, India (Global Corporate Establishment).