

## Souhegan High School Institutes a Conservation Biology Prize

By Dan Bisaccio, Conservation Biology Program @ SHS Amherst, NH



It may seem like “ancient history” for some high school students today, but nonetheless an important teachable one regarding courage and commitment. To make a difference is perhaps one of the better lessons to be learned for adolescents. Understanding the significance Rachel Carson had on a nation and the global community in the early 1960’s is a lesson that in fact, change does happen when effort and committed work coincide. Carson’s publication of *Silent Spring* took dedication and courage to say what needed to be said at a time when it would have been easier to ignore what story her data and research told. All of us are the benefactors of her courage to do so today.

Silvia Torres (1964 – 2006), a biologist in Quintana Roo, Mexico, is one who should be compared to Rachel Carson. Silvia’s knowledge, commitment, and ability to communicate to children the importance of conserving habitat and cultural history will be missed. Late last May, Silvia succumbed to ovarian cancer after a 4 year courageous battle.

Torres led a conservation movement in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo to save and preserve the last acreage of primary rain forest on that coast. In addition, she developed sections of the forest to celebrate the heritage of the local Maya ethno-botany of medicinal plants, history of the chicle tree (chewing gum), as well as preserve the native and endemic species that call this Yucatan forest home. (It is also worth noting that many of our New Hampshire migratory bird species call that forest home.)

Silvia Torres was the Director of the Dr. Alfredo Barrera Marin Botanical Garden located in Puerto Morelos. For 10 years, she would unselfishly give her time and enthusiasm to our Souhegan High School students visiting and hiking the trails in the botanical garden. She always volunteered her time to our students knowing that the biological and cultural legacy of this region must be passed on to children whose future was dependent on it.

Within the forest there is an Acacia tree that is protected by a fierce tiny ant known as the Acacia Ant (Genus, *Azteca*). The ant's scientific name aptly describes its zealous protection as the Aztec warriors of the past guarded their home communities. Almost all of our Souhegan students over the years have willingly allowed the Acacia ant to "sting" them ... to experience the protection this little ant gives its home. Many of us, who have had the privilege of knowing her, think of Silvia as the Queen Azteca Ant protecting the ecological and cultural legacy of Yucatan forests.

To honor the life and legacy of Silvia Torres and her commitment to our global biodiversity, our Souhegan High School Conservation Biology Program has inaugurated an annual award to be given to SHS Alumni and a current SHS senior who best epitomize the spirit of Silvia Torres' commitment.

This year we presented plaques to Silvia Torres' family and SHS Alumni Nate Langille and Julia Day. Our SHS senior receiving the award was Rachel Brayman. Congratulations! The award ceremony took place at the botanical garden in Puerto Morelos on January 14, 2007.

### ***Silvia Torres Conservation Biology Award***

***It is an annual award presented to past and present Souhegan Conservation Biology students to recognize and commemorate the life of Silvia Torres. It is awarded to alumnae and current students who share a commitment to conservation and have the potential to inspire future generations, as Silvia Torres has, to protect and conserve cultural and biological diversity.***

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