



Hong Kong Observatory wins prestigious international award

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■ THE World Weather Information Service (WWIS) website operated by the Hong Kong Observatory (HKO) for the United Nations World Meteorological Organization (WMO) has won the prestigious Stockholm Challenge Award 2008 in the Environment category. It is an award which some information technology (IT) people dub as the “Oscar Award” or even the “Nobel Prize” for the IT sector. So the winning projects carry with them the glamour and sparkle of having achieved the highest standards recognised internationally.

The WWIS website, <http://worldweather.wmo.int>, is a central portal for official weather information worldwide. It contains authoritative weather forecasts and climatological data issued by the National Meteorological Services (NMSs) of countries/territories around the world. The website enables the international public to gain easy access to official weather forecasts for cities at all corners of the globe, for activity planning from leisure travel to disaster relief operations.

The Stockholm Challenge (<http://www.stockholmchallenge.se>) is an international competition held once every two years. Its objective is to promote the use of information and communications technology applications to help counteract social and economic disadvantage.

This year, the Stockholm Challenge received more than 1,400 entries from over 160 countries. HKO was notified in March that the WWIS was shortlisted as a finalist in the environment category. As the incumbent WWIS Co-ordinator, I attended the Stockholm Challenge Week in May when all finalists met for presentations and discussions. I realised very quickly that other finalists in the Environment category were all very strong contenders.

The Gala Dinner and award presentation ceremony on May 22 was a very formal occasion held in the majestic Blue Hall in Stockholm, the venue of the Nobel Banquet. When the Master of Ceremonies uttered the name of the winning project — the World Weather Information Service, I was overwhelmed with elation. The audience erupted into

applause as I was escorted to the dais where the chairperson of the jury pronounced the award citation followed by the presentation. I felt like I was receiving a “Nobel Prize” on behalf of Hong Kong.



Receiving the trophy of the Stockholm Challenge Award.

The trophy was made up of two halves of a solid glass sphere mounted onto a weighty stand. Upon returning to work, I reported the victory and passed the trophy to Lam Chiu-ying, Director of the Hong Kong Observatory and the originator of the WWIS website idea.

Mr Lam has been at the helm from the very beginning. He was the first project co-ordinator, and struggled hard to persuade WMO member countries to participate in an

innovative, but unfamiliar, project. Subsequent co-ordinators and members of the HKO WWIS support team developed many practical solutions to cope with the differing technical capabilities of the countries. I feel so lucky that I am the co-ordinator at this historic moment. As in a sprint relay, I just continued to charge forward and was fortunate to have an illuminating opportunity during my watch. The glory really belongs to all members of the team, past and present, who contributed their best efforts in the project.

While the glamour at the Blue Hall was over in a matter of minutes, the award citation of the WWIS project will shine forever. It says, "They have a strong vision, global objectives, a robust sustainability model and demonstrate information exchange between national and international organisations sharing weather data." It summarised so appropriately HKO's effort over some 10 years to advocate an authoritative weather website for the benefit of the global population. WMO eventually endorsed the idea in 2000 and, recognising our renowned expertise in website management, entrusted it to HKO to design, develop and operate the WWIS.



Toasting our success with Ulla Skiden, Director of the Stockholm Challenge.

We worked hard to turn WWIS into a dynamic and sustainable international project. At present, 118 NMSs are participating in this project. Every day official forecasts for 1,270 cities worldwide are sent by the NMSs to HKO, for processing and display on the website. The WWIS started with only an English version. Because of its success, five other

language versions followed and are operated by partners on the Mainland (Chinese), France (French), Oman (Arabic), Portugal (Portuguese) and Spain (Spanish). HKO now serves as the central information hub, receiving official forecasts from the world and redistributing them to these partners. In 2007, the total number of page visits reached almost 100 million.

Candy Chiu Chiu-yee, now a Chief Scientific Assistant at HKO said, "I volunteered to learn French as soon as I recognised that the WWIS project would involve the need to handle correspondence in foreign languages. I used my own time to attend classes and came into contact with a beautiful language. Through the project, it opened up my vision of the world. I got interested in studying the people and culture of the participating countries, some of which I had never heard of before. WWIS is a worthwhile project that serves all peoples of the world. Looking back, it has been all good fun and I am truly honoured to be a member of the HKO WWIS support team."

As HKO celebrates its 125th anniversary this year, the Stockholm Challenge Award is a fabulous addition to our collection of trophies.



Handing the Stockholm Challenge trophy over to Lam Chiu-ying (left), Director of the Hong Kong Observatory.