

Villagers told to avoid activities near river bank

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KOTA KINABALU: While villagers in Kampung Tanjung, Tuaran have been 'living' with crocodiles for a long time, they must be reminded not to conduct activities along the river bank.

Anywhere where crocodiles are known to be present, wading, playing at water's edge and having livestock by the bank should be avoided, especially during early morning and late afternoon as crocodiles use darkness as cover before an attack, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) Institute for Tropical Biology and Conservation director Associate Professor Abdul Hamid Ahmad said.

There, however, have been cases of attack taking place in broad daylight like the case in Kalumpang last year, he said.

"This (avoiding water's edge for any activity) is common sense as it is not advisable to be near the water's edge in an area where crocodiles are known to be present," he said when asked for some advice for villagers in areas where crocodiles have been spotted.

On the sightings in Kampung Tanjung, Abdul Hamid believed that it could be the result of many people seeing one reptile.

"I can understand their worry - but I would always remember that sightings by villagers can be blown out of proportion, although this is rarely intentional. We will not see a large number of crocodiles suddenly appear



Prof Abdul Hamid

in a village or thereabouts - but there will certainly be many different people who would see the same single crocodile and each person will carry the news as if the crocodile is 'many' or that they are 'frequently' seen.

"Any crocodile, of any size, if seen basking or surfacing in any village, will be a highlighted news. This will not happen in areas where crocs are common such as in Kalumpang, Kinabatangan, Dagat (Tomanggong) or near Rembau Estuary and Linggi River in Negeri Sembilan.

"This indicates to us that crocs are not common in Tuaran and this is, indeed, news to them," he stressed.

To a question if the cold and rainy weather was among factors why crocodiles were more frequently seen basking on river banks, Abdul Hamid replied: "No, as basking is a normal reptilian behaviour, regardless of the weather.

"Cold weather for us is not physiologically significant to a crocodile. In relation

to the Tuaran River, if a crocodile is seen basking on the river bank, it must have been basking there for a long period of time (we know of a crocodile in Kinabatangan who basks almost within the same area over many years)," he disclosed.

Basking is a behavior that will not be observed in areas where crocs are often hunted or disturbed. But, basking is not related to mating, he stressed and added that during mating season, more crocodiles will be seen in the shallows (they don't do it in the deep!).

However, Tuaran River is not known to be a prime breeding habitat, as far as the literature is concerned, Abdul Hamid said.

According to him, surveys by the Sabah Wildlife Department took place between 1996-1998 and they saw crocodiles in several Tuaran tributaries, although at low density and crocodiles at Sg Sambah, Tuaran were also seen taking dogs.

There was no long-term research but sightings of crocodiles in Tuaran and Kota Kinabalu have always been reported to the department.

"This is expected, as Kota Kinabalu and Tuaran are heavily populated; crocodiles of any size will cause a significant uproar. Crocodile control elsewhere (Darwin in Australia) was always targeted at crocs near populated areas so the complaint from the Tuaran people, now, is not uncommon," he stressed.