

Sharks are vulnerable to over-fishing: UMS prof

DE 11.04.2012 3

KOTA KINABALU: Sharks are vulnerable to over-fishing because of their low fertility, and capacity to produce only few offspring in one breeding cycle, says Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) Director of Borneo Marine Research Institute, Prof. Dr Saleem Mustafa.

He said in bony fishes such as tuna, mackerel and sardines, the breeding and population recruitment systems were different.

"That's why sharks deserve special attention. Sharks play a significant role in the ocean ecosystem, being at the top of the food chain.

"They eliminate weaker specimens from the prey populations, and define the evolutionary pathways. Obviously, their elimination alters the ocean ecosystem balance," he said here Tuesday.

Saleem was responding to the raging debate about shark sanctuaries and shark fishing ban in Sabah, while timely, puts the focus on conservation of marine ecosystem and socio-economic imperatives.

He said the marine ecosystem had traditionally provided goods and services in Sabah, and the lifestyles of the people and

sources of food and income of certain sections of the coastal communities were closely tied to marine resources.

Saleem said the entire issue put the spotlight on important and highly relevant topics, including ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management, the need for alternative livelihood and public awareness.

"Because sharks have a behaviour which in many respects is very different from coral reef fishes, the plans for managing shark conservation will have to be unique, as well as within the overall context of marine conservation and ecosystem based approach to fisheries management.

"Probably, it is not practical at this stage to consider 'shark sanctuary' in Sabah as some sort of a limited area in the sea that is 'off limits' and which generally raises concern among the coastal communities using marine resources for sustenance.

"Due to a variety of reasons and obvious practical limitations, very few 'shark sanctuaries' exist in the world today. A conservation plan for Sabah will have to be developed, according to ground realities here," he added.