

Sabah launches three key initiatives to protect sea turtles

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(From second left) Mohd Soffian, Jafry and Josie show the campaign materials after the launch.

KOTA KINABALU: Sabah has launched three initiatives -a behavioural change campaign against turtle egg consumption, a new Sea Turtle Action Plan and updated hatchery standard operating procedures - to protect sea turtles.

“This is an important milestone for Sabah as we come together to launch three key initiatives that reflect our strong commitment to sea turtle conservation and sustainable tourism,” said State Tourism, Culture and Environment Minister Datuk Jafry Ariffin when officiating the ceremony at the Sabah International Convention Centre, Tuesday.

“We hope these initiatives can guide our collective efforts in protecting our precious marine heritage and ensuring a sustainable future for generations to come,” he said.

The event saw the formal handing over of the Sabah Sea Turtle Action Plan 2025 to 2030, a long-term strategic framework developed in collaboration with government agencies, academic institutions and conservation partners including Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) and WWF-Malaysia.

Sabah is recognised as one of the region’s most important sea turtle nesting grounds, making the protection of its turtle populations a matter of both ecological and economic significance for the State’s growing ecotourism sector.

“Conservation is not only about enforcement. It is about responsibility, awareness and collective action,” he said, pointing out that protecting sea turtles requires more than enforcement alone.

“This Action Plan serves as a comprehensive guide for all stakeholders, outlining clear priorities and coordinated efforts required to protect sea turtles effectively,” he said.

Under the Wildlife Conservation Enactment 1997, three sea turtle species, namely the green turtle, hawksbill turtle and olive ridley turtle, are classified as Totally Protected species in Sabah.

Offences involving these species carry penalties ranging from fines of RM50,000 to RM250,000 and imprisonment of one to five years.

Despite the legal protections in place, demand for turtle eggs continues to pose a significant threat.

Smuggling activity from neighbouring countries remains a persistent challenge, with local market demand identified as a key driver.

A baseline study conducted by UMS, guided by CITES Demand Reduction Strategy guidelines, helped shape the campaign’s behavioural science-based approach.

“I urge all stakeholders, including government agencies, researchers, non-governmental organisations and donors, to use this Action Plan as a reference point and actively contribute towards achieving its intended outcomes,” said Jafry, calling on stakeholders to play their part.

Additionally, he appealed to district offices, municipal councils and the Kota Kinabalu City Hall to help bring the message to the public, adding that the media’s role is equally important.

“It is my hope that this call by the Government will be embraced by the public.

“By reducing demand, we can stop the smuggling of turtle eggs, protect our marine biodiversity and strengthen Sabah’s image as a premier ecotourism destination. Ultimately, this will also contribute to broader efforts in addressing illegal cross-border activities,” he said.

On the newly introduced SOPs for turtle hatcheries, Jafry said the guidelines were grounded in scientific approaches and designed to ensure hatchery programmes are managed responsibly and effectively.

“By adopting best practices, we not only strengthen conservation outcomes but also enhance Sabah’s reputation as a leading destination for sustainable tourism.

“Well-managed hatcheries and responsible wildlife interactions will provide meaningful experiences for visitors while preserving our natural heritage,” he said.

“I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the Sabah Wildlife Department and its conservation partners, including UMS and WWF-Malaysia, for their dedication and hard work in advancing turtle conservation.

“Let us continue this spirit of collaboration and commitment for the future of Sabah’s natural heritage,” he said.

Present were State Tourism, Culture and Environment Permanent Secretary Datuk Josie Lai and Sabah Wildlife Director Mohd Soffian Abu Bakar, among others.