

Poaching, deep-sea pollution threaten Sabah's fragile sea turtle populations

By **Olivia Miwil** May 26, 2026 @ 11:12am



Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)'s Borneo Marine Institute deputy dean (academic and international) Associate Professor Dr Juanita Joseph said the primary threats to turtles span nesting beaches, feeding grounds, and deep-sea habitats. — PICTURE COURTESY OF UMS

KOTA KINABALU: Threats to sea turtle populations in Sabah remain a major concern despite encouraging conservation gains, according to Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS).

The university's Borneo Marine Institute deputy dean (academic and international) Associate Professor Dr Juanita Joseph said the primary threats to turtles span nesting beaches, feeding grounds, and deep-sea habitats.

"Egg poaching at nesting sites for sale and consumption is still happening, while at feeding grounds, foreign fishermen continue to kill turtles to obtain certain materials used in the production of accessories.

"In addition, marine pollution in deep-sea areas also has a significant impact on turtle habitats, but there are international constraints limiting access to open waters for monitoring purposes," she said in a statement, in conjunction with World Turtle Day, observed annually on May 23.

Juanita said Sabah has recorded positive results from long-term conservation efforts, particularly regarding the Green Turtle, the most common species found in the state.

Through efforts carried out by the state government and local communities, the Green Turtle population has improved to the extent that its global conservation status has changed from endangered to least concern.

"However, the Hawksbill Sea Turtle remains critically endangered and faces extinction if protection measures are not strengthened. The Olive Ridley Turtle is classified as vulnerable, while the Leatherback Turtle continues to face threats to its survival," she said.

Juanita said the government had also introduced the use of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs), special devices fitted to fishing nets that allow large marine animals, including turtles, to escape from becoming trapped.

She said the initiative was implemented by the Fisheries Department in collaboration with non-governmental organisations, although the use of TEDs in Sabah was still at the trial stage.

On UMS' role, Juanita said the university continued to serve as a regional reference centre for turtle conservation through research, teaching and advisory support to ministries and state authorities.

She said UMS provides scientific counsel on sea turtle egg conservation through the Indo-Pacific Marine Turtle Genetic programme. The university has also represented Malaysia as an advisor in the Turtle Islands Heritage Protected Area since 2018.

Juanita stressed that academic institutions must work closely with local communities to ensure conservation initiatives are effective.

Collaboration between educational institutions, government agencies, and communities is crucial to guarantee the survival of turtle species for future generations, she said.