

Sea turtle nesting in Sabah's Turtle Islands triples since 1970s, researcher says

By **Olivia Miwil** July 1, 2026 @ 10:03am



Associate Professor Dr Juanita Joseph (second left) during a talk in conjunction with Sabah World Biodiversity celebration at a hotel here.
NSTP/OLIVIA MIWIL

KOTA KINABALU: The Turtle Islands Park in Sandakan is one of the world's longest-running sea turtle conservation programmes, with nesting numbers rising sharply since the 1970s, a researcher said.

Associate Professor Dr Juanita Joseph, a Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) researcher, said the site is recognised internationally as an outstanding conservation model.

"It is one of the world's longest-running sea turtle conservation programmes—even longer than similar programmes in the United States," she said.

"Since the 1970s, the number of nesting turtles there has increased threefold. Today, more than 20,000 nests are recorded annually," she said, adding that the islands were gazetted as protected areas under Sabah Parks more than 50 years ago.

She was speaking during a talk titled Safeguarding Sea Turtles: How Local Actions/Research Shape Global Marine Conservation at the Sabah state-level World Biodiversity Day celebration.

She added that sea turtle conservation in Sabah dates back to the 1920s during the British North Borneo administration, while research expanded significantly in the 1990s.

The most common species found in Sabah is the green turtle, whose conservation status has improved from "Endangered" to "Least Concern" following decades of conservation work.

The hawksbill turtle remains "Critically Endangered", while the olive ridley turtle is considered rare in Sabah.

Drawing on decades of research, Juanita said genetic studies have had a significant impact on conservation efforts.

"Genetic studies show that turtles nesting in Sandakan forage in Semporna and Brunei Bay, while some travel as far as Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. Likewise, many turtles feeding in Semporna actually hatched in places such as Micronesia," she said.

"This perfectly illustrates the theme of acting locally while creating global impact," she added.

Beyond nesting beaches, Sabah's coastal waters also serve as feeding grounds for four sea turtle species, including the leatherback turtle.

Juanita said primary nesting areas in Sabah are located in the Sulu Sea, including Turtle Islands Park and Pulau Libaran, as well as Semporna, which hosts the largest sea turtle foraging ground in Southeast Asia. Other important feeding grounds include Tun Mustapha Park and Brunei Bay.

She said the findings had strengthened cooperation among local communities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government agencies and international partners.

UMS has also contributed to the Sabah Wildlife Department's Turtle Action Plan by incorporating research findings, particularly recommendations to improve hatchery management.

The university, together with NGOs, has also conducted public awareness and education programmes to encourage local communities to take ownership of conservation efforts.

In Kudat, local communities manage sea turtle conservation themselves while earning income through ecotourism programmes that allow visitors to witness hatchling releases.