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UM and UMS join seagrass conservation project

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KUALA TERENGGANU: Recognising the vital role of seagrass in Malaysia's marine ecosystem, the Terengganu City and Nature Guide Association (TCNGA) is equipping its members with expert knowledge to serve as "micro ambassadors", providing accurate information on the plant to tourists and local communities.

Its Chairman, Mohd Nor Ismail, said based on the experience of most members, public and tourist awareness of the importance of seagrass conservation remains low.

"Many people do not know what seagrass is or the role it plays in the ecosystem. That is why we see tour guides as the best medium to raise public awareness," he told Bernama at the Community Education and Engagement Programme for Seagrass Awareness (Phase Four), organised by Yayasan Petronas in collaboration with Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) as the implementing partner.

Mohd Nor said the association has been working with Yayasan Petronas and UPM since last year to enhance members' knowledge and awareness of the importance of seagrass, a flowering marine plant and its habitat.

"We have continuously participated in various educational programmes conducted by Yayasan Petronas and UPM to ensure we have sufficient knowledge about seagrass in our role as tour guides," he said.

Meanwhile, UPM Seagrass Project head Prof Dr Muta Harah Zakaria said seagrass serves as an important breeding ground, shelter and habitat for various marine species, while also acting as a natural filter that helps maintain water clarity by trapping sediments and reducing seabed erosion.

She said seagrass also helps maintain the balance of the marine ecosystem, ensuring the sustainability of fisheries resources, which are among humanity's key food sources.

"Many people still confuse seagrass with seaweed, even though they are entirely different organisms. Worldwide, there are only about 72 to 80 species of seagrass, of which Malaysia is home to 17 species, while there are more than 10,000 species of seaweed globally," she said.

Muta Harah, who has been researching seagrass since 1994, said Terengganu is home to 10 seagrass species, commonly found in Kemaman, Setiu and Paka in Dungun.

She said under the collaboration between Yayasan Petronas and UPM, which began in late 2024, mapping of seagrass habitats is currently being carried out in nearly all states in Peninsular Malaysia to assess the latest status of the ecosystem.

The study aims not only to identify the locations and extent of seagrass meadows, but also to detect any new species and measure the amount of carbon stored by the plants as part of efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Meanwhile, Yayasan Petronas Chief Executive Officer Shariah Nelly Francis said the collaboration with UPM and TCNGA is also intended to encourage greater public participation, including from local communities, in fostering a sense of responsibility for protecting the marine ecosystem.

"Besides the mapping project, which is expected to be completed in 2026, one of the key objectives of this collaboration is to raise awareness of the importance of seagrass among all segments of society.

"We hope they will become key drivers in helping us protect and conserve this highly valuable marine ecosystem," she said.

Shariah Nelly said as part of its social impact commitment, Yayasan Petronas plays an important role in supporting seagrass mapping and conservation efforts by bringing together researchers, government agencies and local communities to work towards the shared goal of preserving the ecosystem for future generations.

She added that the initiative also involves Universiti Malaya and Universiti Malaysia Sabah as implementing partners for seagrass mapping and community engagement programmes, while the Department of Fisheries Malaysia and the Sabah Biodiversity Centre are strategic partners. - Bernama



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SUMMARIES

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