

Give wildlife room to roam, tourists urged as Sabah gears up for more visitors

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KOTA KINABALU: Visitors on nature tours must exercise caution and respect wildlife by giving animals space to move and behave naturally, says a conservationist.

Sabah Biodiversity Conservation Association (Seratu Aatai) founder and Universiti Malaysia Sabah senior lecturer Dr Nurzhafarina Othman said the need for responsible wildlife encounters would become even more important as more visitors come to Sabah, particularly with Visit Sabah 2027 approaching.

She said increased tourism could also mean more human-wildlife interactions, especially at popular nature destinations.

Recalling an incident in the Lower Kinabatangan last year, Nurzhafarina said tourists on a boat ride had gathered around a herd of elephants crossing the river.

“Sometimes, our excitement to see wildlife can have an impact we never intended.

“A herd was crossing the river when boats gathered nearby to watch the elephants swim.

“As they hurried across, a little calf was left behind. We received a call and went to assess the situation and helped bring the anxious and confused calf across.

“Thankfully, the calf was safely reunited with its herd,” she said.

While the incident ended well, she said it was a reminder that wildlife needed space to move, communicate and care for one another.

“Keep your distance. Slow down. Let them pass,” she advised, adding that the best wildlife encounter was one in which the animals were allowed to remain wild.

Nurzhafarina said the Lower Kinabatangan offered one of the best opportunities to see wild Bornean elephants in their natural habitat, where visitors might be lucky enough to watch them swimming, playing, feeding, moving along the riverbank or simply resting.

“And that is precisely what we hope you’ll let them do: be elephants. When you encounter elephants along the Kinabatangan River, please keep your distance, keep your boat at a respectful distance and simply enjoy watching them from afar,” she said.

Nurzhafarina said the elephants were already being squeezed from all sides by roads, development and the loss of their natural habitat, and the least humans could do was give them the space they needed along the river.

She said visitors could sometimes do the most by simply observing, appreciating and giving wildlife room to live.

“Such incidents affecting wildlife have happened and will happen again because there are now more boats and tourists. So please, let us all respect the wild.”