

Ocean degrading rate cause for concern: UMS

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KOTA KINABALU: The rate at which ocean habitats are degrading is a cause for concern since it is resulting in species extinction, according to UMS Borneo Marine Research Institute Director, Professor Dr Saleem Mustafa.

"Calls for action for cutting carbon emissions, reducing over-fishing, stopping unsustainable fisheries, increasing marine protected areas and controlling pollution are getting louder but still willingness to invest and to translate rhetoric into action are far too slow and disappointing."

He said this in a statement here in conjunction with World Ocean Day, which will be observed globally on June 8.

"Marine scientists, nevertheless, need to step up their efforts towards ecosystem recovery by generating knowledge on ecosystem dynamics and means of restoring ecological balance and species diversity.

"And joining all those stakeholders (educationists, social scientists and even general public) to bring about changes in policies designed to achieve harmony between human society and ocean ecosystem," he said.

He said his Institute is poised to play a greater role at the international arena with its recognition granted by International Ocean Institute as the Focal Point for Malaysia on May 10 and subsequent engagement with the international programmes of the Ocean Project.

"The Institute has resolved to intensify its efforts towards coastal marine ecosystems, especially the critical ocean habitats and action plans for building their resilience, and enhancement of the stocks of depleted species.

"We believe that the most effective and economically sensible strategy is to build strength in highly stressed natural resources to offset the effects of climate change and

support the sustainable development of marine resources that supply goods and services," he said.

He pointed out that seafood which comes by direct harvest from the sea amounts to 146 million tonnes (valued at US\$105 billion) and contributes significantly to food security.

"This cannot be sustained with continued habitat degradation and loss of biodiversity. Therefore, we require policy priorities to address the current issues as well as future threats.

"Out of the three most prominent marine critical habitats, namely coral reefs, mangroves and sea grasses, the last one has not received the respect and interest it deserves," he said.

He said the first two are under strong arms of the concerned ministries, but sea grasses are yet to be as effectively protected.

"The current reports suggesting that sea grass beds store 20 billion tonnes of carbon and are sequester 10 per cent of the carbon in the world's oceans provides an important insight into their vital role. Therefore, more attention needs to be given to such an important natural resource.

"Coastal development plans and environmental impact assessment should take these resources into consideration," he said, adding that there is a need to have a correct estimate of the coverage of sea grasses in the country.

"A national project on sea grass distribution, their species composition and amount of carbon stocks will address the glaring paucity of information on this important component of the coastal marine ecosystem."

On the occasion of the World Ocean Day 2012, Borneo Marine Research Institute has planned a range of activities that reflect its pledge to saving the marine ecosystem.