

UMS to tackle beached whales

MARINE MAMMAL

RESCUE: Sabah has highest number of cases, task force to develop SOP to deal with problem

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KRISTY INUS
KOTA KINABALU
news@nst.com.my

UNIVERSITI Malaysia Sabah marine scientists will form a task force to assist related agencies in handling cases involving beached whales.

The university's Borneo Marine Research Institute (BMRI) director Prof Dr Saleem Mustafa said the possibility of whale beaching incidents in the state was likely to see an increase because of climate changes.

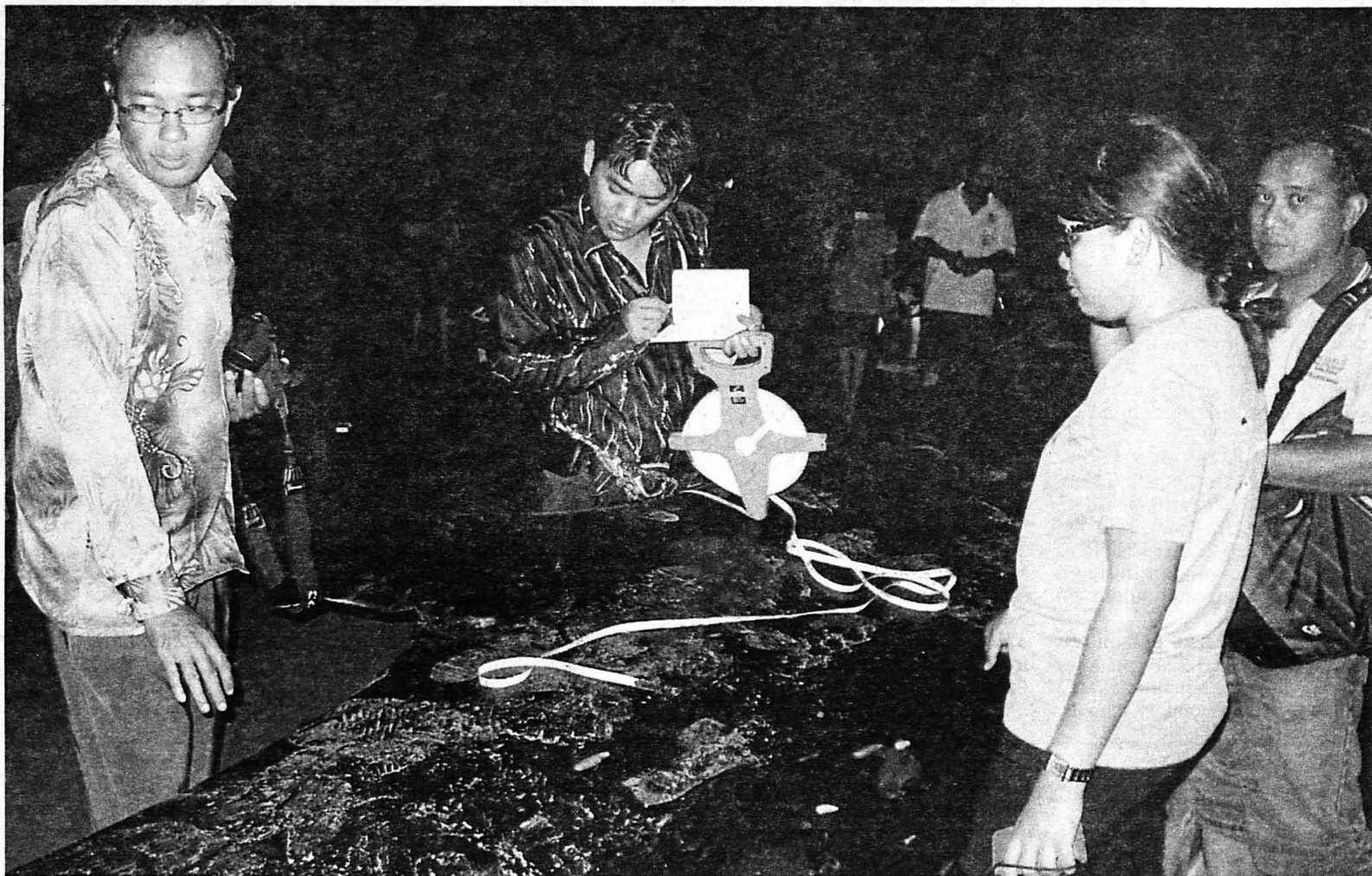
He said Sabah was known to have the most incidents involving stranded whale cases in the country based on studies as early as the 1970s.

BMRI will lead the task force initiative to be better prepared to face such situations, said Saleem.

The institute will also hold a meeting with various agencies to develop a standard operating procedure (SOP) in dealing with stranded marine mammals.

UMS came out with the task force and SOP following the latest incident of a stranded whale in Kuala Penyu on Aug 2. The mammal died after 12 hours of being stranded despite attempts by various agencies and locals to help it return to the waters.

Measuring 15.8m and weighing more than 10 tonnes, it was stranded on the beach at the mouth of Sungai Setompok. The carcass was



Dr John Madin (second from left), who leads the **Universiti Malaysia Sabah's Borneo Marine Research Institute research team** for the whale stranded in Kuala Penyu incident, taking notes on the salient features of the whale while other team members look on.

towed to a nearby jetty the next day for burial.

Dr John Madin, who leads the UMS research team for this case, said they were conducting a DNA analysis to identify the whale species. The results are expected to be out in a month's time.

He said while they believed it was a Bryde's whale from the Baleen family, there were still uncertainties and claims reported online that the mammal was one of the

other species.

"As the identification and taxonomic status of the whale is currently unclear and possibly confused with other species in the Balaenopteridae family, tissue samples will have to be processed at the Institute's Microbiology and Fish Disease Laboratory."

Madin also said external examination of the whale showed recovering wounds and many blisters on the dead whale, which could

possibly be because of past injuries and long exposure to sunlight.

"The whale also appeared emaciated. With these observations and the fact that it was unable to swim despite efforts to pull it to deeper water during the rescue effort, we believe the main cause of it being stranded was due to an unknown illness.

"However, other factors such as extreme weakness and old age could not be ruled out," Madin

said, adding that they could not determine the exact age of the whale except that it was not young.

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