

Scientists embark on Tun Mustapha Park Expedition

KUDAT: A team of scientists and researchers has begun a three-week expedition in the 1.02 million-hectare Tun Mustapha Park (TMP) to gather marine scientific data for the gazettement of the park.

The data would be useful for the consultation process and final decision on the park's gazettement, said Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Maximus Ongkili.

He said this is particularly vital in identifying the boundaries which depended on resource mapping and identification of sensitive biodiversity breeding spots, among others.

"The marine park is ecologically more diverse than Australia's famed Great Barrier Reef or the Caribbean, but has yet to be gazetted despite its establishment being announced way back in 2003.

"The expedition is crucial as scientific marine data is lacking to support the park's gazettement. It will also enable immediate conservation

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efforts and sustainable development of the marine resources to take place," said Ongkili, who launched the expedition on Thursday onboard an expedition boat at the Marudu Bay.

The expedition is led by Universiti Malaysia Sabah's (UMS) researcher, Muhammad Ali Syed Hussein, with participants from Universiti Malaya, Sabah Parks, WWF Malaysia, the Netherlands and Australia. It is supported by the National Oceanography Directorate, Sabah Fisheries, Felcra Berhad and the Malaysia Maritime Enforcement Agency and will end on Sept 26.

As a signatory to the Coral Triangle Initiative (CTI) on Coral Reefs, Fisheries and

Food Security, Malaysia has developed a National Plan of Action to protect its portion of the CT area. Tun Mustapha Park is one of Malaysia's CTI Priority Conservation Areas.

Ongkili said the expedition would assess aspects of marine biodiversity and ecology, as well as the socio-economic benefits of the marine ecosystems to the local communities.

"The effort to develop and manage Tun Mustapha Park is also in line with the government's transformation programmes to uplift the quality of life of the coastal communities while ensuring sustainability.

"People are often looked upon as targets of development but they are actually also

partners in conservation and resource management efforts," he said.

The proposed TMP area has more than 50 islands and islets located in the Kudat, Pitas and Kota Marudu districts in the northern part of Sabah. Its unique biodiversity supports a series of complex and linked habitats and is home to endangered marine animals, such as green sea turtles and dugongs.

It is also home to Sabah's third largest volume of fishery products from coral reefs, bays and open waters, and the source of livelihood to 80,000 coastal inhabitants, with great potential for eco-tourism.

Yesterday, Ongkili also chaired a dialogue session on sustainable financing for the

implementation of CTI programmes and activities with various development partners. They comprise WWF Malaysia, US CTI Programme Integrator, Coral Triangle Support Partnership, Environment Australia and the Asian Development Bank.

Ongkili, who is chairman of the CTI Council of Ministers, said the dialogue session hoped to generate resources for the sustainable financing of CTI lead programmes.

Under the Ninth and Tenth Malaysia Plan, MOSTI through its Science Fund has funded a total of 14 research projects in the Marudu Bay area with total funding of RM3.56 million.

Aside from this, MOSTI al-

so disbursed RM3 million under its TechnoFund for a local company to produce high premium sea cucumber (*Holothuria Scabra*) through induced spawning. The project, which began in 2009, is expected to be completed by the end of 2012.

He said the Sabah Coordination Committee (SCC) for the CTI programmes and activities set up this year, recommended seven community projects which had been approved by the CTI National Coordination Committee with a RM990,000 fund from MOSTI.

Malaysia will host the upcoming 8th CTI Senior Officials' Meeting and 4th Ministerial Meeting in November. - Bernama



Dr. Maximus (centre, with cap) with the ministry's deputy secretary-general (science) Prof. Datin Paduka Dr. Khatijah Mohd Yusoff (fourth right) and National Oceanography Directorate Undersecretary Prof. Dato' Dr. Nor Aeni Haji Mokhtar (third right).



Dr. Maximus chatting with some of the participants before the team sailed off on their scientific survey expedition trip.