

372 Mabul turtles tagged by UMS

BP 6-11-2015 10

KOTA KINABALU: Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), supported by Borneo Divers and Sea Sports (Sabah) Sdn Bhd, has tagged 372 turtles in Mabul Island as of May this year.

The 372 sea turtles include 346 green turtles and 26 hawksbill turtles tagged between August 2010 till May 2015.

UMS Borneo Marine Research Institute (BMRI) senior lecturer Dr Pushpa M. Palaniappan said most of the turtles tagged were juveniles, which constituted about 70 per cent of the population.

"If you find old turtles, it is not a good sign. So what we have in Mabul is very good."

Pushpa and her team have previously received funding from the Sciencefund scheme by the Malaysian Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI) where 126 sea turtles in Mabul Island and 535 sea turtles in Sipadan Island were caught and tagged between 2010 and 2011.

Pushpa said sea turtles were growing well in Mabul Island where they were protected and abundant food was available.

However, she was unable to comment whether sea turtle conservation efforts had achieved the goals given that regular monitoring of the turtles in Mabul only started five years ago.

"Sea turtles are long-lived animals, that live between 70 and 100 years.

"We only started regular monitoring five years ago, so we are unable to see much. We need long term data," Pushpa said this in a press conference on the third Borneo Divers' Celebration of Sea Turtles in Mabul programme to be held from November 9 to 12.

The Borneo Divers' Celebration of Sea Turtles held in November this year is a follow-up programme of the Mabul World Turtle Day in May.

Borneo Divers and Sea Sports (Sabah) Sdn Bhd has been working



Divers capture a sea turtle using the JS Method in order to tag it.

with UMS on sea turtle research and conservation since 1998. The successful collaboration led to the first Borneo Divers' Celebration of Sea Turtles in Mabul programme in November 2013. The programme aims to raise public awareness and educate domestic and international tourists, as well as local residents on sea turtles that inhabit the waters of Mabul Island.

The programme also facilitates an underwater census of the resident population of green and hawksbill turtles in Mabul Island. All turtles that are caught, using the JS Method, were photographed, measured and tagged.

The aim of the study is to monitor the long-term growth rates of the resident population of sea turtles in Mabul.

In the first year of the programme, the team caught and tagged 61 sea turtles in 10 dives over 3.5 days of field work.

Pushpa said sea turtles were generally shy in nature and would swim away when they detected the presence of humans.

However, she said turtles in Mabul and Sipadan Islands were relatively unafraid of humans, which was a rare occurrence.

"We are lucky to be able to work on them in Mabul and Sipadan."

She said there would be 11

tagging sessions during the event with a limit of 12 participants per session. The organizer will be conducting two to four dive sessions a day. Pushpa reported that the team was seeing positive sign on turtle's growth as they saw both tagged and untagged turtles in every dive.

"Every time we go, we are tagging more and more (turtles). So it is a very good sign."

On the other hand, Pushpa said turtle eggs delivered to hatcheries on Mabul Island have a hatch rate of 98 per cent.

At present, Pushpa said there were three hatcheries she knew of on Mabul Island, which were set up by Borneo Divers, Scuba Junkie and SMART Resort.

"If the eggs are good, we may get 98 per cent hatch rate. It depends on the condition as well, when the eggs are found and transferred.

"As soon as the hatchlings emerge, they are released to the sea."

Pushpa said Mabul Island recorded a maximum of 150 turtle nests a year, with around 100 eggs in each nest.

She said Scuba Junkie was even paying RM10 per egg to villagers who brought turtle eggs to the hatchery.