

Unique Tun Mustapha Park potential tourism game changer

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KOTA KINABALU: With its unique biodiversity, the Tun Mustapha Park (TMP) is a potential game changer to help boost tourism sector in Malaysia, particularly Sabah.

The 898,726.26 ha TMP area has more than 50 islands and islets located in the Kudat, Pitas and Kota Marudu districts in the northern part of Sabah.

The TMP 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.

The area's unique biodiversity supports and linked habitats and is home to endangered marine animals, such as green sea turtles and dugongs.

A small community of the distinctive Palauh (pelaut) or sea gypsy people is also found inhabiting the open sea area in TMP.

A team of scientists and researchers from local universities and Non-Governmental Organizational bodies (NGOs) have recently completed a five-week (from April 15 to May 19) scientific expedition in TMP.

The findings of the research works were presented during a

two-day seminar, organized by Sabah Parks, at a leading hotel in Kota Kinabalu, last month.

The expedition, organized by the Sabah Parks, was to collate information for the Park management to focus on conservation activities as well as to have better control of the Park.

Participants of the open sea and land expedition were from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), UiTM, University College Sabah Foundation (UCSF), Sabah Environmental Trust (SET), WWF Malaysia, Politeknik Sandakan and Sabah Parks.

The first scientific expedition was launched in the same area in 2012 to gather marine scientific data for the gazette-ment of the park.

TMP was gazetted on May 19, 2016 under the Parks Enactment 1984 with an area of 898,726.76 ha, covering only the sea area.

According to WWF Malaysia, TMP is the largest marine protected in Malaysia.

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.

The focus of research during the recent scientific expedition include community interrelation with forest eco-system services of the islands in TMP, tourism resources assessment, the role of TMP in the conservation of cultural heritage and conservation of TMP marine resources.

Some researchers used the expedition to update their earlier study on the land cover change in TMP's three main islands - Pulau Banggi, Pulau Balambangan and Pulau Malawali.

It was suggested that inter-agency cooperation and collaborative management approach supported by remote sensing monitoring strategy to ensure long-term sustainability of TMP.

Landsat imageries of 2000 and 2016 revealed a significant reduction of forest area in the land area, while mangroves had declined about 1,400 ha in 16 years.

Bird investigators recorded 102 bird species found in TMP, of which 17 species in 12 families are new additions.

For marine species, researchers recorded 18 species of elasmobranches, comprising 11 sharks (Whaler Sharks)

and 14 rays (Stingrays of the family Dasyatidae).

Researchers also raised concerns about poaching of the endangered marine species like sea turtle in TMP, citing a discovery of 19 rotting Green Turtle carcasses in the TMP area in 2015.

Ironically, most of the identified tourism attractions are located outside the TMP area.

According to Dr Rahimatsah Amat, CEO of Sabah Environmental Trust, Tanjong Priok, which was gazetted as a cultural heritage site, is located at Pulau Balambangan.

Additionally, he said Pulau Guhuan, Pulau Balundangan Besar and Balundangan Kecil are known as sea turtle landing sites and Pulau Bangau is an important nesting site for egrets.

"All these potential tourism attractions are iconic and scarce, and possess added value in term of conservation as well as tourism sector," he said.

It was also observed that

currently, tourism in TMP is limited to small lodging operators and adventure activities by private operators.

Sabah Parks on the other hand has yet to generate revenues from activities in places within TMP.

"Therefore, tourism can be used as a platform to generate as well as to promote sustainable development and conservation in TMP," Dr Rahimatsah said.

He also suggested that Pulau Balambangan, Pulau Kalutan, Pulau Simanguak, Pulau Guhuan, Pulau Balundangan Besar and Balundangan Kecil and Pulau Bangau be integrated into TMP.

Dr Rahim observed that Pulau Balambangan is an essential location for the purpose of establishing a station/post for Sabah Parks to manage TMP.

In addition, Pulau Balambangan and its cluster are also suitable as concessionaire sites. It's important as it can generate revenue for TMP.

He said there was also a

need to improve and diversify activities for tourists in TMP, especially in the Kudat coastal area.

Low impact water activities such as snorkeling, canoeing, banana boat and para-sailing can also be promoted along the stretch from Pantai Terongkongan up to Simpang Mengayau and towards Kg Parapat Laut.

In addition, attractions such as geological features, sea stack, marine mammals, aquaculture farm or experiencing sea gypsy life style.

"These resources can be promoted to diversify tourism activities and to promote trip packages (day trip or more) with a fee.

"The fee is imposed as conservation fee on both visitors and tour operators (as concession fee for boats).

"Through these actions, sustainable financing can be generated for TMP and responsibility in protecting TMP can be shared with the tour operators," he said. (By EMIN MADI)



Breathtaking view of the TMP area.



Some of the researchers during the scientific expedition in TMP. Standing far left is Dr Rahimatsah Amat.