



**UNIT KOMUNIKASI KORPORAT
JABATAN PERIKANAN MALAYSIA
BERITA PERIKANAN HARI INI**

**20 Disember 2022
25 Jamadilawal 1444H**

SENARAI AKHBAR	TAJUK
Utusan Malaysia	•
Berita Harian	•
Harian Metro	•
Kosmo !	•
Sinar Harian	• Bot nelayan asing ditahan
The Star	• Looking after a natural gem
The Straits Time	•
Nanyang Siang Pau	•
Malaysia Gazette	•
Harakah	•
Malaysiakini	•
Bernamea	•
Borneo Post (KK)	•
Guan Ming Daily	•
Sabah Media	•

UTUSAN MALAYSIA	KOSMO!	THE STAR	NANYANG SIANG PAU	MUKA SURAT	TARIKH
BERITA HARIAN	SINAR HARIAN	THE SUN	ORIENTAL DAILY		
HARIAN METRO	NEW STRAITS TIMES	THE MALAY MAIL	PELBAGAI		
KATEGORI LIPUTAN: POSITIF		NEGATIF	NEUTRAL	8	20-10-2022



BALL Watch Malaysia recently adopted Reef 38 in Lankayan. — BALL Watch Malaysia

Looking after a natural gem

A marine conservation area in Sabah that was recognised as a 'Green List' site earlier this year is one of the best ecotourism spots in the country.

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IMAGINE being on a small island resort that's surrounded by crystal clear waters and white sandy beaches. In the morning, when you head to the mess hall for breakfast, you are greeted by lots of fishes and other sea creatures swimming right underneath the planks that you walk on.

Every so often you can even spot a baby shark or two ... doo doo doo.

When noon comes, it is the turtles' turn to make an appearance (specifically the Hawksbill and Green sea turtles). Add to that some seabirds stopping by the buoys for the humans to take pictures of with their trusty phone cameras.

Frankly that's the only thing your phone is good for at this place — there is hardly any mobile network coverage here so you're "forced" to stay off your devices and enjoy your surroundings instead.

Lankayan Island in Sabah may not be as popular as some of the other islands in the state, but it is by no means an inferior one. It is located in the northeast and is part of the Coral Triangle region, where, among others, 600 species of reef-building corals, over 2,000 species of reef fish, 25 species of sea-grass and algae, seven species of giant clams and six of the seven marine turtle species have been found and recorded.

The Coral Triangle is in the western Pacific Ocean and includes the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and the Solomon Islands.

Lankayan — about 80km from Sandakan — is also situated within the Sugud Islands Marine Conservation Area or SIMCA, which covers 46.317ha of the Sulu Sea. There are two other islands under SIMCA: Billean and Tegaipi.

What's special about SIMCA, apart from being the first privately managed marine protected area in Malaysia, is that this is a "no-take" zone, meaning no fishing or removal of any coral and other marine life, is allowed in the vicinity. Failure to comply will result in

heavy fines or even imprisonment, or both.

On May 19, SIMCA was officially recognised as a well-managed protected area and was named an International Union Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Green List site. This is the first global recognition of its kind in Malaysia as well as the first in the Coral Triangle.

This recognition is the result of the long-term commitment of a small team of dedicated folks who work for a private, non-profit company called the Reef Guardian, as well as the local government, stakeholders and local communities.

Reef Guardian, which has been in Lankayan for nearly 20 years now, was appointed by the Sabah government in 2003 to be, well, the guardians of the area. A large part of what the organisation does is to manage, restrict and control human activities within SIMCA to ensure a balanced co-existence of ecotourism amid coral habitat/marine life.

It's a unique collaboration and agreement between the government and two private entities. The state or federal government do not directly fund the conservation work at SIMCA, though, but Reef Guardian does work hand-in-hand with the Sabah Wildlife Department to make sure things run smoothly and there is constant enforcement of regulations.

"The island belongs to the government, and they leased it to the Reef Guardian for 30 years. We then rented the island to the resort — this is pretty much how we have been able to sustain most of the conservation work," explains Dr Achier Chung, the lead marine biologist for Reef Guardian who also manages and oversees all the work done by the team. The lease is at RM60,000 a year, and there is an option to extend it for 10 years.

According to Dr Chung, tourists who stay at the resort would have to pay a conservation fee of merely RM25 per person, per night, which is collected by Reef Guardian. "The money from this is definitely not enough to fund everything as our operational costs can run pretty high at times. However, we do not have to pay for our accommodation or utility bills as these are all undertaken by the resort. Our food



Dr Chung (standing, fourth from left) and her Reef Guardian team members are responsible for managing SIMCA. — Photos: Reef Guardian



Lankayan Island is located within the Sugud Islands Marine Conservation Area, or SIMCA.



is also subsidised by them.

"But even though we get enough support in kind from the resort, we still need to do some fundraising programmes ourselves throughout the year to ensure that we can continue to do conservation work at SIMCA," Dr Chung notes.

One of the fundraising programmes done this year was the Adopt-A-Reef Campaign, which saw the participation of BALL Watch Malaysia. As part of its CSR efforts, the Swiss watchmaker adopted "Reef 38" in November, located about 4km from Lankayan. The medium-sized reef was discovered by Dr Chung herself back in 2006.

"It is one of the most beautiful reefs out here and is great for divers," she says. The adoption, of course, comes at a price, and this money will be channelled to fund some of the work done by the Reef Guardian, including research and training. As part of the package, Reef 38 has been named "BALL Watch Malaysia", at least for one year. Evelyn Wang, general manager of BALL Watch Malaysia says, "Through its efforts in documenting the positive outcomes of biodiversity protection and a well-managed and well-governed protected

marine area, Reef Guardian proves that ocean conservation is a necessary investment of resources.

"Together with the commitment of local governments and organisations, BALL Watch is proud to play its part in ensuring the reefs within SIMCA are well protected."

Unsustainable fishing and tourism practices, among others, have put our oceans and marine life in such bad conditions and we need to better understand how we can work together to protect them. This is where organisations like Reef Guardian come in. For two decades now, the reefs in SIMCA have been protected from illegal activities like fish bombing, a commercial fishing practice that destroys coral reefs and negatively impacts food security for the local population.

Dr Chung and her team (which includes senior marine biologist Davies Austin Spiji and environmental control officer Leony Siki) carry out regular checks to monitor coral reef health and record reef fishes as well as coral diversity. Almost all the team members are enforcement officers or "Wildlife Wardens", accredited by the Wildlife Department. This means that they can reprimand

anyone who breaks the rules in SIMCA.

Reef Guardian also does educational programmes on-site, teaching tourists at the resort not just about what the team does, but also how everyone can play a part in ensuring our oceans remain amazing for many generations to come.

"The IUCN Green List recognition was a milestone for us and shows that all our efforts have come to fruition over the years," says Dr Chung. This recognition is not permanent, though: in five years, Reef Guardian must again prove to IUCN that it has either kept to its conservation efforts or increased and improved its work in the area to remain on the Green List. If the organisation fails to do this, then it may be taken off the list.

"We are currently drafting a 10-year management chart, which is split into two five-year projects or plans. All marine parks must have a long-term management plan. For us, we will evaluate ourselves every two years to see whether we are moving on the right track, or whether we need to change our direction," she says.

For more information on Reef Guardian, check out their website (reefguardian.com.my). You can make a donation to the organisation, or ask about their fundraising campaigns. There is also an Adopt-A-Nest campaign, where you adopt a nest of turtle eggs that are kept in the hatchery on the island.

Lankayan is a popular spot for turtles to lay their eggs, and if you happen to be there during nesting season, you may just witness a turtle laying eggs on the beach. These eggs are then kept in the hatchery. Once they are hatched, the "babies" are immediately set free into the ocean, ready to face the world.

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Bot nelayan asing ditahan

GEORGETOWN - Sebuah bot nelayan asing ditahan sepasukan Agensi Penguatkuasaan Maritim Malaysia (Maritim Malaysia) Pulau Pinang dalam Op Tanjung yang dijalankan pada Ahad.

Pengarah Maritim Pulau Pinang, Kepten Maritim Abd Razak Mohamed berkata, bot milik warga Indonesia itu ditahan di kedudukan 26 batu nautika barat Pulau Kendi pada jam 11 pagi.

Menurutnya, bot dari Sumatera Barat terbabit dikendalikan oleh empat kru warga Indonesia.

"Ketika pemeriksaan, kita mendapati keempat-empat nelayan itu tidak mempunyai dokumen pengenalan diri dan permit menangkap ikan di perairan Malaysia," katanya dalam satu kenyataan di sini pada Isnin.