

Unique Project Gives Sea Turtles New Lease Of Life

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SEMATAN, Fri:

Sea Turtles in Sarawak have been given a new lease of life with the implementation of the unique Reef Balls Project and you can also do your part to protect them.

The project needs the sponsorship of the public, especially private companies, to ensure that the best possible protection can be given to sea turtles that frequent Sarawak's shores to nest.

The project is a pioneering method in this region and it has proven its effectiveness in less than a year after the first reef balls were placed around Pulau Talang-Talang Kecil, Pulau Talang-Talang Besar and Pulau Satang Besar here.

Environment and Public Health Minister Datuk Amar James Wong said from January to August, the Forestry Department recorded 2,148 nests, 238,324 eggs, 56,155 hatchlings released and 475 turtles tagged on the three islands.

He said for the whole of last year, there were 911 nests, 82,804 eggs, 48,692 hatchlings released and 272 turtles tagged.

"Compare these figures and you will see some impressive improvements," said Wong after the launch of the Sarawak Turtle Satellite Tracking Project on Pulau Talang-Talang Besar yesterday.

He expressed hope private companies would support the project.

He said companies like Shell and Petronas which profited from our natural resources should give back something to nature.

Five out of seven species of living marine turtles exist in Sarawak - the green turtle, hawksbill turtle, olive ridley, loggerhead and leatherback.

The reef balls are presently the best way to prevent the deaths of turtles trapped in trawler nets.

Because it is placed on the sea bed, fishermen who lower their nets where these reef balls are placed would get their nets torn.

So far, 500 reef balls have been placed around the islands that were recently designated as the Talang-Satang National Park.

The project, mooted by Wong, started in December 1997 with the purchase of six moulds from an American company, Reef Ball Development Group Ltd, to manufacture the reef balls locally.

Reef balls are constructed using a special admixture, micro silica and cement of the same pH as salt water - this ensures that the reef balls imitate natural reef limestone and remain stable.

Reef balls can also regenerate damaged reef areas and provide habitats for fish and other marine life.

It was also found that coral colonies are already thriving on the reef balls that had been deployed around the islands here.

Each reef ball, which is 1.83m by 1.22m is size, costs RM450. There are also smaller versions like the bay ball and pallet ball which cost RM300 and RM350 respectively.

Those who wish to help Sarawak protect its turtles through the project can contact the Forestry Department's head of Marine Wildlife Unit James Bali at tel: 082-319121 or fax: 082-441702 or e-mail: jamesab@pd.jaring.my.

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