

# Coral reefs under distress

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## They're threatened by a checklist of destructive behaviours

**T**HE environmental versus developmental paradox continues to twist Malaysia's conscience: the more we obsess about economic and infrastructural growth, the more we destroy our natural heritage. Case in point: our coral reefs, spread across 4,000 sq km that host 550 marine species, are under distress. Our marine life is confronted with a checklist of destructive behaviours: pollution, natural and environmental makeovers, sedimentation, overfishing, sand mining and dredging, and tourism. Environmentalists have warned us about coral reef degradation over the years. If environmentalists can be ignored, perhaps we should listen to Sabah lawmakers: they sounded an urgent call at the state assembly meeting recently.

To wit: Sabah's tourism attractions, Pulau Balambangan off Kudat waters, in particular, are being scraped off its breathtaking natural marine beauty. Balambangan is threatened by fish bombing, polluting ships and unregulated development. We haven't even factored in the reefs' natural degeneration, like the 1998 to 1999 bleaching that was a symptom of the climate crisis. In despair, Sabah lawmakers have demanded

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harsher fines, even imprisonment, for polluters. That aside, punitive action is inadequate because the core problem is not addressed. To save the reefs, Malaysia must press for economic policy re-evaluation, guided by studies to understand adverse effects on coral reef health. On top of that, a legal system to cut down threats is needed, spearheaded by scientific-driven management and participated by communities and mass media. These are the easy parts. The harder aspects are proving almost impossible to accomplish: reducing greenhouse gases to temper global temperatures to a manageable 1.5°C. Industrialised nations dawdle or continue cautiously over this task, some clueless that we may lose up to 90 per cent of coral reefs if global temperatures increase by 2°C.

Protecting reefs needs major funding. Climate crisis damage will cost Malaysia RM41.1 trillion in 70 years. Funding is doable, just by garnishing the economic value of Malaysia's 42 marine parks and resorts that generated RM8.7 billion in 2011 to 2015, as opposed to investments in coral research, management and restoration, which is RM8.1 million. In the meantime, Malaysia continues to be susceptible to climate crisis: flood woes, coastal erosion and disease transmission, aggravated by weak governance. We have been unable to prevent unsustainable development, pollution and overfishing, though there's progress through the 2019 Reef Caretaker Programme that compelled co-management of coral reefs by bigger activism from stakeholders and communities. This mantra needs reminding: people who live closest to nature and biodiversity are the best custodians but also the most affected by malfunctioning ecosystems. Why the fuss about coral reefs? Because what is good for coral reefs is good for human life.