

Farewell, turtle warrior

The man known as Pak Su Cherating dedicated his life to saving the turtles. Now he's watching out for them from somewhere in heaven, writes **Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal**

“**T**HE eggs should be in the sand. Not the pan. *Kalau tidak, satu hari nanti anak-anak kita nak tengok penyu, tengok dalam buku aja-lah* (Otherwise, one day when our children want to see turtles, they can only see in books). This is why I'm doing this. For the future generation. Make sure you get the message out Intan.”

Click. The recording comes to an end. And suddenly there's silence. But it's pierced by the mournful crescendo that's rising from within me. Pak Su's final message, which I'd recorded during our meeting on a balmy night in Pantai Teluk Mak Nik in Terengganu only last month, hangs in the air.

Desperately, I try to stifle that heavy feeling of loss from enveloping me as I grapple with the realisation that the man whose voice I'd been listening to for hours and whose interview I'd been patiently transcribing for a story that was not supposed to be this one, is gone.

Ariffin Hassan, fondly known as Pak Su Cherating, passed away a few days ago while on his flight back from Korea to Malaysia where he'd gone to visit his second son. Pak Su, the guardian of Rimbun Dahan Turtle Hatchery, located along the sweeping beachfront of Pantai Chendor, and whose tireless work in turtle conservation gained him the moniker, Turtle Warrior, was supposed to read about his story this very month.

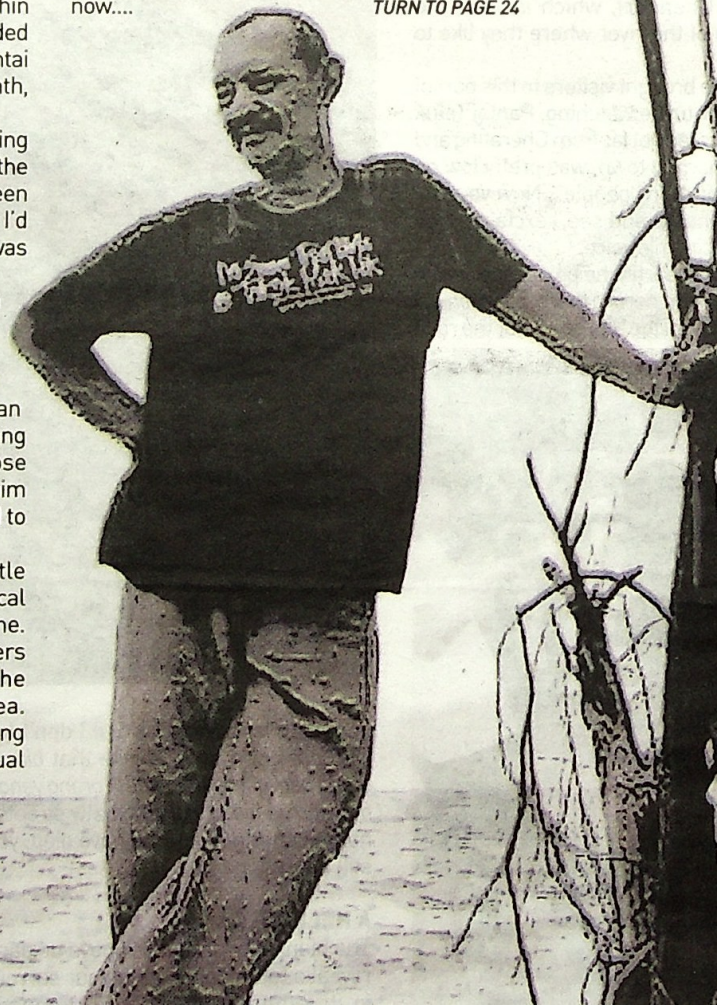
Pak Su and the Rimbun Dahan Turtle Hatchery purchase turtle eggs from the local villagers who sell them for a source of income. Subsequently, he and his band of volunteers would re-nest (bury) the eggs within the sanctuary's fenced protected nesting area. There, they'd monitor closely the incubating eggs and hatchlings as well as the eventual

releasing of the babies to the sea.

“*Jangan lupa beli paper tau Pak Su. Story keluar bulan depan* (Don't forget to buy the papers, Pak Su. The story will be out next month),” I recall gaily hollering to him as I boarded my van to return to my hotel after a magical night of turtle watching, led by his son, Fadhil. The 59-year-old had nodded contentedly before throwing me a jaunty wave from where he stood in the cocoon of the darkness.

But I guess he won't be reading my story now....

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A proud legacy

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A LONG JOURNEY

The night is turning nippy. In the distance, somewhere in the inky darkness, comes the incessant barking from a stray dog. "11.30pm" reads the time on my watch. I prowl back and forth restlessly as the need to 'pee' grows stronger. The public toilet just across the street looks ominously locked and a silent wail escapes me. Scattered around me, some swaying gently on rickety swings, and others huddled in an animated cluster, are members of the media who have come for turtle watching on Pantai Teluk Mak Nik or Monica Bay. We've been waiting for more than an hour for the signal that a turtle has landed.

"Duduk sini Intan (Come sit here, Intan)," a gruff male voice interrupts my reverie. The man pats the vacant space next to him on the wooden bench. "Lama lagi ni (It'll be a while)," he adds, before taking a long drag of his cigarette. Just behind him is his young assistant, an intern, who's engrossed in a call. "Nanti dah sampai, dia orang panggil lah (Once it gets there, they'll call). Let's chat first," says the man, his tone languid.

Happily, I take my seat next to Pak Su, the man behind this turtle watching exercise. Pak Su, I'd discovered during the ride here from my hotel in Kijal, is a legend in these neck of the woods and beyond. He's the go-to man for anything turtle. A man who has made it his life mission to save and protect turtles.

"Pak Su, cerita lah sikit tentang perjalanan Pak Su sementara kita tunggu ni (Pak Su, why don't you tell us about your journey while we're waiting)," I coax, as fellow media members begin to amble over sensing a story.

He takes another long drag of the cigarette before replying: "When I first started out, it was with architect Hijjas Kasturi's wife, Madam Angela. She had a resort in Cherating called Kasturi where many turtles used to land. Because that stretch of beach wasn't under the Fisheries Department, she knew that the local

villagers would end up taking the eggs. So she hatched a plan to establish her own hatchery. She needed someone whom she could work on this project with. People told her to look for me."

When the hatchery began "operations" in 2014, that year around 5,000 eggs were successfully saved, recalls the Negri Sembilan-born Pak Su. "The following year we saved 6,000. It was in 2016 that we had the highest number — around 25,278 eggs. That year we spent more than RM60,000 just buying back the eggs from the villagers who were selling them at RM2.50 a piece."

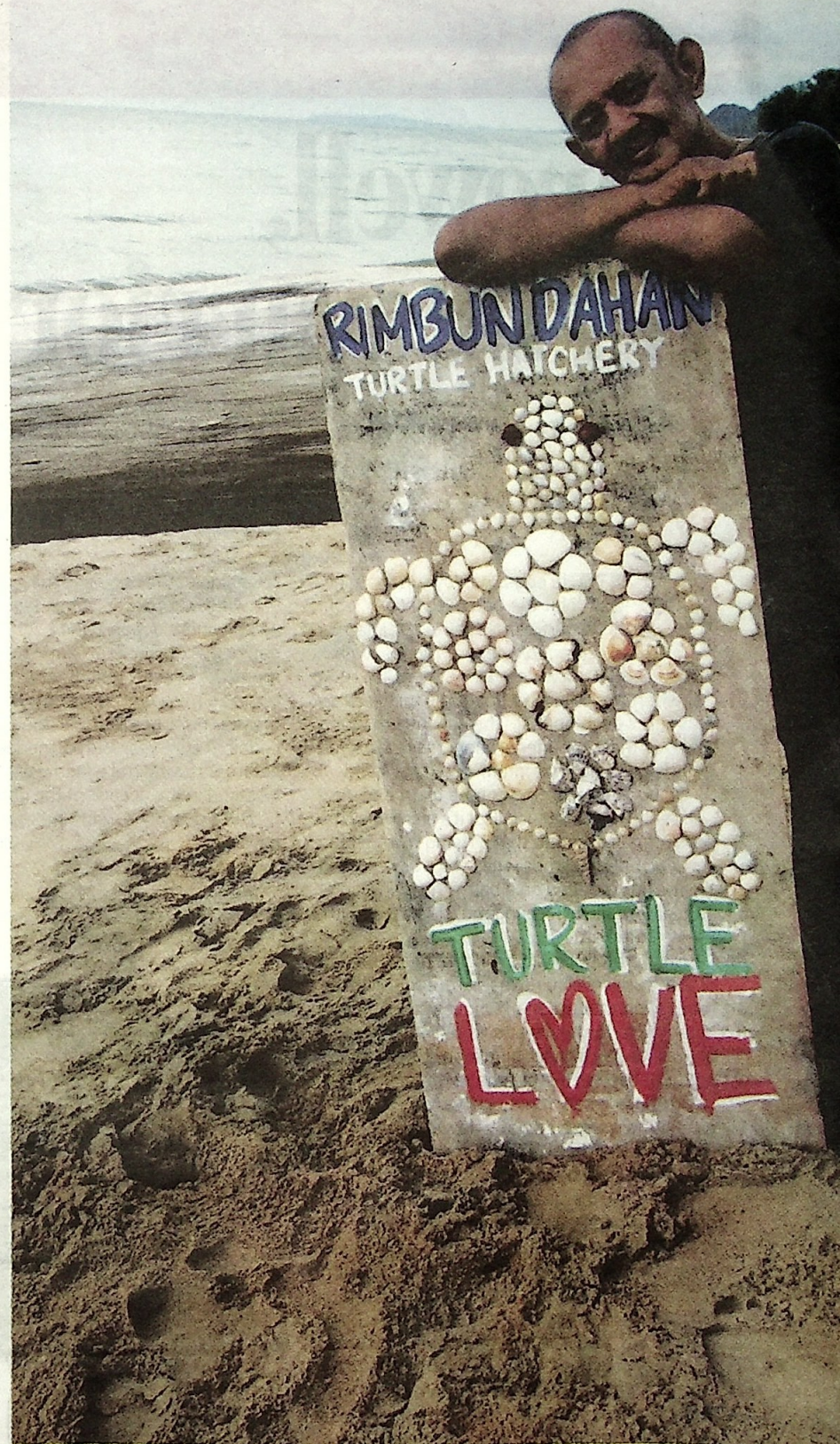
Where do you get all the money to buy back the eggs, I wonder aloud. "Kaya-nye Pak Su!" I tease. He chuckles before replying: "Tak kaya mana pon (I'm not rich). What I'm doing at Rimbun Dahan has been possible because of donations and programmes that we run that help to generate income. We don't have any support from the local government. For example, we allow people to adopt our nests. One nest is RM200 and the eggs number between 50 and 100 pieces. Whoever wants to adopt just pays RM200 and when they're hatched, we take pictures and give to you."

Truly in his element now, Pak Su continues: "The species that come to land here are the Green Sea turtle (*Chelonia Mydas*). Last year we got to save about 14,000 eggs; this year only 8,000 due to the low landing. However, this year we've been able to save a lot of sea terrapin eggs thanks to the location of our new hatchery (in Pantai Chendor), which is near the confluence of the river where they like to swim."

Before he brought visitors to this part of the world for turtle watching, Pantai Teluk Mak Nik, located not far from Cherating and before Kemaman town, was pretty low on the radar for many people. "Now you just Google the name and see," exclaims Pak Su, pride lacing his voice.

Chuckling heartily, he points across the road: "Start from here to there, *pergi tengok apa nama jalan ni* (go and see what the road

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Pak Su checking on the nests.

name is). It's Jalan Pak Su! I don't know who did it. My friends joke that *biasanye orang bagi nama jalan untuk orang yang dah mati, ni mu hidup lagi* (normally streets are named after people who have died; you're still alive)!"

A HELPING HAND

The blanket of darkness above us parts to reveal a full moon, bathing our surrounds in its ethereal glow. Pak Su pauses to admire its beauty before turning to the young man behind him. "This is my intern. My volunteers had all left so there's no one

at the hatchery. I'd been spending my nights sleeping there so I decided to call this young man for help."

"Fadhil dah masuk dalam dengan Pok Din (Fadhil has gone in with Pok Din)," my ears catch his whispered words to Pak Su. The older man nods knowingly before turning to me, saying: "Tak lama lagi ni (not long to go)."

Last year, Pak Su shares that they had many volunteers from Hong Kong and China. Volunteers normally stay for at least two weeks. Interns meanwhile stay on for three months. "This year not so many

Guardian of Rimbun Dahan Turtle Hatchery.
BELOW: Turtle hatchling.



of a mother turtle when she was laying her eggs. It was intact, with handle all. Twice I've seen this. One time, some of the eggs came out were black and smelled bad. We were dumbfounded. Then we took the eggs, cleaned them and discovered that it was crude oil."

LIVING FOR THE TURTLES

"Sayang penyu (Love for turtles). That's the only reason why I'm doing this," replies Pak Su, his voice low, when I ask him why he has dedicated his life to doing this. "I'm not from this part of the world. Saya orang nogori (I'm from Negri Sembilan)! It was only when I moved here that I got acquainted with turtles."

His eyes lighting up in recollection, Pak Su, who also ran his own roti canai stall at one time with his wife before ceasing operations due to the latter's deteriorating health condition, continues: "At the beginning, I was just hanging out

at the beach near Cherating, nothing to do. I remember at the time they had some turtle watching activities and I had friends who used to take visitors. There'd be times when they needed to take the visitors back and would ask me to help bring the next batch in. That's how it began."

Chuckling, the father-of-five adds: "At that time, around 1998, I could barely speak English. Just enough to offer basic explanation. By 1999, I bought a van to start off on my own, look for tourists around the Cherating area. In 2003, I got my eco guide license so I was able to work as a full-time guide."

At the time, turtle watching was one of the popular attractions in the east coast. But according to Pak Su, people came from around the world to see the turtles but there were no organised methods or ways for these guests to join any turtle nesting trips. "If everyone simply went to



the beach to look for turtles, then the turtles will feel threatened and not come up. It was important that guests don't disturb this animal. I felt compelled to do something. And that's when the turtle watching trips started. In 2014 I started my own hatchery."

Softly, he adds: "Kalau buat baik dengan benda ni boleh jadi satu sumber rezeki (If you do good for these creatures, then they can become your source of blessing). I've been doing this for a long time and have never tired of it. Because sayang dengan penyu (love for the turtles). This is our heritage."

Given one wish, Pak Su wants to see a legislation passed banning the taking and selling of eggs from ALL turtle species. "Pahang and Terengganu have different enactments. That's the problem. In Terengganu, they've outlawed the selling of Leatherback turtle eggs. Yang Belimbing dah tak de, apa yang nak di jual (there's no more Leatherback turtle, so what's to sell)? laments Pak Su. "When I go to Pasar Payang



Pak Su giving a briefing to both local and international visitors about the works carried out by Rimbun Dahan Hatchery. PIX BY DR CHEN PELF NYOK



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pak Su spent almost all his waking moments at the hatchery; Pak Su with Angela Hijjas (centre) and fellow conservationist Helen Bong Sze Wai; Fadhil, Pak Su's son, who will continue the legacy his father built.

and sometimes see the Green turtle eggs being sold, I'm not so upset. But recently I went, I saw people selling these small eggs which could have been the eggs of the Hawksbill or Olive Ridley turtle. That upset me. Because these species are critically endangered."

A hush descends as we ponder this disturbing reality. Suddenly, the chiming of someone's handphone breaks the silence. It's Pak Su's. "Udah mari?" I catch him say, before he clicks the phone off. Turning to us, his weary face now wreathed in a relieved grin, he declares: "Jom ke pantai, penyu dah mari (let's go to the beach, the turtle has landed)!"

We walk in companionable silence, the sound of waves gently crashing against the shore growing louder. Suddenly Pak Su stops. Expression earnest, he turns to me and with urgency in his voice, he confides: "What I do isn't liked by many parties. But no one disturbs me because they know what I'm doing is the right thing. If it's wrong, I can always stop. It's no loss to me. But I've always said, I want to give something before I go. At least, people will remember my legacy..."

The legacy that he has built will continue to live on — through his children and his many supporters and friends. Together they will ensure that his dream never fades — just like their precious memory of him.

Al-Fatihah for the Turtle Warrior.

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Go to Rimbun Dahan Turtle Hatchery's Facebook page to see how you can play your part to protect our turtles.

came. We had people from China, Spain, the UK, Korea, Yemen. they helped out at the hatchery."

Their day begins early. In the morning, they have to sweep the rubbish around the area, clean the hatchery, and change the water for the baby turtles. In the evenings, they're involved in baby turtle release activities. And at night, they help him with turtle watching.

"I do a lot of beach cleaning too. It's very important. We've seen plastic coming out

