

Living for the turtles

The Turtle Warrior may have passed on but his family and friends who believe in his crusade will continue to ensure that his legacy continues, writes
Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal

NOISILY, the car grinds to a halt in front of a mud-sodden clearing. The sound of waves gently lapping against the shore serenades my ears as I gingerly step out of the car and feel the squelching of mud under my shoes. Scanning my surroundings, I note a cavalcade of sorts forming ahead of me, and pockets of people milling around under a canopy. The sudden sensation of warm rain pelting against my face makes me hasten my steps towards the sign that reads: Rimbun Dahan Turtle Hatchery.

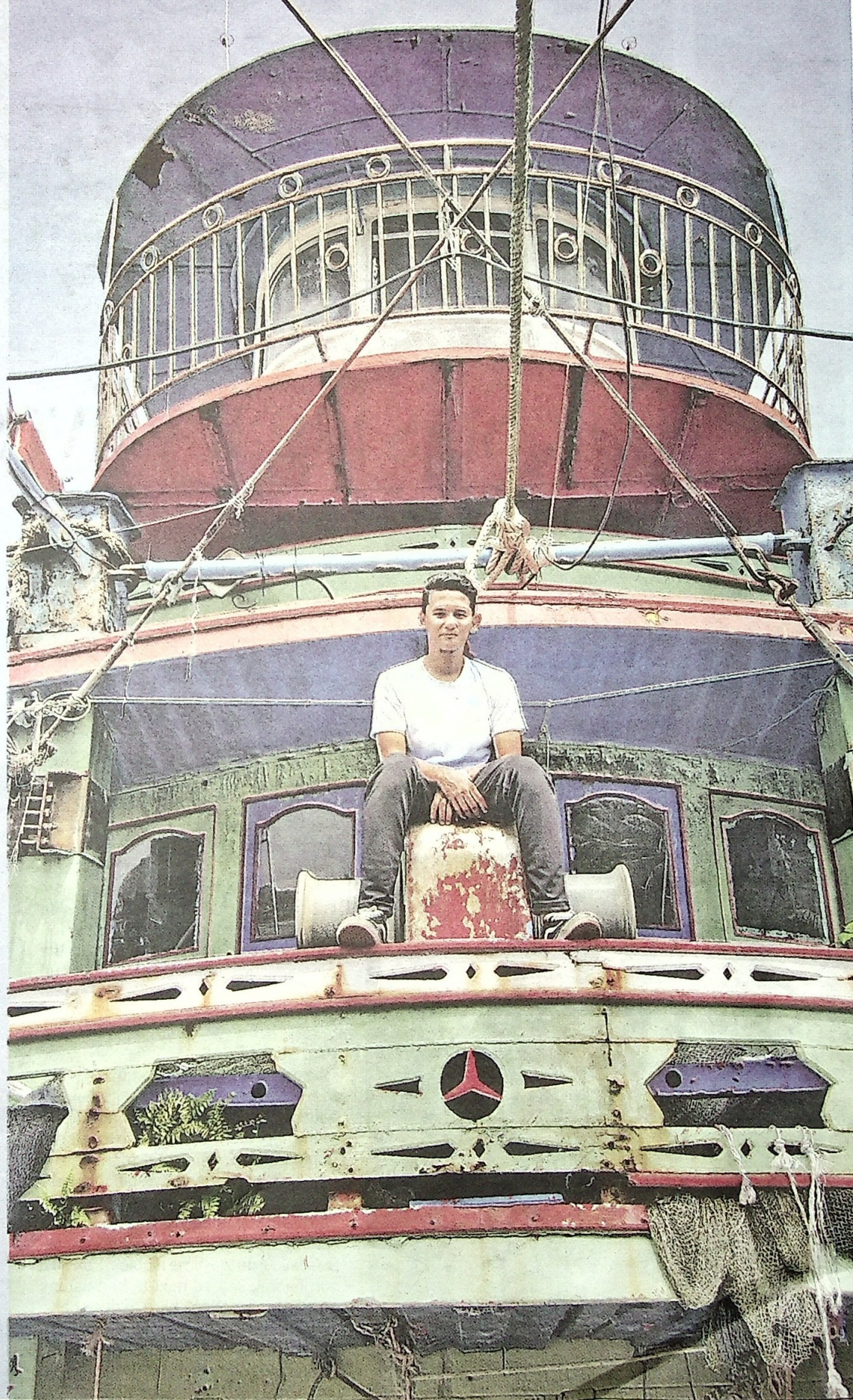
I'm finally here, I whisper to myself, recalling my promise to its owner, the late Ariffin Hassan or fondly known as Pak Su Cherating, the Turtle Warrior, that I would pay a visit to his new hatchery here in Pantai Chendor, Terengganu. The plan was to have him show me around and perhaps I could even stay for a

few days to see just what goes into protecting our turtles. But alas, I was too late. The 59-year-old drew his last breath last month while on his flight back to Malaysia from Korea where he'd gone to visit his second son.

"*Cik cari siapa ye* (You looking for someone)?" a gentle voice jolts me out of my reverie. I must have looked lost, walking so aimlessly like that. Around me, everyone seems to know each other.

It's hardly surprising. After all, they're here to commemorate the late Pak Su in this simple ceremony today organised by the family. I spot a number of faces that I recognise from Pak Su's Facebook, including Pahang Malaysian Nature Society chairperson, Noor Jehan Abu Bakar and Dr Chan Pelf Nyok, co-founder of the Turtle Conservation Society of Malaysia.

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Hatchling release can be a heart-wrenching exercise.

PICTURES BY INTAN MAIZURA AHMAD KAMAL

Pak Su's legacy lives on

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"Erm, *Fadhil mana* (Where's Fadhil)?" I ask the girl, referring to Pak Su's eldest son who runs the operations here at the hatchery. He's also the one who invited me to be a part of this 'remembrance day' for his father. She points to somewhere in the distance, in the direction of the mangroves. "*Yang pakai baju merah tu* (the one wearing the red top)," she says as I squint to get a better look. "*Dia tengah buat mangrove planting. Join lah* (He's doing mangrove planting. Join him)."



Fadhil keeps a close eye as a child attempts to pick up a hatchling.

Thanking her profusely, I make my way towards the mud flats where the red-shirted Fadhil, who must have been looking out for me, is suddenly waving me over to join him. He's standing knee deep in water in a pretty part of the beach, enclosed and framed by lush greenery, and in his hands, mangrove seedlings.

Around him, adults and children alike are engaged in mangrove planting activities. A bright pink 'apparition' that's also in the water and waving manically in my direction catches my attention. It's Helen Bong Sze Wai, Pak Su's close friend and another turtle conservation stalwart. "Right! Let's do this," I mutter before lowering myself into the water and wading over to the bemused new guardian of the Rimbun Dahan Turtle Hatchery, Fadhil Izzudin Ariffin.

PAK SU'S LEGACY

"We had one more nest left that's ready to hatch and we thought that it would be a fitting tribute to Pak Su to gather everyone here and do the release together," begins Helen, whom I'd managed to corner after the mangrove-planting session. Her hair still damp from the rain, she chats animatedly as we sit under the canopy tucking into some of the late Pak Su's favourite tea-time nibbles. Pak Su's son Fadhil, seated next to her, listens quietly, his emotions hard to decipher.

Continuing, Helen adds: "It so happened that another member of MNS Pahang also passed away recently so we thought it'd be a good idea to hold this simple ceremony to remember them."

The nest that Helen is referring to holds the turtle eggs within its deep chamber. It has already been 60 days since Pak Su put them there for incubation. Approximately 60 days is how long it takes before the eggs are ready to hatch although warmer weather tends to result in shorter incubation period. Later, they'll dig into the 'chamber' to check on the hatchlings and clean the nest of remains of unsuccessful eggs and dead hatchlings.

I duly discover that once a few hatchlings have emerged from a nest, making a scratching / shuffling motion with the fingers in the loose sand will sometimes encourage the remainder of the hatchlings to "erupt".

Apparently they're conditioned to respond to the sound of the earlier hatchlings moving on the surface.

The hatchlings will then be collected and placed into a basket and subsequently taken to the beach where they'll be released. I learn that hatchlings cannot be released directly into the water. There is research data to suggest that they may need to run down the beach so they can orientate themselves and possibly imprint the characteristics of the beach. Release must be done approximately six metres from the sea.

"I'll show you how to do it later when we go down for the hatchling release activity," reassures Fadhil. Although it's not my first time doing this (the last time was at Pantai Teluk Mak Nik with Pak Su), I nod, happy at the thought that I'd be able to once again partake in such a 'magical' moment.

Continuing, Fadhil shares that this hatchery I'm visiting at Pantai Chendor

is only a year old. "We were at The Kasturi Resort in Cherating before, for four years. The Kasturi had a beach frontage that spanned more than 800m long. This area here is about 8.093sqm and was chosen because of its strategic location. If you see, we have the beach and the river. When it's turtle-watching season, we can also see terrapins. At Kasturi, conditions weren't so ideal. Erosion for example, was very strong."

Elaborating, Fadhil recalls: "Last October, we had bad weather and water seeped into the hatchery. My father was forced to take about five nests back to the house. The waves literally washed over the hatchery area. Flooding with salt water can kill developing embryos."

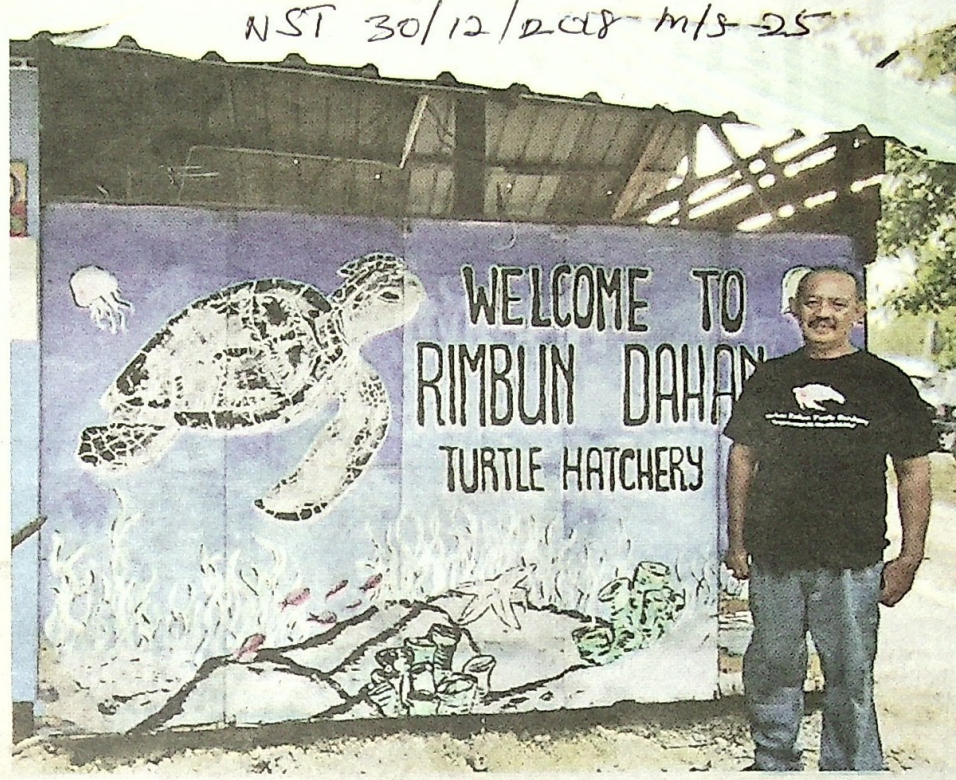
LIFE DEDICATED TO THE TURTLES

Now that they're in a more 'stable' area, Fadhil is looking ahead to continuing what his late father started. "My father had always said to me, that when he's no longer around, I must continue the work here. In fact, not long before he passed away, we had a video call. And again he repeated the same thing. Our family, together with our close friends, will ensure that his legacy continues. My elder sister will be coming back soon from KL and we'll start planning. I'll manage operations on the ground."

His voice low, Fadhil confides that before Pak Su's passing, he was intent on adding a new structure on the hatchery grounds. A surau. "The few months before he left us, he kept insisting that I looked for the ideal spot on which a surau could be constructed," recalls Fadhil, an avid silat practitioner. "He wanted our guests to be able to do their prayers in comfort because the existing space was small."



Nest cleaning exercise.



The late Pak Su Cherating.



The late Pak Su saw the young as future crusaders for the cause.



Helen Bong Sze Wai

Pointing towards the hatchery, where a semi-blind turtle swims gaily in his bright blue container and mangrove seedlings wait for their turn to be planted, Fadhil shares that plans are afoot to carry out repairs and enlarge the space. "In 2016 we got a lot of eggs. Next year, we're expecting a big number again, if the cycle is anything to go by. We need to do something."

Although it's not turtle-watching season anymore (the season runs from May to September), Fadhil continues to spend his nights here at the hatchery. Expression earnest, he explains: "It's important to be around to monitor. Sometimes, we get trespassers who try to sneak in and steal the eggs from the nests. Something like that happened in July. My father and I, along with some friends were having drinks at a local stall just after a turtle-watching trip. Suddenly, Pak Su received a call from someone who said that he wanted to sell some eggs to him. Cut a long story short, we later discovered that those eggs were the very eggs that we're incubating in our hatchery!"

Unlike the Cherating Turtle Sanctuary, which is managed by the Pahang Fisheries Department, Rimbun Dahan Turtle Sanctuary is operated on minimal resources. Says Fadhil: "We don't have anyone to do the patrolling for eggs. Our concept is to just buy the eggs straight from the villagers at a cost of RM2.50 a piece — the same price they sell to the market. If we started doing the patrolling ourselves, it'd cause a rift with the villagers."

He adds: "We buy, we bury and we wait. If the villagers come and attempt to sell at 3am, there'll always be someone here. In fact, I sleep here."

Being on standby for the eggs is very

important. They need to be buried in the new 'nests' as soon as possible or else they'll spoil. Special care is needed when handling eggs that are more than two hours old. The delicate embryonic membranes and blood vessels of older eggs are easily torn if the eggs are rotated or jarred. Dislodgement of the embryo results in death.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Asked whether funding is their biggest challenge, Helen surprises me when she shakes her head. It seems the issue of obtaining a permit is their biggest headache. "We need a permit to run the hatchery. Right now we don't have one from the Fisheries Department; just a licence — for business."

Continuing, she elaborates: "To keep eggs isn't wrong. To keep turtles is. But as you know, we don't keep turtles here. We help save the eggs, incubate them in a safe environment so that the hatchlings can have a chance at life. No one can accuse us of any wrongdoings. In fact, we

welcome everyone to see what we're doing here. And for this reason, we've never been 'disturbed'."

Nodding, Fadhil, who's self-employed but can normally be seen managing the fishermen's boats that come in with their catch at the nearby jetty, chips in: "When we were at Kasturi, we were told that our hatchery was too close to the Department's turtle sanctuary. Now we've moved here, we've applied again. We're still waiting. But we're optimistic because the Pahang ExCo seems to be listening to us this time."

In the meantime, the Kemaman-born Fadhil and his team, which include volunteers and interns, will continue the great work that his father started. Aside from hatchling release and turtle-related activities, other CSR works are also conducted here. Like beach-cleaning exercises and mangrove-planting.

"We also need to do a lot more in terms of marine conservation," says Fadhil. "Other creatures too need saving. Another message that we're trying to drive is that plastic should be boycotted at all

cost — and of course, do not buy turtle eggs. When there's no demand, there won't be any business."

Just like his father, Fadhil recognises the importance of nurturing the minds of the young. His smile wistful, he shares: "That's why when school groups or young children came here, my father wouldn't take any money from them because it's our mission to educate the young. The new generation needs to be the new crusaders in this fight."

As the sky begins to take on a magical hue and a sliver of brilliant gold slices through the blanket of grey that was the sky, Fadhil's eyes light up. Up ahead, I can already see groups milling around the beach. "Jom (come), let's go release the hatchlings. I promise you, once you've held the baby and witnessed its journey to the water, your heart strings will be tugged. And then you'll know why people like Pak Su and I have made turtle conservation our life mission."

I already know...