

VIRAL 'TURTLE SELFIE' ANGERS DIVERS

Viral photo of diver holding a Hawksbill turtle in Sabah sparks call for action by groups

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A PICTURE of a diver holding up a turtle of a totally protected species in waters here has caused anger among members of the diving fraternity.

The picture, which was shared in a WhatsApp group comprising mostly professional divers and Sabah Parks staff, showed the diver holding a Hawksbill turtle above the water surface.

The act was described as thoughtless and the diving group urged the authorities to investigate and take action against the diver. It was unclear whether the incident occurred in the Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park (TARP). The reason for such an act was also unclear.

Sabah Parks director Dr Jamili Nais told the *New Straits Times* that picking up a turtle in a protected marine park for no reason was an offence under the park ordinance.

"By right, no one should touch or handle any marine species — what more a protected one — if it's not for research purposes.

"I have yet to receive an official

complaint on the incident but if it happened outside TARP, it will fall under the jurisdiction of the state Wildlife Department," he said, adding that divers and snorkellers must be mindful when observing marine wildlife.

Sabah Wildlife Department director Augustine Tuuga said the punishment for offences against protected marine wildlife was provided for under the Wildlife Conservation Enactment 1997.

In Sabah, he said, the Hawksbill turtle was listed as a totally protected species under Schedule 1 Part 1 of the enactment and no one was allowed to capture or touch it.

"Divers must practise responsible wildlife watching. If they come across marine wildlife in distress, they should inform the department or Sabah Parks."

Tuuga said the department's representatives would meet Universiti Malaysia Sabah's research team today to discuss the varsity's turtle-tagging methods, which had received backlash after a tagged turtle was found dead near Pulau Mabul.

"Any research approach that is harmful to marine wildlife is not a good method.

"We (the department) want to find out the varsity's way of working and discuss effective methods (to study turtles)."

Non-governmental organisations Semporna Professional Divers Association and Green Semporna claimed that turtles died due to the wrong technique used by untrained volunteers during the tagging process.

Marine Research Foundation



A diver holding a totally protected Hawksbill turtle in Kota Kinabalu recently. PIC COURTESY OF NST READER

executive director Dr Nicolas J. Pilcher, who has 30 years of experience in handling turtles, reportedly said the technique of "shooting up" the turtles to the water surface would cause them

to suffer decompression sickness.

To date, Sabah Wildlife Department officers have recorded 18 green turtle deaths off Pulau Mabul.

Tuuga said some of the protected animals were hit by boat propellers, while others were beached, killed after being caught in fishing nets or died due to unknown causes.