

FISH BOMBING HURTING SEMPORNA

The safety of people flocking to district must be ensured

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IT will be hard for many to resist the natural charm of Semporna district in the east coast of Sabah.

Despite the many challenges faced by the district, people keep returning to the islands to experience the marine life.

Blessed with 49 islands, including the world-renowned island of Sipadan, the district is expanding and progressing as its popularity as a dive haven continues to grow.

From a sleepy seaside town to a bustling island getaway, the district has overcome many obstacles and continues to attract visitors.

But with the increasing popularity comes greater responsibility,

especially in ensuring the safety of visitors.

Last week, three divers were killed while diving near Pulau Kulapuan and evidence pointed to the possibility of fish bombing. They were dive instructor Ab Zainal Abdu and Chinese tourists Zhao Zhong and Xu Yingjie, both 26.

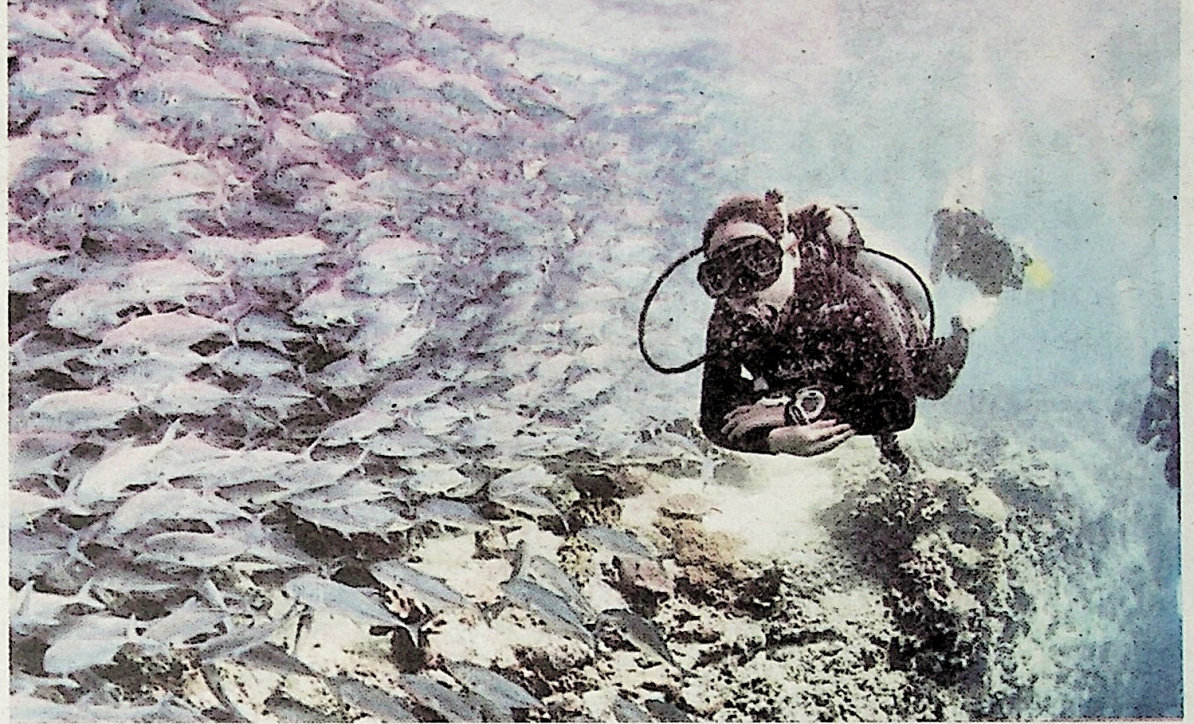
Fish bombing has been a scourge in the district, where people catch fish using homemade explosives made from fertilisers mixed with kerosene and ignited with a detonator and fuse.

Sabah Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Christina Liew said stricter penalties needed to be imposed on fish bombing as it was harmful and destructive to humans and the environment.

She made the call following the deaths of the three divers.

"I understand that this incident could have been avoided. Fish bombing still happens and it has to be addressed.

"It saddens me that lives were taken due to this irresponsible act of fish bombing, which is il-



Divers get to see a wonderful display of marine life in Semporna. PIC BY ABDUL RAZAK ISMAIL

legal," said Liew, who is also the state tourism, culture and environment minister.

She urged the authorities to be vigilant and enforce the law to prevent similar incidents from occurring.

"This incident goes beyond the safety of tourists diving in the area, but areas which we consider to be a treasure to us."

Echoing similar sentiments was Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister Datuk Mohamaddin Ketapi, who condemned fish bombing as it affected the ecosystem and endangered people.

Semporna Fisherman's Association chairman Salleh Abdul Salleh said illegal immigrants were to be blamed for fish bombing because it brought "fast returns" as they were not bothered

about what happened to their surroundings.

"Semporna is becoming increasingly popular as a dive attraction and more people are visiting the islands, while we are also seeing better days in the fishing industry.

"However, we need to be more strict and put in more stringent regulations to ensure fishermen like us can do our jobs and those in the tourism industry are better protected."

Salleh suggested the introduction of jet skis to patrol and chase fish bombers in shallow waters and setting up more outposts to respond to security or medical emergencies.

"People who use fish bombs flee to shallow waters to escape from the authorities. They will find it hard to escape jet skis," he

said, adding that jet skis could also be used for rescue operations.

Pearl seller Karim Jamin said the district would need to introduce more stringent regulations in running tour boats, fishing activities and island trips.

"In the last few years, you can see tourists flocking to the district in huge numbers. We are benefiting, but there is always the threat from cross-border criminals and illegal immigrants who are involved in crimes.

"Fish bombing is just one activity. There is also smuggling, turtle hunting and other crimes. We need help from the authorities and the community.

"We need to make sure our district remains safe from all these threats by cooperating with the authorities."