When time turns the tide

Off the shores of the tropical sea, scientists from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu are restoring coral reefs — with a Swiss watchmaker putting time where the heart is, writes Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal

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UNDER the turquoise shallows off Pulau Bidong, divers hover above the seabed, fastening fragments of living coral to carefully engineered structures. Their movements are patient, almost meditative — a quiet act of restoration in a sea that has seen too much change.

These are researchers from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), a higher-learning institution that has become a leader in coral reef conservation efforts.

For years, UMT's marine scientists have been at the forefront of a fragile ecosystem's recovery, working to restore reefs around islands such as Redang, Perhentian, Bidong, Kapas and Tioman, once vibrant underwater worlds now scarred by rising temperatures and storms.

"Public awareness should be cultivated widely, even from a young age," begins associate professor Dr James Tan Chun Hong, senior lecturer at UMT's Faculty of Science and Marine Environment.

Adding, he shares: "Through coral spawning success, we want to show that there is hope in restoring Malaysia's reefs and preserving their beauty for generations to come."

FRAGILE FUTURE

Malaysia's coral reefs are among the most diverse on the planet, with more than 550 species of hard corals that sustain countless marine organisms.

But they're also among the most vulnerable. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned that a global temperature rise of 1.5°C by 2040 could spell widespread coral mortality.

The warning signs are already visible. Over the past two decades, Malaysia has endured repeated mass-bleaching events, and in 2019, when Tropical Storm Pabuk struck Pulau Bidong, it tore through reefs at Pantai Pasir Cina off the island and left a trail of underwater devastation in its wake.

At UMT's Marine Research Station on the island, scientists like Tan are working to rebuild what nature lost. Their Underwater Coral Garden Project (2022-2025) aims to restore over 1,000 corals, using innovative methods such as the university's proprietary "All-For-One" restoration structure — a system designed to help damaged reefs recover faster.

The university's breakthroughs in coral spawning research have also produced more than one million viable coral larvae, an achievement that brings real hope for large-scale reef recovery. The work is scientific, methodical and slow, but deeply significant for the country's marine future.

PARTNERSHIP IN TIME

It is this long view of stewardship that caught the attention of Luminox, the Swiss watchmaker renowned for its durable timepieces for divers, explorers and rescue professionals.

Last year, the company began supporting UMT's restoration initiatives through a targeted fundraising partnership.

A portion of global sales from the Luminox Pirate Watch LM3051.PIR.LE, a limited-edition timepiece produced in 888 pieces worldwide, is being donated directly to UMT to fund materials, equipment and monitoring costs associated with coral restoration on Pulau Bidong and other affected sites.

The contribution may seem small in the face of oceanic challenges, but for field researchers, every bit counts. Restoration demands constant resources — cement, steel frames, transport, diving gear and fuel for research vessels.

For Luminox, whose watches have long been inspired by the ocean's resilience, the collaboration represents an evolution of its "Born to Protect" ethos — a philosophy that supports organisations working in environmental and humanitarian protection.

But here, the brand takes a quieter role in letting science lead the story.

RHYTHM OF RENEWAL

In many ways, coral restoration mirrors the craftsmanship of Swiss watchmaking: both rely on patience, precision and faith in long-term results.

What UMT scientists build beneath the surface may take years to mature — but each transplanted coral, like each carefully calibrated gear, is a small act of endurance.

Tan sees these collaborations as a sign of changing times.

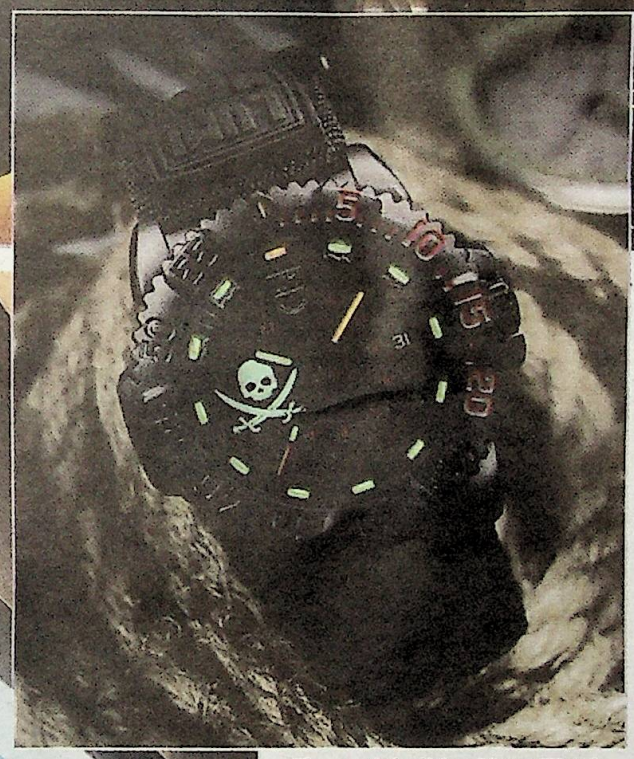
"When science meets public engagement, we accelerate change," he says, adding thoughtfully: "Conservation isn't just about scientists — it's about everyone playing their part, however small."

From Luminox's design studios in Switzerland to the coral nurseries of Terengganu, the partnership is a reminder that protection takes many forms.

Whether it's a diver planting coral polyps or a company dedicating part of its craft to conservation, both gestures move in the same rhythm: time, patience and purpose.

And as the divers resurface, the sunlight glancing off the waves, it seems almost poetic that time itself — kept, measured and now given back — is helping to heal the ocean.

Dr James Tan Chun Hong during his presentation on the state of Malaysia's marine environment.
PICTURES BY INTAN MAIZURA AHMAD KAMAL



The special edition Pirate Watch LM3051.PIR.LE, limited to just 888 pieces globally, celebrates the daring spirit of the high seas while also supporting marine conservation.

Coral restoration from 2019 to 2023.