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Pulling abandoned ghost nets from the water and onto a boat is backbreaking, unforgiving work. PIC COURTESY OF REEF CHECK MALAYSIA

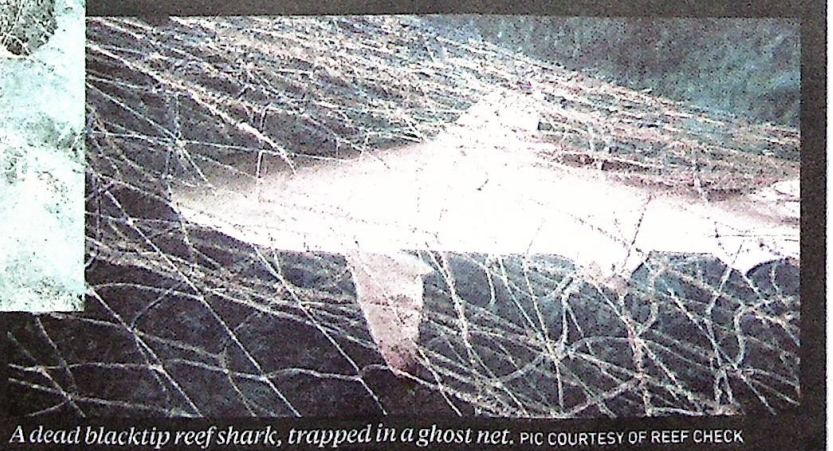
Divers battle poor visibility, shifting currents and the clock to cut ghost nets free from corals. PIC COURTESY OF REEF CHECK MALAYSIA

Beneath the waves

A corporate dive team and an island community are confronting Malaysia's growing ghost-net crisis, writes Elena Koshy

Audrey Soh has been leading her company's corporate social responsibility efforts to tackle ghost nets.

A turtle which died after being entangled in the tight mesh of an abandoned ghost net. PIC BY AUDREY SOH



A dead blacktip reef shark, trapped in a ghost net. PIC COURTESY OF REEF CHECK MALAYSIA

THE water was murky and choppy, forcing divers to work in low visibility and against a rising current. Somewhere beneath the surface, an abandoned ghost net had trapped a young turtle, its small body hidden in the tangle of mesh.

Every minute mattered.

Audrey Soh worked by touch, her hands following the contours of the net as she searched for signs of life. She moved quickly, cutting, lifting and peeling back layers of heavy nylon. But when she finally freed the turtle, the truth was unmistakable.

It was already gone.

"I was too late by maybe about an hour," she says quietly. The disappointment in her voice reveals what the ocean doesn't — the silent toll of discarded nets that continue killing long after they are abandoned.

Around the turtle laid other victims: tiny fish, fragile creatures too small to escape. But there was one glimmer of relief. Tangled near the corner of the net, a small crab was still alive. Soh freed it and watched it scuttle back into the dark water.

"It was heartbreaking," she admits. A single rescue amid so much loss — and a reminder of why she keeps going back under.

For Soh and her colleagues from Etiqa Life Insurance, dives like these are more than routine excursions. They are part of the company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme, a way of giving back to the ocean that they spend so much of their lives in.

Removing ghost nets has become a mission they take personally, especially as abandoned fishing gear continues to pose one of the most persistent and deadly threats to marine life. Each retrieved net prevents countless future entanglements, yet every operation also reminds them how widespread the problem remains.

LENDING A HAND

For most corporates, designing CSR programmes that genuinely make an impact can be tricky, especially when balancing staff participation with initiatives that deliver long-term environmental benefits.

When Soh, an avid diver, took over her company's CSR portfolio, she inherited a well-loved coral rehabilitation project off Tioman Island. It was popular, photogenic and offered plenty of opportunities for employees to get involved.

But during her own dives, Soh kept hearing a different concern from the diving community: ghost nets drifting through Malaysian waters, continuing to trap and kill marine life long after they were discarded.

Unlike coral planting, ghost-net retrieval isn't suited for large volunteer groups. It requires skill, experience and the willingness to work in low visibility and unpredictable conditions.

The more she learnt, the harder it was to look away.

"Ghost nets are one of the main sources of pollution in the sea," she explains, adding: "Many of them are old or damaged, and instead of being disposed of properly, they're just thrown into the sea. They're made of plastic — sometimes even metal — and when they settle on the seabed, they smother corals and restrict their growth."

Recognising the scale of the problem, Soh drafted a proposal to expand the company's CSR focus to include ghost-net retrieval, knowing it would be a tougher sell than a picturesque reef programme. To her surprise, the company backed it.

What began as an observation shared among her diver friends has now grown into one of the organisation's most meaningful environmental commitments: a CSR initiative that prioritises impact over visibility, tackling one of the ocean's most persistent threats — even if few people ever see the work happening beneath the waves.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

With the programme approved, Soh quickly realised the next challenge: assembling the right team. Ghost net retrieval, she stresses, isn't something that can be opened to all volunteers.

"For us, as organisers, we have to identify divers who are really competent and genuinely comfortable in the water," she says, adding: "We can't just take anyone along."

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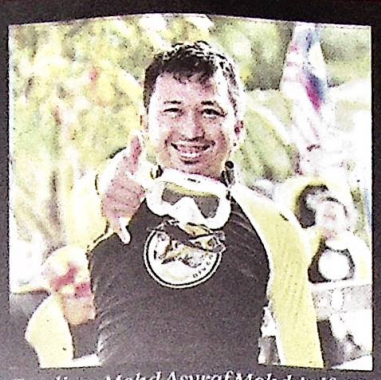
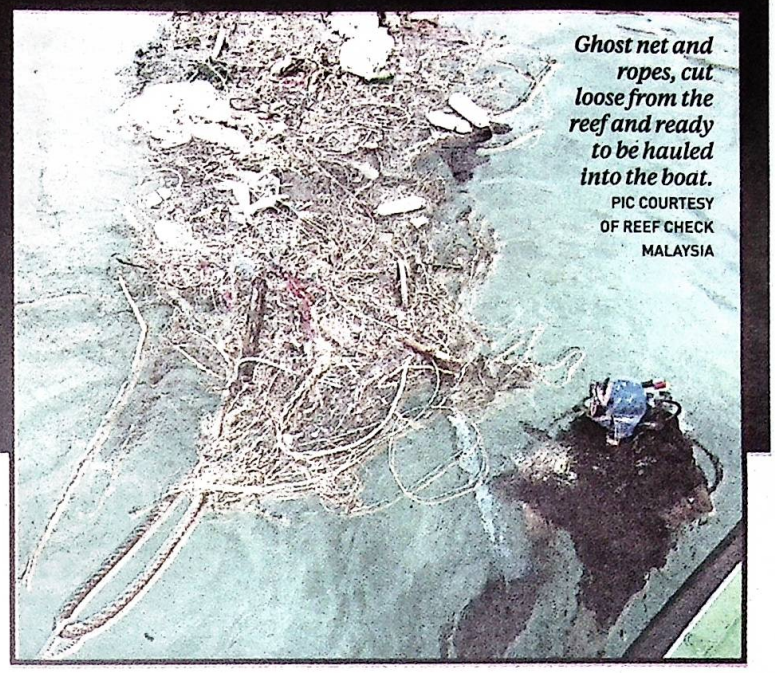
Diver Mohd Aizzuddin Hares, 40, says the work can be gruelling, but the rewards are profound.

Alvin Chelliah of Reef Check Malaysia says every Malaysian has a role to play in tackling ghost nets.



For diver Mohd Asyraf Mohd Arif, 40, every net removed is a second life for the reef.



Ghost net and ropes, cut loose from the reef and ready to be hauled into the boat. PIC COURTESY OF REEF CHECK MALAYSIA

The conditions off Pulau Sembilan, where the team works with the Lumut-based Nature & Oceanography Advocate Society (NOAS), make that abundantly clear.

The waters here are often choppy, with surges that can change within minutes. Visibility drops quickly as sand and silt are swept up by the current, turning the seabed into a dim, shifting haze.

Divers must work close to the bottom, feeling their way through heavy nets that snag on rocks and coral. In such conditions, even a slight misstep can lead to entanglement — a very real and potentially dangerous situation underwater.

"Okay, so we selected only about 10 divers from our group," Soh explains. These were divers with enough experience to stay calm in low visibility, maintain buoyancy control in surging waters and cut through knotted, waterlogged nets without losing their footing or their focus.

It wasn't a large team, but it needed to be lean, skilled and steady — the kind of group capable of carrying out the gruelling, often unseen work of freeing reefs from ghost nets in waters that offer no room for error.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Soh isn't alone in this effort. Her colleagues, comprising a small team of experienced recreational divers, have become the backbone of the company's ghost net retrieval missions. Each dive, they say, leaves a mark.

For diver Mohd Aizzuddin Hares, 40, the work can be gruelling, but the rewards are profound.

"Seeing the reef slowly emerge from under that heavy blanket of net was truly humbling," he says, adding: "I just wish more people could witness this destruction firsthand, because only then can we truly end the scourge of ghost fishing gear."

Like many on the team, Aizzuddin has seen healthy coral and dying coral — and now understands how quickly a reef's fate can change simply because of one discarded net.

His colleague, Mohd Asyraf Mohd Arif, also 40, agrees. For him, each dive reinforces why the work matters.

"Removing even one net means giving that part of the ocean a second life," he says, adding: "My hope is that more Malaysians realise our underwater world needs help not just from divers, but also from everyone who depends on the sea. If we work together, we can stop these reefs from dying quietly beneath the waves."

The divers admit the work is exhausting, often carried out in murky water with shifting currents and nets wedged deep into coral structures. But they also describe it as one of the most meaningful things they have done — a rare chance to make an immediate, visible difference to a fragile ecosystem.

For 43-year-old Soh and her colleagues, every retrieved net is not just rubbish removed, but also a life restored — proof that even small, focused CSR efforts can inspire real change beneath the waves.

MALAYSIA'S SILENT MARINE CRISIS

Ghost nets — abandoned or lost fishing nets drifting through the oceans — have long haunted Malaysia's waters. But only in recent years have conservationists begun to understand the severity of their impact.

For Alvin Chelliah, a marine biologist at Reef Check Malaysia, the issue isn't just a nuisance but it's also an unfolding ecological crisis taking place beneath the waves, largely out of public sight.

Reef Check's work on Tioman Island offers the clearest window into this problem.

In 2015, the organisation began training local islanders to locate and remove ghost nets from reefs and beaches. A reporting hotline was set up and once reports came in, trained islanders would retrieve the nets, record their details and send them for proper disposal.

Between 2016 and 2022, these community-led efforts removed 145 ghost nets from Tioman's waters — weighing a total of 21 tonnes.

The numbers tell a deeper story. While the team retrieved eight to 14

The tiny one-clawed crab Soh rescued might seem insignificant — yet in a sea of loss, it mattered. PIC BY AUDREY SOH

nets a year between 2016 and 2019, the figures surged during the Covid-19 pandemic, when fisheries were classified as essential services and fishing activity increased. In 2020, the number of retrieved nets jumped to 24 and by 2022, that figure had risen to 39.

"We saw an increasing trend during Covid, especially around Tioman," explains Alvin, adding: "But nationwide, we still don't have enough data to understand the full picture."

Most of the ghost nets recovered around Tioman were found inside the marine protected area (MPA) and along the western side of the island. That region's higher human population, shallower waters, shoreline shape and coral structures make it more vulnerable to drifting nets.

The nets themselves came from two sources: illegal fishers operating inside the MPA and legal operators working outside it. Strong currents and monsoonal winds eventually push these nets toward Tioman.

Corporate teams like Etiqa are showing how companies can play a real role in tackling Malaysia's ghost net crisis. PIC BY AUDREY SOH

Globally, ghost nets are notorious for their lethal effects and Alvin has seen the consequences firsthand. Marine animals die in several ways: by ingesting plastic fibres, by suffocating when unable to surface or move, or by becoming hopelessly entangled.

"I've seen numerous turtles, sharks, rays and fish stuck and dead on ghost nets," he says, adding: "The one that really made me sad was finding a dead dolphin with a net around its mouth."

The problem is exacerbated by the materials used. Ghost nets are made of plastic that can remain intact for decades. At first, they drift across the water column, continuing to trap animals. Eventually, as biofouling organisms accumulate, they become heavy and sink. Even then, they remain destructive — smothering corals, seagrass and benthic habitats.

Retrieval, meanwhile, is neither simple nor safe. Reef Check works closely with local conservation groups, dive shop operators and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) across the country, but only highly competent and specially trained divers are allowed to join removal missions. As Alvin puts it: "A ghost net removal dive is nothing like a leisure dive."

Divers must use knives and shears to cut through nets while managing poor visibility, shifting currents and strict depth-time limits due to nitrogen buildup.

To support safer removals, Reef Check has developed a training module and contributed to a regional ghost gear toolkit with the UN Environment Programme.

Despite the difficulties, Alvin notes that Malaysians can still help.

Reporting sightings of ghost nets — through Reef Check's website, social media channels or the Save the Waves app — enables teams to act quickly. He also believes that reducing seafood consumption and shifting gradually towards more plant-based diets can ease pressure on fisheries and reduce gear loss.

Ghost nets may drift silently, but their impacts are anything but quiet. The work of Reef Check Malaysia and its partners shows that these hidden killers are increasing, not diminishing — and saving Malaysia's marine ecosystems will require collective action from those on land as much as those diving beneath the waves.

WIDER CALL TO ACTION

While Soh's corporate team works through choppy waters off Pulau Sembilan, and NGOs like Reef Check Malaysia document ghost-net trends around Tioman, both efforts ultimately point to a shared truth: the fight against ghost nets requires many hands, from different parts of society, working in parallel.

CSR initiatives bring manpower, resources and visibility. When companies choose to support initiatives like ghost-net retrieval, they demonstrate that environmental protection can extend beyond photogenic volunteerism and into more complex, high-impact work.

Even if only a handful of trained divers are capable of doing the physical retrievals, the involvement of corporates helps broaden the conversation. It brings awareness to employees and partners who may not have heard of ghost nets or understood their impact.

NGOs complement this by offering the scientific depth and continuity that CSR efforts alone cannot provide. Their research, community networks and long-term monitoring help reveal the problem in its full scale.

What these stories make clear is that no single group can bear the responsibility of protecting Malaysia's marine ecosystems. Divers step in where they can, NGOs bring scientific expertise and community networks, and CSR teams contribute when resources and priorities align — but lasting change ultimately depends on everyone, from coastal communities to individuals.

Everyday Malaysians have a role too, whether by reporting ghost nets, supporting conservation groups or simply rethinking their seafood consumption. Protecting our seas requires a collective effort from all who benefit from the ocean and rely on its survival.

Seen together, these two narratives show different parts of the same picture: one above the surface, one below it. One corporate-driven, one community-driven.

Both necessary.

And both reminding us that Malaysia's underwater world will survive only if more people, from all corners of society, decide it is worth saving.

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