

## MARINE CONSERVATION THREAT

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# Starfishes, sea cucumbers target of Semporna poachers

**SEMPORNA:** Members of the Semporna Professional Divers Association (SPDA) stumbled upon two abandoned plastic bags containing starfishes and sea cucumbers on a popular tourist island off Semporna here yesterday.

The discovery on Pulau Matakang stunned the local professional diving fraternity, which expressed concern that these marine species might have been taken out from the island by irresponsible individuals.

SPDA chairman Abdul Razak Ismail said such an act was unacceptable and showed a lack of awareness about marine life protection.

"It is disappointing to see there are individuals who take marine conservation efforts for granted or have zero awareness about the importance of protecting our ma-

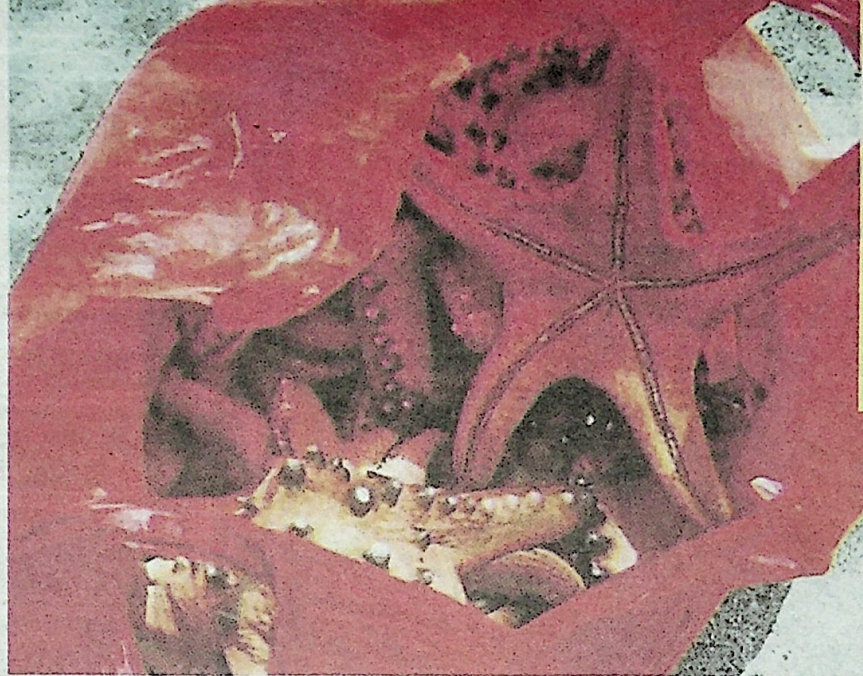
rine species, especially in areas frequented by tourists and divers.

"Taking the creatures out from their habitat is harmful to the marine life. Everyone needs to practise safe and responsible viewing of marine life.

"Tour operators and guides need to have greater awareness about this matter and inform their guests on the 'do's' and 'don'ts'," he said.

SPDA had yesterday shared the discovery on its Facebook account, stating the members found the plastic bags filled with starfishes and sea cucumbers at noon. They, however, could not identify the culprits.

Razak said there were tour operators hiring individuals, who had no knowledge about marine conservation, to help bring guests around. He said these in-



*The bag of starfish found by divers near Pulau Matakang in Semporna. (Inset)*

*Abdul Razak Ismail. PIC COURTESY OF SEMPORNA PROFESSIONAL DIVERS ASSOCIATION*

dividuals were usually paid between RM20 to RM30 for a tour.

He suggested that the authorities provide a course for tour, snorkelling and dive guides, as well as boatmen, on how to handle tourists and create awareness about marine conservation.

He suggested a licence be issued to participants, adding that only those with the licence be allowed to handle tourists.

Recently, the diving fraternity and the public were upset after corals were brought out from the Semporna islands to Semporna jetty on Oct 3, believed to be for export purposes.

Certain quarters claimed that the perpetrators had abused marine export and coral cultivating licences as the corals were not taken from cultivation areas.

Deputy Chief Minister Datuk

Christina Liew, who is also state tourism, culture and environment minister, said coral extraction could tarnish Sabah's image and reputation.

Meanwhile, state Agriculture and Food Industry Minister Datuk Junz Wong said his ministry was mulling the possibility of revoking licences related to extracting and exporting of wild corals in the state.