

Cycle of life

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When the turtle comes knocking at your door, you don't turn it away. You do all you can to protect it – and that's what Resorts World Kijal is doing through its turtle programme, writes **Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal**

IT'S dark. Pitch dark. In the distance, the trees dance an eerie dance – despite the absence of any breeze. Suddenly, the clouds part, wispy and solemn in their retreat, revealing a full moon in all its glory. This stretch of beach of Pantai Teluk Mak Nik (or Monica Bay, as it's otherwise known) in Chukai, Terengganu, is now bathed in a surreal glow, and I can finally make out my surrounds.

Stepping gingerly across a broken rock boulder, I try to keep pace with the rest of the group, comprising members of the media and tourists. The signal to remain silent is issued by the guide and we abide, the only sound to pierce the stillness of the night coming from the waves gently lapping against the shore. "11pm" my watch reads and my anticipation heightens.

"No noise and no flash," the guide reminds us as we approach what appears to be a group of young men standing guard over a mound of sand. One of them rises before ushering us all aside for a quick explanation. We listen intently as he tells us that a mother turtle had landed just minutes earlier and is now in the midst of digging her egg chamber so she can lay her eggs.

"You can come and see but not everyone all at once. Take turns and make sure no torchlight. Or else she'll stop whatever she's doing," warns the young man. We all nod, our heads bobbing in unison in the semi darkness.

My turn eventually arrives and I inch my way towards the mound. Crouching slowly to get a better look, I couldn't help sighing silently in wonderment as I see, one by one, perfectly round, ping pong-sized balls falling into the perfectly dug egg chamber. The mother turtle, a handsome Green Turtle, (*Chelonia Mydas*, named for the green colour of the fat under its shell), continues with her task, seemingly oblivious to her excited audience.

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In Mother Nature's hands

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NATURE'S WAY

Moving away from the scene to make way for the rest of the group, I head towards the young guide, who's surrounded by another group, and manage to catch snippets of his explanation. It seems every year, mother turtles make their way up to the shore late in the night to lay their eggs. If the weather is bad, i.e. it's raining or there's thunder and lightning, the turtle will turn back and hang around in the waters first until conditions are right for her to go ashore again.

The Green Turtle mainly stays near the coastline and around islands, and lives in bays and protected shores, especially in areas where there are seagrass beds. They're rarely seen in the open ocean. This species is listed as Endangered (facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild in the near future) by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources.

The greatest threat to their survival? Commercial harvest for eggs and food. "Other green turtle parts are sometimes used for leather. They also die when they get caught in fishermen's nets," shares the guide.

A palpable buzz suddenly emanates from behind me where a single source of light from a torch is shining on rows of eggs that have been arranged on the sand. I hasten my steps to catch the action. There's an egg count being conducted. "119!" one of the men exclaims, before the other proceeds to grab a bag to start putting the eggs into. These eggs will be taken to a hatchery where they'll be incubated for approximately three months after which time, the hatchlings will be born. Within seven days, these hatchlings would be released into the sea; any later, their flippers will weaken, thus

hampering their ability to survive in the big world.

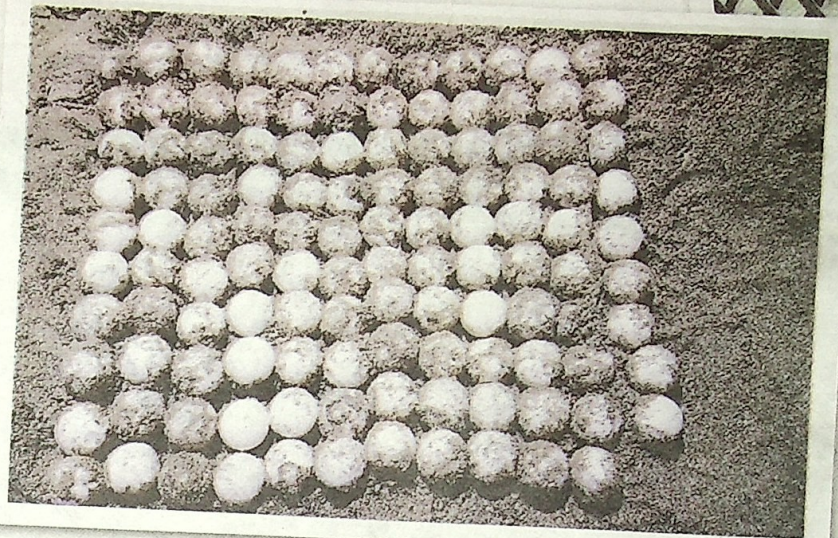
Meanwhile, in one corner near the rocky boulder, shrouded in silhouette, the mother turtle appears to be in a trance, engrossed in her attempt to fill in the nest cavity with sand so that her 'eggs' would be protected from predators and from drying out. Her back flippers work furiously as if time is of the essence. I can only stare, a sense of solemnness pervading my being, as I reconcile myself to the fact that, for all the hard work, she's only burying an empty cavity.

RAISING AWARENESS

In the distance, the clouds seem to be gathering. The air is humid and smells of impending rain. "Come, let me show you all the hatchery and you can see the hatchlings," ushers Ragunathan Kathirgamu, Resorts World Kijal Fun and Adventure manager, his tone urgent. I hasten my steps, spraying sand everywhere in my wake, with memories of last night's turtle landing still fresh in my mind.

We're now on Pantai Kijal, or Kijal Beach in Kemaman, Terengganu, a pristine private beach belonging to Resorts World Kijal, that stretches about 7.6km and with seven turtle landing spots. It's the only stretch of landing spots with a hotel attached, which means that guests who stay here don't need to travel far to wait for turtles. If the ranger happens to spot a mother turtle ambling to the beach to lay her eggs, then he'll notify the guide who will then proceed to alert the guests, should they want to be part of this incredible turtle sighting experience.

Turtles usually arrive on the beaches of Terengganu between April and September. The species that descend mainly comprise the common Green Turtle and the occasional rare *Hawksbill Turtle* (*Eretmo-*



chelys Imbricate). Returning by instinct to the very area that they were hatched, the beach here is one of these hallowed places. Because of this, the resort has been active in its turtle conservation efforts, raising awareness among its guests with activities such as hatchling release, egg planting and turtle release.

We arrive at a modest-looking set-up on the beach, 20x30sq ft in size. Along the 'walls' are diagrams and information about turtles. This is where guests get to learn more about the turtle cycle and also get better acquainted with the processes that a mother turtle undergoes to get her babies into the world.

TURTLE 101

Approaching a bright blue container, I see shiny little hatchlings floating in the water. They're three days old. "If you want to hold them, wear gloves and make sure you don't hold them by their belly. Hold the sides," Ragunathan's caution rings clear, as I excitedly pull on a pair of gloves offered to me by a turtle guide from the Terengganu Fisheries Department, Roslan Mohamad. A wriggling baby turtle is soon in my hand, and I stare at its valiant attempts to break free. "Stubborn bugger you are," I mutter

delightedly before placing it gently into the container.

Moving to the other side, we follow Roslan for a demonstration on how to plant the eggs into the ground. The clouds have started to open and there's a persistent drizzle. We crouch down next to what appears to be a beautifully dug hole. This is the man-made egg chamber that we will plant the eggs for the incubation stage.

Explains Ragunathan, as we stare transfixed at Roslan who's now on all fours and carefully placing an egg into the 'hole' to demonstrate: "After about two months, the babies will use a special 'egg tooth' located on their snout called caruncle to break their shells and hatch from their eggs. It takes about two days for the babies to get up to the surface. To make it easier for them, we will loosen the sand a bit because it would have gotten quite packed due to the heat and rain etc. We'll do exactly what the mother turtle does so they can crawl up easily."

It's important for the cavity to be the right shape and depth, continues Ragunathan. The bottom must curve like a test-tube. "It helps control the temperature. The temperature of the developing eggs is what decides whether the offspring will be male



An insightful session with Roslan about how the eggs should be handled.

Mother turtle laying eggs at Resorts World Kijal.



FROM FAR LEFT: Turtle eggs; Ragunathan explaining the process of how the hatchlings climb to the surface; Close up of hatchling; Turtle conservation programme; Turtle hatchery. PICTURES BY INTAN MAIZURA AHMAD KAMAL

or female. This is called temperature-dependent sex determination or TSD. Two thirds, the ones on top, will be female as the male tends to be at the bottom and they push the female up."

Gingerly, I take my turn to place the egg into the hole. It feels so fragile and for one moment, I thought I might have pressed a little too hard in my fear not to drop it. "Don't die, don't die," a silent cry rises inside. Thankfully, I manage to execute the process without any mishaps.

"Let's go and release some hatchlings now," beckons Ragunathan, pointing to the skies, before adding: "We have to do this before the weather gets any worse." We scramble to our feet and happily follow him and Roslan down to the beach. In their hands are buckets filled with similarly excited baby turtles.

INTO THE BLUE

"Everyone take your own hatchling. Let's get in a line and do the release. Make sure you place the hatchling gently on the sand and just watch it go. If it looks like it's going slightly off course, gently guide it back. It's important this is done correctly because this will be the very same way the babies will return to us again as an adult turtle — 20 years later!" says Ragunathan as we scramble towards the bucket to claim our respective 'baby'.

"Hello Intan!" I whisper to a handsome, wriggling little baby turtle in my hand as I inch my face towards its cute little snout. Its paddle-like front flippers are erect, as if ready to fly. It looks like it can't wait to ride the waves and see what the future holds.

We form a line as instructed and as



soon as the signal to release is given, we crouch down as low as we can and gently place our 'babies' onto the sand. A flurry of movements ensues as the babies rejoice in the feel of the sand and begin making their 'sprint' towards the water.

I try to stifle a sudden feeling of melancholy that's slowly beginning to permeate within me. "Just survive please," I can hear myself muttering as I continue to observe my little 'charge' riding the waves with abandon. Soon she'll disappear from my sight and I will only have memories of this day.

There'll be so many obstacles plaguing her journey. From driftwood to crabs. And what about the birds swooping overhead and other dangerous predators that form the ocean landscape. Experts say only one out of 1000 will survive to adulthood under natural conditions.

"You okay?" a voice interrupts my reverie. It's Ragunathan. Following my gaze towards the sea where Baby Intan's other siblings are also now bobbing in the water, he says gently: "It's always an emotional experience this part."

I nod solemnly and silence ensues. Minutes must have passed and Ragunathan eventually says: "You know, since we started

this programme in 2000, it has been very successful. According to the Fisheries Department, the number of landings that we've had is approximately 156 to 159, up to the end of August of this year. Also, this year we managed to celebrate World Turtle Day, which fell on May 23, and we brought students from an international school in Genting and conducted a *gotong royong* programme. We also took them to Ma' Daerah, a turtle sanctuary in Keroh where they learned a lot about turtle conservation."

Regular beach cleaning is also done here, adds Ragunathan, to ensure that the beach is safe for both turtle landings and activities. The resort is also working with the Terengganu Fisheries Department to attain official protection for its beach and certify its guest turtle conservation programme.

Pride lacing his voice, the 55-year-old, an 18-year veteran of the property, concludes: "Our programme is not about making money. You have to understand, we're blessed. The turtles come knocking at our door and there's no way we can ignore them. It's our duty to ensure their survival." intanmf@nst.com.my



FAST FACTS

- Guests can participate in turtle hatchlings release or egg planting sessions as well as night-time turtle watching held at the resort or at the Turtle Sanctuary Ma Daerah Keroh or Pantai Teluk Mak Nik Kuala Kemaman, transportation included. There's also a special Sea Turtle package for guests.
- Other activities on site include water polo in the swimming pools to an archery range and tennis courts. Or why not go cycling and explore the beauty of the area.
- Go to www.rwkijal.com for more details.

