

RETIRED PROFESSOR SAVING RIVER TERRAPINS

Ex-UTM don says greater awareness needed to ensure survival of critically endangered species

ROS LI ZAKARIA
KEMAMAN
+cnews@nstp.com.my



Professor Dr Maketab Mohamed

BEING a retiree is not an excuse to laze around the house. For Professor Dr Maketab Mohamed, who retired from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai, Johor, two months ago, it is time to give back to society.

And being a former two-term Malaysian Nature Society president from 2010 to 2014, Maketab

has his heart set on the environment and matters that threaten the survival of animals, especially those listed under the International Union for the Conservation



of Nature (ICN) red list as "critically endangered".

"Southern river terrapins are critically endangered. I consider it important to assist (in the conservation of the species).

"This matter needs greater publicity and awareness to ensure that the public understand the importance of their survival," said Maketab, who often visited the Turtle Conservation Society in Kampung Pasir Gajah.

He has been helping Dr Chan

Pelf Nyok and her husband, Dylan Wang, who funded their research on the landing and nesting trends of the turtles.

Maketab said universities, especially those with biological and marine sciences facilities, should carry out research and conservation projects on the species and suggest ways to protect the animals from extinction.

"State governments, together with the Wildlife and National Parks Department, can work to-

gether to conserve terrapins and turtles. Terrapins are found only in Terengganu, Perak and Kedah.

"Sungai Pahang used to have terrapins. Unfortunately, our two survey trips last year yielded nothing.

"This indicated that terrapins in Sungai Pahang are locally extinct.

"If there are enough funds and manpower, a terrapin conservation centre can be set up in Sungai Pahang near Chenor.

Couple brought together, kept apart by their love for turtles

KEMAMAN: Terrapins brought Dr Chen Pelf Nyok, well known among villagers in Kampung Pasir Gajah as "Mek Tuntung", and her husband Dylan Wang whom locals call "Along Dolloh", together, and their love for the reptiles led them to tie the knot early last year.

But their love for the turtles also kept them apart for months as they took notes on the animal and worrying why the number of terrapin landings and nesting grounds have dropped drastically over the past eight years.

With no funding, the couple showed their dedication and love for the reptiles by spending their money to buy terrapin eggs and raised funds through a terrapin adoption programme or sale of merchandise.

Wang slept in tents in the lower reaches of a river in Kampung Pasir Pok Yok, while Chen focused her research on the sandy banks of Sungai Kemaman River near Kampung Pasir Gajah, enduring mosquito bites and avoiding snakes when terrapins landed from 9pm to 6am.

While Chen has been setting up camps with villagers since 2012, she met Wang only in 2016.

Their love for terrapins and turtles changed their lives.

Wang, who is assistant project manager of the Turtle Conservation Society (TCS), a non-profit and non-governmental organisation, is seeing a drastic drop in the number of terrapin nesting grounds.

He shares the concern with Chen, the co-founder of TCS, set

up in 2011.

"In 2012, we recorded 105 nests. Last year, we found six nests. This year, we discovered three nests and this is supposed to be the peak of the nesting season. This is worrying."

He suspected that the big floods of 2012 had changed the river landscape where the terrapins' sandy nesting grounds sites disappeared and, instead, formed in areas not familiar to the terrapins,

He also believed that the turtles were drowned in fish traps and killed by fishing hook and lines.

"We are concerned about the use of poison by anglers who kill not only terrapins, but also fishes in the river."

He said sand dredging affected

the terrapins' nesting grounds and this was made worse as their eggs were eaten.

"This must be stopped. We are doing what we can to save the eggs and incubate them in safer sites.

"We are educating the public on the importance of terrapins in a river system as they can be considered a barometer of a river's health."

Chen said that educating the people on the need to protect terrapins and restrain them from collecting and eating their eggs could boost the animal's population.

"It is not something that can be achieved immediately.

"We can educate children about nature camps and get villagers to join in (the conservation

effort) by helping out collecting terrapin eggs and incubating them in conservation sites.

"There are also those who fail to see the importance of our work. I am trying to influence change by working with the community."

She said gatherings with egg collectors facilitated by village heads or assemblyman could manage expectations and concerns.

"No eggs equals to no terrapins in the future. In fact, the adults that nest now are from eggs that missed detection 20 years ago. And since there are more people combing nesting banks this year, in 20 years, there would be no more terrapins."

Chen said TCS badly needed support from local authorities,



Villagers removing a hook and line on a terrapin.



A Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency officer showing the-seized terrapins in Batu Pahat yesterday. BERNAMA PIC

MMEA foils bid to smuggle 3,300 terrapins into country

"We can reintroduce adults and hatchlings into the river," he said, adding that the drastic drop in terrapin landings and nesting at Sungai Kemaman could be an indication of something worse.

He said terrapin researchers had predicted that without serious conservation efforts, terrapins could become extinct in less than 20 years.

"Terrapins are unlike sea turtles. They lay fewer than 40 eggs

in a nest. This is unlike green turtles, which can lay more than 60 eggs.

"Taking into account the natural threats to the hatchlings, their survival rate is very low."

He said extinction could also be caused by habitat loss, poaching of their eggs, and hunting of the animal for its meat.

"As such, education and awareness about terrapins and their habitat, as well as do's and don'ts, must start at a young age."

BATU PAHAT: The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) foiled a bid to smuggle 3,300 terrapins worth RM150,000 into the state, with the arrest of two men in Tanjung Tohor, Muar here yesterday.

Its director, Maritime Commander Mohammad Othman, said the success followed a joint inspection by the agency and the 6th Battalion general operations force in Parit Unas Pos.

He said enforcers discovered 3,300 terrapins inside seven bags after inspecting a suspicious boat at 12.30am,

"It is believed the boat's two crew members tried to smuggle the reptiles into the country to be sold, especially to restaurants that serve them as exotic dishes."

He said the two men, aged 30 and 50 years, were handed over to the Wildlife and National Parks Department.

He said MMEA was serious in combating activities that violated laws.

"Thus, we hope the public will report any activities that break laws applicable to the Malaysian Maritime Zone."

In case of emergency or complaints, call Malaysian Emergency Response Service 999 24-hour line and Batu Pahat Maritime Zone operations centre at 07-4344020.

which acted as a bridge that connects locals with outsiders like her, handicapped by being a woman and a non-Muslim.

She said TCS had adopted SK Pasir Gajah and ran turtle camps with the school yearly.

She added that it held annual World Turtle Day celebrations with the community, and had started a women's group.

On funding, she said she had drained her three savings accounts.

She said on Tuesday she had uplifted a fixed deposit to pay for terrapin eggs this year.

"It is tough but someone has to do it.

"My husband and I are risking everything for the future of the turtles and terrapins in Sungai Kemaman.

"We have been hearing news of the extinction of (animal) species too often. We hope to save this species from disappearing forever."



Turtle Conservation Society (TCS) co-founder Dr Chen Pelf Nyok and her husband, Dylan Wang, who is TCS assistant project manager, with some turtles recently. PIC COURTESY OF VERA NIEUWENHUIS/ PHOTOGRAPHERS WITHOUT BORDERS