

Headline	Giving turtles a chance		
MediaTitle	The Star		
Date	20 Apr 2012	Color	Full Color
Section	Metro	Circulation	304,904
Page No	22	Readership	1,026,812
Language	English	ArticleSize	699 cm ²
Journalist	CHRISTINA CHIN	AdValue	RM 32,427
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 97,281



Giving turtles a chance

Donations needed for conservation work in Penang

Dateline: Penang

CHRISTINA CHIN

THE Pantai Kerachut Turtle Conservation Sanctuary is calling on the private sector to help make its ambong-ambong (scientifically known as *scaevola taccada*) shrub-planting project a success.

Some 500 seedlings cultivated by the state Fisheries Department need to be planted along Pantai Kerachut, Pantai Teluk Kampi, Pantai Teluk Ailing and Pantai Teluk Ketapang along the island's north-west coast to restore the Green Turtles and the Olive Ridley Turtles' natural breeding habitat.

Department licensing and resource protection officer Mansor Yobe said volunteers were needed to help plant the shrubs as the department managing the sanctuary did not have the manpower.

"We have cultivated the seedlings ourselves but now we need people to help plant them as the sanctuary is largely dependant on the private sector's assistance," he said.

Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) senior research assistant Mohd Afendi Hussin said the ambong-ambong shrubs could grow up to 4m high and 4.6m wide.

"It will take four years for the shrubs to mature.

"If all the seedlings grow well, soil erosion won't be a problem in Pantai Kerachut."

Rantau Abang turtle education centre chief Syed Abdullah Syed Abdul Kadir who also advises the country's 22 turtle hatcheries said Penang was very fortunate as the private sector here was supportive of the sanctuary.

"The sanctuary has progressed well.

"When the turtle conservation project started here in the early 1990s, turtle landings were very rare. Those that came had little chance to hatch their eggs.

"Thanks to efforts by the department and very strong support from the private sector, the eco-system had been restored and there is tighter security on the beach to prevent the eggs from being stolen.

"Better surveillance meant that turtles coming up to lay their eggs were not disturbed," he said.

He said it was only in 1998 that the efforts bore fruit when 10 turtle nests were found.

By 2007, 80 turtle nests had been recorded.

"Optimally, we need to achieve a ratio of one male to two females.

"Yearly research and regular monitoring must be done to adjust the ratio because when the eggs hatch, we do not know the gender of the turtles.

"It will take about 20 years before we can see whether we have been successful in hatching the correct ratio to increase the population because that is the length of time needed for a female to return to the beach it was released from," he said.

Syed Abdullah appealed to the public to donate generously to the national Persatuan Pecinta Penyu 1Malaysia fund set up last year for turtle conservation in the country.

State department deputy director Noraisyah Abu Bakar said the public wishing to donate to the sanctuary should issue cheques to 'Persatuan Pecinta Penyu 1Malaysia (Penang)' and hand them over to the state Fisheries Department.

"We need funds to buy food for the turtles and to run the sanctuary – it's not cheap although we do receive some allocation from the state government.

"We also managed to build fences, a platform and staircases for the sanctuary," she said.

She thanked Shangri-La's Rasa Sayang Hotel and Golden Sands Resort staff for the sand replacement exercise which was carried out at the shaded hatchery.

"Because we could not get a tractor in, we need to manually dig out the sand and replace it to prevent the breeding of virus and bacteria in the 'old' sand which was filled with hatched turtle eggs.

"This exercise must be done once every two years," she said.

Mansor said on the sanctuary's wish list now were research equipment to monitor the impact of global warming on the hatchlings, microchips for tagging of the hatchlings, a satellite tracking system and a concrete pond to rehabilitate the turtles.

"The electronic gadgets cost up to RM100,000 but we need them for research purposes," he said.

During the launch of the shrub-planting project at Pantai Kerachut on Saturday, 60 employees from Sharp (Sungai Petani) were present to plant 100 ambong-ambong shrubs and bury the turtle eggs in the shaded hatchery.

S&O Electronics K. Asami director said the company would be back in June to release the hatchlings during a one-night stay programme.

"This programme is part of Sharp's 100th anniversary.

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"We hope to provide the sanctuary with audio-visual systems for its educational programmes and help with some refurbishment work," he said.



Planting lesson: Mohd Afendi (in white) explaining the best way to plant the scrubs to state Fisheries Department staff (from left) Mohd Ezzam Mohd Radzi, Mohd Khairi Ishak and Muhd Hakim Razali.



Life is fragile: Mansor inspecting a turtle nest under ambong-ambong shrubs at Pantai Kerachut.

Gently does it: Syed Abdullah showing how to place turtle eggs in the sand inside the shaded hatchery.