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Restoring coastal sponges

BY SULYN CHONG - 6 JUNE 2016 @ 11:37 AM

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The rehabilitation of Kampung Sungai Tiram's mangrove forest becomes a communal responsibility, writes *Sulyn Chong*

THE stench of fish and brackish water wafts in the air while various birds chirp merrily around me. The surrounding houses are simple brick structures with, surprisingly enough, tiled floors. I'm standing outside the community hall next to a primary school encircled by mangrove forests.

The sun is relentless as I await the arrival of Abdullah Ayob Abdul Rashid, the Ketua Kampung (village head) of Kampung Sungai Tiram in Lekir, Perak.

To the untrained eye, the surrounding mangroves may appear to be lush and filled with healthy plants as well as rich marine life. But that's far from the truth as Abdullah Ayob reveals: "The mangrove forest around Lekir has been illegally invaded for quite some time and many of the trees have been cut down to make coal, and for various other things."

This is why I find myself fanning away in the noon heat while representatives from the Global Environmental Centre (GEC) and Vale Malaysia introduce the mangrove forest rehabilitation and conservation programme of Lekir, Perak.

FRIENDS OF THE MANGROVE FOREST

Due to many factors, the mangrove forest around Lekir has seen a degradation that's troubling to the fishermen whose livelihood depends on it. Even the community in the area feel, temperatures are rising at alarming rates. In addition, the unforeseen tsunami which hit Lekir shores in 2004, also contributed to a large chunk of the destruction. The tidal waves swept away much of the first layers of the mangrove forest, pushing the coastal lines further inland.

Mangrove forests are known to be the first line of defence from the raging attacks of the sea. Like sponges, they protect the coastal areas from erosion, storm surges and tsunamis. But on a daily basis, the mangroves provide a unique environment that's rich for a multitude of marine life — something the community of Kampung Sungai Lekir is

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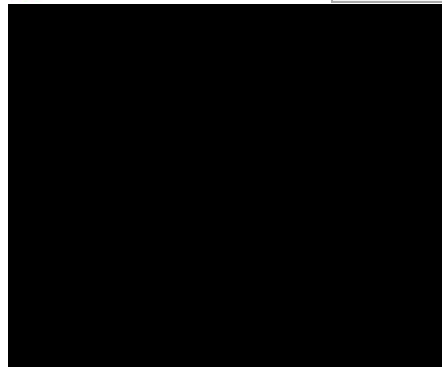
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fighting hard to save.

With help from the GEC, Abdullah Ayob and the villagers of Kampung Sungai Tiram have established Pertubuhan Sahabat Hutan Bakau Lekir Sitiawan or Friends of the Mangrove Forest in October 2014. For the past 1½ years, this organisation has held various activities and exhibitions under Mapei and the Tourism Board in the hopes of rehabilitating and conserving the surrounding mangrove areas.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Friends of the Mangrove Forest encountered great difficulty in kick-starting their awareness initiatives. "When we first started the organisation, many of the fishermen in the village were suspicious of the approach. They were afraid that whatever product we were trying to promote may take away the mangrove forest. They were afraid that GEC would privatise the mangrove forest," Abdullah Ayob says.

It may not have been ideal with only five members to begin with but it soon expanded when more and more started becoming aware of the importance of saving the mangroves. "Currently, we're 40 to 50 people strong, and all these in just 1½ years. If you think about it, 50 people in a village of 250 houses, it's not a small number. That's about 1/5th of the population," adds Abdullah Ayob.

Nevertheless, this hasn't stopped him from conducting awareness campaigns to attract more people to join the organisation. "If possible, I would like everyone to contribute. Slowly but surely it will come to that," he says, radiating a positive outlook.

OUTSIDER VIEW

Conservation and rehabilitation programmes aren't small undertakings. They're usually run by the community in the surrounding area but they need large funds to support such a project. For this project in Lekir, funds are provided under Vale Malaysia's CSR division.

When speaking to Raja Zainariah Raja Hitam, Head of CSR and Communication of Vale Malaysia, she shares that the organisation is evolving into a very strong community group. "When we first visited, the community was oblivious to what was happening around them and when there were illegal explorations in the area, they didn't know what to do or where to seek help. Even if they did seek help, they're only just individuals. Now, with the establishment of the Sahabat Hutan Bakau, they've become a strong entity," she asserts.

The programme is also supported by the relevant government departments such as the Forestry Department and Irrigation Department. Raja Zainariah believes the good relationship between the authorities and the community in Lekir plays a vital role in moving forward with conservation efforts. "It's because of these strong connections that people are more aware of the village's presence and they don't dare to encroach into the areas without first approaching the village and organisation for permission," she shares, adding that the organisation is now empowered with the knowledge and capabilities of reporting land abuse to the right authorities.

KNOWLEDGE IS KEY



Di Maria scores as Argentina beat Chile

SANTA CLARA: Argentina shrugged off the absence of Lionel Messi to beat Chile 2-1 in the Copa America on Monday, with an emotional Angel Di Maria scoring the opening goal and dedicating it to his grandmother, who passed away before the game.

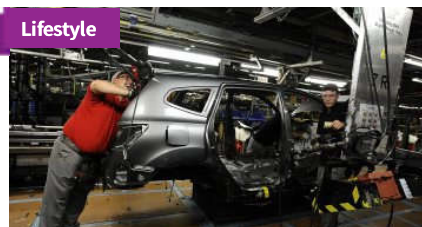
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Nation

Aside from just being watchdogs of the mangrove forest, the members are constantly trained and advised by GEC on ways to conserve and rehabilitate the mangrove forest.

All members are sent to Kuala Gula — an existing mangrove rehabilitation and conservation site for courses on how to rehabilitate mangroves and what's needed to begin a mangrove nursery.

As I walk towards the nursery in a little nook opposite the river jetty, housewife Normala Abdul Aziz happily shares her experience as a member of the Friends of the Mangrove Forest organisation. "We learnt a lot during the course at Kuala Gula. GEC taught us how to plant and recognise the types of mangrove trees. Before that, I had no knowledge on our environment or even what was happening around us."

Many of the nursery's caretakers are made up of housewives like Normala. "We come here during the holidays as well as weekends to help out. Sometimes even after sending our kids to school, we'll come down here to check," she explains. "But of course there are men too. They just do different work. Usually the men will go out and look for seeds and we women will stay at the nursery. That's how we divide the responsibilities," she adds.

The community's efforts go a long way towards making things happen, especially for GEC who comprise only a handful of people. "It only took us a day. We cooperated as a village," says Normala in reference to the nursery building. But what makes this seemingly simple nursery a proud product of the village is the sheer number of mangrove trees grown in it. "We've grown about 15,000 trees and the nursery size has increased. All these are the efforts of the community in this area," proclaims Abdullah Ayob, eyes shining.

Hearing that, I put on rubber boots, roll up my sleeves, take a mangrove plant in one hand and a shovel in the other. Joining the community there, I do my bit to help rehabilitate at least one tree to the threatened mangrove forest of Lekir because I now know how much of a difference this one tree will make.

83 reads



Baby mangrove trees that are healthily growing and will be ready for transplantation in a month or so.



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