

Despite ban, tourists flock to Pulau Sembilan

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IPOH, March 21 — The desire to cash in while the going remained good seems to have led tour operators to continue ferrying tourists to Pulau Sembilan renowned for their “Blue Tears” plankton phenomenon with absolute disregard for environment preservation.

Malay Mail learnt the ban on tourists flocking to Pulau Lalang and Pulau Rumbia was imposed as early as January, but tour operators continued plying their trade.

This was attributed to the fact they had already received bookings and the authorities allowed them to clear them for February and this month.

Another letter from the state government dated March 8 reiterated the ban would remain in place after it was found operators were ferrying passengers without permits or state government authorisation.

The contents of the letter sighted by *Malay Mail* made it clear the ban would remain enforced, and tour operators had until March 31 to settle all bookings.

Yesterday, tourism and cultural committee chairman Datuk Nolee Ashililin Mohd Radzi told *Malay Mail* the state government would not extend its deadline to “close” the islands as it was a key move to safeguard them from degradation.

The islands were advertised as a “must visit” destination for Visit Perak Year (VPY) 2017.

“There will be no changes on the date of the closure. The islands will be officially closed on April 1,” Nolee said.

“The islands are already damaged by the presence of large groups of visitors. Further tourism activities will only worsen the situation there.”

Earlier yesterday, the three tour agencies which provide boat services to Pulau Sembilan said they would appeal for more time to honour their bookings before visits to the islands are halted.

Their spokesman Jenny Tan said the operators had received bookings either through walk-in or the Internet until August 31.

Tan said the agencies were taken aback by the sudden decision to close Pulau Sembilan as they only received a letter on the closure from State Park Corporation on March 8.

“By then we had received bookings until August, with June being the peak season,” she said, adding that during the peak season, they were allowed to send tourists to the islands daily, and during the off peak-season, the islands were only open during weekends.

Tan said the agencies were verbally informed by the corporation in January there were plans to close Pulau Sembilan.

“During a dialogue with the Bagan Datuk district office last month on the closure, we appealed to them to extend the date as bookings had been made,” she said.

“We have no issues with returning the deposits but we are more concerned about Malaysia’s reputation.”

Nolee said continuous tourism activities would harm the islands’ main attraction — the rare species of plankton that glow in blue after sunset along the coastlines.

“We are liaising with a non-governmental organisation, Global Environment Centre, who are experts in conservation of the islands,” she said.

“They also proposed the islands should be off-limits for several months of the year to allow them to rehabilitate.”

Nolee said the tour agents should cooperate with the decision as it was made for the good of all concerned.

“They have to understand that continuing the tourism activities on the islands will harm the place totally, and in the next few months or years, the place might not hold their attraction anymore and the business of the tour agents will be affected altogether,” she said.

“But if they cooperate, they could continue the business after the islands reopen.”

Nolee also said the authorities would investigate the people responsible for bringing loads of visitors to the island and take action against them.

Yesterday, *Malay Mail* front-paged the decision to close the cluster of nine islands from April 1 because of public apathy and environment degradation.