



KERATAN AKHBAR

AKHBAR	:	THE STAR			
TARIKH	:	17/5/2017	MUKA SURAT	:	17
JABATAN	:	UMUM			
KLASIFIKASI	:	MAKLUMAN			

Dugong face risk of food decline

Development among reasons for dwindling seagrass in Johor waters

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JOHOR BARU: Johor is in danger of losing its seagrass along the coastline, which will have a negative impact on sea creatures, particularly dugong.

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) faculty of geoinformation and real estate researcher Dr Syarifuddin Misbahi said Johor was home to at least 12 of the world's 60 seagrass species.

There is a 20km to 30km stretch in Johor waters where seagrass can be found in abundance, mainly in the eastern and southern parts of the coast.

"Despite the murky waters in the east of Johor, people can still see the seagrass at the Merambong shoal during low tide," Dr Syarifuddin told *The Star*.

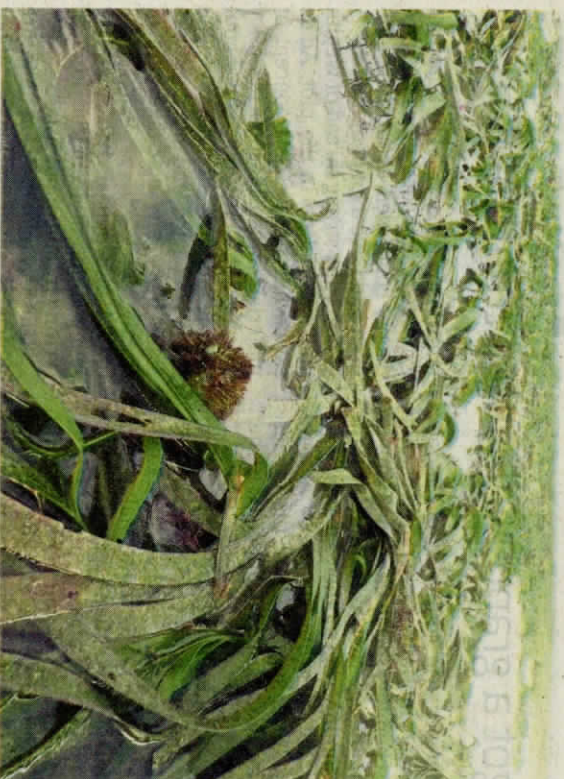
The Merambong shoal is situated between Johor and Singapore, along the Tebrau Straits near Gelang Patah.

"This area is the biggest seagrass area within Malaysian waters. It is about 2km long with a width of 700m and is home to at least 10 seagrass species," he said.

He added that various factors, including development, had contributed to the decline in seagrass.

Dr Syarifuddin pointed out that the area is a known hotspot for dugong, a protected animal, as the mammal eats the seagrass there.

"Besides development, other fac-



Diminishing greens: Seagrass, which makes up a dugong's main diet, can be found along the Tebrau Straits near Gelang Patah, Johor.

tors include water quality and the presence of boats and heavy vessels along the eastern and southern Johor waters.

"This is also a major factor because the animal is shy and does not like the sound of ships or boats," he said.

He said a dugong's diet consists mainly of seagrass and a healthy adult dugong weighing 300kg consumes about 30kg of the plant daily.

"We have been conducting research with a group from Tokyo Metropolitan University in Japan. We have been using satellite images to map dugong sightings in Johor waters for the past four years," he said.

Dr Syarifuddin added that the state government's move to establish the Johor Marine Park near Pulau Tinggi and Pulau Sibul off the coast of Mersing was a good one as

Seagrass is a natural defence to stop erosion around mangroves and is a natural habitat for dugong, sea turtles and other sea creatures.

Dr Syarifuddin Misbahi

the water was cleaner, there was no development and heavy vessels did not ply those waters, making it an ideal location for dugong.

"Seagrass is important for our ecology. It is a natural defence to stop erosion around mangroves and is a natural habitat for dugong, sea turtles and other sea creatures.

"We will give our research results to the authorities in the hope of creating awareness of the importance of seagrass conservation.

"It will also help in the conservation of dugong in our waters," he said.

It was reported that the carcass of an adult dugong was found at Pulau Tinggi near Mersing on April 21.

The state government is in the process of gazetiting the area as a dugong sanctuary.