



KERATAN AKHBAR

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Protecting the coastal environment is equally vital

WE, from the MareCet Research Organisation (MareCet), a local marine conservation NGO, are disheartened with the recent issue of the RM1.2bil Aman Laut mixed development project in Kuala Kedah which was highlighted in various local newspapers and news portals on May 29. We are deeply concerned about this mega development project that involves reclamation of about 50 hectares of coastal sea area.

While the project has been issued a stop work order by the Department of Environment (DoE) and requested to resubmit a full Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report, MareCet would like to weigh in to stress that all assessments should be conducted in a thorough and objective manner so that no adverse ecological impact will occur in the area as a result of this proposed project.

MareCet has been conducting dolphin research and conservation work in Langkawi since 2010 and has expanded our work to the adjacent mainland waters (from Kuala Perlis extending southward to Kuala Kedah) since 2016. Through our findings, the occurrence of at least three species of marine mammals are confirmed in the waters of Kuala Kedah – two species of dolphins (Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin and Irrawaddy dolphin) and one species of porpoise (Indo-Pacific finless porpoise).

All three species are listed as “Vulnerable” (to extinction) on the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species. Initial observations from our research have found that the area of the proposed development appears to be an important feeding ground for the IndoPacific humpback dolphin (*pic*) and Irrawaddy dolphin populations in the area. We have documented numerous dolphin sightings in the vicinity of the Aman Laut project development site, with most of these dolphin groups observed feeding and foraging. Dolphins generally prefer sites that correspond to areas of good food sources, good conditions for prey capture and offer protection for their life cycle (e.g. breeding, calving, socialising, feeding and resting). Our research suggests that Kuala Kedah’s coastal waters fulfil some, if not all, of the above criteria. Therefore, we believe that the area is important for their survival. Dolphins are not only consid-



ered sentinels of ocean health but also have potential to be a source of ecotourism attraction for Kedah.

We are concerned about the adverse impacts of the development activities of the Aman Laut project on the welfare of the dolphins and also the greater marine environment. Reclamation and infilling of the sea and clearing of mangroves cause irreversible loss and degradation to the marine and coastal systems.

In this case, such activities will directly affect the habitats which dolphin populations depend on to survive. Dredging and infilling the area induce pollutants and excessive nutrients into the sea, hence affecting the water quality. This in turn affects the growth and survival of fishes and other marine species in the area, which not only constitute a significant part of the dolphins’ diet but a source of livelihood for the local fishermen and a seafood resource for Malaysians.

We believe such development should be subjected to detailed environmental impact studies, which should include thorough specialised analyses of potential impacts to the coastal and marine ecology in the area. Such an assessment is crucial given the importance of the area to local marine wildlife and seafood resources, and would be in line with Malaysia’s commitment under the Convention on Biological Diversity, and commitments to protect important marine habitats as contained within the National Policy on Biological Diversity (NPBD) 2016-2025 published by the Natural

Resources and Environment Ministry. This would also be in line with Malaysia’s aspirations to be among the top 20 countries on the global Environment Protection Index (EPI) by the year 2050, as stated within the federal government-led National Transformation 2050 (TN50) agenda.

Additionally, all three species of marine mammals found along the Kuala Kedah coast are fully protected under the Fisheries Act 1985 and Fisheries (Control of Endangered Species) Regulations 1999.

We acknowledge the potential of the Aman Laut development project to raise the economic standards in Kedah as our country continues to press forward with modernisation. However, we would like to encourage sustainable development and modernisation that should not come at the high cost of the environment and the ecosystem services it provides to Malaysians.

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