SOS NEWSLETTER
JANUARY 2008

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SAVE OUR SEAHORSES (www.sosmalaysia.org)

SEAGRASS WORKSHOP - report by Choo Chee Kuang (Pics by Serina & Effendy Rahman)

SOS was recently awarded the MNS ABN-AMRO grant worth RM20,000 to promote community-based seagrass conservation in the Pulai River Estuary.

On 25 Nov, a formal seagrass workshop was carried out at Pendas, Johor for the local community participants who comprised mainly inshore fishermen. The workshop started with an introduction to the programme objectives and goals.

Our invited speaker, En. Rozaimi from the Malaysian Nature Society who also did his master degree on seagrass cultivation, gave an introduction on the seagrass and its importance. Choo then continued to elaborate on the seagrass status at Sungai Pulai and the monitoring techniques.

The participants then proceeded to close up inspection on the fresh seagrass specimen and took the opportunity to taste the fruit of Enhalus acoroides before they departed to the intertidal Merambong seagrass bed. Monitoring technique was demonstrated in situ and three 50-m transects were run through the meadow. The species code established by the Seagrass-Watch proved to be very effective as all the participants had no difficulty recognizing and remembering them.

On the following day, another similar workshop was held at the Kampung Pendas, Serina Rahman thrilled the crowd with her talk on seagrass-associated endangered species and dugong video clip.

Fishermen and village representatives examining a fresh seagrass specimen. Session handled by Ms. Yeong

Briefing session took place at the spacious Balai Raya.

Simpan Arang for the indigenous Selerat community who lives by the riverine mangrove forest of the Pulai River. The turnout was better than expected and the seats in the health care centre were sold out.

SOS newsletter has come up with a new look in coloured-PDF. Newsletter will be published quarterly. Contributions from members and ex-volunteers are most appreciated.

Special points of interest:
- Seagrass workshop
- Syngnathids tagging updates
- Pygmy seahorse project
- 2008 slots for booking

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Briefing session took place at the spacious Balai Raya.

The Selerat folks were charming people but not too shy to ask question.

Serina Rahman, an avid photographer, writer and active environmentalist, also gave a talk on the endangered species that are associated with the seagrass e.g. dugong and sea turtles. The crowd
Points to ponder:
1) Where did they go?
2) What caused their disappearance?
3) Will they come back the following year?

Syngnathids Tagging Updates — report by Choo and Sharifah

Towards the end of Year 2007, fewer and fewer seahorses were found and tagged, the trend or fluctuation for the pipefish, on the other hand, was not obvious.

Was the disappearance of seahorses caused by the heavy rain or human-inflicted? Are they seasonal? Will the tagged seahorses make a come back?

The answers to these questions shall entail continued investigation.

Lobbying to Save the Seahorse

In the wake of the proposed clearing of 2,255 acres of pristine mangroves for petrochemical hub in the Pulai River Estuary, SOS has launched an online petition “Seahorse in Perils” with Care2 since Aug 07 to protest against the massive destruction.

The petition has now collected about 4,000 signatures from around the globe. SOS volunteers have also written in to the government officials and politicians, addressing the urgency to protect critical seahorse habitat. Several letters of concern have also been published in the mainstream media.

Despite this, the project has been given green light, bypassing requirement for a Detailed EIA. Although the Department of Environment claimed that they have issued more stringent development and control plans, these were not made public.

The decision now lies in the hand of the Johor State and the Pontian Municipal Council, which SOS will continue to lobby with.

To our dear volunteers, your petitions and letters have not gone unnoticed. In meetings many government officials have addressed their concerns and have emphasized on the need to reduce the development impacts.

They need another step—to bring it into action.

Cont’... (Seagrass Workshop)

was much absorbed by her talk despite the Malay language which was foreign to her.

Approximately 30 participants later proceeded to the riverine seagrass bed, a subtidal one, for seagrass mapping. Unfortunately we didn’t get good picture during the mapping because everybody was wet, including our photographers. The seagrasses were submerged and water visibility was less than a meter. Volunteers plod on the knee-deep mud and engaged in hardcore mapping – an unforgettable spirit.

SOS would like to take this opportunity to record our thanks to the MNS facilitators: Serina, Effendy, Rusyanti, Mohala, Rozaimi and Khor Hui Min, not forgetting SOS volunteers who helped out on the first day: Kuah, Lee, Koa and Cheo. We are grateful to Cikgu Bakthiar and Zurina for various assistance.

Last but not least, to our important collaborators, Sonny Wong from the MNS HQ, the ABN AMRO Bank representatives, the Tanjung Kupang Fishermen Association and the Johor National Park.
Plan to gazette Merambong

The Minister of Tourism and Environment YB Freddie Loong has declared intention to gazette the Merambong area. The Port of Tanjung Pelepas also wants to adopt the Merambong and seahorses, a step to improve their Corporate Social Responsibility. SOS hope to engage this commitment by assisting in the reserve designing and planning.

A first step to a successful reserve entails involvement of all relevant stakeholders, which means that the fishing community, port authority, scientist and policy makers must reach consensus in all stages of the planning process.

Since 2006, SOS has proposed the establishment of Pulai River Estuary Consortium (PREC), made up by the relevant stakeholders and chaired by the State Minister. However it was not taken seriously by the government authority.

With the MNSJ coming into the picture recently, SOS hope to work with another partner that share our common goal to conserve the Pulai River Estuary.

Project Pygmy (27-29th November 2007) – report by Choo and Yeong

Sightings of the Pygmy seahorses have been reported around Sabah in the last couple of years, with quite a number of picture evidences.

The Pygmy seahorses comprised two species (Hippocampus bargibanti and H. denise) that live in relatively deep waters (25 m and above) found exclusively in certain species of sea fans. Other than these pieces of meager information, other aspects of their life history remained largely unknown.

In November, Choo and Yeong have made an excursion to document the species and distribution and did some questionnaires survey.

To our amazement, both species, with the body sizes ranging between 2.0-2.5 cm, were found in Mabul, Sipadan and Si Amil Islands. A total of nine specimens were recorded. They were so minute and so well camouflaged that it would be impossible for us to spot without the guidance from experienced dive masters.

The Pygmy seahorse is a great asset for the diving industries, and there could be impact caused by divers’ disturbances, especially photographers.

The next phase of the project will bring us to collaborate with the Sabah Park to systematically map out the distribution of the pygmies seahorses and assess the possible threats.

Students’ Project

From Aug to Oct 07, two undergraduate students from the Universiti Malaysia Terengganu have carried out their field work at the Pulai River Estuary, under the supervision of Mr. Choo Chee Kuan and Dr. Juanita Joseph.

Tan Ai Nee was studying the seahorse’s prey distribution and density over the seagrass meadow to investigate if correlation exists with seahorse abundance while Hafizam was investigating the population genetics and genetic heterozygosity in the seahorse population.

The students wanted to take the opportunity to thank the volunteers who helped with their sample collection.

Top: Hafizam and Ainee.
Left: Ai Nee making net tow on the meadow and collected zooplankton samples.

Development vs traditional livelihood. An old man in his 60’s fishing for “udang belacan” deploying a push net. Catch had significantly plummeted along with abating mangroves and seagrasses.
Latest 2008 Survey Schedule (until May) open for online registration. Hurry!

Important Notes:
Before you make a booking, please plan properly and make sure that you will be available for the slot.
If a particular slot is full, you can still request to be put on the waitlist.
Unfortunately we have to increase the participation fees due to the hike in fuel prices hence boat rental cost.
The new participation fees are as follow:
Newcomers: RM40 (working group) & RM30 (student)
In return you will get a T-shirt, badge and a certificate of participation,
Ex-volunteers (RM20)

* SOS reserves the right to cancel trip with prior notice under unavoidable circumstances.

### JANUARY

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