

# Fishermen, students happy with conservation of underwater meadow

KAMPUNG Tanjung Kupang villager Mohammad Safiuddin Talib has been out to sea catching fish in the Johor Straits since he was a young boy.

The 38-year-old father of two, who is a part-time fisherman, said his grandfather played an influential role in nurturing his love of the sea and his interest in fishing.

"Although I am a teacher at a primary school in Gelang Patah, I go out to sea at least five times a week to catch fish.

"This area along the Merambong shoal used to have lots of fishes, but when development started about 10 years ago, fishes were fewer," he added.

Safiuddin, however, said the fishes have returned with the presence of the Merambong seagrass shoal, much to the delight of fishermen in the area.

"This area is a known site to fishermen around Iskandar Puteri because it is near open sea.

"A couple of days ago, I managed to catch a stingray weighing about 100kg.

"Fishermen can get more than RM300 worth of fish whenever they come here, which is quite positive as previously, there was hardly any catch," he added.

A group of students from Shattuck St Mary Forest City have been actively assisting the researchers from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) in growing the seagrass.

One of them, 17-year-old American Ezra Tanner said it had been an eye-opening experience for him and his schoolmates.

"We got to know the local villagers and how important the seagrass and the environment here are as a whole for their livelihood and existence.

"It is a unique experience for me as back home in Utah, there is nothing but desert.

"I am glad that I am able to go through this experience as this area not only has seagrass but also mangroves," he added.

Another student, Ian Gabriel Esco Eubank, 17, said being involved in the project inspired him to be more environmentally aware.

"Initially, we did a lot of clean-up and replanting in the area that helped us learn about the importance of seagrass and mangroves.

"As I am interested in nature, I want to pursue my studies in environmental engineering and hopefully, make the world a better place to live in," he said.

Lai Ze Xian, 19, from Johor Baru, said being involved in the project made him realise the importance of having a balance between development and the well-being of the environment.

"Many people, including the locals, may not know that we have seagrass in Johor and other marine life such as dugong in our waters," he added. — By MOHD FARHAAN SHAH



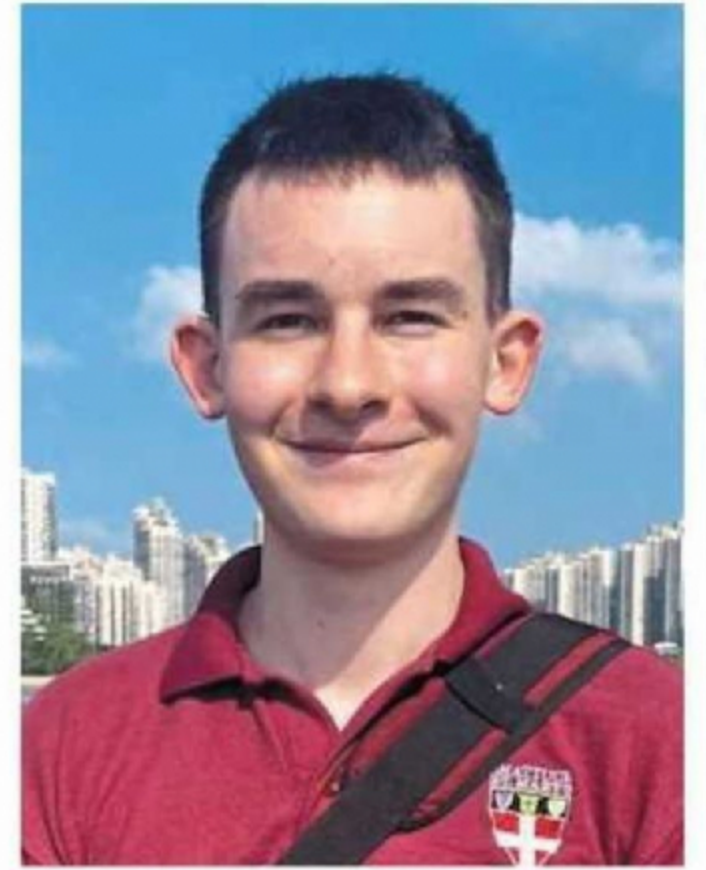
Ian is inspired to be more environmentally aware after being involved in the project.



Safiuddin is happy that fishes are returning to Merambong shoal.



Ze Xian realises the importance of a balance between development and environmental well-being.



Ezra says being involved in seagrass cultivation is an eye-opening experience.



Boats ferrying researchers from UPM and visitors to see the seagrass at Merambong shoal along Johor Straits.



Starfish and seahorse (right) are among hundreds of marine lifeforms found at the Merambong shoal.

trails within the seagrass area," she elaborated.

Prof Muta Harah said this showed how important it was to safeguard seagrass as it was home to marine life.

She said seagrass played a vital role as it stabilised the substrate, providing a habitat and nursery for fish and many invertebrates, as well as being the primary food source for fish, dugong and sea turtles.

"Seagrass also exports nutrients to nearby ecosystems as it interacts with coral reefs and mangroves.

"It acts as a water filter for the sea and a playground or even a 'preschool' for young marine life such as seahorses, crabs and fish," she added.

Prof Muta Harah said the seagrass was also a flowering plant with a vascular system, produc-



ing flowers, fruits and seeds.

The difference between seagrass and seaweed, she said, was that seagrass was leafy compared to seaweed that had an erect stem and roots to hold on to the seafloor.

"Seagrass also possesses four unique characteristics including adapting to life in a saline

medium and can grow when fully submerged.

"It has an anchoring system that can withstand wave action and tidal currents and has the capacity for a hydrophilous pollination mechanism for propagation in the marine environment," she explained.

Prof Muta Harah said UPM's

collaboration with CGPV would continue.

She added that the existence of Forest City and the Merambong shoal proved that development of modern infrastructure and environmental sustainability could be carried out in a balanced and simultaneous manner.



Oysters are among the various lifeforms found seeking shelter at the Merambong shoal.

(Far left) Seagrass can produce fruits such as this one, which some say has a nutty flavour.