

F&N teams up with Reefcheck Malaysia to rehabilitate coral reefs in Redang.

# Preserving paradise

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**A** DIK, kenal Spongebob Squarepants tak? (Do you know Spongebob Squarepants?)” I asked my newfound friend, a student at SK Pulau Redang in Terengganu. She shook her head. I was disappointed as I had thought I could use the animated character to get the students to start thinking about saving the ocean.

Later on, Reef Check Malaysia assistant programme manager Pricynthia Nesha asked the 50 students, “How many species of turtles are found in Malaysia?” The students confidently said four and could even name all the species: leatherback, green, hawksbill and olive Ridley turtles.

Shame on me. Clearly, they did not need to know about Spongebob Squarepants since they already know about turtles. The Primary Four and Five students were taking part in F&N Save Our Seas programme. Launched in September 2012, the programme aims to raise awareness on the importance of marine conservation and to instill responsible behaviours at the beach.

For the students, they got to play games and learn more about conserving the ocean from Reef Check Malaysia, one of the programme partners. Ten F&N employees also participated in the one-day educational programme led by Pricynthia.

One of them was F&N dairies technical training manager, Ng Kar Teong. “I studied Environmental Science at Universiti Putra Malaysia many years ago. Today, I got the chance to practise what I’ve learned in some ways,” he said.

The marine conservation programme was initiated by F&N Holdings CEO Datuk Ng Jui Sia. The avid diver explained how the programme came to be: “One of my dive partners was trying to get involved in reef conservation. I realised that he needed help because as an individual, he didn’t have enough resources. A corporation like us have the ability and resources to make a difference.

“F&N is (one of) the largest food and beverages manufacturer and packaging user in Malaysia. We recognise that it’s our responsibility to minimise our environmental footprint. One of the pillars in our corporate social responsibility is environmental conservation and marine environment falls under that. We decided there is a need for us to form a diving group that will identify marine conservation projects for us to get involved in.”

Apart from the educational programme for the school kids, the F&N project includes reef rehabilitation. While a number of employee volunteers were engaging with the students, eight others dived into the sea off the marine park headquarters on the main island and Pulau Paku Kecil to install 40 artificial reef frames and attach coral fragments onto them.

Coral nubbins were earlier collected from donor sites and planted in a nursery (constructed with plastic pipes). This step allows the fragments to grow and be conditioned to the marine ecosystem before they are transplanted to a permanent site for the artificial reef.

According to Reef Check Malaysia general manager Julian Hyde, coral transplanting is a delicate process as there are many factors that can affect the development of coral reefs, including water quality and temperature.

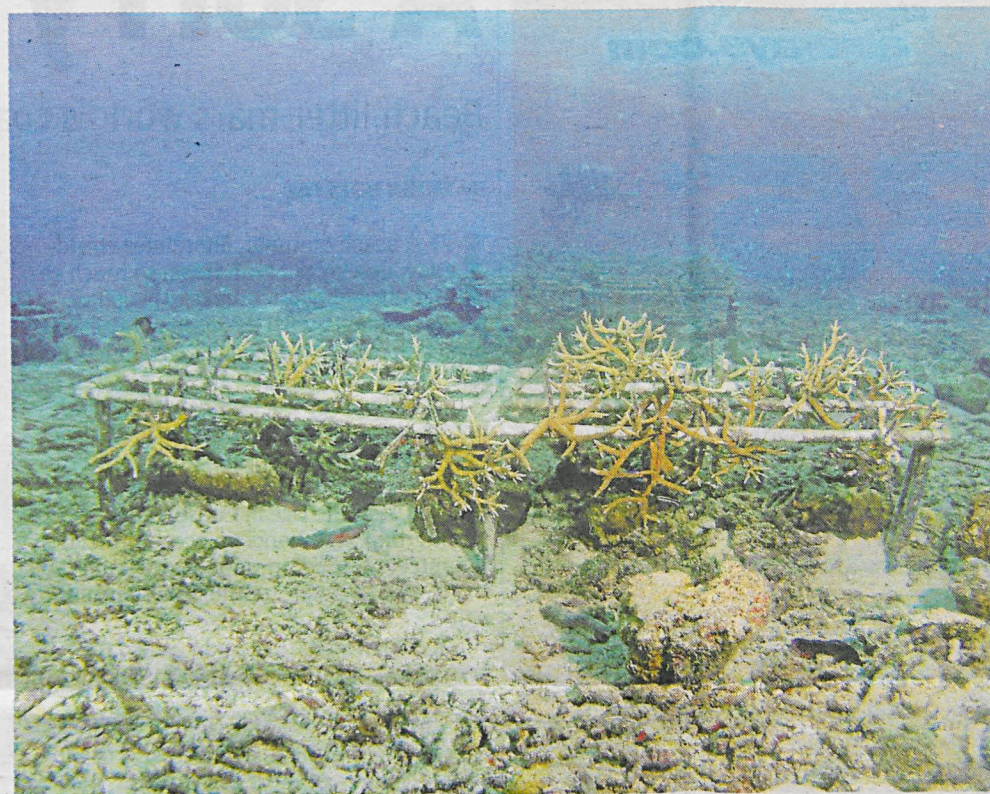
“Basically, these corals need to grow undisturbed, under good water conditions. Some factors like algae can disrupt their development and these are caused by unsanitary water,” said Hyde.

Looking after a growing coral reef nursery requires collaboration with local dive operators.

“We need to maintain the artificial reef from time to time. If left unattended, the frames might fall off due to strong currents and it’s going to waste our efforts. Local dive operators are going to help us scrub algae off



**Nurturing corals:** Divers attaching coral nubbins to the artificial reef frames in Pulau Redang, Terengganu.



Staghorn corals are growing on this artificial reef.

the frames and monitor the development of the site,” said Hyde.

F&N is also assisting in clean-up and recycling activities and has put up posters on environmental awareness on the beach. It’s not hard to miss the blue posters with eye-catching illustrations stating basic steps anyone can take to preserve the environment.

“Visitors come here and they make full use of every available attraction on the island. We realise that somehow, they may or may not contribute to the preservation of this island. That is why we need to provide facilities like recycling bins and information to them, so they can help us keep Redang clean,” said

Datuk Ng.

For F&N marketing manager in food and services Lorainne Tan, the initiative to rehabilitate coral reefs and preserve the environment in Redang are important steps in making a difference. She observed that the experience of diving in Redang today is not the same as 10 years ago.

“I can see that the number of fishes and corals are getting lesser. Every time I come back, I feel that the condition of marine life here is not getting any better. With this initiative, it gives us hope that we can rehabilitate the reef and restore the condition of the ocean in Redang.”

## Reefs of worth

HIDDEN from view beneath the waves, coral reefs and their benefits to man are often ignored. Yet, they are highly productive ecosystems that provide numerous services, including fisheries, recreation, tourism and coastal protection.

One study, The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB), puts the monetary value of these functions at US\$115,704 per ha annually. For Malaysia with its 4,000sqkm of reefs, this translates to the marine ecosystem contributing RM145bil annually to the economy – that is three times the export value of the palm oil industry.

These statistics push coral reefs high up in the ranking of important business sectors in Malaysia, according to Reef Check Malaysia (RCM). “And if coral reefs are a valuable economic resource, protecting them should receive a higher priority than it currently does.”

Right now, growing tourist numbers are placing stress on coral reefs around islands. The adverse impacts range from damage by divers and snorkellers to uncontrolled development and pollution from rubbish and sewage.

In Sabah, fish bombing using explosives made from fertiliser and diesel is a major threat. Between May 2011 and April 2012, RCM received 103 reports of fish bombing around Semporna, with a total of 166 blasts heard. Each bomb can damage about 20sqm of the seabed. Recovery of the destroyed area can take 25 years or more. – **By TCL**