

The need for improvement

Experts suggest setting up a special agency to regulate scuba diving activities in Malaysia.

JUST as diving operators are starting to receive bookings and gearing up to welcome locals and foreigners to Malaysia's world-famous dive sites, a tragic incident has cast a dark cloud over things.

On April 9, four foreign divers went missing while diving in the waters of Pulau Tokong Sanggol, near Mersing in Johor. Three of them were eventually found and rescued, but the fourth diver is believed to have died.

The incident received widespread coverage both in and out of Malaysia. It even compelled the Sultan of Johor, Sultan Ibrahim Almarhum Sultan Iskandar, to order all diving activities in Mersing to be temporarily suspended pending a review of safety measures and diving rules and regulations.

Professional scuba diving instructors contacted by Bernama viewed the incident with deep concern, saying that although it is not typical, the situation requires the serious attention of authorities as it was not the first time divers had gone missing, been hurt or even died while diving in Malaysia.

One of them, Dr Samir Muhazzab Amin, who is a Professional Association of Diving Instructors-certified instructor (PADI), proposed that a specific agency or body be established under the relevant ministry to regulate scuba diving activities as well as monitor the registration of diving centres and instructors in Malaysia.

No regulating body

Dr Samir said although not many cases of divers going missing or dying have occurred at Malaysian dive locations, such incidents nevertheless can have an impact on operators of dive centres, as the public would perceive diving as a risky sport.

"In fact, this tragedy may have tarnished our country's image as a diving paradise, and it occurred at a bad time for our tourism industry, which is still struggling to recover from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic," he said. Dr Samir is also the deputy director of Consulting, Community Networking and Development at Universiti Putra Malaysia's Sports Academy.

He described the Johor ruler's order to review diving rules and regulations as timely, recognising that while Malaysia is renowned for its dive sites and has earned some RM1.5bil from the sector up to April 2017, the truth is that diving activities in this country "are not well regulated and managed, while diving equipment and boats are not properly maintained".

Dr Samir, who has been a diving instructor for 10 years, said the fact that there is no clear regulations to regulate scuba diving activities in Malaysia is very worrying. The industry, he stressed, needs to be regulated to ensure the safety of divers and prevent any future catastrophes.

"The reason why I'm saying it is not well managed is that to date, Malaysia has yet to have an agency or special body that has clear regulations to oversee scuba diving activities. As a consequence, when any unpleasant or unfortunate situation occurs, all agencies will point fingers at each other," he said.

He said the absence of a dedicated agency to regulate scuba diving activities will also make it easier for people to open dive centres without possessing the necessary accreditation and licences.

"We are worried tourists may use the services of these unaccredited diving operators. This is why it is necessary to have a proper agency that can act as a referral platform to those who wish to get advice on diving, identify registered diving centres and use the services of certified diving instructors," Dr Samir said. He noted that the absence of a regulating body allows problematic instructors to remain in the industry even after they have been terminated for misconduct elsewhere, because there are currently no rules in place to prevent them from being re-certified as instructors by the other scuba diving associations.



Diving is a fun activity, but it does require the diver to follow certain rules to stay safe at all times. — Photos: Pixabay

location or locations they wish to explore, which may then expose them to danger.

He said it is crucial to report one's dive site to ensure that the area is safe. It will also facilitate rescue operations in the event of an emergency.

Muhammad Fajrul Omar Muhammad Ridzuan, who is also a PADI-certified instructor, stressed the importance of using the services of certified instructors and boatmen so that they can assist the scuba divers should they encounter a problem.

He said instructors and boat operators must be licensed to carry out scuba diving activities because the risks faced by divers are not the same as those faced by snorkellers.

Foreign instructors

Dr Samir also said that with a regulating agency, foreign diving instructors are also able to offer their services in this country.

"Take me, for example. I'm a scuba diving instructor but I can't teach (diving) in Australia because it has specific regulations to govern the industry locally, but a trained scuba diving instructor from Australia is able to come to Malaysia and work here because they are not required to fulfil any local requirement in order to become an instructor here," he said.

He claimed that many foreign instructors use the social visit pass to enter Malaysia and work as diving instructors.

Dr Samir also said that currently, scuba divers do not have to report the dive

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"The government can, perhaps, set standard operating procedures (SOP) which boatmen must comply with in assisting divers facing danger," he said, adding that diving is safer than other extreme sports activities and rarely results in death or serious injury.

His views were shared by Mohd Dalila Mansor, a Rebreather Association of International Divers (RAID) instructor examiner with over 25 years of experience in the field.

Mohd Dalila said diving is not only safe but a fun-filled activity provided that divers are disciplined and adhere to the necessary SOP, the most important one being the pre-dive preparations, which include inspecting

their equipment to ensure they are functioning well, and attending a briefing on the conditions of the dive site.

Diving safely

"During the briefing, the divers will be reminded of the safety risks and how to navigate across the (water) current, as well as what steps to take in case they run out of air. They are also briefed on the types of fish considered as dangerous (and therefore best be avoided) and safety measures to take if they are separated from their 'buddy,'" he said.

Mohd Dalila said in diving, there is an emphasis on the buddy system as it allows a diver to stay close to another diver during an expedition. The diver and buddy can continuously monitor each other and render immediate assistance if required.

He said if a diver loses sight of his buddy, the first thing he should do is observe his surroundings for a few minutes. If his buddy is still not visible after that, then he should rise to the water surface and inflate his buoyancy control device, which can help him to stay afloat for up to 12 hours.

"While floating on the surface, the diver must blow his whistle which can be heard as far as 200m away to attract the attention of the boatman.

"This is why it is crucial and a must for the boatman to remain at the location where he drops off the divers. The boatman should not wander off elsewhere and should observe the conditions at the dive site including the weather and strong currents," he explained.

Mohd Dalila stressed that in diving, it is absolutely crucial for the dive centre, boatman, instructor and divers to communicate with each other at all times.

He advised those who want to go scuba diving to always seek the services of accredited professionals who have extensive knowledge of the dive site they wish to go to. — Bernama

