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TURTLE CONSERVATION

GIVING TERRAPINS A FIGHTING CHANCE

Martial arts exponent will fight tooth and nail to protect the critically endangered Kemaman terrapins

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A FIFTH-DEGREE black belt taekwondo exponent has found his calling by ensuring the survival of terrapins in Sungai Kemaman.

Dylan Wang, known affectionately as "Along Dolloh" by the locals, is not someone you want to mess with.

The martial arts exponent is willing to fight tooth and nail to protect the river terrapins (*Batagur affinis*), whose nesting grounds are along the sandy banks of Sungai Kemaman.

As the terrapin nesting season has begun from the landing of a first female terrapin last week, Wang and his team of terrapin warriors, including the villagers, have cleared a spot for a campsite to enable them to stay vigilant and tag all terrapins emerging to nest with microchips.

"Our team of 18 villagers and five members of the Turtle Conservation Society of Malaysia (TCS) have microchipped 110 female terrapins. It is estimated that there are 230 of them in Sungai Kemaman," he told the *New Straits Times*.

"Our goal is to ensure the survival of the species, which is listed as critically endangered in the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List. It is also listed as one of the top 25 most critically endangered freshwater turtles and tortoises in the world."

Wang said in Malaysia, the river terrapin was listed as a totally protected species in the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010.

Although terrapins are not considered a barometer of a healthy river ecosystem, Wang said they nevertheless maintained the quality of the river water by feeding on carrion.

"It is important to conserve the terrapins because of their ecological services. They are important as scavengers, herbivores and carnivores, and often contribute significant biomass to the ecosystems.

"They break down the energy of plant materials and convert them into protein.

"For example, river terrapins readily consume water hyacinths (*eichhornia crassipes*), an invasive plant that clogs waterways and alters river flows.

"Terrapins are likely seed dispersers for many plant and fruit species. The passage of seeds through the digestive system may be important for effective germination of some plant seeds and seed dispersal by animals plays an important role in the gene flow, demography, distribution and evolution of plants."

He said the conservation efforts not only ensured the survival of the species but also inculcated a sense of belonging to a natural heritage that could be lost forever if not protected.

"The local village committee and villagers are proud of the project and this effort attracts tourist visits to the kampung and the Turtle Gallery, thus generating economic benefits for them. At the same time, we create interest among the younger generation.

"TCS conducts turtle camps for students from kindergarten to secondary schools and villagers are well aware of the current status of the terrapins because they have been consuming their eggs since decades ago," he said.

Wang said from 2011 until last year, the TCS had saved more than 4,500 river terrapin eggs from human consumption and without the conservation project, the terrapin eggs would have been consumed.

Wang said the project received support from the World Wide Fund for Nature and non-governmental organisations.

"Previous funders and sponsors were project-based and typically lasted a year. We have just been awarded a grant from the United Nations Development Programme's Global Environment Facility for two years.

"Apart from research grants, our funding comes from sources such as symbolic terrapin adoption programmes at RM35 per terrapin, sale of merchandise, donations from the public or school groups that participate in our Turtle Trips, as well as corporations that do corporate social responsibility projects with us."

On the role of villagers in the project, Wang said they collected terrapin eggs for TCS, and it paid them an incentive of RM5. Wang hopes that one day, the villagers would voluntarily collect the terrapin eggs for incubation even without any incentive.

"We hope that the project will be sustainable in future, and funds from tourists and the symbolic terrapin adoption programme will sufficiently support the conservation effort.

"We also hope to garner more support, especially from the government, to work towards restoring the symbolism of turtles to the state of Terengganu," said Wang who thanked the Department of Wildlife and National Parks for issuing a special permit for the conservation project.



Villagers removing a hook and line to save a terrapin.



Dylan Wang counting terrapin eggs before transferring it to a hatchery near a sandy spot at a conservation site. PIC COURTESY OF TURTLE CONSERVATION SOCIETY OF MALAYSIA



Dylan Wang with his 'gang of turtle warriors' at a conservation site along Sungai Kemaman. PIC COURTESY OF TURTLE CONSERVATION SOCIETY OF MALAYSIA