

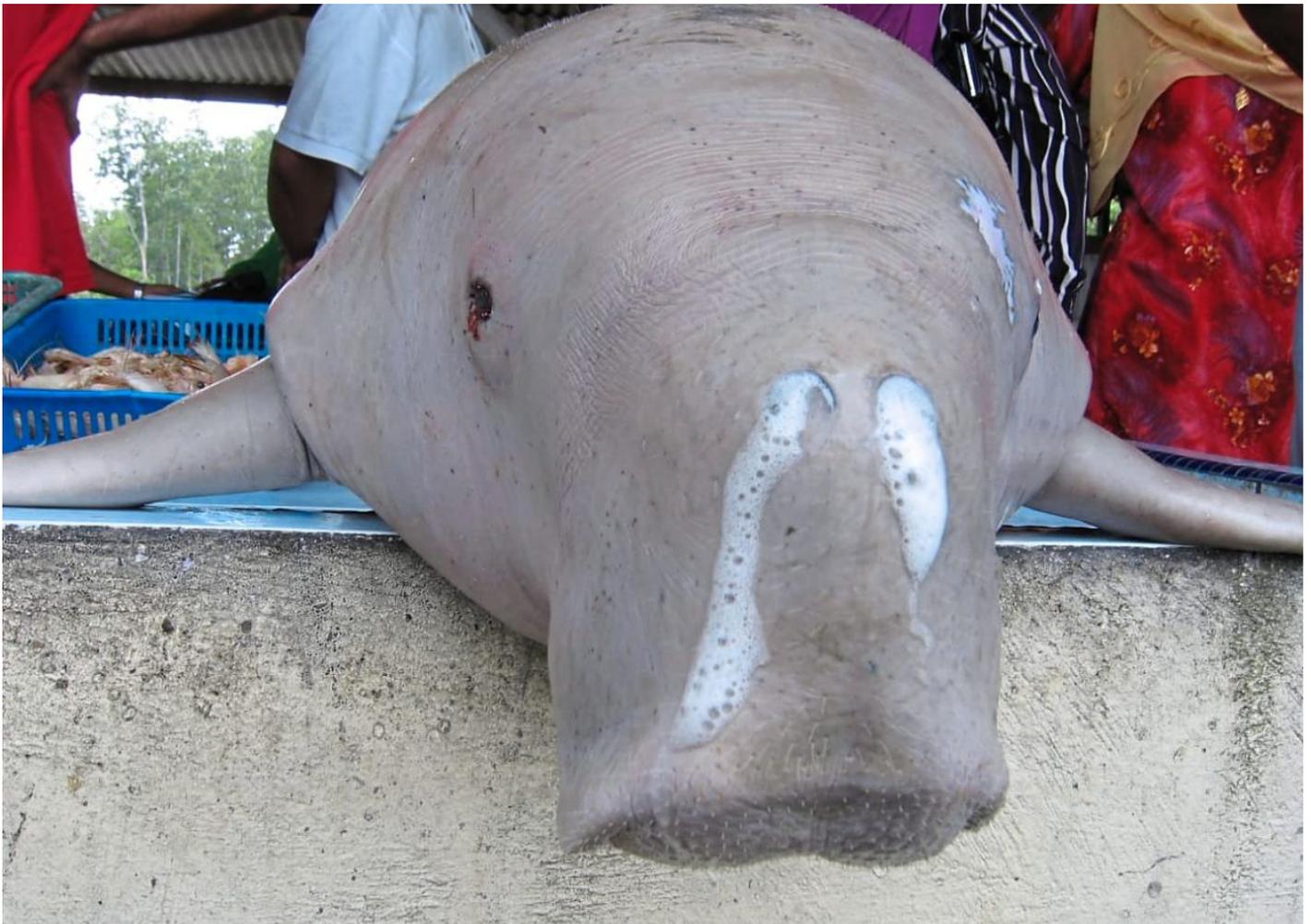
Saving the dugong



By ZAZALI MUSA

METRO NEWS

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A baby dugong found in the seagrass meadows of Tanjung Adang near Gelang Patah in 2010.

BACK in the 1960s and 1970s, the waters off Gelang Patah on the west coast of Johor were the favourite playgrounds of the dugong, also known as the sea cow.

seagrass, the main diet of the

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“Local fishermen used to catch glimpses of the shy creatures but such moments are very rare these days,” said Rolan Oni from Kampung Simpang Arang in Gelang Patah, located about 30km from Johor Baru city.

The 40-year-old fisherman, from the indigenous Orang Seletar community, said he first saw a dugong, almost five metres long, when he was 16 years old.



A 3.1m male dugong found dead in Tanjung Kupang, Gelang Patah in 2019. – Photos: THOMAS YONG/The Star and courtesy of Dr Serina Rahman and Affendi Yang Amri

Rolan, who has been going to sea since he was eight years old, said from stories told by older fishermen in the village, there were about 200 to 300 dugongs five decades ago.

“But their numbers have decreased and I worry that the animal may possibly be on the verge of extinction,” he said.

He recalled an incident in 2004, where a 30kg baby dugong got caught in a fishing net. He said the village fishermen’s chief at that time, Tang King Tong, managed to convince the fisherman to release the dugong back into the sea.

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He said it happened when he was out fishing in Tanjung Bin, which was rich with seagrass, located about 50km from Kampung Simpang Arang.

“I dived into the water to release them.



Dugong feeding trails seen amongst the seagrass.

“When they were freed, the baby immediately suckled at its mother,” he recalled.

He revealed that according to the beliefs of Orang Seletar fishermen, when releasing a trapped dugong, they should ask the creature to “bless” them with a bountiful catch.

“I did just that, and that day I returned home happy with a good catch from the sea,” said Rolen.

Orang Seletar are one of the 18 Orang Asli ethnic groups in Malaysia and considered part of the Orang Laut (sea nomads) of the Straits of Johor, which separates Singapore and peninsular Malaysia.

There are about 3,000 Orang Seletar living in south Johor in nine villages — Kampung Bakar Batu Perling, Kampung Teluk Kabung, Kampung Simpang Arang, Kampung Sungai Temun, Kampung Pasir Salam, Kampung Pasir Putih, Kampung Kuala Masai, Kampung Teluk Jawa and Kampung Kong

of two adult dugongs floating

the other died due to

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Superstitions

Rolen claimed that in the old days, it was common practice for the Orang Seletar to consume dugong meat, which tastes like beef.

“The best part was thought to be the belly. People in my community would normally make a curry or stir-fry the meat with chillies,” he said, although he himself had never eaten dugong meat.

There was also a belief, he said, that the teardrops of dugong had magical powers and that the bomoh (shaman) used it to make love potions.

“Some people have even offered money, up to RM1,000, in requesting us to collect the teardrops of a living dugong,” he added.

The superstitions surrounding the dugong were many among Orang Seletar.



Dr Serina emphasises the importance of protecting and preserving seagrass, which dugongs feed on.

Rolen pointed out that the bones of the dugong would be hung at the main door of a house to prevent intruders and spirits from entering.

Mohammad Irfan Yazid, 23, the manager of Kelab Alami, said a carcass of a 50kg baby dugong was

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The information is gleaned from the fishermen when they spot the animal while fishing at sea.

Irfan said fishermen were required to inform Johor Fisheries Department when they find dead dugong, for record purposes.

But on that occasion, they had no choice but to immediately bury the carcass as it had started to emit a foul smell.

“We can spot the dugong grazing trail on the seabed during low tide,” he added.

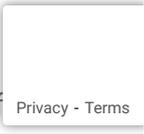


Irfan says Kelab Alami works closely with local fishermen from Gelang Patah to compile information on dugongs.

The waters of Gelang Patah, especially near Pulau Merambong, Tanjung Kupang and Tanjung Adang, are rich in seagrass, the favourite grazing ground for dugongs in the west coast of Johor.

Meanwhile, visiting fellow from ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute Singapore, Dr Serina Rahman said that five to seven dugongs were spotted in the waters of Gelang Patah in March this year.

“Consider yourself lucky if you have seen these shy creatures swimming near you,” she said.

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dugongs could travel f

“These days, however, the creatures are exposed to risk when they travel as they have to make a long detour and pass the busy Straits of Malacca.

“They could get injured from propellers of passing vessels or get caught in fishing nets,” she added.



According to Rolen, it is very rare to catch a glimpse of dugongs in waters off Gelang Patah these days.

Researchers who conducted studies in recent years had spotted about 25 dugongs in the waters of Pulau Sibu and Pulau Tinggi in Mersing.

“But I cannot confirm whether the dugongs from the two islands in the east coast of Johor still travel to Gelang Patah to feed on the seagrass there,” said Dr Serina.

She theorised that the creatures most probably travelled to Pulau Tioman in Pahang, as the area near the island was also rich in seagrass.

She said their grazing marks were only visible during low tide – which occurred about three to four times a month – and the different patches on the seabed showed the mammals were there to feed on the seagrass.

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with seagrass.

Crustaceans as well as seahorses can camouflage themselves on the seabed to hide from predators.

“It is important to protect and preserve the seagrass as it is a favourite breeding ground for prawns and crabs too,” Dr Serina said.

She pointed out that this would support coastal fishermen.

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