



Coral fragment planted to artificial reef made from bottles and crushed glass mixed with cement.

PICTURE BY REEF CHECK MALAYSIA

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While searching and pulling Crown of Thorns, the divers manage to collect discarded fishing nets and trash from the reef.



Help save the

Find out how you can contribute towards Tioman island sustainability efforts, writes Zulkiffly Ab Latif

HERE I am again on one of Tioman island's familiar blue and white ferries headed towards Kampung Tekek — its main hub and administrative area, from Mersing, the gateway to the island.

With its powdery beaches, framed by swaying palm trees and crystal clear waters of the South China Sea, the island located some 30km off the coast of Pahang truly warrants a visit, if not return visits. And, I have revisited the island many times. Over the course of these jaunts, I've begun to feel alarmed by the many changes on the island: a new jetty here, a new passenger waiting hall there or a new resort chalet somewhere along the beach that used to be pristine coastline.

Although change is perhaps the only constant in this world, over development and environmental impact from tourism are valid concerns to a fragile ecosystem that cannot be taken lightly.

Partly due to these concerns (and the fact that I get to visit the island again), I enrolled in a three-day programme that aims to effect a different and more positive change on the island.

STRAIGHT TO BUSINESS

The open aired shuttle mini-bus rolls through the main road of Kampung Tekek towards Berjaya Tioman Resort, the island's largest hotel establishment. The minibus is a wonderful opportunity to take in the sights of the island's largest town, where one can see stalls sporting colourful hand painted signs

and restaurants as well as other choices of accommodations lining the roadside.

At the main lobby of the hotel, I meet Alvin Chelliah, a marine scientist who also acts as programme manager for Reef Check Malaysia, a non-profit organisation that strives to protect, restore and revive coral reefs in Malaysia by engaging the local communities. Since 2014, Alvin has been managing Reef Check's long term programmes on Tioman.

"Thank you Abang for coming," Alvin greets me as he shakes my hand. I half-heartedly expect him to ask about my journey when he abruptly adds: "There will be two activities today, transplanting of coral at the Coral Rehabilitation Garden near the Marine Park jetty for scuba divers and volunteering at a local community centre for non-divers."

Feeling a little spent from the journey to Tioman, I choose the community centre volunteer task.

It is barely two hours since my arrival on the island, and I am already into my first task with 40 other participants of the Tioman Island Reef Rehabilitation Project, a conservation programme organised by Reef Check Malaysia in cooperation with the Royal Bank of Canada.

Well into its fourth year, the programme is part of the bank's greater RBC Blue Water Project, which is a 10-year global charitable commitment to provide access to drinkable, swimmable fishable water, now and for future generations. Launched in 2007, the project has pledged CAD 50 million (RM153.98 million) to 770 charitable organisations worldwide that works toward protecting water.

Converging at the aptly named Rumah



Tekek is Tioman island's largest and most developed village.



After being injected with vinegar, the Crown of Thorns starfish will die and disintegrate.

Magnificent sunsets are given Tioman.



Hijau which means Green House in Malay, I meet local islander Hisham Uyah, a passionate surfer and somewhat of a role model that many of the island's youth look up to.

For the past eight years, Hisham has steadily got more involved with Tioman's environmental issues, culminating in the setting up of the Rumah Hijau community centre which educates and promotes sustainable practices such as recycling and repurposing discarded items into commercially viable tourist souvenirs.

It is here that all the participants, all of whom are Royal Bank of Canada employees learn to make hand-crafted recycle bins as well as artificial reefs from crushed glass bottles mixed with cement. Thanks to the tropical sun and humidity, the work is tedious.

The glass bottles have to be soaked in order to remove its labels. They are then dried and finally placed into a machine to be crushed. Spearheaded by the locals and situated within Kampung Tekek next to Tioman Cabana, a lively beachside accommodation and bistro, Rumah Hijau is worth a visit for those wanting to learn and contribute towards the island's environmental sustainability efforts.

UNFORTUNATE HUNT

Together with the other scuba diver participants at Berjaya Tioman Resort's dive centre, I listen to Alvin as he explains the tasks at hand. He holds up what looks like a water jet gun fixed with a long pointy steel rod.

It is actually a purpose designed injector, normally utilised in forestry and agricultural work. Interestingly, the injector is the ideal tool when cutting Crown of Thorns, a type



The Royal Bank of Canada team collected 350kg of trash.



REEF CHECK

Founded in 1996, Reef Check's mission is to protect and rehabilitate reefs worldwide. It is the world's largest international coral reef monitoring programme involving volunteer recreational divers and marine scientists and is active in 82 countries and territories.

As a local chapter of the bigger Reef Check network, Reef Check Malaysia (RCM) is a non-profit organisation that was registered in 2007 to engage with the local community to raise awareness for the importance of, and threats to, coral reefs.

The Cintai Tioman Campaign is initiated by Reef Check Malaysia and EcoKnights, with the support of The GEF Small Grants Programme (GEF SGP), implemented by UNDP, Yayasan Sime Darby and HSBC Amanah Takatui.

From activities on coral reef rehabilitation to community-based engagements, Cintai Tioman aims to help reduce the impact of human activities on coral reefs around Tioman Island, and also empower the local communities to get involved in the management and conservation of the island's resources. Visit www.reefcheck.org.my

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of starfish with poisonous spikes that eat healthy coral.

Left unchecked and due to a lack of natural predators, the COT as it is popularly known, can threaten coral reefs. Cutting of the COT is done by injecting it with vinegar. As Alvin hands out the "weapons" and bottles of vinegar, he quips, "Please be careful with these. Do not stab yourselves and do not stab the coral!"

Our first hunting ground for the day is Batu Malang, a popular diving and snorkelling spot near the smaller uninhabited island of Tulai. The diving spot is a 40-minute boat ride from the beach of Tekek, and is identifiable from the surface as a mass of huge boulders rising up from the sea.

Descending to a depth of 15 metres, a magnificent stretch of fringing coral welcomes our hunting party. We circulate the reef counter-clockwise, making sure it is on our left side as we search for the Crown of Thorns.

Batu Malang means Unfortunate Rock in Malay, and I wonder how apt the name is as I ascend towards the ocean's surface after a half hour of fruitless searching.

"Maybe the COTs didn't get the memo that we're coming today," jokes with Abdul Manap, affectionately called Pak Manap, a certified scuba instructor and Reef Check Eco-Diver trainer as we wait for the dive boat to come near us.

"Maybe other dive groups already collected them. Or maybe it's just a sign of a healthy reef," Pak Manap shrugs.

Whichever the case, the lack of COTs is a good thing. The second culling attempt at Renggis Island, another popular snorkel-

ling and diving spot that lies just off the pier of Berjaya Tioman Resort proves to be less disappointing.

In total, 43 COTs are culled. Back at the dive centre, I see an impressive sight: mounds and mounds of plastic trash bags being unloaded from the speed boats by the non-diver participants.

Concentrating on the mangrove area of Tulai Island and the beach of Kampong Tekek, the group collected 350kg of trash. According to Reef Check Malaysia, from the collected trash that included over 1700 bottles, the populated data will help identify the source of trash and its impact on the marine ecosystem.

PASSION AND PERSEVERANCE

It is the last night of the trip and all the participants have gathered at Berjaya Tioman Resort's Sri Nelayan, an open-air restaurant featuring Malaysian styled furnishings and intricate wood carvings. A small troop of Tioman's children, garbed in various forms of traditional attire are on the brightly lit stage. Our group and some of the resort guests

begin clapping our hands rhythmically when the children perform the Jogel accompanied by an upbeat music tempo. I find it thoroughly amusing as well as heartwarming, watching a form of Malaysia's culture being kept alive and shared with others by such young children.

Alvin asks if I enjoyed the three-day programme on the island. My answer is a resounding Yes. He further adds that this three-day trip invoking the 40 Royal Bank of Canada employees is only the kickstart to the rest of the year's activities.

Through Reef Check Malaysia's cooperation with the Royal Bank Of Canada, more projects will be carried out throughout the year. This includes Reef Check Surveys, recycling programmes, coral plantings, ghost net removals, installation of mooring lines and buoys to protect shallow water reefs, beach and underwater cleanups as well as rapid responses to environmentally effected areas.

Having met people such as Alvin and his Reef Check team, I begin to consider the possibility that despite whatever changes this island goes through, Tioman island's grace and beauty will endure.



Recycling bins made from excess or discarded building materials at Tioman.



Removing a ghost net entangled on the reef.