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Raising youth's awareness of the marine ecosystem

Ashraf Abdullah

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Realising that human activities could cause damage to the marine environment, particularly coral reefs, the Government has embarked on an awareness and education programme for the future generation.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who said this tonight added that educational programmes were the Government's priority in its effort to increase environmental awareness, especially among schoolchildren.

"Being the future custodians, our children need to know all about our marine environment.

"Realising this fact, we have embarked on a collaborative effort among government agencies, the private sector and non-governmental organisations to produce the Marine Education Kit, or commonly known as MEK," he said at the fund-raising dinner for the Marine Park Trust Fund at the Putra World Trade Centre.

The dinner was hosted by the Department of Fisheries. Four companies presented mock cheques for RM250,000 for the fund.

Dr Mahathir's speech was read by Agriculture Minister Datuk Amar Dr Sulaiman Daud. The Prime Minister is on official visits to several South American nations.

Also present was Dr Mahathir's wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

The MEK consists of educational materials on marine ecosystems like the coral reefs, mangrove, coastal zones and, sea and oceans.

"The objective of the project is to increase the knowledge, awareness and understanding among schoolchildren and teachers at primary and secondary level about marine ecology," Dr Mahathir said.

He added to expand the outreach of the project, 360 resource teachers from primary and secondary schools throughout the country would undergo training programmes to use the kit before the end of this year.

"More teachers will be trained next year. This is a very good example of the tripartite smart partnerships among NGOs, the private sector and public agencies," he said.

Dr Mahathir said findings had shown that snorkellers and scuba divers could cause changes to the reefs, but the impact could be minimised, if not eliminated, through awareness and educational programmes.

Dr Mahathir said in 1985, the Government approved the establishment of the Marine Park Trust Fund in an effort to provide a sustainable financing mechanism for marine park programmes in Malaysia.

The Government's launching grant for the trust fund has enabled the Department of Fisheries to finance the establishment of five marine park visitor centres on the islands and the mainland.

"To date, there are three park centres on the islands and two in the mainland. By the end of next year, two more offshore centres will be completed, making a total of seven.

"With the establishment of these offshore marine park centres, we are able to provide round-the-clock protection for the resources within the parks."

Dr Mahathir said since the establishment of the parks and the enforcement of no-fishing regulation within the park areas, there was an increase in fisheries stock.

"The marine parks have certainly benefited fishermen, because the

breeding and foraging habitat of the fishes is protected."

In 1996, the three offshore marine park centres had collectively trained 2,950 people through the hosting of 62 training programmes.

The Prime Minister said the trust fund was a platform that enabled the private sector as well as individuals to contribute towards the conservation of the marine environment.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was located within the centre of the marine bio-diversity region of Indo-Pacific, and has 60 to 70 genera of coral reefs, and 157 families of shore fish.

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