

29/03/2003

Antarctic expedition may provide some answers

PENANG, Fri. - Marine biologists from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) are confident their studies of the ecosystems of the Antarctic may provide solutions to some of the problems faced in the tropics.

Assoc Prof Dr Zulfigar Yasin said the ecosystem of the Antarctic was simple, compared to that of the tropics, which was very complicated.

He said the team's study of the marine ecology, including the subtidal ecosystems of Antarctica, could help Malaysian research and development in the fields of aquaculture and biotechnology.

Zulfigar, who is USM marine research station director, was speaking today after giving a slideshow presentation of his 10-week-long expedition to the Antarctic with a four-member team from USM.

The other members of the team comprised planktologist Dr Wan Maznah Wan Omar, invertebrae taxonomist Sazlina Md Salleh and marine biologist Mahadi Mohamad.

They had been part of a multinational expedition comprising 41 scientists from 17 countries who had sailed 15,000 nautical miles covering about a third of the cold continent over a 73-day period, during which the temperature was as low as minus 60 degrees.

The research had been conducted from a purpose-built research ship, the ice-breaker Aurora Australis, which departed from Hobart Harbour in Tasmania, Australia, on Jan 30 and returned to Tasmania on March 17.

The expedition, logged as the longest marine scientific voyage, was at the invitation of the Australian Government and partially sponsored by the National Science Academy.

Zulfigar said the team brought back hundreds of specimen of plankton for further research at USM marine research centre at Muka Head here.

Meanwhile, USM vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dzulkifli Abdul Razak said USM would take the cue from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and continue with research on the Antarctic.

He said USM hoped to send more teams to the continent which has often been regarded as the largest cold storage centre "where the secrets of the earth's past and its clues for the future are kept".

"We have already been allocated a few places for another expedition, which may be as early as December this year, to study the subtidal ecology of the polar region," he said.

Dzulkifli also announced that USM had also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Tasmania to collaborate on further scientific research, especially on the Antarctic.