

Sabah Government Under Musa Makes A Wise Approach To Protecting Its Coastline, Says UMS Marine Scientist

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By Newmond Tibin

KOTA KINABALU, Aug 10 (Bernama) -- The Sabah government, under the leadership of Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Aman, has made a wise and visionary approach to protecting the state's coastline, said Universiti Malaysia Sabah's (UMS) Borneo Marine Research Institute director Prof Dr Saleem Mustafa.

He said all people in Sabah are connected to the coast in one way or the other and many of them live and work along the coast.

"Beaches provide us with recreational means, the coast provides facilities and resources for fishing to name some of the coastal services. Even inland communities are connected to the coastal zone.

"In Sabah, the coast is not only a geographical entity, but economic and cultural as well. The richness of our coastal zone is an integral part of local culture and its wise use is an issue of great significance," he told Bernama, here.

Saleem said protecting the coastline is consistent with the efforts to reduce the impact of land-based activities to sustainable levels.

"A legislative backing for coastal protection can serve to demonstrate the government's resolve of listening to the community that includes scientists, environmentalists and the common man for protection of ecosystem services and cultural values," he said.

As such, he said the Sabah government's decision to bar any development on the Kota Kinabalu seafront totalling 1,555 hectares from Tanjung Aru to Likas Bay through the Land Ordinance (Amendment) 2012 Bill, which was approved by the state assembly last month, is a significant and bold move motivated by the need to protect the marine ecosystem services.

"This decision should serve as a blueprint for area-based management that comprises multiple management aims and takes into account both ecological and social considerations.

"The selected area from Tanjung Aru to Likas Bay is not just any area. It is an extremely important area that over the last few decades has seen the most intense development in Sabah in terms of urbanization, business, trade, commerce and tourism," he said.

Saleem said the marine environment abutting this coastline that has been at the receiving end of reclamation and stressful coastal development needed respite from human impacts and a healing touch that "I think this Act will provide".

"This single Act has multiple benefits for the coastal environment. The marine environment, nearshore habitats, wetlands and waterways will probably start receiving serious consideration in strategic planning and land-use decisions at state level," he said.

He said the Act will also preserve the scenic seascape, which is a unique natural asset that attracts people and for which Sabah is so well-known, not the concrete structures along the coastline which can be found elsewhere.

"Another positive outcome of this policy would be spreading the interest of investors beyond Kota Kinabalu to interior areas and hinterland. This will contribute to balancing the development, and creating business and economic opportunities to other regions as well.

"I do not think this Act is anti-development...it is in fact pro-ecodevelopment and a futuristic investment in nature conservation for sustainable development goals, with positive socio-economic implications," he said.

Saleem said this Amendment Act that applies to the Kota Kinabalu coastline is a need-based initiative for protecting the coastal and marine environment.

"This stretch of land from Tanjung Aru to Likas Bay is home to rich marine biodiversity. It is where the only marine protected area, on the west coast of Sabah (Tunku Abdul Rahman Park), is located.

"It is where many indigenous marine animals use habitat connectivity necessary for their survival and recruitment. It is where catchments and wetlands are situated. It is the area which offers a migratory route to global stocks of some of the endangered and charismatic forms of marine life," he added.

He said the Act is a timely move since interest is fast building up for preserving the ecosystem services and valuation of the natural resources.

Ecological systems such as those in the Tanjung Aru-Likas Bay area provide enormous community benefits. Valuation of services of biological systems makes a strong case for bringing them into management discussions and decisions.

"Economists are assigning monetary values to natural resources for the products and services they provide to enable policy makers take decisions regarding the conservation and sustainable development of the resources.

"We need to minimize the pressure of exploitation and invest in building resilience to help the marine habitats and animal communities that they support to be in a better position to face the effects of climate change and to continue to provide benefits to the society," he said.

Saleem said The Act can become a model in the long run for adopting in other parts of the State or the country, and it could be embraced as a feasible, implementable and popular tool to cover most of the threats to the coastal and marine habitats, and to protect the amenities as well

Regulating development on coastal land amounts to building resilience in marine critical habitats and the whole ecosystem, and a major step in long-term coastal zone security, he said.

Due to its strategic location, this area (Tanjung Aru-Likas Bay) has been a focus of attention for observations on bathymetry, coastal hydrodynamics, water quality, biodiversity and fishing activity, he said.

"The decision to protect the coastline is, therefore, backed by scientific facts. The scientific community and general public who enjoy sights and sounds of our seashore will be too happy with this decision," he said.

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