

Malaysia Loses Millions Of Ringgit To Maritime Artifact-theft Syndicate
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By Asniah Abdullah

KUALA LUMPUR, June 12 (Bernama) -- Malaysia has been losing millions of ringgit worth of maritime artifacts, including 67 historic merchant vessels and warships, to artifact-theft syndicate, according to the National Heritage Department.

Its archeological heritage officer, Ruzairy Arbi said there were too many shipwreck sites in the country, especially in Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Sabah and Pahang, where valuable artifacts, including gold and diamonds, could be found and sold in the black market or kept as personal collection.

'There are 35 shipwreck sites in the Straits of Malacca alone. The number of shipwreck sites found in Malaysia is more than ever recorded as new sites are discovered every now and then," he told Bernama.

According to the department's records, one of the oldest shipwreck sites in Malaysia was found in an area known as Bambek Shoal, five kilometres off Port Dickson in Negeri Sembilan.

The site marked the important naval engagement between the Dutch and Portuguese fleets in 1606, known as the Battle of Cape Rachado, which ended with the Dutch lost two of its vessels 'Nassau' and 'Middleburg', and the Portuguese lost its 'San Salvador' and 'Don Duarte de Guerra'.

After much underwater excavation works, the remains of Nassau which were successfully traced where approximately 5,000 artifacts were found, including guns and bullets, ceramics from northern Europe and jars from southeast Asia, as well as pewter items.

Another shipwreck site was found about 40 nautical miles off the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia in 1995, involving what was believed to be a royal vessel from China, 'Royal Nanhai' which sank in 1460.

The ship, measuring 28-metre long and eight-metre wide, believed to have capsized while transporting royal items to Malacca, including black lacquer boxes, minister's official stamp with elephant-shaped handle and Chinese blue-and-white ceramic bowls from the Jingtaij Tianshun Dynasty (1450-1464).

Ruzairy said the department had been receiving reports and complaints from fishermen and treasure hunters about artifact-theft activity in the waters off Labuan, Kudat, Balambangan and Mantanani, as well as in the Straits of Malacca to Tanjung Tuan in Port Dickson.

However, he refused to disclose the actual number of artifact-theft cases and losses recorded so far.

"The older the artifact, the higher its commercial value will be," he said.

Ruzairy said those shipwreck artifacts were important sources of data to prove the existence of the famous commercial and marine entrepot port in the Straits of Malacca between 1278 and 1511.

As such, he said the department, with cooperation from the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), were always on the state of preparedness to combat maritime artifact-theft activity.

"We have also asked the MMEA to detain and question those who carry out diving activity in the no-diving area at sea or those who did not have a valid licence issued by the department to dive and collect the artifacts," he said.

He explained that the historic shipwreck artifacts were protected as underwater heritage under the National Heritage Act 2005.

The department had also gazetted four shipwreck sites in Tanjung Tuan, Pulau Upeh-Pulau Besar, Pulau Tioman and Labuan as the protected zones as they were prone to maritime artifact-theft activity.

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