

Ravyna's love for environment

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KUALA LUMPUR: While many 15 year olds would be scrambling to keep up with their peers to look cool with the latest electronic gadgets, Ravyna Jassani is into environment conservation.

She devotes her free time to environmental conservation-related activities, particularly in the cleaning up of Sabah's beaches.

Selected to take part in the Special Pangaea Borneo Project team under "Pangaea", an organisation created by world explorer Mike Horn, Ravyna explored the island and observed the coral reefs of east Sabah.

The team comprised 10 teenagers, aged between 15 and 20, from across the globe (three from Malaysia, three from Singapore, one each from South Africa, Poland, Australia and Japan).

During their 10-day exploration, they sailed in an environment-friendly boat known as the *Pangaea*, which is powered by solar and wind energy, taking them from Sandakan to Mabul.

The team experienced sailing across the South China Sea, watching "fishing bombs" explode within metres, to exploring a whole new underwater world.

"Borneo has one of the highest marine biodiversities in the world but sadly is faced with numerous environmental issues, endangering the delicate fish and corals.

"We were given the opportunity to dive, snorkel, carry out coastal clean-ups, reef checks and surveys, and even learnt how to sail," Ravyna said.

She said the project started with a coastal clean-up on the tiny island of Bankawan. From far, it looked like a pristine inhabited island.

"As we neared the beach, we were shocked to find the amount of garbage washed ashore."



The waste that was washed ashore on Bankawan island. — NST picture by Siri Suebsiri

"Within an hour, we collected more than 500 bottles, scores of pieces of styrofoam, clothes, shoes, three car tyres, plastic bags and other waste.

"It is truly shocking what people throw into the seas and oceans.

"Borneo is an amazing place, and it's sad to see that it is being treated so badly.

"A major problem there is dynamite fishing which is illegal. As we were snorkelling around one of the islands in east Sabah, we were jolted by a loud blast.

"It was a fish bomb and it was not to be our last encounter that day."

When the team set sail to Sem-porna, a small fishing boat 50m to

100m away repeated the harmful act. "Usually, the fishermen we passed by were quite friendly, waving to us and showing us what they had caught.

"However, these fishermen seemed quite dodgy, almost like they were hiding something."

As the team watched, one of the men took something from the boat, casually threw it into the water and a loud blast followed.

"We couldn't believe what had happened and the danger it could have caused if someone was diving or snorkelling there."

She said the incident couldn't even be reported as they were on a small

unregistered boat.

"We were enraged, but all we could do was stare helplessly in despair as dead fish rose to the surface. It was a sorry sight."

Dynamite fishing not only affects the fish in the area, it affects all marine life, especially coral reefs.

"They take a very long time to grow and are already being negatively affected due to the rising sea temperatures."

She said apart from the coral reefs, bigger marine life such as sharks and dolphins were also affected, as sound travelled much faster in water, and such creatures had sensitive hearing.

"When a bomb goes off, it can disorientate these animals, causing some of them to die."

Ravyna said this might have caused the massive decline in the number of dolphins and sharks in Borneo, albeit it had the highest marine biodiversity in the world.

"The only way this can be stopped is through education and awareness campaigns to teach the future generation of fishermen to adopt sustainable fishing techniques.

"We must provide them with alternative sources of income, such as introducing seaweed farming, clam or pearl harvesting and coral farming.

"Unsustainable methods of fishing such as dynamite fishing, trawling, cyanide fishing that may seem easier are only going to affect the fishermen negatively in the long run. It has to stop now."

She said in a local island village of Mabul, dozens of shops were selling more than 100 shark jaws (the type used for decorations).

"People must realise that sharks are endangered species, even more so than the dolphins and they aren't man-eating monsters.

"More people get killed by toasters, vending machines and chairs compared with being killed by sharks.

"Still, millions of these beautiful creatures are being slaughtered for their fins, all for soup."

She said consumers also needed to realise how and where their food come from, and how eating food like shark's fin soup was causing huge problems to marine ecosystems.

"I think it's important for the community worldwide to realise what is happening to the environment and how important it is to manage and conserve it before it is too late.

"We want to help make more people aware and concerned about marine life and the oceans, and maybe even start doing something about it as part of their family outings."