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Tuesday February 17, 2004 Ads by Google

Protecting marine life

MALAYSIA has joined the Philippines and Indonesia to protect the rich marine life in the Sulu-Sulawesi region, where there are 25 known species of whales and dolphins as well as more than 400 species of corals.

The three nations signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on the Sulu-Sulawesi Marine Eco-region (SSME) on Friday to give their commitment to the purpose.

They also adopted a tri-national Ecoregion Conservation Plan (ECP) which was developed through 12 workshops at the local, national and regional levels.

The signatories to the MoU and ECP were Malaysia's Science, Technology and Environment minister Datuk Seri Law Hieng Ding, Indonesia's Marine Affairs and Fisheries minister Rokhmin Dahuri and the Secretary of the Philippines' Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Elisea Gozun.

The tri-nation pact was made on the sideline of the ongoing Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biodiversity (COP-7), which gathered more than 2,000 bio-diversity experts, scientists, environmentalists, government officials and policy makers from all over the world.

Law said the initiative was timely as the bio-diversity in the region was coming under increasing threat.

"A truly sustainable path will require the close cooperation of all three nations and partnerships among all the stakeholders in the region," he said, after the signing ceremony at the Pan-Pacific Hotel in Kuala Lumpur.

According to the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), the region – covering the Sulu Sea between Sabah and the Philippines and the Sulawesi Sea, reaching down to the east coast of Borneo island – also has over 1,000 species of reef fishes, unusual fishes, such as the coelacanth, five of the world's seven species of marine turtles, endangered marine mammals such as the dugong, more than 400 species of algae, and 16 species of sea grass.

The area, covering nearly a million square kilometres, is also an

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important source of food and livelihood for countless subsistence and commercial fishermen, said WWF Malaysia executive director Datuk Dr Mikaaail Kavanagh Abdullah.

“The seas are a crucial spawning ground for commercially important fish species like the yellowfin, skipjack, big-eye tuna as well as shrimps,” he said, adding that the eco-region was also a favoured tourist destination

Dr Mikaaail Kavanagh said the SSME formed an integral part of the global marine biodiversity resources and benefited more than 35 million people in terms of fisheries, tourism and navigation.

He said the MoU provides for the formation of a tri-national committee for SSME to serve as a forum for sharing and discussions in the course of carrying out the eco-region conservation plan for the region, which covers nearly a million square kilometres.

On the conservation challenges in the eco-region, Dr Mikaaail Kavanagh said many reefs were under serious stress from social and natural forces, including dynamite fishing, over-fishing, coastal development, sedimentation and coral bleaching.

“The region has among the highest human population density in the world which leads to a severe impact on marine ecosystems from over-exploitation, pollution, and coastal development.

“There is also a lack of institutional capacity and limited resources to enforce environmental protection laws,” he said. – *By Celeste Fong*

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