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New marine species discovered in South China Sea during expedition

An expedition to the South China Sea to study the marine biodiversity there has turned out to be a political and scientific milestone for the region.

Scientists on Exercise Anambas discovered half a dozen new marine species, and expect hundreds more to be identified in the next few months.

Five years in the hatching and Exercise Anambas finally gathered enough funds to set sail for South China Sea in early March.

Funded by their respective Foreign Ministries, 24 marine biologists from Asean, China and Taiwan spent 10 days gathering plants and animals from two groups of Indonesian islands -- the Anambas and the Natuna.

Hopping from island to island, they dived, used traps, nets and even trawled to collect samples of the rich flora and fauna there.

The scientists are now back at Singapore's Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, which co-organised the expedition with the Indonesian Institute of Science.

And just one day into sorting out the samples collected, they have discovered new species of crabs, fish and even the highly poisonous blue-ring octopus.

Director of Fisheries Museum of Natural History, Thailand, Dr Anuwat Nateewathana, said: "It's very dangerous if nobody knows because it can bite fishermen if we touch it. They have venom... can die in a few hours."

The specimens will be distributed to the scientists to bring back to their respective countries for research and documentation.

Calling it a major step forward for the region, the scientists are already talking of an Exercise Anambas II.

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Director of Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, Associate Professor Peter Ng, said: "We can show that we're working together just for science, beyond the politics and the situation and we want to advance scientific knowledge for all the countries to benefit. The waters are all connected, so the information should be shared among all the countries, regardless of whether they are disagreeing with the territories in the South China Sea. "

It will be at least two years before some of findings can be published internationally.



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