

An Expedition with a Dual Mission

An expedition to the Indonesian island groups of Anambas and Natuna turned out to be more than a scientific mission. Not only was *Exercise Anambas* a trip to explore biodiversity, it also served a political purpose - to promote regional scientific collaboration among countries surrounding the South China Sea.

The expedition, co-organised by NUS Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research (RMBR) and Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), made history as it was the first that got scientists from different countries of the South China Sea working together. "We brief the researchers at the onset that this is not their typical scientific trip, but to see if researchers from different countries can work together," said co-expedition leader and RMBR's Research Officer, Mr N Sivasothi.

Funded by the respective foreign ministries, the S\$120,000 mission set sail in early March this year. For 10 days, 24 marine biologists from Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, China and Taipei China gathered data on plant and animal diversity on Anambas and Natuna. "We sampled 60 sites within the two island groups, and the northern-most island, Pulau Laut, being the most interesting," said Siva of the islands which had not been surveyed scientifically for more than 100 years.

The researchers were divided into multi-national teams to comb different habitats, namely freshwater streams, beach, rocky shores, mangrove and coral reefs. Together, they dived, trawled and even used traps and nets to collect specimens.

RMBR's Director, Associate Professor Peter Ng said that *Exercise Anambas* was a boost to regional cooperation. "We've showed 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 about the territories in the South China Sea." So cordial were the working relationships that there is already talk of *Exercise Anambas II*.

The expedition was first mooted at the Workshop on Biodiversity Assessment in May 1997. It almost did not materialise, recalled Siva as it was dogged by funding and political hitches. Then in January this year, he received a call "and just as quickly, I was on board Baruna Jaya VII (LIPI's research vessel) heading towards Anambas and Natuna. It was a no-holds-barred, all-out expedition," he laughed.



The researchers pay a house call on a village head to inform him about the expedition and to find out more about the habitats on the island.



Safely attired in life vests, the researchers head for the island in a speedboat.



Casting the net far and wide for a good catch.



No, this turtle was not a catch. Found stranded in shallow waters, it is being given a hand to get back to the ocean.

Hauling in a bountiful harvest

When Dr Anuwat Nateewathanam, Director of Thailand's Fisheries Museum of Natural History, combed through his catch from a night trawl, little did he expect to find a rare visitor seen mainly in the colder waters around Australia -- the Blue-ring octopus.

Pint-sized but highly poisonous, the Blue-ring octopus was just one of the many prize catches in the whopping haul of 300 kilograms of marine species obtained in *Exercise Anambas*.



Small but deadly -- this pint-sized octopus has venom that can cause death within hours of a bite.

In sorting and cataloguing their harvest, the scientists have so far recorded

over 2,000 species of marine fish species, of which about half a dozen are new species. More discoveries are expected with further study and as the samples are sent to regional and international experts for detailed study.

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Last modified on 17 June, 2002