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JOHOR

Mangroves offer a natural defence

MNS: They act as barriers and protect coastal folk from flood and high tide

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MANGROVE conservation is important to prevent erosion in coastal areas in Johor.

Without mangrove forests the state will be open and vulnerable to natural disasters like tsunami.

Johor Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) vice-president Vincent Chow said coastal mangroves provided natural barriers and protected coastal communities from increased storm surge, flooding and extreme high tides.

"The tsunami on Dec 26, 2004 along the north-western coast of

peninsular Malaysia proved the importance of coastal mangroves as a natural barrier against such a catastrophe as damage to areas with mangroves were less apparent than those without," he said.

He stressed that mangrove forests provided a habitat for thousands of species.

He said the fertile mangrove mudflats supported numerous crustacean species as well as mud-skipper species that attracted shorebirds, either local or migratory, to feed on them.

Chow said thousands of migratory birds made their pit stop annually at the estuaries of Sungai

Mersing, Sungai Danga, Sungai Tebrau and Sungai Skudai to feed and rest before they took off to New Zealand during the summer migration.

"They follow a flight path that has been used for thousands of years, which is known as the Eastasia Australasia Flyway and Johor is lucky as we are near to the flyway," he said.

However, Chow said this was slowly changing as mangrove wetlands were making way for development.

He highlighted that the mangrove root zones provided shelter and food to small fishes and crustaceans.

He said generations of these small fishes continue to replenish the coastal waters with population of fish that support the livelihood of coastal fisherman communities.

"Currently, the fishermen in Muar, Pontian and Batu Pahat are lamenting about poor returns from fishing," he added.

Chow said mangroves were essential to maintaining water quality.

"With their dense network of roots and surrounding vegetation, they filter and trap sediments, heavy metals and other pollutants."

He pointed out that mangrove forests had an untapped potential for sustainable revenue-generating

initiatives including ecotourism and other recreational activities but remained relatively under developed.

"We are fast losing the natural defence of the mangrove buffer strip as strong winds and high waves strip the exposed stretches of coastal zones unrelentingly," said Chow.

He said research conducted by Forest Research Institute of Malaysia found that from 1995 to 2005 about 128.88ha or 14% of mangrove area in southwestern Johor, from Tanjung Piai to Kukup, had decreased due to shoreline change and erosion.