

Wan Junaidi: We can't stop coral reefs from dying

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By **NICHOLAS CHENG**

nicholascheng@thestar.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR: There is no way Malaysia can stop its coral reef population from dying due to the strong El Nino and climate change.

Saying that the natural warming of Malaysia's waters was something that was beyond control, Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wan Junaidi Tunku Jaafar said the only thing that could be done was for the country to minimise the damage on corals caused by humans.

"I have discussed this with the Marine Park Department (JTLM) and we will work together

with local universities, the Department of Hydrology and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation on the problem of El Nino's impact on the corals and coral reefs," he said in a phone interview.

Universiti Malaya coral reef ecologist Affendi Yang Amri had said climate change coupled with a strong El Nino could threaten up to 90% of the country's coral reefs.

The loss of coral reefs could also translate to a significant drop of commercial fish like groupers, snappers, emperors, sweet lips and fusiliers, which rely on reefs for habitat.

Dr Wan Junaidi said there were more pressing issues faced by the ministry in the protec-

tion of Malaysia's underwater ecosystem.

Pollution and ghost fishing, he said, were causing just as much damage to the reefs as El Nino, while the JTLM severely lacked the staff to monitor and maintain the vast 3,600 sq km of coral reefs in our waters.

Ghost fishing is when abandoned nets and fishing gear wraps itself around reefs, breaking or damaging them and snaring aquatic life in the process.

"We send scuba divers to monitor the reefs and to remove any nets that may have been caught in them. But we are very shorthanded."

Gazetting marine parks is also an issue for the ministry, because the power to do so

comes under the Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry Ministry.

"We can only gazette marine parks under the Fisheries Act, which is not under us. It's under another ministry.

"We need the law to fully enable us to protect the underwater ecosystem. But we are enforcing someone else's law. I am personally handicapped because of the law," he said.

Wan Junaidi added that the ministry's intention of gazetting the proposed Tun Mustapha Park off Kudat, which has over a million hectares of coral reefs, was being hampered as the Fisheries Act was not under his purview.