

## SEATRU Slot V, 2010



by  
Ir. Ong Yih Miin (M18824)

**T**O change the public's perception of engineers as the destroyer of our environment, I decided to participate as a volunteer in the Sea Turtle Tagging and Nesting Research Project, a sea turtle conservation program organised by the Sea Turtle Research Unit (SEATRU), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT). The program runs from April to September every year.

Volunteers have to commit to eight days of participation on the remote and isolated Charga Hutang beach on Redang Island. The beach is located on the northern most part of the island. It is not open to tourists but snorkeling before 3pm is allowed. There is no telecommunication signal on the beach. That means no TV, no Internet, no SMS and not even a phone call can be made or received on the island.

The program is really popular and I was lucky enough to have my booking confirmed for Slot V. On 28 August 2010, I took the early morning flight from LCCT to Kuala Terengganu airport and met three volunteers at the arrival hall. We shared a taxi from the airport to the Turtle House, UMT. Four volunteers were already there when we arrived at the Turtle House. We had a short briefing by the research assistant before heading to the jetty. We took a ferry from the jetty to Redang Island and were later transferred by a speedboat to Charga Hutang.

At Charga Hutang, the staff briefed us on sea turtle nesting activities and our responsibilities as a volunteer. We were divided into four groups and each group had to patrol at night. We then decided to go for the prawn spa. We walked a short distance before reaching a small stream. After few minutes of soaking our legs in the water, small prawns came and nibbled at our legs to remove dead layers of skin!

For dinner, En. Mizi, the staff at Charga Hutang, cooked us ginger chicken with star anise and kangkung with chili belacan. The dishes were unexpectedly delicious. After dinner, we all changed to long trousers, brought our mats and sleeping bags, and eagerly headed to the beach. The night was starry with little clouds. We walked on the beach from one end to the other end. We were told not to switch on our torchlights as the light would scare the sea turtle and prevent them from landing. However, to our horror, one of the volunteers stepped on something and we noticed that many little creatures were crawling on the beach.

When we switched on our torchlights, we realised that the little moving creatures were actually the new hatchlings. We became very excited, but En. Mizi told us to switch off our lights immediately because the little sea turtles are easily attracted by the light and may lose their way to the sea. After another round of patrol with no sign



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of sea turtle landing, we lay down on the beach and waited patiently for the next landing.

We almost fell asleep when En. Mizi gave us the signal that a sea turtle was landing. We all ran to him, except for one volunteer who was already in dreamland. I could not see clearly but I could hear the noise of a sea turtle splashing the sand. The creature was body pitting. It is a process of digging the body pit before digging the egg chamber and laying the eggs.

After a while, the sea turtle became very quiet. En. Mizi told us that she was laying her eggs and that we could approach her from behind. En. Mizi collected the eggs from the egg chamber and put it on a tray. We counted a total of 120 eggs. Once we were done counting, En. Mizi returned the eggs and lowered a string into the egg chamber. The string was tied to a dead coral at one end. He covered the chamber with sand and marked the location with a stick and secured the string to it.

The SEATRU program has been running since 1993. The researchers tag every sea turtle which land on the Charga Hutang beach with a unique number. The number is punched on an inconel plate which would be attached to their left and right flippers. We recorded the left and right numbers and the size of the sea turtle in the Turtle Nesting and Tagging Form after En. Mizi read out the tag numbers and took the turtle's measurement. It was a busy night as three sea turtles landed and laid eggs.

We woke up at 7.30 a.m. the next morning and started the day by measuring the location of the nest deposited the night before. After that, we carried out a nest check. Ants infested one nest and all the eggs had to be excavated and relocated. The nest check was basically to ensure there were no predator attack and the nest would be covered by sand after checking. For the hatched nest, the nest would be excavated and the total number of hatched eggs, eggs attacked by ants or crabs, and the number of unhatched eggs would be counted and recorded.

The experience at Charga Hutang was really valuable and memorable. ■

*For those interested to join the program, please check out the website at [www.umt.edu.my/seatru/](http://www.umt.edu.my/seatru/).*

**OUR APOLOGIES**

In the article entitled "Current Human Capital Requirement of Aircraft Engineering in Malaysia" published in the November 2010 issue (pages 10-15) of JURUTERA, the author's name should be read as Ir. Assoc. Prof. Dr Shuhaimi Mansor instead of as published. We apologise for the error.