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The Flying Dusun

#### Marine Turtle Conservation

The Turtle Islands National Park is located some 40 kilometres north of Sandakan. The park consists of 3 islands - Selingaan, Bakkungaan Kecil and Gulisaan, including the surrounding coral reefs and ocean. The Park is famous for its green turtles and hawksbill turtles which lay their eggs on the beaches of the islands. The Park covers an area of 17.4 km square.

On August 1, 1966, the first turtle hatchery in Malaysia was established on Selingaan, funded entirely by the Sabah State Government. Hatcheries followed on the other two islands, too. In 1972 all three islands were designated as a Game and Bird Sanctuary. In 1977, this status was upgraded to that of a Marine Park. Permanent park staff monitor the turtles, protect the hatcheries and tag the turtles for research purposes.

Only on Selingaan there are chalets for overnight visitors, and those who wish to see the turtles laying eggs must stay overnight. A curious fact of the three islands is that turtles come ashore nightly, not only during certain seasons and thus one is virtually guaranteed to see those ancient mariners. During the peak season (October) up to 50 turtles come ashore to lay eggs.

However, park rules and regulations are strictly enforced and visitors are not allowed on the beach from sunset to sunrise as not to disturb the turtles. A ranger will call all visitors to observe only one turtle laying eggs per night. The eggs are collected and the visitors liberate the beach immediately as not to shy away other turtles which are very susceptible to movement on the beach. After the laying and collection of eggs, and eventual tagging of the turtle if it is a 'first time visitor' tourists are allowed into the hatchery to observe the further work of the rangers: the transplantation of the freshly laid eggs into a man-made incubation chamber. The chamber is no different from that of the turtle: between 60-75 cm deep, in the sand, but within a protected hatchery to make it impossible for natural predators to dig the nests open. Since temperature determines the sex of the turtles part of the hatchery is shaded, while the rest remains under the open sun.

After the transplantation of the eggs visitors will get turtle hatchlings - baby turtles - to release into the sea, which is also done by night to further increase their chances of survival.

Not all nests are emptied by the park rangers, but some remain undisturbed and develop naturally. By conserving the turtles the park does not want to endanger other wildlife on the island: many animals that are natural predators of the turtles such as monitor lizards, a crab specialising in turtle hatchlings, eagles and other birds, and marine animals such as sharks. They need the turtles for their survival.

The turtle conservation programme in Sabah is the oldest in the world and with the most detailed statistics and research. Marine turtles have been around for 230 million years at least, but due to human activities they have been brought, over the past hundred years, to the brink of extinction. Let us hope that the work of Sabah Parks is contributing to their survival!

Out of the five still existing marine turtles two species frequent the islands, the Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) and the Hawksbill Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*). Green Turtles lay an average of about 100 eggs per session and may come to the shore to lay eggs twice in one season, but then they disappear again for up to three years before their next appearance. The whole process, from crawling ashore, looking for a suitable nesting area, digging a breeding chamber (60-75cm deep) and laying eggs, closing the chamber and returning to the seas can take up to five hours. Eggs need about 7 weeks incubation and the hatchlings take anything from one to three days to dig through the sand of their breeding chamber to the surface. The temperature in the chamber determines the sex of the turtles: higher temperatures mean more females, lower temperatures result in more male turtles. It is believed that less than 1% of the hatchlings survive and reach maturity, at the age between 25-50 years - little is known about the life-cycle of the turtles, but it seems that they do come back to the beach where their lives started.

# Turtle Islands National Park

## WHERE TO STAY

Winner Hotel  
Phone: 60 088 243222  
Fax: 60 088 217345

Hotel Deleton  
Phone: 60 088 252222  
Fax: 60 088 267999

Best Western Kinabalu Daya Hotel  
Phone: 60 088 240000  
Fax: 60 088 263909

Berjaya Palace Hotel  
Phone: 60 088 211911  
Fax: 60 088 211600

Hotel Shangri-La  
Phone: 60 088 212800  
Fax: 60 088 212078

Likas Square Business Suites  
Phone: 60 088 252233  
Fax: 60 088 251122

Tang Dynasty Hotel  
Phone: 60 088 263389 /  
251155  
Fax: 60 088 263989 / 265566

Beverly Hotel  
Phone: 60 088 258998  
Fax: 60 088 258778

Promenade Hotel  
Phone: 60 088 265555  
Fax: 60 088 246666 / 253980

Hyatt Regency Kinabalu  
Phone: 60 088 221234  
Fax: 60 088 225972

Le Meridien Kota Kinabalu  
Phone: 60 088 322222  
Fax: 60 088 322223

Nexus Resort Karambunai  
Phone: 6 088 411222 / 411030  
Fax: 6 088 411020 / 412028

Shangri-La Tanjung Aru  
Resort  
Phone: 60 088 225800 / 41800  
/ 293306 (Reserv)  
Fax: 60 088 244871 / 217155

Sutera Harbour Resort -  
Magellan Sutera  
Phone: 6 088 318 888  
Fax: 6 088 317 777

Sutera Harbour Resort  
- Pacific Sutera  
Phone: 6 088 318888  
Fax: 6 088 317777

Imperial International Hotel  
Kota Kinabalu  
Phone: 6 088 522888 / 447200  
Fax: 6 088 522999 / 442300  
Email: www.imperialkk.com

Imperial Boutec Hotel  
Kota Kinabalu  
Phone: 6 088 525969  
Fax: 6 088 525968