

Clement Lee

– Reaching Out To Greater Heights and Depths



It was not the first time Clement Lee made the headlines, only this time, it made the whole of Asia sit up and pay attention. In October, Clement became the first Asian to be awarded the DEMA (Diving Equipment and Marketing Association) Reaching Out Award – a prestigious recognition given to outstanding individuals for their contribution to the global diving industry. Sabah's own Clement joins the ranks of notable figures including John Cronin, the founder of PADI, Stan Waterman, the co-director of underwater photography and second unit in the production of the motion picture 'The Deep' and winner of 5 Emmy awards and Clement's personal inspiration, Jacques-Yves Costeau who was the first ever recipient of this award. The ceremony this year took place in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA.

Sabahans and Malaysians alike are truly proud of his achievement but what does it mean to the man himself? "To me, it is most significant that they give recognition to someone from Asia. I am proud, honoured and humbled to be recognized internationally."

Clement is undoubtedly one of the most influential forces in the diving's growth not only in Sabah (he established Borneo Divers and is known for putting Sipadan Island on the map) but also throughout South-East Asia. His love for scuba diving blossomed during his teenage years and in 1983 he became a certified diver. Needless to say, it was a move that changed the face of scuba diving in Sabah forever.

Having established Borneo Divers and his work on promoting Sipadan island as one of the world's top diving sites are commendable achievements, but what sets him apart is his



unwavering passion for the environment. "I have two basic principles: Conserving the environment and ensuring the dive industry is always handled by professionally trained and qualified people." And his contributions have indeed reflected this through dozens of his environmental efforts and programs such as Mabul Marine Day and Project AWARE, which incorporate clean-up activities of both the beach and the reef. The environment is and always will be the key element, says Clement. "Without our environment, there will be no diving industry. The environment is our silent partner and although 'they' don't speak, 'they' fight back. And when 'they' fight back, there is always a huge price to pay," he says. It is upon these principles that Borneo Divers voluntarily

vacated Sipadan Island years ago. "We left without compensation, which is fine with me but we did it in the name of preserving the environment. And 4 years after vacating, I am glad to say that you can see more marine life coming back – more turtles, sharks, jackfish, barracudas and much more. And interestingly, there is a good regeneration of the coral reef. All this is good news for our environment," he says, adding that many other marine life experts and photojournalists share his sentiment.

As proud as he is of the thriving dive industry in Sabah, there are challenges that need to be addressed. Among them, Clement believes, is the unfair tagging of Sabah in travel advisories. "I recently had a group of Americans diving in Mabul with me as part of a familiarization trip. And they asked me one day, 'Why is Sabah mentioned in travel advisories?' Upon which I shot back the question 'Do you feel safe here during your trip?' And they replied, 'Oh definitely! And your people are so warm and friendly.' So I said, 'There you go, you just answered your own question,'" he recounts. Clement admits that global events such as 9/11 and the Bali Bombings will undoubtedly have an effect on our travel industry but instead of giving in to these adversities, this is when the industry needs to step up even more to market and promote the destination. "And this is where I can say I am very proud of the Sabah Tourism Board for cushioning the shortcomings and push back of the industry during trying times. It is this kind of concerted efforts that help the industry as a whole," he comments. He also stresses on the importance of continuously producing professionally qualified and trained people in the diving industry. "We are working on a program for Form Five leavers to join training courses, hoping to instill an interest in diving and in turn, create more dive professionals, especially among our local people," he adds.

Clement ends with words of praise for Sabah as a prime diving destination. "I have been to so many dive spots in the world, including Thailand, Maldives, the Cayman Islands but I have to say none of them can compare to what we have here. Indeed, people say you can see the same things in other places: turtles, barracudas etc. But I tell you, no where else in the world can you find all these marine life in one island (Sipadan), all within metres of each other. That is the beauty of Sipadan," he tells. But Sabah's unrivalled treasure? "Our people. No where else can you find the warmth, charm and hospitality of the Sabahan people. This is one asset that no one can ever take away from us."