

Community-Led Blue Economy Activities in Sabah

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SABAH MAJU JAYA



The Asia Foundation

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Foreword

Australia is proud to support the Sabah State Government to advance inclusive, sustainable development in the blue economy, while also protecting Sabah's precious ocean and river ecosystems.

This study on Community-Led Blue Economy Activities in Sabah highlights the critical role of local communities, including women and youth groups, in utilizing ocean resources to support livelihoods while also preserving their natural heritage.

Australia is a marine nation, with more ocean territory than land. We rely on our ocean for food, energy, livelihoods, transport, climate regulation, recreation, and wellbeing. The sea is also central to our national identity. As Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia, Indigenous Australians have been sustainably caring for the ocean for millennia, and it holds important cultural and spiritual significance.

This is why, under Australia's National Sustainable Ocean Plan, Australia is committed to integrating the perspectives of First Nations people and other local community groups to deliver on our commitment to sustainably manage 100 percent of the ocean within our national jurisdiction.

The ocean is under immense pressure. Up to 50 percent of our planet's coastal ecosystems have been lost over the last century, putting the health of our ocean, and its capacity to sustain future growth, at risk. For the world to take advantage of emerging growth opportunities in the blue economy, we must maintain the long-term health and resilience of the ocean. We must also ensure that benefits from ocean resources are shared and decision-making on how we use and manage the ocean is inclusive and fair.

On behalf of the Australian Government, I congratulate the Sabah Maju Jaya Secretariat for its commitment to supporting inclusive growth that empowers communities and celebrates local leadership.

Thank you to The Asia Foundation for this important report.

H.E. Ms Danielle Heinecke
Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia

Foreword

On behalf of the Sabah Maju Jaya Secretariat, I am deeply delighted to be given the opportunity to provide some remarks in this distinguished report.

The Sabah State Government is deeply committed to advancing sustainable development that not only protects our rich natural heritage but also uplifts the lives and livelihoods of our people. Nowhere is this more critical than in the coastal, rivers and marine regions of Sabah, where biodiversity of global significance meets the everyday aspirations of local communities. Today, as we face new environmental, economic, and social challenges, these communities are also becoming champions of a brighter, more sustainable future.

This study on Community-Led Blue Economy Activities in Sabah is timely, vital and a testament to the power of local leadership. It highlights how community members—from fishers to youth groups, from indigenous leaders to women entrepreneurs—are taking initiative to protect marine ecosystems, build sustainable livelihoods, and foster resilience in the face of climate change. It also reflects a broader shift in our development model—one that puts people and nature at the centre of policy and planning.

Under the Sabah Maju Jaya development agenda, we are committed to inclusive growth that empowers communities and safeguards our natural assets. The blue economy is not just a policy priority for Sabah—it is a people’s priority. When we center our development efforts around the voices and visions of local communities, we unlock not only economic potential but also social and ecological well-being.

The findings and recommendations in this report offer valuable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, researchers, and civil society, on how to support and scale what is already working on the ground. More importantly, it reminds us that real progress comes when we listen to those who live closest to the land and sea. They underscore the importance of inclusive, participatory approaches that honor local leadership while aligning with state, national and international sustainable goals.

On behalf of the Sabah Maju Jaya Secretariat, I congratulate The Asia Foundation (Malaysia) for conducting this study. My utmost gratitude and appreciation go to the Australian Government, in particular the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as well as the Australia High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, for the generous and continued support in promoting blue economy in Sabah.

To the communities who shared their stories and led the way—thank you. Your dedication, experiences, and aspirations inspire all of us. Let this be a foundation for deeper collaboration, stronger governance, and shared prosperity in Sabah’s blue economy journey. Let us continue to walk together toward a resilient and inclusive blue economy for Sabah, where no one is left behind and our oceans and rivers thrive for generations to come.

Thank you.

Yang Berbahagia Datuk (Datu) Rosmadi Datu Sulai, JP.
Chief Coordinating Officer, Sabah Maju Jaya Secretariat

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Abstract

This report examines community-driven initiatives within Sabah's blue economy, emphasizing the integration of indigenous knowledge, sustainable practices, and environmental conservation in marine and riverine activities. With its expansive coastal and river communities, Sabah is increasingly recognizing the blue economy as a tool for fostering a balanced approach to economic growth that benefits all. The report highlights various community-led projects that contribute to this vision, focusing on sustainable resource management, youth empowerment, and cultural preservation.

The report showcases diverse activities across coastal and river communities in Sabah, including Semporna, Sandakan, Pulau Banggi, Sebatik Island, Pitas, and Kuala Penyu, each demonstrating unique approaches to marine conservation, eco-tourism, and waste management. For instance, community-based tourism initiatives in Sandakan and Kuala Penyu combine eco-tourism with cultural heritage, providing sustainable livelihoods while preserving regional biodiversity. In Semporna, youth-led coral and turtle conservation projects, supported by local and international NGOs, empower young people to take an active role in marine stewardship.

Key themes emerging from the report include the vital role of traditional conservation systems, such as the Tagal system, which regulates resource extraction in riverine and coastal communities, and the increasing involvement of women as micro-entrepreneurs in the blue economy. These grassroots efforts, often supported by external partnerships, are fostering more resilient and sustainable economies by merging local knowledge with modern conservation techniques.

However, the report also identifies several challenges, such as youth migration to larger cities for better employment opportunities, statelessness, waste management issues, and the detrimental effects of unsustainable fishing practices on both marine biodiversity and the communities that depend on it. Addressing these concerns through targeted policy reforms and local capacity building is crucial for ensuring the long-term success of Sabah's Blue Economy from the grassroots level.

In conclusion, community-led initiatives in Sabah highlight the critical role of integrating cultural heritage, environmental stewardship, and economic development in shaping the Sabah's vision for an inclusive and sustainable blue economy. While Sabah has a broader ambition for developing its Blue Economy, it is essential that key aspects of local communities, including their cultural heritage and customs, access to infrastructure and support, capacity building, and opportunities for local participation in decision-making, are woven into the larger framework. This approach aims to support more sustainable economic development by enabling local communities to play an active role in environmental stewardship and the overall success of Sabah's blue economy.



Figure 1. Mapping of Community-Led Blue Economy Activities in Researched Locations

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A scenic view of the sea under a blue sky with light clouds. In the background, a large, multi-decked fishing boat is anchored. In the foreground, a smaller, blue speedboat with two people is moving across the water. A semi-transparent white box with the word 'Introduction' in a dark blue serif font is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Introduction

Blue Economy in Sabah

In December 2023, the Sabah State Government committed to developing its blue economy. This initiative aims to explore the significance of oceans and coastal areas in fostering economic development and prosperity while ensuring sustainability for the future. It aligns with the objectives outlined in Budget 2024, which focuses on sustainable economic growth, job creation, and improving living standards. The blue economy has also been included in the 12th Malaysia Plan as a strategic approach to enhancing Malaysia's economic growth.

Sabah's blue economy focuses on four main activities: sustainable management of living resources through fisheries and aquaculture, responsible extraction of non-living resources like minerals and renewable energy, promotion of maritime commerce and trade, and addressing ocean health concerns such as waste disposal, pollution, and environmental impacts. Given Sabah's economic disparities and high poverty rate, this initiative aims to foster an economy that is fair and impartial by involving stakeholders, primarily coastal and river communities, in sustainable marine-based activities.

The Sabah blue economy has the potential to foster economic growth and social inclusion, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 14: Life Below Water, SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, and SDG 1: No Poverty. By alleviating poverty and empowering communities, investing in education, training, and capacity-building programs tied to the blue economy can enhance the skills and capabilities of local communities, particularly those residing in Sabah's coastal and river areas, facilitating their meaningful engagement in marine-based industries. However, careful management is essential to prevent exacerbating income inequality in Sabah.

The Australia-Malaysia Reform Partnership Program

The Asia Foundation's work on the blue economy in Malaysia is a key component of the Australia-Malaysia Reform Partnership, funded by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This program offers a distinctive approach by assisting Advanced Middle-Income Countries in showcasing how limited resources can generate significant outcomes. Through targeted policy reforms and the strengthening of bilateral relations, the initiative fosters engagement platforms and mutually beneficial partnerships between Malaysia and Australia, driving impactful change and sustainable development.

Objectives

- Document and understand community-led blue economy initiatives in Sabah.
- Highlight communities' indigenous knowledge and practices as exemplary models to inform and strengthen participatory development frameworks for Sabah Blue Economy strategies and policies.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach, centering on field observations and in-depth interviews to document community-led blue economy activities in Sabah. Ethical considerations were paramount, with informed consent obtained from all participants before the interviews to safeguard their well-being and uphold the study's integrity and credibility.

The research focused on six strategic locations—Semporna District, Sebatik Island, Sandakan, Banggi Island, Pitas, and Kuala Penyu—selected for their unique geographic characteristics, reliance on marine and river resources, diversity of economic activities, and varying levels of community engagement. These sites provided a representative sample of Sabah's coastal and riverine communities, allowing the study to capture the breadth and depth of practices across different economic and social contexts.

The team prioritized documenting community-led initiatives, whether or not they received government support, to uncover innovative solutions from challenging economic and infrastructural conditions. These included waste management innovations, conservation efforts, and informal economic practices. The methodology also aimed to capture Sabah's local communities' lived experiences and political challenges, particularly those facing statelessness and exclusion from formal support systems. While the study acknowledged the impossibility of covering all community-led blue economy activities in Sabah, the selected examples provide valuable insights into local dynamics, resilience, and sustainability in coastal and riverine areas.

A thematic analysis guided the research, enabling the identification of key economic activities and industry-specific practices across regions. This approach highlighted commonalities and unique practices within the blue economy framework, presenting a holistic understanding of sustainability and community engagement. Despite similarities in economic activities across locations, the study uncovered distinctive examples that underscore the importance of local knowledge and adaptive strategies. These findings serve as a foundation for further, more detailed studies, emphasizing the critical role of community-driven practices in shaping Sabah's blue economy and a more informed development strategies.

Study Limitations and Challenges

Uneven Demographic Representation amongst Respondents

Despite efforts to ensure a balanced men and women ratio in the participant sample, most participants were men, which may have skewed the findings. For example, on Sebatik Island, eight men and only four women were interviewed, limiting the inclusion of women's perspectives. This imbalance is partly due to men's greater involvement in the public sphere, while women tend to stay in the private sphere, especially in rural areas. Additionally, while participants appeared more comfortable in smaller or group discussions, men were typically more vocal, further limiting the representation of women's views in the study.

Limited Representation of Community Groups

The study primarily engaged certain groups, leading to the possibility that the data collected may not accurately reflect the broader realities of the entire community. Difficult-to-reach groups may have had limited representation.

Cultural Sensitivity and Diversity

Understanding and respecting cultural norms and practices posed a challenge, particularly when working with communities from diverse cultural backgrounds. Variations in traditions and values made maintaining cultural sensitivity across all interactions difficult, potentially affecting the depth of engagement and data quality.

Time Constraints

Time limitations affected the thoroughness of the study, with insufficient preliminary data and planning before fieldwork commenced. A more comprehensive mapping exercise and literature review of previous studies could have enriched the data collection process.

Restricted Depth of Exploration

Due to time constraints, the study had to focus on the most accessible or prominent issues, leaving some aspects of community life and coastal dynamics unexplored. This narrowed the scope of insights gained, potentially overlooking critical but less obvious factors.



Sabah Community-Led Blue Economy Activities

Semporna District

Located in the Tawau Division on Sabah's southeast coast, Semporna borders Kalimantan to the south and Mindanao (Philippines) to the east. "Semporna," meaning "perfection" in Malay, reflects the community's strong ties to the sea. A recent District Office census shows a diverse population predominantly comprising Bajau ethnic groups, especially the nomadic Bajau Laut. These coastal communities rely heavily on marine resources, with fishing and tourism as key economic drivers.

To better understand the interdependence between residents and the ocean, the team visited three islands in Semporna: Kulapuan, Mabul, and Larapan Hujung.

Kulapuan Island

Kulapuan Island is home to around 500 residents, mainly from the Bajau Tabawan, Palaau, Panubal, and Siasi communities. Most families are large, often with 8 to 10 members, and many young people leave the Island to work in Semporna City. Because of its remote location, Kulapuan faces limited access to healthcare, education, electricity, and clean water—necessitating costly trips to the mainland. The Island has two formal schools and one religious school, all privately run. Electricity comes from generators and solar power, and an estimated 98 percent of residents are undocumented due to registration delays and birth certificate issues.

Traditional Fishing

Kulapuan residents primarily employ net fishing, hook fishing, and spearfishing. Their catches—squid, crabs, clams, abalone, and Lokan—are sold locally or to middlemen (tauke) near Semporna or Tawau. Children learn swimming, boating, and diving at an early age, fostering a natural affinity for the sea. Women also contribute significantly by collecting Siput Kahanga—a local shellfish—for sale or home use, thus preserving culinary heritage and supporting the Island's economy.

Empowering Youth through Marine Conservation

On Kulapuan Island in Semporna, community-based marine conservation is flourishing, driven by local youth actively involved in coral reef and turtle conservation efforts. In collaboration with Reef Check Malaysia, young people participate in coral restoration activities, using recycled bottles to nurture and monitor coral health through regular diving sessions. Although there is no financial compensation for these maintenance activities, the initiative fosters environmental awareness and pride among the youth, empowering them to take ownership of their local marine ecosystem. The partnership with Reef Check Malaysia provides essential training, equipping the youth with the skills needed for effective coral restoration.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has been crucial in engaging the Island's youth in turtle conservation efforts. Inspired by an awareness campaign on environmental shifts, young individuals now actively participate in protecting turtle hatcheries. WWF incentivizes their involvement by providing a 10 Malaysian ringgit allowance per night, leading to a minimum of RM 100 monthly for many participants.

Since the project's inception in 2022, turtle conservation has expanded significantly, growing from just four locations to more than 40 sites. The youth take turns in these conservation activities, balancing their commitments with work and family responsibilities, ensuring the project's sustainability during the peak turtle nesting season from August to November.

The marine conservation initiatives on Kulapuan Island, including coral and turtle conservation, highlight the importance of community empowerment and environmental stewardship. These efforts are particularly significant as job opportunities on the Island are limited, encouraging young people to stay and contribute to their community's sustainability.

By acquiring skills in coral restoration, waste management, and turtle conservation, the youth can generate income while preserving their natural heritage. Collaborating with nonprofit organizations like Reef Check Malaysia and WWF ensures continuous support and training, fostering a sense of responsibility and joy in protecting the marine ecosystem for future generations.

Mabul Island

Mabul Island, known for its rich marine diversity, is a major diving destination in the Coral Triangle (the "Amazon of the Seas"). Its population of roughly 4,000 is predominantly Bajau (or Sama-Bajau), along with smaller groups of Suluk and Bajau Laut. The Island's population fluctuates as some residents travel to and from the southern Philippines or other parts of Sabah.

Traditional Boat-Making and Cultural Practices

Mabul Island has no roads and relies heavily on water transportation for movement within and to nearby islands. Villagers craft boats known as "perahu" or "sampan," using boat-making techniques passed down through generations. With the rise in tourism, these traditional sampans have been repurposed as boat houses, offering tourists an immersive cultural experience. Additionally, these sampans are sold, either whole or in parts, to other islands for fishing activities.

Among these boats, the Lepa Sampan stands out and is recognized as a cultural heritage in Sabah. For the Bajau community, particularly the Bajau Laut, the Lepa perahu is integral to their way of life, serving as permanent living quarters, fishing vessels, transportation, and even wedding venues. The Lepa perahu also features prominently in Sabah's Regatta Lepa, an annual event held in April that showcases a vibrant floating parade of colorful Lepa boats, boat races, tug-of-war, beauty pageants, and fireworks, celebrating the rich maritime traditions of the Bajau people.



Figure 2. The Star (2023).
Regatta Lepa in Semporna.

Marine Craft

Treasures from the ocean, such as seashells, coral, pearl oysters, and snail shells, are also sources of income for some residents of Mabul Island. These marine treasures are carefully cleaned and prepared before being sold as souvenirs. Seashells and snail shells are typically priced between RM 5 and RM 35, while coral and pearl oysters can fetch prices ranging from RM 35 to RM 300, depending on their size and authenticity.

Community Ecotourism

Mabul is a very popular tourist destination for diving activities after Sipadan Island in Sabah, a destination for scuba divers on par with other famous destinations such as the Red Sea, Mediterranean Sea, the Maldives, Papua New Guinea, and the Caribbean Sea due to its unique and exotic flora and fauna habitat. This makes the Island a main attraction to the island resort and main trust activities such as diving, snorkeling, and fishing.

The tourism sector on the Island is divided into two concepts: enclave tourism (luxury resorts on the water) and rural tourism (chalets in the residential areas of the local population). Outsiders own most of the resorts and chalets, while rural tourism is owned by the heads of villagers, with a handful of the youth working in these resorts and chalets as housekeepers, cooks, boatmen, and tour guides. The low employment among local communities is mainly due to the low education level and lack of skills.

Due to the increased ecotourism activities in Mabul, it has also been observed that local communities have turned into tourist agents such as boatmen, tour guides, snorkeling, and scuba diving guides. This employment opportunity is more lucrative than working in resorts, with a scuba diver guide earning RM 350 to RM 850 monthly, depending on the working hours and years of experience.

Empowering Youth through Marine Conservation

Like other Semporna islands, Mabul has active youth-led coral reef restoration, primarily through the NGO Pemimpin Iklim Mabul, in partnership with Green Semporna and Reef Check. These initiatives provide capacity-building and technical training to develop local conservation leaders. Along with regular habitat monitoring, Pemimpin Iklim Mabul organizes community-based coral restoration projects that foster environmental stewardship while opening new employment opportunities for young residents.



Figure 3. Pemimpin Iklim Mabul. Coral Restoration Activities.

Larapan Island

Larapan Island, located in Semporna District, is a small, underdeveloped island with a population of a few hundred people. There are more than 105 houses, most home to at least seven family members, although some may have fewer. The island's surrounding waters are part of the Tun Mustapha Marine Park, rich in marine life including coral reefs and fish. Most residents are Bajau Kubang, and about half are undocumented. The island is divided into two regions: "Hujung" (end) and "Tengah" (middle), with most community activities concentrated in these areas. Interviews were conducted in the Hujung area.

Subsidies for Small-Scale Fisherman

Fishing remains central to Larapan Hujung's economy, and the government, through the Department of Fisheries, subsidizes items like boat engines and equipment to modernize and sustain local practices. Subsidies may also include fuel support for registered fishermen and at least RM 300 for those needing financial assistance. While some fishermen registered under the Malaysian Fisheries Board benefit from fuel subsidies, not all are eligible. These subsidies are crucial in ensuring the community can sustain its fishing activities and maintain economic stability.

Empowering Youth through Marine Conservation

Like other islands in Semporna, Larapan Hujung has embraced coral restoration as a core environmental initiative. In partnership with Reef Check Malaysia, young islanders use recycled bottles to cultivate new coral growth. Comprehensive training in various coral preservation methods enables them to conduct weekly dives for monitoring and maintenance. Reef Check Malaysia's part-time employment opportunities and guidance have propelled the deployment of more than 520 coral-growing bottles. This approach sustains local marine ecosystems and opens alternative career pathways beyond fishing and farming. Through exchanges with peers on Mabul and Kulapuan, Larapan's youth bolster regional conservation efforts.

Community-Driven Waste Management

On Larapan Hujung Island, the community has established a waste disposal facility where young people work part time to manage household waste. They collect, sort, and transport waste to the disposal center and then to town using boats. The focus on waste management, including plastics, bottles, and food waste, helps maintain the Island’s cleanliness while providing employment.

Heritage and Cultural Tourism

Local dances such as Magi-magi and Ratu Lepa enliven weddings and community gatherings, fostering a strong sense of unity. Homestays and boat rentals for visiting tourists—particularly those from China—further diversify incomes, reflecting the Island’s growing participation in cultural and ecotourism.



Figure 4. Waste Disposal Facility in Larapan Hujung.

Sebatik Island

Sebatik Island showcases Sabah's cultural and ecological richness, as it straddles the border between Malaysia and Indonesia. Malaysia governs its northern part, while Indonesia administers the south, creating a unique tapestry of ethnic and cultural diversity. The Island's lush tropical forests and vibrant coastal ecosystems nurture diverse flora and fauna while fishing and agriculture (palm oil, cocoa, fruits, and bananas) anchor local livelihoods. Notably, no physical barriers separate the Malaysian and Indonesian sides, allowing fluid cross-border interactions and trade that strengthen economic and social ties. In Kampung Mentadak, interviews shed light on the Island's blue economy activities, illustrating natural resources' vital role in daily life.

Seaweed Farming

Seaweed cultivation has grown into a key economic activity in Sebatik, complementing the traditional fishing sector and creating new revenue sources for islanders. With ideal coastal waters for high-grade seaweed, Bursa-Point's designation as part of Sabah's Aquaculture Industrial Zone in 2022 further amplified the industry's potential. Official data show that 57 local entrepreneurs now engage in seaweed farming, earning monthly incomes between RM 1,000 and RM 3,000. Rising global demand, particularly from China and South Korea, has cemented Sebatik's role in making Tawau Sabah's second-largest seaweed producer, underscoring its contribution to the blue economy.

Seaweed cultivation in Sebatik combines long-standing local knowledge with modern approaches, from seed procurement to selling dried seaweed. Farmers in Kampung Mentadak often rely on the traditional method of tying seedlings to ropes before submerging them in the Island's nutrient-rich waters. Simultaneously, government development programs and academic outreach efforts train cultivators in advanced techniques that boost yields. This blend of tradition and innovation has prompted more households to move from fishing to seaweed farming, benefiting from stable incomes and a growing pool of shared technical expertise.

Culture and Customs

On Sebatik, the “Gompi Guno” philosophy, rooted in the Tagal system, an age-old practice regulating resource extraction to prevent environmental depletion. The philosophy embodies the principle of “use and protect,” guiding how people harness and safeguard marine resources. This ethos informs everyday fishing practices by balancing immediate catches with long-term stewardship. However, as the fishing industry expands, concerns arise over the erosion of these traditions. Beyond fishing, barter trade—where residents exchange goods like food, produce, and essentials—reflects the community’s resource-conscious mindset.

Cultural practices reinforce these ideals. For instance, the Tidung community’s “tarian piring” (plate dance) parallels agricultural work, emphasizing the value of honoring the land and environment. Yet modernization is gradually shifting focus from these customs toward tourism and larger industries, causing traditional agriculture, fishing techniques, and cultural ceremonies to wane in importance.

Handicraft

Handicraft production on Sebatik Island intertwines cultural preservation, economic vitality, and cross-border trade between Malaysia and Indonesia. Artisans—often women—create bamboo crafts, woven mats, and baskets from pandan and palm for local and international markets, including Singapore, Thailand, and Tioman Island. These creations, enriched by shared cultural influences, attract tourists and generate employment. According to Ujang, village head of Kampung Mentadak, craftsmen refine their skills through workshops led by organizations like the Sabah Foundation, ensuring age-old techniques evolve to meet modern demands. Intricately woven mats can fetch up to RM 240 each, underscoring both craftsmanship and cultural value.



Figure 5. Handicraft Artisans in Sebatik.

Sandakan

Sandakan, located on the northwest coast of Sabah and facing the Sulu Sea, serves as a key hub for maritime and fisheries activities. However, it is perhaps best known for its wildlife conservation centers, notably the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, Labuk Bay Proboscis Monkey Sanctuary, and the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre. Drawing more than 2.6 million visitors annually, these sanctuaries underscore Sandakan's importance as a premier biodiversity and wildlife preservation destination.

Turtle Conservation

Wildlife preservation in Sandakan has progressed through initiatives that balance species protection with local economic needs.

Established in 1977, the Turtle Islands Park—comprising Selingan, Gulisan, and Bakungan Kechil—is managed by Sabah Parks to protect essential nesting grounds for green and hawksbill turtles. Over 47 years, these islands have attracted around 800,000 visitors and facilitated the hatching of nearly 16 million eggs. Government support, including RM 1 million in 2018, helped release 17 million hatchlings, illustrating how committed policies and resources can bolster conservation efforts.

Another successful model is the Walai Penyu Conservation Park on Libaran Island, where residents maintain debris-free beaches to promote healthier turtle habitats. Serving as on-the-ground stewards and educators, they actively involve neighboring communities in marine protection efforts. This participatory and informed decision-making—from governmental oversight to grassroots initiatives—ensures cohesive conservation strategies safeguarding the environment while supporting residents relying on marine resources.

Waste Management through Recycling Efforts

Sandakan faces pressing environmental concerns, largely due to the lack of a sanitary landfill. Its sole dumpsite in Kampung Sim Sim raises health, environmental, and social issues, compounded in water villages lacking proper sewage systems, wastewater is discharged directly into the sea, worsening pollution. Plastics and microplastics pose risks to both human health and marine life, while untreated waste contaminates soil and coastal waters with toxins.

In response, the Majlis Perbandaran Sandakan collaborates with community leaders, government agencies, the private sector, and NGOs on comprehensive solutions. One key initiative, “Trash to Cash,” aims to recycle 10,000 kg of household waste annually—focusing especially on water villages—following successful precedents set by private companies and NGOs like PKD Gum-Gum. At the same time, Future Alam Borneo (FAB) tackles marine debris by recycling plastics into useful items such as furniture. Although FAB relies on external grants, it conducts workshops to foster a recycling culture among children and families, offering economic incentives and partnering with international organizations like Dutch NGO Clean Rivers to expand its impact. These collective efforts pave the way toward a more sustainable and resource-efficient Sandakan.



Figure 6. Majlis Perbandaran Sandakan. Community Recycling Activities.



Figure 7: Circular Economy Products from Plastic.

Community-Based Tourism

Launched in 2022 by Majlis Perbandaran Sandakan, the Community-Based Tourism program aims to strengthen coastal economies through ecotourism. Targeting four pilot villages—Kampung Tanjung Aru, Kampung Banangan, Kampung Bokara, and Kampung Tanjung Pisau—the initiative provides residents with training in homestay management, arts and crafts rooted in circular economy principles, and infrastructure improvements. Collaborations with the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Heritage, Lembaga Pelancongan Sabah, and Sabah Rural Tourism reinforce these efforts.

The program has already succeeded, notably in Kampung Tanjung Aru and Kampung Banangan, where a combined total of 1,500 tourists have boosted local incomes and community engagement. In addition, the formation of Koperasi Pemandu Pelancongan Sandakan has enhanced ecotourism activities by creating a platform for broader community participation and attracting more robust investments in sustainable ventures.



Figure 8: Ecotourism in Kampung Tanjung Aru.

Kuala Penyu

Kuala Penyu, situated on the west coast of Sabah about 120 kilometers south of Kota Kinabalu, is a tranquil coastal town acclaimed for its scenic charm and cultural richness. Often referred to as the gateway to Pulau Tiga, it features a tapestry of vibrant local traditions—most notably those of the Dusun Tatana community—and a flourishing Rumbia (sago) palm industry. Interviews conducted in four villages—Kampung Sawangan, Kelampun, Lambidan, and Sawangan—reveal how Kuala Penyu’s close-knit communities, deeply rooted in cultural heritage, continue to embrace emerging opportunities in the blue economy.

Bagang System and Sustainable Fishing

In Kuala Penyu, particularly in the village of Lambidan, fishing plays a vital role in the local economy, with the traditional Bagang system being a prominent method of catch. Introduced in 1987 and supported by the Malaysian Fisheries Development Board, Bagang structures are sturdy, square-shaped frameworks made from mangrove wood or bamboo, equipped with durable bamboo nets. This community-based fishing practice not only provides a sustainable livelihood but also incorporates management strategies to ensure the long-term health of fish populations. By using selective fishing gear, respecting fish breeding seasons, and involving the entire community in monitoring and regulating fishing activities, Bagang promotes ecological balance and economic sustainability for local fishermen.

The efficiency of the Bagang system has allowed the community to innovate and adapt to modern challenges. The nets are fitted with generator-powered lights to attract anchovies and other small fish at night, allowing fishermen to harvest their catch in shallow coastal waters with minimal effort. Unlike large-scale, environmentally harmful methods like trawling, Bagang employs sustainable practices that preserve the surrounding ecosystem. After the fish are caught, they are sun-dried, sorted by grade and quality, and then marketed across Sabah, Peninsular Malaysia, and even Brunei, further enhancing the cultural and economic significance of the Bagang system in the Kuala Penyu district.

Figure 9. Sabah Gazette (2022). Bagang.



Cultural Attraction and Tourism

Kuala Penyu's annual Rumbia Festival serves as a vibrant celebration of the sago palm, highlighting its cultural, economic, and ecological importance. Grown in the nearby peatlands, sago not only sustains local diets but also plays a crucial role in the region's trade. The surrounding peat ecosystems are vital, filtering water and preventing coastal erosion—key elements of the area's blue economy. The festival features a variety of hands-on demonstrations, cultural performances, and food exhibits, offering visitors a deeper understanding of sustainable resource management and the principles of responsible ecotourism.

In addition to the Rumbia Festival, other local events like Kaamatan and Odou Bankajar further emphasize Kuala Penyu's commitment to blending cultural traditions with environmental preservation. These festivals showcase local dance and folklore, including the poignant legend of Batu Luang Beach. According to the story, a newlywed couple and their families, after a wedding celebration, made their way to the groom's home. As they reached Batu Luang Beach, a sudden thunderstorm struck, forcing them to seek shelter in one of the beach's caves. As the storm subsided, the family emerged—except for the bride, who was tragically trapped when the cave collapsed as she stepped out. This tale not only enhances the cultural richness of Kuala Penyu but also draws attention to the importance of preserving the region's peat swamps, mangroves, and coral ecosystems. Through these cultural celebrations, the district continues to attract eco-conscious tourists while reinforcing its dedication to sustainable practices.

Ecotourism

As the gateway to Pulau Tiga National Park, Kuala Penyu has seen residents diversify their livelihoods through homestays, restaurants, and adventure activities like kayaking and snorkeling. While the town's beaches may be less suited to diving, they remain affordable destinations for swimming and snorkeling. Homestays offer tourists immersive experiences of local customs and lifestyles. Although Pulau Tiga's resorts are mostly owned by non-locals, the island's popularity supports local hospitality, transportation, and guiding employment, thereby contributing to regional development.

Waste Management and Circular Economy

Recycling initiatives in Kuala Penyu have proven instrumental in supporting the district's blue economy by reducing land-based sources of marine pollution. One standout example is the bamboo straw project pioneered by Mr. Ghafar, Chairperson of Kg. Lambidan's Development and Security Committee spearheaded by SK Lambidan and its Parent-Teacher Association. Prompted by the government's 2018 restriction on plastic straws, the community recognized that discarded plastic commonly finds its way into nearby rivers and coastal areas, posing a risk to marine habitats. By switching to bamboo straws made from a locally abundant species called Bulu Anap, the project not only created an eco-friendly alternative but also stimulated local artisanal crafts. Fathers harvest the bamboo, mothers, and youth craft and package the straws, and the school provides training. Their success at a Public Service Department-level innovation competition sparked large orders, including 600 sets from the Shangri-La Hotel. This demonstrates how local collaboration can lessen plastic waste and maintain a healthy coast.

E-waste management is also crucial for safeguarding marine life from toxic runoff. Ester Ermelissa Ngoai, chairman of the Commission for the Harmony of God's Creation, established a campaign involving churches, district councils, and schools across Kuala Penyu, Tenom, and Sipitang. Multiple collection sites make it easy for the community to dispose of electronics safely, preventing chemicals from leaching into waterways. Supported by the Department of Environment, this initiative underscores a united commitment to preserving marine habitats that underpin fisheries and aquaculture livelihoods.

Pulau Banggi

Pulau Banggi, one of Malaysia's largest islands, is located off Sabah's northeast coast in the Kudat District. The region comprises Banggi Island and 50 smaller islands, including Pulau Patununan, Pulau Malawali, Pulau Balambangan, and Pulau Mandidarah. The island mainly consists of the Bajau Ubian and Dusun Bonggi communities, alongside smaller groups like the Suluk, Kagayan, and Balabak. Within the Coral Triangle, Pulau Banggi boasts rich marine biodiversity and forms part of Tun Mustapha Park, a multiple-use marine protected area managed by Sabah Parks. The main socioeconomic hub, Karakit, supports the island's fisheries and growing ecotourism sector.

Due to its proximity to the Philippines, Pulau Banggi experiences seasonal visits from transient seafarers, which occasionally leads to illegal resource extraction. During a recent field visit, the team explored two coastal towns—Loktohog and Karakit—to better understand the island's marine-based livelihoods.

Balat Farming

Balat (sea cucumber) farming is a key livelihood in Pulau Banggi, especially in Loktohog and Karakit. Households use homemade floating cages (sangkar) to farm 4 to 5 sea cucumbers per cycle, lasting 8 to 12 months. According to local farmer Mr. Shahudin, medium-sized sea cucumbers can fetch RM 700 per kilogram, while extra-large specimens sell for RM 500 each. Annual harvests typically generate around RM 1,000 per household, with additional income from middlemen who export Balat, mainly to China, for its culinary and medicinal value.

Balat processing, involving drying and freezing, is primarily managed by women who collect sea cucumbers from shallow reef flats or during low tide. This practice has evolved over nearly three decades, making Pulau Banggi a leading center for Balat farming in Malaysia. However, the sector faces challenges, including high costs, limited seedlings, and a lack of training or financial assistance. Many residents also lack digital literacy, limiting their market access and forcing reliance on middlemen offering below-market prices.



Figure 10. Balat Farming in Pulau Banggi.

To supplement incomes, locals gather additional seafood like Lokan and abalone for local sale or distribution to Kota Kinabalu. Young men often work on larger fishing vessels, while traditional fishing methods like live reef fish for trade remain integral to Bajau Ubian culture. Women play key roles in fish processing through cleaning, gutting, smoking, and drying, and they also harvest Lokan from mangroves. Sabah Parks supports sustainable practices through community-based forestry initiatives, issuing licenses, and assisting Balat farmers.



Figure 11. Balat Processing Location in Pulau Banggi.

Pitas

Located 130 kilometers north of Kota Kinabalu in northern Sabah, Pitas spans 1,507 square kilometers and is home to approximately 37,300 people, 98.8 percent of whom are Bumiputera or Indigenous. The name "Pitas" is derived from the Sungai word "Nopitas," meaning "lost," referencing historic floods along the Bangkoka River that once isolated the settlement. Today, about 20 percent of the population continues to practice traditional religions, reflecting the region's deep indigenous beliefs. However, Pitas remains underdeveloped due to its isolation, limiting job opportunities and leaving many residents in poverty. During a field visit to Sungai Eloi Village, the team observed how mangroves are essential to the community's customary territory and cultural identity.

Tagal and Mangrove Conservation

In Sungai Eloi, Pitas, traditional customs are closely tied to mangrove conservation. Villagers, primarily farmers and fishers, rely on the mangrove ecosystems for both sustenance and cultural practices. The Momokan ritual, where ceremonies are held at sacred sites believed to house ancestral spirits, exemplifies the community's spiritual connection to the mangroves and their gratitude for nature's resources.

To preserve these vital ecosystems, the community implements the Tagal system. The specific Tagal zones within the mangroves restrict fishing, farming, and logging activities, ensuring sustainable use. The Gompì Guno principle further emphasizes responsible harvesting by limiting the amount and frequency of resource extraction, helping maintain the health of mangroves that support fisheries, protect coastal waters, and mitigate environmental changes.

Community-led conservation extends to daily monitoring and education initiatives. Sacred areas are respected to preserve cultural knowledge and environmental stewardship for future generations. These efforts not only protect biodiversity but also support livelihoods by preventing soil erosion, maintaining water quality, and boosting eco-tourism opportunities. Organizations like PACOS bolster these initiatives by building community capacity, enabling locals to sustain conservation efforts independently and advocate for responsible development that safeguards the mangroves.

Sustaining Small-Scale Agriculture through Culture and Conservation

The mangroves in Sungai Eloj play a pivotal role in supporting small-scale agriculture among local communities. By regulating water flow and providing natural irrigation through interconnected rivers and channels, these mangrove ecosystems help maintain soil fertility and prevent saltwater intrusion, ensuring that traditional rice cultivation and other crop production remain viable for local communities' food security.

Agricultural activities among local communities in Sungai Eloj are guided by the Gompj Guno principle, where farmers rotate their crops to avoid overexploitation of resources. Some rely on traditional bamboo or buffalo-drawn plows, while others use modern machinery to boost productivity. This approach not only bolsters household food security—enabling families to consume their harvest year-round and sell any surplus at local markets (tamu)—but also preserves the health of the mangroves and surrounding waterways.



Figure 12. PACOS Members in Pitas.

A person wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt, black shorts, and a yellow hat is standing on a white surfboard, paddling on a body of water. The water is a deep blue-green color with some ripples. The person is facing away from the camera, towards the right side of the frame. The surfboard is white with a black stripe down the middle. The person is holding a black paddle with orange blades. The background is a vast expanse of water under a clear sky.

Challenges

Youth Migration to Urban Areas

The underdevelopment of coastal villages and the expansion of the fisheries industry by larger corporations have led to a significant outmigration of young people from these communities. Many youths leave their villages searching for better employment opportunities on bigger islands or cities such as Tawau and Kota Kinabalu. This migration trend threatens the sustainability of the blue economy, as it depletes local human capital and weakens traditional knowledge systems.

The loss of younger generations also leads to declining cultural practices, including traditional languages and music. In places like Pitas, cultural customs are at risk of disappearing as younger residents no longer reside in the community or choose not to learn their ancestral traditions.

Statelessness and Undocumented Residents

Sabah's geographic proximity to Indonesia and the Philippines, combined with its porous borders, has led to a long-standing presence of undocumented residents and stateless individuals in coastal communities. Many of these residents have lived in Sabah for generations but remain classified as stateless due to the lack of formal documentation. This situation hinders their ability to access government support on healthcare and education, making it more difficult for them to improve their livelihoods. Additionally, the statelessness issue challenges conventional perceptions of illegality, as these communities have deep cultural and historical ties to Sabah. Recognizing their unique circumstances is essential to formulating well-rounded policies that balance security concerns with social integration.

The lack of documentation also exposes these communities to external threats, including piracy and exploitation by external actors. Without a legal identity, stateless residents are vulnerable to abuse and have limited recourse to legal protection. This precarious status contributes to their exclusion from formal economic activities, leaving them to rely on informal or illegal means to sustain their livelihoods. Addressing the statelessness issue is crucial for fostering community resilience and enhancing the blue economy's inclusivity.

Waste Management Crisis

Improper waste management is a critical challenge in many of Sabah's coastal communities. Without proper systems in place, residents resort to dumping waste into rivers and the sea, leading to significant environmental degradation. In areas like Mabul Island and Banggi Island, poorly managed squatter settlements contribute to this waste management crisis. In addition, the rise of tourism in remote areas such as Semporna and Kuala Penyu further compounds the problem, as the existing waste management infrastructure is insufficient to handle the growing volume of waste.

Poor waste disposal practices have a severe ecological impact, with marine habitats suffering from pollution. Waste contamination affects fish populations, creating unnatural habitats for dangerous wildlife like crocodiles. These crocodiles mistake plastic waste for food, resulting in increased human-wildlife conflict and casualties.

Unstable and Low-Income Levels

Many coastal communities in Sabah face dire economic circumstances, with residents struggling to sustain stable livelihoods. The remoteness of these areas, combined with the statelessness of many villagers, limits their access to formal employment and government assistance. Middlemen and external players exploiting their disadvantaged status further exacerbate their economic vulnerability. Migrants, who are visibly present in these coastal areas, also add to the competition for limited resources and jobs, intensifying economic insecurity.

Poor infrastructure, lack of clean water, and inadequate sanitation contribute to these communities' poverty cycles. Unstable incomes force many residents to live in unhealthy conditions with limited opportunities for improvement. The lack of stable livelihoods not only affects individual well-being but also hinders the broader goal of building a sustainable and integrated blue economy in Sabah.

Unsustainable Fishing Techniques

Fishing practices in Sabah's coastal communities have evolved in ways that raise concerns about long-term sustainability. Traditional fishing methods are being replaced by modern, often destructive techniques, such as the usage of "Jurut" nets and fish bombing. These practices harm marine ecosystems by destroying fish habitats, coral reefs, and eggs, resulting in declining fish stocks since the 1990s.

Wealthier fishermen using advanced technologies have a competitive advantage over traditional fishermen, widening economic disparities within the community. Fish bombing, despite being illegal, continues to be practiced, causing extensive environmental damage. Additionally, traditional fishermen's use of sampans poses safety risks, as strong tides can easily sweep these boats away.



Conclusions and Lessons Learned

Differences in Roles Shaped by Social Norms Within Fishing Communities

In Sabah's fishing sector, men generally assume high-visibility tasks such as venturing out to sea, while women anchor critical yet often under-recognized roles in coastal and intertidal zones. Women's responsibilities—ranging from grading and packaging to processing the catch—require specialized skills that maintain product quality and marketability. Women also serve as micro-entrepreneurs in local *tamu* (traditional markets), generating steady incomes for their families and showcasing their expertise in shellfish harvesting.

Beyond traditional fishing, aquaculture has become integral to Sabah's blue economy, offering promising opportunities for women. Activities like seaweed cultivation and shellfish farming demand regular care, monitoring, and marketing—areas where women's existing strengths align well. In Semporna and neighboring regions, seaweed farming yields monthly earnings between RM 1,000 and RM 3,000, supported by the Sabah Fisheries Department and other government initiatives. These ventures improve women's participation and contribution to a more diverse and resilient blue economy.

Building Youth Capacity for Environmental Stewardship

Youth-led coral and turtle conservation efforts in Semporna demonstrate how targeted training, community-driven projects, and tangible incentives can foster environmental leadership. Collaborations with organizations like Reef Check Malaysia, WWF, and Pemimpin Iklim Mabul equip young people with practical skills in coral propagation, turtle hatchery monitoring, and waste management, nurturing ecological awareness and local pride. By merging traditional knowledge with modern techniques, these initiatives promote intergenerational continuity and strengthen conservation efforts over time.

They also introduce new income streams tied to Sabah's developing blue economy. WWF-funded allowances, part-time work via Reef Check Malaysia, and ecotourism in Kulapuan and Mabul diversify livelihood options, making marine conservation a viable alternative to more traditional pursuits. Complementary programs like Sandakan's "Trash to Cash" convert waste into resources, boosting community welfare and preserving marine biodiversity. Together, these initiatives build economic resilience and support sustainable community development.

The Role of External Partnership in Capacity Building

Across diverse localities, communities thrive when supported by collaborations among private entities, government agencies, academic institutions, and NGOs. These alliances unite multiple stakeholders under a shared vision, delivering capacity-building programs—ranging from citizen science to skill development in fishing, seaweed cultivation, conservation, and entrepreneurship. Long-term commitments combined with multifaceted approaches simultaneously address economic, social, and environmental needs. Examples include Reef Check Malaysia's marine conservation in Semporna and integrated waste management in Sandakan, underscoring the value of sustained involvement from various partners.

Despite promising outcomes, securing consistent funding to maintain programs and empower community self-reliance remains a hurdle. Success depends on equipping local with the expertise and leadership required to manage projects once external support diminishes. By combining targeted training with community engagement, outside organizations and government agencies can foster a resilient blue economy that protects marine biodiversity while creating dynamic livelihood opportunities.

Cultural Foundations for a Resilient Blue Economy

Sabah's community-based blue economy is deeply rooted in practices like the Tagal system, an indigenous conservation tradition regulating resource extraction. Enshrined in native law and administered by local leaders, this centuries-old model determines when, where, and how communities harvest environmental resources. More than 600 Tagal-designated river sections protect fish stocks, safeguard river health, and support local livelihoods. Communities in Sungai Elo (Pitas) and Kampung Mentadak (Sebatik Island) extend these principles through the Gompil Guno philosophy, emphasizing the dual priorities of use and conservation. Anchored in cultural norms and supported by local governance, such measures balance economic progress with ecological integrity.

Vibrant cultural expressions—like the Magi-magi and Ratu Lepa dances, the Tidung community's tarian piring, and the Batu Luang beach folklore—reinforce community identity and cohesion. At the same time, festivals like Odou Bakanjar in Kuala Penyu celebrate local heritage. Activities such as homestays, boat rentals, and barter trade further enrich tourism experiences and household incomes. Sabah's coastal communities illustrate how cultural heritage can complement modern economic aspirations by intertwining traditional customs, village-led decision-making, and cultural festivities.

Women as Micro-Entrepreneurs

Women play a vital role as micro-entrepreneurs in Sabah's blue economy, contributing significantly to the economic vibrancy of coastal communities. Many women make and sell traditional handicrafts in local markets, with some expanding their reach through government and NGO capacity-building initiatives, enabling them to export their products beyond Sabah to wider Malaysia and even overseas. Additionally, women actively participate in selling marine products, such as seafood and coastal herbs, in local markets, while others run small "mom-and-pop" shops in coastal areas. These efforts enhance household incomes and complete critical links in the blue economy supply chain, showcasing their entrepreneurial spirit and resilience in sustaining community livelihoods.

Security and Successful Engagement

Security concerns in Sabah's coastal regions significantly shape the blue economy and influence the effectiveness of community engagement. These maritime areas bordering Indonesia and the Philippines contend with migration challenges, stateless populations, and occasional piracy incidents—complicating fisheries, aquaculture, and tourism initiatives. In some red zones, minimal patrol staffing undermines local mobility and job access, highlighting the need for effective, coordinated security measures that protect marine assets and community livelihoods alike.


Collaboration with the Eastern Sabah Security Command has proven critical for building trust and mitigating risks. By partnering with village leaders, the command coordinates sea curfews and frequent patrols with local intelligence gathered from grassroots networks. Community patrol groups deter activities like fish bombing and coral theft, strengthening ties between enforcement agencies and residents.

Many villages comprise both documented and undocumented community members who rely on local leaders for protection. Establishing a secure environment is essential before any external organization can initiate workshops or projects. Trust-building, characterized by clear communication, consistent engagement, and integrated planning, fosters community support, ensures participant safety, and promotes the sustainable growth of Sabah's blue economy.



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