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## Overfishing depleting Tambelan Islands maritime resources

Scientists are warning that the ecosystem of the Tambelan Islands, located at the southern part of the Natuna Islands in Riau, has been severely degraded by overfishing, threatening several endangered species including sea turtles.

Erlinda Yurisanthae, a marine scientist from Tanjungpura University in West Kalimantan, said that the use of illegal fishing methods, such huge trawling nets, explosives and poisons such as potassium cyanide, were endangering Tambelan's biodiversity, including its coral reefs and sea turtles.

"Economic activity has had a significant affect on Tambelan's coastal areas," she told The Jakarta Post on the sidelines of a two-day workshop titled "The Natuna Sea and South Kalimantan Waters Expedition".

Erlinda was part of the expedition, which was comprised of 36 scientists from the Oceanographic Research Center at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) and 22 lecturers from several local universities.

The expedition visited Natuna from Nov. 4 to 16 and South Kalimantan from Nov. 19 to Dec. 1.

Erlinda said illegal fishing had been carried out primarily by fishermen from outside of the Tambelan Islands, although some local fishermen were allegedly paid to direct outsiders to good fishing locations.

The Tambelan Islands cover 356,905 hectares of Bintan Regency, the administrative center of Bintan Island in Riau Islands Province.

Tambelan, which has a northern border on the South China Sea, can only be reached by sea from Bintan Regency.

The sea turtle is one of the most endangered animals in the world, according to the list of the most protected animals, which prohibits international trade in protected species.

Fahmi, a LIPI marine scientist, said the expedition also discovered that the population of the sea turtles was declining, despite a huge initial turtle population, especially on Uwi Island and Pejantan Island.

Aside from overfishing, an ongoing local tradition of eating turtle eggs might also have contributed to bringing the sea turtles to the brink of extinction, Fahmi said.

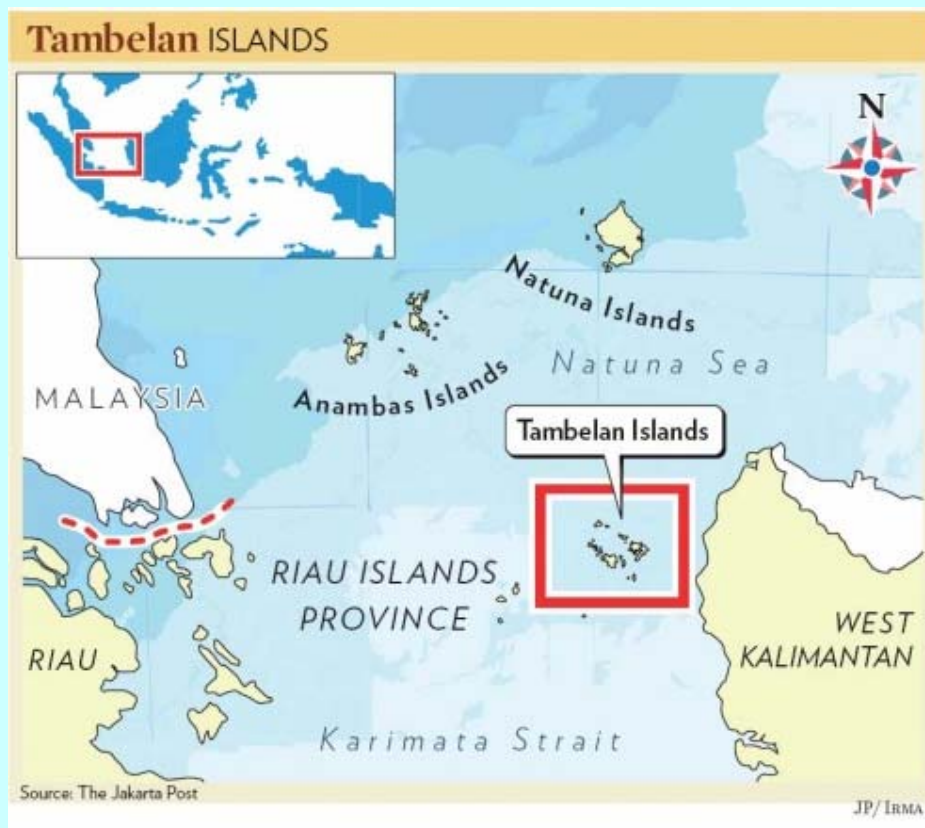
"They won't stop consuming turtle eggs, so to the population decreases," he told the Post.

Fahmi said local residents claimed that they were preserving the turtle population by protecting turtle nesting places along the beaches and prohibiting the slaughter of turtles.

In fact, they were making it easier to harvest turtle eggs, which were sold for at very low prices ranging from Rp 600 (7 US cents) to Rp 1,200, depending on their size, he said.

Over the last several years, the Riau administration has advocated the development of a national park for Tambelan Islands. By establishing a national park, exploitation of biodiversity would be effectively illegal.

"The local government has suggested that a marine national park be established over an area of 15 million hectares, mostly located in the Tambelan Islands," said Husni Azkab, a LIPI scientist.



A proposed regional law on the Tambelan National Park should have been deliberated this year, but was delayed due to several obstacles, including a lack of scientific data.

The local residents of Tambelan depend on the sea and its marine resources for their livelihoods, but resources were continuously depleted by overfishing, he said.

According to LIPI's Oceanographic Research Center, the coral reef ecosystem of the Tambelan Islands has been continuously degrading since the 1990s.

According to the Natuna Expedition, only 6.41 percent of Indonesia's coral reefs, including those in Tambelan, were in very good condition, while 24.3 percent were in good condition, 29.22 percent were in moderate condition and 40.14 percent had been damaged.

Apart from establishing a marine conservation park in Tambelan, Erlinda said the local government should designate fishing areas for local fishermen so they would not lose their livelihoods. Alternative economic activities should also be provided for local people during the transition period.

"I don't see any rejection of these ideas from the local people because they understand that the Tambelan ecosystem has been severely degraded by illegal fishing and the use of prohibited fishing methods," she said.

"They have seen the decrease in fish catches from year to year. They want to end this difficult situation."

The Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Ministry recorded that the volume of commercial marine species in Natuna waters was 0.27 tons per square meter in 2010, down from between 1.8 to 2.3 tons per square meter in 1974, due to overfishing. **(ebf)**