

Turtle saviors of Saba

The steady erosion taking huge chunks out of many of Bali's southeastern beaches has yet to bite into Saba Beach. Here tall trees shade the black sand glittering sharply with mica, horses gallop the strand meeting turquoise surf and a handful of fishermen repair nets under thatched-roof shacks. Here also turtles come ashore to lay their eggs, the only beach in Gianyar regency where the turtles are safe from erosion, says fisherman I Made Kikik, who was born and raised in the area. His many years by the sea are written in the deep lines on his face like the rings on trees; like so many fishermen, Kikik is poor. Despite the paucity of his income he sets aside money from April to September to feed the turtles that hatch in the little shaded yard he has constructed to protect the eggs and hatchlings from the wild dogs that roam the beach most nights.

"I started to take care of the eggs, digging them up from the burrows and bringing them here for protection, because I felt sorry for the babies. All the eggs were being eaten by wild dogs and monitor lizards," says Kikik who journeys up Saba Beach most nights during the six-month turtle breeding season to chase away the feral dogs that he says are devastating turtle populations on Saba Beach. Passionate about turtle protection, Kikik has formed the Bali Turtles of Saba group, made up of eight other local fishermen who work together to conserve and improve turtle survival rates.

Kikik's small patch of fenced beach has a pink rag doll hanging on the gate, local plants climb the driftwood timbers that support the fencing wire and two palm-leaf shelters are the new home of hundreds of reburied turtle eggs soon to hatch. Underfoot the black sand is scorching hot, within the nests a perfect temperature for the growth of the babies.

"On hatching we get a bucket and fill it with seawater for the babies. we keep them here for two months to grow, feeding them shrimp and fish that we chop finely. It costs about Rp 10,000 [85 US cents] a day to feed 50 hatchlings and there are times we have hundreds of babies to care for," says Kikik. He explains that his group does not release the babies on hatching due to their great vulnerability to predators, both on the land as they make their way to the ocean and in the sea itself.

"By the time they are about two months old they can swim fast and keep away from predators," says Kikik adding that before he began his turtle-rescue operation he had noticed turtles in the local ocean had grown more scarce, this he put down to wild dogs eating the eggs. "The dogs are wild, they are dangerous and we worry about rabies. When we go to protect the eggs at night we carry stones to chase the dogs away," Kikik's friend and fellow fisherman, Ketut Sudiana, acts as secretary for the Bali Turtles of Saba group. In his hand he has pages torn from a child's school exercise book. In shaky writing he has listed all the eggs that have been relocated to the safe zone and the numbers of live births and releases achieved in 2013 and those to date this year. Survival rates are extremely high with just one or two baby turtles lost out of the hundreds the group has raised.

"We love these turtles — really love them. Some people try to catch and kill turtles and that makes me ashamed. In the past these turtles were nearly gone from this beach so now we are protecting them for the future," says Ketut. Staggeringly, among these turtle protectors, not one has any biological-science background; they have been running on instinct for the past seven years. "What we need more than anything else are some research scientists to teach us how to better care for the turtles," says Kikik, adding funds to build a pond for the hatchlings and a pump to bring fresh sea water would also be extremely valuable assistance.

Also on the group's wish list are funds to build a better, more secure pen and help with feeding costs. As a backdrop to Kikik, tucked into the shady trees that stretch along this beach with million-dollar views, several villas have been erected on valuable seafront land — the contrast with Kikik's turtle protection pen built from found objects and old fishing nets is striking.

"It is a real struggle when we have hundreds of turtles to feed. We receive no funding from the government or anyone else," says Kikik, gently burying another clutch of turtle eggs within the Bali Turtles of Saba beach compound.