

## Activists nix airport, seaport plans for Maratua Island

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and environmental activists are opposing local government plans to build a seaport and airport on Maratua Island in East Kalimantan over fears the projects will disrupt nearby turtle and coral reef conservation programs.

"The construction of the projects will surely affect the turtle habitat and coral reefs on Maratua Island. I've protested against them several times, but the local government apparently focuses more on development projects instead of conservation," Rusli Andar, site coordinator of WWF's marine program, said on Thursday.

Maratua and nearby Derawan Island were part of the so-called Coral Triangle in the Northeast Borneo Seascape group, a breeding ground for eggs for green turtles, while Maratua was a habitat for the endangered hawksbill turtles, Rusli said.

The islands were home to the largest number of coral species in Indonesia, 470, after Raja Ampat in West Papua, he added.

Maratua, a 2.2-hectare island in the Sulawesi Strait, is home to 3,000 families, mostly itinerant Bajo seafarers.

To open the island to tourism, the local government previously announced plans to start operating an airport and seaport in 2013.

Bahrin, a local diving instructor, said that nearly 90 percent of the coral reefs around Maratua Island were already damaged.

"The damage was caused mainly by the rampant use of bombs by fishermen to catch fish," he said.

It would be better for the government to remind people about natural conservation instead of proceeding with the ports simply for economic gain, Bahrin said.

Arif Hadianto, the founder of the Berau Coal Diving Club, said that aside from the routine reef checks conducted by group members, the club cooperated with PT Berau Coal, the WWF, The Nature Conservancy and several local NGOs to disseminate information on the importance of conserving nature to local residents.

"We developed an eco-tourism concept on Maratua Island by helping local people to create their village as an eco-friendly tourism site," he said.

The club now has 60 members, including employees of Berau Coal's business partners, who also campaigning against destructive fishing and the disposal of garbage into the sea.