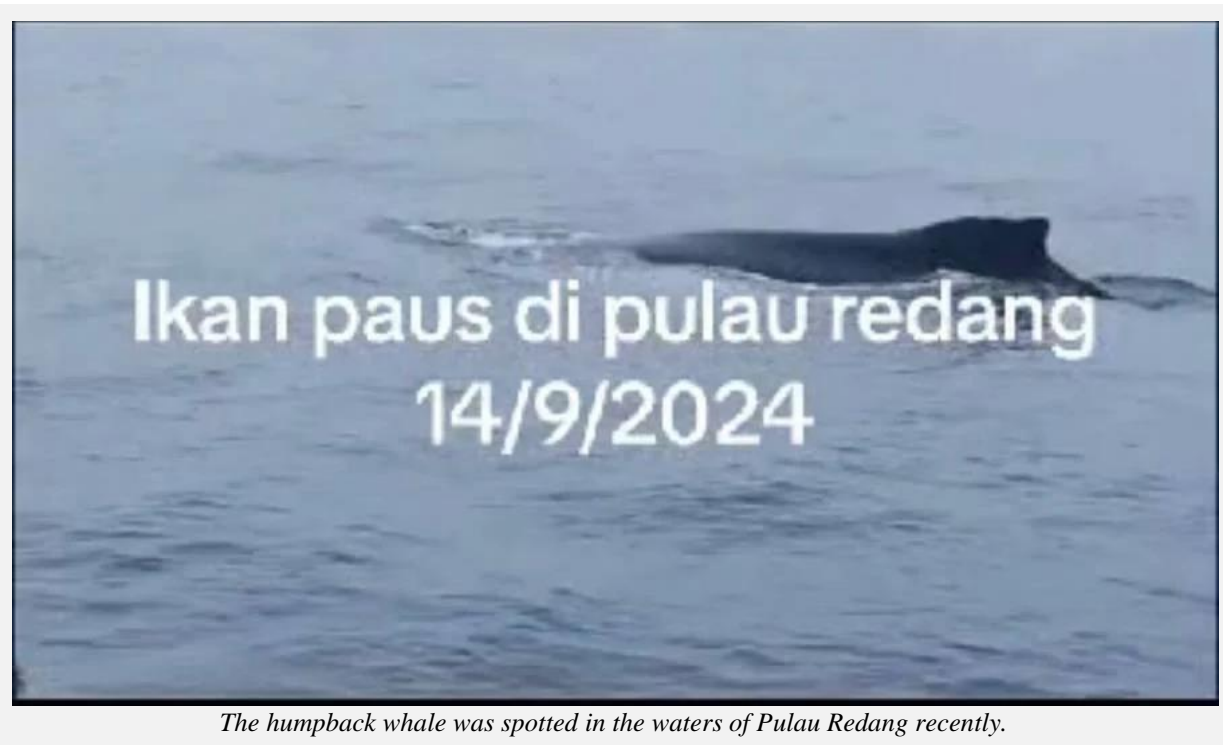


## Fisheries Dept: Whales off Redang shows marine ecosystem healthy

By Bernama - September 16, 2024 @ 12:53pm



KUALA TERENGGANU: The presence of whales in Malaysian waters is an important indicator that Malaysia's marine ecosystem is healthy and able to support the megafauna.

A research officer at the Fisheries Research Institute of the Malaysian Department of Fisheries (DOF) Muhammad Amirul Siddiq Abdul Rashid said the sighting of marine mammals, especially humpback whales, in the waters of Pulau Redang last Saturday, allowed them to document their migration patterns.

"The presence of whales from this species is rare in Malaysia, unlike the Bryde's whale. So, it provides an opportunity for researchers to document their migration in addition to providing supporting data about the biodiversity and habitats in the area.

"So far, it is not yet identified the factors for its appearance in Malaysia. However, based on the Humpback whale species around the world, there is a possibility that it migrates a little further than its usual distance from its original habitat in cold waters such as the Arctic Sea or the Antarctic Sea," he told Bernama.

Japan says arrest of anti-whaling activist long sought

Amirul Siddiq said the whale faces several threats within Malaysia's ocean environment, particularly the risk of becoming trapped in shallow waters.

If this occurs, the whale may be unable to return to deeper waters, ultimately facing the danger of drowning, he said. "Plastic pollution and dangerous chemicals can also affect the health of whales and their food sources, while changes in water temperature due to global warming can affect the availability of food and migration patterns of whales.

"They also change important habitats such as areas where these species socialise," he said.

Regarding measures to overcome the risks facing the animals caused by the fishing community, he said the DOF had organised education and training programs on the importance of preserving marine mammals for the group.

"The fishermen are also offered resources and tools to help reduce the impact of fishing activities on marine life.

"They are provided guidelines on responsible fishing practices, preventing bycatch and information on habitat hotspots for marine mammal species and other endangered animals," he said.

Amirul Siddiq said although the marine mammal does not harm humans, any interference can cause a defensive reaction in the animal. He also cited Section 27 of the Fisheries Act 1985 which prohibited any form of interference with whales.

"The implication of disturbance for the animal is the potential of stress or physical injury. There are also species that can threaten human safety such as the killer whale which will become aggressive if it feels threatened," he said.

Meanwhile, marine ecology and ecosystem researcher at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), Associate Prof Dr Maizah Mohd Abdullah said the university, with its focus on marine and aquatic resources, was actively preparing to enhance the blue economic framework.

This framework aims to align with Malaysia's maritime economic sector to ensure the sustainability of the ocean ecosystem, she said.

She also expressed hope that the matter will be discussed in the Blue Economy round table discussion to be held in Putrajaya soon involving industry players and stakeholders including government representatives.

"The presence of these marine mammals motivates us to work hard researching and educating the community about ocean literacy through the Marine Endangered Species (MES) group, comprising researchers in the country and abroad," she said.

She said they did not have enough evidence yet to prove that the waters of Pulau Redang were the passageway of the whale species as it was the first time it was sighted in the area.

Therefore, she added, it was important for the sighting of Humpback whales or any marine mammal species to be reported to the relevant parties to facilitate data collection, to see if there is a change in the migration pattern of the endangered marine life.

"Without complete data, it is difficult for researchers to predict whether this emergence reflects a positive situation or otherwise," she said.

Maizah, however, cautioned anyone who came across the mammal to keep a distance of at least 100 metres as a basic guideline.

"Immediately turn off the boat engine and do not provoke or chase the mammal," she said.

Maizah said large-sized marine animals, like the Humpback whale, are important to the ocean ecosystem because they can absorb an average of 30 tons of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and remove it from the atmosphere over centuries compared to a tree that only absorbs up to 48 pounds of CO<sub>2</sub> per year. - Bernama