



Management Plan for the Semporna Islands Park

Proposed through the Semporna Islands Project



Final draft for discussion

January 2001

This text has been drafted with financial assistance from the Commission of the European Communities. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and therefore in no way reflect the official opinion of the Commission.

THE SEMPORNA ISLANDS PROJECT AND DEVELOPMENT OF THIS PLAN

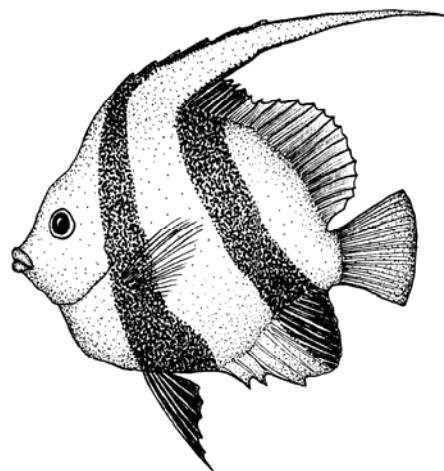
The Semporna Islands Project (SIP) began in 1998 and is due to end in April 2001. It is a collaborative venture between the Marine Conservation Society (MCS), Sabah Parks, WWF Malaysia and Nature Link and is funded by the European Community under its global environment budget line. The project objective is to produce a plan for conservation of biodiversity and sustainable use of the Semporna islands and reefs.

The recommended course of action is to establish the *Semporna Islands Park*, to be run by Sabah Parks. This publication presents the draft plan of management for the site. The development of the plan has been open and transparent throughout the course of the project. It has actively involved local people, other user groups, Semporna area general public, Semporna District office and local government departments, Sabah government departments and institutions, and the Ministry of Tourism Development, Environment, Science and Technology.

A series of discussion documents have been produced during this time and a range of formal and informal meetings, workshops and other events have been organised, including meetings of experts and specialists on the SIP Advisory Committee. These activities have been co-ordinated through the SIP Core Management Unit by the project officers: Elizabeth Wood (MCS), Hj Mahmud Mansor (Sabah Parks), Muhamad. Saini B. Suliansa (WWF), Ajirin Adrian Angkaji (Sabah Parks and WWF) and Azimah Jumatli (WWF).

This plan has been prepared by Elizabeth Wood (MCS), incorporating information from the many people and organisations who have been involved in the project. This includes the project officers (from Sabah Parks, MCS and WWF), volunteer divers (from MCS), specialist teams (from Sabah Museum, Forest Research Centre, Fisheries Research Centre, Sabah Parks, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, WWF and Marine Conservation Society) and independent experts (from Gibb Environmental Ltd., and Pacific Aqua-Tech Systems). Additional input on many aspects has come from Lim Li Ching (WWF Malaysia and Sussex University). Maps have been produced by Christopher Wood (MCS). Fish drawings are by Sue Daly (MCS), and photographs are by Elizabeth Wood (MCS), unless otherwise credited.

Bannerfish *Heniochus
acuminatus*
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MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE SEMPORNA ISLANDS PARK

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MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE SEMPORNA ISLANDS PARK SUMMARY

The first section of the Plan (Parts 1 – 5) highlights the main characteristics, attributes and management issues affecting the Semporna Islands site. It provides summary descriptions of natural features, biodiversity and resources, and provides information on the people who currently live in the proposed park and use the islands and reefs.

- The proposed Semporna Islands Park is situated at the entrance to Darvel Bay off the east coast of Sabah, Malaysia. It includes eight islands and associated reefs, and covers an area of approximately 350 sq km. The central high islands are formed from volcanic rock and are unique in Sabah.
- The dramatic and beautiful islands and reefs are an important natural unit supporting exceptional biodiversity and many species of high conservation value. The proposed park is considered as one of the prime coral reef sites in Malaysia.
- Over 2,000 Suluk, Bajau, and Bajau Laut live in the proposed park, and this unique mix of people adds a further dimension to the area through their cultures, lifestyles, legends and skills. There are settlements on most of the islands, and there is also a large ‘water village’ in one area of the reef top.
- The main activities are fishing, gardening and seaweed cultivation. Fish, shellfish, medicinal plants, fruits and timber are amongst the natural products that are harvested. Recreational use is currently almost non-existent, but there is enormous potential for tourism, provided development is carefully managed.
- Use of marine resources over many years has led to a serious decline in the population of fish and other edible species on the Semporna island reefs. This is causing hardship to fishermen and is threatening biodiversity. Damaging fishing methods such as fish blasting have added to the problem.
- Extractive use of land and terrestrial resources has had similar impacts and consequences. Vegetation communities have been altered as a result of settlement and cultivation, and some wild animals have been hunted to local extinction.
- The special attributes and values of the area can be retained, and the problems solved, through conservation of resources and management of activities.

The second section (Parts 6 – 9) provides recommendations for the establishment and development of the Semporna Islands Park. It includes plans for conservation of biodiversity, sustainable use of resources, tourism development and low-impact mariculture.

- Park status recognises areas of exceptional importance, and provides a means of managing them for the benefit of people and the environment. It allows for a co-ordinated approach and gives strong legislative backing for conservation measures.
- The Semporna islands and reefs are of high conservation value and have many other important attributes that merit designation of the area as a State Park. Effective management under Sabah Parks will bring many benefits.
- The management goal will be to ensure a healthy future for the area by safeguarding livelihoods and the environment, promoting sustainable use of natural resources and encouraging environmentally-sensitive development.
- Conservation of biodiversity will play a key role in maintaining the health, productivity and value of this special area. Certain areas, habitats and species will be completely protected in order to ensure that the conservation aims are achieved.
- Fishing, low-impact mariculture, cultivation, craftwork and tourism are seen as appropriate sustainable use activities provided that they are properly managed to benefit people and the environment. Policies for sustainable use must be based on sound science and active involvement of the users and local communities.
- Action needs to be taken to reduce fishing pressure so that fish and invertebrate populations can recover. Fishing methods also have to be controlled in order to reduce habitat damage and over-exploitation.
- Development (or maintenance) of low-impact culture of marine species is recommended as one way of providing alternative livelihoods. However, this needs to be done in a controlled way with due regard for the main objectives for the park.
- The proposed park has great potential for recreation and tourism. The objectives for tourism development should be to facilitate appreciation and enjoyment of the natural environment, boost conservation efforts and bring benefits to local people and to Sabah as a whole.
- Tourism development has to be especially carefully controlled in order to protect the natural features, habitats, flora and fauna of this unique site. It is vital that local communities are involved in tourism development and benefit from it.
- There will need to be limits on facilities in the park, and on the number of visitors who use the park at any one time. These measures will help to prevent overcrowding, and damage to vulnerable or ecologically sensitive areas.

The third section (Parts 10 – 12) discusses legal aspects, the time-scale and priorities for implementation, and the need for an environmental awareness programme to promote successful establishment and running of the park.

- Currently, the islands and reefs are not protected or managed. Bodgaya was a Forest Reserve and Boheydulang a Bird Reserve, but these designations were revoked over 20 years ago on the assumption the area was to become a State Park.
- It is recommended that a *Notice of Intention to Gazette the Semporna Islands Park* is published after submission of this plan. A public hearing has to be held within 3 months of the notice being published, and during this time the plan will be made widely available and comments invited. Modifications will be made to the plan on the basis of this consultation, and the amended Management Plan produced at the same time as the park is finally gazetted.
- State Parks are normally established on State land. The Semporna Islands Park will be a special case because it will include State Land, land with Native Titles and land claimed under Customary Rights.
- This should not be seen as an obstacle. The park should be established immediately, with the title for all areas of the land and sea that indisputably belong to the State being vested in the name of the Board of Trustees of Sabah Parks. Concurrently, a special commission or working group should be established specifically to look into unresolved land claims.
- The question of non-Malaysian citizens living in the proposed park is beyond the control of Sabah Parks and can be addressed by the government later. In the meantime, it is important to establish the park and introduce management strategies for resource use and other activities. This Management Plan is based on the assumption that the population will remain about the same for the foreseeable future.
- Zoning is seen as the simplest and most effective way of achieving the objectives for the park. Four main zones are recommended - Pelagic Use/Buffer Zone; General Use Zone; Sanctuary Zone and Preservation Zone.
- A permit will be required for entry into the Park, and for all activities and developments. Permits will be designed to cover different uses and will enable Sabah Parks to regulate activities and impose standards.
- Responsibility for implementing the management plan for the Semporna Islands Park will lie with Sabah Parks, but local communities will continue to be actively involved in the development of the park, and wider consultations on the management plan will be carried out with all interested parties.
- Various specialist Management Committees (e.g. Fisheries, Land Use, Tourism Development) should be established to provide relevant expertise and assistance in management planning for the park, in addition to the existing Advisory Committee.
- A detailed financial plan for the Semporna Islands Park needs to be put together as soon as possible. Basic funding will be provided through the State government once the park is gazetted, but it is recommended that in the longer-term there should be considerable emphasis on raising funds from users.

- Additional staff will be required once the park is gazetted, and it is recommended that local people are employed as far as possible. Appropriate training will be a high priority.
- Establishment of a 'Surveillance and Enforcement Unit' is recommended, involving the Police, Navy, Fisheries Department, local communities and tour operators. Equipment and resources necessary for enforcement need to be made available early on.
- A monitoring and research programme should be established, in order to provide up-to-date information on the condition of the park, and the impact of human use and management strategies.
- Resource use permits will be granted by Sabah Parks dependent on the outcome of an Environmental Impact Assessment and compliance with other park regulations
- An environmental awareness and education programme should underpin the implementation of the management plan. The objective will be to inform and entertain, and to ensure that people are familiar with the park regulations.
- The park could be established by May 2001, allowing Sabah Parks to begin to bring in new staff, develop a financing strategy and draw up plans for the Park Centre. It is anticipated that the rest of the year 2001 will be spent organising staff, establishing committees and developing budgets, while working on the park plan and regulations. The awareness and education programmes should begin in these early stages, as well as plans for the Park Centre. If progress is good, the park could be fully operational by 2005.