Be responsible, respect the environment, Masidi urges tour operators

By MOHD IZHAM B HASHIM

KOTA KINABALU: Tour operators have been urged to carry out their activities more responsibly and respect the environment to avoid harming Sabah’s natural attractions.

Making the call, Tourism Culture and Environment Minister Datuk Masidi Manjun said the increasing popularity of firefly spotting tours coupled with harmful practices is causing a gradual decline in the population of local fireflies.

"They were once hot attractions, with thousands illuminating the riverbanks in Klias and Kota Belud. Fireflies are among Sabah’s prized attractions but regrettably, disturbance from harmful practices like the increasing number of tour boats using loud engines and spotlights as well as oil spills have driven the fireflies away from the areas where they normally live," he said at the Seminar on Firefly and Tourism Sustainability at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) here yesterday.

Masidi stressed the importance of respecting the environment and adopting sustainable practices to ensure the long-term survival of the native fireflies which were priceless assets to the state’s tourism industry.

Commenting on the pollution of firefly habitat, he said his ministry might consider banning the use of diesel-powered boats, replacing them with battery-powered boats which are quieter and would not pollute the environment.

According to Masidi, the growing popularity of firefly spotting has prompted some operators to bring excessive numbers of tourists.

"Oil spills from boats mainly powered by diesel engines are threatening fireflies which naturally lay their eggs near the bottom of the trees.

"The fuel is causing pollution to the natural environment and destroying the natural habitat of the fireflies," he told students attending the seminar.

Speaking to reporters later, Masidi said tourism players including tour operators must realise that 'mass tourism' was unsustainable and could harm the environment on which the tourism industry depends.

"Tour operators need to take the lead in responsible environmental tourism to ensure that Sabah’s natural assets continue to be enjoyed for generations to come," he said.

Masidi also noted that the collaboration between the tourism industry and UMS was a significant step in the right direction to develop better understanding on the lifecycle of fireflies and hoped the initiative would pave the way towards developing better framework for the long-term survival of fireflies in the wild.

On another development, he said the ministry would be carefully monitoring the first group of climbers planning to scale Mount Kinabalu when the National Park reopens in December.

"We are aware that many climbers have signed up hoping to be the first climbers to reach the summit after the quake, "he said, adding that the ministry was planning to limit the number of climbers between 100-120 climbers a day.

Elaborating, he said the reopening of the Ranau trail, scheduled for December, was part of efforts to control the number of climbers up at the peak.

"The first batch of climbers will provide useful feedback on improvements that need to be made","he said, adding that the ministry was planning to limit the number of climbers between 100-120 climbers a day.

Among those present at the seminar was the director of Tourism and Culture Malaysia, Ag. Ahmad Zaki Abu Bakar.