Tourists scaring off fireflies?

KOTA KINABALU: The current practice among tour operators to bring large numbers of tourists for river cruise and fireflies watching is threatening the survival of the species, said Tourism, Culture and Environment Minister Datuk Masidi Manjun.

He said it is of some concern that the increasing popularity of night river cruise packages to watch fireflies seems to have negative impact on the population of the insect.

"In the name of tourism, we are destroying the very reason why we have tourists coming," he said when speaking at the seminar on Firefly and Tourism Sustainability at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) here yesterday.

Masidi said he has received complaints that the number of fireflies in certain popular tourism spots, such as Sungai Klias has significantly dropped over the years. Speaking to reporters later, he said the decrease in firefly population in Klias might have been caused by the uncontrolled and unsystematic way of bringing tourists to cruise the river.

"I was told that we could have up to 50 tour buses of tourists in one day, the river must be overcrowded with boats and perhaps noisy tourists. "We need to find the right carrying capacity, and start limiting the number of tourists that can be brought in daily."

"Maybe UMS can help us to identify what is the right number that will not affect the population of the fireflies. "They can also conduct studies that can help us better understand the species, what they like and don't like, how we can have tourism in their habitats without affecting their population," he said.

Sabah is blessed for being among the few places in the world to have abundant populations of fireflies and the tiny bioluminescent insect has been an iconic product that rakes in millions in tourism receipts for the State every year. Locally known as "kunang-kunang" in local language, fireflies are neither flies nor bugs, but are actually beetles that flash to attract mates or prey.

Fireflies tend to be dark brown and soft-bodied, and often with the elytra, or front wings, more leathery than those of other beetles. Also known as the world's most efficient light producers, the fireflies' bioluminescence allows them to glow, or rather, flash without losing much energy through heat.

They can be found in some of the relatively pristine mangrove swamps in Sabah, notably in the Klias and Kota Belud areas. They usually gather along the riverbank where their larvae have abundant sources of food.

"Sabah is very lucky, apart from fireflies, we also have the proboscis monkey, pygmy elephant and many other species that are only available in very few places. But all this will not last very long because we are not taking good care of them. The reason for it is our greed, we want to cash in as much as can, as soon as we can," said Masidi.

To reduce the impact of night river cruise activities on the fireflies, he said having tour or boat operators to use only electric-powered boat may need to be considered in the future. Masidi said no one knows if the noise and air pollution caused by the diesel-fueled outboard engines used by river cruise operators agitate the fireflies and disrupt their reproduction process, hence reducing their population.

He added that only trained guides, who have sound knowledge on fireflies, should be allowed to bring in the tourists, so that they can ensure the guests does not do anything that would disturb the insect.

"I have a personal experience. We were watching the fireflies but they were not flashing as much; so someone said, we should throw something at them or shake the trees to agitate the insect so that they will flash more. "We are so keen to please the passengers and make sure they get to see what they want to see, We only think about pleasing the guests and not about the insect. This is not how it should be,"he said.

Earlier in his speech, Masidi also called on the students to play an active role in preserving the State's natural wonders.

"The younger generation, he said, should be the 'warrior of change' and push for better and eco-friendly methods to be adopted across the tourism sector. He added that his ministry is open to suggestions and ideas from any parties who want to contribute to the survival of fireflies as well as other animal and plant species upon which the state's tourism industry is heavily dependent on."