Pulau Bidong to be opened to day-trippers

**GET CLEARANCE:** Visitors must seek permission from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu

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TERENGGANU will consider allowing a limited number of tourists to make day visits to Pulau Bidong during the Visit Terengganu Year 2013.

Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Ahmad Said said the state government would maintain its firm stand on protecting the natural heritage around the island.

"The number of tourists at any one time will be limited as we don't want the coral to be affected," he said after the launch of Bidong Underwater and Land Challenge (BULC) photography contest in conjunction with Earth Day 2012 at the Universiti Malaysia Terengganu's (UMT) Pulau Bidong research facility here yesterday.

Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin launched the event organised by Coral Malaysia and UMT with cooperation from the state government.

Ahmad said Pulau Bidong, a Vietnamese refugee transit point until 1991, was a great destination for divers.

"The island could be promoted as a destination for divers as there are many good diving spots and huge underwater wrecks like buses, which are now covered with colourful corals."

He said anyone who wanted to visit the island must get approval from UMT.

"We received many requests from former Vietnamese refugees who have resettled overseas to re-visit the island for nostalgic reasons, but we decided not to develop the island for tourism for fear the corals and plants around the island will be destroyed."

After the launch, Sultan Mizan went scuba diving with Coral Malaysia members to explore the wrecks around the island.

The sultan also placed a football-sized pearl replica inside a giant clam replica in Pulau Bidong waters to mark the start of BULC.

Coral Malaysia president Jamhariah Jaafar said 30 divers took part in the competition.

"The aim of BULC is to create awareness of our natural heritage and to help promote it as a tourism product internationally," she said.

The underwater category top prize is RM5,000 while the land category champion will get RM3,000. The results will be announced in July.