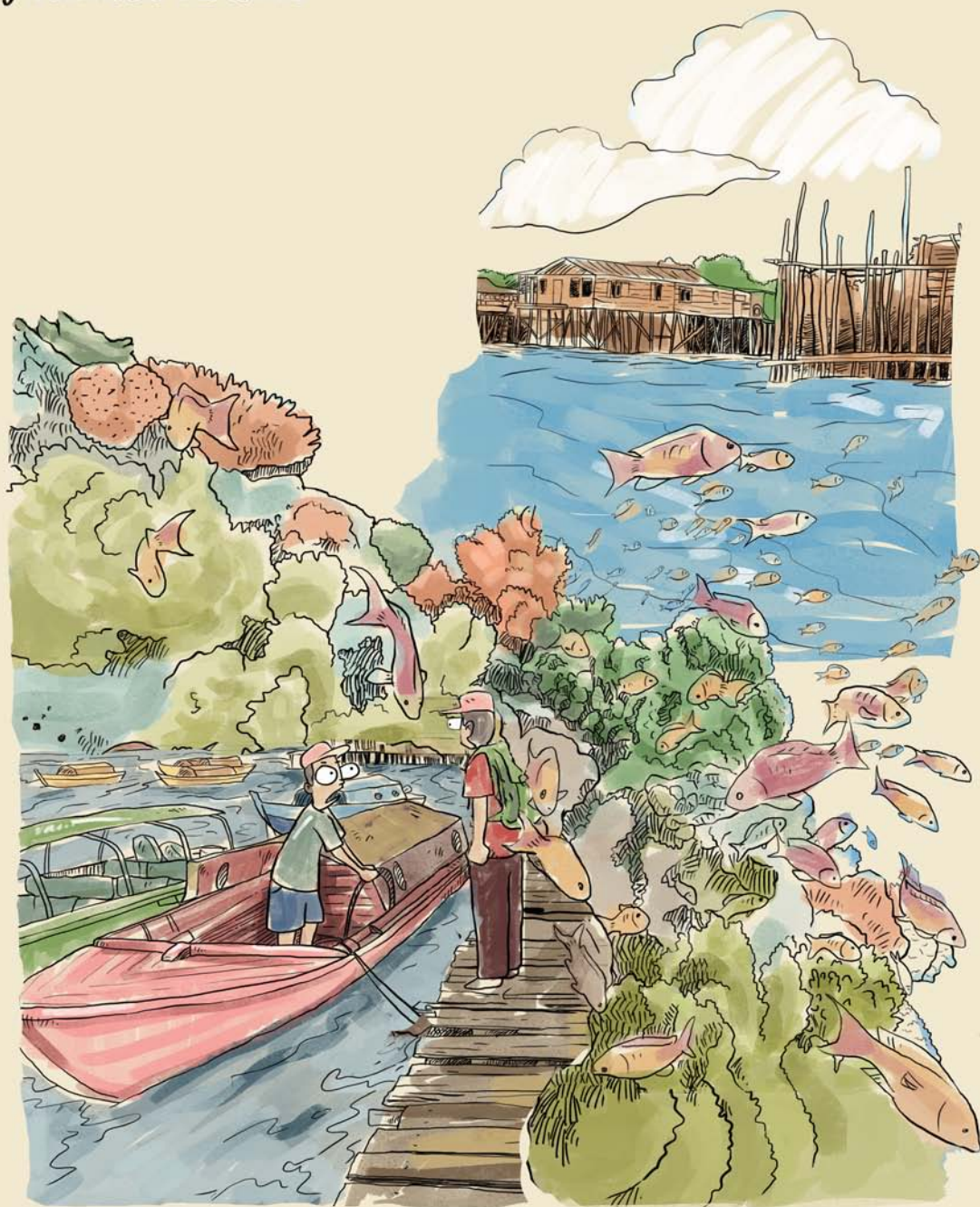
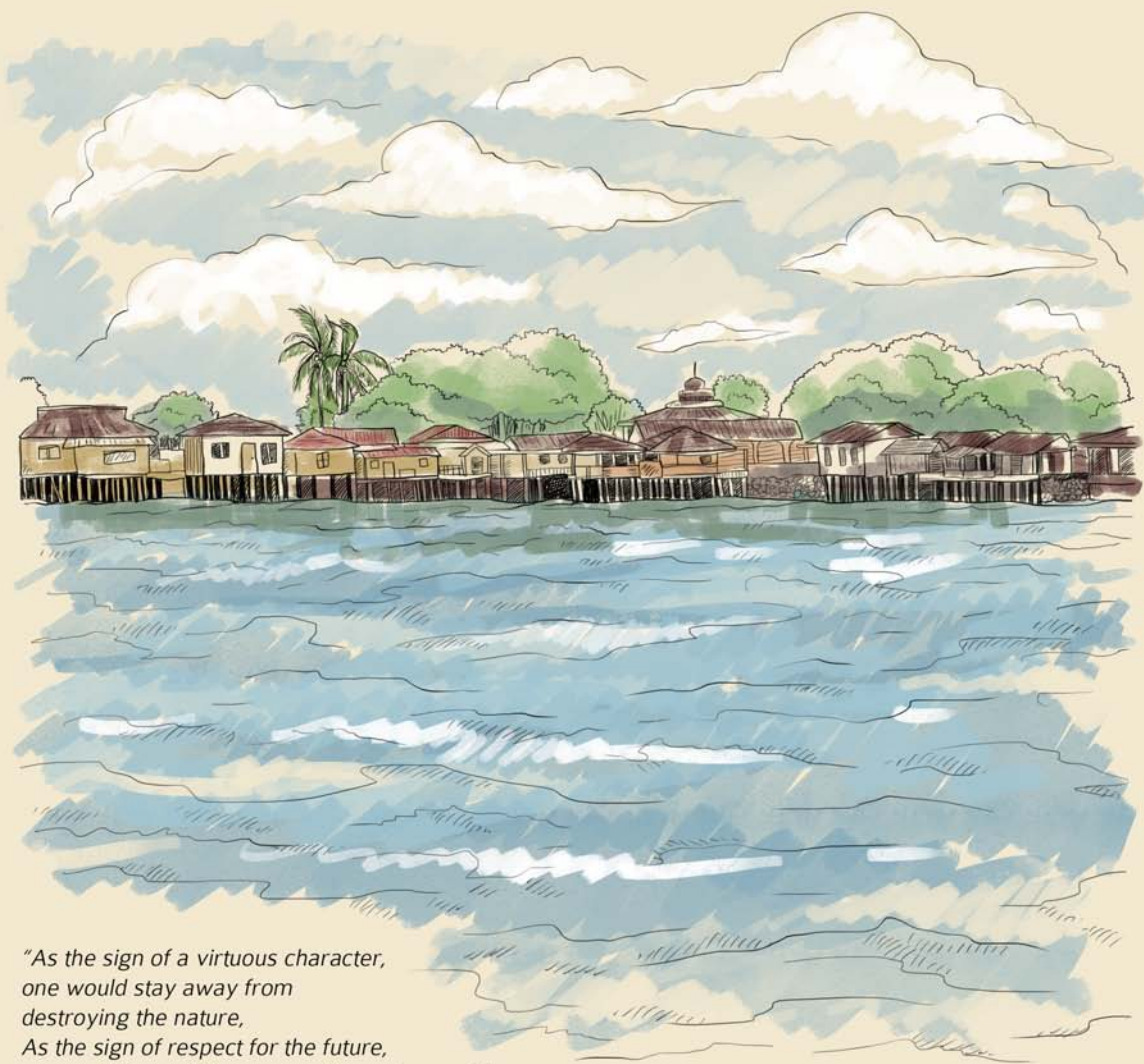


# Persistence in the Front Line

By RamSeS Firdaus





*"As the sign of a virtuous character,  
one would stay away from  
destroying the nature,  
As the sign of respect for the future,  
one would guard the seas and keep the earth".*

*"If one wants to survive , one would protect  
the seas and the straits,  
keep the earth with its lush forests, where  
sustenance and grace lie,  
there lies all kind of imagery, there lies all  
kind of blessings,  
there lies all kind of benefits, there lies all  
kind of adat guidance" .*

Those two pieces of Malay guidance poems above are what drove my spirit to travel and find out what is really happening in Belakang Padang area, one of the districts in Batam City. It is a point where according to many people all kinds of commodities are smuggled, including natural reefs.

That morning the weather was fine. The sky was clear and blue with no slightest clouds at all. From the corner of Penawar Rindu Island, the district city of Belakang Padang which has existed since the Dutch colonial era, I can clearly see the tall buildings and skyscrapers of the international trade center in Southeast Asia. It is one lost piece of land which used to belong to Malaya; Singapore.

"Where are you going to, sir? Can I hitch a ride?" asked me to someone who was preparing a boat at the dock.

"To Sarang," the man said. Sarang is the name of a small island north of Tanjung Ugang, an industrial area in Batam City.





"Where are you going?"

I paused and thought for a moment. My goal that day was to do a preliminary survey of communities in border areas. The result of the survey will be used by the institution where I work to design economic empowerment program and advocacy on sustainable fisheries in the international waters. Belakang Padang District water is one of the areas where it borders directly to two neighboring countries, namely Malaysia and Singapore.

Actually, my destination was not clear. I got some information from a friend about smuggling activities in Lenggang. Unfortunately, the information was vague.

"I am going to Lenggang," I said after a brief silence. "Okay then," said the owner of the boat who I found out later named Anto.

There were already three women sitting in the boat. One was holding an umbrella and she looked about 50-60 years of age. The other two women were young. I took a seat on the bow of the boat where it was still empty.

The tide was high at the time. Anto took a shortcut passing the small islands overgrown with lush mangrove trees that are still untouched. The shortcut is only passable during high tides.

I became acquainted with people in the boat. Actually, they were a family. I tried to start a conversation with the old woman holding an umbrella. Her name is Mrs. Jumiah.

Mrs. Jumiah told me a lot of things including her son-in-law who was jailed a week earlier because he was caught smuggling cigarettes into Singapore.

I suddenly realized that the smuggling activities between countries are real, not just a rumor. Sarang Island ("Sarang" literally means nest or den) where Mrs. Jumiah and Anto live is apparently a den of smugglers. So I changed my mind.

"Bang Anto, why don't we go straight to Sarang?" I told Anto. "

Why? Aren't you going to Lenggang?" Anto asked. "Just go to Sarang," I replied.



## Sarang Island, A Den of Smugglers

Sarang Island is one of the small islands in the border region of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. This island belongs to the sub-district administration level of Sekanak Raya, which is a 20-minute trip using 40 hp motor boat from Belakang Padang. Almost 100% of the people on this island earn their living as a fisherman.

Some of the houses look nice, in contrast to the narrow wooden houses mostly owned by the fishermen. It takes less than 10 minutes to circle this densely populated small island. In some corners you can people fixing fish traps, fishing gear in the reef waters.

During the peak of smuggling activities, almost all of the grown-up people of Sarang Island were engaged in these illegal actions, ranging from smuggling cigarettes to the trade of natural reefs.

Their method is simple. They work and deliver when there is an order from the collector in Singapore. "If there is a request from toke (financier as well as collector) in Singapore, then we work," said Ahmad, a fisherman who knows a lot about coral reef illegal trade in Singapore.

"We take the reefs while we set up fish traps, but not all reefs sell," said Hasim, a friend of Ahmad. In fact, Hasim when he was still single used to catch fish using explosives as far as the Sulawesi waters. The delivery is done using a fish merchant ship every week in and out of Singapore.

"The reefs here were once fine. As a result of bombing and reef collection, they become dead," said Jali, Ahmad's neighbor and Hasim as he took a cigarette from his pocket. Jali also told the story of his parents about the wealth of fishery resources in the region long ago.





The stories told by Jali and Sarang village elders are true. The results of the ecological survey conducted at the beginning of the program indicate an integration of ecosystem which enables fisheries to thrive. The integration includes coral reefs, seagrass beds, and mangroves. This integration of ecosystem sustains the presence of fishery resources in the area. However, the current condition of coral reef ecosystems in this region is very poor.

The earnings from selling reefs taken in this area are not always stable and high. Ahmad told his disappointment about the behavior of toke. "Sometimes we deliver 3,000 coral rocks and the toke paid for only 500 or 700 rocks. The rest are unusable (discarded)," said the toke but the fact is all of them are used. Also the prices never go up from a long time ago. They are still 30-80 cents depending on the type, although it is now becoming harder and harder to collect the coral rocks," said Ahmad.

If there is no order from the toke, the coral rocks are usually sold to aquariums and ornamental fish businesses in Batam or even sold out in the open to people passing by on the dock toward Belakang Padang.

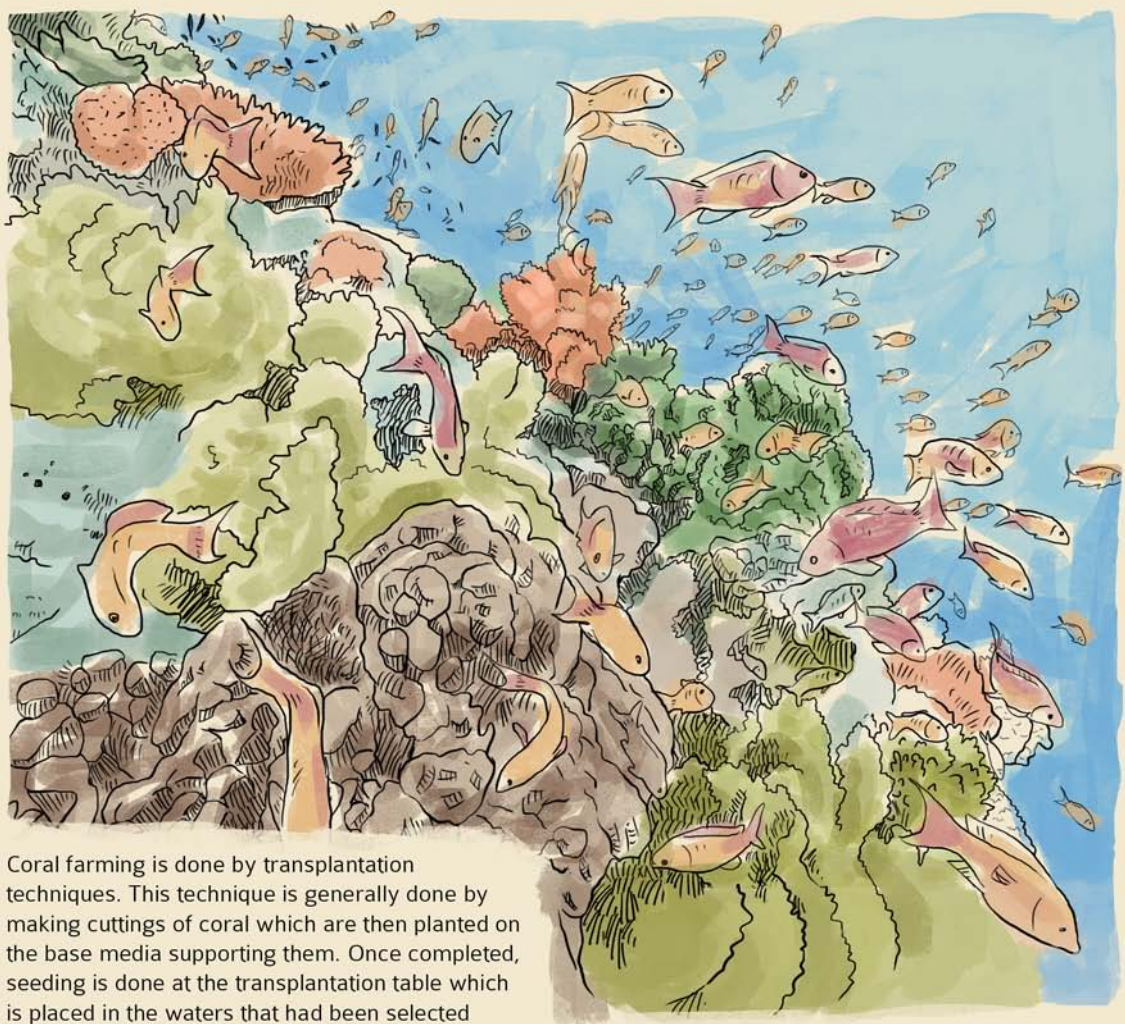
### A Change

My visit to Sarang Island really helped the next process. The results of the survey there were used by the organization to plan the programs. We then opened a dialogue with the community and performed mentoring process of coral farming groups which were created three months since I came there the first time.

Jali, Ahmad and Hashim, the three sources that I met during the survey, along with other people created the Coral Farmers Group (KBK). Group was born as a form of public awareness of the present condition of coral reef resources. They cultivate corals in the village. On several occasions, Jali, Ahmad and Hashim became the resource person on coral cultivation workshops outside the village.







Coral farming is done by transplantation techniques. This technique is generally done by making cuttings of coral which are then planted on the base media supporting them. Once completed, seeding is done at the transplantation table which is placed in the waters that had been selected before.

Jali was elected as chairman of KBK. Between his main a job as a fisherman, Jali, Ahmad and Hasim as well as other members clean up the coral garden from the trash and water plants swept away by the current. This is a routine activity that is done once a week. "It was us who damaged the corals, and now it is also us who take care of them," Jali said jokingly.

### **Storm, internal conflicts**

"We cannot force them to stay with us. This work, they say, is fruitless. For us, this effort is done purely out of our conscience and our wives can understand that, but we can't expect the same with their wives." Hasim told Jali.

Hasim was trying to calm Jali who was upset with the members of his group who do not care anymore about the group activities. The spirit of members began to decline when direct economic benefits from cultivating coral reefs were not obtained. Their effort was blocked because it is very hard to obtain a permission on the trade/selling of ornamental coral reefs.

Several steps to meet the requirements in order to obtain trade licenses has been completed, ranging from establishment of a business institution, location permit, to cultivation permit for ornamental coral reef from the relevant agencies that have been obtained.





Jali was sitting quietly in the front yard of Hasim's stilt house. No one knows what he was thinking. He gazed across the sea facing Singapore. It was late afternoon. From where Jali was seated, he could see the lights from the tall skyscrapers in Singapore that are being turned on. Jali was snapped out of his daydreaming when the loud call to prayer was heard and he mumbled, "Why are the lights of this village not turned on?"

### Hopes and plans

"Hello, assalamualaikum," I started a long-distance conversation with Jali some time ago.

"Good news, buddy. There is a Fantasy Island tourism project that is planning to create and develop a coral reef cultivation and we are asked to handle it," I said. Jali sounded happy to hear the good news from me. Before we closed our phone conversation Jali said, "It's okay if we can't sell these to Singapore as long as we can now show to everybody the fruits of our struggle. Our persistence finally paid off."

The long wait of Jali, Amad and Hasim to reap the results of their coral farming is finally over. Although the coral reefs cannot be sold to Singapore and they are not paid in dollars, a new hope begins to unfold. After the request from the Fantasy Island Project, now Jali and his group landed a similar project from the Batam City Government. This became the turning point of the spirit of the group led by Jali.

The persistence of Jali, Ahmad and Hasim, three people from different generations has been tested over time. Their wait and labor are not in vain. Hopefully, the combination of these three generations is likened the unity of three ecosystems: mangrove, seagrass beds and coral reefs that provide a variety of benefits and support the sustainability of fishery resources.

Hopefully the persistence of Jali, Ahmad, Hasim and members of their group at the frontline of the border is becoming stronger and stronger.

## Ramses Firdaus

*'Will continue to maintain marine environment in Riau Islands to the end of life'*

That's the motto of Ramses Firdaus, a 40-year-old man. Many people consider his motto is too farfetched, but the man who was born in Batu Bersurat, Riau islands, indeed wants to dedicate his life to environment and marine conservation. Ramses claimed to have this 'dreams and passion' since he was in the University of Riau year 1993, in the Department of Marine and Fisheries.

During his youth, Ramses is very active in campus organizations. This has made him need longer years to complete his bachelor degree. Ramses thought that the best school is not only in the classroom, but outside of school such as in environmental and campus organizations.

Being too active on campus did not become any obstacles for him in having accomplishments. Ramses managed to get two educational scholarships, the first one was Supersemar, a tuition scholarships (for 4 years) and a scholarships for graduate study from USAID (for 2 years).

The working experience of a father of two children is also consistent in the field of marine environment. In year 1999 to 2002, he worked in Daksana Samudera, one of the NGOs that deal with the management of coral reefs and marine environmental campaigns in the Riau Islands. After that he also joined in Co Fish Project to manage Mangrove Sanctuary and Fisheries (2002-2005).

Since 2006, Ramses joined Yayasan Gema Lingkungan Indonesia (YGLI) and have collaboration activities with Coral Cultivation Group (KBK/ Kelompok Budidaya Karang) in Sarang Island for conservation of mangroves, coral reefs and seagrass, supported by GEF SGP Indonesia.

Not satisfied with NGOs and CBOs active in the marine environment, Ramses has also taught several environmental courses in the Faculty of Biology, Andalas University to be able to teach several environmental courses in the Faculty of Biology at the University of Education in Riau Islands. For him, teaching is the manifestation of his dream to educate the people of Riau islands in order to conserve marine environment and fisheries.

