

Firefly population drops

KUALA SELANGOR: The famous fireflies that blink like Christmas lights in this seaside town top the list of wildlife hit by a thick haze of pollution from Indonesian forest fires.

For many visitors, no trip to Malaysia is complete without a star-lit canoe ride to see the twinkling fireflies near the mouth of the Selangor river, but some residents fear memories could soon be all that remain of the insects.

"At one time the tourists waited for the boats, but now the boatmen wait for the tourists," said Mokhtar, 55, who ferries visitors by canoe to glimpse the tree-dwelling fireflies and earns RM10 per trip. "Tonight I fear I may get only one boatload of visitors."

The haze dampened the light-emitting mating ritual of the fireflies. "They are the most popular firefly colony in Southeast Asia, in terms of accessibility and the impact of their synchronised flashing, so they become an eco-tourism draw," said Andrew Sebastian, of the Malaysian Nature Society,

which manages a nature reserve nearby.

But this year the haze discouraged the fireflies – which are, in fact, beetles – from twinkling as much as usual, said Mokhtar. "The fireflies were there, but they were less energetic," he said.

"We have noticed a drop in the firefly population," said Laurence Kirton, a

Forest Research Institute of Malaysia biologist, who has been monitoring the insects for the last five months.

He did not say how much the figure had dropped, but felt firefly park officials' estimates of about 50% were not too far off the mark. – Reuters

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A boatman waits to ferry customers to see fireflies in Kuala Selangor. It is estimated the firefly colony has dwindled by half.