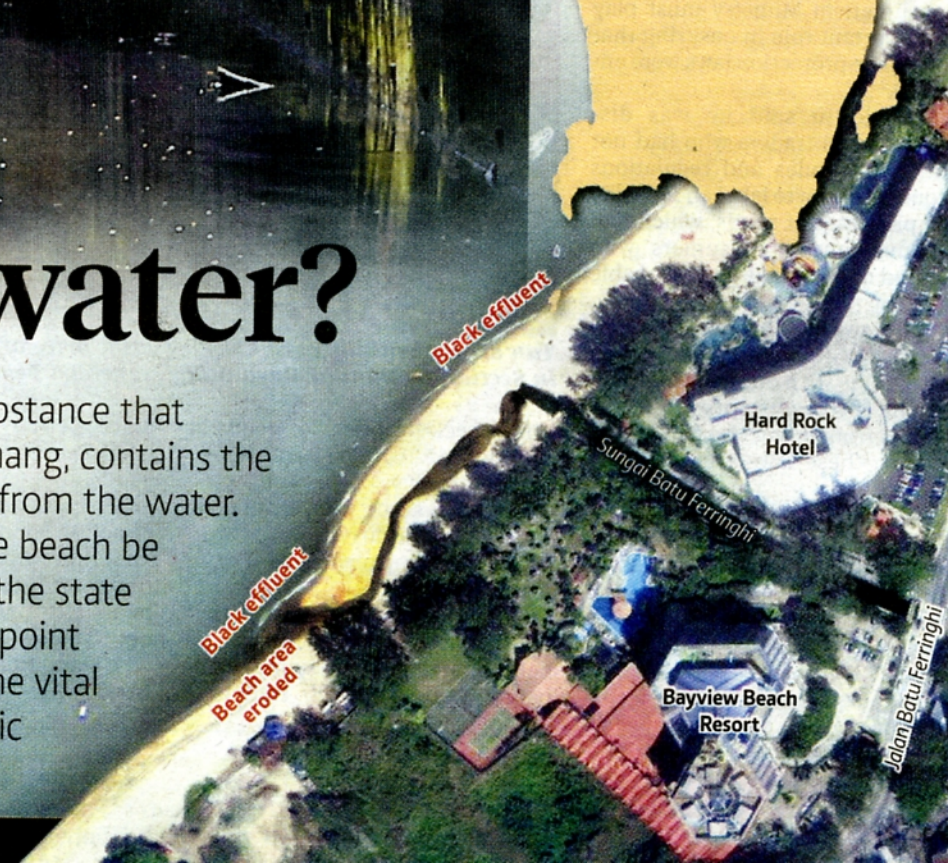


Sungai Batu Ferringhi's sordid condition has set alarm bells ringing among the people, but the same cannot be said of the state authorities. Pic by Danial Saad

E. COLI in the water?

The Department of Environment believes the black-coloured substance that continues to flow from a river into the sea at Batu Ferringhi, Penang, contains the dreaded *E. coli* bacteria. Its officers say people should stay away from the water. One non-governmental organisation is even demanding that the beach be cordoned off in the interest of public safety. The response from the state authorities is lukewarm, to say the least, with no one able to pinpoint the source of the contaminant, which threatens to undermine the vital tourism industry. What's even more shocking is that an automatic water quality monitoring system in the area is not functioning.



'E. coli likely cause of black seawater'

HEALTH CONCERN: NGOs call for closure of popular beach pending test results on water quality

**PREDEEP NAMBIAR
AND BALVIN KAUR**
GEORGE TOWN
news@nst.com.my

THE latest in a series of calamities to befall the Batu Ferringhi tourist belt could leave the popular beachfront deserted, with *Escherichia coli* (E. coli) possibly tainting the waters.

Right after beach erosion left a 50m stretch with no more than a sandy patch, Department of Environment (DoE) officers are discouraging people from swimming in the waters, following suspicion that the contamination could be caused by the bacteria.

A Drainage and Irrigation Department (DID) officer said this could have been caused by a broken sewerage pipe, causing black effluence to flow downstream Sungai Batu Ferringhi and out to sea.

Yesterday, DoE officers took water samples from the area and said the tests results would be ready in two weeks.

In the wake of this incident, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) called for the stretch of beach to be cordoned off. Its president, S.M. Mohd Idris, said the move should be carried out in the interest of the safety of beach-goers.

"If they suspect, for some reason, that it should be closed, please do not hesitate. The agency concerned must take it upon themselves to close the beach. If you know it, please do not just say it, please do it," he told the *New Straits Times*.

He said the water in Sungai Batu Ferringhi also stank, and noted that the polluted water appeared to be coming from a source about 300m from the sea.

"SAM is disappointed that such polluting activities still occur because it conflicts with the state's slogan of 'Cleaner and Greener Penang'.

"We call on the relevant authorities to probe the cause and source of the pollution. The findings should be made public to allay public concerns."

He added that the pollution could affect marine life and the health of swimmers in nearby areas because the pollution might have spread.

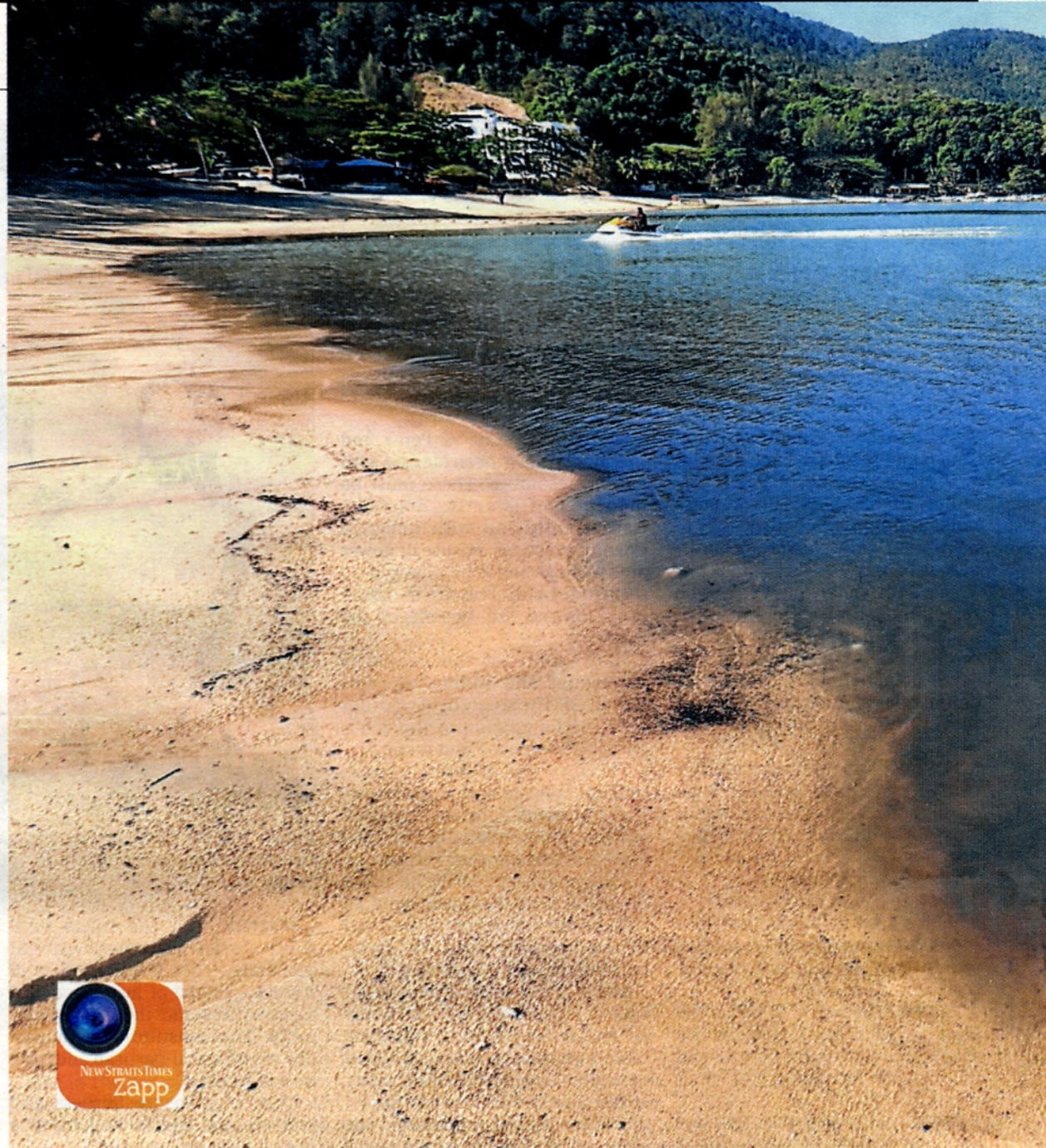
Checks near the river revealed the presence of a DID automatic water quality monitoring system, which looked abandoned as the equipment was rusty and overgrown.

Yesterday, the NST front-paged a report on the beach pollution, which stemmed from pungent black effluence from the river that spread to the Batu Ferringhi beachfront.

Erosion has also defaced a 50m



**BATU
FERRINGHI
SHAME**



stretch of beach, rendering it unsuitable for use.

Attempts to contact the authorities, including the Penang Island Municipal Council and the DID, to state the source of the erosion and the cause of the river pollution were unsuccessful.

Malaysian Nature Society Penang chapter adviser D. Kanda Kumar said putting red-and-white striped tape around the area was not adequate as beach-goers would ignore it.

"They need to put up notices around the area warning tourists about the danger.

"They can also post guards to make sure tourists stay off the beach," he said, adding that water sports operators should also be advised to avoid the waters for now.

Penang Environment Working

Group chairman Datuk Dr Ong Hean Tee, while commending DoE's quick response, lamented that the matter was being taken lightly by the authorities.

"This is a serious problem. The authorities must act swiftly and work together to find a solution and not play the blame game."

He said that if there were dangerous substances in the water, the authorities must cordon off the beach until remedial works were carried out.

"For that, we need data on the sea (water quality) as soon as possible."

Tanjung Bungah assemblyman and environmental activist Teh Yee Cheu said pending the results of DoE's tests on the water samples, the public should refrain from swimming in the stretch.

"Hotels in the area must also alert their guests, as the public cannot be exposed to the area."

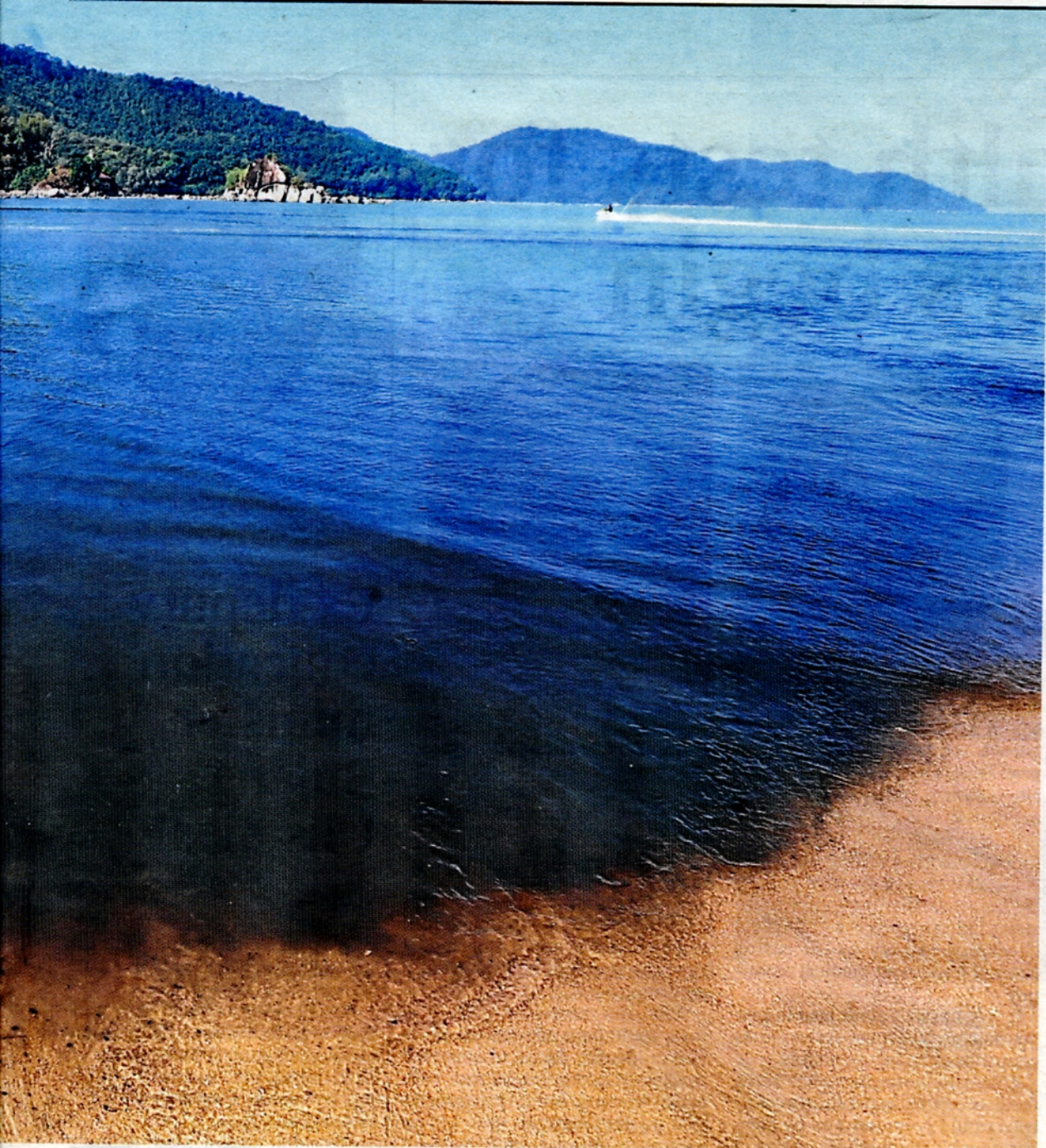
Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Seri G. Palanivel said DoE would expedite the analysis of the water samples taken out from the area.

"Usually, it takes about two weeks for a thorough report, but since it concerns tourism and health, we are expediting it." **Additional reporting by Muhamad Syakir Abdul Wahab**

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The black water off the Batu Ferringhi beach. It is believed the pollution is caused by a broken sewerage pipe.
Pic by Danial Saad

State rep insists beach has improved

GEORGE TOWN: Despite the alarming condition of Batu Ferringhi beach and calls by non-governmental organisations for the authorities to "shut down" the tourist belt, a state lawmaker insists the beach has improved.

State Tourism Committee chairman Danny Law Heng Kiang on Sunday said he had not received complaints on the matter.

"The beach has improved a lot compared with the past few years. Anyway, I will find out from the hoteliers before I comment on the matter."

When contacted yesterday, Law

said: "Although the beach pollution will affect tourism, it is a temporary problem and it will return to normal once the matter is solved."

When asked when the matter would be solved and if the beach would be closed to public while remedial works were carried out, Law said it was up to the Department of Environment.

State Environment Committee chairman Phee Boon Poh, when asked on the dangers of E. coli and whether the affected beachfront would be closed, thanked the NST

for highlighting the matter.

He said the authorities would check the source of the problem and would not resort to finger-pointing.

"If there is any illegal discharge, action would be taken against the polluters. Usually, this kind of discharge is from a sewerage treatment plant."

State Health Department director Datuk Dr Lailanor Ibrahim said the media should advise the public to be wary of the polluted waters.

"A detailed investigation by various agencies has to be undertaken before any action could be taken."