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Don't get hooked on eating this fish

Trending ikan bandaraya dishes may be toxic traps, health experts warn

By ARFA YUNUS
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PETALING JAYA: As satay ikan bandaraya (suckermouth catfish) goes viral on social media, marine experts are warning Malaysians against eating the fish, especially since it comes from the country's most polluted rivers.

Known for its ability to thrive in murky environments, ikan bandaraya is increasingly being promoted as a culinary delicacy.

This is even as the authorities have declared all-out war against the invasive species whose burrows can damage riverbanks and lead to soil erosion.

Now that satay ikan bandaraya is trending on social media, experts are sounding the alarm as its ability to thrive in polluted waters causes the fish to absorb surrounding pollutants such as heavy metals.

Ikan bandaraya has no natural predators in Malaysian waters, according to Prof Dr Mohammad Noor Amal Azmai from Universiti Putra Malaysia's Institute of Bioscience.

With its thick, tough skin and limited meat, he said the fish is often found in less-than-ideal environments.

"Its skin is thick, so other fish don't want to eat it. That leaves it to multiply freely, especially in areas where no one will consume it," he said when contacted.

Though not traditionally part of

Attack of the monster fish

Suckermouth catfish threatens riverbanks, cities

By ARFA YUNUS
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PETALING JAYA: Our freshwater fish are being driven to extinction, while riverbanks are facing massive erosion which could pose risks to urban infrastructure, especially in major cities like Kuala Lumpur.

The culprits in both cases is an invasive species of fish. Or three species, to be precise.

These fish burrow into the sand at riverbanks, destabilising them and causing erosion. When the river gets swollen during heavy rain, it could lead to the collapse of the banks.

In Kuala Lumpur, these fish are found in large numbers in the

100,000 across the peninsula. "Can you imagine how many holes they have dug up? Easily tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands," he said. "Imagine what will happen when we have floods. It will be much worse."

He added that the fish are also breeding uncontrolled because they have no natural predators.

Originally from the Amazon River basin in South America, these three species have made their way into Malaysian rivers, causing significant disruption to local ecosystems.

This is particularly problematic for densely populated cities like Kuala Lumpur.

In June, it was reported that over 700kg of ikan bandaraya was caught at Dengai Sungai

Facts about the 'bandaraya' fish

Hypostomus plecostomus
Common name: Common Pleco, Suckermouth Catfish
Size: Can grow up to 50 cm (20 inches) in length
Origin: Native to the Amazon Basin in South America

Pterygoplichthys pardalis
(Amazon Sailfin Catfish)
Common name: Amazon Sailfin Catfish, Leopard Pleco
Size: Can grow up to 40-50 cm (16-20 inches) in length
Origin: Also native to South America, particularly in the

University biologist Dr. Ahmad found that the experiment "It was from Yet it lived and survive in polluted water more than 100 times longer than other fish. To avoid bury themselves in mud, they cause soil erosion. In Petaling Jaya, the banks are being eroded and the fish are causing soil erosion. Because of urban population, the fish are causing soil erosion and the fish are causing soil erosion."

Aquatic concerns: The Star reported on Oct 26 about the risk posed by ikan bandaraya whose burrows can damage riverbanks and lead to soil erosion.

the local diet, the fish has gained newfound attention amid efforts to control its population in Malaysian waterways.

The Star recently reported how the invasive species is silently accelerating soil erosion along riverbanks, posing risks to urban infrastructure in cities like Kuala Lumpur.

"We've seen people on social media promoting suckermouth fish satay. Generally, all fish can be eaten, but the question is

where it's caught," said Prof Mohammad Noor Amal. He said the new trend of eating the fish now that the authorities are encouraging anglers to catch as many as they can to reduce their numbers.

"If it's sourced from clean and clear waters, enjoy it. But in the Klang Valley, where the water is contaminated and rife with parasites and other polluted material, it's not advisable to eat ikan bandaraya caught in such areas," he said.

Prof Mohammad Noor Amal recommended alternative uses for ikan bandaraya instead.

"The initiative to catch ikan bandaraya is good and should be supported.

"Fish caught in polluted areas could be processed into secondary products such as fish feed, or promoted as agricultural fertilisers.

"Instead of encouraging people to eat it, let's focus on other productive ways to use it," he added.

Echoing this sentiment, biodiversity expert Prof Dr Amirrudin Ahmad, from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu's Faculty of Science and Marine Environment, warned that the fish's habitat poses potential health risks.

"The fish feeds on algae and moss, which absorbs pollutants sitting at the bottom of the food chain. We then consume these contaminants indirectly," he said.

Although short-term health effects may not be immediately apparent, Prof Amirrudin pointed to studies on the acceptable limits of heavy metals, such as lead, and other pollutants in the fish's body.

"Even if the lead content is within safe limits, this isn't a justification for consumption when it concerns public safety. When I see suckermouth fish satay being prepared, I can't say it's wise.

"Processing it for animal feed is fine, but eating it when it's caught in dirty water is not recommended. The fish lives in an unhealthy habitat," he said.

Prof Amirrudin added that if the fish were sourced from cleaner environments, such as the upper reaches of the Gombak River or its native habitat in the Amazon river, it would be a different story.

"If the fish were living in a clean environment, there would be no problem. But in the many places where it is caught here, it's best not to eat it," he said.

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'More research on effects of eating polluted fish needed'

PETALING JAYA: Satay ikan bandaraya (suckermouth catfish) could pose serious toxic risks due to potential heavy metal contamination, say public health experts.

The growing interest in these unconventional dishes has led experts to advise caution and restraint until more is understood about the health impacts of consuming fish from polluted waters.

Prof Dr Mohd Hasni Ja'afar, a toxicologist at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, warns that the fish's habitat in polluted waters may expose consumers to serious health hazards.

"The public should exercise caution when consuming ikan bandaraya as it typically inhabits dirty and polluted rivers.

"Studies on food contamination in our country's Environmental Impact Assessments show evidence of heavy metal accumulation in fish from certain rivers. This bioaccumulation process presents a real risk," he said when contacted.

He added that a recent report from Indonesia highlighted high levels of lead (Pb) in ikan bandaraya, which is commonly used in dishes like otak-otak and fish balls in the country.

Mohd Hasni is concerned that the same scenario could occur in Malaysia and called for a comprehensive analysis of local varieties of the fish before it enters the local food market.

"Even if it tastes like prawn, it's



Time to scale back: Despite growing interest in satay ikan bandaraya, experts say such dishes could contain heavy metal contamination. — Photo courtesy of the Suckermouth Catfish Hunters Community

highly unhealthy," he cautioned. "Consumption could lead to grave implications."

If lead contamination is present in suckermouth fish meat in Malaysia, Mohd Hasni said the consequences could be dire for public health.

Lead is a known endocrine-disrupting chemical and is associated with several neuro-behavioural risks.

"Lead has a naturally sweet taste, which may make contaminated fish more appealing.

"However, Pb exposure can severely impact IQ and emotional regulation, especially in children,

and has been linked to issues like vandalism and aggression," he explained.

"Some studies have even found a relationship between lead exposure during pregnancy and increased risks of autism in children."

Hasni added that vaccination is ineffective against the effects of heavy metal exposure.

In Malaysia, he said industrial and agricultural pollution has significantly degraded river quality, leaving several waterways classified as Class V – suitable only for irrigation and drainage.

These heavily polluted rivers,

"Lead has a naturally sweet taste, which makes contaminated fish more appealing."

Prof Dr Mohd Hasni Ja'afar

he said, are the very habitats that ikan bandaraya prefer.

"This issue has become a significant problem in Malaysia because of our polluted rivers.

"Before consumption, it is essential to conduct thorough studies on our ikan bandaraya.

"I suspect we would find similar levels of heavy metals here as seen in Indonesia," he added.

Sharing a similar view was Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman, an epidemiology and biostatistics expert at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), who highlighted the need for further research.

"The impact on public health has not been well studied and remains unestablished so far.

"There should be a detailed study," she said, adding that public health implications will ultimately depend on the findings of such research.

Health expert Datuk Dr NKS

Tharmaseelan cautioned the public about the potential dangers of consuming ikan bandaraya.

Often referred to as "garbage cleaners", ikan bandaraya are known for feeding on waste materials, including decaying organic matter and other contaminants from polluted rivers.

He warned that these hazardous substances may linger within the fish, rendering them risky for human consumption.

"The public should be mindful of eating these fish as they consume everything, both beneficial and bad, including decomposing animal matter.

"Preparing satay doesn't fully cook the fish, which could make it nearly poisonous, depending on its diet. These fish present significant risks if incorporated into the human diet," he said.

He also noted that health consequences may include gastrointestinal issue, such as gastroenteritis with symptoms of diarrhoea and vomiting, particularly in children, where cases of food poisoning could prove fatal.

While no preventive vaccine exists, he highlighted that medical interventions, including hospitalisation, may be necessary for severe cases.

He also backed calls for a comprehensive study on health risks, stating that it could provide critical insights into the illnesses caused by ikan bandaraya consumption and appropriate treatment options.

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THE anticipation was palpable as he pulled and pulled at the cast net. Sweat had begun to bead on his brow, glistening under the warm sun, as he felt the weight of the net begin to change.

With one final tug, Mohd Rashid Mohamad brought the net up with a few fishes of the invasive kind entangled within it.

Elated from his first ever catch, the RHB Banking Group managing director and chief executive officer reflected on how even small actions could contribute to bigger environmental and social impact.

In line with RHB's commitment to making a lasting environmental impact, Mohd Rashid, together with some employees of the banking group, were at the recent Touch Hearts Community Weekend Programme to catch invasive fish species such as black tilapia and suckermouth catfish at the Sungai Kuyoh, Bukit Jalil river.

This was one of the many activities held concurrently by the bank throughout the Asean region during the weekend.

Mohd Rashid said it was all about "small acts and big impacts".

"RHB Touch Hearts supports RHB's broader Sustainability Strategy, under the Community Empowerment Pillar, which focuses on building stronger, more inclusive communities and promoting financial inclusion across Malaysia and Asean."

"Touch Hearts contribute to RHB's broader sustainability goals of empowering two million individuals and institutions by fostering social and environmental resilience," Mohd Rashid told *The Star*.

He added that the programme

SMALL ACTS, BIG IMPACTS

RHB's Touch Hearts initiative transforms communities and fosters environmental protection



Mohd Rashid (third from left) said all efforts of RHB Touch Hearts were in line with the bank's sustainability framework. He is pictured here with volunteers pointing to a few invasive fish species caught. — SHAARI CHEMAT/The Star

embodies RHB's mission to create a lasting social impact by addressing immediate needs and providing long-term solutions that aims to empower communities while driving environmental sustainability.

Established in 2016, the RHB Touch Hearts programme promotes volunteerism among RHB employees, empowering them to give back to the community

through various community engagement activities.

It aligns with RHB's commitment to social responsibility and sustainable development.

The 2024 edition of RHB Touch Hearts saw over 3,000 RHB volunteers from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei, Cambodia and Laos come together to champion their chosen pro-

grammes focused on community engagement, environmental conservation, educational programmes and business support.

The group's fund-raising efforts have collectively raised over RM600,000 this year.

Since the programme's inception, over 15,000 RHB employees across Malaysia and Asean countries, dedicating more than 10,000

volunteer hours, have actively participated in community service initiatives, directly impacting more than 60,000 individuals in various communities.

These efforts have focused on underserved areas, flood-affected regions, schools and vulnerable groups, demonstrating RHB's commitment to social responsibility.

Reflecting on this year's activities, which centred on people and planet pillars, Mohd Rashid said the meaningful impact can be driven through empowering communities and enhancing environmental awareness.

"By zeroing in on these two pillars, RHB can play a part in addressing the immediate needs of underprivileged groups while providing long-term solutions through education, healthcare and financial literacy."

"We are also encouraging sustainable practices, fostering environmental protection and raising awareness about the importance of preserving Malaysia's natural resources."

Mohd Rashid added that the uniqueness of RHB Touch Hearts lies in its employee-centric approach and long-term impact and comprehensive reach.

"Unlike one-off CSR activities, Touch Hearts is designed to create a lasting social and environmental impact, addressing a wide range of social, business and environmental needs, ensuring our efforts are relevant to the communities and ecosystems in Malaysia and beyond."

"It empowers our employees to take ownership of the corporate responsibility agenda by actively participating in sustained, meaningful volunteer efforts," he said.

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lokal

Gerik

Ikan kelah liar memang didambakan kaki pancing kerana dikatakan paling sukar ditangkap, sementara keenakan rasa dan harganya yang mahal menyebabkan 'Raja Sungai' ini menjadi buruan ramai.

Selepas berdekad diburu dan ditangkap secara berleluasa, ikan kelah atau nama saintifiknya *Tor tambroides*, kini di ambang kepupusan lalu mendorong pihak berkuasa meletakkan lindungan air tawar ini di bawah perlindungan undang-undang.

Selain itu, usaha memelihara dan memulihara ikan kelah juga dilakukan menerusi beberapa projek santuari, antaranya Santuari Kelah Akekchep Sungai Tiang, di sini, yang dioperasikan oleh Orang Asli suku Jahai.

Pengarah Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (Jakoa) Perak dan Kedah Hairulnizam Abd Rahman berkata, lokasi ikan kelah di Sungai Tiang itu ditemukan hasil penyelidikan Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) dengan kerjasama penduduk setempat pada 2016.

"TNB melihat kawasan ini berpotensi menjadi pusat pemuliharaan ikan kelah kerana di kawal oleh penduduk dan selamat daripada pencerobohan.

"Pada 2020, TNB menyerahkan tapak ini kepada kami dan kami serahkan kepada Orang Asli di Kampung Orang Asli Sungai Tiang untuk uruskan melalui Koperasi Orang Asli Sungai Tiang (KOAST) yang ditubuhkan pada tahun sama," katanya.

Terletak jauh di pedalaman, mereka yang berhajet ke santuari ini perlu menempuh perjalan



HADI menunjukkan ikan tengas di Santuari Kelah Akekchep Sungai Tiang.



PETUGAS KOAST yang mengusahakan Santuari Kelah Akekchep Sungai Tiang membawa pengunjung merasai pengalaman menyusuri Tasik Banting dan menikmati keindahan alam semula jadi di Taman Negeri Royal Belum.



IKAN tengas yang menjadi tarikan pengunjung di Santuari Kelah Akekchep Sungai Tiang.

Enggan 'Raja Sungai' pupus!

Santuari Kelah Akekchep Sungai Tiang terpilih jadi pusat pemuliharaan ikan kelah, tengas

nam menaiki bot sekurang-kurangnya satu jam 45 minit dari jeti awam Banting ke Sungai Tiang, bergantung pada paras air Tasik Banting. Lebih cetek paras air, lebih lama masa diambil.

Bersedia menyahut cabaran itu, penulis menyertai Jakoa Perak dan Kedah ke santuari berkenaan namun tidak menyangka perjalanan menaiki bot hanyalah permulaan bagi satu kembara yang agak jerih.

Masakan tidak, selepas tiba di jeti Sungai Tiang, kami perlu menaiki bot galah, menyusuri sungai itu yang mengambil masa kira-kira sejam seha-

lum sampai di Akekchep, sekali gus menjawab pertanyaan penulis mengapa santuari ini kurang dikunjungi sekalipun dibuka kepada orang awam sepanjang tahun.

Menurut Hairulnizam, pusat pemuliharaan itu hanya menerima sekitar 200 pengunjung setahun dan Jakoa sedang merangka beberapa langkah bagi meningkatkan jumlah pelawat dan seterusnya melonjakkan pendapatan Orang Asli di situ.

Untuk ke kem Akekchep, kami perlu menapak kira-kira 15 minit, meredah denai. Penat memang terasa namun keindahan alam semula

jadi dengan air sungai yang jernih dan keredupan suasana rimba, memberikan ketenangan yang jarang-jarang dikecapi di hutan konkrit.

Akekchep sebenarnya istilah bahasa Jahai, iaitu 'akek' bermaksud janggan, sementara 'chep' pula bermakna tangkap. Justeru, istilah akekchep bererti 'janggan tangkap'.

Kampung Orang Asli Sungai Tiang didiami 118 keluarga berjumlah 454 penduduk dengan kegiatan utama menangkap ikan dan mencari hasil hutan.

"Santuari ini adalah antara usaha memulihara ikan asal di Sungai

Tiang ini namun ikan kelah dan tengas dijadikan spesies utama pemuliharaan," katanya.

Sementara itu, Tok Batin kampung berkenaan Hadi Mes berkata, memberi ikan makan adalah antara aktiviti utama yang dapat dilakukan oleh pengunjung.

"Untuk bermain dengan ikan-ikan ini pengunjung boleh naik ke atas platform yang kami bina daripada buluh dan kayu lasil. Dulu, kita main di tepi (tebing) sahaja, tetapi ramai yang tergelincir, jadi berbahaya," katanya.

Bagaimanapun kata Hadi, buat masa ini hanya ikan tengas menun-

jukkan sifat jinak kepada manusia, sementara kelah pula lebih 'malu-malu'.

Berkongsi lanjut, Hadi berkata, tempoh terbaik untuk pengunjung datang melihat kelah adalah pada musim tengkujuh atau dari September hingga Disember.

"Ketika itu musim mengawan (ikan kelah). Penyu satu sungai (ikan kelah), dari hulu ke sini."

"Di luar masa (mengawan), memang ada ikan, cuma kita tak nampak. Kalau hujan air akan keruh, tetapi kalau air betul-jernih, kita akan nampak pasir di dasar sungai," katanya. Bernama





SAMBUTAN Hari Perikanan Sedunia (HPS) 2024 mampu meningkatkan kesedaran mengenai kepentingan industri perikanan dan ekosistem marin.

Ketua Pengarah Perikanan, **Datuk Adnan Hussain** berkata penganjuran sambutan itu juga bertujuan menghargai usaha nelayan, penternak, penyelidik serta semua yang terlibat dalam sektor perikanan, Jabatan Perikanan Malaysia (DOF).

“DOF amat berbangga dengan kejayaan sambutan ini dan ia merupakan langkah pertama dalam menggalakkan kesedaran tentang pentingnya sumber perikanan yang lestari. Sokongan daripada usahawan perikanan juga amat memberangsangkan.

“Sambutan ini turut menjadi platform untuk usahawan mempromosikan produk perikanan mereka sekali gus memberi impak positif kepada ekonomi,” katanya dalam kenyataan. Adnan berkata acara julung kali diadakan baru-baru ini berjaya menarik lebih 13,000 pengunjung dengan pelbagai pengisian program.

“Pelbagai aktiviti kesedaran awam dan pameran agensi kerajaan yang diadakan, membawa mesej penting tentang pemeliharaan ekosistem marin kepada semua pengunjung termasuk pameran produk perikanan dan demonstrasi masakan.

"Acara ini juga telah memperlihatkan kerjasama yang erat antara usahawan, penggiat industri dan pengunjung dalam usaha mempromosikan perikanan yang bertanggungjawab," ujarnya.

Tambahnya sepanjang tempoh dua hari penganjuran, pengunjung juga berpeluang mendapatkan penerangan dan tawaran perkhidmatan langsung kerajaan.

"Sebanyak 13 kaunter perkhidmatan jabatan serta agensi telah mengambil bahagian pada HPS kali ini.

"Penglibatan 20 reruai usahawan produk perikanan, enam reruai usahawan jualan Agro MADANI dan *food truck* dalam sambutan ini turut merancakkan aktiviti ekonomi terutamanya bagi usahawan perikanan. Sebanyak RM72,240 jualan berjaya direkodkan sehingga hari kedua program," katanya.

Dalam pada itu, Adnan berkata DOF mengucapkan terima kasih kepada semua yang terlibat dalam menjayakan sambutan ini termasuk pengunjung, peniaga dan orang awam yang menyokong penganjuran HPS.

"Untuk maklumat lanjut mengenai acara ini sila layari portal rasmi dan platform media sosial Jabatan Perikanan Malaysia," katanya.

– **WILAYAHKU**