

Say no to shark fin soup, experts urge

DE 13/07/2011 13

KOTA KINABALU: Sharks, being the prime predator, keep the underwater food chain in balance and, without sharks, the ocean's food chain would be in disarray, according to experts.

However, sharks, with their fins much sought-after as a gastronomic delight, are fast being depleted and their absence in the food chain is helping other species to multiply without control and unbalance the ecosystem, including wiping out more species down the food chain.

Over-fishing and shark-finning, cutting the valuable fins off sharks, are threatening the shark population. Moreover, shark-finning is very cruel because after the fins are cut off, the sharks are tossed back into the sea to die.

Yet most people have no pity for sharks and their indifference comes of no surprise because sharks have been portrayed as man-eaters, no thanks to popular movies. In fact, not all sharks are killers.

Shark-finning, however, will remain a lucrative business as long as shark fin soup remains on menus.

Can sharks be saved from extinction?

Banning or regulating shark hunting and finning is a first step. Some 20 countries have banned shark hunting. But enforcing the law is another matter since some traders go around the rules and import shark fins.

Probably the most effective way to combat finning is to drive home the point that shark fin soup, long entrenched as a status symbol or tradition, particularly among the Chinese community, has, in fact, little or no nutritional or medicinal value.

The shark fin, itself, is actually tasteless. The flavour of the soup comes from the broth and the green merely gives it texture.

Also, **Technical Advisor of the Green Connection** (Aquarium and Science Discovery Centre), Professor Steve Oakley, warns that toxic amounts of methyl mercury in sharks, including the fins, could cause brain damage when eaten by humans.

In fact, Malaysia's Natural Resources and Environment Ministry has stopped including shark fin soup on its menu at functions.

In Sept 2008, the Gayana Resort here became the first tourism establishment in the country to stop serving shark fin soup.

Shark-finning is a socio-economic activity for the community on Mabul Island off Semporna near Tawau.

During the shark hunting season, fishing gear, including



Dr Ridzwan

bait, are set up especially for hunting sharks. Each boat can haul in between eight and 10 sharks with hook and line.

Small sharks weigh about 10 kg while the large ones reach 60kg and about 1.5metres in length.

When caught, the sharks are finned and their carcass discarded due to low market prices (30sen/kg). However, those species that have a market value will be kept whole and sold.

Fins from each fish are sold in sets of four: one dorsal, two pectoral, one caudal, fetching approximately RM130-RM150.

Sharks grow and mature rather slowly, said Universiti Malaysia Sabah's (UMS) Borneo Marine Research Institute (BMRI) Director Prof Dr Ridzwan Abdul Rahman.

"Habitat degradation, over-fishing and unsustainable fishing practices, including dynamiting, cyanide poisoning and finning, all contribute to the pressures imposed on this group of fish," he said.

Of note, the State Government recently declared its commitment to banning "shark hunting" in Sabah.

Dr Mabel B Manjaji-Matsumoto, a lecturer at BMRI, said placing the shark species on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), an international agreement between governments, might be an effective step to ban the trade of shark fins and might help reduce shark-finning.

"Most of the shark and ray species are already on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List, but this doesn't mean that their trade is regulated."

She said the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species has been widely recognized as the most comprehensive, objective global approach for evaluating the conservation status of plant and animal species.

Meanwhile, UMS Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation) Prof Dr Rosnah Ismail said research would help to influence existing policies on marine conservation.

UMS has been directly involved in shark conservation in Sabah through research since 1995.

"It is pertinent to address the illegal, unregulated and unreported shark fisheries, especially the ones involving fishing activities in the waters of neighbouring countries and landing on Malaysian shores (as in Mabul Island)," she asserted. - Bernama