

Community Cooperation, Tagal Committees Help Preserve Pelian Fish Ecosystem In Sabah

APRIL 17, 2026

Kota kinabalu: Cooperation between tagal committees and villagers in Sabah in implementing government directives on the removal of koi fish from rivers and tagal areas has helped facilitate the enforcement of a circular that came into effect on April 8. Sabah Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Industry Datuk Jamawi Jaafar said cooperation and support from local communities are crucial in ensuring the directive to remove koi fish is carried out more effectively across all affected areas to curb the spread of Koi Herpesvirus (KHV).

According to BERNAMA News Agency, villagers are increasingly aware of the impact of releasing ornamental fish into rivers or tagal areas, as they fear the virus could infect pelian fish species. Villagers have expressed their gratitude for the directive, as previously, they had only heard speculation regarding the cause of pelian fish deaths in tagal areas. Once the official statement was issued, residents began to understand that the practice of beautifying tagal rivers by introducing koi fish was a major mistake. With the circular in place, all tagal operators are working to remove koi fish from their respective rivers.

Tagal, a Kadazandusun word meaning 'do not', is a traditional natural resource management system in Sabah that prohibits fishing in designated river zones for a certain period to allow fish to breed, before harvesting them as a source of food and income for local communities. Pelian fish, or *Tor douronensis*, is among the native mahseer species found in Borneo, particularly in Sabah and Sarawak, and is commonly reared in tagal areas.

Jamawi said the issue of pelian fish deaths in rivers and tagal areas has been reported since June 2022, prompting various studies conducted in collaboration with the Marine Science Department of Universiti Malaysia Sabah. In January, study findings indicated that koi fish could be a contributing factor disrupting river ecosystem balance due to viruses carried by the species, thereby affecting pelian fish.

He said the circular directive was issued to all tagal operators to ensure koi fish are promptly removed from rivers and tagal areas, with implementation now actively underway, especially in rivers identified to have the presence of the species. This includes continuous monitoring in several tagal areas such as Ranau, Keningau, Tambunan, Tenom, and Sipitang.

However, Jamawi clarified that the directive does not apply to koi fish kept in ornamental ponds, but firmly reminded that they must not be released into rivers or tagal areas. Koi fish found in rivers are being captured and disposed of in accordance with biosecurity guidelines set by the Sabah Fisheries Department or relocated back to ornamental ponds.

'We do not want the KHV virus to continue disrupting river ecosystems, which has persisted for a long time. We know pelian fish are a treasure of Sabah and must be protected. If this situation continues, pelian fish could become extinct in Sabah's rivers. As such, it is my responsibility as minister to enforce this regulation so that future generations can inherit pelian fish species in our rivers,' he said.

Recently, the Sabah Fisheries Department instructed all state Tagal Committee chairmen to take immediate action to remove koi fish species (*Cyprinus* sp.) from tagal areas and local rivers to curb the spread of KHV. In the Sabah Fisheries Director's Circular No. 1/2026 dated April 8, the department said the directive was issued following the detection of positive KHV cases affecting local fish, including pelian species, in several rivers and tagal areas.