

Mameng trade raises concerns over dwindling wild population [WATCH]

By **Olivia Miwil** September 22, 2026 @ 9:47am

SEMPORNA: Growing tourism demand for endangered fish species could put further pressure on their dwindling wild populations.

The humphead wrasse, locally known as mameng or shou mei, is classified as Endangered on the IUCN Red List and listed under Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

The contrast is particularly visible at Semporna's fish market.

As tourists return from island trips, young fishmongers call out in Chinese to attract customers.

Tourists gather around the live seafood and bargain with the sellers, including for mameng.



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Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) marine biologist Dr Achier Chung said such demand could increase pressure on the species' already limited wild populations.

"The problem is that the species has very limited populations in the sea.

"People will try to come into conservation areas to fish for this fish to meet this demand.

"Otherwise, the fish can be transported from other countries, such as the Philippines, to meet tourism demand," she told the New Straits Times.

Both China and the Philippines have banned the sale of mameng.

Chung said better data on wild populations was needed before stronger conservation measures could be considered, including controls on harvesting, permits or a possible ban on catching and selling the species in the state.

The Sabah Fisheries Department said the state is open to introducing a ban or formulating stronger policies to protect mameng, subject to findings from a resource assessment study.

Former Department director Datin Dr Shuhadah Mustapha had said in July Sabah did not issue import or export permits for live humphead wrasse, including to Peninsular Malaysia, Sarawak and Labuan.

However, domestic trade remains permitted, and the species may be caught, sold, consumed and cultured in cages.

The department also does not currently have population data for humphead wrasse in its natural habitat.

Fish landing records showed that 12,090kg of humphead wrasse worth RM1.45 million were landed in Semporna in 2025, compared with 36kg valued at RM3,600 in Kota Kinabalu.

Meanwhile, Chung said UMS had been trying to breed the species through its aquaculture programme for about nine years but faced difficulties due to a shortage of male fish to fertilise the females' eggs.

"If they can breed this species, that can reduce harvesting from the wild. The fish can be produced in the hatchery or on the farm for public consumption," she said.



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