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Crisis over crustacean

The population of mud spiny lobsters, found mostly at Tanjung Penyusop in Johor, is dwindling because of various threats to their habitat. The Fisheries Department has introduced measures such as catch-and-release to protect stocks and ramp up production in the next decade.

Story and photos by REMAR NORDIN
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THE monsoon season is usually off-limits for deep-sea fishermen due to strong water current that make it difficult or even dangerous for them to go out to sea.

Also hiding from the strong current are marine crustaceans, such as the mud spiny lobsters (*panulirus polyphagus*) that migrate from the deep oceans into the shallows.

The season is a much-awaited one for shoreline fishermen in Johor as this lobster species is their main catch during this period.

The shoreline fishermen at Tanjung Penyusop, in Kota Tinggi, are particularly dependent on it to bolster their income.

However, the catch has been dwindling for the past few years, and the fishermen are understandably worried.

Though they are now getting almost double the price for a kilogramme – from RM80 10 years ago to RM150 now – the catch has dropped drastically to just a quarter of what it was two decades ago (see sidebar).

Sahronev Mohd Noh, 37, said these lobsters used to come up to the sandbanks, and even children were able to catch them by hand.

"I started catching lobsters when I was about 13 years old.

"Back then, we did not need a boat to go out to sea to place bait inside the lobster trap," he said when met at the Tanjung Penyusop

beach. "We could just come down to the beach here, look under a rock and we would find mud spiny lobsters of all kinds and sizes," he said.

He added that in the past, the crustaceans were in abundance as they were not a popular seafood like they had become today.

The third generation lobster fisherman said lobsters used to be every fishing family's backup food supply when they could not go out to sea during the monsoon season.

"It is funny how time changes things. The lobster could not be sold for a single sen back then, but now it has become my source of income to put food on the table for my family," said Sahronev.

Norizam Amir Hashim, 37, decided to become a lobster fisherman 15 years ago, due to the increase in demand for the crustacean.

"I used to sell fish at the local market but due to the high demand for lobsters then, I decided focus on catching the latter.

"But over the years, the population of lobsters in the area dropped," he said.

Norizam believed the drop was due to the ongoing development in the area which he claimed had polluted the waters around Kota Tinggi.

Fishermen in the area now have to spend more time to catch lobsters as mature ones are harder to get, he said.

"I usually set my trap in the early morning and go out again in the afternoon to check it and collect what I have.

"We release the smaller ones back into the water and only keep the large ones.

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Size matters: Lobsters measuring less than 6cm must be thrown back into the sea as they are too young.

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JOHOR

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'Mature lobsters migrate from dirty feeding grounds'

"But these days, catching large lobsters is getting harder as their numbers have dropped.

"We often find only smaller ones in our trap," he said, adding that some fishermen have resorted to selling young lobsters due to the shortage.

Fisherman Mohd Yazid Jasimin, 41, said the price of lobster was about RM150 per kilogramme now, but they would often control how many were caught in a day.

"Fishermen here are aware of the conservation efforts and they will release lobsters that are too small.

"Once we have our target amount for the day, we will return to shore and sell our catch to restaurants nearby," he said, adding that there was a huge demand from seafood restaurants and hotels in Kota Tinggi.

The lobster season will usually start in December and end in March every year due to the rough water currents in South China Sea, added Mohd Yazid.

Pengerang Fishermen Association board member Razak Nahar, 57, hoped that the government would increase lobster conservation efforts in Kota Tinggi.

"We are not opposing the development, but conservation efforts must also be done so that these two elements can co-exist and create a balanced ecosystem.

"There are also cases of industrial and shipping wastes being dumped

into the ocean that has impacted the population of lobsters in these waters, because these crustaceans depend highly on clean water to survive," he said.

Razak said the lobsters' habitat was destroyed when large cargo ships dropped their anchors on coral reefs.

A lobster shop owner in Pengerang, Noorfarahana Seman, 34, said the shop received daily shipments of about 10kg of lobster per day, worth over RM1,000.

"The current market price is around RM150 per kilogramme, but consistent supply is difficult to obtain because fishermen are finding their catch getting smaller.

"They told me that the main reason is due to dirty waters, so the lobsters have moved away from their normal feeding grounds in search of cleaner waters," she said.

In a restaurant, one lobster is priced at about RM16 per 100g (baby lobster) and RM21 per 100g (mature lobster) excluding cooking charges.

The price of grade A lobster is set at RM150 per kilogramme and grade B lobster at RM105 per kilogramme.



Noorfarahana showing a fully matured lobster that can cost about RM150 per kg.



Sahronev said mud spiny lobsters used to be in abundance in the past and they could be found under rocks at the beach.



Norizam became a full-time lobster catcher when its price increased.

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Department hopes to raise lobster production to 400 tonnes in 10 years



Bohari (second from right) releasing a lobster into the sea near Tanjung Penyusop, Kota Tinggi.



Nur Afifah showing the correct way to measure a baby lobster carapace using a calliper.

THE Fisheries Department wants to increase lobster production to 400 tonnes a year in the next decade through its conservation efforts.

The department's fisheries conservation and protection division senior director Bohari Leng said the department had set up the Lobster Refugia Action Committee in Pengerang, Sedili in Kota Tinggi, and Tanjung Leman in Mersing.

"The last time we recorded 400 tonnes of lobster a year was 20 years ago. Now we can only get about 100 tonnes a year.

"The lobster population is rapidly declining, particularly on Johor's east coast and in the Johor Straits.

"In order to achieve our target, we have introduced the refugia committee, where the fishermen will have to comply with the regulations set by the department when it comes to catching lobster," he said when contacted.

The committee comprises department officers, fishermen and non-governmental organisations.

Bohari said the new regulations required fishermen to release any mud spiny lobsters in their catch that were less than 6cm carapace (shell that covers the head and thorax) each in length.

"Lobsters reach their sexual maturity at a size of 6cm and it takes them three years to reach this. Those that are smaller than 6cm must be released so that the lobsters can breed at least once before being caught.

"Any female lobster carrying eggs must also be released back into the ocean to reproduce.

"This will also ensure the population can recuperate and ensure a sustainable source in the future.

"Although large lobsters can lay up to two million eggs, the number of hatchlings that grow to adulthood is extremely low," he said.

He added that the lobsters' mating period was between August and September.

The catch-and-release approach is being applied throughout the

east coast of Johor.

The department will also introduce an off-season for lobsters, where trawlers are not allowed to catch lobsters within a designated area near Tanjung Leman from December until the end of February every year, said Bohari.

"The no-catching zone is about 1,400sq km where fishermen are not allowed to catch lobsters. This is to protect the mature lobsters and their habitat.

"The Lobster Refugia Action Committee will also have the authority to set a premium price for lobsters, as these crustaceans are considered a high-end seafood."

He said the mud spiny lobster was the dominant species in peninsular Malaysia.

Johor is selected as the conservation area because the species is widely found in its east coast area, he elaborated.

"The species is found in abundance from the Johor Straits up until Pulau Tioman.

"There are reports of lobsters

being found in west coast waters such as Muar, but the numbers are not significant," he said.

Bohari said the main threat to the population was development, so the department had introduced conservation measures to counter the impact and ensure the survival of this marine animal.

"We have a marine park and no-catch areas in Johor, and we hope this will provide enough space for lobsters to take cover, reproduce and grow," he said.

So far, the new regulations, which were implemented starting this year, have been widely accepted by the fishermen.

The department had conducted regular awareness programmes last December before listing them as new regulations under the fishing licence.

"We wanted to spread awareness first and from our surveillance, the fishermen have long practised the catch-and-release method on their own, which is a good sign," said Bohari.

"Once we have managed to

increase the population by a significant amount, we plan to introduce breeding facilities, but this will come later down the road.

"For now, we will continue with our programme of releasing baby lobsters into the ocean," he said, adding that strengthening the stock was department's main agenda.

Sultan Iskandar Marine Park resource management and protection chief Nur Afifah A. Rahman said the public also played an important role in maintaining the species, by refusing to eat baby lobsters.

"There is currently a trend where baby lobsters are offered in seafood restaurants.

"Restaurant owners claim that there is a demand for them because they are cheaper and the stock is easily available.

"This is wrong and can set back all the efforts we have put in," she said, hoping the public would be more aware of the importance of allowing the species to breed and replenish stocks.