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Dept: Puffer fish not a popular food in M'sia

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JOHOR BARU: Puffer fish does not always end up on the dining table, some are kept in aquariums as ornamental fish.

Johor Fisheries Department director Zainudin Abdul Wahab said the fish, which contains deadly toxins, was not a popular food among Malaysians.

"Local fishermen will throw it back into the sea if the fish is caught in their nets, especially if it is dead; it has no value.

11.4.2023
"Puffer fish can be found not only in Malaysian waters but throughout the world, which is why we do not export it to foreign countries such as Japan," he said.

Zainudin said in the Land of the Rising Sun, the lethal puffer - which is known as fugu - is a luxury delicacy, but it must be prepared by trained and certified chefs.

"This fish must be handled properly to make sure it is not harmful for human consumption," he added yesterday.

He said there were ornamental

fish lovers who kept puffers in their aquariums.

"People can buy puffer fish at shops selling ornamental fish. However, the sellers must have a licence to sell such a poisonous fish," he added.

Zainudin said the department had been taking proactive measures to create awareness among the people, alerting them on the danger of consuming puffer fish.

Apart from using social media platforms to reach out to the public, he said officers from the department had also been meet-

ing fishermen on this matter.

Asked if the department would carry out its own investigation into the tragic deaths of an elderly couple who died after consuming puffer fish, Zainudin said they would allow the Health Department to complete their probe first before making any further decision.

On Saturday, Eng Kuai Sin @ Ng Chuan Sing, 84, died after fighting for his life at the hospital for two weeks while his wife Lim Siew Guan, 83, died several hours after they ate the fish on March 25.

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Pinang points

Enjoy freshness of wild-caught seafood

KNOWING how the more than 4,000 inshore fishermen in Penang work can help you make better and more delicious choices when buying seafood.

A marine biologist once described them to me as “artisanal fishermen”, in that their drift nets take a lot of skill to deploy; the nets will twist into a useless mess if not let out deftly.

They triangulate their fishing spots using landmarks, and the ones I went out to sea with rely on the peaks of Penang Hill and Gunung Jerai to fix their positions before deploying their nets.

A prawn fisherman works two nets almost frantically.

Each net is floated out from either side of the boat for no more than 20 minutes.

After the second net is fully deployed, it is time to retrieve the first net.

This happens at 20-minute intervals throughout the tidal condition of roughly six hours.

Fishermen looking for fish like mackerel or pomfret have it a little easier.

Their nets stay longer in the water and during the wait, they use rods and reels to try their luck.

They use large live bait, since they only want whoppers as their bonus catch.

Fishermen targeting live low-

Inshore fishermen in Penang go out to sea in locations just half an hour's drive from markets

er crabs have to leave their nets on the seabed for at least three days.

When they bring their catch back, they are too tired, so they rely on wholesalers to sell to customers.

Several fishmongers are also wholesalers.

One such fishmonger at Pulau Tikus market told me that every day, he takes all the catch of 20 inshore fishermen in Penang.

He cannot pick and choose; he bears the risk if the fishermen bring back unpopular fish and has to pay more if they find rarer fish.

I noticed this during the Covid-19 pandemic because that was the time when I went to market frequently after getting sick of takeaway food.

He would sometimes sell the weirdest fish, such as Bombay Duck, Sicklefish and Flathead.

Once, he had two rare Coral Groupers – their eyes and gills looked so fresh and there was not a single scale missing on their bodies, which told me they were line-caught instead of getting snared in nets.

If you see an array of fish for

sale that is of uniform size you can be almost certain that these are farmed saltwater fish.

They would have been growing together in the same floating sea cages and would therefore be of the same size.

There is nothing wrong or bad about farmed fish, except that if you want to experience a higher degree of culinary delight, fresh wild-caught seafood still takes the cake.

Last week, my buddy from Kuala Lumpur stayed with me for a holiday.

We both love to cook and had a long-standing debate about the differences in quality of seafood between KL and Penang.

On his final day here, I took him to Pulau Tikus market and he was stunned by the freshness and obvious wildness of the seafood.

He bought many fish to bring back to KL.

When it comes to seafood, you cannot beat living on an island with thousands of inshore fishermen who go out and come back with the tide, from locations just half an hour's drive from the market.



During the prawn season, these XXL prawns weighing 597g sold for RM36.