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# Grouper fish may be off the menu for now

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**GEORGE TOWN:** The much sought-after grouper fish may be off the menu as there is a shortage of supply due to several factors, including the northeast monsoon.

Fisherman Abdul Khalid Abbas, who represents a group of fishermen in north Seberang Prai, said strong winds in the evening posed a grave danger to boats in the open sea.

"We usually experience about 20% less catch during the monsoon. Fishmongers and restaurants are well aware of the situation every year," said Abdul Khalid, 48.

The Malaysian Meteorological Department had issued a notice of heavy rain in Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Johor and western Sarawak during the early phase of the northeast monsoon from November to January.

HLY Ocean Aquaculture general manager Richard Teo said it would take between 10 months and a year for the fish in his farms to grow from fingerlings to table size of about 900g to 1.2kg in weight.

"The main focus has always been Chinese New Year as the demand soars compared with other months.

"But during the year end, although we have enough supply, unfortunately, it is not enough to meet the demand as there are more functions and events," said Teo, who breeds mostly Tiger Groupers.

In September, Penang fish breeders suffered losses after their cage-bred fish died due to the "red water" phenomenon.



**Demand dilemma:** Industry players say there is a shortage of popular fish such as groupers, and their prices have gone up by about 10% on average.  
— K.T.GOJH/The Star

Universiti Sains Malaysia Centre for Marine and Coastal Studies director Prof Datuk Dr Aileen Tan had said that while the algae was not known to have any direct toxicity or toxic effects, it was possible that the fish died due to high levels of discharge by the plankton.

Teo, who also runs a restaurant at his farm, said he has started receiving orders for the Chinese New Year celebration.

"Some called to ask about the Chinese New Year packages, but I've not come up with a menu yet. However, I expect slots to be fully booked soon," he added.

Another fish farmer Teoh Tiong Hai, 43, believed that the slow economy has caused a drop in orders from restaurants.

"Towards the end of the year, everyone's on a tight budget. Even neighbouring countries like Thailand have slowed down their demand for our farmed fish.

"I believe demand will pick up closer to the Chinese New Year," he said.

Teoh expects a mad rush for seafood sometime in January when restaurants would also start placing their orders.

Meanwhile, Penang Koo Soo Kwong Choon Tong Restaurant and Tea Shop Association chairman Vinah Yee, who represents some 40 major restaurants in the state, said some restaurants had reported a drop in fish supply in the market.

"We are experiencing about 30% to 40% shortage. It is not easy to get the supply these days.

"There's a shortage of popular fish such as groupers, and their prices have gone up by about 10% on average.

"Alternatively, some chefs have to use their creativity and come up with dishes to replace the groupers or reduce their usage," she said.

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## Some 12,000 turtles killed for exotic meat, say police

**KOTA KINABALU:** A staggering 9,000kg of dried meat from 12,000 illegally harvested turtles have been seized by marine police from a trawler in waters off Sabah's northern Pulau Banggi.

Describing it as the biggest marine police seizure this year, Sabah Police Commissioner Datuk Jauteh Dikun said the value of the dried turtle meat along with other endangered marine species were worth about RM4.5mil.

"According to Wildlife Department's estimates, the amount of seizures this time involved at least 12,000 turtles caught illegally," he said.

However, he told reporters yesterday that four men, believed to be foreigners, on board the trawler

managed to escape as a marine police patrol boat approached them in waters between the island of Banggi and Bangsi at about 11.15am on Nov 29.

However, they were picked up by a speedboat in shallow waters, he added.

Comm Jauteh said the owner of the trawler registered in Semporna has been detained.

"We are investigating whether the owner is directly involved or rented the vessel to a third party," he added.

Comm Jauteh said the marine patrol, under Ops Taring Gelora, were out in the Mangsee Reef area in northern Kudat waters when they spotted the trawler.

Comm Jauteh pointed out that



**Illegal catch:** Comm Jauteh showing reporters photos of the items seized by Marine Police at a press conference in Kota Kinabalu.

turtle meat could reach up to RM500 per kilogramme.

Based on preliminary findings, the turtles were believed to have been caught in the Sulu Sea and the South China Sea and were

bound for markets overseas.

Police believe the suspects were not only catching the turtles themselves but also buying them from others in the area before selling to buyers from abroad.