

# 'FISH-APOCALYPSE' IS COMING?

The human race is fishing for trouble, a documentary claims. Will Malaysia be spared?



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NOW I do not know about you, but I can't get through a week without having *ikan tenggiri goreng* with loads of curry and dhal at my favourite banana leaf restaurant. Well, sometimes it is *ikan bawal hitam* or *kembung goreng*. It's a love affair that is as deep as the ocean. It spans decades. First, with Papa and Mummy and the four of us at the dinner table. Now with my wife and three little ones in Jenaris. It must be the same with you, too. Hey, it should be. Malaysia is not a landlocked country thousands of miles away from a coastline. Sea fish is easily available just

about anywhere. Not like in Xinjiang, China. A few years ago, as I journeyed across arid and arresting landscapes in that province, I shared tales of our wondrous fish with my guide. He marvelled at our marine bounty and blessing. God and geography blessed the very-far-from-the-sea Chinese province with plenty of things, too. But sea fish is not one of them. So, swimming happily in fish, you can imagine my concern when I watched the Netflix documentary, *Seaspiracy*, recently. I mean, I know human beings have been and are exploiting marine resources at speed. But *Seaspiracy* puts the megaphone of protests right on the doorstep of our outer ear. We are made to hear and feel the fish/marine mammal crying. Good grief. Did you see the stricken dolphins in the bay in Taiji, Japan? But that's the nature and intention of 'shock and awe' films and images. You fall off your chair before



Dr Nicolas J. Pilcher

you can sit up straight and think. Dr Nicolas J. Pilcher is exasperated. The executive director of the Marine Research Foundation in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, decries the cloak-and-dagger and sensationalistic style in *Seaspiracy*. "It's stupid. Misleading. It's selective in its data points," he says. "It does not mention efforts being made around the world to develop sustainable fisheries." And implicitly lumping countless people who are fishing responsibly with the industrial-scale ocean enterprises is just not right, he adds. Perhaps, in keeping the documentary to one and a half hours, the producers have exposed themselves to accusations they adopted a reductionist view of reality. The Englishman Pilcher, who has spent more than 30 years in conservation and can hold his own in a conversation in Malay, says the documentary's broad claims weaken the message that sorely needs to get across to the authorities and the



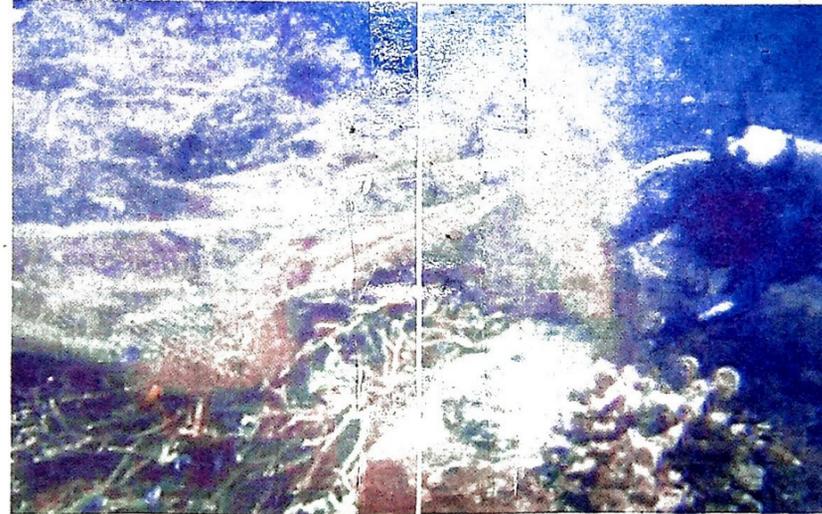
Dr Amy Y. Then

public. But both he and University of Malaya's Dr Amy Y. Then believe Malaysia can do a better job taking care of its fisheries. People like me, who love their *ikan tenggiri goreng*, had better listen to them. Otherwise, we may one day, like my friend in Xinjiang, only get to marvel at the marine blessings of others. Oh, that would pierce me with untold grief!



(Top) Humans have to solve the world's fishing problems without losing their heads. PIC BY DCXT

(Bottom) A diver removing a ghost net stuck on a reef. PIC COURTESY OF REEF CHECK MALAYSIA



A black tip reef shark entangled and killed by a drifting ghost net. PIC COURTESY OF REEF CHECK MALAYSIA

## We are taking too much valuable 'trash' from the sea

THE documentary, *Seaspiracy*, claims commercial fishing's bycatch hauls (non-targeted or unintended species) are huge. You want to snare a bird, but you also get more than a handful of insects.

These hapless creatures are called trash fish (*ikan baja*). They are usually undersized and have little commercial value. But their ecological value is immense.

"The catch is closely associated with specific fishing gear that is considered non-selective, especially trawl nets. Trash fish can make up 30 to 50 per cent of total landings in some parts of Malaysia, so I would say this is a serious issue," says Dr Amy J. Then of University of Malaya.

Another group of bycatch species includes sea turtles, dolphins, dugongs, sharks and rays, she adds.

Marine Research Foundation's Dr Nicolas J. Pilcher is equally blunt.

"This is exactly the case in Malaysia. There are not enough measures to reduce bycatch.

"There are technologies and devices. But we are not using them. The only one being used now is the turtle excluder device. The Marine Research Foundation was instrumental in getting the device adopted. We worked together with the Fisheries Department on this. "It saves turtles from shrimp floor fishing. It is required in four east coast states during the 'Pukat Tunda Musim Tengkujuh' period from November to February. But no other state is using it."

The trash fish is important, Pilcher says, as food for the commercial fish that we have not taken from the seas yet. So, if there is less trash fish in the seas, can we expect our *tenggiri* to grow to maturity? UM's Then points out that even a "few entanglements per year" can threaten populations that are already low in numbers and are facing other anthropogenic threats.

### FISH FARMS (AQUACULTURE)

CAN a human being weigh 1kg more after eating 1kg of meat? That is essentially what *Seaspiracy* is saying about salmon raised in farms. You put in Xkg in feed. You get Ykg in weight. The documentary states that up to 20kg of forage fish is needed to produce one kg of salmon. This claim has since been withdrawn. Pilcher does not quite agree with the equation, too. But the executive director of the Marine Research Foundation in Kota Kinabalu is convinced commercial fishing takes out a tremendous amount from the marine ecosystem to make fish meal, fertiliser and pet food.

"The thing is, many think aquaculture is the solution to feeding people. But the amount of protein (fish meal) which is needed is a lot. "There is a strong demand for low-quality marine life (trash fish) for this purpose. There's no disincentive to end bycatch." According to Then, a senior lecturer in the Ecology and Biodiversity Programme at UM's Institute of Biological Sciences, feed is the most expensive component of fish farming. Fish caught in the wild, she adds, is used to feed fish in coastal and marine farms in the country. "If farms can conveniently obtain trash fish and keep costs down by processing fish-based feed (i.e. feed with high fish content), they will likely continue to use this method. "As you might imagine, this is not a sustainable practice and it also constitutes wastefulness. "The feed industry is pushing for the use of manufactured feed that has much lower fish content and incorporates common agricultural products such as soy and chicken feathers," she says. This is something to think about the next time you sink your teeth into succulent fish that comes from a farm. How can you, the consumer, push fish producers to a more sustainable path?

## Is the 'ghost net' of death really that big?

THE Netflix documentary, *Seaspiracy*, launched harpoons swiftly and strongly. But it took more than a few arrows itself. And a couple of missiles.

It made many claims, among them, that the commercial fishing industry is harvesting the oceans to death.

It also says people are fixated on the plastic straw-in-the-seas problem, when in fact, discarded fishing gear is an equally if not graver threat to marine life.

Is this 'poison' also in Malaysian waters?

University of Malaya's Dr Amy Y. Then reflects on the potential damage that these nets can cause. "Discarded nets pose a threat to

marine life, mainly due to the ghost fishing effect where they continue to entangle for many years animals that include protected species such as turtles and dolphins. "The nets can also cause physical damage to the reefs, and smother them by blocking access to sunlight."

But the senior lecturer in the Ecology and Biodiversity Programme at UM's Institute of Biological Sciences says the lack of data makes it hard to determine the impact of the problem.

Dr Nicolas J. Pilcher, executive director of the Marine Research Foundation in Kota Kinabalu since 2004, does not consider discarded fishing nets a big issue in Malaysia. "Fishermen are loath to discard or lose their nets at sea because it is too expensive. Discarded nets are a problem, but do not rank as a priority problem."



Alvin Chelliah

Then says bad weather may sometimes leave fishermen with little time to haul their nets fully and safely. "Some may even throw illegal

nets away to avoid being caught by enforcement officers."

Reef Check Malaysia, a non-governmental organisation based in Kuala Lumpur, provides information on the garbage removed from the nation's beaches and water from 2015 to last year. Reef Check's senior programme manager, Alvin Chelliah, says fishing gear made up about 1.86 per cent of the total amount. This is far less than the 46 per cent in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, as told by *Seaspiracy*.

"These ghost nets, like every other piece of garbage in the seas, come from just about anywhere. We have picked up plastic bottles with labels showing they are from China, Thailand and many

other places. "The nets do kill marine life. But I don't agree with *Seaspiracy*. You can't just dismiss all the other trash. There is still so much plastic waste out there," says Chelliah, who works in Tioman.

### SUSTAINABLE FISHING

IS there such a thing as sustainable fishing? *Seaspiracy* says that's a pie in the sky.

In Malaysia though, UM's Then says we are trying to do something right. "We have conservation zones, marine protected areas, fishing zones, and prohibitions on destructive and unsustainable fishing gear."

Another approach that we've