

IN SEMPORNA

FISH BOMBER TURNS OVER A NEW LEAF

Father of 4 quits illegal activity after close call with authorities and another bomber's horrific accident

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THERE was something beyond getting abundant fish that made Ahmad turn to fish bombing, or blast fishing, for nearly two years.

Ahmad, an undocumented migrant in his 40s living in Semporna, said he learnt about the tools and techniques of blast fishing from other villagers about 20

years ago.

He said it was easy to make the explosives from cheap ingredients such as fertiliser, kerosene and a wick bought from grocery stores.

"It can be processed in the kitchen just like roasting peanuts in a wok. The mixture and wick are filled into the glass bottles.

"Throw the explosives into the water after lighting the wick. A lot of fish will die from the explosion and float to the surface."

For the small cost of about RM10 for the bomb materials, Ahmad could harvest almost a boatful of fish. But it was the thrill of blast fishing that he enjoyed the most, even though he knew it was illegal.

"The sound that went off after the bomb was thrown into the water and the visual effects of the blast were so satisfying. It was the thrill that made me addicted to fish bombing," he told *New Sun-*



Ahmad, a fish bomber-turned-carpenter, says he has peace of mind making a living from selling custom-made furniture. PIC BY LANO LAN

day Times.

But a typical fish bomb can have devastating effects on the marine ecosystem. The underwater explosion causes a shockwave and releases heat and chemicals that can harm small fish, the eggs of marine animals, and even the tiniest species such as plankton, which leads to the depletion of important food stocks.

Ahmad said it took between two and four people to do the bombing. One person does a pre-bombing dive to check the underwater location of the target fish and collects the dead fish after the blast. Another person stays on the boat and watches out for the authorities.

Ahmad remembers the day when he and three friends were

almost caught by patrol boats near Bohey Dulang island, a famous tourist destination in Tun Sakaran Marine Park.

"I was keeping watch at that time. Less than five minutes after the blast, the authorities' boats were approaching us. It was nerve-wracking because the others were still collecting fish," Ahmad said.

"We were lucky to be able to escape... I cannot imagine what would have happened to us if we had been caught that day," the father of four said.

Fish bombing is a criminal offence in Malaysia, punishable under Section 8 of the Explosives Act 1957, which provides for a maximum sentence of seven years' imprisonment, a fine of

RM10,000 or both if convicted.

Ahmad quit fish bombing for good not long after that close call with the authorities, and after witnessing another bomber lose his hands and suffer a burst intestine as a result of mishandling explosives near his village.

Ahmad soon learnt carpentry skills from his uncle and now has peace of mind making a living from selling custom-made furniture.

"In those two years, so many incidents had happened due to fish bombing.

"Most of us who used to bomb fish when we were younger have given up for good because we know that marine life adds more value to the economy for future generations."

Incidents down by 85pc thanks to detection tech

SEMPORNA: Fish bombing incidents in the waters off Semporna have dropped significantly since June this year, but this is not the time for complacency and all stakeholders need to get involved in protecting the area's rich biodiversity, says an anti-fish bombing campaigner.

"The number of fish bombings detected in the area of coverage of our sensors has been decreasing month-to-month and is now reduced to 85 per cent," Stop Fish Bombing Malaysia (SFB) executive director Terence Lim said.

SFB is a non-governmental organisation that uses underwater detection technology to support the authorities in the fight to eradicate illegal fishing practices that destroy coral reefs and marine life in the waters off Sabah, which includes a massive marine park.

"However, we are still getting reports of fish bombs that are not in the coverage of our sensors," Lim said.

Since 2019, SFB has deployed underwater bomb detection sen-

sors that cover a surveillance area of up to 100 sq km in the waters off Sabah, including South Tun Sakaran Marine Park and North Mabul island, off Semporna.

He could not reveal the number of sensors due to safety and security reasons.

The acoustic arrays can detect the precise location of underwater blasts and provide real-time and exact coordinates to help law enforcement agencies respond rapidly to an incident.

Lim said more financial support would allow SFB to widen its surveillance areas and salvage sensors damaged by blasting.

With the data, Lim said, SFB had at least six of the detections leading to arrests.

"One of them was carrying a fish bomb apparatus. The others were only found with fish and

were referred to the Fisheries Department."

Since 2015, about 53 fish bombing cases have been prosecuted and 15,706.56kg of fish confiscated, according to the Sabah Fisheries Department.

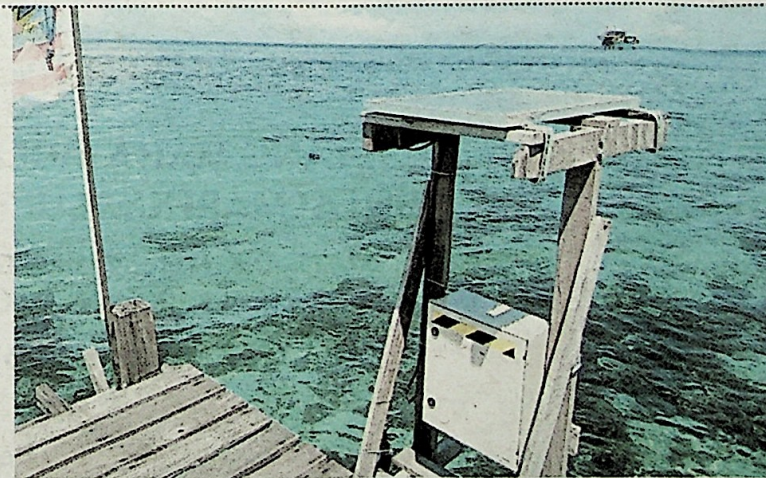
Lim said after the Covid-19 Movement Control Order was lifted in April last year, stakeholders managed to bring down the number of fish bombings by providing real-time and exact coordinates to enforcement agencies for further actions.

"We would like to thank the Semporna marine police, district police chief Superintendent Farhan Lee Abdullah and the 14th Battalion General Operations Force.

"Without them going out and responding to incidents, we will not be able to reduce the fish bombing incidents," he said, adding that SFB had been pro-



Terence Lim



One of the sensors used by Stop Fish Bombing to detect blasting in the waters off Semporna. PIC BY LANO LAN

viding information in a WhatsApp group with other agencies such as Sabah Parks, the Fisheries Department and WWF-Malaysia.

Lim said fish bombing was a security threat, but law enforcement agencies had other priorities such as fighting cross-border crime as the country reopened after the pandemic.

"As a result, it is critical that others, such as diving, resort operators and maritime communities, collaborate to reduce fish bombing incidents."

Lim said blast fishing might not be eliminated, but he and other stakeholders were continuing the fight one case at a time.

Lim, an avid diver with a long career in Sabah's marine tourism industry, said a single blast could have devastating impacts on the marine ecosystem.

"With our technology to detect real-time fish bombing, we now need additional funding to extend the coverage of the sensor to better protect our marine ecosystem," said Lim.

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To stop fish bombing, scale up job choices for islanders

SEMPORNA: Island communities need better access to alternative livelihoods as part of a lasting solution to fish bombing and other illegal activities that undermine efforts to protect Malaysia's rich coastal biodiversity.

Fish bombers can be divided into three groups: curious opportunists who want to make a quick profit, larger commercial operators, and people living in coastal areas struggling to feed their families.

Stop Fish Bombing Malaysia (SFB) executive director Terence Lim said there had been many initiatives in education and the creation of a circular economy for the islanders. However, they still resort to fish bombing because they need to put food on the table (every day). They cannot wait."

Tourism, which is recovering

quickly in Sabah after two years of pandemic lockdowns, offers an alternative source of income for islanders.

Semporna has always been the top tourism destination in Sabah, particularly for island hopping, diving and other water activities.

Malaysia lifted pandemic controls in April and opened its borders to tourists.

Since September, Sabah has recorded 1.19 million in tourist arrivals, including 450,000 international visitors.

Semporna Professional Divers Association president Suzimin Edris said offering more opportunities for islanders in the

tourism industry would reduce their reliance on blast fishing to feed their families.

Skills-based training — from emergency first response to dive master courses — is offered by the state and federal tourism ministries.

Suzimin said it was important to make the training programmes accessible to all family members to ensure they didn't slide back into old habits.

"Those who are in the tourism sector may not take part in fish bombing, but it may not be the same for their family members.

"It is because this method is the



Suzimin Edris



Bombed fish sold in a market in Semporna. PIC BY LANO LAN

only way that can help them get fish easily.

"Tourism operators also need to be educated to make jobs avail-

able. Another issue is that tour operators are not keen to hire the rest as most of them are not citizens."