



How Hong Kong's love of seafood leads to illegal imports of endangered fish and a guide to more sust...



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How Hong Kong's love of seafood leads to illegal imports of endangered fish and a guide to more sustainable options

👉 Demand for humphead wrasse, or 'So Mei' in Cantonese, has likely lead to unlicensed sale and overfishing of the protected species, marine experts say

👉 Hongkongers must choose sustainable options and the city should increase conservation efforts by establishing marine protected areas

by Kelly Fung | Published: 22:00pm, 3 Aug, 2023 ▼



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EXPAND



COMMENT



Stanley Shea, the marine programme director of Bloom HK, called for more marine protected areas in Hong Kong. Photo: Cat Wong

In Sai Kung, the water tanks in seafood restaurants house a fascinating array of fish from all around the world. But if you look closer, you may notice a troubling trend: exquisite fish labelled “rare” to entice customers into purchasing endangered species.

Stan Shea Kwok-ho, Marine Programme Director of Bloom Hong Kong, an NGO dedicated to ocean conservation, is concerned about such business tactics.

“It is peculiar how some restaurants take advantage of the concept of rarity and turn it into a marketing strategy ... not many places would label like that,” said Shea, 40.

How Hong Kong can choose more sustainable seafood

Last month, the expert teamed up with marine biologists Yvonne Sadovy and Daniel Pauly to lead a tour, organised by Bloom, of Sai Kung's fishing pier, wet market, and seafood restaurants, bringing attention to the sale of endangered species and the importance of marine conservation.

Pauly, a marine biologist from the University of British Columbia in Canada, said the endangered species trade needs to be regulated: “It would be good [for] the fish on the red list of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Hong Kong's biodiversity is worth saving.”

Established in 1964, The IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species tracks the global conservation status of different animal, fungi and plant species.



Marine biologist Daniel Pauly and Yvonne Sadovy were looking into the species diversity at Sai Kung wet market.

The list includes the humphead wrasse, the only live reef fish to be protected in Hong Kong, which is often dished up in the city.

Known as Napoleon or “So Mei” in Cantonese, the fish has a bulbous forehead, two black streaks near each eye, and a diamond-shaped pattern. Unlicensed sale and possession of the fish is illegal, and a humphead wrasse can fetch as much as HK\$3,000 per pound.

Sadovy said a limited quota of Napoleons are legally imported to Hong Kong from Indonesia each year, but some still procure the fish through illegal channels.



*The endangered humphead wrasse can fetch up to HK\$3,000 per pound.
Photo: Saving Face*

“In Sai Kung, Lei Yue Mun and sometimes Tuen Mun, [I regularly see] fish which must have been illegally imported because they are seen long after any legal permit was issued,” she said.

“Judging by their sizes, these are juveniles, which should be protected and not for sale,” she said.

Slow to grow, young Napoleons are highly prized because they are more tender than mature ones.

But the demand for juveniles has left them vulnerable to overfishing and put their survival at risk.

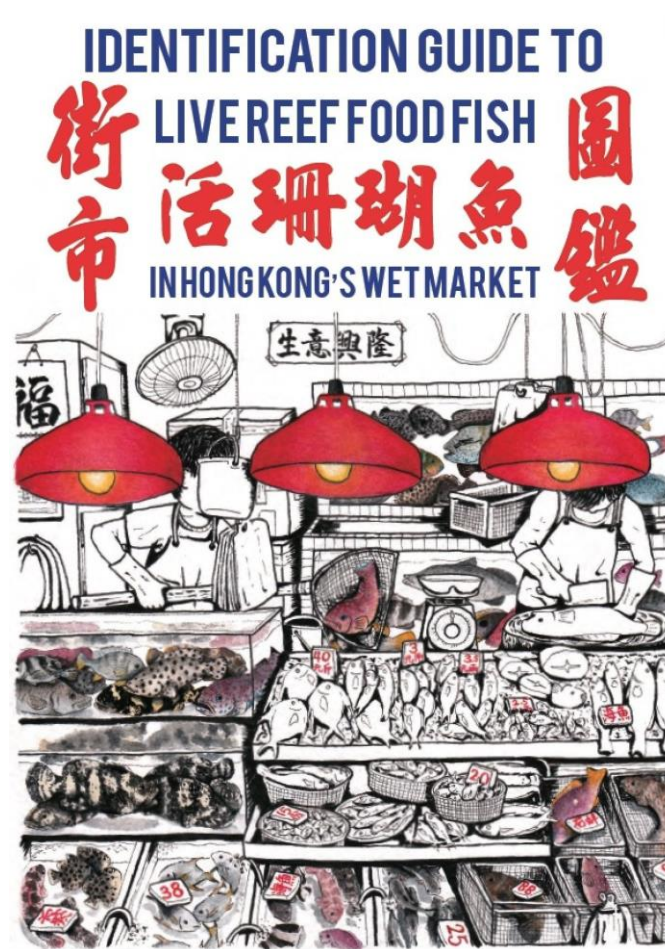
University of Hong Kong students turn food waste into dog toothpaste through upcycling competition

Guide to better choices

Hong Kong is the second largest per capita consumer of seafood in Asia. In 2017, Hongkongers ate an average of 66.5kg each, according to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

To better illustrate the problem, Shea helped compile a bilingual guide called **“Identification Guide to Live Reef Food Fish in Hong Kong’s Wet Markets”**, based on research conducted by current PhD candidate Arthur Chung and his team.

The online guide features information on 42 live reef fish (LRFF) commonly found in the city’s wet markets, including the identification features of each species and their IUCN Red List conservation status.



The online guide helps readers identify different fish at wet markets. Photo: Handout

The guide aims to help customers make more informed decisions and choose sustainable options.

“When you go to supermarkets, often you don’t know the basics, such as where [seafood] came from and how it was produced,” said Chung, 28.

Although more restaurants are offering sustainable options, Chung noted this trend was generally limited to high-end or fine dining restaurants: “I do not recall seeing any wet market stalls mention sustainable seafood at all.”

In the fight against pollution, your favourite seafood may soon play a major role

Protecting Hong Kong’s waters

More than 90 per cent of the seafood consumed in Hong Kong today is imported from over 170 countries worldwide. Local fisheries have struggled with declining stocks due to overfishing. And now only one shop at the Sai Kung wet market exclusively sells catches from Hong Kong waters.

“Hong Kong started as a fishing village, but the fact that it is so challenging to find a local fishery store shows that we don’t have enough fish in [our] waters,” said Shea.

He emphasised the value of setting up marine protected areas (MPAs), which allow fish to grow and create a spillover effect for fishermen to catch them.

Some of Hong Kong’s freshwater turtle species could soon be extinct

According to the Convention on Biological Diversity, a global conservation agreement, at least 30 per cent of the planet’s land and water should be protected by 2030. Currently, only about five per cent of Hong Kong waters are designated as MPAs.

“While Hong Kong has protected its land, hopefully, there will be more marine protected areas,” Shea said. “Without sustainable local fisheries, we may not even be able to see that one stall in the future.”

Link:

<https://www.scmp.com/yp/discover/lifestyle/features/article/3229956/how-hong-kongs-love-seafood-leads-illegal-imports-endangered-fish-and-guide-more-sustainable-options>