

Expert: Carry out studies on 'toxic' shark fins

WORRYING: Professor suggests that marine food sources be tested for poison

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THE Fisheries Department and other relevant authorities should carry out studies to see if shark fin soup could pose a significant health risk for degenerative brain diseases.

Local fisheries expert Professor Datuk Dr Mohamed Shariff Mohamed Din said this was necessary because a recent study by scientists from the University of Miami showed high concentrations of BMAA in shark fins.

BMAA is a neurotoxin linked to neurodegenerative diseases in humans, including Alzheimer's and Lou Gehrig's Disease (ALS).

Prof Sharif, from Universiti Putra Malaysia, said that most of the shark fins consumed in Malaysia were imported from various sources.

"First, the smaller fishes eat these cyanobacteria, then the bigger fishes eat the smaller ones and

this goes on until they end up in the sharks. So, the cyanobacteria containing BMAA moves up the food chain and it finally ends up in humans.

"It is best that efforts are taken to keep our waters free of pollution as most of the problems are the direct result of it."

He said there had been records of similar cyanobacteria blooms off the coast of Borneo, but they were not as frequent as in the waters of Western nations.

He said that efforts to check on marine health issues in the nation were frequently bogged down by funding problems.

"We need to carry out more studies on the existence of neurotoxins, mercury and other harmful substances that may have found their way into our marine food sources."

Shark fins were primarily derived through finning, a practice where the fins are removed at sea and the rest of the mutilated animal was thrown back in the water and left to die.

There had been various figures as to the number of sharks killed every year, but it was estimated to be in the region of 70 million sharks.

The global movement to ban shark finning had been gathering momentum recently and several states in the United States had recently either banned, or were in the process of banning shark fin trade.

The University of Miami's findings, published in the *Marine Drugs Journal* last month, suggested that consumption of shark fin soup and cartilage pills might pose significant health risk for degenerative brain diseases.

Scientists from the university

tested seven shark species from South Florida for the study.

They were the blacknose, blacktip, bonnethead, bull, great hammerhead, lemon and nurse sharks. Most of these species could also be found in Malaysian waters.

The cyanobacterial neurotoxin BMAA was detected in the fins of all the species examined, although with varied concentrations.

BMAA could be transferred from cyanobacteria in the lower levels of marine food chain like crustaceans and smaller fishes to the marine apex predator, which was the shark.

With the worldwide prevalence of Alzheimer's disease estimated to quadruple in 2050, by which time, one in 85 persons worldwide would be living with the disease.

The study also concluded that until more was known about the possible link of BMAA to Alzheimer's disease and other neurodegenerative diseases, it might be prudent to limit exposure of BMAA in the human diet.

"It is best that efforts are taken to keep our waters free of pollution."

Professor Datuk Dr Mohamed Shariff Mohamed Din
local fisheries expert