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Humble 'pla tu' caught up in nets of destruction



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PUBLISHED : 19 DEC 2019 AT 04:01
NEWSPAPER SECTION: NEWS
WRITER: ANCHALEE KONGRUT



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I am a big fan of pla thu, or mackerel, one of the signature food ingredients of Thai cuisine. Eaten with decent nam prik -- shrimp paste chilli-based dip -- I would not trade this for any swanky dishes.

Suffice to say, I grew up eating only fine pla thu, mostly local fish from Mae Klong, a fishery town in Samut Sakhon, thanks to my late mother

who took the quality of food ingredients -- especially pla thu -- seriously.

In Thai cuisine, pla thu from Mae Klong is famous for its succulent and tender meat. The reason why pla thu there is super tasty is its coastal bay that is rich with sediments that provide good nutrients for mackerel.

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As a pla thu lover, I have been upset for a decade now because fine pla thu, especially those from Mae Klong, have become hard to find. My reaction is not baseless. Several studies and news reports have warned about the impending extinction of local pla thu, especially those from Mae Klong.

Research conducted last year by Associate Prof Maythee Kaewnern of Kasetsart University's Faculty of Fisheries showed that there has been precipitous decline in the volume of pla thu in less than a decade.

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In 2011, the catch volume of pla thu in Thai seas was 147,853 tonnes. Last year, the figure dropped to 20,461 tonnes.

Most pla thu I find these days in local markets comes in unusually huge sizes -- over 15 centimetres in length, with a coarse texture to the flesh and a lack of flavour -- not to mention being sold at steep prices. These large pla thu are not from Thai seas but were caught in other waters such as those in Indonesian or Sri Lankan territory.

Why has there been such a decline in the Thai pla thu population and how can this worrying trend be reversed?

Is it because of climate change, or water pollution? Or is it because there are too many pla thu lovers like myself whose consumption has driven up demand? Actually, the culprit in the near extinction of pla thu is Thailand's populist policy of helping prolong the use of destructive fishing methods which has led to overfishing.

As Thailand has become a major global exporter of seafood, overfishing has become rampant, posing a threat to pla thu for the past several decades.

Fishing gear has been used that can net juvenile mackerel which should be left in the sea to grow larger and breed. These fishing nets use fine mesh which don't let small fish escape.

Another destructive method is the use of lights to attract fish to fishing nets. This method is popular among Thai trawlers for catching small anchovies for sale to feedstock processors. Lights attract both juvenile and adult fish, including small mackerel, according to Banjong Nasae, a respected fishery conservationist and adviser to Thai Sea Watch Association.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives has acknowledged the problem for three decades.

In 1983, the Fisheries Department under the direction of then deputy agriculture minister Boon-eua Prasertsuwan, a Chart Thai Party MP, introduced a regulation that banned fishing with lights. This was to save

small fish and prevent overfishing. However, the ban was lifted in 1996 by Monthon Kraiwatnusorn, then a deputy agriculture minister and MP of the New Aspiration Party.

The lifting of the ban was achieved after forceful lobbying by operators of commercial trawlers who tend to seek to influence politicians to draft laws to support their causes.

Over the past two decades, conservationists and local small-scale fishing folk have demanded governments ban these destructive fishing methods. But most of their calls have not been met. On the contrary, commercial trawlers and big businesses have often received support from governments and politicians.

History repeated itself yesterday. Agriculture and Cooperatives Minister Chalermchai Sri-on, who oversees the Fisheries Department, gave in to the demands of the National Fisheries Association of Thailand (NFAT), which represents major commercial fishing boat operators from 22 coastal provinces. Many of these operators have strong political connections.

They threatened to stage a prolonged protest and halt all fishing activities if the government did not give them what they wanted.

They made big demands, mostly calling for the relaxation of strict laws introduced by the previous government. They even called for the government to spend 10 billion baht to purchase boats from fishermen whose businesses collapsed due to the laws. These groups are known to have supported the continual use of some destructive fishing methods.

The future of Thai seas is in peril if business goes on as usual. And it won't be just my favourite pla thu that will be affected but the sustainability of the sea.



ANCHALEE KONGRUT

EDITORIAL PAGES EDITOR

Anchalee Kongrut is Bangkok Post's editorial pages editor.

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