

Pollution, greedy fishermen a threat to horseshoe crab

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ONCE considered useless, the humble "belangkas" is thrust into the limelight as more people discover the beneficial properties of its blood.

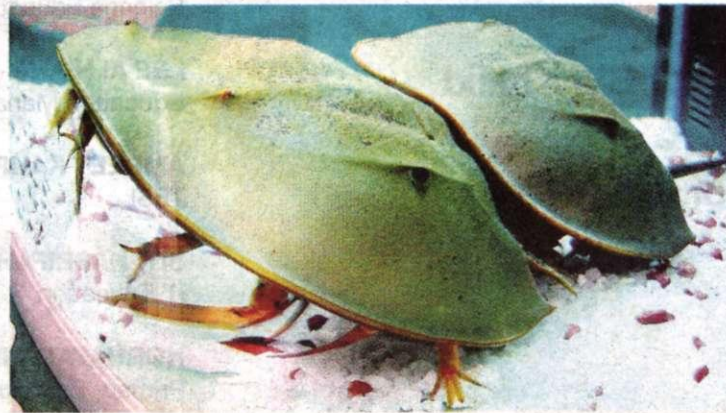
But the attention is not always welcomed because with it, comes unsustainable demand and irresponsible fishing.

Universiti Malaysia Terengganu Institute of Tropical Aquaculture senior researcher Dr Zaleha Kasim said the price of a horseshoe crab had skyrocketed from a mere 50 sen to a gut-punching RM5.

This, she said, had given rise to fly-by-night companies and greedy fishermen who were all in for the quick buck.

Zaleha has had to change her mobile phone number after being bombarded with calls from parties demanding she buy their catch.

"I can't stand these people who



Horseshoe crabs don't fare well in captivity. — Bernama picture

demand that the university buy from them. When we refuse, they'll blame us. We only need a small amount. These people call us and force us to buy up to hundreds of

horseshoe crabs," she said.

Most of the time, these horseshoe crabs are found to be in poor condition.

"Then, there are those who call

us for advice on how to rear horseshoe crabs. They cannot be cultivated.

"Most of them die in captivity within two to three months of being caught," she said.

She also explained that it takes up to nine years for a horseshoe crab to mature sexually and be able to mate.

"There is no quick get-rich-scheme with these horseshoe crabs."

Zaleha said the UMT research team would not only draw up the scientific protocol for their blood extraction but also for the conservation of these "beautiful and gentle creatures".

"Not much is known about horseshoe crabs. They're not a protected species but don't be fooled into thinking that they are abundant in our waters.

"It is very important that we protect them from unsustainable fishing. This would ensure our supply if the research is successful," she said.

There are also threats from habitat destruction and pollution.

"As mangrove forests disappear and beaches and the sea are polluted, the number of these animals will dwindle," she said.

Horseshoe crabs are also important for migratory birds.

"Horseshoe crabs are food source for migratory birds which flock to the country every year. If we protect the crabs, then the birds come with the bird watchers in tow. Now, isn't that eco-tourism?"

Zaleha also dismissed talk that consuming horseshoe crab meat has traditional medicinal benefits.

"It is not scientifically proven," she pointed out.