

'They are destroying ecosystem'

Chris Maskilone

KOTA KINABALU: The Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) on illegal immigrants in Sabah was told about rampant fish bombing activities in waters around the State being mostly carried out by immigrants residing in Sabah, some having the IMM13 document.

When asked by RCI Chairman, Tan Sri Steve Shim, what type of fish were caught with the explosive method, Fisheries Department's Legal and Enforcement Unit Chief Mohd Yusoff Anthony said the most common species were *ikan sulit*, *ikan anjang anjang*, grouper and trevally.

"Don't buy *ikan sulit* and *ikan anjang anjang* as 95 per cent of those sold in markets are bombed," he advised. He said that if not curbed this destructive fishing method will end the existence of fish and marine life as the illegal activities destroyed the habitat and breeding grounds of marine life.

"Fish bombing destroys the coral ecosystems which is a breeding ground for fish and other marine life. We also received reports that divers' hearing could be damaged because of the loud sound when fish bombs explode underwater," he said.

"Homemade explosives are thrown onto the coral beds where

fish are abundant and the explosion will destroy the corals which are where the fish as well as other marine life breed and take refuge in.

"Fish bombing is also bad for tourism as it affects scuba drivers," said Mohd Yusoff.

He said the department had received information that fish bombing activities were prevalent in Mengalum, Mantanani, the upper part of Banggi and islands around Semporna including dive havens, Mabul and Sipadan islands.

The cases in Mabul and Sipadan islands were isolated cases as only about five have been reported, he said.

Replying to a question from panel member Datuk Henry Chin, he said it was difficult to nab the fish bombers red-handed since they would be carrying out the activities whenever they have the opportunity to do so.

Chin had asked him how many of the people charged in court for fish bombing activities were arrested red-handed at sea carrying out the illegal style of fishing.

"All those charged were arrested on shore and were charged with possession of bombed fish.

We have no cases of any arrests during the bombing activity," said Mohd Yusoff.

Mohd Yusoff said these people were usually charged under Section 26 © of the Fisheries Act 1985, which is for knowingly having in possession fish that were caught by explosives.

"The burden of proof is on the Fisheries Department's enforcement personnel because if the suspects insist that they do not know they are in possession of bombed fish, the personnel have to prove that they are lying," he said.

So far, 209 Filipinos, 18 Indonesians and 148 Malaysians have been charged in court under Section 26 © of the Fisheries Act 1985 where they were fined between RM300 and RM10,000 or/and jailed between three to 18 months.

He also said that based on the cases the department had investigated,

There are cases of foreign fishermen encroaching into Malaysian waters but these are minimal, he said.

Asked if he was happy with the punishment provided under the law, Mohd Yusoff said that the State Fisheries Department has proposed heavier penalties by amending the relevant law. He said there was a need for heavier penalties imposed on those found in possession of bombed fish so that people would be deterred from carrying out the destructive method of fishing.