



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Press Statement

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Recognize Aquatic Animals as Living Beings, Not Just Resources

On World Aquatic Animal Day, observed on 3 April 2026, the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) calls on everyone to reflect deeply on our relationship with the millions of aquatic creatures inhabiting our oceans, seas, rivers, mangroves, and coral reefs.

This year's theme, "From Objects to Subjects: Transforming the Way We See and Treat Aquatic Life," challenges us to fundamentally rethink how we perceive and treat aquatic animals. For far too long, our laws, economic systems, and social practices have regarded them primarily as resources. This mindset, driven by profit and efficiency, must shift toward recognising aquatic animals as sentient beings with intrinsic value, rather than as exploitable commodities.

Despite their ecological importance, aquatic animals continue to be treated largely as units of production. Fish are measured in tonnes, crabs sold by weight, and crustaceans traded by size. Aquaculture is evaluated by output, while marine mammals are often valued mainly for their tourism appeal.

Scientific research in marine biology and animal behaviour increasingly demonstrates that many aquatic animals are sentient, capable of experiencing pain, stress, and even social bonds. Studies published in the *Journal of Experimental Biology* provide compelling evidence that crustaceans can feel pain. Earlier research has also shown that prawns and hermit crabs display behaviours consistent with pain perception, suggesting that all decapod crustaceans, including lobsters and crayfish, may share this capacity.

According to Professor Bob Elwood of Queen's University Belfast, there are currently no comprehensive regulations protecting the welfare of these animals. He has highlighted practices such as removing claws from live crabs before discarding them back into the sea, raising serious ethical concerns.

Malaysia, a maritime nation bordered by the Straits of Malacca, the South China Sea, and the Sulu Sea, is endowed with rich marine biodiversity. This natural wealth supports food security, livelihoods, and cultural heritage. Coral reefs in Sabah and Terengganu, seagrass meadows in Johor and Middle Bank in Penang, and mangrove forests along our coasts form interconnected ecosystems that sustain fish populations and protect coastal communities.

At the same time, these ecosystems face mounting threats. Among the most destructive is fish bombing or blast fishing, an illegal practice that uses explosives to kill or stun fish. Despite being banned, it persists in parts of Malaysia, particularly in Sabah. This method causes extensive environmental damage. Studies by Reef Check Malaysia (RCM) in 2011 found that affected reefs had lost more than 75% of their structure, often reduced to rubble fields marked by blast craters. These practices damage coral habitats, creating unstable rubble that offers little shelter for marine life and leaves juvenile fish more vulnerable to predators.

More than a decade later, RCM's 2025 Annual Survey Report reveals a disturbing trend: Malaysia has lost approximately 20% of its coral reefs since 2022, an area equivalent to about 47,250 football fields yet reef conditions continue to deteriorate.

Cyanide fishing further compounds the problem, targeting high-value coral reef species such as the humphead wrasse and groupers for the live reef food fish trade (LRFF) and aquarium trade. These practices severely damage coral habitats, leading to coral bleaching and death while also harming non-target marine life.

Although such destructive methods are illegal under the Fisheries Act 1985, enforcement gaps and strong market demand allow them to persist. Overfishing, fine-mesh nets, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing continue to deplete fish stocks and undermine conservation efforts. Meanwhile, poorly managed aquaculture can result in water pollution, disease outbreaks, and compromised animal welfare.

Climate change adds further pressure through rising sea temperatures, ocean acidification, and coastal development, all of which disrupt fragile marine ecosystems. Plastic pollution from land-based sources continues to flow into rivers and seas, harming aquatic life and contaminating the food chain.

While government initiatives such as the National Plan of Action against IUU fishing and marine park protections by the Department of Fisheries are positive steps, stronger enforcement, greater transparency, and the integration of animal welfare considerations into fisheries and aquaculture policies are urgently needed.

World Aquatic Animal Day is more than a symbolic observance. It is a call for Malaysia to strengthen marine conservation, improve fisheries governance, and promote ethical responsibility towards aquatic life. Rather than asking how much we can extract from our waters, we must ask what is needed to ensure that marine ecosystems and the animals within them can thrive.

As a nation blessed with extraordinary marine biodiversity, Malaysia has both the opportunity and the responsibility to safeguard its aquatic life. CAP urges policymakers, scientists, industry leaders, educators, and all stakeholders to move beyond viewing aquatic animals as objects of exploitation and to recognise them as sentient beings within a fragile and shared marine environment.

Today, and every day, let us honour aquatic animals not as commodities, but as fellow inhabitants of our shared and vulnerable Earth.

Mohideen Abdul Kader
President
Consumers' Association of Penang