Inside a dank, dimly lit corner shop within the sprawling Cartimar pet complex in Pasay City, Philippines, a representative of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) gazed at a large and brightly lit aquarium where the shop’s most expensive fish are displayed for sale.

His eyes veered toward a single fish: A dull greyish-green fish delicately flecked with dark cyan, around the same size and build as a jumbo tilapia, but with much thicker lips.

The day’s search was done. At last, a mameng.

“Alam niyo po bang illegal iyan (Do you know that’s illegal)” he asked a slight, moustachioed shop attendant cleaning a tank. Distracted, the attendant shot the WWF representative a quick glance, then shrugged.

Also called Maori, Napoleon or humphead wrasse, mameng (Cheilinus undulatus) is one of the world’s most valuable live food fish, occasionally found in seafood restaurants, markets and even exotic pet retail centres such as Cartimar. Fetching up to USD 138 per kilogram\(^2\) in posh seafood restaurants in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and Malaysia, the fish is certainly tasty — but is certainly endangered as well.

How traders are able to sell this, plus other endangered and legally protected marine organisms with impunity, is the story of laxity on the part of the Philippine National Police, Coast Guard, Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, and the Department of the Environment and Natural Resources in enforcing standing laws and curbing the illegal trade in marine life.

Among the world’s most massive, colourful and long-lived reef fish, adult mameng grow up to 6 feet from snout to tail and can tip the scales at over 200 kilograms. With a lifespan of more than 30 years, mameng are classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as “endangered” — meaning that wild populations may become extinct without immediate management and protection. Thus, they are protected by Philippine law.

Republic Act 9147, or the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act, allows the collection of endangered or threatened wildlife (including mameng) solely for scientific, breeding or propagation purposes. The Act prohibits the killing of all endangered animals except for religious or indigenous tribal rituals, or if the animals host an incurable and communicable disease, or the animals are

---

Endangered mameng (humphead wrasse) openly traded

Gregg Yan

SPC Live Reef Fish Information Bulletin #20 – December 2011

Endangered mameng (humphead wrasse) openly traded

Gregg Yan

Endangered mameng (humphead wrasse) openly traded

Gregg Yan

Endangered mameng (humphead wrasse) openly traded

Gregg Yan

Figure 1. Juvenile mameng, or humphead wrasse (Cheilinus undulatus), for sale in Penang, Northwestern Peninsular Malaysia (photo by Gregg Yan).

1 Communications and Media Manager, WWF-Philippines. Tel: +632 920-7923/26/31. Email: gyan@wwf.org.ph

2 USD 1.00 = PHP 44 (as of December 2011. PHP is the Philippine peso)
killed in an act of self-defence. The commercial trade in mameng, whether for seafood or the aquarium trade, is punishable by law.

The Philippines became a signatory to the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) on 16 November 1981. As a signatory, the Philippines is obligated to regulate the trade in all species, whether they fall under CITES Appendix I, II or III.3

Unless special permits are issued by a governing body such as the Philippines Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources or the Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, all trade in endangered species, including consumption and sale, is prohibited.

In 2007, several high-profile Metro Manila restaurants, including Portico 1771 and North Park, were found to have been offering mameng. With lobbying from WWF and concerned citizens, the dishes were promptly dropped from the menus.

Sadly, not all establishments have abolished this delectable fish from their menus.

On a Saturday afternoon, hours before the typical influx of diners, the WWF representative visited the Seafood Restaurant Hotpot along Malate in old Manila and asked a trailing waiter, “Meron po ba kayong mameng (Do you have mameng)?”

“Meron po, pero mamaya pa makukuha, saka kukunin pa sa kabila (We have it, but we’ll get it later from the other restaurant),” he replied, referring to the restaurant’s extension.

Two weeks later, a separate trip to the Full Moon Restaurant and KTV Bar in Fort Ilocandia, Laoag, found the dish was on the menu at these establishments as well. “We offer it mostly to the Chinese clientele,” said a waiter.

Illegal exports of live and frozen mameng specimens have also proven to be lucrative. WWF data reveal that a meter-long mameng sold for almost USD 1,380 in one Hong Kong restaurant. The thick lips of the fish alone can sell for almost USD 460.

On the remote isles of Tawi-Tawi in the southern Philippines, divers with compressors hunt for young mameng in shallow reefs and drop-offs for several hours weekly. Once the fish are spotted and are driven into cracks and crevices, the divers squirt a diluted mixture of sodium cyanide to stun and draw the fish out, eventually killing all corals, sponges and other immobile invertebrates around the site. Once captured, the juvenile mameng are reared in rudimentary shallow pens made of coral and limestone.

These destructive fishing activities typically violate several laws: the capture of mameng, entering and fishing in marine protected areas, and the use of cyanide.

Captured fish are then fed and fattened for traders who come from the nearby Sabah (Malaysia) border. Traders from mainland China also come to buy the fish, which are then kept alive in aerated, filtered holds. In December 2006, 359 juvenile mameng were confiscated from the M/V Hoi Wan, a Chinese fishing vessel apprehended in Palawan. The find remains one of the most significant wildlife apprehensions in Philippine history.

Though sufficient laws give authorities a legal basis to curb the trade, it continues — mainly because of a lack of on-the-ground enforcement. There is much more to the illegal seafood trade than just mameng, though.

---

3 CITES uses a system that classifies species according to the immediacy of their possible extinction.
Sharks, manta and eagle rays, giant clams, even dolphins and whales are occasionally butchered and sold in various towns and cities throughout the country.

Off Bohol’s Pamilacan Isle in November 2006, the WWF representative witnessed the butchery of devil rays (Manta mobula) and manta rays (Manta birostris). The latter is a protected species, classified as “near threatened” by IUCN, and according to Republic Act 8550, the sale of its meat is illegal. Locally called sanga, these majestic giants are usually caught after dark, their leisurely pace and tendency to surface making them easy prey for fishers armed with strobe lamps and drift nets. Dropped off in areas such as Baclayon Pier in Bohol, they are soon carted off for slaughter and sale, their tails cut off to make souvenirs.

Sanga meat sells for USD 1.15–1.60 per kilogram, depending on the quality. Light meat is preferable and slightly more expensive. Dried sanga strips sell for USD 11.50–18.50 per kilogram. Although deemed illegal by Fisheries Administrative Order 193 under Republic Act 8550, otherwise known as the Fisheries Code of 1998, the trade in manta ray meat continues.

“It’s really bad down in Masbate,” WWF Sorsogon researcher Dave David said during a research trip. “Fishermen hunt manta rays nonstop. It’s the wild west down there.”

Even the sea’s largest fish are not spared. On 15 February 2010, an 18-foot-long whale shark (Rhinodon typus) was found floating belly-up in Tingloy, Batangas — its dorsal and pectoral fins neatly sliced off.

Long held in esteem as a Chinese delicacy, shark fins and meat are usually exported to China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Whale shark flesh, called “tofu meat”, sells for about USD 9.20 per kilogram, while dried shark fins are a hundred times more valuable at USD 920 per kilogram.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources disclosed that at least 200 whale sharks were slaughtered in 1997 alone. Stacked like cordwood, dried fins from many different shark species are still seen today in Hong Kong shops.

Whale sharks are classified by IUCN as “vulnerable” and protected under Republic Act 8550 under Fisheries Administrative Order 193, the same law that protects manta rays. Possession or slaughter of a single whale shark merits a maximum jail term of four years, coupled with a maximum fine of USD 230 and the cancelation of the offending party’s fishing licenses.

Joel Palma, the head of WWF’s Conservation Programmes said, “This is a real eye-opener, for it proves that the slaughter of endangered species — even one as big as a butanding — can still take place if we let our guards down.”

The whale shark remains the only legally protected shark in Philippine waters. But repeated visits to the Cartimar pet complex revealed that white-tip and black-tip reef sharks, nurse sharks, and bamboo and epaulette catsharks are all sold legally, for USD 34.50–57.50 per shark.

An unnamed, Chinese-run, live seafood shop within the vast Dampa complex along Macapagal Highway also offers live nurse and bamboo catsharks for consumption, albeit at slightly more expensive rates.

Any visit to Cartimar, as well as other shops offering marine fish and invertebrates, will also likely turn up giant clams.

Seven of the world’s eight giant clam species can be found in the Philippines, all protected by Republic Act 8550, which states that the taking of rare, threatened or endangered species as listed by CITES and as determined by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, is unlawful. Violation of this section is punishable by imprisonment, ranging from 12 to 20 years, coupled with a fine of up to USD 2760.

At a popular seaside palutuan (seafood dining hub) in Mactan City in 2009, the WWF representative came upon seven live giant clams being sold for kinilaw (raw seafood served in vinegar), a popular dish.

Asked if she knew that selling the clams was illegal, the vendor replied with a smile, “Oo. Pero wala namang nanghuhuli eh (Yes, but no arrests are made).” Less than a hundred metres away is a police outpost, perhaps too occupied to bother checking its environs.

A Cartimar vendor peddling giant clams said the police rarely raided her shop. “Saka hard corals lang ang kinukuha (They just confiscate the hard or reef-building corals).”

Whales and dolphins are also slaughtered and sold. In 2007, lobbying again convinced two upscale Makati restaurants, Tsukiji and Sushi Tsumura, to drop whale meat — a long-standing Japanese delicacy — from their menus.

The list goes on, from endangered dugong to top shells, giant triton and other shellfish. From city centres to remote markets, the trade in illegal marine life flourishes.