

Asia demand puts fish on red alert list

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Demand for live reef fish, shark fin and sea horses in Hong Kong and China has led to dozens of species being ranked as "vulnerable" and "endangered" on an international alert list for threatened species.

Over 30 out of a 100 marine species added to "the red list", published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, are in demand as luxury food or for medicinal value by Asian communities.

The move marks the first comprehensive consideration of marine fish which biologists now realise are under threat.

Commercial exploitation, recreational fishing and habitat loss, coupled with the biology of slow-reproducing fish, led to the listing, which is a warning.

Napoleon wrasse and giant groupa, in demand by gourmets of live reef fish, 21 species of sea horse – an ingredient in Chinese medicine – and seven shark species were listed.

Rob Parry-Jones of Traffic East Asia, the wildlife trade monitor, said shark fin was the most valuable part of the shark, which is also harvested for its liver oil, leather, meat and cartilage.

"There is cause for concern about the fin trade but it is not just targeted at shark fisheries," Mr Parry-Jones said,

adding that incidental capture of sharks during conventional fishing was also a problem.

A lecturer at Hong Kong University's Department of Ecology and Biodiversity, Dr Yvonne Sadovy, said demand from Asian communities and the biology of species such as Napoleon wrasse had sparked concern.

"There has been a massive increase in (live reef fish) trade in the 1990s – really starting in the mid-80s. A large proportion – 60 per cent – of demand comes from Hong Kong and China," she said, adding that Singapore and Taiwan were also significant markets.

Technological improvements in transporting live fish, and the attraction of colourful reef fish had fed demand.

"Napoleon wrasse is quite highly sought after. Giant groupa is big and rare. People see them as something exotic, different, colourful and it is desirable," said Dr Sadovy.

Indonesia, Palawan in the Philippines, and the Maldives have already banned the export of Napoleon wrasse, which is known locally as *so mei*.

Dr Sadovy said: "They are listed as a signal for concern. It sends a message.

"It sounds like a criticism of Asian communities, but it is not . . . It is like aquarium fish, the biggest demand is from the West."