

Green rough-backed puffer (*Lagocephalus lunaris*) as a tourism product in Betong, Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract This paper discusses, in general, the types of Tetraodontidae found around the world, and focuses on the green rough-backed puffer found specifically in Sarawak. The discussion includes biological conditions, physiology, and the characteristics of this species. In addition, explanation is given on the differences of the poison content of the green rough-backed puffer and other puffer fish. Furthermore, this paper discusses the method of catching the green rough-backed puffers, called *membuntal* by the villagers of Kampung Manggut at the riverside of Saribas River, Betong, Sarawak. The different dishes made from the green rough-backed puffers, well-loved by the locals and tourists alike, are also discussed in this paper. The final part of this paper deals with the "Puffer Fish Festival" held by Betong Resident's Office, an effort to make the puffer fish a tourism product in Sarawak.

Keywords Green rough-backed puffer – membuntal – dishes – tourism – Betong – Sarawak

INTRODUCTION

Sarawak is well known as a one of the main tourist destinations in Malaysia. The historical heritage, shopping complexes, the richness of various ethnics and cultures, and most importantly, the natural environment preserved in the national parks which draw tourists to the state every year. By developing tourism industry, the state is able to increase revenue with foreign currency exchange, provide job opportunities, diversifying the economy and so on.

Saribas River, which flows to the South China Sea, is visited by a kind of unique fish twice a year to lay its eggs, a fish known as the green rough-backed puffer. During the green rough-backed puffer season, this fish can be found in large amount in between Tanjung Nangka and Tanjung Matu which is near to Kampung Manggut, Spaoh. Locals consume this fish as their source of protein. Capturing the fish is easy and only requires simple and cheap equipment. The locals also know how to remove the poison from the fish making it safe to eat.

The presence of the green rough-backed puffers in huge quantity is awaited by the locals. When the season comes, at night hundreds of locals, holding torch light, go to the river to capture the fish. It

seems as if there is a Festival of Light in Saribas River. The lively night where the locals come out to fish is promoted by the Betong Resident's Office as a tourism agenda in Betong District. To attract more tourists and to make the "Puffer Fish Festival" livelier, the Resident's Office as the organizer holds other supplementary activities like mini-expo, water sports, fish catching competition, cooking competition, boat race, evening shows like singing competition, Malay drum performance, *tandak* dancing and other activities. Now, the "Puffer Fish Festival" is an annual agenda listed in the Sarawak Tourism Calendar.

GREEN ROUGH-BACKED PUFFER

There are puffers in almost every part of the world. Puffers are categorized into three main families, Ostraciidae, Diodontidae and Tetraodontidae. From the Ostraciidae, there are main species like the long-horned cowfish (*Lactoria cornuta*), yellow boxfish (*Ostracion cubicus*), longnosed boxfish (*Rhynchostracion nasus*), horned-nose boxfish (*Rhynchostracion rhinorhynchus*), turretfish (*Tetrasomus concatentes*) and helmet cowfish (*Tetrosomus gibbosus*). From the Diodontidae, the main