

Believed to bring good luck and wealth, the arowana or dragon fish is in great demand and a mature fish can fetch about RM15,000 each. An intrigued SHARON NG KOOI KIN visits an arowana farm to watch the harvesting of the fry

THE fastest growing commercial fish breeding industry in Peninsular Malaysia must surely be at Bukit Merah, Semangol, Perak.

A few years ago, such farms did not attract much attention but today there are over 50 in this small region alone, with one opening every few months!

The 7,000-acre Bukit Merah Lake is the natural habitat of the Malaysian Golden Arowana, an ornamental fish highly prized by aquarists, resulting in many fish farms being established in its vicinity.

The unpolluted lake water is piped to the farms to encourage the breeding of these majestic fish in captivity. The farms themselves have become a tourist attraction of sorts and visitors often drop by before or after going to the nearby Orang Utan Sanctuary in Bukit Merah Laketown.

Arowana aquaculture is one of the newest and most lucrative ventures into which many local and foreign investors are putting their money.

Let's enter the exciting world of fish aquaculture that makes use of the latest scientific techniques and electronic devices.

Such sophisticated set-ups are not unlike that required for protecting someone or something very precious and valuable, like a fortress of gold. Only, in this case, it is the Golden Head Arowana (Kim Leng or Golden Dragon in Hokkien dialect), an equally valuable commodity. A mature Golden Arowana can fetch about RM15,000!

Investors from as far as Germany and UK have bought ponds of arowana in his farm and profits are shared 50-50.

There are 63 ponds in Choong's five-acre project and each pond is monitored by a CCTV camera that can be viewed by the investors from anywhere in the world! So you can literally keep an eye on what and where you've put your money on.

The fish will also be micro-chipped and closely cared for. Sick fish are placed in quarantine, referred to as the ICU. The most common diseases affecting the arowana are anchor worm parasite infection, fin rot and cloudy eyes. Pure oxygen, saline baths and injections of Diptrex or antibiotics are the usual treatments.

Once every two months, the fry are harvested and transferred to a thermostat-controlled

aquaria where the water temperature is maintained at 27-29°C.

Many of the fry still have yolk sacs attached to their bellies but these will slowly be absorbed, usually within eight weeks. Older, free-swimming fry are then fed tubifex worms until after three months when their diet switches bigger mealworms, fresh prawns or minced fish meat.

There is an endless stream of visitors to deal with as millions of ringgit have been poured into this new investment opportunity. A fish pond containing 15 to 30 adult arowana is valued at between RM40,000 and RM100,000. There is a huge demand for Golden Head and Red Arowana, so they command the highest prices.

Together with some visiting investors, we follow the harvesters to ponds designated for the morning's harvesting. Entering the pond, two workers slowly drag a net across its bed. At the other end, the outer edge of the net is lifted up on two poles, trapping all the fish. A short aluminium ladder is then placed inside the net to allow the expert handler to step down and examine each fish for fry.

The arowana (both male and female), keeps the fry inside its large mouth cavity for about two months! The male is the one that usually undertakes this incubation task and develops a remarkable brood pouch on the underside of its mouth. The fry hatch from eggs within a week and it's a wonder that they are not swallowed when the parent feeds.

Of the three ponds harvested that morning, only one fish out of maybe 60 examined, has fries in its mouth, a brood of 34. The handler gently draws back the lower jaw of the parent fish, shakes it briefly to release the fry into a scoop net. These are then transferred to a big plastic bag.

After six to eight months when they attain 20-25cm in length, the arowana fry will be sold for between RM20 and a few hundred ringgit each, depending on species. In its natural environment, the peak breeding period for the arowana is August-October.

Breeding Zones

While the proliferation of fish farms may be good for investors, the Perak State Government has expressed concern over the fast pace at which these fish farms have expanded in the last few years.

In a Bernama news report (Dec 30, 2009) Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir expressed fears that padi fields will be turned into arowana breeding ponds.

"It is profitable for breeders, but the effect on padi planting in Kerian is worrying. It is estimated that 400 padi fields are being used to breed arowana," he was reported as saying.

The report also said that Zambry proposed the establishment of Arowana Breeding Zones in Kerian District, especially in the Bukit Merah area.

The arowana breeding industry is growing quickly because of high demand from local aquarium

hobbyists as well as international markets like China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea and UK.

The Chinese believe that rearing a pair or two of the Golden Arowana at home or in the office, will bring good luck, prosperity, good health, happiness and family harmony. The fish is also believed to have the power to cast out evil spirits.

How To Get There

Head for Semanggol in Perak to check out what this fishy excitement is all about. A guided tour of the arowana breeding farms will reveal an agriculture project and investment opportunity that's excitingly innovative because it combines nature's ability to reproduce itself and man's ever expanding scientific know-how.

Exit the North-South Plus Highway at Bukit Merah toll plaza. Drive past Bukit Merah Lake Town junction and three kms from the toll plaza, turn left to Tebuk Pancur. Here, you'll see lots of posters and banners advertising arowana breeding centres, some as near as just 200m down the road.

source SHARON NG KOOI KIN , NST Online