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Consumers fall for Nest-y scam

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PETALING JAYA: “Blood nest” – a much sought after variety of bird’s nest – is actually tainted with dangerous chemicals to deceive consumers into paying double the price for a premium grade.

While the normal bird’s nest, which is ivory in colour, can fetch up to RM10,000 a kilo, the reddish “blood nest” fetches up to RM20,000 a kilo.

Traders justify the exorbitant price by claiming the “blood nest” is a premium grade of the Chinese delicacy.

In exposing this scam on Saturday, Deputy Agriculture and Agro-based Industries Minister Chua Tee Yong said these tainted bird’s nests were dangerous to health and may even be fatal when consumed by humans.

He said the nests were either sprayed with iodine or stored at premises where there was high ammonia content to give them a uniform bright-red colour.

“Some also use *karya* gum (from a soft wooded tree) to give the bird’s nest its reddish colour,” he told *The Star*.

Chua advised the public against purchasing bird’s nest from dubious traders and urged the industry to practise self-regulation to ensure the quality and safety of the product.

He said that all bird’s nests must have a Veterinary Service Department health certificate before they could be exported.

Federation of Bird’s Nest Merchants Associations chairman Datuk Beh Heng Seong said the term “blood nest” was coined by conmen and that there was “no such thing”.

“Bird’s nest is made up of the saliva of swiflets and is ivory in colour. It is impossible for bird’s nest to be red in colour.

“The so-called blood nests have high levels of nitrates from the artificial red colouring added to it,” Beh said, admitting that many consumers had been deceived into paying a high price for the dangerous product.

He said a kilo of bird’s nest costs between RM8,000 and RM10,000 in the market depending on the grade while a kilo of the “blood nest” was between RM15,000 and RM20,000.

Beh said Malaysia produced some 240 tonnes of bird’s nest worth RM1bil a year and 90% of it was exported to China.

Asked whether the federation, comprising 19 associations and 10,000 members nationwide, had tried to rein in those who were cheating consumers, he said they were looking at educating consumers on bird's nests and coming up with guidelines for the industry.

Meanwhile, Fomca secretary-general Muhd Sha'ani Abdullah urged the Health Ministry to issue guidelines on what a genuine bird's nest was and to warn consumers of bird's nests with added colouring.

He said so far, they have not received any complaint from consumers on the so-called "blood nest" but added that could be because consumers were unaware of tainted products in the market.

He suggested that the Health Ministry issue certificates for untainted products.

"Traders should also be responsible by making sure no harmful chemicals are used in their products," said Muhd Sha'ani.