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Jan 23, 2005

Fish fraud

E-mail claims odd creatures washed up in Phuket after tsunami

By Magdalen Ng

ONE has huge black eyes and a gaping mouth with deadly serrated teeth.

Another is a crimson-red crustacean with spidery limbs and potent claws.

These and other alien-looking creatures were washed up on the shores of Phuket in the wake of the Dec 26 tsunami - or so an e-mail that has been circulating on the Internet claims.

Titled 'Deep Sea Creatures 1 - Found At Phuket Seaside After Tsunami', it comes attached with pictures and names of these subterranean lifeforms.

Dr Bertrand Richer de Forges, 56, a French marine biologist who specialises in deep-sea crabs, was piqued when he heard from colleagues about the e-mail recently.

He got hold of it, saw the pictures and was shocked.

'It's a joke. These are the pictures from my expedition,' he tells LifeStyle.

Based on the island of New Caledonia in the South Pacific, Dr Richer de Forges is currently involved in a research project at the invitation of the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research at the National University of Singapore.

When LifeStyle checked with Associate Professor Peter Ng from the Raffles Museum about the e-mail, he said that the scientist who actually found the fish - Dr Richer de Forges - was working with him.

The latter says the creatures in the e-mail were not from Phuket but were, in fact, caught in a Tasman Sea expedition he undertook with international scientists in the South Pacific in May and June 2003.

The pictures must have been lifted from a website posted at www.oceans.gov.au/norfanz/CreatureFeat.htm, he adds.

The site details the deep-sea habitats and biodiversity found in the Australian-New Zealand research voyage.

He is certain about the origins of the e-mailed pictures for various reasons.

For one thing, the identification labels shown in them were the same ones used by his team. He also recognised the deck of the cruise ship shown in the photographs.

Plus, it is extremely unlikely that these deep-sea creatures could be washed up, he says. Only fishes that live around 50m below the water surface will be caught up in a tsunami as the waves reach 'greater height and speed at shallower sea depths'.

In contrast, the deep-sea creatures shown in the pictures can only be found 500m to 2,000m below the water surface, and hence are unlikely to have been affected by a tidal wave.

In a big underwater earthquake - such as the one that took place off Aceh, Sumatra - such creatures are likely to get buried by the displaced sediments in the seabed, he says.

There are rare exceptions: Some deep-sea creatures like the giant squid may be washed ashore after a storm. 'The squid floats when it is dead, which is not true for other deep-sea fishes.'

As to how the pictures from the website ended up in the spam e-mail on the tsunami, the mystery remains.

'It's all a fraud,' he says with a laugh.

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