

# Heavy metal poisoning jumbos

## Wildlife Dept: Recent death of pygmy elephants likely due to cadmium in food

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**KOTA KINABALU:** Sabah's endangered pygmy elephants are at risk of cadmium poisoning, but it could take years to determine the source of this heavy metal pollution, says state Wildlife Department director Augustine Tuuga.

The recent elephant death at an oil palm estate in Ulu Tungku, Lahad Datu, was likely due to poisoning as there were traces of cadmium found in its internal organs, he said.

"High levels of cadmium were in the elephant's liver and kidneys."

Based on that, he said that its death was attributed to a cardio respiratory failure as a result of a total failure of the body system

to function.

Tuuga said there were multi organ failures due to congestion of vital organs and also infection as a result of septicaemia, which possibly happened following ingestion of toxic substances.

He said further diagnostic tests were required to confirm the cause of death.

"How it ingested cadmium is a question we are still trying to answer. It may take years before we find out where it came from."

Among others, he said this was because of the high cost of sample analysis, at about RM10,000 per analysis for each sample collected.

He said Sabah does not have a specified lab to conduct these types of tests and has to send samples to the National Poison Centre.



**At risk:** A pygmy elephant in this file photo being fitted with a satellite collar by wildlife rangers in Kinabatangan district.

He said the department was trying to source for more funds to conduct these analyses.

Last year, a report of a scientific

study revealed that heavy metal pollution (inorganic pollutants) from unknown sources around plantations was posing a threat to

Sabah's wildlife.

The study was ground-breaking as it coincided with the post-mortem report on the deaths of three Borneo pygmy elephants from cadmium poisoning in November last year.

The scientific study conducted over eight years since 2013 on small carnivores found 13 different types of metal in their fur, including lead, mercury, chromium and cadmium.

Findings of the study under the Kinabatangan Small Carnivore Programme, which evaluated the health of small carnivores in the area, pushed for an in-depth investigation to identify the source of the heavy metals as this is a crucial step in protecting wildlife, human welfare and economic development.