

Something to chew on... Betel nut banned in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

The chewing of betel nut is a national pastime in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Everywhere people can be seen chewing the egg-sized nut... everywhere, that is, except in the capital of the Pacific nation, Port Moresby.

Early in January this year, the governor of Port Moresby, Powes Parkop, banned the public sale and chewing of betel nut, known locally as *buai* - a decision that, overnight, left many people angry, with a bitter taste in their mouth. Hundreds of street vendors across the city lost their livelihood, and the 250,000 city residents are now without ready access to their beloved *buai*.

Why ban the chewing of a pine-tree nut? Betel nut is chewed in combination with mustard and lime powder, a practice that creates a mild stimulant for the chewer, similar to smoking a cigarette; however, the habit also turns saliva red, and a lot of red spittle ends up being spat on to the floor, leaving an objectionable, red staining to surfaces, and the teeth of offenders!

The tradition of chewing betel nut has been widely practiced for centuries in many parts of Asia; yet the spitting out of the accompanying spittle has been blamed for the spread of air-borne diseases, especially tuberculosis, and the WHO has linked betel-nut chewing with several forms of oral cancer.

The betel-nut ban in Port Moresby came into full effect on 1st January 2014, with a 7-day period of grace to kick-start the regulation. Residents wishing to continue to buy betel nut now have to venture 7 to 8 miles outside the city to purchase the nut, and personal possession for returnees to Port Moresby is limited to a maximum of 2kg.

Enforcement of the new law is by stringent police checks, and tree-covered gatherings of people are prime targets for newly-appointed patrol officers. Those who flout the law risk a 300-kina (£70) on-the-spot fine, or 2-hours community service. Repeat offenders face prosecution. Airlines and maritime operators are not immune; a hefty 10,000-kina (£2,350) fine will be levied if they are found to have allowed the transportation of *buai* on any of their craft.

Despite the penalties, smuggling of betel nut continues, and arrests have already been made – most prominently, for sending death-threat text messages to the city governor.

And authorities are finding that locals are prepared to go to unusual lengths in an attempt to circumnavigate the ban. Smuggling stories abound: gravel trucks with hidden layers of betel nuts, spare tyres stuffed with illegal bounty, and, at one road-side check point, a funeral cortège of wailing mourners was stop-searched, only to reveal the focus of their lament - a coffin full of betel nut rather than the body of a recently-departed loved one.

While traders and taxi drivers are frustrated with the loss of trade and income, many in Port Moresby tentatively welcome the ban, despite reductions to income, as the city is noticeably cleaner.

“The *buai* ban is an improvement in terms of the health and hygiene of the city”, said the general secretary of the United Church in PNG, Revd. Uve Rova, “but it affects the income of vendors, most of whom are members of the United Church, so church funds will be affected too. People are suffering because of the actions of a few irresponsible users”.

Generally, *buai* vendors are recently-arrived city dwellings, looking to earn a basic living. Most are women, and, many are mothers trying to cover the daily expenses of their family. Governor Parkop acknowledges that street vendors have been affected adversely by the ban, and has promised to introduce new, as yet undisclosed, ways to assist them. The women’s work secretary of the United Church in PNG, Revd. Gloria Marke wants women to realise that they have many skills and the ban is an opportunity for the women to discover untapped talents: “Selling *buai* is easy money, women are more gifted than that,” she said, “the United Church is enabling women to undertake skills and leadership training in order to encourage their financial independence”.

Other potential benefits of the ban will include increased dietary choice in the capital. It is hoped that betel-nut producers, devoid of a crop to sell, will now turn to growing other agricultural produce, and as a result, both the variety and availability of vegetables will improve in the city markets. Until late last year, betel nut dominated the market stalls and walkways of the capital.

It is still early days for the betel-nut ban in Port Moresby, but the popular governor, now in his second term, will be looking for further city improvements. Many residents believe that an alcohol ban will be next, as the outlawing of alcohol abuse and drunkenness is already high on the political agenda.

Given the general support of the betel-nut ban, the next proposal to prohibit unlicensed alcohol in Port Moresby may not be too difficult to swallow. And, no doubt, the ever-resourceful Papua New Guineans, deprived of another pastime, will find new avenues for their ingenuities.



*‘Bloody Mary’s chewing betel nuts
She’s always chewing betel nuts
Bloody Mary’s chewing betel nuts
And she don’t use pepsodent!
Bloody Mary, South Pacific – The Musical*

