Barn owls here to stay

Another pair released in effort to control Subang Jaya’s rat population

By OH ING YEE

THERE are currently a pair of barn owls here to stay. They are set to nest and breed, if Assoc Prof Dr Hafizuddin Mohd Noor of Universiti Putra Malaysia and his colleagues have their way. Hafizuddin said this after another pair of barn owls was released on Thursday night – the third release in the pilot project by Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Subang Jaya Municipal Council (MPSJ), Department of Wildlife and National Parks (Perhilitan) and Sj Eko.

The project to reintroduce barn owls for controlling urban rat populations is the first of its kind in Malaysia and Asia. It was reported in StarMetro (“Natural pest control”, published on Dec 25, 2015) that a total of 301 barn owls had been collected for the two-year project.

The birds come from MPSJ, Subang Jaya assemblyman’s office, Residents Committee (RKP) Zones 1 and 2, and several corporations around Subang Jaya.

To-date, nine pairs of owls have been released last year. The owls were released in different locations, namely SS13, SS15 and SS34. Hafizuddin explained that barn owls are a form of biological control for rats.

“Compared to snakes, the owl is more suitable for reducing the number of rats, as a male owl can bring up to 10 rats back to its nest in a night.

“The barn owl has been employed and encouraged to breed in artificial nest boxes in the rice field and oil palm plantations since the 1980s.

“The outcome has been encouraging as the rat population has been kept low. The applications of chemical rodenticides have also been greatly reduced,” he said.

Dr Hafizuddin added that employing barn owls was a green approach compared to the use of pest chemical rodenticides that contaminates the environment.

The downside is that it usually takes a while before the results are seen.

“People ask, ‘Why are there still rats?’ The barn owls cannot be expected to be the magic wand to solve the city’s rat problem.

“Public perception that barn owls alone will solve the rat problem is misplaced. From a biological point of view, it is impossible to exterminate rats. We can only control and manage.

“We need to disseminate this information so that the entire community can understand,” he said.

Dr Hafizuddin, who is an expert in vertebrate pest ecology and biological pest control, said both authorities and the community needed to make concerted efforts to cut the availability of food for rats.

“It will not help if we continue to litter. Hence, it is important to keep the environment clean,” he said.

Residents at the event were fascinated and excited to see the owls up close.

Also present at the event were Subang Jaya assemblyman Uzairul Yeth and MPSJ councillor Ken Chia and the sponsors for the initiative.

Uzairul said the house now wants to work on promoting a war on rats that does not harm the owls.

“We hope residents can understand that if this project succeeds, it will benefit not just Subang Jaya but other urban areas too,” she said.

Universiti Sains Malaysia head researcher for the project Prof Dr Abas Hassan-Abdul said they would advise on the type of rat poison to use.

A student researcher placing one of the barn owls in an artificial nest box.