

Barn owls here to stay

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

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THE barn owls are here, and they are here to nest and breed, if Assoc Prof Dr Hafidzi Mohd Noor of Universiti Putra Malaysia and his collaborators have their way.

Hafidzi 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 Echo*.

The project to urbanise 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 RM150,000 had been collected for the two-year project.

The funds came from MPSJ, Subang Jaya assemblyman's office, Residents Committee (JKP) 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 SS15, PJS9 and SS14.

Hafidzi explained that barn owls were 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 have been kept low. The applications of chemical rodenticides have also been greatly reduced," he said.

Dr Hafidzi added that employing barn owls was a green approach compared to the use of potent chemical rodenticide that contaminates the environment.

The downside is that it usually takes a while before you see the results.

"People ask, 'Why are there still rats?' The barn owls cannot be



Dr Hafidzi (left) answering residents' queries about the owls.

expected to be the magic wand to 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 Hafidzi, who is an expert in vertebrate pest ecology and biological pest control, said both the 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 ecstatic to see the owls up close.

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

Yeoh said the issue now was to work on rodenticide that only killed rats without harming 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 Abu Hassan Ahmad 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.