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LIFE & TIMES

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Hoot for pest control

How barn owls have become the perfect rodent hunters in oil palm estates

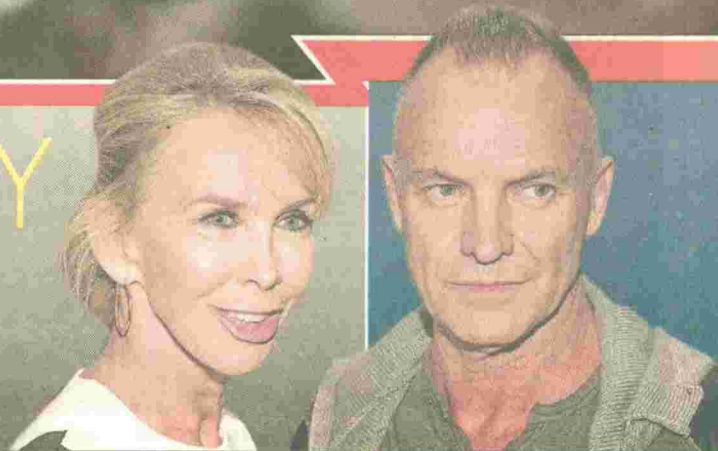
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LIFE & TIMES **GREEN**

Hunters with wings

Malaysia is a world leader in using barn owls in pest management in oil palm plantations, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

WHEN oil palm plantations expanded so that they could produce crops all year round, an unexpected problem occurred: An explosion of rats.

Rats ate oil palm seeds, thereby, spoiling the quality of the free fatty acids in palm oil. One option was to use rat poison to get rid of them. Then the rats became resistant to the poison. The second generation rat bait was stronger, but it led to the destruction of other animals.

Snakes, of course, feed on rats. "But do you know that a snake takes two weeks to digest a rat?" says John Duckett, 81, managing director of Agricultural Consultancy Services. "A snake eats, on average, 12 rats a year."

So, if snakes and poison don't do the trick, what will? Barn owls.

These are not the same kind of barn owls found in Europe. Those are from the nominate race and go by the name *Tyto alba alba*. The ones here are called *Tyto alba javanica*. Since there's no winter in the tropics, our barn owls can hunt all year round.

They also have a far longer life span and higher survival rates. Duckett says: "Since owls are nocturnal, 98 per cent of their diet consists of rats as rats are nocturnal. Owls have very sensitive hearing too."

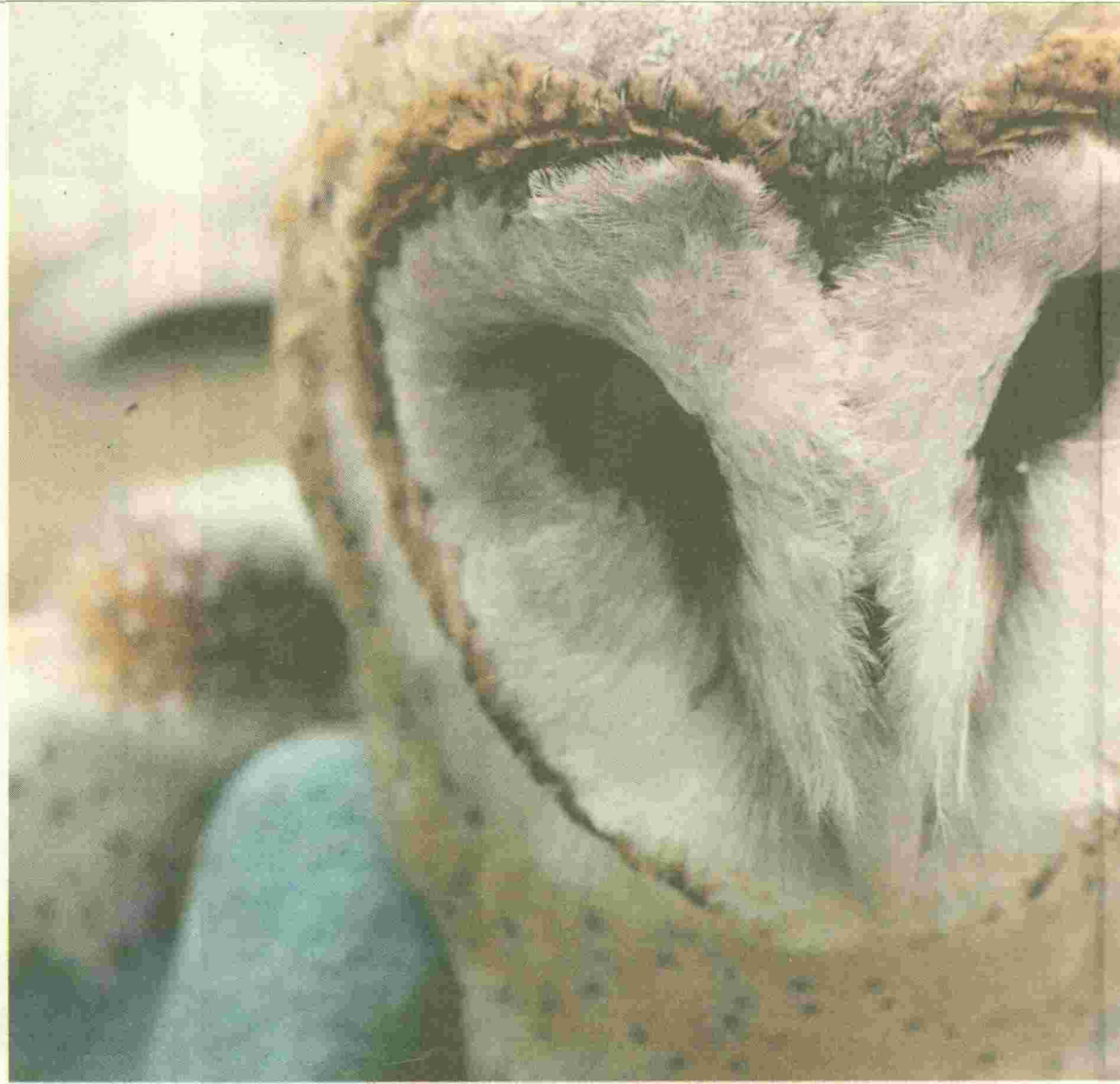
COST-SAVING

Proud of what has been achieved, Duckett says: "One of the plantations that I've had the most association with — Southern Perak Plantations in Sabak Bernam — has not used rat bait for the last 20 years."

The father of four estimates that by using these nest boxes (a ratio of 1 nest box to 18 hectares), many plantations have saved up to 10 fold of their revenue spent annually to control the rat population.

If you're wondering whether housing these nesting boxes in your garden will encourage owls to come and, thereby, effectively kill rodents in your house, John says: "Technically, yes. City folk can keep these boxes."

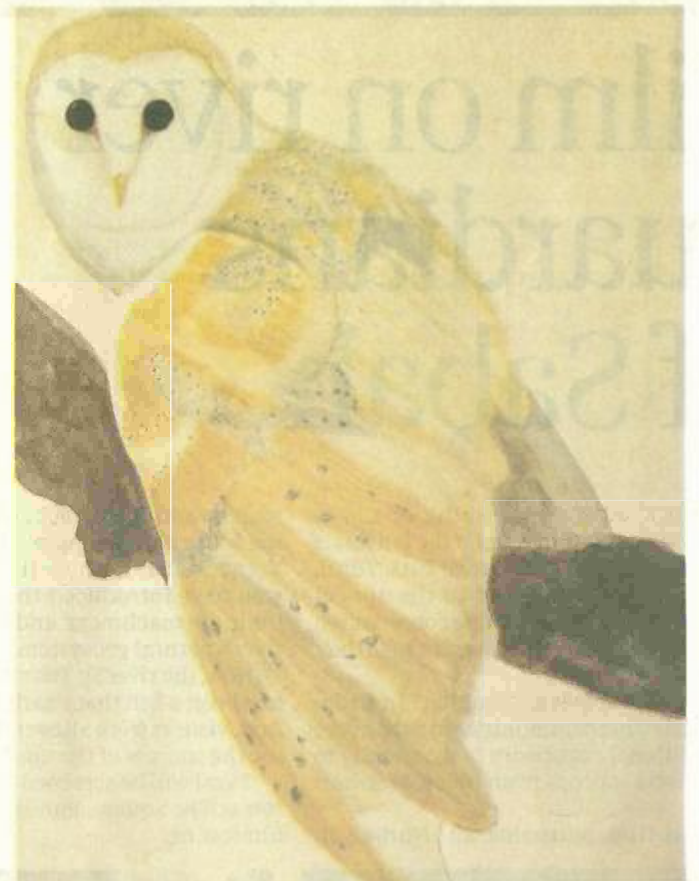
However, like everything else, it requires proper monitoring. "It's a



management tool," says John. "You have to have monthly inspections. Count the number of eggs. See if the boxes need repair. It is when they are not monitored or vandalised that we will hear statements like, 'Barn owls are not effective in preventing rat infestation.'"

There are three parts to the success of using these nest boxes for barn owls in oil palm plantations. First, over a period of 20 years, the peninsula has seen the status of barn owls change from 'rare' to 'common'.

Second, full biological control



Painting of a barn owl by Neill Duckett (1976).

over the problem of rat infestation has been achieved.

Indeed, the practice of using barn owls to get rid of rats is now widely followed in many oil palm plantations.

With the declining use of pesticides, animals that used to die from ingesting rat poison have returned. "We are now seeing more civet cats,

monitor lizards, feral cats and other animals," says Neil Duckett, John's son, who's a director and producer at R&N Films. This means a richer ecosystem in oil palm plantations, which is always a good thing.

BARN OWL PIONEER

Neil, 48, is quick to say that it's his father who first discovered nesting



One of the barn owls that regularly visits Duckett's home.

LONG-TIME RESIDENT

JOHN DUCKETT arrived in the country in the 1950s with the British Army. After his tenure ended, he joined a rubber plantation as a junior assistant.

Life on a plantation was certainly full of adventure. "Once, a seladang killed a tapir. My conductor and I went to look for the seladang. But, they're tricky animals. They'll go round the whole village and then creep up on you. The seladang was behind us when our dog (a mastiff-boxer mix) attacked it. This gave us time to run and climb a tree. From there, I was able to shoot it," he says.

As he recounts more adventures, it's obvious there was lots of fun on the plantation as well. "As the junior assistant, I became the secretary of the Planters Club and ran it. My entertainment allowance was a princely sum of \$30. This was about one-eighth of my salary. A little secret I discovered was that I found

a dye which could be sprayed on the green and didn't come off on the golf balls. So our club had beautiful green all the time. But I've never played golf myself!" he says.

DOCUMENTARY

John insists that he's always been interested in nature as he grew up on a farm in the UK. He then takes out lovely scrapbooks that he and his children have created, all bound and properly labelled. He thumbs through the pages, all the while pointing out photos, newspaper cuttings, paintings and drawings of all the animals

he's come across. Every single entry is accompanied by a full write-up in penmanship that is neat and tidy.

As John opens to a page in a scrapbook that his son Neil created in 1976, the latter says: "Yes, we've been doing this all the time. We'd follow Dad on his trips into the jungle. Go out, see an animal, draw or paint it and write about it."

This ability to be creative about knowledge gleaned has evolved into something more in recent years. Neil shares news of a documentary his brother, Richard, directed called, *The Barn Owl: Predator Among The Palms*.

(www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jkptkQ66mQ&feature=youtu.be)

"It won an award at the Kuala Lumpur Eco Film Festival 2012 in the Best Short Film category," explains Neil.

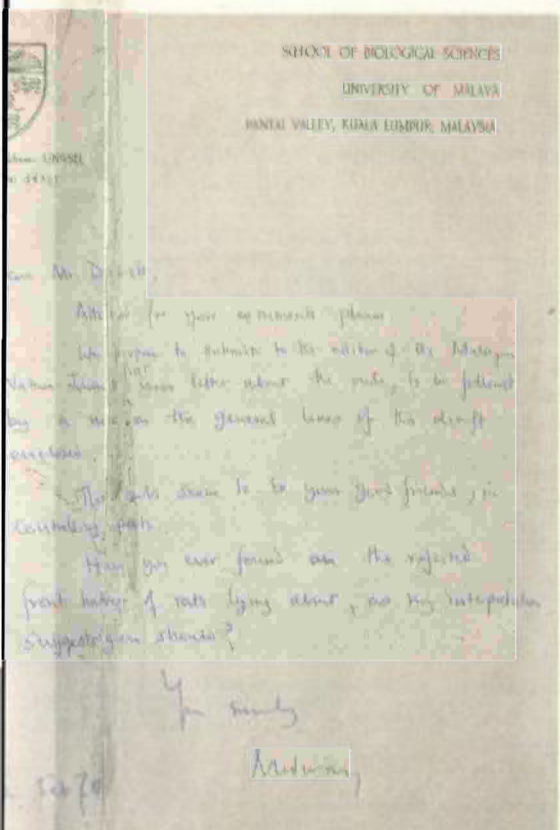
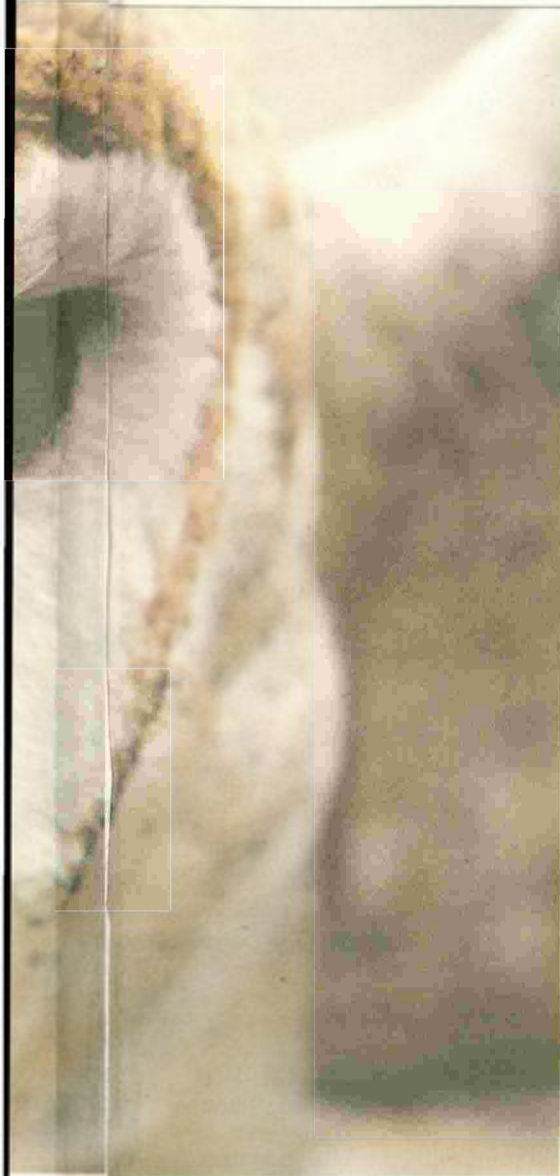
Part of their aim in creating the documentary is to give a balanced view of oil palm plantations which Neil says are "under international attack environmentally. It's not true that all plantations are not concerned with the environment. Sometimes, people choose the wrong kind of land, those that are not suitable to grow oil palm."

Reinforcing his family's long association with owls, John recalls: "The night my daughter Rebecca was born, an owl came hooting. Owls are lovely, beautiful things. They are social birds and want to be around people."

way, at the time a lecturer at the University Of Malaya, to make enquiries about this discovery. Medway replied to confirm that these were indeed barn owls. He points to a letter and says: "He also wrote, 'The owls seem to be your good friend, in controlling pests'. That's how I got the idea to use these barn owls to get rid of the rats."

Next was the arrival of Graham Lenton at University Of Malaya, who studied the ecology of the barn owl and its possible use in rodent control. He made several conclusions, namely, there were very few barn owls in Peninsular Malaysia because they didn't have nest sites. He set about designing nest boxes for the barn owls. Once barn owls were considered a viable measure to control the rat population, a full scale project was established on Kok Foh Estate, Bahau, Negri Sembilan.

Neill Duckett and his father, John Duckett.



Lord Medway's letter suggesting the use of barn owls to control the rat population.

barn owls in Peninsular Malaysia. John however, is more modest and says: "Before 1969, any unconfirmed earlier appearances of these barn owls and their nests in the peninsula were rare. It was thought that they were migrants from Sumatra."

In 1969, John found an owl's nest in the attic of his house in Fraser Estate, Johor. He wrote to Lord Med-