

Enticing Swiftlets With Man-Made Caves

By Emin Madi

KOTA KINABALU, July 13 (Bernama) -- At a glance, the three concrete buildings, surrounded by a perimeter of fence in Kampung Kolopis, Penampang some 20 km from here, give the appearance of a fortress.

But these special structures, are neither fortified buildings nor human residences for they are actually the home of the "burung layang-layang" (swifts).

The buildings are the brainchild of Laurentius Nayan Ambu, the deputy director of Sabah Wildlife Department.

Laurentius said, the idea of setting up the man-made swiftlets home came about after he began to give talks on commercial bird farming in 1998.

"Initially, I received invitation to give talks on bird farming by people from around the country. Later the invitations came from Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand," he said.

BIRD FARMING

"One day some participants challenged me to prove that I can really manage bird farming," he said.

Laurentius said he took up the challenge and after buying 1.6 hectares of idle land overlooking a paddy field at Kampung Kolopis, he set up his first single-storey bird house in 2000, which he initially used as a research centre for bird farming.

The bird house has now attracted more than 1,000 swiftlets with hundreds already nesting or producing white nests on a specially designed nesting planks inside the dimly-lit and square structures.

In 2004, Laurentius built a two-storey bird house equipped with a cooling system for better air circulation and ventilation in the fully-concrete building.

"I undertook great pains to develop the technology which can provide a more conducive system for bird farming in the country, especially in Sabah," he said.

SWIFTLETS' FARMERS

According to Laurentius, there are more than 50 active swiftlets' farmers in Sabah.

"I think bird farming is good for the cottage industry, especially to raise the standard of living of the rural people. It would be good if the government provide grants to help rural folks to start bird farming," he said.

Laurentius said that depending on capital investment, bird farming can be a viable venture . The minimum requirement is a two-storey building measuring about 8.0 x 8.0 metres.

"This measurement correlates directly with the arrangement of the nesting planks," he said.

Laurentius said a one-storey 8.0 x 8.0 metre swiftlet house can produce about 5.0 to 7.0 kg of high quality white nests, depending on the swift population.

An average of 110 to 120 nests can produce about 1.0 kg of raw bird nests.

He said it takes four to five years for the man-made caves to attract and build up the desired swift population before it can be harvested.

SWIFLET FARMING

Explaining the methods of swiflet farming, Laurentius said one of them is by attracting the birds with the use of cassette tapes that emit the calls of the birds.

The other method is foster parenting or using "mossyness" swiflets. There is also the translocation technique, where young birds from the natural caves are translocated into the farm house. Essentially, this involves feeding by hands.

Laurentius said swiflet farming is different from ordinary (bird) farming, because it does not involve caging but free-ranging methods, where birds are free to enter and leave the bird house.

According to him, the two types of normal farming involve micro and macro habitats.

NATURAL REQUIREMENTS

"In the micro habitat concept, we try as close as possible to mimic the natural requirements of birds in natural cave.

"Light has to be just dim enough to see, while normal temperature is between 27 to 29 degrees Celsius.

"In macro habitat, to sustain the whole operation you need a mosaic habitat type in order for the population of the birds to survive in the long run".

Through his extensive research on swiflets, Laurentius found out that one of the ecological behaviour of the birds, is that they will return to where they were hatched.

Swiflets also live in pairs, meaning if there are 1,000 birds in the house, there are only about 500 nests, he said, adding that white birds or "collocalia fuciphaga" is the most common type suitable for swiflet farming.

In 1994, the Convention of International Trade and Endangered Species of world flora and fauna (CITES) wanted the trade on swiflets and their produce to be banned unless with special permit.

" We (Malaysia) did not agree with the proposal because trade in Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) is not endangering the survival of swiflets. Management of bird nests in Sabah is good, said Laurentius who in charge of CITES in Sabah.

-- BERNAMA