

## Tourist Characteristics at Tabing Salt Lick

*Ang Sek Chuan and Chan Ngai Weng*

A-10-10 Pangsapuri Ria, 12000 Butterworth,  
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

---

**Abstract:** Salt lick tourism has been one of the activities in Taman Negara, Pahang, Malaysia. The primary objective of this paper is to analyze the tourists' log book at Tabing Salt Lick (N04° 23' 12.8" E102° 24' 13.9") and to study the demographic pattern of wildlife watching tourists. The methodology in this study uses the written entries on the log book for analysis. Demographic and visit characteristics were identified from the data. The findings confirm that wildlife watching in remote salt lick will continue to be a popular tourists' attraction. It was found that there are two main groups of tourists who are attracted to salt licks, the true wildlife watchers and the fun-seeking day trippers. Within a span of 1 year 9 months, only 4% of tourists visiting this salt lick were Malaysians (despite the fact that Malaysians made up 53.9% of tourists visiting Taman Negara) while the majority are from Europe. Foreign tourists in Malaysia are interested in wildlife watching and thus building hides at salt licks should be sustained and maintained. Furthermore, there is a lot of potentials to popularize this attraction amongst Malaysians whilst at the same time improve awareness on wildlife conservation.

**Key words:** Tourism • Natural heritage • Salt lick • Tabing Hide • National Park

---

### INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia there are not many academic studies on salt lick tourism. Most researches on salt licks are inclined towards the study of animals' visitation, chemical analysis and biodiversity. Surveys and questionnaires by tourists are deemed to be formal. It appeared that there are certain margins of error in all opinion polls. The "Shy Tory Factor" is a good example of such error in an opinion poll where face-to-face interviews and human telephone calls are more likely to prompt a "shy" response than the more anonymous "robo-call" telephone surveys or internet polls [1]. Anonymous survey using log book has never been a popular method of research. However, in training report, log books have been used as one form of evidence of satisfactory progress [2]. The object of this study is to understand the behavioral and demographic patterns of wildlife watching tourists at a salt lick hide. The behavior of wildlife watchers in remote hides would make an interesting object of study. It would be interesting to document how they react and express themselves freely and anonymously without anyone observing when left alone or with friends. The reaction and freedom expressed in the log book could provide some outspoken comments and a valid study on salt lick tourism. Such comments are

considered unbiased and clearly show what the tourists perceive, want and will return or commit to. The scope of this research is to provide useful information on the demographic behavior at salt lick sites that will assist stakeholders on sustaining salt lick tourism in remote areas in a national park.

**Study Area:** The 4343 square kilometers Taman Negara (National Park) of Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan was gazetted as a national park in 1938-1939. Taman Negara is chosen for this study based on its rich biodiversity and the fact that it is the oldest established national park in Malaysia. The village, Kuala Tahan is the most popular gateway to Taman Negara. There are six salt lick hides for tourists around Kuala Tahan with five hides having facilities for overnight stay. One needs to register with the Wildlife Department to stay at the hide. The cost per person for an overnight stay at the hide is RM5.00<sup>1</sup>. This study will only concentrate on Tabing Hide. Tabing Hide was chosen mainly because of the presence of the log book and the fact that Tabing Hide is one of the more popular hides visited by many tourists.

Tabing Salt Lick has been in existence for many years since 1930s – first as a hunting ground and later as a tourist attraction when Taman Negara was gazetted as

---

<sup>1</sup>USD1 = RM3.20 (16 July 2010)

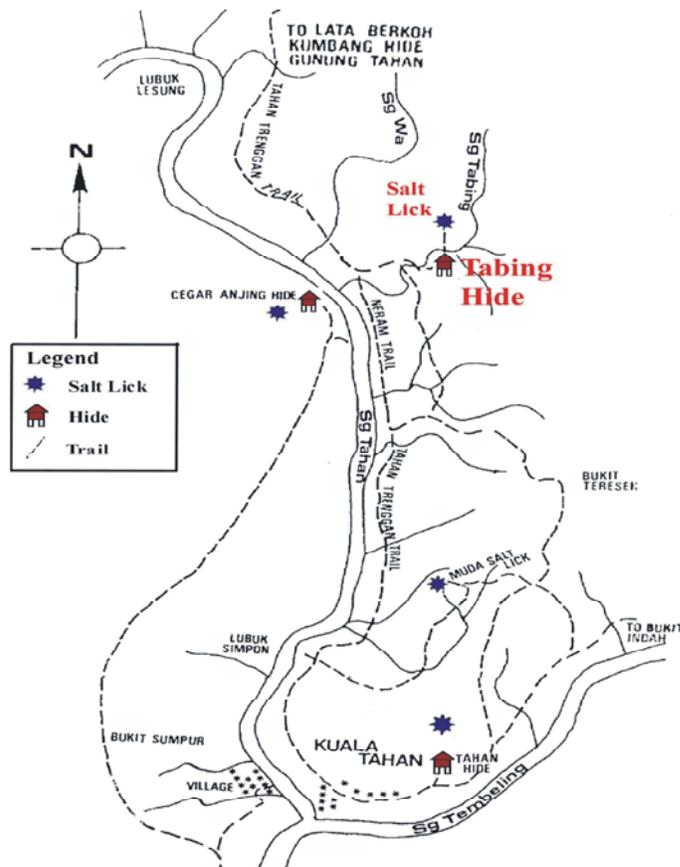


Fig. 1: Map to Tabing Hide adapted from Perhilitan [2]

national park. The first hide was a tree hide, literally built on a tree [3]. The second hide to replace the first was built ten meters to the right. While the present run-down hide was built on higher ground to the right of the second hide on top of a slope. Trees have overgrown and blocked the sites of the first and second hides. The present hide above the slope provides a much better view. Initially, there were two trails to Tabing Hide. One trail is along the Sungai Tahan while the other branches off from the end of the Bukit Tereseke – Sg Tahan trail cutting across the interior to Tabing hide. Tabing Hide (*Bumbun Tabing* in Malay language) is about three kilometers and one and a half hour trekking from Kuala Tahan (Figure 1). Visitors can also take a small boat for 4 persons at a cost of RM40<sup>2</sup> to the river bank of Sungai Tahan. Then at a junction along Kuala Tahan-Gunung Tahan trail, trek another 200 meters to Tabing Hide.

A stream flows beside the salt lick. The lick is 50 meters from the hide. Ungulates dig and eat the mineral

rich soil at the lick. There are 8 beds at Tabing Hide with toilet facilities. Wildlife rangers need to pump water from the stream to the hide when tourists book to stay overnight. Tabing Hide is best described by a tourist named Scott Tyrrell<sup>3</sup>, “*The bed was a raised platform of hard, widely spaced wooden slats. Ours was one of eight and they were all located in a concrete room about ten meters square, the roof was wood and tin and in one corner was the toilet. The toilet was filthy with mud and crawling with insects, the shower, such as it was, was fed from a tank in the roof and leaked, sending a constant stream of water down the concrete steps that grew mould, moss and harboured whole colony of ants. One wall of this concrete box had a four meter slit in it which served as a window and the only means to view the outside world (it was here that we were forced to spend most of our time) and the whole structure was raised five meters off the ground on thin concrete legs. In the jungle, the mighty jungle, Scott and Anny slept for three nights*”.

<sup>2</sup>Price for 2009

<sup>3</sup><http://www.travelblog.org/Asia/Malaysia/Pahang/Kuala-Tahan/blog-267216.html>

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A visit was made to Tabing Hide on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2009 to collect data for this paper. The log book was partially soiled with humidity of the rainforest. There were 25 pages with comments in the log book. A digital camera was used to capture all the written pages. Back at home, the pages were read thoroughly using Window Photo Gallery viewer. Google online translation was used to translate some comments in foreign languages to English Language. The data were keyed into MS Excel software. Using the simple statistical functions of MS Excel, the data were analyzed and graphs were created from the MS Excel software.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

It was fun reading the log book. “Where are the dinosaurs?”, “I got a leech on my ass!!”, “Now, just call me Indiana Jones Jr!:)” and “Don't litter and take your rubbish with you!!!” are some of the humorous, jokes and even serious advices. The presence of a large spider in the toilet became one of the most popular topics in the entries in the log book. A total of twenty-six entries (13% of total entries) on spider were recorded in the log book. It was the hottest topic recorded and discussed. For example, Bernardo Lopez of Spain on 9<sup>th</sup> Aug 2009, remarked, “The huge spider of the toilet is still there!!” and the last entry by Eric Showen and Paul Craft on 28<sup>th</sup> Aug 2009, “...the spider by the toilet is DEAD!!” There is a possibility that visitors to the hide are bored

and have nothing to comment on except the huge spider in the toilet. The tourists could also be misinformed about the non poisonous spider in Malaysia. They may presume and associate the huge spider with the deadly black widow. A Swedish (no name given) summed up, “We enjoyed the book!”

**By Countries (Table 1):** The records in the log book start from 25 Feb 2008 and end on 19 Nov 2009. Within a span of 1 year 9 months, it is very surprising to note that only 4% of tourists visiting this salt lick were Malaysians. This indicates that salt lick tourism is a very low priority amongst Malaysian’s tourists. The bulk of visiting tourists to the hide were from the UK (12% of all visitors), followed closely by the Czechs (9%), Germans (8%), Dutch (7%) and the rest of the world (5% or less). Hence, Europeans were the main visitors to this salt lick. In Europe, there are many artificial salt licks especially during the breeding seasons. Wildlife watching is also part of the tourism activity in Europe. This could be the reason why salt licks are popular with Europeans and have become one of their favorite hobbies. Countries where wildlife watching is not a popular touristic activity such as Bermuda, China, Ireland, Kajakistan and Mexico are, not surprisingly, poorly represented in the log book.

**By Months (Table 2):** July to September has always been the super peak period for Taman Negara. The brochure by Mutiara Taman Negara stated *Super Peak Rate applicable for room stay between 1<sup>st</sup> July*

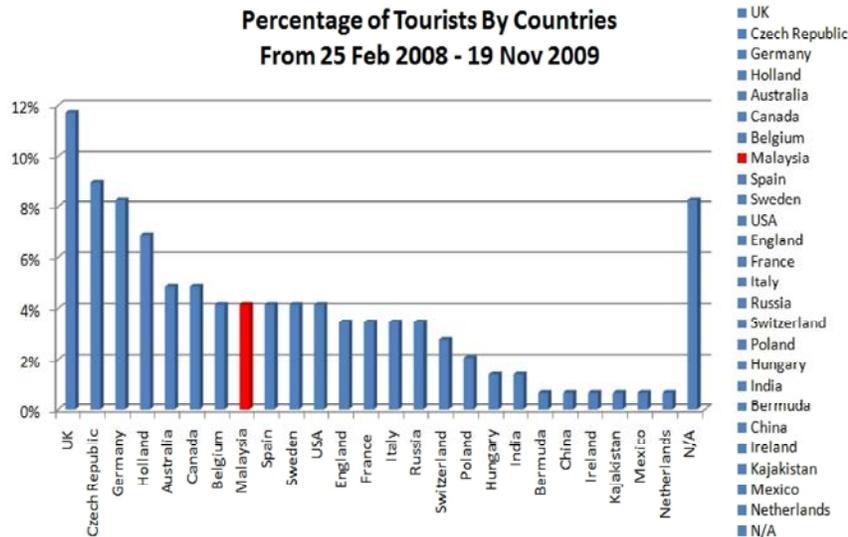


Table 1: Percentage of Tourists by Countries

**Percentage of Tourists to Tabing Salt Lick by Months  
From 25 Feb 2008 - 19 Nov 2009**

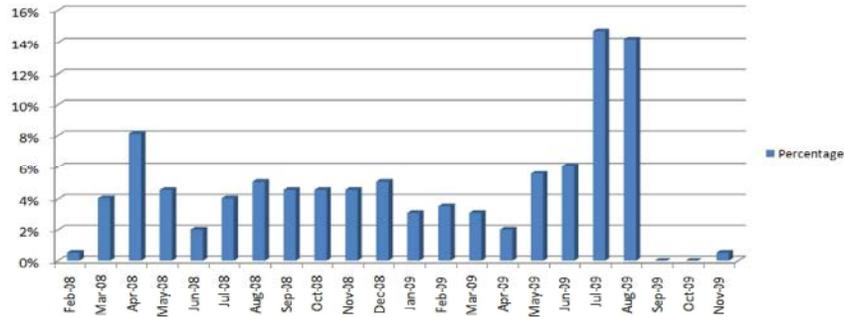


Table 2: Percentage of Tourists to Tabing Salt Lick by Months

and 15<sup>th</sup> September 2009 [4]. As expected, July and August 2009 attracted the most tourists to this hide. There was also the July Feast, a month long program at Kuala Tahan for tourists. July 2009 recorded the highest number of entries with 15% and followed by August 2009 with 14%. There was no entry for September and October 2009. This was due to the closure of Tabing Hide after it was found to be uninhabitable and run-down.

**Wildlife Recorded:** Only three species of wildlife were recorded on the log book at Tabing Salt Lick in this study. This was further confirmed by a report in 2004 by Melissa Lim<sup>4</sup> which states that *Bumbun Tabing is known for sightings of wild boars, barking deers and tapirs*. From the log book, deer was the most sighted with 13 records at 52%, followed by wild boar with 11 sightings at 44% and tapir with only one sighting at 4%. The species of deer could not be confirmed as entries in the log did not specify them. However, a few tourists were able to identify barking deer and mouse deer. There are at least three species of deer around Tabing salt lick – sambar deer, barking deer and mouse deer. An entry by Louis Weinberg on 28 July 2009 described the mouse deer as “a miniature deer. So cute! Deer” A sighting of wildlife at the salt lick is a wonderful experience for many tourists as these animals found in Malaysia are not found in their countries. Wild boars are considered very common in Taman Negara, as many can be seen even at the park HQ foraging for fruits, roots and worms. It was no surprise that they can be found at Tabing Salt Lick. However, most wild boars forage for roots and worms rather than licking mineral salts.

**Wildlife Watchers vs Fun-Seekers:** In an opinion poll, it would be impossible to gauge the true feeling of the individual that is being surveyed. The “Shy Tory Factor”<sup>5</sup> is another reason. However, data from log book provides a wider perspective and a suitable barometer of fun-seeking tourists. Serious wildlife watchers prefer to comment on wildlife seen, what to expect and information that describe nature – because they know what to write. Fun seekers are those who happen to arrive at Tabing Hide to experience the hide or their itinerary include trekking to this hide. Many considered the visit to this hide as their first experience. Many fun seekers were negative in their comments by the absence of wildlife, they make fun when commenting, such as: - “We saw a panther!”, “We encountered a dead giraffe in a tree” and “got peed on by some macaques”, “No animals or birds”, “There was some chicken korma on the floor, on the path, on the way, in the forest” and “After coming face to face with a tiger and scope from a wild orangutan, I stop here for some smoke...” There are those who enjoyed the trekking to Tabing Hide although they did not view any wildlife, “Very nice place, we like!!”, “Good walk.”, “Nice hike in from the resort”, “Seen a deer, swimming monitor lizard in big river, grey-white spider on tree, loads of pigs, couple of leeches on my ankle and many homo erectus”, “Good walk, one deer and lots of trees!”, “Great rain for a whole night!! Saw pig’s family (4 sticks!) and a lot of birds” and “Nice walk here, incredible sounds in the afternoon”. It is with these favorable comments that salt lick hides will continue to be a crowd puller and they should be sustained as a tourist destination. Not all visitors to the hide make entry in the log book. There were several entries that need

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.journeymalaysia.com/MR\\_tamannegara2.htm](http://www.journeymalaysia.com/MR_tamannegara2.htm)

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shy\\_Tory\\_Factor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shy_Tory_Factor)

Table 3: Comparing visitors to Tabing Hide in 1995[9], 2002[4] and 2008[5]

Year	Visitors per year	Visitors overnight at Tabing Hide	Visitors per night
1995	43,491	1,031 (2.3%)	2.8
2002	65,744	1,647 (2.5%)	4.5
2008	84,044	2,101 (2.5%) <sup>a</sup>	5.7 <sup>b</sup>

Estimate zero growth at 2.5%.<sup>a</sup> Estimate based on 2.5%.<sup>b</sup>



Fig. 2: The dilapidated Tabing Hide

translations in Czech, France, Italy, Russian and etc. Some entries in foreign languages could not be interpreted by Google translation.

As early as 1987, in the bulletin Perhilitan [5], someone commented that the increasing number of visitors to the Park make it impossible for everyone to have an opportunity to stay in a hide to watch wildlife, since the maximum the hide could accommodate was only 8 persons. It was suggested that new salt licks be located or even to create artificial ones to cater for the high influx of visitors at Kuala Tahan. A search through the library of Perhilitan provides only two reports on Tabing Hide's occupancy (Table 3). In the Perhilitan's Annual Report [6], it was reported that there were 1,647 visitors that spent the night at Tabing hide in 2002. There were 65,744 visitors comprising of 35,422 locals (53.9%) and 30,322 foreigners (46.1%) to Kuala Tahan, considered the gateway to Tabing Hide. This means that only a mere 2.5% of the tourists that entered Kuala Tahan managed to spend the night at Tabing Hide. Based on the above 2.5% visitation to Tabing Hide, with 84,044 visitors to Kuala Tahan in 2008 [7] then this can be computed to 2101 visitors that could probably have spent the night at Tabing Hide in 2008. There were only 105 entries in the log book from Mac 2008 to Feb 2009 (a 12-month period). This mean there is an average of 8.7 visitors per day visiting Tabing Hide. With 105 entries and projected 4.5

visitors per night (Table 3), which is equal to 473 visitors. This figure represents only 0.6% for 2008 as compared to 2.5% in 2002. These projected figures are inconclusive and faulty. The probable reasons as gathered from the log book could be the closure of the hide by Perhilitan and the zero promotion of this interesting tourism activity. The most likely reason for the closure could be the dangerous state of the dilapidated Tabing Hide (Figure 2). This may have prompted the management for safety reasons to discourage rather than encourage visitation to the Tabing Hide.

**Estimate Collection for 2002:** With 8 beds and RM5.00/night and with 1,647 visitors that spent the night, then the collection would be RM8235.00 (RM5.00/night X 1647 visitors). The fee collected will not be enough to pay for the salary of rangers who manned the hide. At least 3 rangers are employed to check the hide, pump water to the tank and housekeeping. The estimated average salary of three rangers would be RM36,000.00 (RM1000.00 X 3 persons X 12 months) per year. With the fuel cost for boat, maintenance of equipment and sundries, the budget for Tabing Hide could easily be RM50,000.00 per year. Fee should be increased to sustain the hide. Promotion on salt lick tourism should be done to sustain the National Park. Research by Hjulmand [8] has shown that *hypothetical willingness-to-pay survey that respondents generally*

were willing to pay considerable amounts for tourism activities in the tropical rainforest, especially if it is for conservation.

This finding shows that Tabing Hide is a popular salt lick destination in spite of its deplorable state. The poor upkeep will defeat the objectives of a national park. Tabing Hide is apparently a favorably built hide over a hillock. It is also a popular tourist destination, well discussed and even day trippers drop-by to view the lick for a memorial adventurous experience in a rainforest. There are several blogs and websites on Tabing Hide. It will be a waste if Tabing Hide is not maintained but left to rot and deteriorate into eventual ruins. In a fragile jungle, robust building (built with concrete) that can last for years should be maintained so that unnecessary rebuilding of a new hide can be avoided. Usually, a new construction will create new damages to environment, disturbances to wildlife, lots of thrash and even poaching of wildlife by foreign workers. Refurnishing an old hide will save cost and the excess fund could be used for interpretation and education on Malaysia's natural heritage. Unfortunately in Malaysia, there are always budget for new construction but there aren't any for maintaining the status quo. If conservation and preservation is the primary objective of a National Park then it is time to look through the policies and to rectify them for sustainable ecotourism.

There were only a handful of comments on the depleted condition of the hide. As such it can be concluded that the natural attractions have overshadowed the negative part of the dilapidated hide. Highlighted below are the only five negative comments in the log book on the dilapidated hide:-

- Hope everyone keep this place clean (Azie, Malaysia on 25 Feb 2008).
- Building is @ poor state. Please renovate! (Dominic, Canada on 25 May 2008).
- While in renovation, no wall, no doors, no sleep (Khuo, Malaysia on 23 Nov 2008).
- Please tell the housekeeper to clean it! Dirty (Alejandro, Spain on 17 Dec 2008).
- This place needs to get cleaned! Disgusting! (Kati Aldrecht, Germany on 19 Dec 2008).

There is no activity for wildlife watching on the "Daily Activity Schedule" offered by Mutiara Resort [4]. Salt lick tourism has not been promoted by this anchor tenant. Probably, salt lick hides offered beds and the resort might be losing if tourists opted to stay at hides. Other tour operators do provide visit to another easily

accessible Tahan Hide (without overnight facility) within the park HQ, although it is only a part of the larger itinerary. The lack of interest and promotion could mainly be due to profitability. Since salt lick hides are under the jurisdiction of Perhilitan (Wildlife Department) it is the onus of Perhilitan to sustain the hide. It is time for Perhilitan to implement holistic sustainable management for salt lick tourism. Without a proper management and policy to make salt lick a viable tourism product, this natural heritage will suffer consequences of neglect and loss of ecosystem and biodiversity. Tendering out the hides to private enterprise or NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) to upkeep the facilities could be a viable alternative to sustain the salt licks. Dark Caves<sup>6</sup> is one example where fragile ecosystem is being well promoted and taken care by a nature based private enterprise with support from an NGO.

## CONCLUSION

Tourist visitations at Tabing Hide were not promoted by tour companies. Tourists were there because of their interest to visit Tabing Hide. There were several genuine animal watchers in the entries. This means that salt licks are still popular with wildlife watchers even without any promotion. The run down state of the Tabing Hide did not deter tourists from visiting the hide. Therefore, it is necessary to refurnish the Tabing Hide to accommodate tourists. There is a need for better management of the hide for visiting tourists. Poor management of the hide does not attract enough tourists to sustain the hide and eventually the hide will be left to rot. The presence of interpretative posters made by volunteers from Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) found on the wall of the hide to provide information on the lick is a commendable effort. It is time for resorts at Kuala Tahan to embark on CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) to help mitigate the sorry state of Tabing Hide. This natural heritage should be maintained for the sustainability of Taman Negara. There was one comment that is worth taking note by Pierre Beaucam on 13<sup>th</sup> Feb 2009 from Belgium, that says "I think they could charge a higher entrance fee and then spend it on maintenance!" Another visitor, Jura on 16<sup>th</sup> Feb 2009 from Czech, commented, "Nice place, I don't understand why it is closed. For me it is really useful". In concluding, the writers like to quote from Perhilitan's Taman Negara Master Plan [5] in their own words that *maintenance is necessary for the preservation and restoration of the wilderness scene*. Isn't it time to walk the talk?

<sup>6</sup>Dark Caves, Selangor, Malaysia

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors wish to thank Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) for funding, technical and administrative support in the Research Universiti Project (No. 1001/PHUMANITI/816097) which resulted in this paper. We are grateful for fieldwork assistance by Tai Ean Keat and Ooi Chai Hee for his log book photographs and Khaw Chin Bin for his assistance in translating Czech to English Language. We also gratefully acknowledge the help and hospitality from PERHILITAN of Kuala Tahan.

#### **REFERENCES**

1. Sexton, R., 2010. Election 2010: Tackling the Shy Tory problem. Guardian.co.uk.
2. Nixon, M.C., 2000. The anaesthetic logbook-a survey. *Anaesthesia*, 2000, 55: 1076±1080
3. Nordin, M., 1982. Kuala Tahan Complex, Developments, Function and its Future. *The Journal of Wildlife and Parks*, Vol. 1.
4. Mutiara Taman Negara, 2009. Brochure. Mutiara Taman Negara, Kuala Tahan.
5. Perhilitan, 1987. Taman Negara Master Plan. Department of Wildlife and National Parks.
6. Perhilitan, 2002. Annual Report 2002. Department of Wildlife and National Parks, Peninsular Malaysia.
7. Perhilitan, 2009. Log Book. Wildlife Department Malaysia.
8. Hjulmand, L.G., U. Nielsen, P. Vesterlørkke, R.J. Busk and E. Erichsen, 2003. Tourism as a Development Strategy in Rural Areas Adjacent to the Crocker Range National Park, Sabah, Malaysia. *ASEAN Review of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation*.
9. Perhilitan, 1995. Laporan Tahunan Perhilitan 1995. Jabatan Perhilitan Malaysia.