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## Sarawakians going into swiftlet farming in a big way

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KUCHING: Sarawakians are flocking to the lucrative swiftlet farming business as more and more bird houses are being set up in the state.

Sarawak Bird's Nest Suppliers Association secretary Colin Wong Chung Onn said there was an estimated 5,000 swiftlet houses statewide with many more under construction.

“The number of swiftlet houses has more than doubled compared with a year ago,” he told *StarBiz*.

About 60% of these houses are found in the Mukah and Sarikei divisions in central Sarawak mostly along the coastal areas.



Unprocessed swiftlet nests have a market price of between RM3,000 and RM5,000 per kg compared with at least RM7,000 per kg for processed nests.

Unlike Peninsula Malaysia, Sarawak is a late starter in commercial swiftlet farming.

It is learnt that the state authorities, in consultation with the industry players, are drafting comprehensive guidelines to regulate the development of the industry.

Acting on environmental and health concerns, the state authorities had investigated more than 400 illegal farms last year, said Sarawak Assistant Minister for Planning and Resource Management Naroden Majais.

He said the construction of swiftlet farms was being closely monitored to prevent illegal operations.

Naroden said two licences were needed for commercial swiftlet farming - one to construct the building for the swiftlets

to nest and the second for the rearing of the birds.

Some 250 licences to construct buildings and a handful to rear the birds have been approved.

Wong said big-time investors were constructing double or three-storey concrete shophouses to rear the swiftlets while the smaller ones, like farmers and fishermen, were building wooden houses.

Unoccupied or under-utilised shophouses and residential houses have been converted into swiftlet farms.

He said it would cost about RM400,000 (excluding land), to build a three-storey shophouse (36ft x 76ft) for swiftlet farming.

Sarawak's first swiftlet eco-park, a RM40mil joint-venture between state [Economic Development Corporation \(SEDC\)](#) and [Borneo Resources Synergy Sdn Bhd](#) is expected to be ready in Balingian, Mukah division within the Sarawak Corridor for Renewable Energy by next year.

The park will have 40 three-storey units and 15 three-storey bungalow units.

The SEDC has been tasked by the Sarawak government to spearhead the development of swiftlet farming on a well-planned, sustainable and eco-friendly manner.

Similar eco-parks have been planned for other parts of the state.

Wong said some pioneer swiftlet houses in Paloh, Mukah division could each produce up to 3kg of swiftlet nests a month.

“Unprocessed swiftlet nests fetch a market price of between RM3,000 and RM5,000 per kg compared with at least RM7,000 per kg for the processed nests.”

Some of the raw nests are being sold by middlemen to Indonesia, Singapore and Hong Kong.

He said based on a conservative estimate of the 5,000 bird houses producing an average 0.5kg of nests a month, this would mean a yearly production of 3,000kg. At an average market price of RM3,500 per kg, it would generate RM10.5mil per annum for the Sarawak economy.

Sarawak's production of swiftlet nests, Naroden said was 2,854kg last year, up from 2,095kg in 2008.

For the first 10 months of last year, 1,757kg valued at RM7mil were produced.

Naroden said China was the biggest market for edible swiftlet nests, followed by Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia.

Wong said the production of swiftlet nests from caves, like Niah Cave in Miri, had been on the decline over the years because of over-harvesting.

Although swiftlet farming is potentially lucrative, he said there were investors who had not been successful in their ventures due to several factors.

“Choosing the right location to site the swiftlet houses is vital, otherwise it will take a longer time to attract the birds.

“Other important factors are the design and conditions, like temperature and humidity, of the houses,” he added.

According to an investor, the returns from successful swiftlet farming was comparatively higher than most businesses.

He said a two-storey swiftlet house (20ft x 60ft which costs between RM250,000 and RM300,000 to build) could produce between 36kg and 48kg of nests a year (worth between RM144,000 and RM192,000 based on RM4,000 per kg) from the fourth year of operation.

“Once in operation, it will take at least 18 months for the first collection of the nests. Production will gradually increase with more swiftlets nesting,” he added.

For the most successful operator, it would take about five years to fully recover the costs to build the swiftlet houses and related facilities, adding that from then on, the profits would be high.

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