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# NON-TIMBER FOREST AS AN ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC SURVIVAL FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY IN TERENGGANU, MALAYSIA: A CASE STUDY OF RATTAN

# Mohamad Pirdaus Yusoh<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Fuad Abdullah<sup>2</sup>, Mohd Nazip Suratman<sup>3</sup>, Mohammad Nasrul Hakim Roslan<sup>4</sup> & Badli Esham Ahmad<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Borneo Institute for Indigenous Studies, UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH <sup>2</sup>Faculty of Business and Management, <sup>3</sup>Faculty of Applied Sciences, <sup>4</sup>Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies, <sup>5</sup>Academy of Language Studies, <sup>2,3,5</sup>Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainable Development, UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

# Abstract

Rattan holds significant prominence as a non-timber forest product, primarily distributed and extensively traded within the Southeast Asian region. This research aims to examine the role of rattan as non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and to explore the significant economic value of rattan, in providing economic sustenance for the Orang Asli communities. The study is a case study with a mix method approach where 95 Orang Asli respondents from Kampung Sungai Berua, Hulu Terengganu, Malaysia participated. The collected data was analyzed by economic value analysis. The study found that the economic value of rattan is RM34224 per year where the highest monthly income earned by the Orang Asli is RM600 and the lowest is RM70 for each type of rattans. The Orang Asli community rely on rattan for a variety of purposes, which include selling them as raw materials, or personal use for craftsmanship, cultural practices, and the production of tools and equipment. As such, this study emphasizes the necessity of striking a balance between economic, ecological, and cultural considerations in harnessing the potential of rattan and other NTFPs to support the livelihoods and cultural heritage of Orang Asli communities.

*Keywords*: Natural resources, traditional knowledge, socioeconomic, Orang Asli, survival

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Senior Lecturer at Universiti Teknologi MARA. Email: fuad.abdullah@uitm.edu.my

### **INTRODUCTION**

The forestry sector is an important source of socioeconomic development in Malaysia. Socioeconomic activities can be defined as activities that involve the community in the field of economics and cover economic and social factors (Rahim, W. R. W. A., & Idrus, R. M., 2019). It is also a study related to the relationship between economic activities and social life. The term forest community simply means the management of a group of trees by a group of people who have a common goal (Abdul Rahim, W. R. W., 2019). Community forestry is defined as the control and utilization of local community profits from local forest resources. This profit is not only from wood production but has various values and benefits that can be obtained from the forest ecosystem, including cultural, spiritual, social, health, ecological, recreational, aesthetic, and economic (Curran et al., 1999)

Community forestry is a prevalent practice among indigenous populations, specifically the Orang Asli in Malaysia, who rely heavily on forests for their sustenance. This approach entails the allocation of specific portions of state forests to local communities that have historically utilized and maintained these areas, regardless of political demarcations. The Orang Asli community is granted complete autonomy in making decisions pertaining to forest management, utilization, and financial allocation (Abdullah et al., 2019). All revenues generated from the forest are directed towards forestry initiatives and local development endeavours.

The Orang Asli community is indigenous to Peninsular Malaysia, a minority group of only 209,575 people, which is 0.7 percent of the total Malaysian population. The indigenous people in Peninsular Malaysia are divided into three large groups, namely Negrito, Senoi, and Proto Malay. Each group is then divided into six small tribes, totalling 18 tribes, according to their culture, language, religion, economy, social organization, and physical characteristics 2022 according to (JAKOA, 2023).

However, in an effort to overcome the rapid development gap with mainstream society, the Orang Asli community is placed at all levels of development, starting from the most basic of their lives up to the community that has developed on par with mainstream society. Traditionally, Orang Asli community have relied on hunting and gathering activities, utilizing natural resources for their sustenance and cultural practices (Abdullah et al., 2023). The utilization of natural resources is an integral part of their traditional culture, playing a crucial role in their daily routines, including hunting, fishing, agriculture, construction, handicraft production, and medicinal practices for minor ailments (Abd Kadir et al, 2023). Previous studies have examined the utilization of plants, animals, and aquatic species by various indigenous communities, highlighting the significance of these natural resources in their

lives. These studies provide a comprehensive understanding of the close relationship between Orang Asli communities and their natural environment (Abdullah et al, 2021). Consequently, any changes in the environment can have profound impacts on the livelihood strategies of these communities, and conversely, alterations in their livelihood strategies can also affect the natural environment (Diansyah et al, 2022). The process of modernization and land development, in particular, has a significant impact on the symbiotic relationship between communities and nature. The Orang Asli community is not exempted from these effects (Abdullah et al., 2021). Figure 1, indicates the studies location at Kampung Sungai Berua, Hulu Terengganu, Malaysia.



Figure 1: Location of the study area Kampung Sungai Berua, Hulu Terengganu, Malaysia Source: Google Maps, (2024)

# LITERATURE REVIEW

### Non-timber forest product

Non-timber forest products refer to all physical animal and plant-based commodities, excluding industrial timber, that can be harvested from forests for both subsistence and commercial purposes (Ros-Tonen,2000). Non-timber Forest Products (NTFPs) is a concept that refers to natural products obtained from Malaysian forests, other than logs. Malaysia has vast and diverse tropical

rainforests, which produce a wide variety of flora and fauna that have economic, social, and ecological value (Svarrer, 2005, Yusoh et al., 2023). These non-timber forest products play an important role in the economy and social life of rural communities in Malaysia, often produced and collected by local communities (LaFrankie, 1994). Non-timber forest product categories include herbs and medicinal plants, forest fruits, rubber and latex, rattan and woven materials, honey, natural fibers, livestock products, and more. It is important to manage non-timber forest resources wisely and promote sustainable harvesting to protect the country's natural wealth and ensure the quality of life of local communities. Malaysian government authorities have imposed controls and regulations to protect non-timber forest resources and control illegal logging, as well as promote the development of sustainable non-timber forest resources are important in global efforts to preserve biodiversity and combat climate change (Tedong, 2022).

#### Rattan

Rattan, a plant native to tropical regions, holds significant importance as a renewable non-timber forest product in Malaysia. Its utilization extends to various countries including Indonesia, the Philippines, China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and India. Rattan is renowned for its diverse applications in both industrial and domestic settings (Saifullah et al.,2018). The design of rattan furniture, particularly the incorporation of loungers or swings, gained immense popularity from the 1960s to the late 1990s due to its aesthetic appeal.

This furniture has come to symbolize traditional Malaysian homes, transcending racial boundaries. Moreover, it has long been associated with the vibrancy of rural communities and has undeniably become an indispensable nonwood product manufactured in Asia (Lim et al., 1994). The material's strength and flexibility make it a preferred choice for crafting furniture and handicrafts. The production of rattan primarily revolves around product design, production methods, and the individuals involved in the manufacturing process. However, the availability of resources poses a significant challenge to the production of these items. In terms of its properties, rattan exhibits versatility, enabling further advancements in product development. Furniture, carpet beaters, and walking sticks are commonly crafted using larger-diameter rattan, while mats, baskets, traps, animal cages, and coarse wickerwork are made using smaller-diameter rattan (Kodoh et al., 2009). The National Forestry Policy 1987 (Amendment 1992) has outlined the need for non-timber forest resources to be managed on a sustainable basis to guarantee the interests of industries based on these resources. The bamboo planting project is an effort by the Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia to introduce non-timber products that have the potential to be commercialized. Permanent forest reserves have been managed based on the

concept of sustainable forest management since the beginning of the 20th century. Nowadays, with the shift in the demand and wishes of the general public for various forest products and services, the concept of sustainable forest management has been expanded to include other areas such as forest protection functions and the production of non-timber products (Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia. ,2023).

#### The scenario of Orang Asli in Malaysia

The Orang Asli community, indigenous to Peninsular Malaysia, has a unique cultural and socioeconomic significance, relying historically on forests for sustenance (Hazlan et al, 2022; Yusoh et al., 2022). This reliance on natural resources, especially NTFPs like rattan, signifies the critical connection between the community and its environment (Abdullah et al., 2020). However, challenges such as resource availability affect its production, emphasizing the need for sustainable management and utilization of these NTFPs. However, Unsustainable harvesting practices may contribute to habitat destruction. Clear-cutting or destructive harvesting methods can disrupt the ecosystems where these resources grow, affecting not only the target species but also other flora and fauna in the area. Furthermore, Communities dependent on non-timber forest products may face poverty and livelihood pressures, leading to unsustainable harvesting practices as they prioritize immediate economic needs over long-term sustainability (Abdullah et al., 2020). To overcomes this issue, the Orang Asli needs to broaden their range of economic well-being sources by incorporating various NTFPs in addition to rattan which also has the market value. This strategy not only mitigates the risks associated with relying solely on one resource but also plays a significant role in preserving biodiversity. The hypothesis of this study is the Orang Asli community greatly benefits from the presence of rattan, as it serves as a significant source of income that can either be their main or supplementary source, thereby contributing to their economic well-being. The study underscores the importance of preserving biodiversity, combatting climate change, and promoting sustainable harvesting of non-timber forest products for the well-being of both the Orang Asli community and the environment on a broader scale. The study intends to delve into the intricate relationship between the forestry sector, indigenous communities (specifically the Orang Asli in Malaysia), and the sustainable utilization of rattan as NTFPs. Thus, the principal objective of this investigation is to elucidate the considerable economic significance of rattan as a non-timber forest product within the Orang Asli community.

# **METHODOLOGY**

This study constitutes an exploratory research initiative conducted within Kampung Sungai Berua, Hulu Terengganu, situated on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia and designated as an Orang Asli resettlement village. The study employed a mixed method approach, utilizing rapid rural appraisal and unstructured interviews. The purposive sampling had been used to 93 out of 95 heads of households (HoH) representing the Semaq Beri and Bateq tribes who have significant knowledge and experience with rattan use. to collect data from. The data acquisition process encompassed direct household interviews through a well-structured questionnaire, designed to extract information regarding the identity of the rattan collector among the Orang Asli and other pertinent variables.

Subsequently, the collected data underwent rigorous quantitative analysis, integrating field participation observations and questionnaire responses. The determination of rattan's annual economic value as a component of NTFPs was achieved through the prescribed formula below:

2.1 The average number of NTFPs

The average number of NTFPs  $=\frac{(Xi + Xii + \dots Xn)}{n}$ 

Where:

Xi = Number of rattans taken N = Large number of rattans collected

2.2 Total collection NTFPs per year

$$TP = RJ X FP X JP$$

Where:

TP = Total product (Total collection rattan per year)

RJ = Average number

FP = Frequency of retrieval

JP = Amount of retrieval

2.3 Economic value of NTFPs per year

$$NH = TP x HH$$

Where: NH = Value of forest products per type TP = Total withdrawal (Unit/ year) HH = Proce of forest products

2.4 The percentage of economic

$$\% \text{NE} = \frac{Nei}{(\sum NE)} \times 100\%$$

Where:

%NE = Percentage of economic value Nei = Economic value of rattans types  $\Sigma NE$  = Total economic value of all rattans

# **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) are intricately linked to the socio-economic and cultural aspects of the Orang Asli community, who rely heavily on forest resources. The livelihood systems of the Orang Asli, which revolve around forests, exhibit significant variations across different ethnic groups and regions, influenced by socio-cultural, historical, and ecological factors. The Orang Asli have been inhabiting forest areas for a long time, leading an isolated existence from mainstream society. The people's lifestyle is characterized by a harmonious and symbiotic relationship with nature. The impoverished state of the majority of the Orang Asli community can be attributed to their reliance on income derived from forest resources, a practice that has been ingrained in their traditions for an extended period. Typically, they venture into the adjacent forests to procure valuable yields, subsequently selling them to intermediaries.

Table 1 provides an overview of the various types of rattans with economic significance that are utilized by the Orang Asli. The highest monthly income that can be earned from rattans is RM600 which is from Manau A Grade and followed by Manau B grade which is RM300. However, the lowest is from Batu which only can contribute to RM70 per month.

No.	Туре	Grade	Length (Feet)	Price per Unit (RM)	Estimation Collection for a week	Estimation Collection for a month	Monthly Income (RM)
1	Manau	А	9	3	50	200	600
2		В	9	1.5	50	200	300
3		С	9	0.5	50	200	100
4	Mantang	А	9	1.5	50	200	300
5		В	9	0.8	50	200	160
6		С	9	0.5	50	200	100
7	Tanah	None	24	0.5	100	400	200
8	Kangkung	None	24	0.3	100	400	120
9	Kerai	None	24	0.3	100	400	120
10	Tawau	None	10	0.3	100	400	120
11	Batu	None	24	0.18	100	400	72
12	Saga	None	9	0.5	50	200	100
13	Semambu	None	9	0.5	50	200	100
14	Duduk	None	9	0.5	50	200	100
15	Riau	None	24	0.3	100	400	120
16	Udang	None	24	0.3	100	400	120
17	Jernang	None	24	0.3	100	400	120

#### Table 1: Type of rattans and income earned by the Orang Asli

The economic worth of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) is determined by the product of the aggregate annual harvests and the prevailing prices of forest commodities. The study revealed that the employment of NTFPs in Kg Sungai Berua, Hulu Terengganu resulted in an economic value of RM34224 per annum. The economic value of individual NTFP categories in a single year is presented in Table 2.

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No.	Туре	Grade	Total taking (Unit/ year)	Unit price (RM)	Economic Value (RM)	Percentage (%)
1.	Manau	А	2400	3	7200	21.04
2.		В	2400	1.5	3600	10.52
3.		С	2400	0.5	1200	3.51
4.	Mantang	А	2400	1.5	3600	10.52
5.		В	2400	0.8	1920	5.61
6.		С	2400	0.5	1200	3.51
7.	Tanah	None	4800	0.5	2400	7.01
8.	Kangkung	None	4800	0.3	1440	4.21
9	Kerai	None	4800	0.3	1440	4.21
10.	Tawau	None	4800	0.3	1440	4.21
11.	Batu	None	4800	0.18	864	2.52
12.	Saga	None	2400	0.5	1200	3.51
13.	Semambu	None	2400	0.5	1200	3.51
14.	Duduk	None	2400	0.5	1200	3.51
15.	Riau	None	4800	0.3	1440	4.21
16	Udang	None	4800	0.3	1440	4.21
17	Jernang	None	4800	0.3	1440	4.21
Total			60000	11.78	34224	100

Table 2. The economic value of rattans

In the local language, the activity of finding and collecting rattan is known as 'rope work' or 'wicker work'. This activity is one of the important traditional economic activities, especially for the residents of Kampung Sungai Berua, Hulu Terengganu. In fact, it is said that through this activity, they began to be exposed to the use of money, that is, after the rotan was marketed. This activity has been actively carried out by the Orang Asli community in Terengganu because there is a lot of demand for commercialization. Therefore, this economic activity has become one of the most important economic activities and a financial source for them to buy other necessities of life.

Basically, this activity of looking for rattan is done in the forest area near the residence only, taking less than 20 minutes of walking time. However, due to the lack of resources as a result of forest exploration activities for commercial oil palm plantations, the Orang Asli community has to go to more distant areas. For the Orang Asli Community of Kampung Sungai Berua, most of them will look for reeds on the upstream of Tasik Kenyir. The areas they focus on are the Kerbat River, Lepar River, Kerom River, Lawit River, Genong River, Papan River, Chenah River, Lemar River, Biwah River, Taat River, Metong River, Cicir River, Perpek River, Cacing River, and Terenggan River. The distance between these areas and their residence is estimated to take 1 to 2 hours by boat through Lake Kenyir.

If the rattan spot is far from their village, they will camp in the area for a period one to two weeks. Therefore, they will bring their family members to the area. This action allows them to find rattan more comfortably and in large quantities. However, when the rattan resources in the area are reduced, they will move to other areas. Usually, the work of finding rattan is done in groups consisting of five to ten men. However, sometimes they will bring children to give them as a learning process to the way of life in the forest. However, it is very rare for women to participate in these activities. Women will be tasked with cleaning and splitting the reeds brought home.

The types of rattan that are sought are focused on those that have commercial value. Rattans that are commonly taken by the Orang Asli community in Kampung Sungai Berua are of the Manau (Calamus manan), Matang (Plectocomia elongata), Tanah (Calamus balingcusis), Kangkung/Sabong (Calamus potystachys), Kerai (Calamus conirostris), and Tawau (Daemonorops) types. Augustiflora), Batu (Calamus Insignis), Sega (Calamus Caeesius), Semambu (Calamus Scipionum), Duduk (Calamus Sedens), Riau/Tunggal (Calamus Laevigatus), and Shrimp (Korthalisa Lociniosa) san Jernang (Daemonorops Calicarpa).

The amount of rattan obtained is not constant and closely related to the factors of individual efficiency in doing work, skills and seriousness, physical strength, and rattan resources in the area. An area is considered to have a lot of rattan resources if they can obtain a total of around 25 to 30 rattans at a time. From the aspect of how the Orang Asli community works here, even though they go out looking for rattan in groups, the results obtained are according to individuals. An efficient individual will acquire a large amount of rattan, and vice versa.

As the hunting grounds for rattan extend farther from their village, the Orang Asli community incurs escalated costs, encompassing transportation and sustenance expenditures. These circumstances impede their capacity to generate adequate funds to defray travel expenditures like gasoline and essential provisions. Consequently, they are compelled to seek financial assistance from intermediaries. A portion of the proceeds from rattan sales is allocated to debt settlement. This situation exerts significant strain on the Orang Asli community, as they are left with minimal resources to cover family expenses.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the economic value of rattan within the Orang Asli community in Malaysia is notably significant, establishing itself as a pivotal non-timber forest product (NTFP). Not only does rattan serve as a source of economic sustenance for the community, but its extraction also necessitates judicious and sustainable forest management practices to uphold the ecological equilibrium and safeguard

the traditional lifestyle of the Orang Asli. The sustainable harvest and utilization of raw rattan are crucial elements in ensuring the preservation of forest resources while perpetuating the invaluable cultural heritage intertwined with its extraction. By meticulously attending to these intertwined aspects—economic viability, cultural importance, and ecological sustainability—the extraction and utilization of raw rattan can be sustained, providing ongoing economic benefits to the Orang Asli community while simultaneously conserving the intricate ecological balance of the forest and preserving the cultural heritage that is deeply rooted in this essential forest resource.

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