First the good news

Barn owls, Tyto alba, have been a key aspect of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) in oil palm plantations in West Malaysia since the 1980s, after initial research indicated that a pair of barn owls and their offspring could consume up to 2,000 rats a year, and that 98 per cent of their diet consists of rats (Duckett, 1980). Barn owls are encouraged to populate many estates in Peninsular Malaysia by the siting of wooden or plastic nest-boxes on poles, at a density of one per 10 ha.

Studies of rat damage to palms in Golden Hope Plantations showed that rat damage decreased markedly within three years of the introduction of barn owls, to within the baiting standard of 5 per cent, rendering baiting unnecessary (Ho & Teh, 1997).

The use of owls in oil palm, and barn owls in particular, is often cited as an example of environmentally-friendly pest control. Barn owls, it could be said, are a symbol of the oil palm industry’s commitment to combine the best agricultural practices with environment-friendly resource management.