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A Study on the Biodiversity of Oil Palm Agriculture in KLK Estates in Sabah, Malaysia: A Preliminary Report

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Perak Darul Ridzuan,

*Biodiversity has been the buzz word and a subject for smear campaigns against the palm oil industry in the last few years due to the fear that further expansion of oil palm areas will destroy virgin forests and/or forests with high conservation value. There is also the accusation that oil palm plantations are devoid of biodiversity when compared with natural forests. Apart from some notable exceptions, large-scale empirical studies on the biodiversity of oil palm agriculture remain exceedingly few and far between. In August 2006, Kuala Lumpur Kepong Berhad (KLK) undertook a collaborative work with Princeton University, New Jersey, USA on a PhD project in Sabah to quantify biodiversity in KLK oil palm estates. This project comprises three phases with the following primary objectives: i) to document the agricultural biodiversity present in oil palm plantations (Phase I), ii) to compare oil palm biodiversity with that of other land uses (Phase II), iii) to identify ways to enhance biodiversity in oil palm plantations (Phase III), and (iv) to determine the economic value of biodiversity for oil palm agriculture (Phase III). This project is being conducted in 15 of KLK's oil palm estates located in Tawau and Lahat Datu in Sabah, East Malaysia. During Phase I of this biodiversity study, a total of 26 butterfly, 35 bird and 7 mammal species were recorded from field surveys. Additionally, 11 species of birds and mammals were recorded through causal observations. Examples of species recorded include the Clipper (*Parthenos sylvia*), the Black-winged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) and the Prevost's Squirrel (*Callosciurus prevostii*). It is hoped that this project will add more information on the richness of biodiversity in oil palm estates, particularly in Sabah and enable a better understanding of the biodiversity in oil palm plantations and for the palm oil sector in this region. In many ways this would also help us in building up our knowledge base. The data collected through these studies will be useful for the development of management systems that would enhance the level of biodiversity in oil palm plantations and to facilitate companies in meeting Criteria 5.1 and 5.2 of the principles and criteria of the RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil). The ultimate goal of this series of studies is to provide the information for the reconciliation of biodiversity conservation and sustainable agriculture.*

Keywords: Oil palm, biodiversity, RSPO.