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Welcoming the Guardian of the Swamps: the Bornean Banteng

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Two bulls forming a small bachelor group in Kulamba swamps. Herds comprising of 6 to 30 animals might be observed at any one time

Cattle, as most people know, comes in many types that are called breeds and cattle has gone through agriculture since the time when man began to use natural resources. The breeds have been developed from many "original" cattle, the species of wild cattle that roamed the plains and hills of the world, some of which still remain in that wild state, although under continuous threats. The Bornean banteng is one of those original cattle.

Meet the tembadau, the Bornean subspecies of the banteng, *Bos javanicus lowii*. It is a medium-sized species with mature body weight reaching 700 kg in bulls. It is truly sexually dimorphic species with cows significantly smaller in size and both bulls and cows have horns. No doubt, it is majestic not only in appearance but also in survival edge. Tembadau grows, breeds and lives in sub-optimal habitats and low quality food, oddly displaying an amazing resistance to unlimited array of diseases and parasites of the humid tropics. What else do we want? There it is, right in our backyard, a species of the homeland that has not but forgotten by its own people.

How long does it take to develop a breed? It can be long or very long. The question is do we want to develop one? The aim of animal production in Malaysia is one and simple – producing meat for its people.

Whilst what is needed for food is in the form of beef, imports have come in many forms – live cattle and buffalos, frozen beef, semen, embryos and even experts. Because imported live cattle arrive in aircrafts and ships, the fact that many of them have actually been harvested from free roaming animals has always been smoke-screened. However good the intentions of importing might have been, it has not significantly helped in developing the technology, both in the fields and numbers, in the country. Thanks to the tembadau for keeping themselves available over this long period of impasse.

Despite being a Bornean species, the existence of the tembadau in other parts of Borneo is questionable. One thing is a fact though, that the current stronghold of the animal is in Sabah. It lives in the plains and low-lying hills, most of which have given way to the palm from Africa. Many small populations are scattered and isolated in Sabah's discontinuous forest reserves but the largest population is in the blackwater swamps of the Kulamba Wildlife Reserve, a place only accessible by air. True, the animal is safely isolated, and probably partly, guarded by the behemoth nature of the giant crocodiles in the vastness and the darkness of the swamps.

The tembadau promises an unlimited opportunity for future studies and research trials.