

# **“White Gold”: The Role of Edible Birds’ Nest in the Livelihood Strategy of the Idahan Communities in Malaysia**

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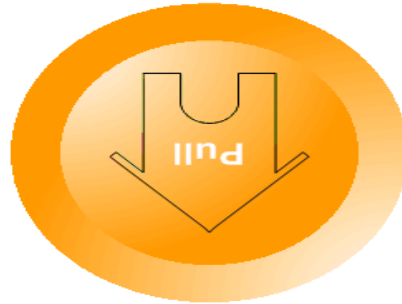
# Presentation

- Introduction
- Conceptual Framework
- Historical Background
- Birds Nest and Idahan Rights
- Sustainable Livelihood
- Conclusion

# Research

- Analyze the role of edible bird’s nest activities in the economic life of the Idahan community,
- income diversification among rural communities: “demand-pull” vs “distress-push and
- Assess the impact of participation in non-agricultural activity on livelihood and well-being.

Higher return on labour in the RNAE  
Higher return on investment in RNAE  
Lower risk of RNAE compared to on-farm activities  
Generation of cash in order to meet household objectives  
Economic opportunities



**Rural Non-Agricultural Economy**



Population growth  
Increasing scarcity of arable land  
Decreasing access to fertile farming  
Declining farm productivity  
Declining returns to farming  
Lack of access to farm input markets  
Decline of the natural resource base  
Temporary events & shocks  
Absence or lack of access to rural financial market

## Conceptual Framework

# Birds Nest

- Edible bird’s nest – the ‘*caviar of the East*’ - has long been sought after by the Chinese.
- According to historical records, the trading of birds nest, started in China during the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907). It was believed that bird's nest had been brought back from 'Nan yang' (the southern countries), by sea-faring Chinese sailors, and introduced to the courts of *China's Emperor as a supreme delicacy* (food of the Emperor).

# Historical Background

- Harrison and Harrison (1970:33-35) traced the trading of bird’s nest in Sabah to the period before the **fifteen-century**.
- In the past, these nests were exchanged with Chinese stonewares and procelains, iron, brass and gold, glass beads and textiles. Historical records documented that the Idahan were among the early traders in bird’s nests.

# Birds Nest and Idahan Rights

- 📌 Administrative and Legal
- 📌 Myths

## Idahan Rights: Administrative and Legal

- Idahan rights to the four caves of **Madai**, **Baturong**, **Sengarung** and **Tepadung** were granted and endorsed by British Administration under the Chartered Company of North Borneo, and post-independent governments.
- The government instituted the **Birds Nest Ordinance** (1914):
  - regulates the collection of the nest in various parts of the State
  - recognizes the Idahan ancestral and customary rights over the four nest caves.



# Idahan Rights and Birds Nest: Legend

After a while Siod Rapat said, “Brother, I want you to remember this hill. Its name is **Madai**. In the future you and **your children will find riches here**.” Gomorid said: “Yes”. After a wild and fruitless chase Siod Rapat stopped on top of Baturong Hill and waited for his brother, who caught up hours later. Siod Rapat then said: “Brother, remember also this hill. Its name is **Baturong**. In the future it will give you and your children riches”. As before Gomorid replied: “Yes”. They looked again for the golden deer. The two brothers grew tired and they rested on top of **Tapadong** Hill. Here, as on top of Madai and Baturong Hill, Siod Rapat told Gomorid to remember the hill, the name of which is Tapadong. Gomorid, as before replied: “Yes”.

*(Source: Orolfo 1961: 271).*

# Map of Malaysia

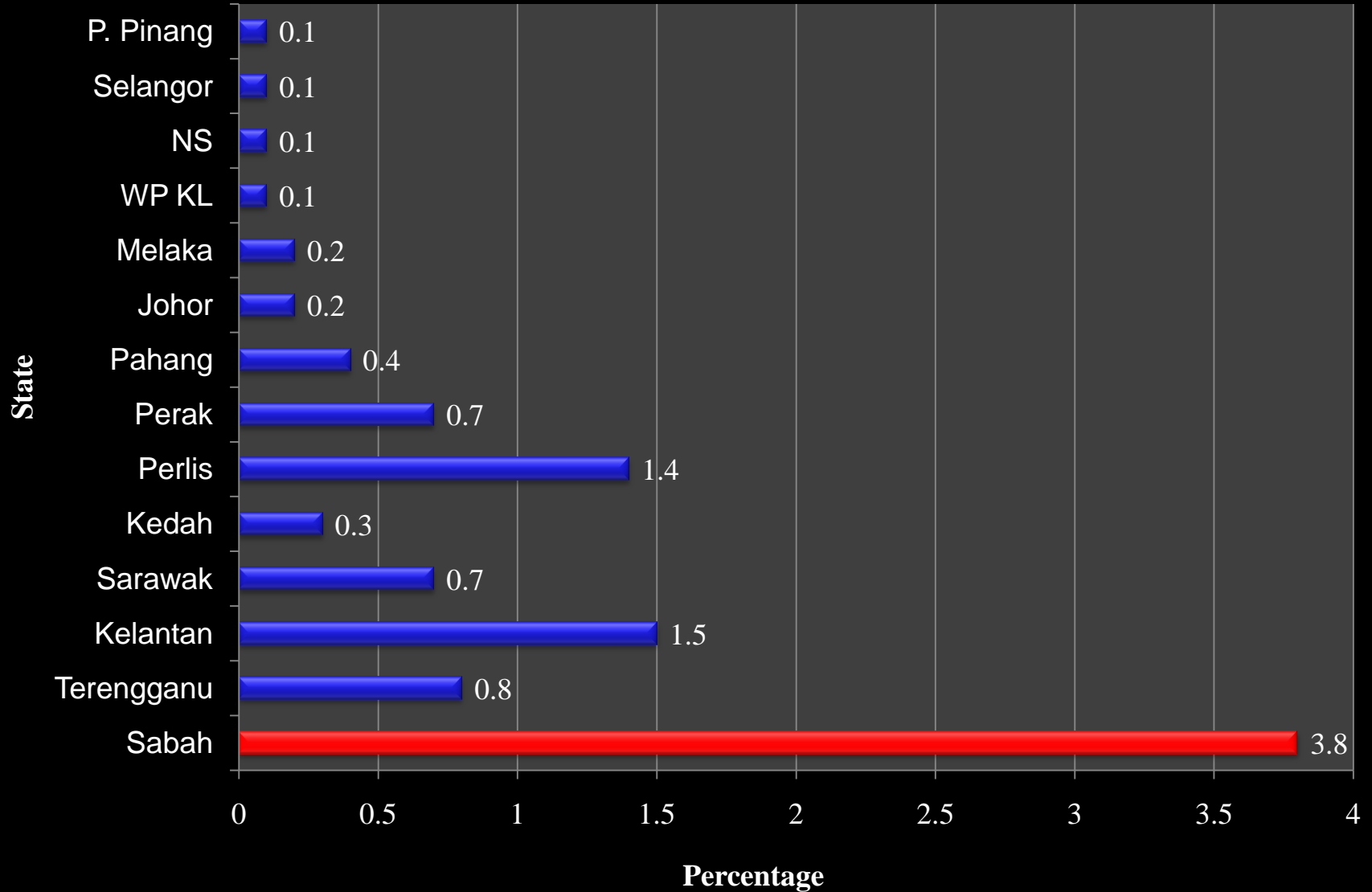


# Location of Madai Caves, Lahad Datu, Sabah, Malaysia



**Madai, Baturong, Segarong dan Tepadung.**

# Malaysia: Hardcore Poverty (%)



Source : Household Income Survey (HIS 2007)

# Respondents

Villages	Ethnic Background		Total
	Idahan	Others	
Segama	11	20	31
Segangan	14	-	14
Sepagaya	24	9	33
Tabanak	17	6	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>101</b>

# Educational Background: Head of Households

		Non-Agriculture Activity	
		Other RNAE	Bird’s nest Activity
Education	No formal education	35.1 (34.3)	19.4 (28.6)
	Primary	18.9 (25.7)	27.4 (29.6)
	Lower Secondary	27.0 (22.9)	21.0 (23.2)
	Secondary	18.9 (11.4)	25.8 (25.4)
	Diploma	- (5.7)	4.8 (3.6)
	University	- (-)	1.6 (-)

Notes: Figures in bracket refer to the educational level of spouses

# Household Income

Participation		Income Sources			
		Non-Agriculture Income (RM)	Income from Agriculture (RM)	Transfer Payment (RM)	Income from Assets (RM)
Non- Participants in Birds Nest	Min	1,904.66	490.81	80.00	3,261.21
	Median	400.00	0.00	0.00	1016.50
	Std. Deviation	1583.48	823.53	314.53	6001.84
Involved in Birds nest	Min	1,524.27	1,358.64	228.40	637.37
	Median	1000.00	450.00	0.00	0.00
	Std. Deviation	1684.58	2260.65	637.01	2123.63



## Income from Selling of Birds’ Nest

	Income from Bird’s nest (Monthly) RM	Income from Bird’s nest (Year) RM	Ratio of Income from Bird’s nest of Total Income (%)
Mean	259.90 (NZ\$107.91)	3,233.36 (NZ\$1,347.23)	14.77
Minimum	3.50	42.00	0.51
Maximum	2,500.00 (NZ\$1,041.66)	30,000.00 (NZ\$12,500.00)	100.00



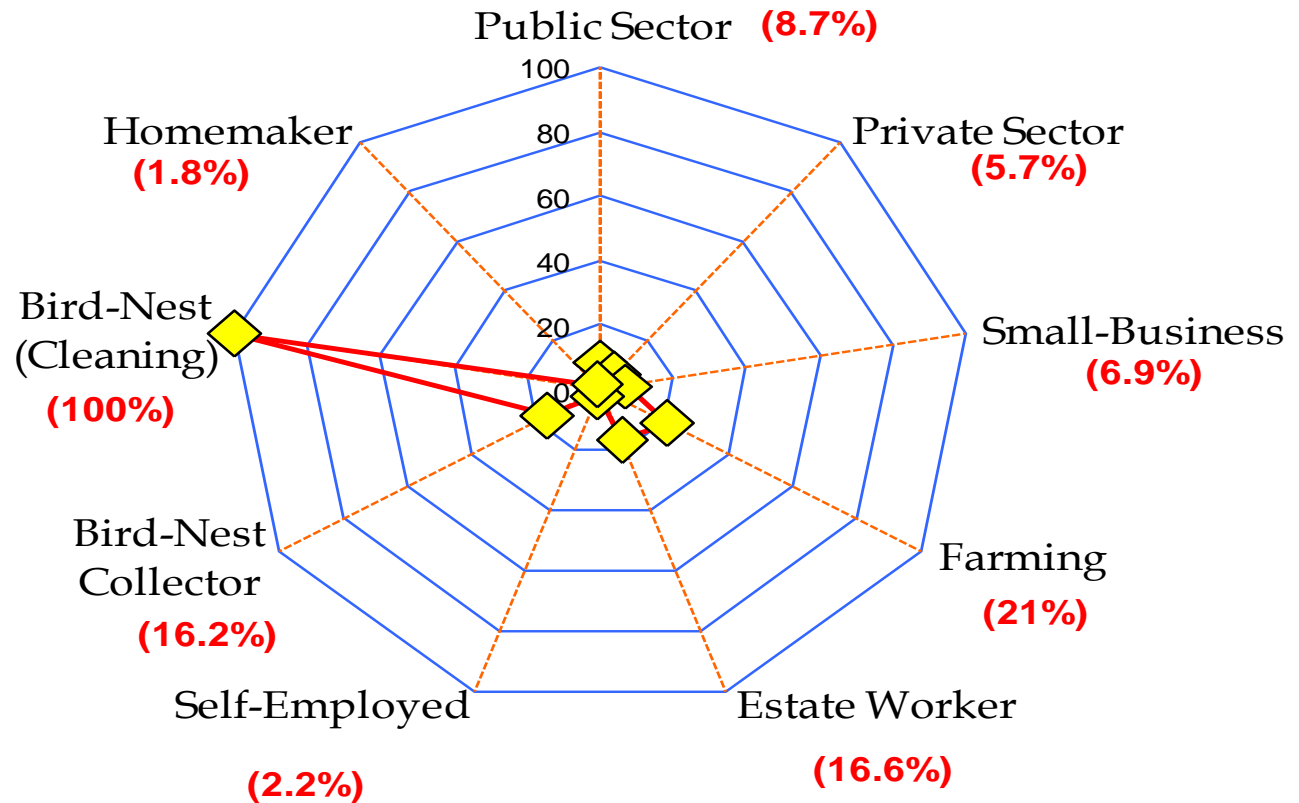
## Prices of Birds Nest in International Market

	US Dollars Per Kilo
First Grade /SS grade (A1)	US\$3,000/kilo
Second Grade / S grade (A2)	US\$2,900/kilo
Third Grade / S1 grade	US\$2,800/kilo
Fourth Grade / S2 grade	US\$2,700/kilo
Fifth Grade / S3 grade	US\$2,500/kilo

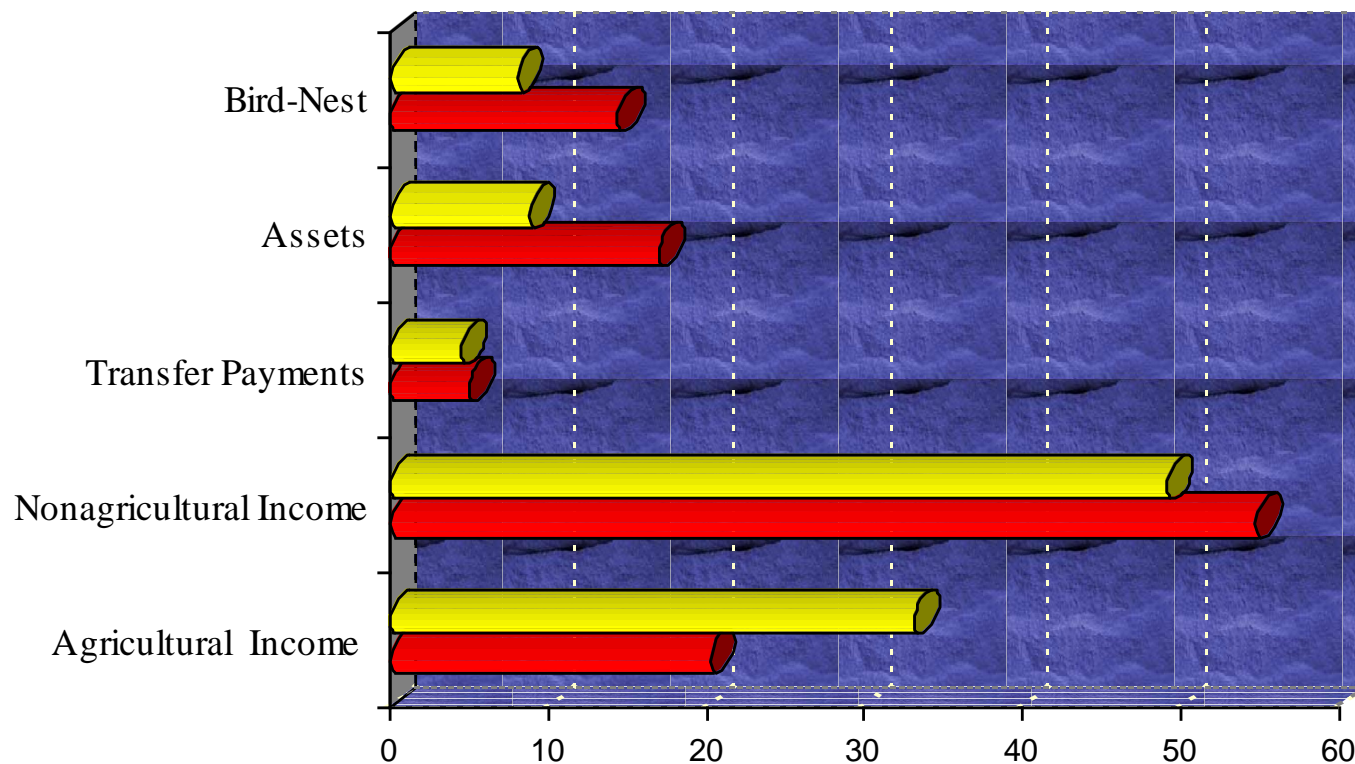
## Prices of Edible Birds Nest in Malaysia (RM, US\$)

Category	Grade	Per 100 gram	
		RM	USD
Creamy Yellow Cave Nest	1	1,970.60	514.00
Creamy White Cave Nest	2	1,545.00	401.60
Red House Nest	1	1,545.00	401.60
Red House Nest	2	1,359.60	353.40
Creamy Yellow House Nest	2	1,359.60	353.40

## Contribution of Income from Bird’s Nest Activities to Total Household Income (%) by Main Occupation



## Ratio of Income from Agriculture, Nonagricultural, Transfer Payments, Assets and Bird’s Nest to Total Household Income



	Agricultural Income	Nonagricultural Income	Transfer Payments	Assets	Bird-Nest
Non Poor	33.1	49.1	4.5	8.8	8
Poor	20.2	54.7	5	17	14.4

# Sustainable Livelihood

- Economic
  - Source of income
  - Livelihood strategy – diversification
- Social
  - Cultural
  - Over harvesting
  - Conflict
  - Sustainability

## (a) Cultural

- *Papas* – harvesting month (April)
- **Assume basic economic functions**
  - managing bird’s nest harvesting, paying taxes, trading and distributing amongst family members the economic returns from selling bird’s nests.
- **Strengthen Family Ties**
  - establish new ties and renew old ones.
  - conflicts and dissatisfaction regarding distribution are addressed collectively
- **Social Capital**
  - Bonding
  - Bridging

## (b) Overharvesting

- Yearly Rotation of birds nest harvesting
- *Peterey* – three families
  - Besai,
  - Begahak
  - Orang Sungai
- Idahan vs non-Idahan

## (c) Conflict

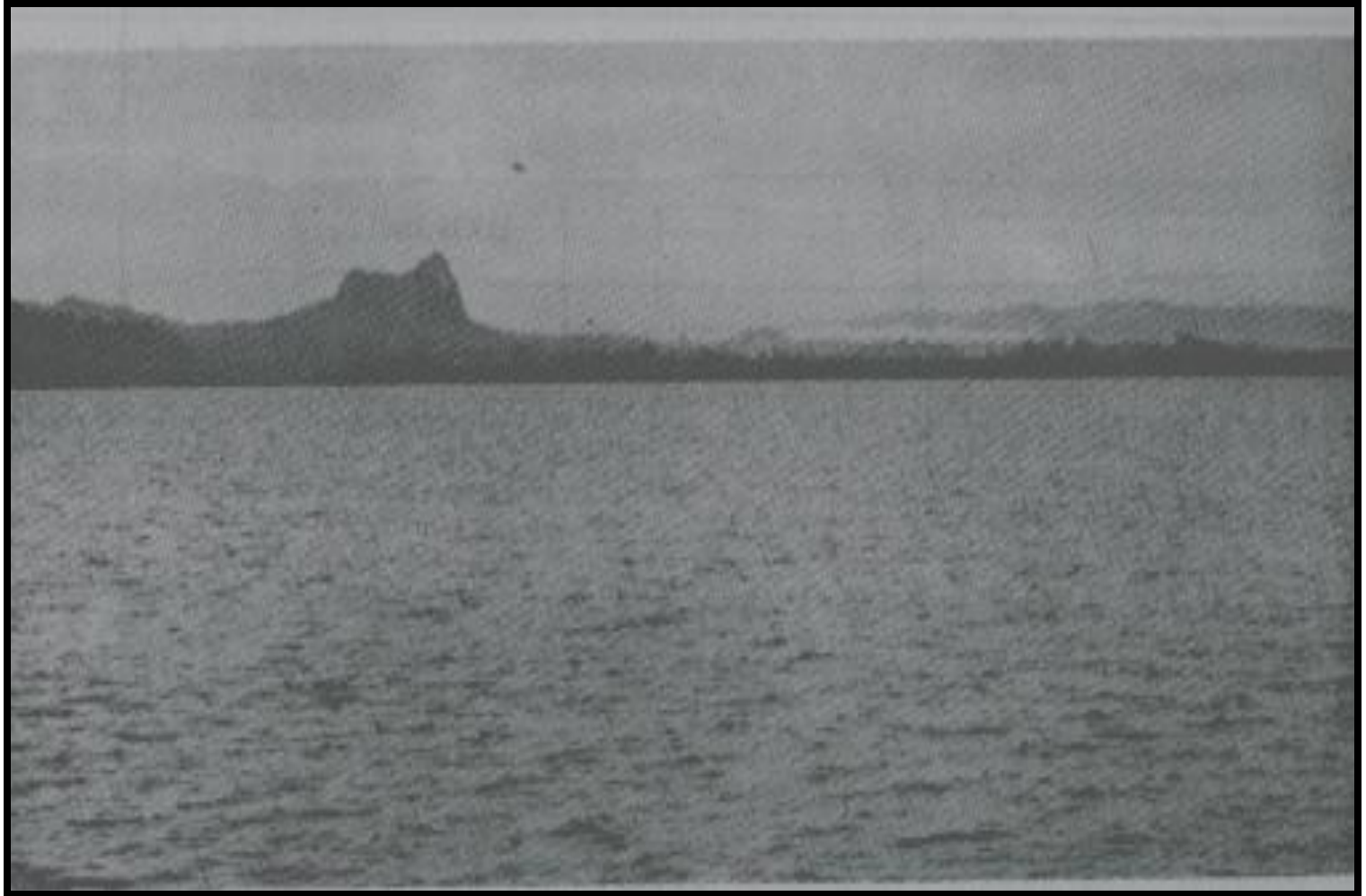
- Conflict harvesting of bigger chambers (rotation)
- *Buku Daftar Tatasusila Pemilik-Pemilik Madai*
- Registry documenting the year of harvesting, lineage, inheritors and nest chambers
- Idahan vs Non-Idahan



## (d) Sustainability

- Overharvesting (once to thrice a year)
- Ancestral rights
- Economics vs tradition
- The role of the state

# Madai Hills, Lahad Datu



# Entrance to Madai Hills



# Madai Hills





# Official Directives against harvesting during off-seasons.

Penalty of RM20,000 (NZ9,500) or 2 years imprisonment



# Houses built at the entrance of the Madai caves





## Idahan families built temporary houses at Madai Caves



# Temporary settlements of bird nests harvesters





## Equipments used for climbing and collecting birds nest (Bamboo poles, rattan ladders and guy ropes)



## A birds nest collector resting in between his climbs





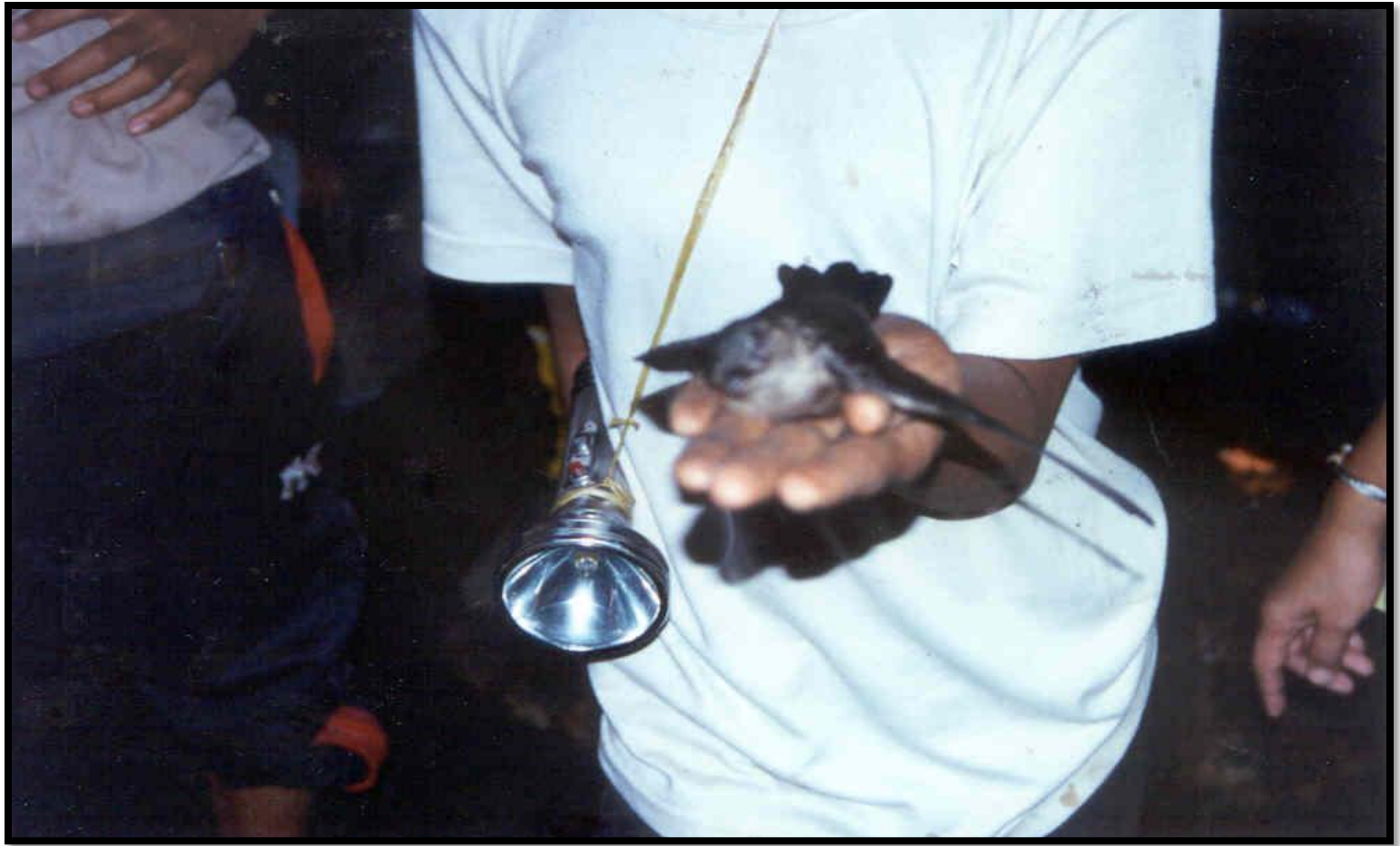
## Socialization - Youths collecting nests in the cave



## Youths collecting bird nests using net tied to long bamboo pole



## **Baby swiftlets that have fallen from their nests**





# Newly collected bird nests





## A swiftlet and its’ nest



## Samples of bird nests according to grade



# Typical sizes of bird nests

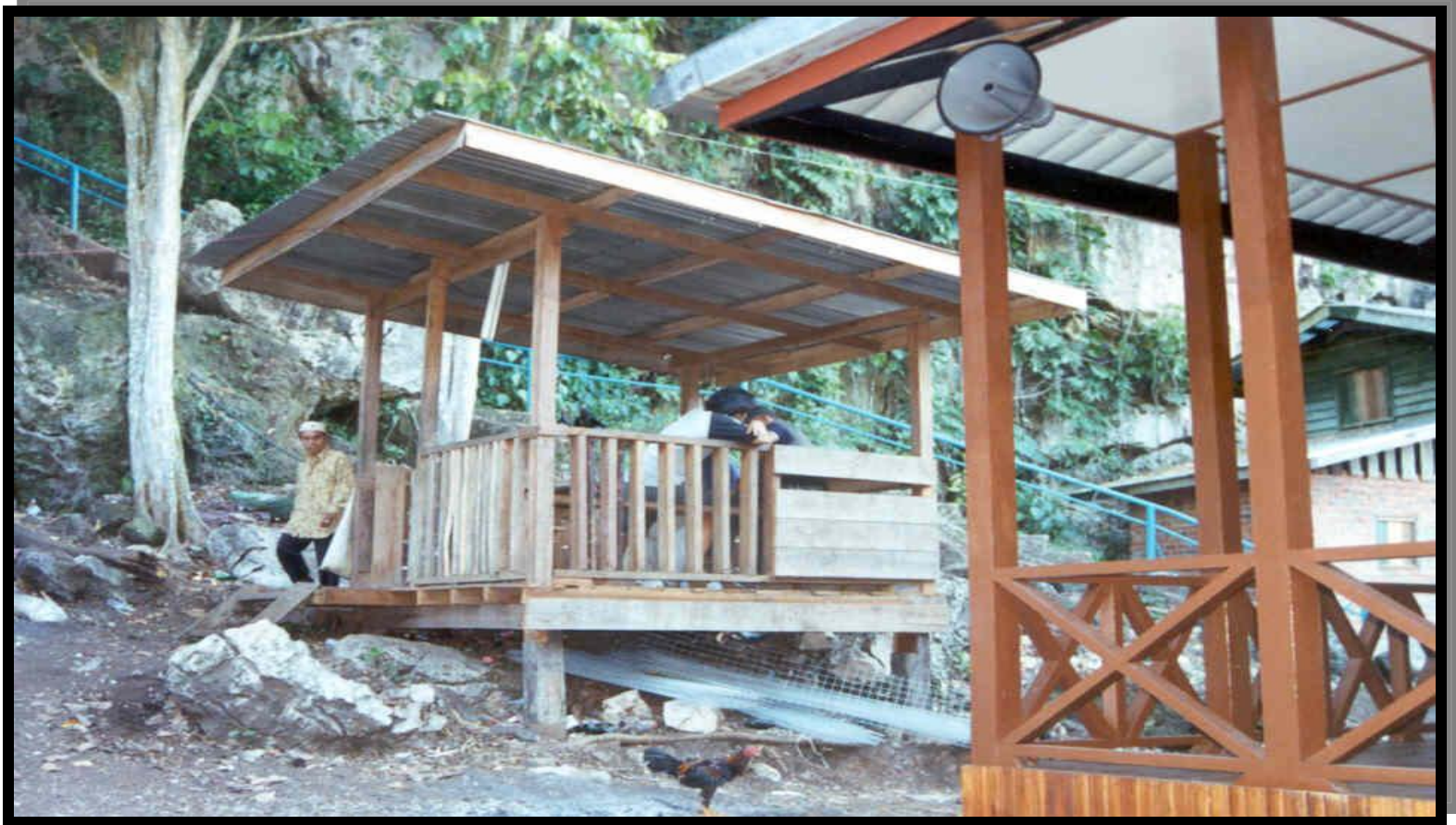




## Bird nests soaked in water



# Weigh-in centers





# Packaging of bird nests





## Village headmen handling the weighing of bird nests



## Government Officials handling the weighing of bird nests





## Informal trading at Madai Caves during harvesting



## Female petty traders the Madai Caves during the harvesting season





# **Women selling home-cooked food during harvesting**



## Participation in Birds nest Activities

- Bird’s nest activities strengthens Idahan identity and ties them together as a community.



**Thank you**