

A LEGACY OF WALLACE: SARAWAK MUSEUM AND THE HISTORY OF HERPETOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN SARAWAK

Indraneil Das¹ and Charles Leh²

1Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation,
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak,
94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak,
Malaysia
Email: idas@ibec.unimas.my

2Sarawak Museum,
Jalan Tun Haji Openg, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: charlleh@sarawak.gov.my

ABSTRACT.– We provide an account of the history of herpetology of Sarawak, and the contributions of early collectors and observers. Alfred Russel Wallace wrote a long passage on the gliding habits of the so-called Wallace's Flying Frog, and made a small collection of reptiles and amphibians. He is also said to have inspired James Brooke, the First Rajah of Sarawak, to start the Sarawak Museum. This historic collection is repository of herpetological specimens made by Edward Bartlett, Charles Hose, Robert Shelford and Tom Harrison. More recent collections have been made during field work in northern Sarawak by Robert F. Inger of the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Robert B. Stuebing, during the International Tropical Timber Organisation Expedition to Lanjak-Entimau, and during the Royal Geographical Society/Sarawak Forest Department Expedition to Gunung Mulu (1977–78). New amphibian species from the Mulu Expedition were described by Julian Dring. At present, types of five amphibian and eight reptile species are extant in the Sarawak Museum collection.

KEY WORDS.– History of herpetology, Sarawak Museum, Kuching, amphibians, reptiles, type specimens.

INTRODUCTION

Herpetological collections and observations in Sarawak in the pre-Wallace era are few. The first work on the topic appears in an appendix of a book published in 1848 by the Scottish botanist, Hugh Low (1824–1905), an admirer and self-proclaimed disciple of James Brooke (1803–1868), the First Rajah of Sarawak (biography of Low in Cowan, 1968). It lists 19 species of reptiles and three of amphibians (although several more were mentioned in the text itself, including unspecified “land tortoises” of two species, flying lizards, etc.). For some, only generic identities were provided, the list evidently prepared on the basis of specimens existing at the time in the British Museum (Natural History), London.

Some of the earliest Bornean specimens in western museums came from collections made by European residents of Sarawak or by explorers in search of botanical or zoological specimens. In 1864, the British Museum (Natural History), London, received from Borneo, a collection made by Lewis Llewellyn Dillwyn (1778–1855), from “Labuan and Borneo”, some of the collections made with the assistance of James Motley (1814–1892), a civil engineer with the Eastern Archipelago Company at Labuan.

In 1865, Italian nobleman Marquis Giacomo Doria of Genoa (1840–1913) and botanist Odoardo Beccari (1843–1920) arrived on Borneo to collect mainly botanical specimens. But the duo also made perhaps the first extensive herpetological collection, that was described by Wilhelm Carl Hartwig Peters (1815–1883), from the Zoologisches Museum Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, who wrote two papers in 1871 and 1872, and by Peters and Doria (1878), who described numerous herpetological novelties collected by the Bornean expedition, which was written in popular vein by Beccari (1902).