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## Collecting in the “Land Below the Wind”, Herpetological Explorations of Borneo

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**Abstract.** Herpetological explorations and collections from Borneo, including the East Malaysian States of Sarawak and Sabah, as well as the Indonesian Province of Kalimantan, are described. Borneo was far off the commercial trade route of Europe, and consequently, biological explorations of this large tropical island were to commence much later than in other adjacent regions, such as Java and Sumatra. Some of the earliest collectors include James MOTLEY, Alfred Russel WALLACE, Odoardo BECCARI and William Temple HORNADAY. The Sarawak Museum at Kuching has historically played an important role in the exploration of Borneo, and many leading naturalists of the day were based here – Eric MjöBERG, Robert SHELFORD and Tom HARRISSON. Dutch explorations of their former colony – Kalimantan, commencing from the establishment of the *Natuurkundige Commissie voor Nederlandse Indies* in 1820, have been important, and significant collections from this southern portion of Borneo were reported on by Hermann SCHLEGEL, Salomon MÜLLER, Pieter BLEEKER, Theodorus Willem VAN LIDTH DE JEUDE, Jan Kornelis DE JONG and Leo BRONGERSMA. The continuing new discoveries of amphibians and reptiles in recent years indicate that much remains to be learned about the herpetofauna of Borneo.

**Key words.** Sarawak, Sabah, Kalimantan, Sarawak Museum, Zoölogisch Museum te Buitenzorg, history of herpetology.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The second largest (after New Guinea) tropical island (area ca. 575,000 km<sup>2</sup>) in the world, Borneo straddles the equator, and thereby receives rainfall spread throughout the year. Mountain ranges extend in a north-east to south-west direction, separating (the once Dutch-held) Kalimantan from the northern former British protectorates of Sarawak, Brunei and British North Borneo (now Sabah). Because of the location of the island south of the area prone to cyclones and hurricanes, Borneo and adjacent regions have been referred to as “Land below the Wind” by seafarers and travellers.

Being far from trade routes to either India or China, Borneo featured poorly in ancient maps of south-east Asia (SUÁREZ 1999) and remained isolated from the western world. Early trading links did exist between coastal regions of northern Borneo and both India and China, as archeological evidence indicates (SAID 1999). In the Sixteenth Century, emissaries of Spain and Portugal reached the shores of the island, and in 1609, there was a brief British interest in the island (HARLOW 1955). However, it was to be the Dutch and the British who were to control the island from the Seventeenth Century till the end of World War II, when Indonesia (in 1949) and Malaysian Borneo (in 1962) gained independence from colonial rule. British interests in the Far East grew primarily to protect commerce (primarily tea, but also silk and ivory) in China in the late 1700s (WRIGHT 1970). The major shipping lanes in the South

China Sea, particularly along south-western Borneo, were prone to piracy, leading to the establishment of Singapore. Independent of the British Crown Government, the English adventurer, James BROOKE arrived in Sarawak in 1839, and for helping the Sultan of Brunei in quelling a local rebellion in 1840, was awarded the territory. Self-proclaimed Rajah, BROOKE started to rule north-western Borneo in 1842. The political stability of Sarawak, as a result of the rule of the BROOKES and the support given to visiting European intellectuals soon began to attract, among others, natural historians and collectors curious about the natural production of this great island.

Because the history of herpetology, and indeed biological research in general, of Borneo started relatively recently compared to other parts of the Indo-Malayan region, such as Java (RAFFLES 1817; HORSFIELD 1821–1824) or Sumatra (MARSDEN 1811; RAFFLES 1822; see also GALLOP 1995), natural history drawings have not played an important part in the advancement of scientific knowledge on Borneo. As recently as 1832–1834, English traveller G. W. EARL (1837) remarked that the north-west coast of Borneo, from Tanjung Datu to Brunei “is scarcely known even to the native trader”. The first checklist of the amphibians and reptiles of Borneo appeared in an appendix of a book published in 1848 by the Scottish botanist, Hugh LOW (1824–1905), who was described as an admirer and disciple of James BROOKE (1803–1868), the First Rajah of Sarawak. The work listed 19 species of reptiles and three of amphibians