

AN INTRODUCTION TO PULAU TIOMAN

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Pulau Tioman is the largest island on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. It is located at the co-ordinates 2° 35'N and 104° 15'E in the South China Sea. This island is located 32 km from Mersing, Johor and 80 km from Kuala Rompin (Pahang). Pulau Tioman can be reached either by boat from Tanjung Gemok, Kuala Rompin or Mersing. There are daily flights from Subang Airport (Kuala Lumpur) to Pulau Tioman. A small airport was built on the island in late 1980s to allow small airplanes to land.

In its early history, Pulau Tioman was known as a stop over for sailors, fishermen and traders to get fresh water and fire wood or evading from storm. This fact was mentioned by the great Malay writer, Munshi Abdullah in his book on his journey to Kelantan with Stamford Raffles in the early 19th century. This island was a settlement for Malay fishermen several hundred years ago and there are now six major kampungs on the island. These kampungs are Kampung Genting, Kampung Asah and Kampung Mukut in the south, Kampung Tekek and Kampung Salang on the north and Kampung Juara on the east of the island. Today, the number of villagers in the kampungs approximately is 2,654. Most of them are fishermen from either Pahang or Johor. Rubber and coconut are the main crops planted on the flat coastal area.

Pulau Tioman belongs to the state of Pahang. The total land area of the island is about 133.6 sq. km or 13,360 ha. Large part of the island is covered by tropical rain forest with hilly topography, inland forest and small flat land areas along the coast. Pulau Tioman is underlaid by volcanic, plutonic and contact metamorphic rocks. The volcanic rocks occur mainly on the eastern, northern and southern parts of the island. Part of the island coastal area is made up of rocky and sandy beaches. Several river systems coming from the hilly-forested areas represent the main supply of fresh water to the villagers. These rivers include Sungai Mentawak, Sungai Keliling, Sungai Nipah, Sungai Paya, Sungai Lalang and Sungai Ayer Besar. Small patches of mangrove swamp forests are also found on the western part of the island. Some plant species, especially the ferns, resemble those found in Kinabalu Park in Sabah. Rare species of *Rafflesia* are also found on this island.

The District Officer of Rompin is responsible for the management and development of the island. Tioman has beautiful beaches with surrounding marine areas. The landscape and beauty of this island have attracted many tourists, locally as well as from abroad. In addition

to fishing activities, tourism is becoming a very important income generating activity on the island. Many tourist facilities such as chalets, rest houses, hotels and motels were built either by the state government or by the private sector. Local participation in tourism activities has also increased tremendously from the late 1980s.

Apart from beautiful beaches and marine ecosystems, Tioman also has been gazetted as a wildlife reserve by the state government to protect its flora and fauna. This gazettelement was done on 28 September 1972 (Pahang Gazzet Vol. 25 No. 405) for the inland forest area encompassing total area of 12,383 ha, but in 1984 part of this area (4,087 ha) was excised for agriculture development and tourism activities. Today, only 8,296 ha or 61% of the island, remains as Pulau Tioman Wildlife Reserve.

Some 45 species of mammals are found on the island. These include some protected species such as binturong (*Artictic binturong*), long-tailed macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*), slow loris (*Nycticebus coucang*), black giant squirrel (*Ratufa bicolor*), brush-tailed pocuspine (*Atherurus macrourus*), red-giant flying squirrel (*Petaurista petaurista*), common palm civet (*Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*) and larger mouse deer (*Tragulus napu*), which are very common on the island. There are 138 species of birds recorded from the island and the most common is the hill myna (*Gracula religiosa*). Two species of swiftlets, the black-nest swiftlet (*Collocalia maxima*) and grey-rumped swiftlet (*Collocalia fuciphaga*) are the most important economic birds on the island. The villagers collect nests of these birds from caves on the island for sale. This island also has unique species of freshwater fishes and plants. Twenty-five species of snakes are recorded on the island. These include the reticulated python (*Python reticulatus*), grass green whip snake (*Ahaetulla prasina*), common black cobra (*Naja naja*), king cobra (*Ophiophagus hanna*) and variable reed snake (*Calamaria vermiciformis*).

The marine area around Pulau Tioman and eight other nearby islands have also been gazetted as marine parks and marine reserves under the Fisheries Act (1985). The other islands include Pulau Tulai, Pulau Sepoi, Pulau Chebeh, Pulau Tokong Bahara, Pulau Sembilang, Pulau Sri Bulat, Pulau Labas and Pulau Gut. These marine reserves are confined to an area at the lowest tide two nautical miles towards the ocean. The establishment of the marine parks and marine reserves is to conserve, protect marine fauna and flora such as fishes, coral reefs and aquatic floras from being destroyed by fishing and other human activities. The rare giant clam and several types of corals are found around Tioman and its neighbouring islands.

Pulau Tioman is far more important not only for its unique marine ecosystems but also the richness of terrestrial fauna and flora. Good and careful planning by the authorities on this island may save it for the generations to come. There must be a balance between human need and conservation of biodiversity on the island. Islands are always said to be fragile ecosystem, which need careful study and consideration before any development and human intrusion occur. Once it has been destroyed, it will not come back, cannot be replaced and will be lost forever.