

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter consists of the research background, statement of the problem, research questions and objectives of the research, research significance, research scopes, and conclusion.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

People in Southeast Asia have used kratom for its medicinal uses for centuries (Ahmad & Aziz, 2012; Assanangkornchai et al., 2007; Vicknasingam et al., 2010). Its scientific name is *Mitragyna Speciosa*. The Kratom tree has a wide range of recognition. Because of its mild stimulant-like effects, Kratom is widely used, especially among adult males. Enhances energy and mood (Ahmad & Aziz, 2012; Saingam et al., 2013; Suwanlert, 1975; Vicknasingam et al., 2010). In contrast, Kratom use by women is generally stigmatized outside of clinical settings. But village healers have long recognised that Kratom leaves had medicinal capabilities, and they use them routinely to treat fever, cough, diarrhoea, and pain, as well as to deworm livestock and create healing potions for wounds (Ahmad & Aziz, 2012; Assanangkornchai et al., 2007).

Kratom leaves are a common household treatment for aching muscles and joints after a hard day's work (Suwanlert, 1975). Besides the psychotropic effects, certain men use it to boost their libido. Regular drinkers use Kratom to heighten libido and prolong sexual interactions (Suwanlert, 1975). Despite this, one study revealed no correlation between Kratom use and low testosterone (Singh et al., 2018c), and those who regularly used it reported increased sexual

performance (Singh et al., 2020) organizations. Kratom, unlike alcohol, is not frowned upon by Islam, making it a popular stimulant among Muslims. Small groups of people, especially retirees, benefit from its mood-boosting effects, which give them more energy to socialise after a long day (Grundmann, 2017; Singh et al., 2019).

Kratom is widely found in the northern states of Peninsular Malaysia, especially in four districts in Kedah, namely Padang Terap, Baling, Sik and Pendang. Kedah emerged as the largest supplier of Kratom in Malaysia (*New Straits Times*, 2017) It is reported that 47,550 Kratom trees were planted in Padang Terap, 1,000 were planted in Baling, 3,030 were planted in Sik, and 30,000 were planted in Pendang (*Astro Awani berita Malaysia*, 2022). It is common to farmers in rural areas of Kedah to rely on Kratom as a supplement to boost their energy so that they can work more hours (Saingam et al., 2013; Suwanlert, 1975).

As this plant thrives in the climate and soil of northern peninsular Malaysia and southern Thailand, Kratom is common in Southern Thailand as the alternative to energy drinks and alternative drugs. Drinks made from Kratom are considered safer and less hazardous than alcoholic beverages in some southern Thai villages, where they are provided to adults, male visitors, and close relations (Saingam et al., 2013). Some Thai villages utilise Kratom in religious rites honouring local deities (Tanguay, 2011)

Other than that, in Thailand, Kratom has reportedly been used as a cheaper alternative to heroin and to reduce heroin dependence and treat heroin withdrawal symptoms (Tanguay, 2011). Substance abusers have reported using Kratom to help them overcome their addiction and reduce dangerous behaviours like injecting drugs and engaging in sexual activity (Saref et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2019; Vicknasingam et al., 2010).

Because of that, the Thai government has declared decriminalization of both Kratom cultivation and consumption (Charoenratana et al., 2021). The impacts of decriminalization of Kratom on Thailand's economy have shown increased smuggling and demand for Kratom within the country. According to Bukit Aman Narcotics Criminal Investigation Department, the main factor is that Kratom demand is rising and popular due to Thailand's decision to remove Kratom from the list of harmful narcotics (*Sinar Harian*, 2021). The market is further boosted by new Thai legislation that permits its use in conventional medicine (*Utusan Malaysia* 2021).

Because of the strong demand, smuggling has increased in the border areas between Thailand and countries like Malaysia. One kilogram of Kratom smuggled to Thailand fetches between RM100.00 to RM150.00 on the international market. However, it only fetches RM30.00 in Malaysia (*Berita Harian*, 2020). Enforcement agencies in Kedah discovered 9,314 kilograms of Kratom leaves in 2015, more than double the 5,654 kilograms discovered the year before. At the same time, in 2013, 37,243 liters of Kratom water were confiscated, which was significantly more than the 9,072 liters in 2012. (Sukor et al., 2017).

Data from (*Department of Statistics Malaysia*, 2019), Kedah state residents, on average, have the lowest household income, which is RM 4,984.00 compared to Johor state RM 6,923.00 and Selangor, which is RM 8,826.00. According to study (Sukor et al., 2017) states that youth use and sell drugs because of increasing economic standards, cost of living and poverty because of the increase in the cost of living and the pressure of the uncertain economy can lead to the involvement of individuals in something prohibited such as drugs and Kratom (Sukor et al., 2017).

Kratom has become a source of side income, especially for farmers and smallholders in the state of Kedah, to cover the cost of living after the sudden drop in rubber and rice commodities in 2015. (Sukor et al., 2017). As a result of the economic pressure, paddy field workers and small rubber farmers choose to sell Kratom as their side income. (Sukor et al., 2017). It can be seen in the comparison of the seizure rate of Kratom leaves in 2014, which was 5,654 kg, and grew by 9,314 kg in 2015. (Halim et al., 2020).

According to the Rubber Industry Smallholder Development Authority (RISDA), Malaysia loses over RM100 million annually in tax revenue due to the ban on commercial cultivation of Kratom, while neighboring countries like Indonesia bring in approximately RM10 million per month from the sale of Kratom exported from the Kratom plant in Kalimantan (*Harian Metro*, 2017). It supported the statement by the Chief Minister of Kedah, Datuk Seri Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, who has publicly declared his support for pushing the Malaysian federal government to legalize Kratom leaf exports to Thailand, where demand for Kratom-based health goods and isotonic drinks is on the rise (*Berita Harian*, 2022). However, the Malaysia parliament proposed to list Kratom to be placed in Schedule 1, Dangerous Drugs Act 1952 (*Parliament*, 2015). The proposal's reasoning is since Kratom is cheap and easy to get, and that its use is comparable to that of drugs with the potential to damage the human nervous system (Che Nasir et al., 2017). Therefore, different opinions on the legalization of Kratom may have different impacts to the locals and society.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Sukor et al., (2017) performed research to determine why farmers and rubber tappers in Kedah use Kratom as a side income. They discovered that the current economic element is the essential factor. These findings, however, are restricted to the general population of Kedah state and may not be indicative of the specific. Other studies by Charoenratana et al. (2021)

conducted a study in a specific population area in Tambon Namphu, Thailand, where there are many Kratom plants grown by the residents. The study is to determine the level of acceptance of the population of Kratom decriminalization, and most people there agree with the new regulation. However, this study did not explain, from an economic perspective, the impact on stakeholders if decriminalization is implemented.

Deputy Minister of Health, Dato Seri Dr Hilmi bin Yahaya, in April 2015, while in the parliament, proposed to list Kratom to be placed in schedule 1, Dangerous Drugs Act 1952 (*Parliament, 2015*). This proposal is based on the justification that Kratom addiction is the same as taking drugs that can affect the human nervous system and that the price is low and easy to obtain (Che Nasir et al., 2017).

(Singh et al., 2020) conducted a study to compare the perceptions toward Kratom use among Kratom users and non-users in Malaysia. Similarly, non-users viewed Kratom policies differently from Kratom users, displaying increased odds of reporting the belief that Kratom use, and sales must be regulated with stringent laws and Kratom should be regulated instead under the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952 to overcome Kratom use problems.

Meanwhile, the Chief Minister of Kedah, Datuk Seri Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, is trying to get permission to legally export Kratom leaves for Thailand from the Federal Government because Kratom is in high demand in the industry producing health products and isotonic

Based on the positive and negative implications of Kratom usage to the locals, it is unclear whether the illegalization of Kratom will have a negative impact on the locals in Kedah. There is no study on surveying the public opinions on this matter. There is only a study on

farmers and rubber tappers in Kedah who used Kratom as a source of the side income to support their low income (Sukor et.,2017). Therefore, this study aims to explore the Padang Terap community perception on the illegalization of Kratom under the Dangerous Drugs Act (1952)

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

This study embarks on the following research questions:

- 1.3.1 Why do people in Padang Terap continue to sell Kratom even though it has been declared a controlled substance under the Poisons Act (1952)?
- 1.3.2 What is the perception of Padang Terap people if Kratom is gazetted as an illegal substance under the Dangerous Drug Act (1952)?
- 1.3.3 What are the impacts on locals if the selling of Kratom is prohibited by the Dangerous Drugs Act (1952)?

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study embarks on the following objectives:

- 1.4.1 To explore the reasons of selling Kratom by locals in Padang Terap even though it has been declared a controlled substance under the Poisons Act (1952).
- 1.4.2 To explore the perception of Padang Terap people if Kratom is gazetted as an illegal substance under the Dangerous Drug Act (1952).
- 1.4.3 To explore the impacts on locals if the selling of Kratom is prohibited by the Dangerous Drugs Act (1952)

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study will inform the opinion of the public on regulating Kratom under the Dangerous Drugs Act (1952) and effects on people's livelihood and their household economy.

1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on a specific set of Padang Terap residents, specifically the paddy field workers, small rubber farmers, and the public.

1.7 CONCLUSIONS

Kratom is abundantly distributed throughout peninsular Malaysia's northern states and southern Thailand. It has been used in local communities for various purposes, including traditional healing and replacing illicit substances. The Thai government has removed Kratom from the list of dangerous substances, causing it to be in high demand in Thailand and increasing illegal importation from Malaysia. Compared to domestic sales, the export market price to Thailand is significantly greater. Some argue that kratom should be allowed because it can help the countries and communities' economies, while others argue against it owing to health concerns.