

Gunung Jebak Puyuh – The Pearl Amongst a Sea of Palm Oil

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Gunung Senyum Recreational Forest—Pahang

even if they are not as large as those of Senyum. The caves of Jebak Puyuh are less visited thus are more pristine. They are smaller but packed with fine exquisite formations and mysterious hidden gardens.

This is my first visit to the caves of this area in 18 years. I live in Penang and travelling to Senyum in Central Pahang is a tiring 6 hour drive. The purpose of my visit after a long hiatus is to help save it from being blasted away by the prominent cement producer, YTL Cement. The limestone of Jebak Puyuh happens to be suitable as the main ingredient in the production of cement. According to sources, if the cement producer is successful in acquiring the necessary permission, within 60 years, Jebak Puyuh will cease to exist! That's akin to being wiped out of existence! It is a daunting thought. From a majestic towering limestone karst tower to rubble in 60 short years. A mere blink of an eye in geological terms.

The limestone of Jebak Puyuh and Senyum is of Permian age or about 240 million years old. The rocks began as deposits of dead shelled creatures, coral and skeletons of creatures living in a warm shallow sea that used to cover the area many millions of years ago. These deposits laid down over thousands of years eventually transformed by heat and pressure into limestone rock that was later exposed on the earth's surface. A process that took millions of years. During that time, the rocks were hollowed out by acidic water. After the caves formed, secondary formations like stalagmites and stalactites formed inside the caves. All this is set to disappear in 60 years! Within one's life time.

About 95% of limestone is underground while only the balance is what we see sticking out of the ground. These towering steep hills are like islands surrounded by tropical rain forest. Being isolated and offering many different types of micro-habitat, many plants and animals have adapted to living in this harsh and dry habitat. Over the millions of years, these life forms have evolved into unique species sometimes only confined to a single hill.

I spent three days at the Gunung Senyum Recreational Forest, in Jengka recently. This is just about the geographical center of Peninsular Malaysia. Jutting dramatically out of the rolling plains of Central Pahang, Gunung Senyum and Gunung Jebak Puyuh are hard to miss. The jewel of this place is without doubt the caves of Gunung Senyum and Gunung Jebak Puyuh.

They are spectacular hills with equally spectacular caves with high ceilings and large chambers. Some with skylights allowing the sun's rays into the normally dark recesses of the caves.

The hidden jewel however has to be Gunung Senyum's lesser known neighbor, Gunung Jebak Puyuh. It's a hidden gem as it takes a little more effort to visit and the little more effort is more than rewarded by the equally spectacular caves

15% of Malaysia's endemic plants are found on limestone. That's impressive considering that limestone constitute less than 2% of Malaysia's land area! A study found 47 species of land snails on both Senyum and Jebak Puyuh of which 7 are endemic to either Senyum or Jebak Puyuh. A prominent botanist reported that "Senyumia minutiflora (Gesneriaceae) is endemic to Gunung Senyum and Gunung Jebak Puyuh and is found nowhere else in the world. What is more, it is the only representative of its genus, so if the species becomes extinct, the genus also becomes extinct".



Senyumia minutiflora

She went on to say "It's population has noticeably decreased since Gunung Senyum was opened up to tourism. The Jebak Puyuh population is therefore very important for its continued existence". The balsam *Impatiens ridleyi* (Balsaminaceae) is only found at Batu Caves, Senyum and Jebak Puyuh. However, they are difficult to find at the former two localities while Jebak Puyuh remains the only pristine area available for the continued survival of this rare plant.

Apart from destroying an important habitat for rare and endangered flora and fauna, Jebak Puyuh complements Senyum in terms of tourism and recreation. Gunung Senyum is appealing for the mass tourist due to its easy access just a few minutes walk from the car park. Gunung Jebak Puyuh on the other hand is the "wilder" of the two as it takes a 45 minute hike to reach. Not having Jebak Puyuh available for visitors will without doubt certainly impact upon the attractiveness of Gunung Senyum Recreational Forest as a whole.

The Malaysian Karst Society is advocating underground quarrying of limestone resources particularly where the surface area has been degraded or not under natural forest. Underground mining maybe a little more expensive but is it really worth blasting away the above ground part of Malaysia's limestone resources for short-term monetary gain? This is the part that is harboring the unique flora, fauna, archaeological artifacts and geological features in addition to providing recreational, tourism and landscape scenery values. The reasoning is simple.

Why destroy that bit that is important when there is an abundance underground?

Clearly, Jebak Puyuh is an important site for conservation. Lets hope YTL Cement will see the true value of Jebak Puyuh beyond the short-term value. Otherwise, can we trust the authorities to help protect this important resource?