

Letter to the Editor, NST (7th July) - In response to the article on relocating Quarries

Dear Sir,

The Malaysian Karst Society (MKS) lauds the Perak State Government's decision to relocate quarry operations to alternative sites (NST 3 July 2009). However, MKS would like to urge the Perak State Government to go one step further. The State Government should consider using its abundant underground limestone resource instead of quarrying other above ground limestone hills. That would be like cleaning up one mess only to mess up another area.

Limestone hills are landscape icons that distinguish the Silver State of Perak, in particular the Kinta Valley, from other areas in Peninsular Malaysia. Marring these majestic hills with quarry operations would lessen the landscape value of Perak.

Just like an iceberg, about 95% of Perak limestone resources is underground, with only a small portion sticking out of the ground. These towering hills are like islands surrounded by tropical rainforests. Being isolated and offering many different types of micro-habitat on its surface and in caves, many plants and animals have adapted to living in this harsh and dry habitat. Over millions of years, these life forms have evolved into unique species which are often confined to a single hill. Many have not even been recorded by science.

Some 15% of Malaysia's endemic plants are found on limestone karsts. That is very impressive considering that these geological structures constitute less than 2% of Malaysia's land area! The millions of bats living in limestone caves are major pollinators of important economically valuable crops like petai and durians. Insectivorous bats are also nature's pest control helping to control mosquitoes and other agricultural pests.

Is it really worth blasting away above-ground limestone resources for short-term monetary gains? This is the part that harbours unique and valuable flora, fauna, archaeological artefacts and geological features, in addition to providing recreational, tourism and landscape scenery values. These are values that will continue to provide economic return in perpetuity if protected and properly managed.

Underground mining may have its disadvantages. The most obvious being cost. However, it has been shown that it only costs a little bit more to mine underground. Some sort of government incentive can easily be provided to help lower cost. In Perak, many potential sub-surface quarry sites are under old tin mining land. Land that in most cases is degraded, meaning primary forest areas need not be cleared. There are already a few examples of sub-surface quarrying operations in Malaysia, including in Perak.

For this reason, MKS would like to make an impassioned plea in urging the Perak State Government to help save these important islands of biodiversity. The reasoning is simple – why destroy the bit that is important when there is an abundance of the same underground? Go underground!

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