

The STAR

Saturday August 16, 2008
Trouble for the caves?

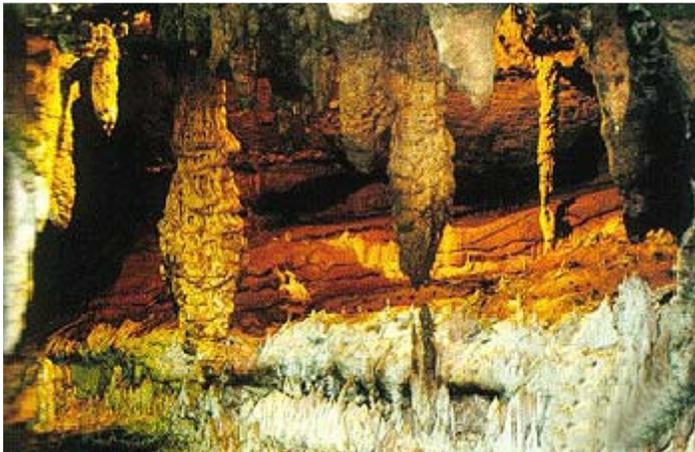
Gunung Senyum, which first opened as a recreational forest on July 14, 1989, covers 794ha of the Jengka forest Reserve in Pahang. Managed by the Temerloh Forestry Department, the area is an important biodiversity reservoir.

With its many caves and a forest rich in flora and fauna, Gunung Senyum offers visitors many educational and adventure activities.

There are two limestone hills here, namely the 550m Gunung Senyum, which has 18 caves, and Gunung Jebak Puyuh, which has seven caves. Gunung Senyum was highlighted a while back when a leading Malaysian conglomerate sought permission to quarry limestone from its hills.

"I am very concerned for Gunung Senyum," said a 45-year-old local who didn't want to be named.

"I was very disturbed when I heard that the beautiful caves of Gunung Senyum, which took millions of years to grow might be destroyed to produce cement.



Cave in Gunung Senyum

"I am a cave enthusiast and I have been bringing people here to enjoy the wonders of Gunung Senyum for 19 years, including foreign researches from England and Sweden. They usually come here on extended day trips to conduct research on insects, bats and herbs.

"Gunung Jebak Puyuh, for one, is still active and growing. Many have said that it is much nicer than Gunung Senyum.

"I have encountered several animals here. There are many species of bats living here, some of which are endangered. Rare or endangered plants include the Merawan Jeruai tree and the Albino Ara tree, which you can see if you trek to Gunung Jebak Puyuh.

"Many NGOs are protesting the project, and I hope that the Government will at least listen to what they have to say before giving the go-ahead," he said.

The Malaysian Karst Society (MKS), a non-profit, non-government organisation formed to conserve the karst outcrops in Malaysia, has even sent a letter to the company in question expressing their misgivings and requesting a dialogue with them.

“It’s been several months and we still haven’t received a response,” its president Hymeir Kamarudin said.

“We hope they would agree to not quarry the place, and we would be more than happy to suggest and identify other less sensitive suitable sites for quarrying. There are technologies and quarrying methods such as basement quarrying, which neither deface nor destroy our above ground resources.

“We are currently embarking on a project to compile a database of all cave and karst features in Malaysia to determine the holistic value of a limestone hill where aesthetic, conservation and economic values are taken into consideration. This project is important because it will enable us to better manage the country’s limited limestone resources.

“We hope the private sector is interested in funding this project to enable them to make sound decisions in relation to Malaysia’s limestone resources,” said Hymeir.

Even though it isn’t as well-known among tourists as the other caves in Malaysia, Gunung Senyum Recreational Forest is an interesting destination for those interested in caving and trekking, as well as those who appreciate the diverse flora and fauna of the natural world.