

KARST NEWS

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The Newsletter of the Malaysian Karst Society

September 2008

For members only

Message from the President

Much has happened over the last few months. Gunung Jebak Puyuh, within the Gunung Senyum Recreational Forest in Jengka Pahang is being threatened by quarrying. MKS organised a quick trip there to visit the hill with TV3 in late August. As a result, two very good reports appeared on the TV3 news over two days. An article on Jebak Puyuh with a side bar of comments by MKS appeared in The Star newspaper in early August. We hope another article will appear soon on this.

The quarrying project proponent, YTL Cement, is currently in the midst of putting together the Detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (DEIA) required by the Pahang Department of Environment (DOE). MKS hope to be involved in the process of approving the DEIA. The DEIA will be made available for public comments so anybody can submit comments. We will get a copy of this document and will make it available to any interested parties. Thus far, there has not been any positive response from YTL Cement to our previous letter to them although a short non committal email reply was received by MKS. MKS will continue to follow-up and take all reasonable action to try to stop the destruction of this valuable hill.

A visit to some recently discovered limestone in the Ulu Muda Forest Reserve in Kedah was made in early August. An article on this trip appeared in the 5th September issue of the New Sunday Times.

Membership renewal for non-life members is due shortly. I would like to appeal to members to continue to support our cause and encourage your friends to join us. The MKS is committed to protecting our karst environment and your support is crucial for us to have a strong voice when dealing with the issues at hand.

In late August, a Single Rope Technique (SRT) basic training was held in Penang. A total of about 8 persons attended this training. Most were from Penang and 2 came all the way from Ipoh. More training will be held in the near future. Watch out for the announcement. If you are interested, do contact me directly.

The proposal for what we think is MKS' main project is ready. This project, **The Establishment of a Cave and Karst Database for Malaysia**, will help put MKS as THE organisation to contact for any information on caves and karst in Malaysia. We plan to collect data from secondary sources and from the field over an initial five year project period. After five years, it will mainly be a matter of constantly updating the data. The database will help us identify gaps in karst research and thus will spawn follow-up projects for many years to come. We hope to start seeking funds for this very important project soon.

There are many projects that MKS would like to do. All require money and time. As you can see, there is much to do and MKS would like to see more people volunteering their time to "get things done". Let us know if you have the time to help conserve and better manage our caves and karst resources.

Lastly, I would like to take this opportunity to wish our members, **Selamat Hari Raya, Happy Deepavali, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!**

Hymeir Kamarudin
President

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To help conserve the environment and reduce costs, we encourage members to download KARST NEWS from www.mykarst.org. We plan to discontinue mailing out newsletters in 2009. Please update your email address with us thru our email at karstsoc@gmail.com and we will inform you when a new newsletter is available.

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Committee Members

Gunung Senyum and Jebak Puyuh

Through the efforts of the MKS, the plight of these hills has been brought to the attention of the public and has been featured in the newspapers and TV news. Here are some of the articles that have appeared in the STAR newspaper.

The STAR

Wednesday September 10, 2008

Adnan: Human survival is more important

By ROSLINA MOHAMAD

KUANTAN: The Pahang government will not mind sacrificing any land area if it can provide lucrative earnings that can be translated into scholarships and financial aid for the people, said Mentri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob. However, he said the state was yet to make a decision on a proposed RM1 bil cement factory by a conglomerate at Gunung Jebak Puyuh in Maran.

“If we have to give up the area, which has numerous caves, in return for sizable earnings and benefits for the people, we will do so. This is my opinion. If the area needs to be relinquished without affecting residents and the environment, and in return we get money for the poor and scholarships, we will allow the project. It will help fill the state’s coffers,” he told reporters after chairing the weekly state exco meeting here recently.

Adnan was asked to comment on the project reported by TV3 recently pertaining to an area rich in clay and limestone deposits. The report said the project could have adverse effects on the mountain which was more than 300 million years old. The area has limestone caves with stalagmites and stalactites and rare flora species.

To a question that the mineral deposits were underground and the project could cause environmental damage, Adnan said the state would look at the reports before giving the nod.

“We will listen to the opinions of geologists, historical experts and environmentalists. There are those who want to look at the stalagmites and stalactites but the poor will continue to suffer. We will consider the needs of the people and their opinions,” he said.

In reply to another question, Adnan said the state could make an official stand to not have any development.

“Land need not be opened, water not sold, islands left untouched and no trees cut. But the Federal Government will need to provide RM1.2bil annually to manage the state. If I get a commitment from the Federal Government on this, I will freeze all development. There will be no biotechnology, biodiversity or infrastructure and we can forget about ECER” (East Coast Economic Region Master Plan).

“You can visit Pulau Tioman and Gunung Tahan without having to build hotels and airports,” he added.

Adnan said that Pahang had always been accused in environment issues with critics making judgements on preserving stalagmites and stalactites more than on human survival. The cement factory is proposed on a 240ha site. It is expected to occupy 80ha and produce three million tonnes of cement annually. Its production will be double that of the conglomerate’s factory in Bukit Sagu, Kuantan, in operation for the past five years.

If approval is obtained, the project will commence next year.

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. "



A 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 researchers 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.

ULU MUDA

by Hymeir Kamarudin

The exciting journey into the wilds of Ulu Muda to explore limestone caves that were not known to exist before and to see the rare specie of hornbills turned up another surprise.

We returned to the wilds of Ulu Muda some four months ago to further explore a new find. A new limestone hill was discovered where none was thought to exist. No geological map showed the existence of limestone in the area. Although it is a small hill, this find is significant as this limestone hill like many others, harbours interesting limestone-adapted species of plants and animals. In addition, there are unexplored caves. We knew the state government has gone ahead with the construction of chalets and other tourism facilities at Kuala Labua, a popular camping site for anglers, birders and other adventurous people. These are the sort of people who do not mind making the journey that sometimes takes up to five hours. Being 14km away by boat, we thought the development would be small with little impact on the environment. Most people just would not go this far, thus the market would be small. It takes one hour by a slow local long-tail boat when the water level is high.

However, Muda Lake is notorious for its fluctuating water levels. Just a few years ago, the lake water was so low, the same trip to Kuala Labua would take a gruelling 5-6 hours on and off the boat. Off the boat as one has to push, pull or simply walk beside the boat due to the extremely shallow water. These low water levels can last a few years. But the authorities decided to go ahead with the development anyway.

We were looking forward to this annual trip as the mid year months is when the rare Plain-pouched Hornbills seem to congregate in the Kuala Labua area making fly-by at dawn and dusk. Heading north at dawn and south at dusk. Ulu Muda is only the second place where this endangered species has been found.

In Malaysia, they were never thought to exist until a Singaporean birder in Belum had a closer look at what many thought were the more common but nearly similar looking Wreathed Hornbill. He noticed something different about them. Armed with a scope and a digital camera, he noticed these Wreathed Hornbills lack the barring on its gular pouch and the corrugations on the side of its massive beak. He realized then that he was looking at thousands of rare Plain-pouched Hornbills. This find was very significant. A new species for Malaysia.



That was in the mid 1990s. We first noticed these hornbills making overflights over our Kuala Labua campsite in 2003. Knowing that Belum isn't too far away, we made sure we noted the markings and sure enough, it was the Plain-pouched Hornbill.

Ulu Muda is now only the second place in Malaysia where this enigmatic species is found. We have been making this annual trip ever since. Unlike in Belum, the Plain-pouched Hornbills in Ulu Muda tend to fly lower making identifying them easier and there is no need for scopes. A good binoculars will suffice.

We have counted about 200-300 birds at any one dawn or dusk session. Where they come from or where they were going remains a mystery to this day. On this trip we were hopeful we would see these magnificent birds again. Alas, after turning the bend in the river, we were greeted with the sight of sheer devastation!

Something you would expect to see in a typical Malaysian urban area, heavy machinery and tractors and forest cleared for development. But this is 14 km into the jungle! The tourism project was obviously full steam ahead. A large tract of forest probably about the size of two football fields was clear cut to bare soil. Only a few trees were left standing. An old logging trail that was well on the way to becoming part of the Ulu Muda jungle has now been reopened allowing access to this site.

Allowing access deep into Ulu Muda will certainly encourage illegal hunting and the removal of other valuable forest products. Our regular campsite, Kuala Labua, across the river from the cleared area, what was previously bush is now all muddy with tracks of heavy machinery crisscrossing all over.

Trees were cut and land flattened to accommodate unsuitable tourism facilities. All in the name of ecotourism. Do they really know what ecotourism is? Obviously, their contractor's foreign labour does construction the "normal" way. The only way they know how. Here development should instead consider the natural environment and buildings should blend with the environment, not mar it.

Is it viable for governments to be building tourism facilities deep in the jungle when access is uncertain, access that is dependent on the lake's water level. Perhaps that was why the old logging trail was reopened. To provide an alternative during times of low water.

We felt angry and sad at the wanton destruction of this normally quiet and peaceful spot in the forest of Ulu Muda. The clump of tall bamboo where the monkeys would lay in slumber in the evening is now partly in the river. The large magnificent trees where the hornbills and woodpeckers would normally rest or find food is no more.

To make matters worse, the Kedah Mentri Besar had recently threatened to log this important catchment area, all for short-term returns at the risk of losing all of nature's bounty. Logging the catchment means losing the water that irrigate the vast paddy fields that feeds us, and the water that supplies the common folks and industries in three states.

Fortunately, there was good some news. It was during this trip that we found the first evidence that the Plain-pouched Hornbills are breeding in Malaysia. This is a momentous discovery. This makes the Ulu Muda forest even more important to conserve and protect. It is harder and harder to find pristine forest like Ulu Muda, especially one that can provide so much environmental benefits to humanity. In addition, it provides us with a wonderful place to visit to experience the wilds of Malaysia. Large mammals, birds, aquatic life, reptiles, micro-organisms, plants or simply the breath-taking scenery.

Are we prepared to see all this disappear? I hope not. Let us all make it known that we would like to see Ulu Muda gazetted as a well managed protected area that benefits humanity and nature.



The tractor was a disturbing sight at the Kuala Labua campsite.



An area larger than the size of two football fields that was previously filled with trees has now been reduced to an open waste land.

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See us online at
www.mykarst.org
and download the newsletter
in colour

*Views and opinions expressed in this
newsletter do not necessarily reflect
those of the Executive Committee of
the Society.*

COMING TRIPS

Gua Anak Tempurung 9 November 2008

Meet at Coffee-shop opposite Balai Polis in Sg. Siput (South)
at 9:30am

Contact Robert to confirm (012-5226560)

Duration Half day

Challenge rating ★★☆☆☆

Gua Anak Tempurung is a river cave in Gunung Tempurung. The 400m long stream that runs its length is usually knee-deep, but could get deeper depending on downpour. So be prepared to get wet! Bring along a change of clothes and light source.

The cave is not known to many and therefore quite pristine. There are some interesting formations in this cave. The trip should be over by lunchtime.



Membership renewal for ordinary/associate members is due by January 31st 2009. Please send your subscription together with the enclosed form to the MKS by December 2008 for prompt renewal.

Chuping Hills, Perlis

13, 14, 15 December 2008

Challenge Rating ★★☆☆☆

When caving in Perlis, it goes without saying that the caves would be at the Perlis State Park. But the less visited caves of the many outcrops of the Chuping Formation is a very good alternative. The hills of the Chuping outcrops can be seen dotting the northern central part of the Perlis plains.



This trip will visit at least three hills. Day one will have us arrive in Perlis about mid day. After checking into our rooms and lunch, in Kangar, we will first visit a small but interesting dry cave before spending the remainder of the evening at picturesque Timah-Tasoh Lake to take in the view and spot some birds. The next day we will visit a series of small caves with the last getting us to a high ledge to take in the breathtaking view of the surrounding country side. After a quick lunch we will visit a wet cave with a muddy stream in the afternoon. On the last day we can do some sight-seeing before we start our trip back home. This trip is for members only. Non members are encouraged to sign up or a fee of RM30 is charged per person. Priority will be given to existing members. All other expenses will be on a shared basis. Trip limited to 15 persons only. Please contact Hymeir at 019-4428926 before 30th November to book a place.