

# Artefacts, fossils may be lost

**EXPERTS** who have done studies on Gunung Pulai warn that mining the mountain's resources will destroy millions of years of artefacts and fossils that could rewrite large parts of the country's pre-historic and early history.

At least two of them, a geomorphologist and an archaeologist who did the initial work on the artefacts, landscape and fossils they discovered in Gunung Pulai, said human settlements in the country, as well as the unique fauna in Peninsular Malaysia, may have existed much earlier than we had had initially thought.

They believe that the mountain could be developed sustainably to mirror the concept of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's geoparks.

Universiti Malaya's Dr Ros

Fatihah Muhammad, who is with the university's Faculty of Science's Department of Geology, had in recent months been to the Gunung Pulai cave complex to collect geological specimens.

The geomorphologist, who is a committee member of the Malaysian Cave and Karst Conservancy, said in her initial investigations of the caves, she had found specimens that warranted a more extensive analysis.

"We have not carried out a thorough and systematic expedition of Gunung Pulai, but we will do it, given the time and budget.

"Gunung Pulai is also special in the sense that there is no other limestone hill like it.

In geomorphology, the crescent-shaped limestone hill is unique and there is only one like it in the peninsula."

Ros Fatihah and archaeologist Associate Professor Dr Zuliskandar Ramli, the deputy director and senior research fellow of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Institute of Malay World and Civilisation, are of the view that the caves in Baling could hold the key to new historical facts,

and preserving their historical, geological and paleontological heritage is paramount.

Ros Fatihah said her studies on cave paleontology had unearthed orang utan (now extinct in the peninsula) fossils in Batu Caves, Selangor, and Lenggong, Perak, dating back between 33,000 and 500,000 years, and that she did not discount the possibility of finding vertebrate fossil bones in Gunung Pulai that are even more ancient.



Dr Ros Fatihah Muhammad

This, she said, was based on the general rule of geomorphology, that the higher the cave floor, the older the site would likely be.

Some of the cave floors in Baling are at least 9m in height from the ground, making them generally higher than others.

"My preliminary surveys have discovered that these caves in Baling have huge potential and I believe we will find more important fossils in Gunung Pulai."

Zuliskandar, who had been making numerous study trips to the mountain for several years, said the archaeological wealth in

Gunung Pulai had indeed been proven as the site had evidence that it was where the first humans settled down in Kedah, 17,000 years ago.

Samples of shells that he sent to a beta laboratory in the United States to determine their age proved that they were among the sources of food collected by those in this pre-historic settlement.

This, he said, made it among the oldest known human settlements in the country, and the oldest in Kedah.

One of the caves that he explored also had pre-historic drawings, which he believed were left by the community then.

Among the artefacts and ecofacts he and his team gathered from the caves, including 3m inside their walls, were Neolithic Stone Age tools, including a Haobinlian axe, hammer, earthenware and plates.

Both academicians confirmed that they had not heard of any Heritage Impact Assessments being carried out by the consultant engaged by the mining company to carry out the EIA.



Dr Zuliskandar Ramli

Zuliskandar did not mince his words when he said that if he was assigned to it, he would not approve the mining project.

He said the institute would be more than willing to assist residents with the setting up of heritage trails that could draw tourists.

Both senior academics are not convinced that mining the mountain while preserving the artefacts contained therein is possible.

They said the nature of the cave complex made it a very sensitive and vulnerable heritage site that would not survive mining at the mountains.

Ros Fatihah, who confirmed that no mapping of the caves had been done, said Peninsular Malaysia's land mass was blessed with only about five per cent of surface limestone, which houses caves along with paleontological and archaeological records, and why this was important to preserve some of it.

Both experts said they needed more time to explore the caves, but were confident that the findings would be well worth it.