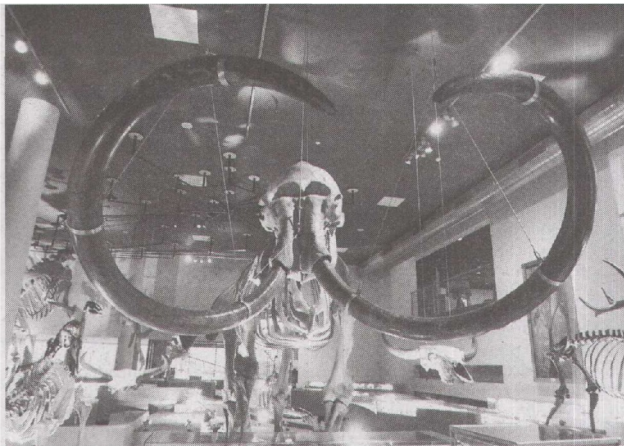


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# A natural history museum of our own

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Leiden's National Museum of Natural History is a natural draw for both tourists and scientists and a treasure house of biological diversity. — Courtesy of FRIM

VISITORS to the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC often say that the experience is like getting lost in another world — the size of 18 football fields — with more than 125 million natural science specimens and cultural artefacts.

Each year, it attracts more than seven million visitors and 8,000 scientists, who come there to tap its huge repository of biological information.

Last week, the scientific community in Malaysia celebrated a long-awaited milestone — the completion of a comprehensive blueprint for the development of the Natural History Museum in Malaysia (NHM Malaysia).

The plan is for it to be on Federal Hill, incorporating green standards, with room for the development of a biopark in the future.

Scientists have always viewed nature as a vast laboratory of life that has generated not only millions of species but also millions of solutions to the problems of life. Some examples of nature's solutions include natural processes for biological control of pests and diseases, pharmaceutical remedies and conversion of biomass to energy.

A major part of biotechnology, agriculture and life sciences — often touted as the backbone of Malaysia's "new" economy — has to do with harnessing such processes for industrial-scale applications.

The effects of environmental change on living things are captured and fixed in museum specimens, waiting to be deciphered by scientists with the right questions and tools, explains Dr Francis Ng, deputy director-general of the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM), who led the nine-month feasibility study for the formation of the museum.

Increasingly, natural history scientists are also involved in studies to increase our understanding of the processes driving change in the environment, with the objective of improving methods and tools for environmental conservation and management.

The idea of NHM Malaysia goes

back to 2006, during the fifth National Biodiversity and Biotechnology Council meeting, chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The council decided to set up an institution that would lead the charge in turning Malaysia into a one-stop centre for conservation, research and use of tropical biological diversity by 2020.

There are many reasons why it makes sense to establish an authoritative voice on natural history on Malaysian soil.

For one thing, our location in Southeast Asia, the region of highest biological diversity in the world, affords us a big advantage in terms of natural history.

Of all the countries in the region, only Laos and Malaysia are without such institutions.

On world biodiversity rankings, Malaysia is among an elite group of countries, yet our knowledge base on the subject is patchy in comparison.

The study also found that of the 22 organisations, including government departments and universities that collectively hold about three million specimens, the standard of maintenance was well below international standards in all except the new facilities at Universiti Malaysia Sabah.

There is major untapped potential here in terms of research, when you consider that much of the biodiversity in the world remains unknown. The wealth of information contained in our forests, rivers, mountains and seas can be viewed as shared legacy.

During colonial times, the British established the Botanic Gardens and Raffles Museum for its administrative territories, but with independence, Singapore inherited them both while Malaysia was left without any museum of comparable stature.

Moreover, as is often argued by environmentalists, the existing institu-

tional framework is simply too weak and fragmented to be able to support our National Policy on Biological Diversity.

As a result of the way our institutions tend to be organised, each department overlooks one particular sector of biodiversity, for example, forestry or fisheries.

Confined by narrowly defined research agendas and administrative boundaries, local scientists have faced formidable challenges in developing a truly comprehensive overview at national level and even more difficulty in gaining regional or global expertise.

Put another way, if we are serious about achieving our vision of being a global biodiversity hub, we need an institutional framework that can support those objectives.

A natural history museum will also help the country meet its international commitments, such as those under the Convention on Biological Diversity (which puts a responsibility on governments to conserve biodiversity and share the benefits from the use of genetic resources in a fair and equitable way) and foster knowledge exchanges with other countries in Southeast Asia.

It is perhaps for these compelling reasons that the NHM Malaysia blueprint has received solid support from the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry.

Earmarked for the period under the 10th Malaysia Plan, the framework specifies not only the physical development needs of the museum, but, more importantly, the "software" components, including human resource requirements, governance structure, areas of research and collaboration, and record-keeping.

The blueprint specifies the steps needed in order for the museum to gain international recognition, such as through the establishment of a code of ethics and accreditation system.

In theory, we have the ingredients and the capacity for the making of a fine natural history museum.

Of course, there are challenges

ahead, not least of which is the rather hefty price tag of RM400 million, which does not include the acquisition of a suitable site.

The government has, in the past, shown foresight in terms of allocating resources for long-term investments. The proposed budget for the entire NHM Malaysia project is only 0.2 per cent of the RM200 billion development allocation under the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

The biggest hurdle remains bringing together the right mix of like-minded visionaries who are willing to take the driver's seat and lay a strong foundation so that the museum can become self-sustaining.

Beyond blockbuster exhibits, there is a need to build up the scientific reputation of the museum and to ensure a continuous synergy between its collections and the scientists behind the research.

Ng and his team believe that authenticated reference collections, once they have been acquired, are invaluable national assets. Although the process will take time, the museum should support our local universities in the development of world-class training programmes in the life sciences and environmental management.

Indeed, perhaps the most important recommendation from the study is that it is the quality of the scientific collections on the back end that provides the authority for the exhibitions in the front.

The key to the survival of NHM Malaysia lies not just at the ticket counter in the lobby but in the storage facilities away from the public eye.

Good collections, meaning those with specimens that are rare, varied and well preserved, are like goldmines for scientists, who will contribute to their upkeep.

But once poorly managed, they quickly become irrelevant and unattractive.

There is also a need to foster a culture of sharing of information and resources between the various institutions that already have natural history collections.

Great museums are major tourist landmarks and are playgrounds of the imagination. Their showcases serve not merely to inform, but to inspire.

The Smithsonian, the Field Museum in Chicago, the National Museum of Natural History (Naturalis) in Leiden and the Natural History Museum in London excel in three core functions — robust management of scientific collections, cutting-edge research as well as innovative exhibitions and outreach programmes catering to visitors of all ages.

With the right leadership behind it, Malaysia's own natural history museum could inculcate a sense of respect for our natural world in our next generation, revive interest in a field of study in which we have a comparative advantage and become a tremendous source of pride for all Malaysians.

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