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Two's company!

Unguarded chambers

Star **2**

Limestone outcrops scattered around Kampung Merapoh in Pahang hide enormous chambers and exquisite flora and fauna, yet not a single one of the hills is protected. >2

Dazzling sight:
Colourful layers of sedimentary rock on the walls of Gua Tahil Bintang. — Photo by LAILI BASIR

Caving in to development

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Villagers of Merapoh, Pahang, fear that a proposed quarry and cement plant will mar their idyllic rural environment.

Stories by **TAN CHENG LI**

ZOO Imam Mat is sad and angry at the same time. You would be, too, if the fish farm that you have been nurturing for 16 years was forcibly closed. "He is very frustrated. The source of his livelihood is suddenly gone," says his son, Sabri Zoo.

His 78-year-old father had started the caged fish culture business in 1997 in a pond near their village of Merapoh, Pahang, under a state government-initiated project. The Fisheries Department had provided the villagers with cages, fish fries and feed to kick-start the project. It thrived and Merapoh farmed fish became sought after by restaurants in nearby towns.

"The patin and talapia that you get in Gua Musang and Kuala Lipis are from here. They are in demand as they don't have any muddy taste because a stream runs through the pond," says Sabri, 32. "My father used to earn between RM5,000 and RM8,000 a month from the caged fish and with that, he raised a family of 12. Now, it is all gone," he says, pointing to the 20 cages abandoned by his father.

Ordered to vacate

Some 15 villagers involved in the fish farming were instructed to remove their cages, numbering about 120, two years ago but a few, including Zoo, held on until early this year. It appears that the area is the site for a quarry and cement plant. The land had been leased to the company Bintang Tower, while the cement manufacturing licence had been given to Lipis Cement.

Villagers first heard about the development over 10 years back but it never took off, so the caged fish culture continued and bloomed. All was quiet but in June 2010, Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob told the press of plans for a cement factory there, a joint venture between the government and a local firm. Revival of the project appears imminent when in late 2011, Singapore-based company,

ASN Cement, proposes to take over Lipis Cement.

The villagers voiced their protest for the project through social media and the press and recently, they were told that the state legislative assembly has "rejected the application of the cement plant." State officials also told the press of plans to gazette the area into a park. The villagers, however, remain wary; they fear that the decision can be overturned upon the appeal of the company.

"There is nothing in black and white. We don't know whether we can go back (to the pond) as it is still their land," says Mohd Sapri

Khalid, 51, chairman of the association for caged fish culture. He says the villagers are still awaiting compensation for their losses. "We were previously told that we will be compensated when we remove our cages but now, the new company says this offer was given by the previous company, not them."

For Sabri, if the project goes ahead, it will deal him with not one, but two blows: aside from the loss of his family's fish farming business, he has to give up his budding caving eco-tourism plans. Scores of limestone outcrops surround Merapoh

in the district of Lipis, all largely unexplored. Sabri, a trekking guide at Taman Negara, last year teamed up with another nature enthusiast, Laili Basri, to explore the feasibility of bringing visitors into the caves. Both are new to caving but with help from locally based caver Liz Price, and others from Croatia and Japan, they have to date explored over 85 caves, and mapped 12.

From their finds, the Merapoh caves have loads of visitor appeal. Some caves have large chambers; others are filled with unique formations or have interesting geology. Some hide pools of crystal-clear water harbouring fish and tortoises. Gua Hari Malaysia (named such because they found it last Sept

16) has an almost kilometre-long river flowing through it, forming

cascades and pools. In Gua Tahi Bintang, a now dried-up stream had eroded its walls to expose layers of bedding (sedimentary rock deposits) and also carved rimstone dams. Its name is derived from one wall filled with streaky formations resembling shooting stars. Gua Seribu Cerita, meanwhile, has loads of old cave paintings – and possibly some made-to-look-old graffiti, too – along an overhang.

Although the licence held by Lipis Cement allows the quarrying of two hills, Gua Gunting and Gua Goyang, the villagers fear that the others will eventually be mined since the land lease is for 100 years.

A possible adverse impact is water pollution, say Wan

Amiruddin Wan Ibrahim, who heads the local protest group. "All kinds of chemicals and waste will enter Sungai Merapoh. Eight villages depend on water from this river. It is our only water source. It is a small river and we pump it for use downstream of the development."

The former *penghulu* points out that as Sungai Merapoh feeds the tributaries of Sungai Pahang, the repercussion of water pollution will be widespread. He says dust pollution will also affect the inhabitants of the over 300 homes in the village.

"The haze lasted a week and it already caused so much health problems for the old people here. With this project, dust will be a daily affair. And when the dust settles on our crops, it will cause reduced yields," says Wan Amiruddin.

He adds that the villagers do not think that the project will create jobs. "We don't want this sort of job which is unhealthy. We already have orchards, oil palm and rubber estates. We want to maintain the area. If we save the caves, there will be opportunities for villagers to become tourist guides and we will also protect the environment."

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Threat to biodiversity

There is much else at stake, too, if the quarrying goes ahead. Limestone hills are known to harbour rare, endangered flora, a fact underscored by recent botanical surveys by the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia. Botanists made several remarkable discoveries, including plants found only in Malaysia, growing at Gua Gunting – the very hill that will be quarried. That same limestone outcrop yielded a new species of rock gecko and two new species of bent-toed geckos during a survey by US herpetologist Dr Lee Grismer last month.

“The Merapoh area is very important because the limestone formations provide unique habitats in which many species have evolved that would not be there in the absence of the limestone formations. We only spent two nights there but in that short time we were surprised at the high

amphibian and reptile diversity we observed. It was far greater than we had expected. These limestone formations are an important part of Malaysia’s natural heritage and harbour significant components of this country’s biodiversity,” says Dr Grismer of La Sierra University in California.

Such finds are indication of the importance of the limestone hills and surrounding forest as wildlife sanctuaries. In their explorations, the cavers have encountered fauna such as racer snakes, porcupines, spiders, scorpions, bats and toads. In the forests that clad the hills, they have seen the serow and sunbear, and also found bones of an elephant and a black panther. As such, they hope to see the limestone hills preserved as a geopark.

Surveying the hidden chambers of the outcrops has given the cavers a better understanding of these geological structures and their ecological roles. “Caves are very impor-

tant for us,” says Laili, 41. “They function as a water source, they provide a habitat for fauna. The bats and insects in caves are linked to our daily lives. Bats are pollinators ... without them, our trees will not fruit. As we learn about the caves, we’re also educating the villagers at the same time.”

He has initiated the Save Merapoh Caves campaign to raise awareness and support for the cause. “There is no point in us promoting the caves only to have them blown up. The fish cage business

has been operating for some 20 years. It is supported and funded by the government which has now given the land away. That’s why I want to help ... to make right what is wrong.”

If the cement plant and quarry goes ahead, he fears there will be severe repercussion. “It will affect everything ... our quality of life, the quality of our nature. The worst part is, our next generation will not see what we have now.”

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Plant rethink

LIPIS Cement had received approval for a clinker and cement plant near Kampung Merapoh, Pahang, as far back as 1997. The project site had also been delineated as a heavy industries zone. The project never took off but the company still holds the manufacturing licence, while the lease to the land is held by another company, Bintang Tower.

Singapore-based ASN Cement revealed its interest to restart the project 18 months ago but it has not applied for any licence. The company declined to be interviewed but in a short e-mail to *The Star*, states that its plan is now on hold.

"ASN Cement is fully aware of the concerns surrounding the project. Due to these concerns and other considerations, the project is presently being held in abeyance," says Michael Madrigal, head of commercial and marketing. "In the event that ASN Cement should proceed with the project, we would like to highlight that the concerns of the local community and the public in general, will be adequately addressed."

A source familiar with the project explains that the company had intended to buy over the shares of Lipis Cement, and as such, take over the manufacturing licence. "ASN is just reviving a project that has been there a long time ago," he says, adding that the company takeover plan has not been finalised as there are conditions attached to it.

The source says that Lipis Cement holds an approved Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the project but ASN has conducted a fresh and detailed EIA, which has yet to be submitted. He says 12 caves were found within a 5km-radius of the project site but none will be affected by it. "We recognise that some of the caves are spectacular and we have even offered to establish accessibility to the sites and support development of tourism there."

He says the two limestone hills which will be quarried do not have caves. "Within the project site, there is no unique biodiversity as the area has been logged over and mined for gold in the 1980s," he says.

The source says that the cement plant will use approved technology similar to plants recently approved for operations in Gopeng and Bahau in Perak, and all emissions will be within Department of Environment (DOE) standards.

He adds that the Pahang Government has not officially stated if it is for or against the project. He says as the area has been zoned for heavy industries, another company could still carry out the project should ASN abandon its plan, and other industries might be established. The source also points out that the local authority should clarify why the impact on flora and fauna was not looked at when the area was zoned for heavy industries in the late 1990s.



A new species of bent-toed gecko recently found in Gua Gunting.

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Sabri Zoo's father is among the 15 villagers who had to abandon their fish cages as the area is earmarked for a limestone quarry and cement plant.

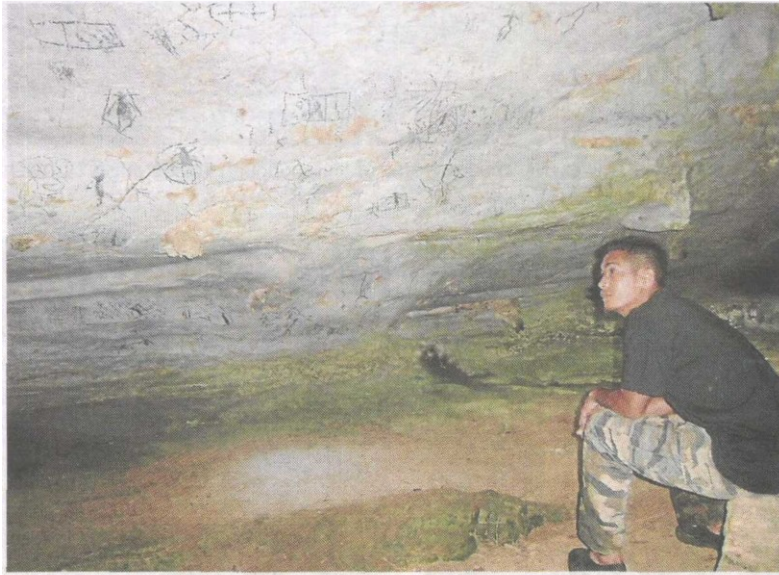


Hidden chamber: The limestone hills of Merapoh, Pahang, hide beautiful geological formations, such as these rimstone dams in Gua Tahiti Bintang. – Photos by LAILI BASIR



for more photos of Merapoh caves and a video on an exhilarating caving experience

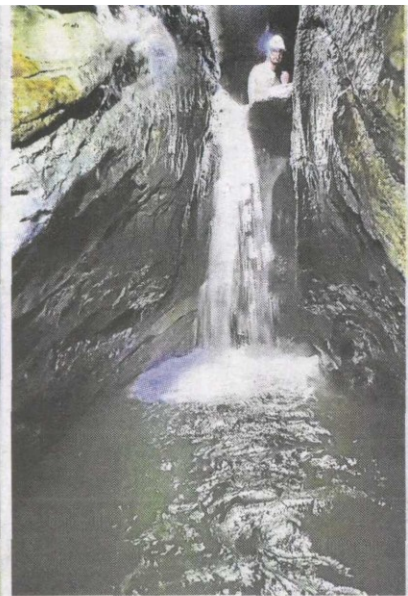
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Nature guide Sabri Zoo contemplating the meaning of old cave drawings found in Gua Seribu Cerita.



The entrance to Gua Air Mata Dayang. It is one of many newly explored caves in Merapoh which will appeal to cavers.



Cavers have to climb, crawl, wade, swim and slide in Gua Hari Malaysia.