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'It is difficult to gazette national heritage sites'

GEORGE TOWN: When the federal government wants to gazette national heritage sites, the biggest hurdle is getting state governments to agree, says Deputy Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister Muhammad Bakhtiar Wan Chik.

Malaysia has 965 archaeological sites, of which 822 are on land and 143 underwater. But only nine have ever been gazetted as national heritage sites.

"I'm not sure what the motive is, but before we can gazette a place as national heritage and protect it, we need the states to give consent and some states are a bit slow to agree," he said.

One of the longest pending ones is Taman Negara.

Muhammad Bakhtiar said because of the massive size of the primary rainforest of Taman Negara,

the federal government needs the consent of Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu to not only gazette it as national heritage, but to also get it inscribed on the Unesco World Heritage Site list.

"It's been 10 years and we are still trying to list Taman Negara," he said after opening the National Archaeological Seminar here on Tuesday.

"Our heritage is a tourism product. If we do not have any products, then we do not have any tourists.

"Tourists don't come just to see the buildings, monuments and tall structures. They come to see our cultures, history and heritage."

He said Malaysia was making plans to get three other sites listed as Unesco World Heritage Sites – the Klang Gates Quartz Ridge, the Forest Research Institute Malaysia in

Selangor and the Royal Belum Forest in Perak.

Muhammad Bakhtiar said the top three most visited sites in any European city were invariably connected to heritage or archaeological sites.

"Heritage and culture attracts more affluent tourists with much greater spending power and we want to attract them.

"We had only about 700,000 Europeans visit us. We also consider South Koreans and Japanese as affluent and we had 484,528 Koreans and 390,777 Japanese come last year," he said.

Malaysia had 25.9 million visitors last year.

National Heritage Department director-general Datuk Dr Zainah Ibrahim, who delivered the opening address at the archaeological semi-

nar, warned that artefacts are often stolen at the Malaysia's archaeological sites and such sites required legal protection.

The seminar saw 65 archaeologists from around the country presenting papers on their latest historical findings.

Dr Zainah said in war-torn countries like Iraq or Syria, cultural cleansing took place in which large numbers of precious archaeological findings were either stolen or destroyed and Malaysia needed to be vigilant to protect its heritage assets.

She said on Oct 17, Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister Datuk Mohamad Ketapi would declare another 107 national heritage sites and 145 national heritage creations including the works of Tan Sri P. Ramlee.