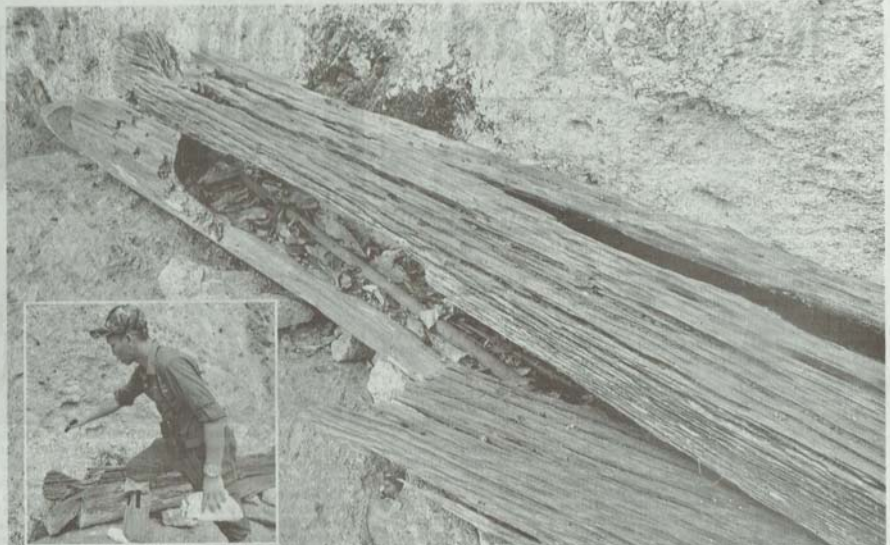


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The narrow ledge of the cliff face where tourists hike to see the coffin, to listen to the guide's explanation.



The blowpipe can be seen inside a belian coffin. (Inset) Guide explaining the meaning of the head motif of the coffin.

Danum Valley's ironwood warrior coffin attraction

David Thien

SABAH'S Danum Valley lowland rainforest conservation region has a Coffin Cliff attraction for tourists who are not squeamish about viewing human skeletal remains and coffin relics of the dead with a glimpse of weapon like blowpipe buried with them.

It was believed that warriors and tribal leaders were accorded the highest niches for their resting places. The hike uphill from the Borneo Rainforest Lodge (BRL) can be quite taxing on visitors who are not that fit for strenuous exercise.

What is interesting at the highest ledge of the cliff face, there lies a weathered belian or Borneo ironwood coffin that is reputed to be at least 250 years old, exposed to the daily elements of harsh sunlight and tropical rain storms, and yet still has not disintegrated.

There's a folklore that it was the resting place of a prominent warrior in the past whose skeletal remains was placed in a sitting position overlooking his village down at the valley below, now however, the skeleton had disintegrated but the belian or Borneo ironwood coffin still remains intact.

According to Jimmy Omar who was a management staff with the conservation establishment managing Danum Valley project under the Sabah Foundation, one of only three virgin forest areas in Sabah under scientific research conservation, "the area was populated by Orang Sungai ethnic tribes."

Using log coffins in the past to intern corpses differs from the customs of other

Dusunic and Murutic tribes using the jar or tajau. Danum Valley comprises of 43,800 hectares of rainforest as old as 130 million and is home to over 300 bird species, 110 mammals, 72 reptiles, 56 amphibians and 57 fish.

This article is to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the Sabah Society this year which had organised yearly expedition trips to Danum Valley in the past, and to support domestic tourism growth in Sabah during this present time due to the Covid-19 pandemic slump.

Guides narrated that the Orang Sungai descended from the Suggan tribe, were among those living in Hulu Kinabatangan area originally linked to the Nanuk Ra-gang myth for the Dusunic tribes traded with traders from China along the Segama and Kinabatangan River.

Today, the Orang Sungai tribe has evolved from intermarrying and many descendants are living along still living along the Kinabatangan River and hinterlands. Suspended coffins or hanging coffins in caves or cliff niches are also found in the Philippines, China and Indonesia.

Every guide has a different account of how long it takes a belian or Borneo ironwood tree to grow to maturity. Experts put its scientific name as *eusideroxylon zwageri*, (*eusideroxylon* means sinking wood being one of the hardest and most durable timbers in the world) and they say the tree takes up to 120 years to reach 30cm diameter and can reach a height of up to 50m in about 1,000 years, growing less than 18 inches a year, depending on climate and soil conditions.

As a timber member of the Lauraceae family – a group of tropical aromatic plants that includes the avocado, bay laurel and cinnamon tree, *eusideroxylon zwageri* can be found across the Malesian region of Southeast Asia. Its large fruits are poisonous to humans but are a vital food source for foraging animals.

The Bornean ironwood is resistant to infection from bacteria and fungi and retains a lemon odour post-manufacture, making it an extremely popular tree among timber exporters. Logging, combined with the tree's slow regeneration rate, has led to over-exploitation of the species with declines first recorded in the 1950s.

The Forest Research Institute of Malaysia said it is one of the trees being added which are classified in "Vulnerable" in the International Union for Conservation of Nature ("IUCN") Red List of Threatened Species overexploitation and shifting agriculture. These trees are heavily harvested for timber. The timber is one of the hardest and most durable timbers of Southeast Asia.

The Malaysian Timber Council likens its timber as monotypic with the sapwood being bright yellow when fresh, darkens on exposure and is sharply defined from the heartwood which is light brown to almost bright yellow when fresh and darkens on exposure to deep reddish brown, becoming very dark brown or almost black with age.

The timber is exceptionally hard and heavy and it has been classified under Heavy Hardwood with a density of 835-



Overlooking the Danum River Valley with the Borneo Rainforest Lodge beneath.

1,185 kg/m³ air dry being one of the most durable in the world but the heartwood is extremely resistant to preservative treatment.

Its texture is moderately fine to fine and even with grain fairly straight or shallowly interlocked and the timber falls into Strength Group A (Burgess, 1958) or SG 2 (MS 544:Part 2:2001). It is easy to work despite its high density and produces a smooth and often lustrous surface.

The timber is suitable for all heavy construction works, marine construction, boat construction, fence posts, heavy duty industrial flooring, decking, fender sup-

ports, telegraphic and power transmission posts and cross arms, mallets, shingles, columns (heavy duty) and other works where high strength and durability are required.

Many wealthy traditional Chinese still deems belian log timber a desired wood for making coffin as in the past, but the scarcity of such trees under conservation, now banned for export, makes it not viable for making coffin for anyone. A lot of Covid-19 casualties were just put in cardboard coffins for fast burial or cremation.