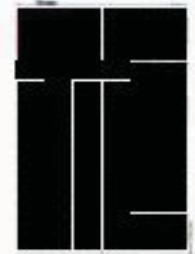


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Lenggong Valley: A treasure trove of Malaysian heritage

DESIGNATED a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) on June 30, 2012, the Lenggong Valley holds exceptional universal value, providing an unparalleled archaeological record of early human habitation.

Several historical artefacts discovered at the site contained evidence of the earliest human settlement in Peninsular Malaysia, including the world-famous 'Perak Man', the name given to the skeletal remains of a man believed to have lived during the Palaeolithic era.

According to the National Heritage Department (JWN)'s World Heritage Division director Mohd Syahrin Abdullah, these assets inherited from the past should be preserved and protected as they serve as reference for future generations to learn about their past, noting that they are proof of the earliest human civilisation in Malaysia and among the oldest in the world.

He is referring to skeletal remains unearthed at Gunung Runtuh, Bukit Kepala Gajah in Lenggong Valley (Hulu Perak), the oldest and almost complete human skeleton discovered in Malaysia and in Southeast Asia, believed to have lived between 10,000 to 11,000 years ago.

Mohd Syahrin, who has held the position since 2015, said early efforts were undertaken to convince the Unesco evaluation team for the preservation and protection of Lenggong Valley, starting with recognition as well as the mechanism and management plan.

Lenggong Valley was declared a World Heritage Site at the 36th session of the World Heritage Committee meeting held at St Petersburg, Russia on June 30, 2012.

"We had a management plan and Alhamdulillah (praise to Allah), we managed to convince them (Unesco) with respect to the recognition," Mohd Syahrin told Bernama, describing the recognition as initial efforts towards preserving Lenggong Valley.

Maintaining status

Besides ensuring the status is maintained based on the Conservation Management Plan

(CMP) document, which has been prepared and gazetted under the Town and Planning Act 1976, several other matters are within JWN's jurisdiction as stated under the act.

"We have created a document that empowers us to provide the sites. From the document, we undertook monitoring activities and were also given permission to undertake planning, etc.

"For purposes of maintaining the status, we have to put in place measures related to protecting and monitoring of the site for tourist visits.

"JWN has also installed fencing around all cave entrances in Lenggong Valley and provided boardwalks to prevent any destruction to the surrounding areas as well as giving easy access for tourists," said Mohd Syahrin, adding that a total of RM25 million had been spent for preserving and conserving

Lenggong Valley since it was awarded the Unesco status.

According to Mohd Syahrin, much of the work were undertaken in the background such as land survey for determining land boundaries, preparing CMP documents containing the key plan for site development and tourism products in the surrounding areas for value-added as well as the various stages of land development.

"Not many people know that all these were carried out behind the scenes, but we need to forge ahead. We have done our best to ensure Lenggong Valley is prepared to receive more tourists in the future," he said.

According to statistics, the number of visitors to the temporary Archaeological Gallery in Lenggong Valley, as at September this year, stood at 20,840.

The National Heritage Department was established on March 1, 2006, with the responsibility of preserving, conserving, protecting and promoting the rich treasures of Malaysian heritage.

The department is entrusted with archaeological research, conservation of buildings and monuments, gazettement and enforcement, safeguarding intangible heritage and natural

heritage, as stipulated in the National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645).

Archaeological treasures

Describing Lenggong Valley as having its own unique attractions, Mohd Syahrin said it did not take long for this site to be awarded the status as a Unesco World Heritage Site as compared to other World Heritage Sites in the country, such as Melaka City and Georgetown, Penang, which took nearly 10 years.

"All efforts geared towards the preservation, conservation and protection of Lenggong Valley took off in 2009 and within three months, we managed to comply with most of the procedures including submitting the relevant documents – at least a year ahead of securing recognition – or full copy dossier of the nomination documents.

According to Unesco, only

countries that have signed the World Heritage Convention, pledging to protect their natural and cultural heritage, can submit nomination proposals for properties on their territory to be considered for inclusion in its World Heritage List. Malaysia signed the convention on Dec 7, 1988, according to data on Unesco website.

"To be included on the World Heritage List, sites must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one out of 10 selection criteria, as such we have to look at the suitability and prepare the document to suit the needs and requirements of Unesco," added Mohd Syahrin.

Lenggong Valley is divided into two clusters: the open-air site and cave site, which have to be protected, while the area is under cultural category, involving human activities.

Citing the Boh Tea plantation in Cameron Highlands, Pahang, and the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM), Mohd Syahrin said it was not a natural site (that could be considered a World Heritage Site), but a cultural site as it involved human interactions.

"As for the cave site or archaeological site in Lenggong Valley, humans had turned the cave there as their dwellings, for shelter and as burial sites.

"For open-air site, it is actually

an archaeological site outside the cave with tool workshops found by researchers, which were evidence of early technology.

"Based on the findings, it was found that Lenggong had a large population. The open-air site showed among others evidence of human habitation at Kota Tampan going back 75,000 years, while Bukit Bunuh showed existence of early settlement dating over 1.83 million years ago, which proved that it's the oldest in Malaysia and among the oldest in the world," he said, adding that the open-air sites in Lenggong Valley are unique as most of them were unaffected by the scourge of disasters such as landslides or floods.

Mohd Syahrin said Lenggong Valley had one of the longest records of early man in a single locality with evidence of human occupation from the Palaeolithic, Neolithic and Metal ages.

"All these discoveries are significant for Malaysia and globally, with the area remaining well under the world's radar, hence attracting more tourists to visit the site," he said, adding that on July 30, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MoTAC), through JWN, handed over the management of Lenggong Valley to the Perak state government.

"JWN is still prepared to assist and monitor the area."

Under Lenggong District

Meanwhile, Lenggong District Council (MDL) president Mohd Amzari Mohd Arzami said the council took over the management of Lenggong Valley after being given the mandate and funds from the state government, with cooperation from the local community.

Lenggong Valley was recognised as a Geopark, Lenggong Geopark, in 2021, the

second Geopark in Perak after Kinta Geopark.

"MDL was given the mandate to manage several Unesco sites in Lenggong Valley from the state government starting this year.

There are eight main World Heritage Sites in Lenggong with four managed by JWN, namely Bukit Bunuh, Kota Tampan, Bukit Jawa and the Archaeological Gallery, while MDL manages Gua Kajang Complex, Gua Teluk

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Kelawar, Gua Harimau and Gua Gunung Runtuh.”

On promotion, Mohd Amzari said MDL received allocations from Perak state government, the federal government as well as allocations from Lenggong MP and Kota Tampan state assemblyman.

“In addition, MDL and several other departments and agencies are also responsible for preserving and upgrading other heritage tourism sites in Lenggong such as the old town site, the cultural area in Kampung Chepor, Kampung Luat, etc, through funds received.”

Mohd Amzari said since MDL was entrusted with the responsibility of preserving Unesco World Heritage sites, the council together with JWN had agreed to coordinate applications related to allocations for the area.

“First is one-off application; second is yearly application and we are working together with JWN to apply direct to the federal government for similar funds provided for Unesco world heritage sites in Melaka and Penang under Budget 2023 last year.

“We are in the process of applying to the federal government for similar provisions through the State Economic Planning Unit and the state government, possibly RM20 million to RM30 million for basic infrastructure development in this area for the future,” he said.

Community support

Mohd Amzari said MDL had always stressed on the importance of educating the community on the need to preserve and develop Lenggong through various programmes, courses and training without incurring much capital, noting that they should leverage allocations received from departments and agencies involved.

He said MDL's current focus was to train the local community as tourist guides for their area, providing them with a source of income from the Unesco heritage sites and geoparks, while helping MDL to manage the area.

“The local community are the ‘eyes and ears’ of the council in the event of any property damage in Lenggong. For example, at Gua Kajang Complex, the hiking community in Lenggong, works together with us by providing whatever inputs for improvements.

“Among the issues highlighted are related to trash, cleanliness and safety and based on their feedback, MDL will provide the necessary requirements,” he said.

Various tourist attractions

According to Mohd Amzari, there are three attractions in

Lenggong: the Unesco World Heritage Site in Lenggong Valley, the sites under Lenggong Geopark, and the gastronomic experience as well as the local people's culture.

He said upon the opening of the Archaeological Gallery and Geopark Gallery to the public, tourists could visit the locations first for a clearer picture on the attractions in Lenggong.

“The Geopark Gallery will be officially opened at the end of this year before the Perak Visit Year 2024. We will try to provide all information on the fun map, translate them onto the board and place them at the end of the gallery for visitors' easy viewing and reference,” he said.

Other attractions that are considered ‘must-try’ activities for visitors include the Raban Lake Boat Trip and the River Cruise along the Perak River.

“Tourists will enjoy soaking up the awe-inspiring scenery at Raban Lake and Perak River and a relaxing trip to the fish ponds in the village. While having tea amid a kampung-style ambience at the village, visitors get to experience local socio-cultural activities, hence generating income for the villagers,” said Mohd Amzari.

Within the large karst outcrop of Bukit Kepala Gajah are Gua Kelawar, Gua Harimau and Gua Gunung Runtuh, where Perak Man was discovered.

“Early humans have evolved

and lived here. Beyond the archaeological heritage, Lenggong is surrounded by beautiful countryside, waterfalls and a lake that's a result of the damming of the Perak River.

“The abundance of wildlife sanctuaries in the area provides an array of birds and animals, making Lenggong Valley a paradise for animal aficionados. It is a great place for ecotourism due to its extensive variety of flora and fauna,” said Mohd Amzari, adding that visitors intending to enter any of the caves must obtain permission and special permit from MDL through their tourist guides, with 30 of them in total.

He said MDL, in collaboration with all accommodation operators, were compiling the data of visitors for this year to enable it to target tourist arrivals next year for purposes of applying for allocations.

“Lenggong Valley, which holds the potential for further discoveries, beckons tourists with all its archaeological and ecotourism attractions, including

activities that are geared for trailblazers and adventure-seekers,” he added.

MDL's virtual tour portal is accessible via www.actsugi.com/lenggong-tourism for visitors to pick their locations as well as accommodations that are available, among them the Aguilar Resort, Kuak Hill Resort and Sumpitan Glamping. — Bernama



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Mohd Syahrin Abdullah

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On display at the Lenggong Valley Archaeological Gallery is a replica of the world-famous 'Perak Man', the name given to the skeletal remains of a man believed to have lived during the Palaeolithic era. — Bernama photos



Bukit Sapi, said to have derived from the volcanic eruption of Toba in Sumatera dating back around 75,000 years ago, is among many archaeological and geotourism attractions in Lenggong Valley.



This display box contains tools made from stone, clay and metal, which were unearthed during past archaeological excavations on Lenggong Valley.

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The wall-length illustration on display at the gallery depicts a daily scene of the prehistoric human community around Gua Gunung Runtuh in Bukit Kepala Gajah, based on archaeological findings in the area, dating as far back as 11,000 years ago.



Visitors feel the cool water from the Geosite Blue Spring Well at Kampung Chepor Lenggong, in Lenggong Valley.