

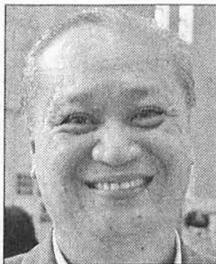
# Prof: Tap geologists for Geopark guides role

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KOTA KINABALU:

While moves are being made to get some areas of Mount Kinabalu Park under Sabah Parks recognised globally as a "Geopark", efforts towards training new specialised Geopark guides should be done.



Candidates for this very specialised field could be sought from geology graduates of local universities as not all want or are keen to go into the oil and gas sector or even being a geologist in academia or careerwise.

"Geotourism' is the new ecotourism and have much to offer BIMP-EAGA communities."

Expressing this view, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) geologist Professor Dr Felix Tongkul (pic) revealed that there are over 25 high value geo-tourism spots in Sabah, some of them are located at unprotected areas, and which may soon be lost if no effort is made to protect them.

"Sabah has many geo-tourism spots that have remained relatively unexplored for promotion as a tourism product," he said.

"Virtually all places have potential for geotourism. People live on land and the earth's landforms are many and as varied as the processes that formed them.

"Each part of the earth has its own 'sense of place' and 'story of formation'. In geotourism this can be 'unlocked' through interpretation."

He emphasised that appropriate interpretation of geosites is the bridge between understanding and conservation.

"Sound interpretation is central to 'engaging' tourists at a geosite and providing them with a quality experience.

"It is through such an experience that tourists will then move from understanding to action.

"In order for geotourism to become fully sustainable, we must first understand the resource base.

"Research is needed on the impacts of tourists on the abiotic landscape so we can move from qualitative to quantitative understandings," Prof Felix explained.

"The strong European Geoparks alliance will continue to underpin the growth of geoparks globally."

He is confident that the 'Geopark' brand will become more recognised eventually becoming like the World Heritage Sites.

"Geoparks will be keenly sought after by governments attracted to their sustainable tourism futures.

"A key characteristic of geotourism is that while it is based on geological features it also provides benefits for local communities.

"Local people must be given the opportunity to be included in geotourism development on their lands.

"Partnership of local peoples and geotourism operators are working well in a number of countries," he said.

"Geotourism will continue to grow rapidly and gain an even greater share of mainstream tourism.

"Its growth is predicted on environmental sensitivity, community well-being and local economic benefits.

Prof Dr Felix Tongkul said Batu Tulug Limestone in Kinabatangan with iron wood coffins high up on the cliff. Goman-tong Limestone with cave in Sukau, Tip of Borneo, Pulau Tiga with its mud volcanoes are some examples other than Kinabalu Park as Geopark attractions.

"Geotourism's growth will generate more local jobs and 'new' income for BIMP-EAGA communities.

"The key to capitalising on geotourism's growth is to identify local 'geo' products, gain community support to develop them for tourism, and then introduce smart marketing.

Prof Felix said sustainability underpins

all tourism development today including geotourism.

"Sustainability means being economically viable, community beneficial, and environmentally responsible."

Sustainability is only achieved through appropriate planning and management, he said.

"Besides promoting understanding of nature, geotourism has a strong educative component in which geoscientific knowledge is communicated to the public.

"This is accomplished through protected and interpreted geosites, museums, information centres, trails, guided tours, school class excursions, popular literature, maps, educational materials and displays with seminars etc.," Prof Felix said.

According to him, the study of geotourism also fosters scientific geological and landscape research in appreciation of nature.

"Geotourism fosters a connection with the earth so that people begin to feel part of the earth's abiotic landscape, in much the same way as they are attracted to its biotic components."

This is accomplished through interactive interpretation and education which involves both the tourist (guest) as well as the local people or community (host), he said.

Hence, Prof Felix called for the authority to introduce Geopark Guide Certification. He said many expeditions or field trips organised or participated by him attracted many participants and continuous requests, that he had to reject as he is a full time academician teaching at UMS.

"Geotour Guides should be certified to ensure high standards of the communication of geoscientific knowledge to visitors. And perhaps they can be called 'Geopark Rangers'" he hoped.

Sabah Parks is working towards the nomination of Kinabalu Park and its surrounding areas to be called 'Kinabalu Geopark', according to the State Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment.