

Malayan Nature Journal

Foreword:

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This Special Issue of Malayan Nature Journal (MNJ) confirms the national importance, as a resource of geodiversity and biodiversity, of the Batu Caves karstic limestone massif and the caves within and around it. For many thousands of years, people in Malaysia have approached limestone hills and caves with respect and awe. In Sarawak, Gua Subis (the ‘Great Cave’) is the largest of several caves in the catchment of the River Niah, that were occupied, for long or short periods from 40,000 years ago (Barker, 2013). Like many other Malaysian caves, Niah Great Cave became an important cemetery during the Neolithic era (the New Stone Age). In Kelantan, Gua Cha was also chosen in the Neolithic period as a special place for the respectful burial of departed individuals and their prized possessions (Tweedie, 1940). Altogether, in Peninsular Malaysia 45 caves of archaeological importance were recognised by Peacock (1965). Batu Caves was among these, first investigated for archaeological potential some 70 years ago by Williams-Hunt (1951, 1952). This latest Special Issue of MNJ, asserts that, through zooarchaeological research, the complex of caves at Batu still retains value in providing insight into past changes in the local fauna over a long time period. Nevertheless, there is also an alarming warning: that opportunities for investigation and study have been hugely compromised by the removal of original cave floors and by the impact of encroaching development on known fossil sites in peripheral locations.

Malaysian caves are not respected solely as temporary shelters, or quiet refuges for funereal purposes. Interest focuses on their teeming wildlife, in many cases specialised forms (Bullock, 1965). This rich biodiversity is not a new phenomenon. In the early 1800s, the Great Cave at Niah was rediscovered by three intrepid travellers from Bintulu. A traditional rhyming narrative poem (*sya’ir*) has related their amazement at the throng of ever-circling cave swiftlets: *‘Berjalan ia orang bertiga, hairan sangat memandang gua; lemah sudah badan dan nyawa. Burung pun banyak dating semua. Burung pun datang berulang-berulang. ‘Apa dibuat didalamnya lubang? Ke laut ke darat berulang-ulang’* (Mera’ee, 2001). The diversity of the rich cavernicole fauna of Batu Caves, vertebrate and invertebrate, as elucidated by members of the 2019 Expedition, is presented in the pages of this MNJ Special Issue, in greater detail than in any previous publication. The combined effort of all participants has set a new standard for investigation and achievement.

Clues to the origin of Malaysian caves are provided by their topography, typically – in towering limestone karst like Batu Caves – ancient flow channels (Gobbett, 1965). The external surface of the limestone outcrop also provides important habitat, a feature which was thoroughly investigated by the authors who have contributed to this Special Issue. Malaysian limestone outcrops are ecologically isolated in the wider landscape, and the pioneer work of the late Michael Tweedie (1940) discovered a high level of endemism among snails. J. K. Foon and M. E. Marzuki, in this Special Issue, have confirmed that, of 38 native species of snail, eight are endemic to the Batu Caves limestone – and occur nowhere else! Regrettably, almost as many introduced alien species of snail (seven) are also present. This exciting, but also threatening information is paralleled by the botanical survey. The botanists have tallied rare native species, dependent on the unique habitat of the karst outcrop. Yet again, the threat to this significant Malaysian natural resource by introduced aliens is identified.

Cumulatively, the message of this Special Issue is that the Batu Caves karst outcrop, and the caves within and around it, undoubtedly constitute an outstanding nature monument. For many years, aware of the importance of this site, the Malaysian Nature Society has a commendable history of striving for its security. The cessation of quarrying was a distinct achievement. That operation was not only injurious to the natural history, but was also a health hazard for the residents of local housing.

At a national scale, the proximity to the capital city, Kuala Lumpur, should be a positive asset. The site has become culturally important to the Malaysian Hindu community, and is a popular tourist attraction. These features need not be detrimental to management for geodiversity and biodiversity conservation. With good intentions and considerate implementation, mutually beneficial outcomes could be ensured. This Special Issue of MNJ is not the first publication dedicated to Malaysian caves, and specially to Batu Caves.

The concluding message is clear: that, surmounting all other features, the Batu Caves karst outcrop is of paramount scientific importance and national significance for its cave ecosystem and unique interior and exterior animal and plant biodiversity, which includes many rare and/or endemic organisms. I hope all readers will support the movement for perpetual protection. The geodiversity and biodiversity of Batu Caves deserves be cherished as an unequalled natural asset for Negeri Selangor Darul Ehsan and, at a national level, for all Malaysians, for all time. This commendable multi-authored Special Issue of MNJ- Volume 75(1) March 2023, provides ample justification for long-term legal protection for the majestic limestone monument of Batu Caves.

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