

Geo tourism another new product in Sabah

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KOTA KINABALU: Given the global trend of developing UNESCO global geoparks, Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment, Christina Liew is optimistic that geo tourism is the way forward as yet another new tourism product for Sabah in the coming years.

She said: "We don't have to look far as the proposed Kinabalu Geopark is just at our doorstep. My ministry, through Sabah Parks, is on track to get the Geopark recognised as a National Geopark Site (Malaysia) prior to being declared as a UNESCO Global Geopark Site".

Christina, who is also a Deputy Chief Minister, has given her blessing for the ultimate realisation of the proposed Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark, describing it as a new concept of tourism. In this regard, she has directed the Ministry's Permanent Secretary Datu Rosmadi Datu Sulai to prepare a Cabinet Paper for submission to the State Cabinet for consideration and approval.

Dubbed "Aspiring Kinabalu Geopark", the proposed Kinabalu Geopark area covers the entire Kinabalu Park area, and the whole or part of the Districts of Ranau, Kota Belud and Kota Marudu. Kinabalu Park as a UNESCO World Heritage Site has an area of 75,370 hectares.

"I am happy this is becoming a phenomenon for Sabah. Let's go for it - a declaration for Kinabalu Geopark to be a UNESCO Global Geopark. After all, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is encouraging nations to protect and preserve their cultural and natural heritage which have outstanding universal value of biodiversity.

"Why Kinabalu Park, one may ask. Basically, it is a source of geological heritage for Malaysia in general and Sabah in particular. We want to conserve this for the present and future generations not only for its ecological functions but also for education, recreation



Liew (seated centre), flanked by Dr Ibrahim (right) and Dr Felix, with district officers and government officials at the ministry's conference room.

and economic development purposes.

"Having a Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark Site will put Sabah on the world map and boost tourism growth. It will also bring socio-economic benefits to local communities involved in the Kinabalu Geopark Initiative.

"This can be achieved through creating jobs and participating in tourism-related entrepreneurial activities," she said after a meeting with officials from the Sabah Parks, Department of Minerals and Geoscience Malaysia, Sabah, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS).

Among the key personnel present were Sabah Parks Director Dr Jamili Nais who is Chairman of the Aspiring Kinabalu Geopark Technical Committee, UKM Prof Emeritus Dr Ibrahim Komoo, UMS geologist Prof Dr Felix Tongkul, Sabah Parks Assistant Director (International Relations), Ludi Apin, and Principal Geoscience Officer Jenneth Cyril who represented the Director of Minerals and Geoscience Malaysia, Sabah, Mohd Yusop Ramli.

The birth of Mt Kinabalu was the culmination of geological processes in western Sabah which began about 40 million years ago.

Geologically, Kinabalu Park is a granite intrusion formed 15 million years ago and thrust

upward one million years ago by tectonic movements (that is, movements of the structural geology of the earth's crust) and shaped by forces that continue to define its landscape.

Christina commended the key stakeholders (including Sabah Parks (Lead Agency), Department of Minerals and Geoscience Malaysia, Sabah, UKM and UMS) for having laid the preparatory groundwork for the proposed Kinabalu Geopark since 2014. "I know it takes a lot of hard work, determination and patience."

Briefing the minister, Prof Dr Ibrahim, a geologist who was responsible for introducing the "UNESCO Global Geopark" label to Malaysia, said a UNESCO Global Geopark has three main elements.

"Firstly, it is a single and unified geographical area. Secondly, it has sites and landscapes of international geological significance. Thirdly, it must be managed in a holistic manner by offering protection, education and sustainable development.

"Geo tourism does not mean geology alone. Here, we look at geological, biological and cultural aspects together so that we provide information to the tourists and give them a complete picture of the history of the geopark," he explained.

An international expert on UNESCO Global Geoparks, Prof Dr Ibrahim stressed that

a geopark uses its geological heritage in connection with all other aspects of the area's natural and cultural heritage to enhance awareness and understanding of key issues facing society.

These include ecological hazards, climate change, environmental issues and sustainable development.

"In other words, we would like to see geological heritage, cultural heritage and biological heritage being examined together to resolve current issues."

He said an equally important point is that a geopark gives local people a sense of pride in their region and strengthens their identification with the area.

"On average, the right size for a geopark is between 1,000 and 3,000 sq km. But not every area can be developed as a geopark. For geopark development, the area must be a source of geological heritage. It must prove its international value. It is to be developed for the benefit of communities living within the geopark and co-managed by all stakeholders. It is not something difficult.

"It happens that Kinabalu Park has such value and so does the Tawau Hills Park which has potential to be declared as a UNESCO Global Geopark. However, if the communities are not interested, we cannot develop any geopark because this is a bottom-up approach, and not top-

down," said the Vice-President of the Global Geoparks Network Association who served as Vice-Chairman of the UNESCO Global Geoparks Council for the last two years.

The Council manages 140 UNESCO global geoparks in 38 countries (including Malaysia) in six continents.

"We hope we will have Kinabalu Park as a UNESCO Global Geopark in the next two years."

Enlightening the minister, Dr Jamili said the proposed Kinabalu Geopark would be registered as a National Geopark with the National Committee on Geopark (of which he is a member) prior to submission to UNESCO for it to be declared as a Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark.

"This National Committee is the focal point for us to submit our documents to UNESCO for the proposed declaration. If successful, it will become the second such geopark in Malaysia after Langkawi UNESCO Global Geopark which was established in 2007."

Under Sabah Parks Strategic Plan (2015-2025), he said Sabah Parks was committed to having a world-class management of Parks of Sabah by 2025.

"We are getting there and among the indicators are a World Heritage Site status for Kinabalu Park (since December 2, 2000) and the Crocker Range which was declared a Biosphere Reserve on June 12, 2014. Currently, these are UNESCO-recognised sites in Sabah," he said in his presentation on UNESCO Conservation Programmes in Sabah.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site is a place (examples, a forest, mountain, lake, desert, monument, building, complex or city) that is listed by the UNESCO as of special cultural or physical significance.

Ludi informed Christina that a dossier on "Aspiring Kinabalu Geopark" was being prepared for submission to UNESCO.

"We expect the proposed Geopark to be recognised as a National Geopark early next year. We will then submit the documents to UNESCO possibly by the end of next year. It is anticipated that the Kinabalu Geopark will be declared as a UNESCO Global Park Site by early 2020," he said.

Meanwhile, Kota Marudu District Officer Arnold Joibi, Ranau District Officer Hj Faimin Kamin and Kota Belud Assistant District Officer pledged full support for Kinabalu Geopark's nomination as a National Geopark and a UNESCO Global Geopark.

There are 27, 17 and 23 tourism sites in Ranau (geological, historical and nature tourism spots), Kota Marudu (historical and nature tourism spots) and Kota Belud (historical and nature tourism spots).

Some 83 communities in the three districts were consulted on the proposed Kinabalu Geopark move, and based on feedback, the people showed enthusiasm and support for the Initiative.

"Aspiring Kinabalu Geopark" was mooted in 2006 and activated in 2014 as an Initiative of the Director of Sabah Parks.

Its Board of Directors (BOD) agreed to nominate Kinabalu Park and its surroundings for declaration as a Geopark.

At the same time, the International Relations Division was established in Sabah Parks to look into the nomination.

In 2015, the Aspiring Kinabalu Geopark Technical Committee was formed comprising Dr Jamili, Prof Dr Ibrahim, Prof Dr Felix and Mohd Yussop Ramli (Director of Department of Minerals and Geoscience Malaysia, Sabah).

This was followed by the formation of a Task Force made up of representatives from Sabah Parks and the Department for the task of carrying out field surveys to identify and determine the boundary of the proposed Geopark.