

A geopark to preserve limestone hills

They are a part of Malaysia's geological heritage

DRIVING along the highways and trunk roads in Malaysia can be breathtaking, particularly if one loves nature. From the magnificent green jungles of one of the oldest rainforests in the world to waterfalls, there are loads of natural wonders to behold. One of these is clearly visible from the North-South Expressway near Ipoh — the limestone hills of Kinta Valley. They come in all shapes and sizes, and many wonder at just how these hills were shaped by forces unseen aeons ago. Ipoh is home to karst outcrops and craggy jungle-topped limestone monoliths. Most of them are cloaked in virgin jungle and rich in flora and fauna — home to serows, monkeys, birds, orchids and ferns. But Ipoh residents and those who frequently pass these natural wonders would have noticed over the years that many of the hills have slowly disappeared, their shapes changed not by natural forces. Sadly, these hills have been exploited by quarry operators to extract limestone, marble, lime and aggregate for use in road-building and the construction of houses.

The tragedy on Monday, where two people were killed when a landslide struck a villa at The Banjaran Hotsprings Retreat, is a strong and formidable reason why there should be a stop to the clearing of limestone hills. Over the years, there have been many landslides, some major and some minor landslips. But they are all signs that we have interfered with nature. Reportedly, the oldest limestone hills, formed about 450 million years ago, appear to be in the Klang Valley, Kinta Valley, parts of Langkawi and the Perak-Thailand border. The younger ones (about 220 million years old) are around the Pahang-Kelantan border. The Kinta Valley is the largest limestone geological formation, stretching from Tapah in the south to Lintang in the north with Ipoh in the middle.

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Environmentalists are concerned that if nothing is done, Perak may be known as the "State of Flattened Hills". The question playing on their minds is whether the limestone hills are preserved and gazetted as protected areas under the National Parks Act 1980 and Wildlife Protection Act 1972. They say "the lack of conservation efforts has resulted in the hills being destroyed by uncontrolled or poorly managed excavations by developers and opportunists". What it has also done is destroy the natural habitat of many species of flora and fauna. The importance of preserving the hills for recreational and educational purposes has been acknowledged in the Draft Structure Plan (Amendment) of the Ipoh City Council 1998-2000. The hills are a part of Malaysia's geological heritage that is worth preserving. Nature lovers have repeatedly called on the Perak government to protect the limestone formations and gazette them as forest reserves to save them from quarry activities. They say — and rightly so — the ecological, scientific and heritage legacy of the limestone hills must be preserved.

In 2013, it was reported that the Perak government had plans to turn the limestone hills into a tourist attraction. It had proposed to build a geopark, a Unesco-designated area containing one or more sites of particular geological importance, aimed at conserving the hills' geological heritage and promoting public awareness. It's similar to the Guangxi Resource National Geopark in Guilin, China, famed for its colourful rock formations. Should not the proposal be pursued before Perak loses all its limestone hills?