



## REFLECTIONS ON TWO INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES April 2010

– Jay Anderson



The boat trip to the karst on Palau  
Dayang Bunting. Photo: Jay Anderson

During 2009 I decided that it was too good an opportunity to miss attending the two International Conferences to be held in Malaysia – so close to Australia – The 4th International UNESCO Conference on Geoparks and the 2nd Global Geotourism Conference. The Geoparks Conference was held on Langkawi from the 9-15 April. Titled 'Global Geopark – the natural way forward' the conference attracted around 500 people from all over the world. I attended in my role as chair of the IUCN Specialist Group regarding Caves and Karst and to present a paper in the Geo-heritage Conservation Section of the conference.

The conference itself was located in the south of the island at Awana Porto Malai – a lovely resort with spectacular views across to large karst cliffs and islands. There were so many interesting papers it is difficult to share all I heard. The keynote presentations were excellent and there were several at the start of each day.

- Communicating geoheritage: an essential tool to build a strong geopark brand (Patrick McKeever)
- Community involvement in Geoparks – from participation to ownership (Claudia Eckhardt)
- Working with children and young people in Geoparks (Chris Woodley-Stewart)
- Quality management in Geoparks (Nickolas Zouros)
- Tourism and Geoparks (Ross Dowling)
- Geopark and Regional sustainable development (Ibrahim Komoo)
- UNESCO Geoparks activities and new aspiring Geoparks (Margarete Patzak and Robert Missotten)
- Geoscientific Forum for integrity of geoheritage within geoparks (Mohd Shafeea Leman)
- The Geoheritage conservation and development of the World Heritage sites and Global Geoparks – a case study in China (Zhao Xun) and

- geodiversity as a basis for Geoconservation, Geotourism and Geoparks (Murray Gray)

The conference included three days of paper presentations – a wide variety of papers in 3 concurrent sessions. In relation to karst and caves, the following areas were discussed:

- Vietnam – karst resources and Geopark development in the mountain karst of north Vietnam (Dong Van Karst Plateau, Ha Giang Province)
- Korea – Jeju Island Geopark
- Malaysia – Gunung Sewu karst
- China – Fangshan karst geopark

The Geopark exploration day (field trip) was very interesting and well organised. A number of large buses arrived to transport delegates all over the island to participate in exploring the 'geolandscapes' and the 'socio-cultural' aspects of Langkawi. Ross and I participated in the geolandscape exploration, which involved a visit to the Kilim Karst Geoforest park. We met at Tanjung Rhu (in the north of the island) for a truly memorable experience in a small boat through the mangroves.

Our local guides outlined the significance of the ecosystem and we were able to observe wild eagles, macaques, monitor lizards and crabs. Our boat wound its way through the karst landscape with amazing views of the limestone. We visited a local fish farm (floating in the river at the 'Hole in the wall'). We then visited Gua Kalawar (Gua = cave) where visitors go through two small caves (on a boardwalk).

The larger of the caves had a colony of bats and there were many macaques closeby the caves. This was a simple and effective cave experience (thru-trip) for the visitors. The boat trip then continued through the mangroves and we went through Gua Buaya (a natural tunnel where the river flows through a limestone hill). We then arrived at the open sea and travelled along the edge of the island – watching the sunset and enjoying the magnificent karst. This was an excellent way to experience the Geopark and it was very scenic!

While on Langkawi we were not able to visit the Machinchang Mountain and cablecar as it was under repair – but we did hire a 'motobike' which made exploring the island easier. We also went on a local 'island hopping' tour visiting the karst islands to the south. One memory is of visiting Palau Dayang Bunting (the island of the pregnant maiden) and Tasik Dayang Bunting (a large lake/doline on the island). I have never seen so many people swimming in such a small area. We did have some concerns about visitor impacts on the natural environment while on the half day boat trip.

On another day we went on a Canopy Adventure (air-trekking adventure tour through the rainforest canopy. We really enjoyed this rainforest experience – although unfortunately the large flying fox was not in operation due to a nasty wasp nest in the tree...

Ross and I really enjoyed the experience of having our own transport and being able to visit parts of the island in our own time. It was great to be able to see the local lifestyle and to spend some time on Langkawi.



Entrance of Gua Kelawar. Photo: Ross Anderson.

We then flew to Mulu for the Geotourism Conference titled 'Making Unique Landforms Understandable'. This was held at the Royal Mulu Resort – located on the banks of the river and adjacent to the National Park/World Heritage Area. The conference was smaller and more intimate than other International conferences. There were two days of paper presentations separated by a field-trip day.

There were a number of memorable and excellent papers. I really enjoyed the keynote presentation by Brian Clark (*Geotourism in Protected Areas*), which was a timely reminder to everyone about balancing tourism needs with visitor impacts and the need for keeping visitors safe but also to protect and manage the environment effectively. Other presentations that were interesting and memorable were about *Visitor Risks in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park* by Lisa King, *Sustainable Tourism Development in the North Pennines* by Chris Woodley-Stewart and just *Simply being there* by John Watson. This latter paper is published elsewhere in this Journal.

It was also great to see karst represented in papers from Iran and Oman. It was my first trip to Mulu (and also gave us an opportunity to familiarise ourselves with the climate, rainforest and caves before the ACKMA week). The daily rain was refreshing and we were impressed with the Park guides. On our first day we experienced the bat flight – which was amazing. While I participated in the Geotourism Conference, Ross visited the Park and enjoyed the 'Mulu experience'.

On the field trip day, the group visited Deer Cave and then went to Wind Cave and Clearwater Cave. It was great to see caves managed so well. Unfortunately Ross was unable to attend the field-trip day due to the high expense of conference day fees.

The conference went by all too fast and before too long we were on the plane – headed off to Miri and to meet up with all our ACKMA friends.

