

Sarawak Heritage Society renews call for a specialized heritage unit in the face of the destruction of the landscape at Fort Alice



This heritage site now stands stark and unnatural in its surroundings

The Sarawak Heritage Society is adding its voice to the cries of outrage over the unnecessary felling of trees at the heritage site of Fort Alice in Sri Aman. The setting of the newly restored Fort was wantonly desecrated by the downing of 11 of the 13 trees standing on the site, in what was described as a ‘collective decision’ by Sarawak Museum representatives and the Resident’s Office in Sri Aman. However, it has come to light that the recommendations of the lead conservation architect on the project, Mike Boon, were expressly disregarded in this case. Such extreme action, taken by a small group of stakeholders in the project, has caused shock and dismay in the local community who took immediately to social media to express their horror. Therefore, the Society is renewing its calls for the State Government to create a specialized heritage unit tasked with co-ordinating a multi-agency approach to heritage conservation in the State.

The Society’s President, Karen Shepherd, said: “The existing ordinances that govern protection of the state’s antiquities and cultural heritage are hopelessly outdated. Even worse, they are rarely, if ever, enforced. It is time for a complete overhaul.” In this respect, the State Government is showing itself to be out of step with governments worldwide and across Asia who are now putting in

The original setting – shaded by the landscape



frameworks to protect their cultural and natural heritage for future generations. She pointed to common practice both outside Malaysia and within, notably in Penang and Malacca, where a specialized heritage unit had been established to coordinate heritage policy and protection.

In the case of Sarawak, protection for heritage sites still falls under the purview of the Sarawak Museum. The Sarawak Cultural Heritage Ordinance (1993) provides that the Director in charge of heritage is empowered to determine the limits of historical monuments or historical sites (Sect. 21.2). Felling of trees on land that is part of a historical site or in its immediate neighbourhood requires permission of an authority entrusted with heritage management (Sect. 22). Shepherd stated: "The position of this authority remains unclear. The Museum have an enormous range of roles to play and it is unrealistic, in this modern age, to expect them to co-ordinate and supervise the number of agencies that heritage protection involves. Even worse, how can we expect the Museum to oversee enforcement? It is simply not their area of expertise."

She went on to say: "It seems as though these kinds of decisions are taken at random without any proper consultation of an appropriate range of agencies or even a systematic basis for decision making in place. How can we leave such significant decisions involving a RM5 million project and the heritage of an entire community up to the whim of a handful of workers in the Resident's office of Sri Aman? It is inconceivable that they should have felt it appropriate to act so extremely against the wishes of the conservation expert on the project. The damage done to the setting of this historic site will not be put right for decades at the very least."



Early reports on this incident suggested that this was a 'miscommunication' between departments. However, it was later revealed as a 'collective decision' by the Resident's Office and Museum representatives. But, it has further come to light that Mike Boon, put on the project for his experience and knowledge in the field of architectural conservation, expressly requested for one particular tree to be felled for the protection of the public while the others were to be trimmed. These recommendations were countermanded by the felling of almost all the trees on the site, laughably barring the one particular tree identified by Boon!

SHS president, Karen Shepherd, further stated that: "These events in Sri Aman highlight a breakdown in the system. The natural thing to do when the system is not functioning is to fix the problem with the

The size of the felled trees gives an indication of their age

system.” She went on to say that it was a similar state of affairs that had allowed the unsympathetic renovations of the summerhouse in the museum gardens, for example, stripping it of key heritage features in yet another case of ‘one hand not knowing what the other was doing.’

Therefore, the Society are asking the Chief Minister to put preservation of heritage on his much welcome new agenda of reforms. Renowned to be a great student of history, SHS calls on him to send a clear message to his various departments that the preservation of the State’s heritage is indeed a priority by instating a heritage unit that will be tasked with its protection and giving it the teeth to function effectively.



The scene of destruction