KOTA KINABALU: The prospect of starting archaeo-tourism in Sabah is good and the state government will be looking seriously into the proposal, Tourism, Culture and Environment Minister Datuk Masidi Manjun said.

Commenting on the proposal by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Global Archeology Research Centre director Professor Dr Mokhtar Saidin, Masidi said there are tourists who are interested in learning about the start of civilization in Sabah.

"The archeo-tourism is a very good idea. In fact, we will seriously look into it. There has been a move but I suppose now with all these latest findings, there is a need for some urgency to turn it into another of our tourism products," he said.

"I believe there are enough tourists who are keen to go into this sort of package. What is needed is a smart package to be offered by the tour companies and it should be a niche product in a sense that there are only specific people interested in this sort of package," he said.

Travel agents must strive on creating a niche market package, he added.

"More importantly, it is for the preservation of the site. When people see that you can make money out of the site they will make sure that they protect it," he said when met after officiating at the 'Arkeologi Di Malaysia' (Archaeology in Malaysia) exhibition at the State Museum here yesterday.

According to Dr Mokhtar, USM has been carrying out archaeological studies in Sabah for the past 20 years and during that time, have made very important findings in terms of how far back the state and Borneo have been occupied by humans.

One of the most important findings by USM and the State Museum Department was the artifact in Mansuli Valley in Lahad Datu which dates back to 235,000 years ago, he said, adding that this shows humans have settled in Sabah even before Niah Caves in Sarawak.

"The joint research by USM and State Museum also uncovered artifacts and human teeth which are estimated to be about 16,000 years old in Balembangan Cave on Barngi in Kudat. There are also cave drawings there which are believed to be the oldest in Malaysia," he said.

"Now the west of Sabah are revealing more archaeological sites among which are in Penampang. The exciting thing about the find is that the data we compiled automatically contributes to the world archaeological find data," he said.

Dr Moktar, who pointed out that Sabah's location being very important in terms of archaeology for the country, suggested that the State Museum set up an archaeology curator so that more can be done.

Meanwhile, State Museum Department director Joanna Kitingan said that the exhibition would be held for three months after which it will be set up in Sandakan.