KOTA KINABALU: Sabah has re-written the annals of history, with the discovery that humans first existed in the State and not Sarawak. Until now, history had recorded human civilisation as having first lived in this region at the Niah Caves of Sarawak about 40,000 years ago.

But a team of scientists has now discovered that humans first inhabited the Mansuli valley (Tapak Lembah Mansuli) of Lahad Datu some 235,000 years ago.

State Tourism, Culture and Environment Minister, Datuk Masidi said research carried out by the Global Archaeology Research Centre of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang, have found evidence that man first inhabited the Mansuli valley at the time. Thus far, tools used by humans during that period have been found.

He said Centre Director Prof. Dr Mokhtar Saidin's revelation on the findings of his team, also indirectly showed that there is much to be tapped on the history of the State.

"With this new information, the world archaeological records are altered," he said, adding that this new information puts the State's historical value up a notch.

Previous records indicated that the first sign of human civilisation in Sabah dated back to 27,000 years ago.

"This is a ground for us to do more research in future, and for this the State Government will continue to assist the university and its team any way possible to do their research here," Masidi said. He said this while officiating at the 'Archaeology in Malaysia' exhibition, which will be held for the next three months at the State Museum on Monday.

Adding to that, he said the proposal by Mokhtar to create an archaeo-tourism industry would be seriously looked into.

"Actually, there are moves aiming towards this area, but I think with the finding we have today, there is an urgency for the sector to be introduced, but of course we need to find the right people. This is not just about the tourism part where tour operators need to come up with smart packages for tourists, but more towards conserving the areas and artifacts available," Masidi pointed out.

In this respect, he said it was very important that people, especially the natives do not simply sell off their artifacts, which they may see as valueless or spiritually dangerous.

He said there are some people, especially from the interior who are still too superstitious, and are more than happy to get rid of so called spirit residing vases (tajau), for free than to keep it due to the value of the artifact.

"Please don't do this. Don't go selling everything you have because our artifacts are actually going out of the country to private collectors," he stated. On other developments, Mokhtar explained that Mansuli, apart from being the first dwelling of humans, is also the oldest in terms of cultural development, since 235,000 years to 3,000 years ago.

"Other locations such as the Skeleton Hill Archaeology heritage site in Semporna has also been found to be the place for the manufacturing of the biggest porcelain in South East Asia. "Research found that maritime trade had started over 3,000 years ago there," he said, adding that there is still a lot that could be discovered especially in West Coast and interior of Sabah.

In this sense, State Museum Director, Joanna Kitingan said the exhibition here and also in Sandakan soon is a good platform for students and the public to understand more about the State and country's prehistoric events.

"In our collaboration with the State and USM, we're upgrading our knowledge on archaeology," she added.

The exhibition features artifacts found all over the country, among them a skeleton of the 'Perak Man' and other artifacts found in various locations of early human civilisation.