THE toothy grin of a crocodile is the first thing greeting visitors at the Sultan Alam Shah Museum in the city centre of Shah Alam.

Villagers had found the carcass of a 70-year-old crocodile on the banks of the Kuala Selangor river. Called Sang Bedal Bukit Belimbing, the creature was fearsome in life and death.

The carcass was surrendered to the Department of Wildlife and National Parks who buried it. The Sultan of Selangor later ordered its exhumation. A sack and plastic garbage bag were found in the croc's stomach. The official cause of death stated the croc died because it could no longer hunt. But pollution is the most likely suspect death of this mighty beast.

Sang Bedal happens to be Mohd Faizul Fitri Musli's favourite exhibit. Mohd Faizul is chief executive officer of the Malay Custom and Heritage Corporation of Selangor (Padat).

The agency founded in 2009 was appointed to take over from the Board of Selangor Museum. Its job covers exploration, conservation, maintenance, research and publication of works of Malay culture and tradition in Selangor. Part of the job requirement is for the boss to have a nose for intriguing things.

The museum houses exhibits ranging from swords from the Portuguese invasion and specially fashioned spittoons for the aristocratic class, to pieces of cloth that look like they are no big deal, until you read the labels and find out this may be the last piece hanging around.

"Let's put it this way. You don't have to be a historian to like history. I like to see the objects in the museum as lessons from the past. In life, you will face many challenges and failures. Within history are the lessons of how our forefathers overcame them," said Mohd Faizul.

At the Selangor state-level celebrations to mark International Museum Day, Mohd Faizul said museums have a role in making a history buff of the man on the street. That's why they must bring history to life.

"We must look at ways of commercialising culture and tradition, promote it. This is important," he said.

He said there was no point in putting an artefact on show only for it to be forgotten when the visitor reaches home.

"We'll have to think out of the box," he said.

To keep up with the times, it is not enough to just focus on artefacts alone. Food, fashion and dance are equally rich in historical value.

This explains the children’s art contest. And the mock wedding ceremony where gifts of bunga telur were given to the VIPs. Plus the komang troupe and the silt show. They were part of the museum's colourful display on that special day.

Guest of honour Selangor state executive councillor Datuk Dr Ahmad Yunus Hairi was also treated to a nasi minyak lunch, a traditional meal at weddings in Selangor.

"The public loves this. Take the bunga telur for example. At Malay weddings today, you get goodie bags. We want people to know what is the original," said Mohd Faizul.

An art contest, results of which were impressive, was an indirect

Preserving our colourful heritage

Crocodile skeleton among intriguing artefacts on display at Selangor museum

story and photos by GRACE CHEN

gracechen@thestar.com.my
of exposing the younger generation to history. Hang Tuah, the legendary warrior and wayang kulit sets were popular subjects. Mohd Faizul says funding was the challenges of running a museum. Besides money for the acquisition of artefacts, money has channelled to building maintenance at Sultan Alam Shah.

Mohd Faizul says the lack of money is not the problem. "We need to be creative and paste with the ways to exhibit the artefacts and in our research," said Mohd Faizul.

Farhani Shamsudin, corporate communications for Padat exhibits plenty of both. She used to work for the Museum of Islamic Arts. "I like to upload pictures of museum objects on my Facebook page. Give information on when it was made, what its function is. I get this idea from the British Museum," she said.

"If you don't know history then you don't know who you are." Sirih junjung is a symbol of welcome in Malay culture. Such traditional meanings can be taught by museums.

2 This batik shirt was once worn by the King of Malay Traditional Songs, Tan Sri SM Salim.

3 Ahmad Fairos, a silat teacher, shows off the Gayong Maarifat style of silat.

4 Dato' Dr Ahmad Yusuf Hairi says museums have a role in making the public more aware of prudence and sustainability.

5 The skeleton of a crocodile believed to be 60 to 70 years old. Its carcass was found floating in the Kuala Selangor river. Researchers say it died of old age but the contents of its stomach — a sack and a plastic bag — reveal pollution might have played a part.

6 A pair of Portuguese swords at Sultan Alam Shah Museum reminds visitors of a time when our country was not our own.

7 Young visitors get a historic view of how a busy street had evolved from the days when bicycles and bullock carts were the main modes of transportation.

8 The kain Imlar created from the ikat style of weaving is no longer in production, a stark reminder of what can happen to our heritage if it is not preserved.

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