Work begins on new NUS museum

Real dinosaur fossils will be among the exhibits when it is ready next year

By TAN DANN WEI
ASSISTANT NEWS EDITOR

MORE than three years after a group of passionate biologists launched an ambitious fund-raising drive to build Singapore’s first standalone natural history museum, they are one giant step closer to fulfilling their dream.

The National University of Singapore drove the first pile for the $40 million purpose-built Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum yesterday, on grounds where the school’s estate office once stood.

When ready in the second half of 2014, the 6,500 sq m, seven-storey “green” building will house not just three real dinosaur fossils, but also a priceless collection of some 500,000 specimens of vertebrates and invertebrates.

It is, in the words of the honorary National Heritage Board chairman, Professor Tommy Koh, “a dream come true”.

Prof Koh, who was the guest of honour at yesterday’s groundbreaking ceremony, recalled how his visits to New York’s Natural History Museum, Washington’s Smithsonian and later the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research (KMBR) had convinced him that Singapore should have a purpose-built museum showcasing South-east Asia’s flora and fauna.

“But I couldn’t get political support,” he said in a speech to 40 guests including former president S R Nathan and Mr Lee Seng Tee, director of donor organisations the Lee Foundation.

Encouraged by his enthusiasm, professors Leo Tan and Peter Ng went knocking on doors to sell this great museum story. Since then, the duo and their team have raised enough money to not only pay for the building, but also buy three 100 million-year-old diplodocus sauropod dinosaurs, two of which are already in storage here. The third is due to be shipped to Singapore by the end of the year.

With the building of the museum under way, the two professors are wasting no time in focusing on their third fund-raising drive – to raise $10 million in endowment for professorships, fellowships and staff costs.

The museum that it is due to replace, the KMBR, is now operating with just two researchers and four curators. It will need to boost the team as the collection grows and the museum moves to its much larger, more public premises. It is looking at hiring at least half a dozen more of such staff, who will also take charge of teaching students.

“We have started the journey, and we’ve reached a part of it,” said Prof Ng, without divulging how much is in the kitty already.