

AITo Update, March 2010: Portrait of a Predator, Converted



This is Pak Jaling. He is 67 years old, and has been here at Bangkiriang since 1981. Bangkiriang is a nesting ground for the endangered maleo bird (*Macrocephalon maleo*)—formerly one of the largest and most active maleo nesting grounds on earth. Bangkiriang lies southwest of the Tompotika peninsula, about 85 miles as the crow flies from the maleo nesting ground where AITo is at work in Taima, Tompotika.

Pak Jaling is not what you would call a conservationist. In fact, it's quite possible that Pak Jaling himself has been responsible for the non-existence of more maleo birds than just about anyone else on earth. Since 1981, Pak Jaling has lived here at Bangkiriang, and made his living taking eggs and trapping adult maleos. Though there have been others as well, Pak Jaling has been the key, the main Maleo Man, the unofficial guardian of

Bangkiriang. He speaks of the old days at Bangkiriang. **“When I came in 1981, and even up through the 1990’s, I could collect over 100 eggs a day here at Bangkiriang—I and others. The beach was black with the birds, everywhere you looked.”**

Over the years, Pak Jaling and the others took their toll on the maleos, taking all eggs they could locate—and many adults as well. The practice continued unabated, despite the fact that the birds received full legal protection in 1990. The eggs were sold, mostly as a luxury item and souvenir, rather like caviar. Eastern Sulawesi acquired a reputation as an excellent place to buy maleo eggs. **Wealthy status-seekers and corrupt government officials commissioned Pak Jaling to collect eggs and live-trap adult birds on their behalf, thinking that a cageful of maleos would make their homes look luxurious.** The birds usually lasted a few weeks or a month before dying, whence with Pak Jaling’s help they were often simply replaced with new wild-caught birds and the cycle repeated. Native forests nearby to Bangkiriang—habitat for the adult birds—were destroyed. **And so, gradually but inexorably, Bangkiriang’s maleos have been disappearing.** Today as we visit, there are but two maleo pairs on the beach, doggedly but fruitlessly scratching out their egg pit. With so few maleos left at Bangkiriang, Pak Jaling now earns most of his living making sugar from palm trees, but he remains here because maleos are his life. Yet, unless things change, within a few more years, the birds will have vanished entirely.



But, mercifully, things are changing. In the last three years, AITo has worked with villagers in Tompotika to protect nesting grounds and reverse the decline of maleos there. Now, with these villagers as converts and maleo advocates, we’re reaching out to others like Pak Jaling in locations beyond Tompotika. Though he admits that he himself has had a direct hand in it, Pak

Jaling mourns the decline of the maleo. Pak Jaling knows more about maleo nesting and development than just about anyone: he knows how they choose the perfect spot to dig their nest pit; he can hold an egg in his hand and know from its feel whether it is viable; he knows how the chicks develop over time, and what they eat; he has spent countless hours watching maleo social interactions. **Pak Jaling loves these birds; he hasn't been their major predator because he wishes them ill, but because until now it was the only way his skills and knowledge of them were valued.** So when we asked him if he'd like to join in an effort to conserve maleos all over Sulawesi—an effort like the one that AITo has pioneered so successfully in Tompotika—he jumped at the chance. With this opportunity, he'll be able to use his knowledge and skills about the maleo in service of their conservation, not their destruction.

So, next week Pak Jaling will join the AITo team on a journey to Manado, North Sulawesi, to attend the **First International Conference on Conservation of the Maleo, March 24-26, 2010.** In 67 years, it's Pak Jaling's first trip beyond the Bangkiriang area. At the conference, a few dozen people—**PhD researchers, common villagers, students, government officials—just about everyone from anywhere in the world who has anything to do with conserving the maleo—will put their heads together to plan Sulawesi-wide steps to save the maleo.** Part of the model and inspiration for these steps will be the actions AITo has already taken in Tompotika—community-based nesting ground protection, widespread public education and awareness campaigns, outreach to governments to support conservation and discourage corruption—and that have brought such excellent results to date. But the maleo will not be saved by protecting it in Tompotika alone, so now it is time to scale up our efforts by joining together with others.



If you add it all up, there is plenty of know-how, and will, and expertise, and love, and—yes, even money—out there to save the maleo everywhere—not just in Tompotika. But we must build the right kind of team to help it happen. At AITo, we're proud to be making sure that the Pak Jalings of the maleo world will be at the table. Next week will be a critical time. Hope and excitement for the future of the maleo are running high, as people from all walks come together on behalf of this remarkable, imperiled bird. Wish us luck!

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