

AITo Update, September 2010: What About Big Blood-thirsty Man-eaters?

There is a school of thinking in conservation which says that the only way to get people to care enough about other animals, forests, natural areas, etc. is to give them (or publicize their) economic value: if people get some direct monetary value from a lake, tree, or critter, then—perhaps—they may care enough to save it. This is held to be truest of all when dealing with large, dangerous carnivores like crocodiles: **unless you want to hunt or farm them for export as shoes and bags, the conventional wisdom goes, then say goodbye to crocodiles—people won't put up with having such dangerous creatures around.**

But in Tompotika, this just ain't so.

Although crocodiles have indeed declined precipitously, and have disappeared from most of the island, in some remote pockets of Sulawesi, Indonesia—including Tompotika—the Indo-Pacific or estuarine crocodile, *Crocodylus porosus*, continues to persist in the wild. Larger populations of this species still remain in New Guinea and Australia, so it is not globally endangered, but it hangs on by only a thread in Sulawesi. But **what does that thread look like? Turns out, it is made of love, not money.**



A Teku fisherman on the crocodile lagoon. Photo: Robin Moore

One of AITo's flagship conservation villages, Teku, hosts two large beautiful brackish-water lagoons, and these lagoons harbor crocodiles. Local people use the lagoons for fishing, they have huts along the banks—and they live at peace with the crocodiles. “We have a pact with these crocodiles,” a local man explains. **“These crocodiles have five fingers, like humans, and that means they are like us. We don't hunt them, and they don't eat us.”** Here in Teku, no one can remember a time when they have hunted or killed their neighbors the crocodiles; nor when the crocodiles have bothered them. “If they had only four fingers, then they might be naughty. But these have five, just like us.”

A few villages away, there is a family which takes this notion of kinship with crocodiles to even



“Twins” Wira and Wirda are the apples of their parents' eyes.

greater lengths. An ancient Southeast Asian tradition holds that, **once in a while, a woman will give birth to twin babies: one a human, and one a crocodile.** When this occurs, the family raises the crocodile as one of their own. However odd that might seem to outsiders, the practice is accepted unquestioningly by locals. Thus, though the sight of wild crocodiles in Tompotika has become quite rare, in this village Wira the crocodile is doted upon but considered otherwise unremarkable in her home. Wira is a 16-year-old crocodile whose human twin sister, Wirda, is also 16 and now attends high school in a neighboring town. The twins' human father supports the family by selling vegetables from a cart, and from whatever other side jobs he can find. According to the parents, the twins were born when the

family lived in a city some distance away, and they were separated at birth, but when she was 9 years old Wira the crocodile missed her family so much that she traveled many miles into the country to find them. **When she reappeared to them, they immediately recognized her as their long-lost twin daughter, and incorporated her right into their family along with their other children,** building a special pool in their kitchen for her use.

Now, Wira sleeps every night either under her parents' bed, or in a special bed they've made for her. In the afternoon, her father feeds her some rice. Then she comes out of her room and makes her way to her pool in the back of the house, where, before she went off to school, her twin sister Wirda would often sit and join her. **At the end of the day, her mother bathes her, the pool is drained for refilling the next day, and she makes her way back to her bedroom to be tucked in for the night.** According to her parents, in the seven years that she's been with them, she has never bitten anyone.



Wira's father feeds her rice, and, once in a while, fish. Photo: Robin Moore



Wira's human mother bathes her every night in her pool in the kitchen. Photo: Bill Yake

This family is far from rich. They have to work hard and scrimp to feed their four human children, let alone a croc as well. And then there is the substantial proportion of their small four-room house that they have devoted to building a pool and other needs for this special member of the family. For all the trouble they go to, **of what "value" is this croc? Talk with these folks, and it is clear that that is not a question that it would ever occur to them to ask.** Wira the croc is a member of their family. They love her, they do whatever is necessary to live with her, and her presence enriches their lives. Call them crazy. Or: perhaps we have a lot to learn from these people.

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