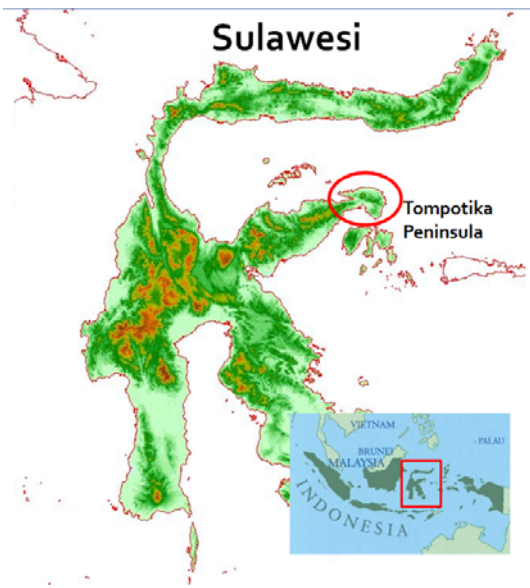


AITo Update January 2011: The Ghost of Tompotika



Sulawesi is really weird. Or it's a biogeographer's paradise, depending on how you look at it. On this 11th-largest island in the world, right in the center of the Indonesian archipelago, almost half the vertebrate species are endemic – that is, found nowhere else in the world. That's because Sulawesi has never been connected to a continental landmass – instead the island is made up of many different parts which were once separate oceanic fragments, shifting over millions of years with the earth's tectonic plates, and eventually bumping into one another to form the oddly-shaped island we see today. Some of those oceanic fragments originated in the Asian region to the west, and others in Australasian region to the east, which has yielded a **completely unique mix of Asian- and Australasian-related flora and fauna on Sulawesi today,**

characterized by pioneers who came from somewhere else and then stayed and evolved. It's weird – unlike anything you'll find anywhere else on earth.

Take mammalian carnivores, for example. In most places in the world, you find the dog (*Canidae*) family (wolves, jackals, foxes, etc.) and/or the cat (*Felidae*) family (tigers, lions, jaguars, lynx). Maybe also bears, weasels, or their relatives. But not Sulawesi! No wild cats, dogs, bears or weasels in Sulawesi; there the largest mammalian carnivores are in the *Viverridae*, or civet family – and who's ever heard of those? Like most of Sulawesi, the civets are weird: you might say they have the body of a weasel, the face of a dog, the movements of a cat. **And the largest of these (4-5 ft long, with the tail) is the Sulawesi Giant Civet, *Macrogalidia musschenbroekii*, which, not surprisingly, is found nowhere else on earth.**

And “found” it is not very often; **hardly anybody is ever lucky enough to see one.** There are only a handful of official records of this very shy, elusive carnivore from various parts of Sulawesi, and some of those are from forests that are now destroyed. **The scientific community knows virtually nothing about its habits, life history, or ecology.** In recent years, efforts to bait and camera-trap this ghostly forest prowler have proved that the civets are indeed still present in some of Sulawesi's forests, but we still know very little about them. What kinds of habitat do they prefer? What is their social system? Do they stay within a home range, or move around? What do they eat most? How many young do they have? How long do the young stay with the mother? No one knows the answers to these questions.



The Ghost of Tompotika, Sulawesi's Giant Civet (*Macrogalidia musschenbroekii*) Photo: Duncan Neville

But if you want to learn as much as you can about the Sulawesi Giant Civet, go talk to local people. In Tompotika, in some areas local people tell us they've never seen them – though they may have seen their more common cousin, the Oriental civet (*Viverra tangalunga*). **But in the more remote villages, folks who spend a lot of time in the forest often have stories to tell of the *sosop onduk*, *pojek anjing*, or *anjing malam* (dog of the night).** Whereas the Oriental civet will come into the village at night to steal chickens, they say, the Giant will not – it keeps to the forest. If you think you glimpse one weaving through the trees at night, in another glance it has disappeared, just like a ghost. If you have snared a pig in the forest, often the Giant Civet will come to pay a visit. **They never hurt people, but they always know what's going on in the forest, and they see us, even though we rarely see them.**

None of us on the AITo team has ever seen a live Giant Civet in the wild. But we're glad to know that they're there, wraith-like and unseen in the forests we're working hard to protect. We hope, some day, that we humans may get to know them better, learning from the insights of local people and scientific studies of the future. Meanwhile, we'll keep working to safeguard the Tompotika Forest Preserve and other places where they dwell. **Though they may appear to us as ghosts who flit through the darkness, silent and mysterious, yet their presence is felt everywhere; as top predators, they are a central and irreplaceable component of this strange and beautiful Sulawesi ecosystem.**

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