

## AITo Update, January 2013: Conservation = Reclaiming Our Identity

Who knew that the humble babirusa could spark all this?

Last November, 2012, the AITo team, including six volunteers from the U.S., AITo staff, and dozens of local Tompotika schoolchildren, spent a week creating two huge, beautiful mural paintings on external



**Taima mural painting. Across the top reads, "Conservation Village Taima"** Photo: Mark Kinney

school walls in Taima and Teku, two Tompotika villages. Each mural depicted natural features and wildlife found in that village: maleo birds, sea turtles, tarsiers, crocodiles, anoa, cuscuses, hornbills, babirusas, and more--a veritable who's who of Sulawesi's endemic and endangered wildlife. Some of these species are still found within village limits today, while others were common in our grandparents' day, but now may be found only after venturing into the forests in the village outskirts.

In both villages, the mural paintings brought the area's natural heritage to life in all its brilliant color and variety. The murals were a kind of "thank you" gift to the people of each village, intended to honor and celebrate both villages' commitments to working with AITo to conserve their endangered wildlife. Villagers of all ages were pleased and proud of the murals, pointing out that the murals themselves would serve as great tourist attractions, in addition to the wildlife they depicted.

But in Taima village, as the mural was being completed, one man raised a concern. "Why," he questioned, "is AITo drawing a pig on our wall?" This man, like most in the village, is a Muslim, and for Muslims, pigs are haram--considered unclean, forbidden to eat or touch, and best avoided entirely. The man was referring to the babirusa, a strange endangered mammal found only in Sulawesi, which looks a little like a cross between a pig and a deer--and in fact, in Bahasa Indonesia, the national language of the country,



**Babirusas.** Photo: Connie Bransilver/WCS

"babirusa" means "pig-deer."

The man's question raised alarm. The babirusa, not a pig per se, but a rare and unique species, was formerly common in the area and constitutes an important part of Tompotika's natural heritage--and that of all Sulawesi. But if some objected to its presence in the mural, what should be done about it? A community discussion followed. Some suggested simply removing the babirusa. The mural was all about harmony and happiness--why not just avoid including anything controversial? Others said to leave it as is--after all, it was only one or two disgruntled guys objecting, and it's only a painting. Still others suggested adding name labels underneath each animal on the mural, where so far there had been no words, only images. With a clear "babirusa" label under it, they suggested, everyone would know that the animal was not a pig, but a babirusa. The discussion went on, no solution really feeling satisfactory.

But then the conversation took a new twist. AITo staff and villagers began to talk about how part of the problem is that most people are no longer familiar with babirusa--they are gone from the near-village environs. In the old days, everyone would have recognized that animal as a babirusa, not a pig, because they were used to seeing them. Now they're found only at a distance from the village, and many have never seen one at all. But the older people in the village would know them. Actually, we realized, the older people would not only recognize them, but would call them by another name--their name in Bahasa Saluan, the older, local language of the area. Most of the villagers present, in fact, did not even remember the animal's name in Bahasa Saluan, but AITo staff, having interviewed plenty of old-timers, supplied it. In Bahasa Saluan, the name for this animal is sangko bulu, which--ironically



**Sangko Bulu, or babirusa—detail from the Taima mural. Photo: Mark Kinney**

given the current debate--stresses our connection to this species, meaning "skin like a human," because of the babirusa's hairless skin. In our meeting, we began to go over the names of all the mural's creatures in Bahasa Saluan, and it was as if we were bringing back old friends to the villagers present.

A decision was quickly made: we would insert name labels, not just under the babirusa, but under all of the mural creatures, giving their names in Bahasa Saluan. The solution felt universally and exactly right: it was as if we had not just solved a problem, but rediscovered something precious. In the days that followed,

many came by to watch and help out with the work being completed, and older folks nodded their heads in smiling recognition at the names they saw painted under each animal. Not another word objecting to a pig was heard.

The babirusa reminded us of a truth we had nearly forgotten: conservation helps connect us to an older, deeper part of ourselves. And though in many cases, this connection to our heritage has been lost, it is not out of reach. Simply by calling the animal by its older, local name, the babirusa became no longer a strange and suspicious beast, but a connection to the people and landscape that came before us--a connection worth honoring and protecting. In Taima village, the babirusa is helping to transform us: by protecting what's left of these animals and their habitat, we protect not only a unique and wonderful fellow species. We also protect our bonds to the people and places that have made us who we are.

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