

AITo Update August 2013: The Bat Man of Batu Bassi

Pak Haji Kamaruddin is a conservation inspiration despite himself.

Before he became a champion for fruit bats, he never gave them a thought. He doesn't concern himself with how bats are doing outside his village, and he doesn't consider himself a conservationist. But over the last few decades, Pak Haji Kamaruddin of Batu Bassi village in South Sulawesi has protected more bats than just about anyone else in Sulawesi to date.

It began back in 1979, when Pak Kamaruddin had "a dream from God." In his dream, God told Pak Kamaruddin that he must protect bats in his tiny new settlement of just a few households. If he did so, came the promise, it would bring great luck to his settlement, and people of all different races, and from all over the world, would come to visit.

So Pak Kamaruddin caught 3 bats, which he says he kept in a cage and fed, and over time, they bred. Eventually he released some of them into nearby trees, though they often came back to him for food.

And, gradually, the bat numbers increased. Pak Kamaruddin, leader of the settlement, ordered his neighbors not to hunt or disturb the bats, but to let them be, and they would bring good luck. And indeed, it seems everyone prospered. The bats--two species of Sulawesi fruit bats that are essential for pollinating fruit trees and spreading seeds--greatly increased in numbers, and continued to spend their days roosting in village trees, while foraging throughout the region at night.



At the same time, over the years, many new families moved into the settlement, forming a village of a few hundred people. Every new family that moved into the area was instructed: in this village, you must tolerate the presence of bats in village trees, and all hunting of bats is forbidden. Stop and talk to village residents that you meet on the street, and they will likely tell you: no, they are not bothered by the bats. They can be a bit noisy,

but they're part of the village; the people and bats don't bother each other.

In fact, Pak Kamaruddin attests, the bats that currently number in the thousands in what is now the village of Batu Bassi bring great benefits to the village. Since the bats have been there, their rice padis have been more productive. Locals who raise chickens and ducks have raised more birds. And visitors have come, just as promised in his dream, to see the spectacle: dozens of village trees laden with roosting bats, all squawking and jostling each other like so many upside-down crows. Batu Bassi is now a showcase and a stronghold for fruit bats in the region, which are disappearing under heavy hunting pressure nearly everywhere else, and have no official government protection despite their rapidly plummeting numbers.

Sometimes, Pak Kamaruddin says, people ask permission to take a bat or two for eating or selling, but he always refuses. Sometimes naughty people even try to steal his bats, but he says there is a curse on his bats, such that anyone who steals one and eats it will become sick, with bleeding.

Does Pak Kamaruddin think it's important that the bats of his village are helping to maintain the natural forests in the nearby national park and beyond? Or the orchard crops of people all over this region? Does it worry him that Sulawesi's bats are in such steep decline outside his village? He doesn't have much to say about these things. And what advice would he have for folks in other locations who might want to protect their bats? "Oh, they can't. No one else can protect their bats like this. Only here."

Pak Kamaruddin is rightly proud of his Bat Village. South Sulawesi--and indeed, the world--owes him a debt of gratitude for so effectively protecting so many bats in his village over these many years, and it is to be hoped that their bats will continue to bring good luck and visitors to the people of Batu Bassi for ages to come.



But he is wrong about that last bit--there is no exclusive franchise on conservation (and thank heavens for that!) In fact, there is at least one other Sulawesi location, a small city called Wattan Soppeng, whose streets are also lined with bat-laden trees, and those bats are also fully protected under local ordinance. And, wittingly or not, Pak Kamaruddin and Batu Bassi are providing inspiration for bat conservation everywhere.

In Tompotika, in the Bat Conservation Awareness Campaign AITo conducts in schools, our staff talk about Batu Bassi village, several hundred miles away, which has proven to the world that it is perfectly possible for people and bats to live together, each bringing the other good luck. In Tompotika--where the forces of commercial bat hunting have been growing--kids also have the inspiration to wonder what it would be like to live in a village where bats roost in safety in village trees while people go about their business

below. Where looking up each day brings you smiling, face-to-face with a beautiful blond Sulawesi Flying Fox. Where you fall asleep each night to the soft flap of bat wings coming and going. Yes, it is possible.

Thanks, Pak Kamaruddin!

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