

AITo Update, February 2015: Preparing for Wonderful Things

In the world of conservation, we get used to bracing ourselves for unhappy events. That favorite patch of forest may be cut down. That precious new chick may not survive. The latest measurement of atmospheric carbon content may be terrifying. You don't even need to be on the frontlines of conservation, as we are here in Tompotika; all you need do is pay attention to nature in today's world, and you must live with the reality of frequent losses, and an awareness of the profound vulnerability of our Earth and the creatures that we love.

Yes, stories of loss and of foreboding are everywhere around us in nature, and those stories are true. *But they are not the only stories.* This month in Tompotika, the air is literally abuzz with a different nature story: a story of discovery and love and accomplishment and anticipation.

As I write this from the small village of Tanah Merah in the foothills of Mt. Tompotika (to be sent later from someplace where there is electricity and internet), the sounds of young voices laughing, drumming on makeshift plastic tub drums, and the calling of coaches' instructions mix with the all-day crowing of roosters, the distant sound of chainsaws, and the constant hum of

cicadas. This week, sixteen Tompotika high school students have gathered here with AITo staff and three guest artist coaches to prepare for Festival, and the air feels electric with their enthusiasm.



In what we hope will become a regular event, this first Tompotika International Maleo and Sea Turtle Festival will consist of a half-day flurry of booths, games, circus workshops, music, awards, and drama performances, all with a conservation theme. Festival will be repeated in six different Tompotika locations, and

includes participants from across the entire region--from these 16 high school students to the more than 200 kids of all ages who submitted entries to our short story, art, or essay contests, to thousands of folks of all ages who will come to take part in the events.

The art contest features art from recycled materials, and has produced an ebullient and colorful display. Shopping bags made from the plastic ring-tops of discarded juice drink containers, otherwise found in abundance on Tompotika roadsides and beaches. A picture frame made of minutely twisted newspaper. A pair of maleos made of painted plastic cut from oil and drink containers of several different textures, each plastic brilliantly applied to give variation to the maleos' plumage. "Protect us!" (*Lindungilah kami!*), it says across the base.

Then there are the short stories, from elementary-aged kids. In one of them, a pair of maleos have nine pages of adventures with a monkey, a snake, a sea turtle, a crow, and a hunter on their way to the nesting ground. In another, a child spends the holidays with her grandparents and witnesses baby sea turtles hatching on the beach for the first time. In another, a group of kids become heroes, catching a maleo poacher by the foot in their snare.



Older kids wrote about the "youth's perspective" on conservation, repeatedly speaking of the need to conserve endangered flora and fauna for their grandchildren. One wrote of humanity's "addiction to exploitation" of sea turtles, and many called for strong enforcement of laws to stop the hunting of wildlife for private gain. Over and over, kids of all ages wrote about sea turtles as the great ambassadors of the sea, and of how proud they are of *their very own*, very unique maleo bird--even the youngest ones knew that the maleo is found only in Sulawesi and especially in Tompotika. The kids' writings, in short--nearly all written by hand with care, many with illustrations--are brimming with what they love. And when our staff picked up the submissions at each school, their teachers told us how excited the kids are to come to Festival and learn the results of their efforts.

But perhaps the most irrepressible sense of anticipation this week comes from the sixteen high schoolers working so hard to create the two Festival showcase dramas. Already enjoying a sense of accomplishment for having been selected to take part in this effort, these 16 kids have also arrived in Tanah Merah full of joy in their new-found recognition of the specialness of their Tompotika home. Few of these kids had heard or thought much about wildlife or conservation prior to getting involved with AITo. But now, they have thrown themselves into this activity, and into the conservation fray, body and soul. They are bonding as a group, delighting in their time together, and working very hard--often stretching themselves well outside their comfort zones--to create the wonderful thing that will be Festival.

And they are *loving* it. In fact, completely on their own, several of them sat down with a guitar on the second night and wrote a song, which has



since become their anthem, sung many times a day by the whole group. Not just a little jingle, but a full song--here's an excerpt (in translation):

Chorus:

Oh, AlTo Kids

Oh, we're the AlTo Kids

Here we have come together
To take part in a beautiful drama production
For the sake of preserving the flora and fauna
of Tompotika

We express all the feeling
Of the spirits of the animals that are almost extinct
of Tompotika

With this drama production
We invite all of you to guard the flora and fauna
of our land

These kids are overflowing with energy and hope and excitement for what is ahead, and, in their experience, it is all inextricably bound up with nature and conservation. That's a *good* thing. We hope you, too, can catch some of their spirit.

Marcy Summers
Director, Alliance for Tompotika Conservation
info@tompotika.org
www.tompotika.org

Photos by Noval Suling

If you would prefer not to receive AlTo Updates, just reply to this e-mail and let us know.