

AITo Update, September 2017: Upang and the Maleo Worms

You just never know what will touch a person, and how that may grow over time.

Back in 2006, AITo was just being born. In July of that year, an intrepid group of seven travelers from the Pacific Northwest region of the United States--their hearts full of hope and concern for Sulawesi's endangered maleo bird and their pockets full of a few thousand dollars from a recent fundraiser--made the journey to Indonesia to help kick off an experiment: a new international partnership to assist some local folks in Tompotika, Sulawesi in their efforts to stop poaching and protect the nesting ground of the fast-disappearing maleo. As it happened, an injured maleo bird called Athena fell into our hands and traveled with us, serving as an ambassador for her species and helping to launch the conservation program.

Much to everyone's delight--and not a little surprise--that program turned out to be a success, and, as readers of AITo's news know, now a decade later the maleo is recovering in Tompotika, with multiple nesting grounds protected, the nesting population growing dramatically, and local awareness and support steadily strengthening.



Upang. Photo: Sandhy Bawotong

But *how* and *why* have individual local Tompotikans come to think differently about maleos, and how does that translate into tipping the scales toward conservation over exploitation? What are the things that have most touched their hearts and changed their behaviors? It would seem that sometimes, the scales may be tipped by the smallest of things. Like a t-shirt, or an earthworm.

A few weeks ago, the AITo team geared up for a big training workshop in Tompotika. We were hosting guests from conservation NGO's in distant provinces of Sulawesi, and there were lots of preparations to make and people to move around. Though our normal mode of transportation is by motorbike, during such times as these we generally rent a car, which comes from a rental company complete with a driver. We've had many such drivers over the years--they stay with us throughout the days or weeks of

the activity to hand and are generally friendly and competent, if often a bit bemused by the strange activities and demands of these conservation people (e.g. no throwing trash out the window, turn off the idle, and walk--don't drive--for short trips).

But this time, the company sent a driver, Upang, who seemed particularly deferential and eager to please. He went the extra mile far beyond his driving duties, offering to help with setting up tarps and equipment. He was especially conscientious in providing receipts when buying gas. He asked questions about our conservation training--what we were doing, and why. And he was particularly attentive to our personal comfort: were we tired, were we thirsty? He knew a place on the way where we could get coconut water if we would like to stop.

This behavior was consistent through more than a month of comings and goings, and did not go unnoticed. A good driver--especially one so solicitous--though but an occasional contractor, is an extremely valuable team member. So I made efforts to include him in some of our activities, and a mental note to ask for Upang again in future.

And then one evening, when Upang and I were alone in the car, I found out why he was so keen. "Do you remember, *Ibu Marcy*, when you came to Kampangar village many years ago? You and some other foreigners. It was a long time ago but I remember it very well. You had a maleo bird with you. I was in middle school. I remember it so well! You wanted some worms for the maleo, and you offered to us kids that any of us who would go and find some earthworms for the maleo could get a t-shirt."



Kampangar Village, 2006. AITo Director Marcy Summers talks to local kids with Athena the maleo bird under her arm. Photo: Steve Caldwell

I, too, remembered this well. Athena, our maleo ambassador, was in need of protein, and when offering to pay kids a little money to find her some worms did not motivate them, fellow-traveler and AITo Board member Rayna Holtz had the brilliant idea of offering kids one of the maleo t-shirts we had had made. The kids had scattered in all directions leaving a cloud of dust as in a cartoon, and had returned minutes later with worms in hand. Had Upang been one of the ones that fed Athena the maleo, I wondered?

"To tell you the truth, *Ibu Marcy*, I was in the back of the crowd. I was rather shy. I helped find worms, but my cousin brought them to you, and he was one of the ones who got a t-shirt. But I have always remembered it." Upang gave a broad, shy smile.

It was a small thing. Later the AITo staff had come to Upang's school to talk about maleos, and he remembered that too. And over time he graduated from school, grew up, and took his place in his community.



Kampangar kids feed Athena worms they have found, 2006. Photo: Steve Caldwell

Upang did not grow up to become a conservation professional, a government official, or a "thought leader" of any kind. Until now, he has not been among those in the community that AITo has worked with directly in our various conservation projects. But if conservation is going to succeed here in the long run, if Tompotikans are going to come to love their maleos and ensure their continuing existence, then everyone--the clove farmers and the kiosk shop-keepers, the cement-builders and yes, the rental-car drivers--will all need to support it with their care, even if their direct involvement is minimal. Ultimately, it is the worms, the t-shirts, the Upangs of Tompotika that will tip the scales one way or the other.

It's a privilege to stick around in this community long enough to see it happen. Thank you, AITo supporters, for making that possible.

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