

AIto Update, September 2011 - Mt. Tompotika: the View from the Top

At 1600 meters (c. 5000 ft), Mt. Tompotika is not an especially tall mountain. It is, however, the highest point in the region, and its distinctive ultrabasic soils combine with unusual biota and rugged topography to create a place which has long been shrouded in mystery and little-visited by humans.



Mt. Tompotika from the West. Photo: Titayanto Pieter

Considered a sacred point of origin by all three of the ethnic groups indigenous to the area--the Banggai, Balantak, and Saluan peoples--Mt. Tompotika has been largely left alone until recent years. Stories surround it, about the wild woman of the mountain who lives up there alone with her dogs and frightens away hunters; about a secret enchanted lake at the top; about the occasional explorers who tread forbidden ground and don't return. Outdoorsy youth from the area's regional center, Luwuk, occasionally plan hiking expeditions to Tompotika's summit, but otherwise, few people venture into the mountain's higher reaches for any reason at all.



Pitcher Plant (*Nepenthes* spp.)

As part of our efforts to protect it in the Tompotika Forest Preserve--which encompasses the summit and a large proportion of the mountain's slopes--the AIto team recently made an expedition to Tompotika's summit. Approaching from the mountain's northern flank, the route leads up through native ultrabasic hill forest and then across a natural burned area to re-enter forest at about 1200 meters.

The view from the top of Mt. Tompotika affords a remarkable juxtaposition of the strange and the beautiful, the precious and the vulnerable. On the one hand, standing in the forest at the top of Tompotika one is surrounded by an odd, otherworldly beauty. The bright green of new growth is everywhere, and yet the place feels ancient. The trees are stunted, gnarled, and covered with moss. Bushy ferns and shimmering fungi poke out through the leaf litter. Bright-red, carnivorous pitcher plants wind everywhere on their long twining vines. It is quiet, but for the wind, which whips across the mountain passes and whistles its way through the wood. It is easy to see why this place is said to be enchanted.

Step out onto a ridge, however, and if the clouds clear for a moment, the entire Tompotika peninsula opens out before you. To the south and east along the Balantak mountain range, gorgeous unbroken forest for miles. To the northeast, an as-yet-intact corridor for maleo birds to travel from the mountain forests to their coastal nesting ground near Taima village, visible about 30 km away. Offshore of that, Tangkuladi island, the daytime roosting site for thousands of fruit bats that we are working on trying to protect. Each night those bats leave their island roost and fly here to Tompotika and throughout the forests we now survey, spreading seed and pollinating as they go.



AITo Conservation Officer Noval Suling, with Tompotika's eastern flank and Balantak mountains in the background

But along the Northern coast and increasingly toward the interior, the Tompotika peninsula's once-forested land looks like a checkerboard, and the scarring is moving closer, even to the mountain itself. Deforestation for farming and logging is creeping up the mountain's flanks. Nickel miners are drilling bores to assess the profit potential of feeding the world's insatiable demand for steel and batteries. Oil palm plantations--the latest seemingly irresistible threat to Indonesia's native forests--are being established to produce prepared foods and biofuels in the West and China. And the local human population is growing and changing: large numbers of transmigrants have come from other parts of Indonesia. Newer generations set less store in old mountain tales, and the long traditions that have kept the mountain remote and isolated have lost some of their traction.

Legends are no longer enough to protect Mt. Tompotika. But, together with locals in the villages we see arrayed below, the AITo team is working to protect Tompotika's forests while finding new ways for humans to live sustainably in this landscape. It's not easy, and sometimes the challenges seem overwhelming. But, with the enchanted forest at our backs, and taking in the long view from the mountaintop, we cannot help but grin. Despite the many threats, Tompotika's forests still stand. Beauty, intricate and spectacular, endures. Conservation is hard work, but there is no effort more worthwhile, or more rewarding.

Thanks for being part of it.

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