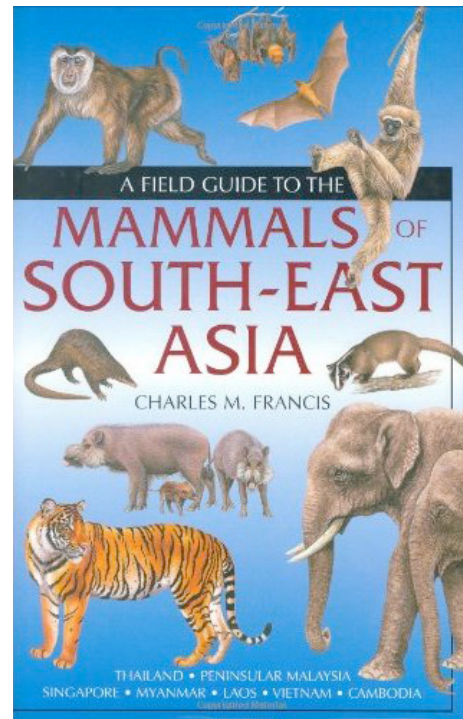


AITo Update, September 2012: This is the Frontier

"**This is the frontier!**" said Dr. Barita Manullang, an Indonesian conservation biologist, of his motherland, as we sat in a Jakarta coffee shop in July. Dr. Manullang is a new member of AITo's Indonesian Board, and together we had been looking at a copy of a book that I had just purchased, *A Field Guide to the Mammals of South-East Asia*, by Charles M. Francis. It's a beautiful book, with drawings and descriptions of about 500 mammals--from tree shrews to pangolins to gibbons to tapirs--that are found in Thailand, peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. That is: most of South-East Asia *except* for Indonesia. Indonesia, you see, has more terrestrial, marine, and freshwater plant and animal species in and around its 10,000-plus islands than any other country on earth. And as denizens of the world's most biodiverse country, Indonesian mammals would require a field guide all their own (or more likely--several volumes' worth!).



But none exists. *This is the frontier!* Indonesia: more species than any other country in the world, more *endangered* species than any other country in the world, and yet, relatively speaking, we know next to nothing about them. Glancing at my own shelf here next to my desk on Vashon Island, Puget Sound, North America, if I want to identify a mammal in my region, I have three different field guides I could reach for. Five different field guides to birds, two for butterflies, two for amphibians, and so on... And that's only the terrestrial critters, and only what happens to be on my shelf--there's a great deal more out there. Yet even among North American critters, biologists would say there are very few that we would consider truly well-studied--mostly we shake our heads and bemoan our ignorance of the ways of our furred or feathered neighbors. In Indonesia, the number of these neighbors is many times more, and our knowledge of them many times less. Indonesia is the frontier.

And Sulawesi is the frontier of Indonesia. With plant collection rates and levels of animal survey effort among the lowest of Indonesia's major islands, Sulawesi is the poor step-sister to the better-known biological treasure-houses of Borneo or Sumatra, whose former connectivity with mainland Asia gave them wide-ranging "charismatic megafauna" such as orangutans and tigers. Sulawesi, a jumble of once widely-dispersed oceanic island fragments that, with the movement of earth's plates, bumped into one another and then stuck--and never connected to a continental land mass--instead is host to its own, totally unique flora and fauna, about half of which, like maleo birds, giant civets, babirussas, and anoas, are found nowhere else on earth. The ones who populate Sulawesi today were the ones who survived on small island fragments, found their niche, and flourished; or who made the perilous journey across the ocean to pioneer this new island frontier, and lived to tell the tale.

There is no field guide to the mammals of Sulawesi, in any language, and the same is true for most other taxa, though a small, heroic handful of various natural history materials have been produced for Sulawesi over the years. Here at the AITo alliance, we are taking our own modest steps to address this lack, and have created an in-the-field, bilingual identification guide to some of the Tompotika area's most weird and wonderful animal species, for use by our own staff,

partners, and visitors, and in our school-based outreach program. In the months to come, we hope to put together a guide to the birds of Tompotika, and then the bats.

There is one fact we have to accept. Whatever we produce, pretty much as soon as we produce it, it's likely to become obsolete. But we're happy about that! Because in the frontier of Sulawesi in general, and Tompotika in particular, new species are still being discovered nearly every time a survey is done--be it for plants, herpetofauna (that is, reptiles and amphibians, often just called "herps"), mammals, or whatever. In Tompotika alone in the last few years, for instance, just a few brief surveys of small mammals and herps have identified 9-10 brand-new species of frogs, geckoes, snakes, and shrews.



Cyrtodactylus batik, a new gecko species discovered on an AITo survey in 2009 and known only from Tompotika. Photo: Umilaela

Even though any field guide in Sulawesi is likely soon to become obsolete--*this is the frontier!*--we are keen to help create them. For our goal, at AITo, is to help people--people both near and far--fall in love with the natural heritage of Tompotika, and that of Sulawesi, of Indonesia, and of this whole wondrous green planet that we all call home. We love what we know, and we cannot love something if we don't know it exists.

Field guides are a time-and culture-tested aid to getting to know the creatures around us--creatures we may see every day but never really notice, or creatures we may spot only once, breathlessly, in a lifetime. Through field guides, what was before the flash of a yellow feather, a stinging leaf as you brush by, or a brief furry scramble across our path now has a name, a face, a context. Other humans have noticed it before, and have recorded ways to help us pay attention, look deeper, know better. There is so much to notice here in Tompotika, so much to love. And we are just beginning--*this is the frontier!* Alas, in today's world, there is no time to waste. We must learn to love them before they are gone. We must get to work.

Thanks for helping.

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