

AlTo Update April 2013: Small is Beautiful

Big can be great. When it comes to old trees, a slice of pie, cheers for the home team, and the Greenland ice sheet, the *bigger* the better, we say. And next month, May 15th, The Seattle Foundation is having a one-day donation event--Give *BIG*--that most certainly follows that rule.

But when it comes to community-based nature conservation, we think *Small* is Beautiful.



Pygmy Sea Horse
Photo: Jerome Doucet

Here at the AlTo alliance, we've chosen to focus on one very special geographic area. Very *small* on a planetary scale (the Tompotika peninsula is about 2500 km², or 1000 mi²), but of *huge* global importance from a biodiversity standpoint. We aim to "go deep, and do it right" for conservation in this one area--and, as a *small* organization, we have to keep our geographic scope *small* in order to be true to that purpose.

But there are also benefits to being a *small* organization. Compared to *large* organizations, which have to pay for offices, operational staff & equipment, fundraising, and the like, AlTo's overhead is *miniscule*--being *small*, we simply don't need much formal organizational infrastructure. So nearly all the funds we do raise go straight to our programs. That makes us very efficient--and makes your support get a *bigger* "bang for the buck."

And being *small* yields great benefits among the communities we work with. Because there are only a few of us on the AlTo team, working intensely and intimately over a long period of time with community members in Tompotika, we've all gotten to know one another pretty well, and are able to build strong, trusting, and enduring relationships. Only with a foundation of mutual trust, for example, could we have embarked on the Wildlife Law Enforcement partnership that we began last year in collaboration with local governments in Tompotika--and under which, for the first time, laws protecting wildlife are beginning to be enforced.

Many of the most direct threats to nature in Tompotika are also operating on a *small* scale. What was driving the maleo bird to extinction before AITo came along and helped it recover, for example, was egg poaching on the *smallest* scale--one by one, individual folks were taking eggs. Same for sea turtles and their nests. Or patches of forest falling to slash-and-burn agriculture or *small*-scale illegal logging. Starting *small*, AITo has been able to make *great* strides on these challenges.

To be sure, not all threats operate on this *small* scale--mining, human population growth, and climate change are but a few obvious examples of threats operating on a *larger* scale in Tompotika. But by starting *small* and demonstrating success in targeted, tangible ways, AITo has been able to build the credibility and capacity needed regionally to start tackling some of the *larger*-scale threats as well. That has been possible only because, from the outset, we believed that *small* could be beautiful, and we proved it.



The Anoa, Sulawesi's dwarf buffalo
Photo: David Slater

AITo is a *small* organization having a *big* impact in a very special place. We won't solve all the world's problems, but we know we are making a profound difference in a place that, in various direct and indirect ways, we are all connected to.



Next month, we hope you will participate in Seattle Foundation's Give *BIG* event by stretching as much as you can, and giving generously to support one or more organizations that you believe in. Your gift will be increased with an additional contribution from the Seattle Foundation for all donations made. Of course, we hope that AITo, just a *little* organization amongst the many *big* ones that you can choose from, will be a lucky beneficiary of your *largesse*. But whatever organization/s you give to, and whether your gift is *large* or *small*, remember: choose the recipient wisely, and your gift will matter. Any gift, *large* or *small*, can make a difference. And we think that in these times, making a difference is beautiful--*big* or *small*.

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