

AlTo Update, April 2014: Tompotika Youth Find Their Power in Conservation

A few weeks ago, something wonderful took place in Tompotika.

In fact, in the past several weeks, there's been a string of happy events in Tompotika: all poaching of maleo eggs at the Taima nesting ground has ended, a major commercial bat hunter has given up bat hunting for good, the sea turtle season has started out with new enthusiasm for protection, and more, which you can read about in future AlTo newsletters.

But underneath the headlines, something very special took place amongst the dozen Tompotika high school students who spent February-March in an AlTo Art for Conservation project. Under the leadership of Australian performers Nick Fury and Ross Brown, the Tompotika students created a fabulous original drama about sea turtles, maleo birds, human villains and heroes, and why



we can all feel good about protecting our precious wildlife. The show, complete with juggling, stilt walkers, huge puppets, and giant maleos, went on the road and was performed in 9 villages across Tompotika for enthusiastic crowds.

"A long time ago, the oceans were healthy, and full of fish. The people were fewer, and took only what they needed to eat..." Photo: Oliver Hensel-Brown

Creating and performing their own show was a fantastic experience for these kids. Many of them found strengths and passions inside themselves that they didn't know they possessed; as those qualities came out, those kids just shone.

But for many of the kids, becoming acquainted through AlTo's program with their own natural heritage--in the form of maleo birds and sea turtles--was also a life-changing discovery. Most of them had rarely thought much about maleos or turtles (though many had consumed their eggs). But learning about these marvelous animals, and Tompotika's unique role in their survival, opened their eyes and hearts in a new way.

This became clear when the troupe spent a couple of days camped near AlTo's maleo nesting ground site near Taima village. Until then, none of the kids had ever seen a wild maleo bird, and with their new-found knowledge and enthusiasm, they were very keen to do so. The problem was that, at that time, strife within Taima village was resulting in poachers coming nearly every day to hunt for maleo eggs--and maleos being driven off by their presence. There was a danger that the kids--in their one chance to see those live maleo birds that they'd been working so hard to try to raise awareness about--might not be able to, due to poachers.



A poacher digs for maleo eggs. Photo: Oliver Hensel-Brown

The kids were furious. Not only because the poachers were driving off maleos, but because they were poaching! As the kids had come to know, maleos are in grave danger of extinction due primarily to human poaching of their eggs, which is completely illegal under Indonesian law. How could they do this? The kids spoke to the poachers (some of whom they knew) with no result, and the authorities seemed to be turning a blind eye.

In group discussion, the kids expressed their frustration--the maleo is such a wonderful bird, unique to their homeland, and in desperate straits, and yet a few guys were allowed steal their eggs with impunity! But what could a dozen high school kids do about it? Their show was great, but they wanted to do something more direct. Finally, they hit upon an idea: they would write a group letter, signed by all, to the police, asking them to come to this place and enforce the laws protecting maleos.

And so, a dozen teenagers who a few weeks earlier had done little acting and given no thought to conservation, had suddenly been transformed into artists and activists. The plight of the maleo had become real to them. They now realized that they had the power to do something about it, and do something they did. The letter they wrote to the police was carefully crafted and came from their hearts, and their performances took on a new depth. And, as things turned out, not long afterwards AIto was able to sign a new contract with the village, and the poaching did, in fact, end.

For the AIto team, seeing the poaching end and the maleos of Taima regain the protections they had lost for a few months was a huge relief and joy. But just as rewarding was watching another group of Tompotika natives--those dozen teenagers--bloom and grow as individuals and as a group. Together, they had opened their eyes to the natural world around them, dug deep, and found new skills and new purpose inside themselves. They had put that to work, and they had made a difference.



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