

AlTo Update October 2014: In Praise of Steepness

Where we began, yesterday, the river was wide, cobbled, and shallow, with multiple channels and rocky sandbars in between them. We are walking into the forests behind Teku village in Tompotika, where, some miles downstream, the river mouth opens onto a wide beach where AlTo's sea turtle program is active throughout the turtle nesting season, which ended last month. To enter forests in the Tompotika region, it is often easiest to simply walk up a river-bed; here you pick your way ankle-deep along the river's edge, and the water is cool and lovely on your feet with the hot sun overhead.

Down in these lower reaches, you walk up the wide flat river, gaining little elevation. The riverbanks are frequently dotted with cleared areas--small cornfields or gardens--with stretches of native forest in between. Little bands of cattle stand or walk by, ringing their neckbells, and you hear the sound of chainsaws in the distance: not far away, there are loggers taking trees out of the forest, legally or illegally. Down in these parts, along the edge of the river there is a continuous track made by the small tractors which pull out the boards milled in place by the chainsaw loggers. Cornfield by cornfield, board by board, tree by tree, the forest along this stretch of river--like virtually every stretch of river near where people live--is shrinking.



The secretive anoa; detail from the AlTo-sponsored mural in Teku village. Photo: Mark Kinney

Some hours further in, and the fields and gardens are becoming fewer, then only occasional, then you see them no more. The tractor track, too, has petered out, and not coincidentally, the condition of the forest is visibly richer: more large trees, more species diversity. Now the only obvious sign of humans is an occasional hut built for overnighting in the forest by the men who go to there to collect damar resin or rattan. Butterflies lighten your way as you go: a string of orange *Appias nero*--the males flit along in a line like a choo-choo train; *Papilio blumei*, a large black swallowtail with electric blue stripes; *Graphium dorcus*, a dramatic black-and-white number with long dagger-like tails. Overhead, small groups of Sulawesi Hornbills fly along and across the riverbed using the taller trees for perches. Their advent is dramatic: not only are they a large bird with a bright blue, red, and yellow face and a huge red crest, but they also announce their presence with great fanfare--their wings in flight make a loud noise like a steam engine.

But what we are actually seeking is the anoa, *Bubalus depressicornis*, a reddish or blackish, waist-high dwarf buffalo with big soulful eyes, a pair of sharp, straight horns, and a reputation for aggressiveness that belies its cute 'n' cuddly appearance. Like so much of Sulawesi's wildlife, the anoa is endemic (found only in Sulawesi) and endangered (hardly found at all anymore). But this part of Tompotika has two things conducive to anoa: miles and miles of beautiful, intact forests reaching into the interior of the peninsula, and a local human population that, peculiarly, doesn't care much for anoa meat. As one local woman said, "Well, I myself like it, but anoa meat doesn't fetch a very good price around here. Most people think it's tough--they like beef from a cow better."

And so anoas are still here, in these forests, though they are gone from so much of the rest of Sulawesi. But even where they are still extant, anoas are very rarely seen: shy and keen of perception, they avoid humans and are usually only encountered when snared or trailed by dogs. Still, in our case, just verifying that they

are there for sure is all we're after, and our guide, a local man called Emus who has snared two anoas in the last three months, is going to take us to their haunts.

As you continue up the river bed, whatever species you are--anoa, hunting dog, human--you will take the easiest, most efficient path. You walk in the shallowest part along the river's edge, and, when it bends sharply, short-cut across the oxbow. It's only animal. But as we reach deeper into the forest interior, although we are still but a few hundred meters above sea level, the banks through which our river-trail cuts are getting steeper. This river is winding its way through increasingly steep, tree-covered hills that form a kind of canyon through which we ascend. As the river forks repeatedly, Emus guides us first this way, then that. He is barefoot, carrying a light plastic rice-sack of his own minimal gear for three days in the forest, plus a large backpack of ours. For all that, Emus walks much faster than the rest of us.

As everything gradually gets steeper, the river bed changes, and our journey becomes an exercise in leaping and scrambling from boulder to boulder. Another few hours, and the boulder-leaping ceases, and you are simply picking and creeping your way up a narrow, deep, slippery cut of rock. Pick your poison: get up that waterfall by balancing on that thin, wobbly, slick log, or go for the cliff-face, hoping you'll find enough tiny toeholds to get up it? (No matter: if you slip, you will simply fall into a verdant pool of cool clear water, and there are worse things in life.) When you look up above the cut on either side of you, you wonder how the lush vegetation can continue to grow on such near-vertical slopes. But it does. And it is gorgeous.

Finally, Emus leaves the riverbed, and we begin a new climb, virtually straight up the steep wooded hillside. It is not easy going. Look for roots the size of handholds, and make sure they're solid before you trust your weight to them. Or: be a quadruped. Anoas, small, lithe, and agile, climb up and down these steep steep hillsides on four nimble cloven feet, between which they expertly distribute gravity's pull. And it works. Where we hikers are laboring, and the loggers have long ago given up, the anoa dances in its element. Eventually we reach a ridge which is a natural trail, and Emus proudly displays the anoa signs: here a footprint, here some dung, here a scrape from the horns. The footprints are delicate, rounded, and oh so precious--it is hard to shake the cute 'n' cuddly impression. But don't be fooled: Emus says anoas are very fierce and brave, and he's seen one toss a hunting dog nearly as big as itself way off into the forest with a just flick of its horns.

Anoas are still here pretty much because people mostly aren't--accessing this place is just too much trouble for us humans. And there is something irrepressibly hopeful and exhilarating in knowing that. For all our tractors and chainsaws, computers, airplanes, and skyscrapers, a diminutive quadruped--a little cow, basically--has it all over us in this place. AITo will keep working, that it may ever be so.

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Anoa footprints next to Diaou river bed, Sept 2014. Photo: Agustian Laya

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