

AlTo Update - May 15, 2015: Happy Endangered Species Day!

Robert Weber/The New Yorker Collection/Cartoon Bank



*“It’s made from an endangered species for that one person in a thousand who couldn’t care less.”*

The thing is, AlTo's experience is that most people *do* care.

It can take a while to get there. The maleo bird story is much like that of countless other endangered species all over the world. For millions of years, *Macrocephalon maleo* pairs wandered contentedly through the rainforests of Sulawesi, assiduously digging deep holes for their marvelous big eggs, from which brave and resourceful chicks would hatch and get along all by themselves from the get-go, with no help from parents or anyone else, thank you very much. They'd grow up in the rainforest nearby to all manner of other weird and wonderful beasts for whom, like the maleo, Sulawesi is their one and only home: marsupial bear cuscuses and dwarf buffalo anoa, flying dragon lizards and giant live-young-bearing frogs.

Then a few millennia ago--only yesterday from the point of view of maleo history--humans arrived on the island of Sulawesi, at first in small numbers. These humans--also

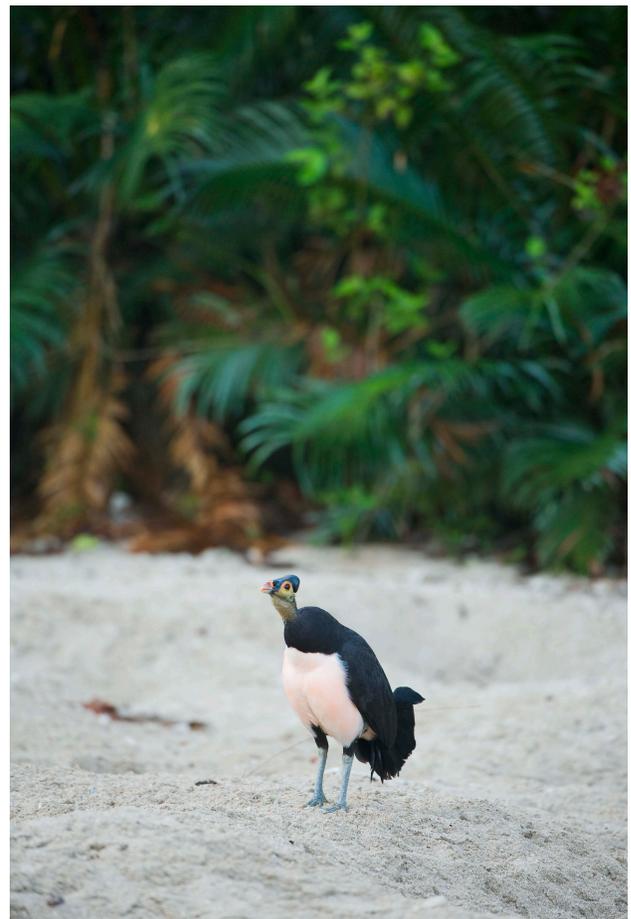
very brave and resourceful--rapidly became maleos' chief predator, exploiting them by taking and eating their eggs, as well as capturing adult maleos whenever the opportunity arose. It didn't take much effort--locating the nesting grounds and digging up the eggs is dead easy. So people did a lot of it. Local people harvesting local wild foods for consumption--what could be more natural and healthy? And those local people also developed important cultural practices surrounding maleos and their eggs, like ceremonially presenting the first eggs of the season to the king.

Problem is, centuries ago, there were not very many humans on Sulawesi. But over time, inexorably, as the numbers of humans first grew, then skyrocketed, maleos began to disappear. The number of maleos returning to long-time nesting grounds dwindled, then petered out. Maleos became locally extinct in entire regions of the island where they used to be common. And at the same time as more and more humans were taking maleo eggs from fewer and fewer maleo parents, those same people were also converting maleos' forest habitat to human uses like agricultural fields and plantations, settlements, clearcuts, and mines. It was simply more than maleos could withstand.

And so, a few decades ago, noticing that maleo populations had shrunk to a tiny fraction of their historic size, the Indonesian government declared the maleo protected, and prohibited its harvest. The IUCN, the international agency that tracks the status of all the worlds' species, also sounded the alarm, listing the maleo as Endangered and protected under international treaties. Sadly, though, hardly any local Sulawesi residents were aware of these developments, and the taking of maleo eggs continued unabated, with the exception that as maleo eggs became harder to come by, they became a coveted delicacy rather than subsistence fare.

Fast forward to 2006, when a little newborn alliance of local Tompotikans joined with supportive folks from other places--that is, AITo--began to spread the word. If something didn't change quickly, Tompotika's premier maleo nesting ground--one of the few viable nesting grounds left anywhere--would, like other maleo havens, inevitably be snuffed. Is that what folks wanted? Did anyone care?

And what do you know: most people *did* care. They'd never really thought about it this way before--hadn't realized that the maleo was endangered, and that it was due more than



A Tompotika maleo. Photo: Kevin Schafer

anything else to the long-term, relentless human harvest of their few, precious eggs. But once folks realized this, they most certainly did care. They did not want to lose their maleos, and with AlTo's help (that's you, reading this--thank you!), they made a plan to save them. It meant they were choosing to give up their traditional but now devastating and illegal harvest of maleo eggs. And, in the final plan, this change they noted, and willingly embraced, because times have changed, and that's what was needed if maleos were to survive at all. *Endangered* was the alarm call: like it or not, something was going to change, and they had the very human opportunity to decide whether that change would mean lifestyle changes they designed and chose themselves, or business as usual lifestyles leading to the inevitable loss of something precious and irreplaceable.

And so the brave and resourceful people of Tompotika changed their lives. Freely and willingly, they opted to do things differently for the sake of another species, and their connection to it. And now nine years later, that Tompotika nesting ground is a vibrant, living place. Maleos are present in never-before-recorded numbers. Whereas everywhere else, maleos continue to decline or just hang on, this is the one place in the world where maleos are actually increasing. The local folks who no longer take their eggs look on with pride: they chose this--they changed their lives--and now, perhaps there's still one in a thousand who couldn't care less, but most people are *glad* of it.

The maleo, and the people of Tompotika, have shown the world something critically important. They have shown us all what can happen when humans pay attention, care, and change their lives for the sake of something more-than-human. In a time when other communities face similar choices--whether or not, for instance, to drill for oil in the endangered Arctic--Tompotika can be our inspiration.

Happy Endangered Species Day!

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