

## AITo Update, February 2017: Experience Conversion

Long-time readers of these updates may remember first meeting this man back in 2010: *Pak Jialing* has the distinction of being just possibly the greatest maleo predator of all time. Since 1981, Pak Jialing has worked for the Indonesian government's Forestry department at what used to be one of the world's largest nesting grounds for the endangered maleo bird: called *Bangkiriang*, and declared "protected" decades ago, it lies several hours' drive southwest of Tompotika. Sadly, *Bangkiriang* is now just about extirpated as a maleo site. Despite the site's--and the maleo species'--fully protected status, over the years and with government's full participation, Pak Jialing and others have dug up most of the eggs and converted most of the forest surrounding *Bangkiriang*. Not surprisingly, maleos have disappeared there.



Mungking (L) and Jialing (R) construct snares. Photo: Marcy Summers

But in his day, Pak Jialing was also an expert trapper of adult maleos, which he sold to others who wanted a high-status trophy in a cage in their yard. "They're not like other birds--you can't keep them in captivity," Jialing says. "They always die. But important people still wanted me to keep replacing them." So demand was always brisk for Jialing's skills. Jialing's friend *Pak Mungking* was also an expert maleo trapper: as a young man he learned how to mimic maleo calls to attract them, he says, and used to hide in a blind where he could even reach out with his bare hands and catch passing maleos--in his case, for the pot.

The skills and experience Jialing and Mungking built up over the years were all too effective... until there simply weren't any more maleos left in their area to be trapped. Now in their 60's and 70's, Jialing and Mungking have both moved away from *Bangkiriang*, and live quietly in nearby villages, where they will happily sit on their porches and chain-smoke, bending the ear of any willing listener with stories of their days with maleos.

That's where the AITo team found them a few weeks back. We came to ask their help with trapping maleos. In our case, not of course for a cage nor the pot, but because we have recently been given permission by the Indonesian government to conduct research on the maleo's breeding biology and habits, and we needed to trap some maleos to apply color-bands to their legs in order to recognize individuals. Truth be known, we'd already tried a few other trapping techniques, but discovered that state-of-the-science trapping methods that work well for similar species simply didn't work for maleos--they're too smart and too sensitive. So, after a few failures, we swallowed our scientific pride and came to the "experts" for help. Do Jialing and Mungking know techniques for trapping maleos safely without injury? And would they be willing to join us for a week or two, helping us trap and band maleos, and teaching us some of their skills? Yes, they said. Yes, yes they would.

When we picked Jialing and Mungking up for the long, potholed drive to Tompotika-- much farther than either was used to traveling--each was dressed up in his nicest clothes and hat, bringing with



A newly-captured maleo, Bird # 7 (Male). Photo: Pandji Kresno

him a small bag of his gear, and a machete. Upon reaching our camp, all AIto staff treated Jialing and Mungking with special deference. For them, this was a special occasion; for us, they were honored guests.

And thus began a week of something new for all of us: for Jialing and Mungking, trying to catch maleos with (in their minds) inordinate attention to avoiding stress and injury, and then only to let them go again. For the AIto team, allying with the "enemy"-- people whose actions have, in the past, been the very engine of the maleo's extinction. But on both

sides, *knowing* the maleo as intimately as possible is the foundation of what we do. And Jialing and Mungking had much to teach us. We began with Mungking demonstrating his female maleo call: closing off both nostrils with one hand and raising his eyebrows, the call he produced indeed sounded uncannily like the maleo voice so familiar to us. Soon our camp was a noisy, goofy chorus of nasal honking as everybody else attempted to copy him.

And so, working together, we began to capture maleos. Things did not always go smoothly. We spent hours the first day searching for leaves from the *kombunoy* palm, with which to build a special blind for Mungking, which was only to be abandoned after twenty minutes, when he discovered that waiting in a blind is less comfortable and more tedious than he had remembered from earlier days. A few of the various snare designs that Jialing and Mungking were used to using did not, to their frustration, seem to be workable at our location. There were long boring hours to wait in between captures, and both men ran out of cigarettes, prompting more than one special trip to the village by our staff. And after our first successful capture on day three, Mungking announced he was homesick and wished to be taken home early, necessitating complicated and expensive arrangements to accommodate the change. But the fact was that both men were, indeed, tremendous repositories of knowledge and experience about a thousand fine points of how to construct, site, and set maleo traps, and various details of their habits and anatomy. And they were both extremely gracious and generous in sharing their knowledge.

And as the week wore on, an ironic truth emerged very clearly: predators though they have been, these men genuinely love maleos. They lit up on seeing our nesting ground, protected from poaching and land clearing, and full of maleos. Jialing spoke of how sad he is that the forest habitat around Bangkiriang has been destroyed, converted for human settlements and oil palm. He blames the government. And he complimented the AIto team for our success in protecting this site, together with local villagers. "No one digs [eggs] here? That's good. It's good that the community around here is becoming aware," Jialing said. "This bird is rare."

Though the manner in which Jialing and Mungking used to decimate maleos was very direct, there is nothing unusual in their claim to love maleos while simultaneously contributing to their decline. Such are our cultures and our numbers that most of us humans, even those who most actively assert their love of nature, pursue unsustainable lifestyles that, wittingly or not, destroy it.

During our many talks, it was never clear exactly how Jialing regarded his own former role in the maleo's disappearance. But what was clear was that, as together we caught and banded five male and three female maleos over the week, Jialing's spirit seemed to lighten and soften. As we carefully weighed, banded, and photographed each bird, Jialing delighted in his new role as a maleo researcher. By the end of the week, he was even cheerful about being reminded not to throw cigarette butts on the nesting ground.

Maybe it was simply this: Jialing loved hanging out with maleos, but the precise manner of his doing so was going to be determined by the human culture around him. In earlier times, the only way for him to be a maleo expert was as a poacher. Now, happily, a different kind of culture is emerging.

If we let them live, the maleos themselves offer the joy of their company freely, to all comers. The gift of conservation is that Jialing, like all of us, has now been given a second chance. "Being here, and seeing all these maleos, and hearing their voices, it makes my heart glad," he said. "It's a long time since I've dwelt among maleos."

Marcy Summers  
Director, Alliance for Tompotika Conservation  
[info@tompotika.org](mailto:info@tompotika.org)  
[www.tompotika.org](http://www.tompotika.org)



Jialing takes a maleo from Marcy to release it after banding.  
Photo: Pandji Kresno