

AlTo Update, February 2018: True Wealth

This month in Tompotika, AlTo's Festival is on. It's a great time for all: the villages where we put on our traveling celebration revel in the carnival atmosphere that comes to town; AlTo staff have a marvelous time all gathering, hanging out, and working hard together for the better part of a month; and the twelve local high school kids who round out the Festival company have the experience of their lives.

After a day of games, booths, and field fun, the climax of the Tompotika International Maleo and Sea Turtle Festival is an original drama performed by the twelve high schoolers. This year's drama highlights one of Indonesia's hottest conservation issues: oil palm.

The show attempts to present the issues around oil palm along with a dose of comedy, romance, and pure theatrical spectacle. There is the rich palm oil baron from Jakarta, who arrives on the scene in a white suit and fancy shoes, dripping with jewelry bling and well-studied charm; there are the young lovers, devastated at the clear-cutting of their favorite place in the woods, and dismayed at the unwillingness of authorities to do anything about it; and there is the local "Boss" and his status-hungry wife, who toady up to the rich guy but run things their way in the village. Very importantly, there is also a suite of enchanting animal characters--maleo, tarsier, babirusa, macaque, hornbill. It is on the wildlife of Indonesia, after all, where the effects of deforestation and oil palm are felt most directly: when native forests are destroyed, wildlife get wiped out with them.



Citra animates a tarsier puppet. Photo: Noval Suling

Consumers around the world are becoming increasingly aware that the booming global appetite for palm oil is driving the rapid destruction of rainforests in Indonesia and elsewhere. (Read the label: chances are you will find it, under various names, in your packaged foods, cosmetics, and more.) The destruction of these forests makes Indonesia one of the top global contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, the worldwide effects of which we are all feeling, more and more each day.



Everyone seeks favor from the Rich Guy. Photo: Sandhy Bawotong

But the negative effects of oil palm are by no means limited to climate change. Though only one in a long line of human insults leveled at Indonesia's native rainforests, oil palm brings a special suite of nightmares at the local village level, and it's these that AlTo's Festival drama is highlighting this year.

In comic form, the drama highlights very human stories. Big Oil Palm comes into an area, and, to many, seems to herald a golden future. There will be jobs a-plenty, and well-paid, for all who want them. "Investment" from outside. Local

villagers are promised that they will be hired as laborers, and/or be given their own small patch of oil palm to cultivate themselves, selling the yield to the company. Every family will be given their own kiosk-shop, the company will build a hospital, the entire village will prosper! And so, most villages eagerly welcome this "economic development," and nearby forests are razed to the ground to make way for the sterile rows of oil palm that will take their place.

But re-visit that village a few years down the road, and what do you find? Only a few people got jobs, hard work at poor pay, while the bosses get rich. If smallholders received their own patch to work at all, they may labor long and then have their harvest refused: told it is out-of-season, of inferior quality, or that demand has dropped. Scores of families receive their kiosk-shop, and then discover that if everyone has their own shop, there are no customers. And perhaps the promised hospital did get built--but it turned out to be just a building, with no budget for doctors, nurses, medicine, or any activity at all within the walls, which turned out to be poorly-built in the first place, and stand empty and mocking in the middle of town, never used and gradually crumbling back into dust.

The money that Big Oil Palm promised has gone into only a few pockets. But everyone is paying the costs. Now, villagers' very existence has become precarious. With the loss of their surrounding forests, village water supplies are often ruined: silted, polluted by Big Oil Palm's herbicides, or sometimes dried up entirely. The forests which once kept soil in place and absorbed torrential rains now being gone, floods and landslides become commonplace--buildings, roads, bridges, and even living souls being swept entirely away. Eroded soil travels downstream to the ocean, where siltation kills nearby coral reefs and fishing grounds. And the loss of those forests chips away that much more at the stability of our planet's climate, bringing more extreme rain patterns to Tompotika, and worsening the whole cycle.

There is no going back: in Oil Palm villages, most villagers have sold their land to the company, and thus no longer have a way to grow their own food or cash crops. Regret is bitter. In AlTo's drama, there's a happy ending:

the spotlighted village gets a wake-up call from nature and a warning from an unhappy neighboring oil palm village, then ultimately makes a decision not to fall for Big Oil Palm's tricks; the lovers are re-united; the Boss and his wife see the light and change their ways.

For maleos, babirusas, and macaques, there never was a choice--without healthy forests, they simply can't exist. AlTo's drama aims to induce human Tompotikans to ask themselves, before it is too late: what is true wealth? Is it cash in a pocket, plastic packets in a kiosk-shop? Or is it clean air and water, freedom from cancer-causing pesticides, fertile soil, stable slopes, rivers in their beds, fish in the ocean, wildlife in the forests, sun and rain in good measure, and the dignity and freedom of living off the land?

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Maleo addresses the audience. Photo: Sandhy Bawotong