

AITo Update, February 2019: A Story about Being Saved By Chocolate

In recent months, our team has been at work assessing the status of the iconic maleo bird, *Macrocephalon maleo*, sometimes called "Sulawesi's Bald Eagle," throughout its entire global range--especially outside of Tompotika, where we have overseen its recovery. The primary objective of this Sulawesi-wide survey (the maleo occurs exclusively on Sulawesi, and was once common throughout the island) is to assess whether the maleo's current IUCN "Endangered" status still applies--or is "Critically Endangered" more appropriate? But the survey has had many other benefits as well: our AITo staff have had the chance to learn useful and fun new scientific skills; they've been able to serve as "experts" for others interested in maleo conservation beyond Tompotika; and all of us have had the chance to learn much more about the needs and opportunities for conservation of all kinds in other parts of Sulawesi.

At present, we are in western-central Sulawesi, in the area around Lore Lindu National Park, and our team has temporarily split up: with me on today's journey are my colleague and friend Nurlin Djuni, who is one of Sulawesi's finest birders and knows this area very well (maliabirding.com), and a local guide, Kornelius, 58, who lives in the village where we began our journey. We were sent to Kornelius by the village head, who described him as the most knowledgeable and experienced maleo person (read: egg poacher) in the village for years. Although the village is right on the edge of the national park, and digging maleo eggs, felling trees, hunting other protected species, and the like are all prohibited by both national laws and traditional local *adat* laws, these laws are not well-enforced, and for decades the unrestrained taking of maleo eggs has been S.O.P. Concomitantly, maleo populations in the area have been on the decline. This journey is an effort to see if they're still active at two nesting grounds last officially assessed in 1998.



Cacao on the edge of Lore Lindu National Park.

We depart the village early in the morning for what Kornelius says should be about a 4-hr walk one way to the first nesting ground, long ago dubbed "*Kaya*," or "rich," because that's what locals became from all the maleo eggs there. The first half-mile is a walk straight up through chocolate plantations--row after row of cacao trees planted on an impossibly steep slope, right up to (and a little past) the national park

boundary. The cacao plantations, Kornelius explains, are relatively new here--formerly natural forest reached all the way to the village, until in the last decade or so folks discovered that cocoa beans--which are harvested from their pods, dried, and then sold to an itinerant dealer--could bring a decent living. Prior to that, many folks in the village made their living collecting rattan in the park forest. Kornelius himself was one of them--in a day's work, he would walk the forest collecting rattan (later sold for making furniture or other uses), and, while he was in the area, he'd swing by the maleo nesting ground to dig for eggs or set a snare for adult birds or other wildlife. His own and the other collectors' maleo yields had certainly diminished over the many years of this practice--but, "*masih ada*," he said, "they're still there."

Leaving the cacao behind, we enter the primary forest of Lore Lindu National Park--and walk for some time amidst some of the most beautiful tropical rainforest I've ever seen. Towering fig trees with enormous buttressed roots. Boles and branches hung with bird's-nest ferns, mosses, and epiphytes. Citrine Flycatchers, Blue Monarchs, Red-knobbed Hornbills, and many other birds flitting and calling around us. And, yes--plenty of mature rattan--a thick, thorny vine--winding its curving way from the ground into the canopy above. In the old days, Kornelius says, you wouldn't have seen so much rattan--it would have been harvested--but now, with chocolate, it's easier to tend the plantations, and the village men just don't come up here into the forest near as much as they used to, and the rattan is left to grow.

We keep walking. At first we are on a clear trail, but before long Nurlin and I are simply following Kornelius, who stops every now and then to look around, chooses his next course, and then uses his machete to clear a path for us through the understory. It's not easy walking--many very steep climbs and descents on muddy banks, using handholds on exposed tree-roots--and it gradually dawns on me that Kornelius does not, in fact, know just where he is going. Turns out, the last time he was up here was 2015, and what used to be a network of well-worn trails used to collect rattan and maleo eggs have simply grown over and vanished. We are lost, and wandering around somewhere in the 2000+ km² woods of Lore Lindu National Park. But the day is yet young--it is only about noon or so, and I feel sure that sooner or later Kornelius will come upon a landmark that he recognizes, and we'll be back on track.

So we scramble on. And meanwhile, it occurs to me: what a fantastic thing, that the head maleo poacher of a few years ago could now lose his



Nurlin, Kornelius, and Marcy, on the edge of a river... somewhere.

way en route to the nesting ground! What great news for the maleo, that the digging of maleo eggs has diminished to that level! And all thanks to chocolate! What could be a better chuckle than that? I envision the shelves of my local grocery store, with a whole huge section devoted just to chocolate bars in all their flavors and brands, diverse as finches. Many of them are even certified organic and fair-trade.

Eventually, indeed, we came across a stream, which led to a river, and a place that Kornelius recognized. We were significantly off-course, but could walk up the river bed to a known point to eventually reach the nesting ground, which is near where a hot spring issues from the ground. The afternoon was wearing on, but I was anticipating soon seeing the familiar soil-scrapes characteristic of maleo nesting activity.

This is the story I wanted to tell you: that thanks to chocolate we got lost and had trouble finding the nesting ground. But that when we finally reached it, it was clear that since the poaching pressure on them had been relieved, the maleos there have been recovering. That we witnessed and rejoiced in a solid patch of clear maleo nesting activity, complete with at least one or two nest spots as recent as this week, their mounds of soft soil, as scratched up by maleo feet, lying peaceful and undisturbed. That though perhaps no longer aptly named *Kaya*, the location is still a worthy birthplace of tomorrow's maleo chicks, and might recover more. Happily ever after!

I love that story. But it is not from the world we live in. Heartbreakingly, when we reached the nesting ground, it was clear that, although old sign of nesting activity was visible, there have been no maleo eggs laid there for at least a few years. The nesting ground is defunct. It is too late for maleos at this location; here, as in so many other locations, maleos have "winked out." It is possible that someday, maleos from some other part of the park where they are still hanging on may re-discover this location--all the requisites for great maleo nesting are still present--but for now, this place is dead for maleos.

There was still one more location to check not far from here, and we pressed on. Maybe this was a fluke, and the other nesting ground is doing all right. But alas, at the other location, the story was even worse--sign of maleo activity there was older still. Kornelius looked around the spot, shrugged impassively, and confirmed, yes, this was the place.

There is more to the story. The day was getting old. To avoid getting lost again, we opted to follow the river as a clear path back to a village, but that way was longer. Then we were caught in a thunderstorm, and, without food or equipment and soaked to up our chests from walking in the river, as dark began to fall we took shelter in a small *pondok* or hut built by rattan-collectors on the edge of the river. There we spent a very cold, wet night waiting for daylight, when we could make our way safely back to the village.

And as we trudged back the next day, I realized: though it is too late for the maleo in this place, there is a bigger story here, and it is still about salvation. On this (longer-than-expected!) journey, we have walked through a large swath of beautiful, rich, and diverse tropical forest. The Citrine Flycatchers and Hornbills are still there, as are the Bay Coucals, the Black-Naped Fruit Doves, and the Lesser Hanging-Parrots. The epiphytes, orchids, and mosses are as rich as ever, and the forest structure is noticeably more complex thanks to the presence of a lot more rattan. We have seen a troupe of endangered Tonkean macaques, and doubtless many more imperiled cuscus, anoa, and babirusa are surviving thanks to fewer snares and hunters these days. There is less illegal logging. Unquestionably, this magnificent forest is better off since all these human-caused pressures have been lessened. And from the point of view of the overall health of our planet, there simply isn't anything more important than keeping our tropical forests healthy and standing. And so, though it came too late for the maleo, we still can and should give thanks for the chocolate.



Lore Lindu National Park, Sulawesi. Photo: Sandhy Bawotong

I know, I know, we all already loved chocolate. No further list of benefits was required. But it never hurts to have yet another reason to love something, and to be grateful.

The walk back to the village from our overnight *pondok* was about five hours, and we even eventually found something that looked distinctly and reassuringly like a real trail. When you have not eaten for a long time, you tend to start fantasizing about food. So, there on the walk back on that second day--tired, wet, and hungry--I started to fantasize about--what else?! Now back here in the village, I am still envisioning those beautiful rows of colorfully wrapped bars. What will it be first: Dark, Almond Toffee, or Milk, San Juan Sea Salt? My own final little chapter in the story of salvation by chocolate awaits...

Marcy Summers
Director, Alliance for Tompotika Conservation (AITo)
marcy@tompotika.org

