

## AlTo Update October 2019: For Want of a Shovel

I come from the Global Consumer class. We tend to be inordinately fond of our tools, gadgets, and gear. We have much to learn from our villager partners in Tompotika.

Last week, four of us--three AlTo staff plus Yudil, a local villager, landowner in the area, and key AlTo ally--made a return trip to Panganian Maleo Nesting Ground. AlTo newly acquired this site in May 2019, when we purchased the beachside nesting ground and its environs from four local landowners. Over time, we plan to clear overgrown invasive vegetation in and around the nesting ground, clean up trash, and plant trees and shrubs of various kinds to make the site more friendly to nesting endangered maleo birds. This was our second work party, after May.

This time I came better prepared. Last May, five of us worked for several hours clearing and uprooting vegetation here without gloves, and given that one of the main invasive shrubs we are trying to clear packs wicked quarter-inch thorns, my hands and arms were pretty beat up by the time we were through. This time, I had brought with me from the US three brand-new pairs of work gloves. As we dismounted our motorbikes at the trailhead to Panganian, I distributed the gloves. A pair of mediums each to Yudil and to Agus, AlTo's Program Coordinator, and the one pair of smalls I split one glove each between myself and new AlTo apprentice Linda. "Thank you!" said everyone enthusiastically. Agus immediately pulled his gloves on and stretched his fingers admiringly. Linda put her one glove in her pocket. And Yudil opened the carrier compartment of his motorbike and very carefully put his gloves inside.

Upon arrival at the nesting ground, we set right to it, pulling up smaller shrubs, and revisiting large shrubs that we had cut back in May, but that were too firmly rooted to pull up at that time. Now, weakened by that pruning and the many weeks of drought we've had lately, we hoped to be able to get them out.

On my knees, I started to loosen the soil around the roots of one such shrub with my hands. My one hand protected by its glove, I could dig my fingers boldly down under and around roots, and grip and haul on the thorny stems with impunity. My other hand, soft and pink, which spends more time at the keyboard than in the garden, had to work more gingerly. I was making progress; the roots were beginning to emerge, but the shrub was still a long way from being ready to come out.

I was glad of my one glove; a second would have been even better. But what I really want, I immediately thought, is a shovel. With a shovel I could really get that extra soil out of the way. I could just sever the roots I couldn't remove. I could get off my knees, put my back into the job, and hog this shrub outta there quickly and efficiently.

But we didn't have a shovel. In prior years, I used to try to keep a set of tools and gear at our nearby camp: shovel, rake, pickaxe--just a few basic tools that I wanted us to be able to use when needed to dig post-holes, clear debris from the nesting grounds, that sort of thing. But the tools regularly went missing, no matter how much effort we put into trying to guard them or lock them up. Or, even if we managed to hang onto them, they would break quickly or rust, often the products of slap-dash manufacturing with poor-quality materials. With no trash disposal around here, their



*Yudil left his gloves carefully tucked away throughout the workday.*

useless carcasses--a toothless rake, a broken pickaxe--would lie around, mocking us. And ultimately I realized that, just to keep what was--in our rural Indonesian context--a special set of tools and gear ready and in good repair, we would have to put a huge amount of our organizational time, energy, and attention into only that. Was that the main thing we wanted to become in the world: Gear Minders? And this, in the name of *conservation*? In this mostly Have-Not context, did we really want to pay that price to be Haves?

So, we didn't have a shovel. And, hankering after that shovel we didn't have, I paused to look around. A few yards away on my left, Yudil, with his bare hands and the one tool he keeps strapped around his waist at all times--his machete--was smoothly and efficiently pulling up the most immovable shrubs. And on my right, there was Linda, our new apprentice, native of a village nearby. Linda had found a large stick, had asked Yudil to sharpen it with his machete, and was using the stick and her bare hands to loosen roots, her one glove set aside carefully on top of a bush, unused. Linda and I were about the same task, but with her stick, Linda was making much better headway than was I. While I fumbled, tugged, and favored my ungloved hand, Linda made herself a digging stick, used it efficiently, and made short work of a dozen shrubs, smiling all the while. Me, I was doing my task, but yearning for something else, something not here. I yearned for a shovel because it's what I was used to; I knew it existed--somewhere else. It wasn't because I really needed it, or because it was the only or even the best way to do the job at hand.

For, behold the humble stick: ubiquitous, elegant, versatile, durable, effective, free, thief-spurned, biodegradable. It was time to try a new tool.

When we finished for the day, there were still a few shrubs that expert stick-wielder Linda--and, in the end, not even Agus or Yudil--could pull out; these were simply too big and too deeply rooted, and would need a few months more to come out after cutting. But, I realized, that's probably for the best. The work of conservation is measured in years, not months, and

in fact we have found that too-sudden changes at their nesting ground are stressful for maleos. For maleos, who need all the consideration we can give them, gradual is gentler.

And me? For want of a shovel, I am learning to love a stick. Yes, AlTo's partnership model of conservation sometimes means outsiders bringing in new tools, methods and ideas to our local community partners. More often, it means both partners working together to find a third, new way of doing things. But also, very often, when you hush up and pay attention, it means discovering that the way folks do things locally is already good and right, just exactly the way it is.

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