

ALTO Update, February 2020: A Tale of Two Poachers



Lodin



Ogam

There are a hundred reasons to stop the illegal taking of maleo eggs. Indeed, it is the only way that complete extinction of the endangered maleo will be avoided. But on the other hand, the question is always raised: if poaching stops, what about the people (generally, men) who have spent countless hours and days of their lives, usually over the course of years, learning to locate and dig up these eggs? What about the income, or sometimes the direct nourishment, that they and their families have gained from selling or consuming the maleo's enormous eggs? Most people in rural Sulawesi where maleo eggs are taken are poor. How can we justify the hardship they will face if this source of income is lost to them?

Lodin's is a classic story. In the survey of all Sulawesi maleo nesting grounds that the ALTO team has just completed, we have seen his tale repeated over and over. Now in his 40's, Lodin grew up learning to harvest maleo eggs with his father and other village men at the maleo nesting grounds that spanned the sunny beach on the western Sulawesi coast where he grew up. Sometimes people had a dim realization that harvesting maleo eggs was illegal (it has been since at least 1970), but since the laws were never discussed

or enforced, no one thought anything of it. When Lodin was a child, he describes the beach as "black" with maleos--scores or even hundreds of maleo pairs busily laying and burying their eggs in the bright sand. "There were so many maleos, you couldn't see the sand!" he remembers. Lodin's father and other village men were able to make a brisk business of digging up and selling the eggs, which are prized as a luxury food, rather like caviar. For some, harvesting maleo eggs was even their primary means of support. Each day the men would go, take as many eggs as they could find, and come home grateful for it.

But as Lodin grew older, the maleos on his beach steadily grew fewer. Where before, Lodin and his comrades could each easily get 10-20 eggs a day, now they could only get three or four. And still the maleos declined. Some of his comrades gave it up: too much time spent searching for too little yield. They moved on to fishing or farming like most of their neighbors, only digging for maleo eggs if they happened past the sign of a freshly-dug nest in the sand.

With the passing years, the numbers of maleos continued to dwindle, and with them the poachers. Maleo numbers shrank to only a few pairs each day, then not every day, then only one pair, and only very occasionally. Still, Lodin continued to check each day, and despite maleos' uncanny ability to hide their egg within the nest mound, any time he saw one, he almost always got his egg. He was proud of his abilities: digging maleo eggs was a difficult skill, he'd learned how from his dad, and here in his village they had always had the tradition of taking maleo eggs "*sepuasnya*," as much as they liked.

Finally, however, the maleos stopped coming altogether. Lodin got the last egg about two years ago; when the ALTO team visited his village recently, he showed us the spot of the last maleo nest. Lodin is a coconut farmer now, and he's sad that there are no more maleos in his region. He misses them. The bright warm village beach is still there, but it is now empty of maleos.



Photo: Kevin Schaefer

In Taima village, on the other side of Sulawesi, Ogam's story begins just like Lodin's. He, too, grew up digging maleo eggs at the nearby nesting ground with other village men. He, too, watched and kept digging as maleo numbers dwindled over the years. He, too, honed his skills at harvesting them, relished the taste of maleo eggs, and relied on the income he received from their sale. And Ogam, too, now digs maleo eggs no more.

But Ogam's story has a very different ending from Lodin's. Because in 2006, when maleos at his nesting ground had dwindled to just a few pairs, foreign conservation biologist Marcy Summers happened through his village, and village leaders asked her for help to halt their maleos' decline. Rather against Ogam's wishes, a village majority opted to work with what became the ALTO alliance to begin following the law, and end the taking of maleo eggs. Ogam then had the option of working with the ALTO team and being paid as a guard, but the truth is, he was disgruntled at the whole plan, and pursued other income sources instead. Actually, he admits, by the time the ALTO program started in 2006, his income from maleo eggs had dwindled to next to nothing anyway. But still: he felt angry and sad at losing this tradition that he had carried on all his life, and his father and grandfathers before him.

The truth is that, any way you slice it, harvest of maleo eggs is going to end. That became inevitable when we humans let our populations keep growing exponentially to what is now approaching 8 billion globally. But what we still have a choice about is how and when it ends. It can end the way it did in Lodin's village: the maleo disappears completely, and with it the poaching of its eggs. Or, it can end the way it has in Ogam's village: before they were completely gone, the humans decided to end the egg poaching themselves, and keep their maleos.

That was in 2006. Since then, the cessation of poaching that the ALTO-Taima collaboration facilitated has resulted in a reversal of the maleo's decline, their numbers quadrupling since the project began. The villagers--including virtually all the former poachers--are happy too; 94% expressed support for the project in a survey last year, and in September 2019 the collaboration agreement was easily renewed. Even Ogam supported the renewal. Back in 2006, when his neighbors forced him to stop poaching, Ogam surely never thought that 13 years later he'd have fully embraced the decision, saying: "I support it [the collaboration agreement]. I think it's good for the maleo, and it's good for us."

For maleo, as for so many of earth's ills, we humans still have a choice. Perhaps remembering Lodin's and Ogam's stories can help us can help us make the right one.

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