

AlTo Update, March 2020: As if the whole world depended on it

No creature is there crawling on the earth,  
Nor any bird that wings its flight,  
But they are nations like unto yourselves.

--the Koran, Surah 6:38

It's sea turtle season in Tompotika right now.

Every night, mother green, hawksbill, and olive ridley turtles haul themselves laboriously up onto the beach to lay their eggs in the warm sand. And 6-8 weeks later--if the mothers have been lucky enough to lay on AlTo's protected beaches--those eggs will hatch.

Baby turtles usually hatch out at night, or very early in the morning. Synchronized in their emergence, the magic moment for an underground nestful of hatchlings will suddenly arrive, and one after another a rapid, steady stream of tiny flailing turtle bodies will start erupting out of the sand and making their way down the beach, straight to the shoreline.



Noval Suling

The rapidity with which it all happens is startling. With front and back flippers flying, the hatchlings' wee bodies make a faint clacking noise as they move in unison across the sand, looking and sounding for all the world like an army of frenetic wind-up toys bent headlong on the sea: focused, driven, oblivious of all else.

Meanwhile, all around the world, the Nation of Humans is experiencing an epidemic of disease. The disease originated in a bushmeat market, where human beings, which now number 7.8 billion worldwide, have made a standard practice of buying and selling the products of their ever-increasing intrusion into the ever-shrinking remaining fragments of natural habitats. This practice is decimating wildlife populations all over the world, driving once-common species (certain bats, rats, snakes) to rarity, and rare species (pangolins, tigers, rhinos) near or to extinction.

In the current case, as in a majority of recent epidemics (Ebola, SARS, bird flu), the new virus jumped from a wild species to a human bushmeat-consumer, and thence has spread easily through the multitudinous, closely-connected, and highly-mobile human societies that cover the planet. The practice of capturing and commodifying rare and threatened wildlife in bushmeat markets is only one of countless agonizing ways in which human habits are destroying the natural web of life of which we are a part, while simultaneously threatening our very lives as well.

In some parts of the world (China, Italy, Iran), many humans have already died. In other parts (United States, Pakistan, Peru), communities are in lockdown, trying to slow the spread of the virus in any way possible. Everywhere it hits, COVID-19 is causing tremendous disruption, hardship, and suffering. In Indonesia, the virus is spreading rapidly and inexorably across the archipelago.

As of this writing, COVID-19 is only just beginning to hit the Tompotika region. Central and regional government have instituted measures (curtailing travel, shortening business hours, rationing hand sanitizer) to hinder its spread, and the AITo team has also made many adjustments (field task restructuring, social distancing, worker support) that we hope will soften the COVID blow as it hits. Many of the villagers we partner so closely with are very vulnerable (poor access to medical care, difficulty of washing and disinfecting, heavy smokers), and, while close collaboration has always been AITo's hallmark, right now we are working hard at re-inventing partnership from a distance of two meters or more.

Many things just can't happen remotely. You can't protect a sea turtle beach via computer. But the strength of AITo's conservation work has always been that it is based

in local communities; now it is community members themselves who, more than ever, are taking the responsibility for walking the beaches, for discouraging poachers, for gently relocating and guarding turtle nests. No travel, no close interactions--only one person at a time, outdoors, loving nature, is required.

It will not be easy, but COVID-19 invites us--nay, requires us--as humans, to reinvent our lives, now, and for the world to come.

As the turtle hatchlings race down the beach, do they see the hard part coming? Do they realize how much their world is going to change? There comes a moment when the frontline of baby turtles meets the line of surf--the frothy white edge which they all must pass through in order to reach the waterworld beyond. In the next chapter, the rest of their lives will be lived in the ocean, in a dramatically different manner that they probably can't even imagine but will soon be busy inventing. Unflinching, one by one they dive into it.



Marcy Summers

That moment is dramatic, and the transition is tough. The force of even a puny wave makes the tiny hatchlings tumble and flip. At that moment of entering the water, they are stunned, tossed, submerged, churned at the water's edge. Some pass through it quickly, others are trapped, buffeted to and fro for some time in the waves. Every one of them struggles. Some of them don't make it. But all of them are transformed as they re-shape their lives in a new reality.

And in the end, most of the baby turtles will make it past this threshold, this difficult gateway to their new life. They will clear the turbulent surf zone, and enter the wide Ocean of Possibilities. They will learn to adapt, thrive, and relish a wholly different way of living on their planet. Individually and collectively, they will find their new place in the ever-changing web of life, creating their new Sea Turtle Nation with freshness, fervor, and faith in the future, as if the whole world depended on it.

Because it does.



Jez Bird

"And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And

listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently. And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal. And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed."

--Kitty O'Meara

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