

AITo Update, July 2021: The Bat Defender

Pak Warman, 54, is a fisherman in Taima village, Tompotika. He and his wife *Ibu Yati* have five children that they have raised in a simple hut on the ocean shore, where they look across at Tangkuladi Island. Tangkuladi serves as a daytime roosting site for thousands of flying foxes, or fruit bats. Bats, when removed from their natural environment—when hunted, stressed, and brought to markets as bushmeat—are believed to have given rise to zoonotic diseases like SARS and Covid-19.



Warman recited his poem before an audience of hundreds of villagers. Photo: Keith Brofsky

While it is improving in some parts of the world, the global Covid-19 pandemic is raging worse than ever right now in Indonesia. With the Delta variant spreading rapidly and generally low rates of vaccination, folks are very vulnerable, and many are sickening. Hospitals are overwhelmed, and, despite heroic efforts by healthcare workers doing everything possible under difficult conditions, people are dying. For humans in Indonesia right now, it is a life or death situation. Warman, his family, and most of his neighbors, unvaccinated and living in close quarters, remain very much at risk.

Warman and his family own land on Tangkuladi Island. In Islam, consumption of bats is *haram* (forbidden), so most locals do not eat them. But Christian minorities outside the area may eat bat meat with relish; hunting is also fuelled by a folk belief that consumption of a bat's heart can cure asthma. Thus, until 2014, the bats of

Tangkaladi Island were routinely hunted for cash and shipped away to bushmeat markets. In addition, many villagers consider bats pests: most folks are unaware of the critical role bats play in maintaining tropical forests, and focus instead on bats' consumption of fruit, which makes up part of their diet. In fact, "Tangkaladi"—the name of the bat island—means "locust" in the local language. Historically, bats in Tompotika have had all too few friends in the human community.



Tangkaladi Island is the only protected roost site anywhere for the Sulawesi Flying Fox, *Acerodon celebensis*, which is listed as Vulnerable to extinction. Photo: Noval Suling

But in 2014, working with Warman and his neighbors in the village, AITo secured a conservation lease protecting Tangkuladi, and all bat hunting ended there.

Warman is not the first person you'd expect to show up as one of bats' most ardent and eloquent advocates. He has only a 6th-grade education. He had some doing to find a piece of paper to write his composition on. And until his friends at AITo gave him a pair of reading glasses, it was hard for him to see to write at all. But being a deep thinker has nothing to do with those things, and back in 2015, unprompted by anything but his own personal desire to speak out for the bats, Warman wrote the poem below, translated from Indonesian.

Warman is one who perceives that our fellow creatures, the bats, have already long been in a life-or-death situation at the hands of human hunters. The prescience and empathy in Warman's poem are particularly moving now, a few years later, when

those activities have brought us all—bats and humans alike—into a life-or-death reckoning with the consequences of our human actions.

In these times, may the wisdom and compassion of a humble Tompotika fisherman inspire us all to "learn anew".

The Island of Bats
by M. Warman

I am a bat
who inhabits the island.
Every evening, my comrades and I
fly to the forest and fields
to search for our life's sustenance and
in the morning, we
go home together to dangle
ourselves under tree branches.
Oh, dear nature lovers, protect
us from the calamities
that are created by humans who
have no mercy upon us.
Please understand that we are animals that are useful
to the world community.
Because without us and those like us
there would be no trees to
inhale and restore poisoned oxygen [carbon]
every night, and it is sure to befall that
various kinds of illnesses
would come to afflict humanity.

Oh, dear intellectuals
and people who understand,
Don't think that we are locusts
that cause losses to humanity.
It's not only humanity
that feels aggrieved.
We too are suffering a great loss.
We may even go extinct
forever.
There has not yet been a single human being
that can prove that I, the bat, am the one
that ate the banana, cashew, papaya
that belongs to him.

DADA DAAH
Goodbye

Feckless human that
Hunts us
Someday
We will all learn
Anew through hands
that love us.



Tangkuladi Island at sunset, from *The Bat, The Virus, and the Forest*, watercolor by AITo Conservation Officer and Artist Ritfan Djano.

Marcy Summers
Director, Alliance for Tompotika Conservation (AITo)

