



Alliance for Tompotika Conservation  
Aliansi Konservasi Tompotika

## AlTo Update, September 2021: This is How It Grows

Last month, AlTo turned fifteen years old. It was August 1, 2006 when residents of Tompotika's Taima village joined with conservationists from within and beyond Indonesia in what became the Alliance for Tompotika Conservation (AlTo), and, together, kicked off the first successful community-based effort to conserve the endangered maleo bird. Now fifteen years later, that effort has succeeded beyond anyone's imagination, maleos in Taima have increased fourfold, and AlTo's numerous other conservation programs—for forests, sea turtles, bats, and more—are thriving.

AlTo's successes in the field with critters and natural areas energize and encourage us. But in the end, what is really driving the extinction of species, climate change, and many other forms of planetary destruction is *human* behaviors, and the attitudes that underlie them. It's the conservation ethic—or lack thereof—that is reflected in the way we humans live our lives on this precious planet. Where does a strong conservation ethic come from, and how do we build it?

One of AlTo's best early allies in Taima village was a man called Roma.



August 1, 2006: Roma (in red shorts) and other villagers return to their homes after joining with AlTo to launch the new maleo conservation project.  
Photo: Steve Caldwell

A smart, skilled, and energetic farmer and fisherman, Roma had grown up harvesting maleo eggs with his father, but in 2006, having watched maleo numbers dwindle while human pressures increased, he saw the necessity of ending egg poaching to avoid the maleo's extinction. Roma, like others in his village, was willing to see the effects of his behaviors, and open to giving this conservation effort a try. (Notice the irony, feel the inspiration: unpretentious Indonesian villagers, who have so [materially] little, were willing to confront the effects of their lifestyle and behaviors on the planet, and change them. For those of us who are members of the Global Consumer Class, and have so much: are we also willing to confront the effects of our lifestyles and behaviors on the planet, and change them? But that's another story.)



Roma, daughter Poni, and wife Ata at home, 2009. Photo: Robin Moore

In the years since 2006, as the fortunes of AITo's conservation efforts rose and fell with the tides of events, Roma became one of AITo's strongest and most effective allies. Highly respected by both his villager peers and his AITo collaborators, Roma has been an efficient team organizer, an honest advocate, a dedicated sea turtle hatchery manager, and a wise counsellor in countless local matters pertaining to conservation.

Over the years, Roma has embodied what a growing conservation ethic among villagers in a place like Tompotika looks like: it starts with a person's inborn love of nature and place, and is nurtured and strengthened with activities and knowledge that help it grow. Now in his 40s, Roma is a powerful advocate for conservation; he was even named a Disney "Conservation Hero" in 2013. And at the same time that all this has been going on, Roma and his wife Ata have been raising a family: a daughter, Poni, now aged 17, and a son, Fino, age 9.

In short, Roma is a model of what building a conservation ethic and constituency in Indonesia could look like. But here's the fun part: as wonderful as Roma is, his young daughter Poni has now just done him one better.

When Poni graduated from high school earlier this year, her parents expressed their hopes for her future career. "Go to the city," they said. "Learn computers. You can earn a good living that way." They had already made significant sacrifices for Poni's education, and wanted the very best for her future. But Poni would have none of it. Her ambition? She wanted to join AITo, and become a professional conservationist. "I want to become even smarter than Papa in the conservation of sea turtles, maleo, bats, and other wildlife... I want to learn the best techniques, and experience them directly—not just read books, or listen to others' experiences."



The face of conservation's future.

As Roma's child, Poni had grown up with care for nature in her bones; she was always going to be a strong member of Indonesia's budding conservation constituency. But for Poni, just voting "yes" on the next conservation decision while making money on a computer is not enough; for her, conservation has become a central goal in her life. Poni understands that loving wildlife in today's world means having to take action to conserve it, and she wants to be right in the middle of discovering how to do that. In her words, "I want to become as expert as *Ibu* Marcy in the field of conserving sea turtles, maleos, bats, and other wildlife. I want to learn about rare wildlife that we don't have in my village, and that I never learned about in school."

In June '21, Poni joined AITo's apprentice program, through which she'll try out the life of a conservation professional for six months before a decision is made about whether she'll join AITo's permanent staff. In her first few months with AITo, Poni has experienced challenging hikes to our field sites, getting soaked in the boat, and the occasional monotony of a week-long guard shift. "But I feel really cool because now I work for AITo."

Poni is part of a new generation in Tompotika—a generation coming of age with new attitudes and habits with respect to nature. Scan Tompotika's human landscape of hope, and one's gaze now rests not only on Roma, but on Poni, and growing ranks of young people like her. "Conservation is important, because it helps prevent the extinction of sea turtles, maleos, and other wildlife... and also raises the awareness of communities," says Poni. "I want to become the Director of AITo... and I want to learn how to conserve wildlife outside the country too."

We can think of nothing more exciting, for Tompotika and the world.

Marcy Summers

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