

AITo Update, May 2019: Life Amongst the Dead

What do you do if you're an endangered species, your numbers decimated by relentless poaching pressure from humans? If you're a bear, say, or a rhino, if you meet a hunter perhaps you might attempt to defend yourself and your babies. But if you're a maleo bird in Sulawesi--gentle, defenseless, and vulnerable--you have only one option: you must try to find a spot to lay your one precious egg in a place where humans won't dig it up.

Maleos can't lay their five-inch egg just anywhere. Maleo parents do not provide any incubation or care for their young once they have laid their egg; rather, they must seek out a place to lay their egg where it can be incubated in sand or soil warmed by geothermal heat or the sun. In former days, Sulawesi's thousands of miles of warm sandy beaches provided such places in abundance. But though it's been illegal for fifty years, most folks in Sulawesi are unaware of, or do not take seriously, the laws protecting maleos, and as a result, widespread overharvest by humans has reduced maleo populations, as well as the places where they nest, to a small fraction of their former numbers. So nowadays, about the only places where maleos still exist are places where *something*--a remote location, say, or organized protection, in the case of AITo's Tompotika sites--inhibits human poaching of the eggs.

In Tanjung Kramet, 300 miles from Tompotika, that something is the dearly departed. Tanjung Kramet is a small cemetery at the extreme tip of a quiet peninsula surrounded by mangroves. The soil in the area is sandy, warm, and easy to dig, and in former days, according to Abdul, 60, who has lived near here all his life, hundreds of maleos used to come every day to lay their eggs in sandy areas throughout the entire peninsula. Today, decades of human taking of their eggs has wiped out all maleo nesting in the rest of the peninsula and the broader region.



But not here amongst the dead. According to Abdul, maleos used to nest in the peninsula's open areas, avoiding all human structures, but over time they began to make a habit of nesting here at the cemetery, right amongst the graves. Today, if you wander amongst the stone- or tile-walled gravesites, here and there you will see the distinctive sign of maleo nests carefully dug alongside or even directly into the sandy surfaces of the graves. Though long gone from the rest of the peninsula, a few maleo pairs, stalwart and penetrating in their choice of bedfellows, still cling to existence here in the cemetery.



A few weeks back, a maleo pair laid their egg here in the white grave.

Even here, they are not entirely safe.

Herwin, 52, another local resident, says most people respect the dead, and won't dig for maleo eggs in a human grave. Maleos are very clever, he reminds us matter-of-factly, and the maleo parents hide their egg well within their large nesting pit. You would really have to dig around and disturb a great deal of the grave to find it.

But at times, Herwin says, it happens that a new grave has to be dug on top of an older one. Burial space, after all, is limited, and people keep dying. Thus, while at their work, sometimes lucky community grave-diggers will uncover a prize--a maleo egg amongst the bleached bones of the human departed. "It's almost the same size as a human skull!" he says with a chuckle. Of course in this case, he says, no one would scruple to take the egg. And in any case, Herwin continues, maleo eggs are rare these days, but if you really want one, anyone can still find them in the cemetery if you look hard enough. The important thing, he says, is "Just lay the bones straight again when you're finished."

The maleo has sometimes been called the "Resurrection Bird," or the "Lazarus Bird." "Its grave is its birthplace," observers have remarked, noting the maleo chick's unique origin in a hole in the ground. Here, protected by the invisible guardianship of the souls of the departed, the grave-chicks of Tanjung Kramet give new meaning to this notion. But it will take some help from the living--practical, respectful protection--for the maleo to evade extinction in the long run.

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