

AITo Update, June 2020: A Bright Star



Dr. Cliff Rice is a wildlife biologist, recently retired as a research scientist with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and a member of AITo's U.S. Board of Directors. In February of this year, he made a visit to Tompotika, including AITo's premier maleo nesting ground at Libuun, Taima village. Upon his return, Cliff wrote the following letter to AITo's Indonesian field staff.

Dear AITo Staff,

As I think you know, I am a member of the AITo US Board of Directors and I came to Tompotika this past February to see AITo's programs first hand. But, right now I am writing to you as an individual, not as a board member.

I first heard of maleo when I came to Sulawesi as a young man – about 35 years ago. I was on a kind of prospecting trip, looking for a possible research project, so I spent several days traveling through Lore Lindu National Park, trying to imagine what a research project on anoa [Sulawesi's dwarf buffalo] might look like. Along the way, we passed a geo-thermally heated maleo nesting ground and my guides told me what it was.

Even in those days, maleos were in steep decline, so although no research project was ever developed from that trip, the decline, and it seemed, probable extinction of this fantastic bird became one of many depressing stories of nature's long-term loss in exchange for human material benefit in the short term. Throughout my career in wildlife, I have managed to do some things that have promoted conservation and also have had periods where I have been able to do very little. But, during that whole time, those of us who care about such things have watched species too numerous to count decline, forest being burned or chopped down, coral reef bleaching – a litany disasters in a darkening world.

It was the prospect of changing this pattern that made me glad to be part of AITo as a member of the board. So, I already knew about the successful rehabilitation of the Libuun nesting ground – I had seen photos and the data. Still, I was unprepared for the impact that actually seeing the nesting had on me. It was just beautiful! To see all those birds out there digging determinedly to deposit their egg in the seemingly most unlikely of nests – something they had been doing all over Sulawesi for thousands of years. But not so much recently. It brought tears to my eyes. When it comes to conservation, Libuun is a bright star in a dark sky.

I know each of you spends so much time on watch at Libuun that you have become accustomed to its special brightness. I also know that keeping hourly logs is tedious and boring work. So, I just wanted to thank you for all the boring, tedious work you have done (and the rest as well), because being able to see Libuun as it is today was a moving experience that I am so grateful for, and I will remember it for as long as I am able to remember anything.

Sincerely,

Cliff Rice



Maleo, watercolor by Yudin Npiah, age 17



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