



## ALTO Update, March 2022: YES for Forests

Yes, his name is Yes. Yesaya, to be official – but he's always gone by Yes, or, as he loves to joke: "No No. Yes Yes!" Yes is like a human dynamo: slight of build but strong as an ox and endlessly energetic. He has a wide and ready smile, revealing teeth stained bright red from chewing betel nut – a widespread practice in eastern Indonesia where he was born, and one he brought with him upon migrating to Sulawesi as a teenage lad in the 1990s. Now married with five children, Yes makes his home in ALTO's partner village, Tanah Merah. He wears a silver cross around his neck, a warm black balaclava on his head (yep, even in the tropics), and he has a frequent, raucous, and infectious laugh. Hang out with Yes for long enough and you too will find yourself regaled with stories and the target of impish teasing.

Last month, a group of ten of us – ALTO staff and local partners – spent nine days exploring the forest in the interior heart of the Tompotika peninsula. This large patch of primary forest – about 830 km<sup>2</sup> (320 mi<sup>2</sup>) – is the backbone upon which most life in this region draws its shape and its support; the health of the air, the water, the soil, the plants, and the human and non-human animals all depend on the health of this forest. The interior of this forest is rarely traveled by humans, but is a stronghold for a great deal of rare wildlife like critically-endangered maleo birds, anoas, and tarsiers; a priceless bastion and refuge for the unique Sulawesi biodiversity that is so rapidly disappearing from our planet, not to mention a climate-stabilizing carbon sink.



***The consummate woodsman.*** Yes spends a great deal of his time in Tompotika's forests. He carries only the most minimal gear of his own; most of the stuff on his back is for the expedition. Photo: Sandhy Bawotong

And it is facing a new threat. Fueled by the world's booming demand for batteries for electric vehicles, at least ten new nickel mines are being planned for this area – nickel mines which start with building roads and bulldozing huge patches of native rainforest, and continue with producing air and water pollution, soil erosion, dust and mud, human health hazards, habitat destruction, social upheaval, and all manner of other ills. It's questionable whether the benefits are worth the costs for the human community; there's no question that it's pure disaster for all the rest of non-human life.

Here at AITo, we aim to prevent the worst of that disaster for humans and non-humans in Tompotika. So, working together with local people like Yes, we hope to facilitate the creation of one or more new protected areas in which Tompotika's magnificent rainforest will remain healthy and standing forever. That's what has brought us on this nine-day expedition; we need to learn more about how both wildlife and humans use this forest in order to best ensure its protection.

One of Yes' main sources of income is collecting dammar, a resin from the Amboina Pitch Tree (*Agathis dammara*) that is used in paints and varnishes. Like other local so-called "non-timber forest products" such as rattan, wild honey, or palm fronds, the pitch or dammar can be collected carefully and responsibly without damaging the tree, the forest, or other (present or future, human or non-) folks' use of it – that is, it can be harvested sustainably.



**Greed kills.** Yes knows how to keep his damar cuts small and infrequent enough to keep the tree healthy. Photo: M.Summers

The key, as Yes explains, is that people have to be wise and exercise restraint. The trees are sensitive living things. Local dammar harvesters divide up and allocate sections of the forest to reduce pressure on individual trees. You must not harvest too often, or too extensively, or from a tree that is too young, too old, or too weak – if you do, the tree will die, and everybody loses. But, on a healthy tree, you make a cut across the bark with your machete, and then you go away. You allow the tree to "bleed," and the resin to harden, for a couple of months. Then – and only then – you may come back, harvest the resin, and make a new cut. In



this way, an individual dammar tree will remain healthy and yield a harvest for decades. Yes collects the dammar in a plastic sack and carries it on his back; from a handful of trees he may get 20 kilos (44 lbs.) or more, which he'll haul 20 km (12 mi.) or more back to the village and the dammar dealer.

Meanwhile, the dammar tree goes on living its life in the forest, providing food for insects and fungi, homes for birds and monkeys, squirrels and civets, stability to the soil, oxygen to the air, and so much more. The dammar tree is not only the source of livelihood for Yes' and many other local families; it is an essential part of the web of life in this tropical rainforest ecosystem. In a hundred different ways, the Amboina Pitch Tree is a deeply good and precious thing. And yet so far, it has not been enough to earn our respect and conservation. Destruction by mining and other human activities have caused the Amboina Pitch Tree to decline, and the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) has declared it as Vulnerable to extinction.



***All you need.*** Our group packed in tents and cookstoves, but local dammar-collectors like Yes eat forest plants and crayfish from streams like this, and make shelters from forest palms. Photo: Sandhy Bawotong

The dammar tree is only one of innumerable deeply good and precious things that AITo hopes to protect by protecting Tompotika's native rainforest. In last month's expedition, Yes and our other local partners had the chance to explore areas of the forest where they'd never been before, while AITo staff began the process of documenting patterns in biodiversity and traditional human uses of the area. Yes learned that the dammar trees he relies on to support his family grow only in certain areas of Tompotika's forests – much the same areas, it turns out, as where the mining companies have been most actively exploring. If nickel mines go in here, virtually every living

thing that the forest supports within those areas will be destroyed, and the damage will continue for miles beyond.



It is almost impossible to hold in one's mind all that is at stake in the face of rainforest destruction. In truth, even the shared pool of our traditional and scientific human knowledge about this forest only scratches the surface of the learning and experience that awaits us there if we let it live on, and approach it with respect.

Dammar is his livelihood, but it is only one aspect of Yes' love for this forest that he calls home. During last month's expedition, our team of ten walked, we observed, we talked, and we simply enjoyed being together, surrounded by nothing but trees and rivers and critters and the peace of the forest. One afternoon, Yes and I were chatting about his life in the forest – the dammar, the crayfish, the way he likes to go out at night, in the dark, to listen to the frogs and catch eels. As we gaze out together across a hillside of huge trees, twining undergrowth, and draping vines, cackling parrots overhead, I ask him, "What will you do, Yes, if this forest is destroyed for a nickel mine?" Yes looks straight into my eyes, and his normally merry expression turns solemn. "That's just it. What, indeed?"

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