

AIto Update, May 2014: Listening Hard

Sulawesi's fruit bats have had a tough time of it lately. Fruit bats, also called flying foxes, play an essential role in the health of native forests--through pollinating trees, dispersing seeds, and the like--but this role is little known nor appreciated by humans, who may see the bats as pests, or hunt them for bushmeat. And, although few local Tompotikans eat much bat meat, the enormous and growing appetite for bushmeat in the neighboring province of North Sulawesi has created a seemingly insatiable demand for bats on the commercial market. Legal protections have not kept pace, with the result that uncontrolled bat hunting in recent years is causing decimation of Sulawesi's bat populations.



Sulawesi Flying Foxes and other bats rely on Tangkuladi for a safe roost. Photo: Robin Moore

Tompotika's bats have been vulnerable to this heavy hunting pressure as well, such that almost all the bats on the small bat roosting island, Tangkuladi, had either been killed or fled prior to last September. At that point, happily, AIto was able to secure a conservation lease from the island's landowners, and for the first time, bats (and also nesting sea turtles) had a place where they could be safe.

The conservation lease made a huge, nearly instantaneous difference, and, to everyone's great joy, the island is once again populated by thousands of roosting fruit bats (though these are new immigrants--it will be many years before bat populations can actually recover).

But there was one fly in the ointment. After first promising (albeit somewhat reluctantly) to give up bat hunting, a few months ago, Rusdin--the main local man heading up bat hunts on the island--made moves to cancel his side of the conservation bargain, and re-install his cruel hunting hooks and nets on Tangkuladi. AIto staff were dismayed and at a loss: what could be done to persuade him to keep his promise and maintain protections? If Rusdin stopped, the area's main bat hunting ring would be ended; but if he started hunting again, others would certainly follow.



Head Bat Hunter, Rusdin.
Photo: Oliver Hensel-Brown

A series of meetings and conversations began. For a long while, Rusdin was sullen, combative, shifty: he blamed others; he asserted impossibilities; he denied things previously agreed to. It wasn't easy, talking with him. Rusdin has a history of this sort of thing, other villagers said--you can't trust him. Just forget the whole thing--it's hopeless.

Rusdin told us that a bat dealer was planning to come on Monday to buy his bats, and he planned to catch as many as he could in the next few days. He can get good money for bats, even if his take isn't what it used to be. He didn't care about the island's protection. And indeed, things seemed very bleak once again for the bats of Tangkuladi.

But Indonesians are often very patient people, and the AITo team decided to keep returning to sit and talk with Rusdin, over and over. Just to sit and talk, and mostly to listen. And as we did so, under all the words it became clear that even Rusdin himself didn't feel good about going back to bat hunting. There was a part of him that really seemed to want to join in the conservation effort--to protect those cool bats, and to belong to that something bigger that the AITo team already seemed to be a part of. Let us sit together a bit longer.

Finally, Rusdin lowered his voice, asking the AITo staff to move off with him to a place we could talk privately. When we were out of sight of other villagers, it came out: Rusdin didn't really want to hunt bats anymore--he'd really like to find a way to stop. But--he was embarrassed about this--he had a big debt to the commercial Bat Boss that he had to pay off, which he had incurred for the purchase of the fishing lines, hooks, nets, and other equipment that he used to catch the bats. Unless he caught some more bats, he would have no way to pay off the Big Boss. He felt trapped. He didn't really want to hunt bats anymore, but he saw no alternative. (Or maybe AITo could buy him a boat and fix him up with a new fishing career.)

Ah, so this is what was at the bottom of it. With some more discussion, we came up with a plan.

Two days later, the AITo team returned to Taima with a truck. Piled in front of Rusdin's house was a big heap of bat hunting equipment: lines, hooks, nets, bat storage boxes, a chain saw, and more. It was weapons buy-back time.

AITo's purchase of the equipment was paid and receipted; Rusdin now had enough to pay his debt to the Big Boss. From now on, with AITo about to take away the hunting equipment, no one in the area--not Rusdin nor anyone else--would be able to hunt bats anymore. And on the morrow we would return to work out a schedule for Rusdin and others to share guard duty at Tangkuladi.

And so we loaded up the truck with the weapons of the hunt; soon afterwards, they were destroyed. And in the following days, Rusdin underwent a rather miraculous transformation.



Rusdin (far R) and AITo staff (L to R) Sandhy, Pandji, and Marcy gather up the hunting equipment. Photo: Oliver Hensel-Brown

No longer the sullen outsider, whatever that bigger thing that ALTo is a part of, Rusdin now belonged to it too, and he threw himself into it with gusto. In the following days, other conservation discussions in the village found him right in the middle, suddenly one of ALTo's strongest advocates. His position in the village meant that people took notice of his opinion; many commented on his radical change, and it helped tip the balance for conservation. And in the weeks since, Rusdin has been Tangkuladi's most enthusiastic patroller.

Sometimes, we had seen, just really hard listening is what is needed. And in fact, after loading up the hunting equipment in the village, when we got quiet and listened hard for a bit longer, across the water on Tangkuladi island we were pretty sure we could hear the bats cheering.

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