

AIto Update August 2014: Art Has Changed Things

Why does AIto sponsor Art for Conservation projects? Are they effective in outreach? Are they just a bit of frivolity, couched in the language of saving the world? Are they prudent use of scarce conservation funds? What difference do they make in the real lives of people and other creatures? As with all our programs, we on the AIto team like to check back periodically and take stock of how things have gone, with frank discussions and a long-term view.

Take the 2012 Mural Project, for example. In this project, a team of international volunteers joined AIto staff and villagers to create huge wildlife-themed mural paintings on exterior school walls in two of our Tompotika partner villages. After a week of intense, shoulder-to-shoulder work in each village, the two beautiful murals were unveiled to large village crowds and high spirits all around. (See AIto Updates from [Dec 2012](#) and [Jan 2013](#), and the [Feb 2013 Newsletter](#) for further details.) When the new murals were completed, everyone from kids to government officials, grandmothers to fishermen hailed the new creations.



Schoolkids, village leaders, and AIto volunteers all worked together in creating the Teku mural. Photo: Mark Kinney

"Thank you for making our school beautiful," said an official delegation of schoolkids.

But what about now, nearly two years down the road? For starters, happily the murals are still alive and well. In Taima village, the mural still stands bright and shining, looking pretty much as pristine as the day it was finished. In Teku, the school wall was older, and some chipping of the plaster has occurred in two spots, which has required repair--but the painting is otherwise intact and vibrant as ever.

According to locals, the murals have become prized elements in each village, and for the region. Young people ride motorbikes four hours from the nearest city, Luwuk, just to take their photos in front of the murals. Cars driving through the village slow down as they pass, and often folks will stop and get out to have a look. In Taima village, the regional government Tourism department has even constructed a small guest house in hopes that visitors will come to see the mural and the nearby Tangkuladi Bat Island that AIto has recently protected. And village heads in at least four other villages in the region have expressed a desire for their own murals.



(Right) Education Head Pak Haswin Hanah describes to AITo Director Marcy Summers how he teaches with the Taima mural (Left). Photos: Oliver Hensel-Brown (R); Mark Kinney (L)

Then there's the feedback from Pak Haswin, Taima's Head of Education. He made a point of relating how he regularly takes the village schoolchildren outside for a lesson in front of the mural. "We talk about the anoa, and the babirusa, and the animals that they don't see around here anymore. Let it not be that those animals become extinct! And we talk about the sea turtles, and the bats, and the maleos, because the children should be proud of them--this is our natural heritage! We must protect it!" In the last year or two, Pak Haswin has become a strong advocate for conservation in the village, and that's made an important, immediate difference in helping to push forward the various field conservation efforts underway with locals. And, we'll wager, the message he delivers--and the daily reminder of it on their beautiful school wall--will make a long-term difference in the values and attitudes of his pupils.

It's very hard to measure, or put a price on, changing people's hearts and minds. As one skeptic pointed out, "You could take the money spent on this project and give everyone in the village three dollars instead. That would buy a good meal or two, or a school uniform, for every family." Absolutely true: these are poor villages, and there are indeed people in them who struggle just to feed their families.

But there's another thing, too. The mural paintings, and the process of their creation, have brought a lot of people a lot of *joy*. In a world where so much of the news about our Earth is grim and sad, and many of us feel helpless to change things, for the scores of people who took part in the creation of the murals, there was a great sense of empowerment, and just plain fun. Side by side, people from very different walks came together and worked hard on behalf of something larger: the planet and the neighbor creatures we all share. The impact of the art works that these folks created has both spread and endured; every time a visitor passes by, or a child looks up, another ray of Earthly joy and beauty beams out and hits home. And that's no small thing. Perhaps our collective works like these murals, themselves, can--as Gandhi put it--"Be the change you wish to see in the world."

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