

## AITo Update March 2016: Beyond Elections

It's true all over the world: elected officials—and their respective government appointees—come and go. In the nearly ten years that AITo has been advocating for nature in Tompotika, we have worked directly with dozens of elected and appointed government officials at the village, district, regency,



Elections in Indonesia are highly contested affairs, with dozens of parties and candidates for each seat. Photo: Noval Suling

months, for instance, AITo has been contacted by the offices of both the incumbent Bupati (chief executive of the Banggai Regency, of which Tompotika is a part), and, after the recent election, the new Bupati-elect. In the last decade, AITo has built a reputation regionally for being fair, open, and helpful; though differing widely in their politics, both Bupatis were in agreement in soliciting AITo's assistance for information and advice on environmental matters.

Happily, the conservation influence has not been limited to information only; government agencies' business-as-usual has changed in recent years. When AITo first started working in Tompotika, for instance, the local fisheries and wildlife management offices had never once interfered with the widespread but illegal public practice of capturing, selling, and consuming sea turtles (not to mention their eggs). AITo started raising awareness in villages, persuading captors to release their turtles, and cultivating positive working relationships with these officials. Eventually, that led to regular instances in which officials from both agencies cooperated with us in confiscating and

provincial, and national levels. Some of them have been supportive of our efforts on behalf of wild nature, others less so. Obviously, it's much easier to forward a conservation agenda when those with political power in the relevant arena are sympathetic, and although AITo doesn't get involved in elections, we certainly take an interest in them.

But the true test of how well the conservation agenda that AITo promotes is received and integrated into Tompotika's culture is not in how well any particular official does or doesn't support that conservation agenda. Rather, it is in how much of the conservation agenda—and concrete conservation action—takes place *regardless* of who happens to be in power. So, AITo puts a great deal of attention into building relationships, knowledge, and skills amongst our government partners, whoever they are, and starting from whatever starting point they are at right now.

That takes time. But in this, AITo's tenth year, it's gratifying to notice some of the ways in which that time and attention has made a difference. In the last several



2013: AITo Director Marcy Summers and BKSDA official I Nyoman Ardika prepare to release a green turtle. Photo: Agustian Lava

releasing captive sea turtles that AITo identified. That's a good thing—dozens of sea turtles have been released, and, better yet, the practice of capturing them has markedly decreased in Tompotika.

But the most recent news is even better. Lately, it's been the wildlife management, fisheries, and forestry offices that have contacted AITo. Last month, Fisheries confiscated a sea turtle in the neighboring region of Pagimana—would AITo like to join in the formal ceremony of its release? Or another recent occasion: a man selling 25 green turtles off a boat nearby has been apprehended—where does AITo think the turtles should be released?

The best thing about these examples is that *AITo wasn't even involved*. The initiative was taken by others, with no pushing from AITo at all! Local government agencies did their jobs, the system worked the way it is supposed to, and endangered wildlife was saved. Sometimes, the most rewarding of all conservation activities is simply to stand back and cheer.



A mother turtle returns to the ocean after laying her eggs on a Tompotika beach. Photo: Pandji Kresno

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