

## AITo Update, May 2016: Recovery Happens

In conservation work, one gets accustomed to many losses. Tompotika is no exception: practically every time I visit the area, at intervals of every few months, I see a new patch of forest cleared, a new road heading into a previously-roadless area, a new stretch of beach built up. That's progress--at least the way human societies have tended to define it. But for those of us who pay attention to the plants and critters who are displaced in the process, it's wrenching. Every time.

I've known about the existence of this "industry road" for a long while. Local people all know about it, and it shows up on government-sanctioned maps, heading off toward the forest interior from the main coastal loop road: one of only a few such roads to pierce into this otherwise most pristine area of Tompotika. It was built, I'm told, in the early 2000's or before, by a logging company intent on removing large trees from the forest interior, and was indeed used for this for a while. But there are no villages back in there, no place that would have brought AITo in to do outreach in our decade of working here, and although we pass the junction where it meets the main road all the time, I've never followed it back to explore where it leads. Truth to tell, I've been afraid of what I would find: logging roads mean forests get cut, generally leaving huge swaths of blasted open debris. Erosion. Wildlife depauperation. And continuing removal of big trees and other marketable products far into the forest on either side of the road. In short, roads generally mean ongoing loss and devastation to the eyes of a nature lover. And a heart can only take so much. So, although part of me has been curious all these years, I've had to wait for the right time to steel myself to go back in there to see the area around the "industry road."

That time arrived earlier this month. But it turns out that the portion of the road that leaves the main road quickly hits an obstacle, so on setting out to explore this road we hiked a few kilometers to meet it from another direction, walking through forest increasingly distant from the nearest villages and plantations.

And here's where it starts to get good: when we met the road, it took a minute to realize that that's where we were. We had hit a more continuous line of semi-open canopy, and the ground layer was full of pioneer and weed species, but otherwise you might not have known that there once was a road where we were walking. The smooth dirt surface that once must have been there to convey vehicles had long given way to the ruts, boulders, and hummocks normal to rain-washed soil. Bridges over stream crossings had long collapsed, flat surfaces gulleyed, trees fallen to block the way. No vehicle, I realized with glee--not with wheels, not with tracks--could now pass this way--only feet can navigate it. The "industry road" built to extract the forest--even just a few years after use--was now no more.

And the effects of that were clear. Even right in the former road-bed, trees of several meters' height--at least 8-10 years old--were growing vigorously. Within a stone's throw on either side, big trees--the kind that host liana vines, orchids, strangler figs, and critter cavities--persisted in abundance, safe now from all but the occasional smalltime logger walking in with a chainsaw



Red-knobbed hornbill. Photo: Sandesh Kadur

and milling his boards in place. Vines of rattan--even older, larger, more valuable rattan, the kind that goes fast when people are around--twisted around the forest understory.

And then there were the animals. Huge Sulawesi red-knobbed hornbills--an indicator of high-quality forests--flew overhead not in pairs or threes, as we usually see them, but in flocks of thirty and forty. Noisy troupes of endemic macaques chattered and fussed at one another as they played out their ongoing social dramas. At a streamside watering hole, we read the signs of a recent struggle, when a python seized a small wild pig who must have let down its guard when coming to take a drink. And the diminutive, rare, and elusive forest buffalo, the anoa, which only persists in high-quality, undisturbed forest--well, after a few hours I finally stopped taking photos of all the anoa tracks--there were just too many.

It was, in short, a rich, complex, and very healthy Sulawesi rainforest. Yes, the old "industry road" whose effects I had dreaded did once cut a swath down its middle. But then at some point, for reasons no one seems to quite remember, the humans in their vehicles simply stopped coming, and Nature set about to reclaim her own.

That was all it took. While over the same decade some miles away, AlTo and the other humans were shedding blood, sweat, and tears to help recover the maleo bird at its coastal nesting ground, here in this forest no humans had lifted a finger for restoration, but bats, birds, and other critters spread tree seeds to help the forests re-sprout. With no industry paying to maintain them, the road crumbled, the bridges fell, and Nature quietly healed her own scars. For better and for worse, human toil in this forest ceased, and recovery simply happened.

Now walking through this forest, our human hearts, used to the pain of witnessing (and participating in) destruction, were swept up in that larger, quieter force of Nature, and we, too, felt healed. And a slightly-revised version of a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. popped into my mind: "The arc of the Natural universe is long, but it bends toward the Good."\*



Photo: M. Summers

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\*With deepest respect for Dr. King, his original quote is modified here by substituting the word "Natural" for "moral," and "the Good" for "justice."

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