



Alliance for Tompotika Conservation  
Aliansi Konservasi Tompotika

## ALTO Update, October 2022 - Mandiodo: Money, Mud, and Misery

The ALTO team first visited Mandiodo village back in 2018, as part of a Sulawesi-wide survey documenting the status of nesting grounds of the Critically Endangered maleo bird across its entire worldwide range.

Far from Tompotika, Mandiodo was a charming little village on the west coast of SE Sulawesi province, flanked by natural forest and tropical waters on either side. According to Asbar (50), once the most active of all maleo egg-diggers in the village, back in the 1980s huge numbers of maleos came to lay their eggs at the Mandiodo nesting ground—50-70 pairs each day was common.

The maleo has declined steadily since then all over Sulawesi, due primarily to excessive taking of their eggs by humans—thus their Critically Endangered status. But even when our team visited Mandiodo in 2018, there was still a spacious, active nesting ground and a few pairs laying each day.



November, 2018: The maleo nesting ground in Mandiodo village, one of the largest in the region, had high potential for community-based conservation and restoration. Photo: Marcy Summers

Villagers told us of their fondness for the birds, and a team of AITo staff even returned to Mandiodo in 2019 to assess the site's potential for an AITo-style community-based conservation effort.

But then the nickel bomb went off.

In just the last couple of years, the huge surge in global markets for electric vehicles (EVs) has caused a sudden, enormous spike in demand for nickel, an essential component of most EV batteries. Indonesia is the world's largest supplier of nickel, and a majority of Indonesia's nickel is mined in Sulawesi. Nickel mining is the new, man-made tsunami in Sulawesi. In a startlingly short time, a new series of nickel mines surrounded Mandiodo village.

And the village has been transformed.



Now stripped of their forests and topsoil, the hills behind Mandiodo are the site of new nickel mining operations. Photo: Galen Priest

On the one hand, a lot of new cash has come into the village. Many village men have been hired as laborers or drivers, greatly increasing their monthly incomes, enabling their families to buy televisions, satellite dishes, tile floors, and other goods that were previously out of reach. In addition, mining companies promise families “mud money”: a small monthly cash payment meant to compensate for the inconvenience caused by the constant dust and mud that villagers now have to breathe, consume, walk and drive on, and live with.

And for some people, the influx of cash that the mines bring makes it all worth it. But the cost is high, and no one has the option to opt out—all villagers pay the price whether they partake of the new money or not. Many have deep regrets. “The impacts felt by the community here are very, very, very severe,” said a village leader.

It starts with dust and mud: mining activities kick up and spread endless quantities of toxic dust (when it's dry) and mud (when it rains) into all the area's air and water sources. There is no escape from it. "Let alone during the day, but even at night, the wind brings dust from the company [mine] and Mandiodo residents are greatly impacted by inhaling it," the village leader lamented. Respiratory diseases have become rampant, as well as skin rashes and ailments.

The main road through town is simply a bath of mud or dust, all the time. "A journey that used to take two minutes now takes an hour because the road is choked with mud... it's been ruined by the mine's heavy equipment," said one resident. "The mud money they pay is not enough," said one village woman. "At first I was getting mud money from five companies, but then three of them left [because they were operating illegally]. Now I only get Rp 450,000 [c. \$30] per month, but I still have to put up with the same dust and mud!"



Mandiodo village, main access road. Photo: Sukendra Mahalaya

The village's two main water sources, the village leader explained, are now contaminated with silt and possibly toxins, and dry up much faster since the mines have come in. On the other hand, when it rains, they have floods, with muddy water everywhere. "The impact on the community is very very heavy," he said.

The waste and silt from the nickel mine have poisoned the sea, too, residents complain. "We used to have a beautiful beach that attracted tourists." But now, a plume of red silt pollutes the village's coastal waters for miles offshore. Fisherfolk have lost their livelihoods. "The fish we catch are dead," said one resident. "We cannot find fish now—and any fish we do find are unhealthy to consume," said another. "I have to travel at least 30 km (c. 19 mi) into the open water in order to find fish."



Red silt covers all the village's beaches, and pollutes the water for miles offshore. "The fish we catch are dead," said one resident. Photo: Vivi Tan Oga

Even the much-sought-after influx of new cash into the village has had a serious downside. Though some now have more money in their pockets, suddenly prices for everything have also shot upward, and villagers complain of increases in theft and other crime, and a general corrosion of community values.

Then there is also the noise, and the constant traffic of mining vehicles going back and forth. And, says the village leader with deep regret, he now misses the forest. "We used to feel cool in our environment. Now, let alone in the daytime, but even in the night we feel hot and stuffy because we no longer have the trees around as protectors of the cool and comfort."

And as for the maleos, "Indeed, this was a center of maleo nesting, here at Mandiodo village." They're gone now. Where the maleo nesting ground used to be, there is now a cheap boarding house for mine workers. It is, with grim irony, called "Maleo Lodgings."



Once the maleo nesting ground pictured above, Mandiodo's open space is now the site of a boarding house for mine workers. "Maleo," adopted as the name of the new boarding house, now remains only a memory. Photo: Sukendra Mahalaya

Mandiodo leaders complain that mining personnel are deaf to their complaints, but this distant community's experience has not been lost on the leaders of some of AlTo's partner villages. In an effort to ensure that our partners have complete information for their upcoming decisions about mining, AlTo is sponsoring field trips for Tompotika village leaders to visit communities like Mandiodo that already host mining operations. These Tompotika leaders—who themselves will likely soon face decisions about whether or not to welcome new mines in their villages—were shocked at what they saw. As they described it, their eyes were opened: though mining companies promise to bring prosperity, they may just as easily produce "dead villages" like Mandiodo. Upon returning to his village, *Pak* Munawir Kunjae, Village Head of AlTo's partner Sampaka village, was forthright with his constituents: "Don't be dazzled by money. That [money from sale of lands] can be spent in three days. And after that? Eat mud money, eat dust money, and die soon... and bequeath disaster and misery to our grandchildren."

In the months and years ahead, the AlTo team is committed to helping local communities make good decisions about mining, and to protecting irreplaceable forests and wildlife. Our brothers and sisters in nature do not even receive mud money—for them, mining is simply a matter of life or death, of existence or extinction.

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