

## AlTo Update, February 2023: Long- and Dearly-Held Cultural Traditions Can Change

The maleo bird of Sulawesi, Indonesia is the island's most well-known and beloved avian resident. It is also critically endangered. Readers of AlTo's news know that in Sulawesi's Tompotika region, where AlTo works in partnership with local villagers, maleo populations are recovering—but elsewhere, the bird is in steep decline. Though the maleo has existed here on Sulawesi (and only on Sulawesi) for millions of years, it is only for the last fifty thousand or so that it has shared the island with humans. And overharvest of its huge eggs by humans is the primary reason for the maleo's rapid decline.



Early people on Sulawesi quickly learned the locations of maleos' communal nesting grounds, and stories of people harvesting and consuming the eggs of the gentle maleo go back as far as we have histories from Sulawesi. In one region, tradition holds that a maleo egg planted in the foundation of a house will bring its residents good luck; in another, a special maleo egg cake blesses newlyweds at a wedding.

But perhaps the most famous cultural tradition surrounding the maleo bird is the annual *Tumpe* ceremony of eastern Central Sulawesi. In the *Tumpe* tradition, the first eggs gathered from what once was a huge maleo nesting ground near Batui village were loaded on a ship and transported across the sea to the then-regional capital in the Banggai islands, where in a formal procession and ceremony, all the community witnessed as the eggs were presented to the Banggai king. Only after each year's first eggs were celebrated and consumed in this way was the harvest season considered open for general consumption in the region.

The *Tumpe* ceremony plays a cherished role in helping members of this community define and maintain their cultural identity. Reminding them of who they are, and who and what they're connected to, *Tumpe* has been carried out faithfully by the *adat* traditional community leaders for perhaps 300 years. But in the last few decades, that has become harder and harder. When the *Tumpe* ceremony was established, maleos were many and humans were few; now the situation is reversed. Like everywhere else on Sulawesi, in Batui the burgeoning human population has meant more and more maleo eggs taken, fewer and fewer left to hatch. Maleos grew scarce, and by now have all but disappeared completely in the area. In recent years, *adat* leaders have been searching out maleo eggs from other parts of Sulawesi in order to have anything to present in the annual *Tumpe* ceremony. That task, too, has been getting harder, yet each year a

collection of eggs—numbering from a few dozen to hundreds—has been assembled, presented, and consumed as part of *Tumpe*.

Then, in December of 2021, the maleo was officially uplisted by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) from Endangered to Critically Endangered, due to the alarming rapidity of its decline. Critically Endangered is the highest category of concern for a wild species; the maleo is but one step away from extinction.

Here's one way this story could have ended: the humans just keep on harvesting until they're all gone. That, indeed, is what has already taken place in a majority of locations where maleos used to live. Growing human numbers and uncontrolled exploitation have led to the maleo's extirpation in most of its former range, and with it the extinction of the tales and traditions that people of those areas used to cherish about their maleo neighbors. You see it in the sad gaze of recollection and regret in the eyes of old-timers in such areas: with the extinction of the maleo have gone the myriad different ways in which human lives have been incalculably enriched by living in relationship with this remarkable bird. "Maleo here," they say, "is nothing but a memory."

But this time, the story is taking a different turn. Two months ago, at the start of this year's maleo season, Banggai *adat* leaders made a critical change to the *Tumpe* ceremony. Maleo eggs were transported across the sea and presented to the king after the traditional procession, as always. But this year, after presentation to the king, instead of being consumed the 86 eggs were then ceremonially turned over to a maleo conservation program in an attempt to hatch and save them.



In recognition of the maleo's critically endangered status, the Banggai *adat* leaders chose to make a life-giving change in their centuries-old tradition, giving it a new ending that, for the first time, recognizes the maleo community, too, as an essential part of the picture whose needs must be considered.

It's not a perfect solution. The science of artificial maleo egg incubation suggests that only eggs placed in an incubator with minimal handling and within 24 hours of laying have much chance of successful hatching, while the *Tumpe* eggs have been sourced from distant parts over many days, and much handled. In addition, though the artificial incubation program to which the eggs were surrendered—that run as a Corporate Social Responsibility program by the natural gas giant Donggi-Senoro LNG (DSLNG)—is probably the best of its kind, only a small fraction of chicks hatch and survive to release. And finally, for the few who do survive to be released—DSLNG boasts 127 chicks released to the wild since their program began in 2013—there is no evidence that the captive-reared chicks are able to find food and survive in the wild.

But it is a welcome start.

Like many deeply-rooted cultural traditions around the world centering on a particular human relationship with another animal, the *Tumpe* ceremony involves human exploitation of the other species: it starts and ends with people taking and consuming maleo eggs. And, again as seen in other cultural traditions around the world, as meaningful as the tradition may be to us humans, in today's world all too often the other species has become rare, its very continued existence on this planet in peril. But what the *adat* leaders of Banggai have shown the world is that even deeply-rooted cultural traditions are not carved inalterably in stone: the keepers of such a tradition can choose to allow its details to evolve—for the sake of another species—while retaining every bit of its significance in binding their community together and giving meaning to their lives.

It is to be hoped that a long-term solution more actually helpful to maleos will ultimately be found. But in this first step itself, the Banggai *adat* leaders offer a model and inspiration for us all: in altering the *Tumpe* ceremony, they signal that how we define our identity as humans lies in *relationship* with other creatures like the maleo—not just in their exploitation. In their willingness to evolve the *Tumpe* ceremony, the *adat* leaders have changed the definition of their community—a community that now includes the maleo as member rather than just object. And that holds, as its highest good, *life* for all.

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