



Alliance for Tompotika Conservation
Aliansi Konservasi Tompotika

ALTO Update, July 2023: “My forest is whispering softly...”

Tompotika’s forests are under seige.

We humans have always cut down trees for our own uses, but as in most of the world, in the latter half of the 20th century the rate of deforestation in Indonesia accelerated greatly. In the worldwide “Great Acceleration” of population growth and industrial expansion after World War II, Indonesia’s human population jumped four-fold from an estimated 69 million in 1950 to 282 million today. Our planet’s overall population growth also boomed during that same period, from about 2.5 billion in 1950 to over 8 billion today. And the appetites of those skyrocketing numbers of humans, both within and outside of Indonesia, have been ravenous; not only have the needs of Indonesia’s growing population continued to expand, but during this time, Indonesia joined the world stage as a major exporter of raw natural resources and materials.

After the mid-20th century, throughout Indonesia and in Tompotika itself, at accelerating rates, we humans began clear-cutting huge swaths of forest for timber and pulp. We logged forested areas to plant coconuts and, to a lesser extent, to create fish ponds where mangroves once stood. Then it was the oil palm boom, which in the 21st century surpassed



Small-scale deforestation in Tompotika. Photo: Kevin Schafer

pulp & timber as the biggest industrial driver of deforestation in Indonesia. And throughout this entire time, ordinary humans have also been clearing forest for farms, for rice paddies, for villages. A hillside cleared here; a forest boundary pushed back there; though it takes place on a small scale, with quadrupled human numbers, this small-scale but ubiquitous destruction has been another major driver of Indonesia’s deforestation crisis. Estimates

are that between 40% and 88% of forest destruction in Indonesia, from various sources, happens illegally.

Now in 2023, the latest engine of destruction in Tompotika's forest is mining for nickel. In this case, the driver lies almost wholly outside of Indonesia, in the worldwide surge in demand for nickel for electric vehicle batteries. Local Tompotikans drive almost no cars, let alone electric ones, so it is not they who will be using the nickel that lies under their forests. But in response to the enormous surge in global demand for nickel, Indonesia's nickel mining production has shot up *14-fold* just in the last eight years. And activities and proposals—both legal and illegal—to clear Tompotika's forests to scrape out the nickel underneath them are legion, and already underway.

Sometimes the scale of the forces arrayed against forests seems overwhelming, and the depth of our human disregard for all the rest of nature and for future generations is unfathomable. Against such a huge and relentless tide of destruction, what are a few defenseless trees to do?

This last February, the theme for AITo's Festival—our biennial celebration of conservation through the Arts—was protecting forests. Through Festival, AITo sponsors and showcases community performers who speak to us all through drama, music, and other arts. Lady Khartiono was one such performer.

Lady is an educator in Luwuk, Tompotika's gateway city, an expert in fish nutrition and in coastal sustainability and education. When her slot came up at Festival, Lady stepped to the stage and sat down quietly. The crowd hushed.

Lady began by reading a published poem about a young girl who escapes from the pain of the world by sleeping--sleeping and forgetting. Then Lady offered her own poem, which she prefaced by explaining that this is the voice of a young girl, Laila, who instead of sleeping and sleeping, "wakes in the dark of the night, in prayer and hope."



Lady Khartiono reads her poem at AITo's Festival
Photo: Pandji Kresno

Laila and the Voice of the Forest

By Lady Khartiono (translated by M. Summers)

My forest is whispering, softly
Part despairing
Part entreating

It says:
On this earth
There is no longer any place to stand
Always ravaged, always torn, all but wiped out

My forest groans, begging and pleading.
I ask; on my knees I beg and plead.

Let the voice of my forest
Reach the ears of those with power
Reach the hearts of those
Who can save it.

Please, save my forest.
For those who subsist by my forest.
For those who will perish without my forest.
For us, who are given life by my forest.

The Alliance for Tompotika Conservation is committed to doing all that we can to prevent deforestation in Tompotika, and to protect the countless wild creatures and local people who live in and depend on healthy forests. The task can sometimes feel quite daunting, and we can all relate to the first young girl's desire to seek escape by "sleeping".

But here on the AlTo team, we aim to be more like the second girl, who wakes in hope and prayer despite the dark of the night. We are learning to seek out small lights and little embers in the dark. Like Lady, and Laila, and the soft whispers of her forests. The more we look, the more we find them. And the better we learn how to blow gently on those small embers—for instance, by giving them a microphone and a stage at Festival; by proposing new protected forest areas instead of mines—the more we find that they flame up, ignite, and take our breath away with their brilliance. They take our breath away, and then give it back, four-fold, or 14-fold, in inspiration. Thank you, Lady, and Laila. We pledge to keep awake, and listening, and working on behalf of those softly whispering forests.

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