



Alliance for Tompotika Conservation  
Aliansi Konservasi Tompotika

## ALTO Update, October 2023: “A Death in the Rainforest”

ALTO is on a mission to gain official protection for as much of the Tompotika peninsula’s interior forest as possible. To that end, starting last year, the ALTO team began a series of expeditions into the so-called Heart of Tompotika Forest in the center of the peninsula. The purpose of these journeys is to explore and document the biodiversity that calls these 83,000 hectares (320 mi<sup>2</sup>) home, and the many ways that local people interact with and depend on the forest and its denizens.

To carry out the current expedition, as in previous ones, we’ve assembled a team: five local ALTO staff to carry gear, cook, take GPS points and photos, and notice all that they can. Myself, to cheerlead and document all that we encounter.



The expedition team. Photo: Sandhy Bawotong

Then there is Yudil, ALTO partner, local resident, former hunter, and woodsman *par excellence*. We first became acquainted with Yudil about nine years ago, when he was his village’s most skilled and active hunter. In these past nine years, Yudil has lost none of his love of or skills in the forest, but he eventually chose to cease hunting. Now he is one of our most enthusiastic and credible conservation advocates—not to mention unparalleled forest guides.

And finally, we’ve recruited three woodsmen—Yarson, Karius, and Diman—from the villages closest to where we’re exploring, to guide our

path and point out the various ways in which they interact with the forest. These men are all hunters. It is hunting—which includes trapping with snares—as well as collecting wild honey, rattan, or dammar resin, that most often draws local people to venture into the depths of the forest, and hunters who know the forest best.

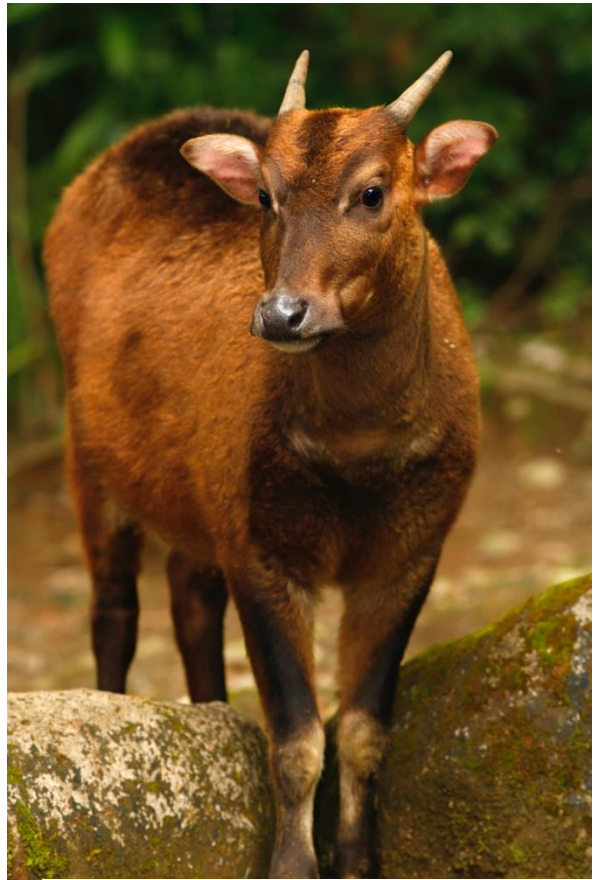
One of the wildlife species of greatest interest to us on these expeditions is the anoa, *Bubalus depressicornis* and *B. quarlesii*, a shy dwarf buffalo of the deep rainforest interior. Found only in Sulawesi, Endangered, and declining, the anoa has already disappeared from much of its former range, due to overhunting and habitat loss. All hunting of anoas is illegal, but the laws are rarely enforced. In addition, anoas need big, unfragmented swaths of native Sulawesi forest, and they don't reproduce quickly. In parts of the Heart of Tompotika forest, though the trees still stand, the forests are "empty"—virtually all large mammals have been hunted out. We do know from previous expeditions that, fortunately, there are also areas of this forest where anoas are, if not abundant, at least clearly present. Even when present, anoas are so shy they are very rarely seen; yet, if through footprints or other sign we can document the presence of anoa in any portion of the forest, it strengthens the case for protecting that area.

Within the first day or two's journey of our starting village, sign of anoa or other large mammals was scarce indeed, and our guides told us that anoa are no longer found so close to the village. But by our third day, that started to change. Our walking by then was through very steep and dense forest; in general, trails are few or none, and in order to cover ground one generally just follows stream corridors or ridge-tops.

This was the case on our third day, as we ascended a ridge-top at about 9000 (c. 3000 ft) elevation. Part of our group stopped to rest and wait for the others, while I ventured on a few minutes further along the ridgetop alone. Suddenly I let out an involuntary yell and stopped dead in my tracks. There, just to the side of the ridge-top where I walked, was a most shocking and gruesome sight: the carcass of an anoa stretched out before me on the ground. Calling the others, I stood horrified by what I was witnessing: a female anoa, perhaps four or five feet from nose to tail, dead perhaps a week or more. Her neck was distended, eye sockets empty, parts of her body swarming with maggots. Her legs were stretched out in surrender, her mouth open in a ghastly gape. The smell of death was overpowering.

Yudil and the others soon arrived. The elements of a tripped snare were clear to see, and they reconstructed the scene: here the bent sapling that provided tension, here the attachment point, here where she would have stepped. The vegetation around her had been well trampled; she clearly struggled mightily, but to no avail, before she died. An anoa will only last about a day in a snare, Yudil said, before it dies—they cannot tolerate being restrained.

"But how come the person didn't come back to check the trap?" I ask, imagining the suffering of this Endangered species, struggling hour after hour with her leg ensnared.



Sulawesi's endemic and endangered anoa.  
Photo: David Slater (<https://www.djsphotography.co.uk/>)



“Usually, they set the snare and then they may not return for a week,” Yudil explains.

A week. My heart stops. Oh, please tell me it isn’t so. “Are you telling me that this happens regularly, that an anoa dies suffering in the snare, and then is *wasted*?”

Yudil looks me straight in the eyes. “Yes. Even I have done this. Before. Now no longer, but yes. She would have been very tortured before she died.”

There is a long, terrible moment where we all take this in, in silence, gathered around the hideous carcass.

And then the urge comes to me to bury her, and I bend to scrape up some soil and duff. “Well,” I suggest, “let’s give her back her dignity.” At that moment, we all join together with common purpose—including our three hunter guides. Chances are high that they, too, have at some point been the agents of this happening—yet they are amongst the most active participants in what now follows. Using the machetes always hanging at their sides, they cut large leaves to cover the body and we all toss leaves, soil, and duff on top. In a moment, the anoa is covered. I start to pick a few especially pretty leaves to gather into a bouquet.

Heading back toward where everyone left their packs, we all join in a search for forest flowers and things of beauty. Karius, one of the village hunters, brings me a bright red new leaf. Then a gracefully curved fern frond. Eventually we even found some flowers. And thus, together we created a fitting forest bouquet, and Karius bound it together with a length of rattan before we placed it on the mound.



A grave in the forest. Photo: Sandhy Bawotong

We are a quiet and somber crew as we file through the forest after this. After some minutes in silence, AIto staff member Sandhy asks Yudil, “Does the anoa make a noise when it is caught?”

“Yes, like a cow,” Yudil replies, and makes a high, tense, bleating sound, “and it calls to its friends.”

“And do those friends actually come?”

“Yes.”

Later that evening, after dinner at our camp, I am sitting alone by the fire when Yudil approaches. “*Bu Marcy*, I have just been talking with our three hunter friends.” [When amongst themselves, Yudil and these village hunters all speak a local language, Bahasa Balantak, which we AITo staff don’t speak.] “They approached me and wanted to talk. What happened today, that was very sad. We have been talking about how to prevent this from happening anymore. People are not aware. Like me, they have to become aware.” Yudil then went on to suggest a combination of outreach activities much like those we’ve carried out previously in his and some other villages, including installing billboards, holding meetings, and identifying and training a key liaison in each village. All very do-able with a little time and funding, and I ask his help to carry it all out, which he enthusiastically promises. What we need, in short, is to create more Yudils.

“My village used to be much worse even than theirs,” Yudil says. “But now, it’s safe. Now people are aware. Last month a guy from outside came with dogs to hunt anoa, and he was reported to the Village Head, who called me. We handled it.”

“Yudil,” I ask, “You used to be a hunter. What changed your mind?”

“Since I joined with AITo! Since I learned that the anoa is Endangered, and only in Sulawesi!”

In the four remaining days of the expedition, Yarson, Karius, and Diman became especially keen, now going out of their way to try to find and point out things of interest. Among them, to all of our great delight: several new examples of fresh anoa footprints and scat.

It is not too late. Change does happen. And maybe, just maybe, this anoa did not die in vain.

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They’re still there: Anoa footprints  
Photo: Sandhy Bawotong