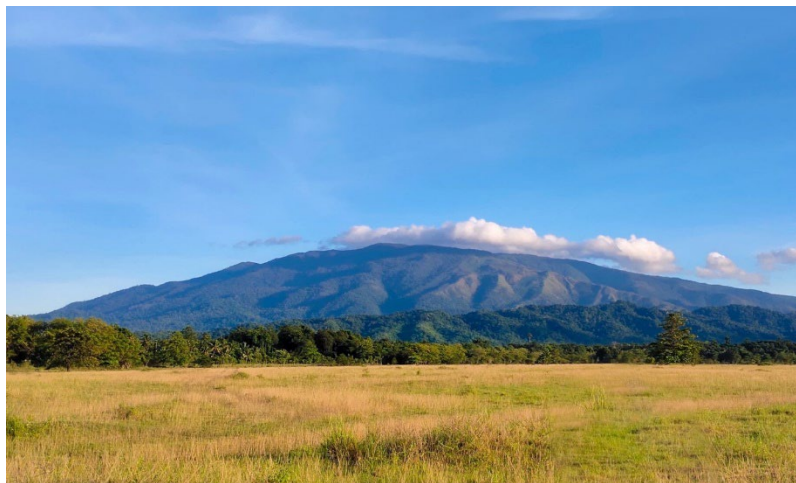




AITo Update February 2024: The neighing of horses

When the Alliance for Tompotika Conservation (“Al-To”) was formed, we picked a venerable namesake. At 1600m tall (5200 ft), Mount Tompotika is the hub and centerpiece of the 2500 km² (c. 1000 mi²) peninsula where AITo works; geographically and culturally, the whole peninsula turns on Tompotika.

At its summit, Mt. Tompotika is noted for three distinct peaks, and the three separate ethnic groups native to this region—the Saluan, Balantak, and Banggai peoples—all honor the mountain as central to their history and culture. For a time, in the 15th-16th centuries, there was even a formal Kingdom of Tompotika, which was linked to other kingdoms scattered around the islands now known as Sulawesi and the Moluccas.



Mount Tompotika. Photo: Sandhy Bawotong

Today, however, local people mostly speak of the Kingdom of Tompotika as linked to the spirit world. Known as the “Country where the Sun Rises,” tradition says that the kingdom on the mountain is not for casual visitors. If you want to journey there, you should be guided by an elder who knows the mountain, and how to respect its

mysteries. Approach with respect. Don’t camp in the unmarked ancient grave areas. Don’t block the invisible paths that the spirits use to travel on. Though we may not see them, they share the space. Without proper guidance and restraint, you will not know where all these things are and how to honor them, and you will bumble.

If it is the will of the spirits, you may be given gifts—brief sights or sounds by which you may connect, however briefly, with the world behind the veil in all its grandeur. Perhaps you may be allowed to glimpse the yellow city at the top of the mountain. Its great gate is said to connect through a magic portal to a special bridge hundreds of miles away in western Sulawesi. Or you may, while deep in the forest halfway up the mountain, hear the sound of horses neighing and pulling the carriages of the spirit people. The stories are many—even members of our own AIto parties have reported glimpsing a figure carrying a spear at the mountain’s summit.

When we approach her with respect, Nature, too, blesses us with glimpses of the marvelous on Mt. Tompotika. *Agathis* dammar trees that bleed their sap like crystal tears. Carnivorous *Nepenthes* pitcher plants that trap and prey on unwary flies. Beds of brilliant and many-hued gem-green mosses of that you could sink into up to your knees. And bands of cackling *Prioniturus* racquet-tail parrots that note your presence with harsh chatter and then are gone.



Tompotika bed of mosses. Photo: Pandy Isfanddri

For millennia, Mt. Tompotika has stood sentinel, presiding over a delicate web of connection between humans, the rest of Nature, and the spirit world, each respecting the needs of the others and exercising wisdom and restraint in their behaviors, for the sake of the whole.

But now, as Mt. Tompotika stands quietly in waiting, the world of humanity faces a crossroads. Local attitudes towards the mountain are changing. Large groups of enthusiastic young people from the city climb the mountain following internet postings rather than local guides, camping anywhere, and leaving trails of plastic candy wrappers, noodle packets and energy drink sachets. Recently, an official government-sponsored event widened the path to the mountain’s summit so that over 40 dignitaries and their crew could climb all at once to launch a well-publicized effort to promote “eco-tourism” in the area.

And, most ominously, in a huge swath right across the belly of the mountain, the Indonesian central government has issued a permit for a nickel mine which, if fully developed, will clear-cut over 80 km² (50 mi²) of Tompotika's pristine tropical forest, stripping all soil and life from the area. The traditional approaches to Mt. Tompotika will be completely cut off, and the villagers who have resided for millennia in the foothills below will live downhill and downstream not of a sacred protected mountain, but of a bleeding wasteland. This so that billions of humans of the Global Consumer Class can drive private electric vehicles.



Nickel mining operations near Tompotika. Photo: Vivi Tan Oga

This where we stand today. There is, however, an alternative scenario for Mt. Tompotika's future. A few months ago, in partnership with AITo, Sampaka village, within whose jurisdiction this part of Mt. Tompotika lies, submitted a proposal to the central government to establish this entire side of the mountain as a *Hutan Desa*, or Village Forest area. If approved, forests in the Hutan Desa will be preserved, traditional human uses and restraints will be honored, and the essentials of life that Nature provides—such as clean water, clean air, and stable soil—will be protected for all living things.

At this crossroads for the future of Tompotika, the people of the village of Sampaka have made their wishes clear in their proposal to the central government: they choose the path towards a protected forest, not a mine. And in the months ahead, with your help, the AITo team will be doing all we can to support them, and the wild Nature that calls this place home. But it is as yet very uncertain how all this will play out, and whether the mine, or the new forest preserve, or some uneasy combination of both—will carry the day.

If the denizens of the spirit world are watching, I wonder, what are they thinking? In those times when we all tried to do such a thing, what did it mean to guard that delicate balance between the worlds of humans, Nature, and spirit? If the green forested slopes of Mt. Tompotika become transformed into just one of hundreds of Sulawesi “project operations” sites feeding international industry and high-tech consumption, what difference will it make? When sacred becomes profane, what is lost? And how are such losses to be measured? Will a mine worker ever be able to hear the sound of horses neighing over the rumble of the bulldozers?

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