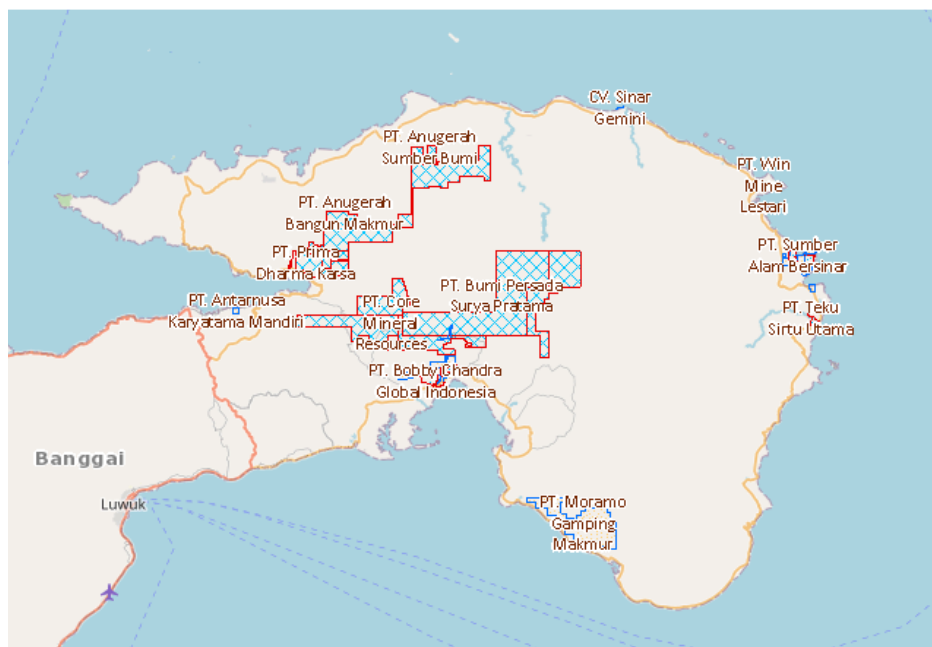




## ALTO Update, October 2024: The View from the Concession

To most people, they are just a series of odd rectangles on a map.

The blue-hatched rectangles on the map below represent recently-permitted concessions for nickel mines on the Tompotika peninsula, Sulawesi, Indonesia. For most of us in the Global Consumer Class, these rectangles are abstractions: nickel-rich places where we expect to “source” one of the globe’s current “critical minerals.” We tell ourselves that by increasing our consumption of nickel for use in electric vehicles we will get ourselves out of the alarming planetary pickle that we’ve created by overconsumption of fossil fuels (not to mention pretty much everything else that Earth produces). Whether we are kidding ourselves about that—and our chronic failure to discuss the Global Consumer Class *decreasing* consumption, period—is another story. But the fact is that even the mining companies who propose the areas and the government officials that issue the permits to strip these rectangles for nickel are shockingly unacquainted with what’s actually there now, and what ultimately will be lost.



Mines on the Tompotika Peninsula with new or existing permits from the central government.

Source: <https://geoportal.esdm.go.id/minerba/>

This will not do. To the local communities that dot the perimeter of the roughly 2000 km<sup>2</sup> (c. 800mi<sup>2</sup>) Tompotika peninsula, these rectangles are far from abstractions: they encompass their villages, their lands, their back yards—the geographical backdrop of their daily lives. And to the myriad wild creatures who live in and only in the forests of Tompotika, they are their ever-shrinking and irreplaceable homeland, without which they will simply cease to exist. If, collectively, we humans want to build a world where all people, as well as the rest of Nature, are respected, we cannot simply wipe out mining areas without consulting those who live there, and without even knowing what we’re destroying. Yet that is exactly what is taking place, in the name of electric vehicles for the Global Consumer Class.

Making a humble attempt to “listen” to some of those people and critters would be a start. So, earlier this month, ten of us AIto staff and villager partners set out to walk across the remote interior of the Tompotika peninsula, from the southern base of the “mushroom cap” to the north coast. Our aim was to get better acquainted with this part of the so-called “Heart of Tompotika Forest,” which encompasses more than 800 km<sup>2</sup> (c. 300 mi<sup>2</sup>) of the peninsula’s interior and which now includes the rectangular patch that is PT Bumi Persada Surya Pratama, one of Tompotika’s largest nickel mining concessions—already permitted, though not yet operating. What’s the terrain like in this area? If forested, what is its condition? What waters flow through there? What wildlife live there? How are they doing? How do local people use this area? And how do they feel about mining?



The Bear cuscus, *Ailurops ursinus*. One of at least 17 threatened and endangered species present in this concession. (Not mentioned in the AMDAL.) Photo: Meldy Tamengge

Now, you might ask: aren’t most of those questions covered in some kind of Environmental Impact Assessment (in Indonesia, the AMDAL), that a mining company would have to submit with their permit application? Indeed, that is the law. But in Tompotika, the AMDALs for permitted mines that we have managed to obtain (no easy feat) are riddled with, at best, uninformed fancy, and at worst, rank falsehoods. In this particular AMDAL, for instance, what little is said about biodiversity, is simply... well, preposterous. In the scientific literature, Tompotika’s rich rainforest is well-documented as a global biodiversity hotspot, harboring tens of thousands of unique species. But according to this AMDAL, there are only a grand total of 23 animal species of *all kinds* in this rainforest area (including flies and mosquitoes). Maybe, if we pretend there is very little there to begin with, then it will seem like nothing is being lost. While at least 17 officially threatened and endangered animal and plant species are known to be present in the area, the AMDAL lists only four, and makes no provision

whatever for their protection when the area is mined. Moreover, it claims, those 23 species that occur here occur only in tiny populations: no species, according to this AMDAL, is present in the concession with more than 139 individuals. With remarkable confidence, the AMDAL asserts that there are precisely 139 individual *Apis* bees in this 6000 ha (15,000 acre) concession. And *Drosophila* fruit flies in the area number exactly 22 individuals! In a different vein, the AMDAL claims the company has held community consultation meetings, but fails to give the dates. In checking with the village covering the largest area within the concession, AIto has confirmed that no one representing that village has been aware of any such meetings, ever. Lesson: if you’re looking for accurate or complete information, don’t look to the AMDAL.

And so, doing a little of our own information-gathering, we set out from one village toward the forest, following a long, hot road that winds through this new mining concession. Originally built in the 1990s, this road opened the way for a long upward swath of now-degraded lands for a few hundred meters on either side. Having lost its ground-stabilizing forest, the hillside across and around the road is riddled with landslides, and muddy torrents draining off them. These bare scars make it easy to see why the nickel companies are so captivated by this area: the exposed soil is bright red.





Once the forest is destroyed, hillsides like this are very susceptible to landslides and flooding.

**Photo:** Sandhy Bawotong

But, unhealthy and degraded as it was, I confess that as we walked through this initial area, I felt strangely gratified. Many are arguing that it is *only* places like this—“brownfield” sites, or already converted or degraded lands—that should be available for establishment of new mines—never “greenfield” sites where natural areas would be lost. And so here was a place where we could welcome new mining activities, encouraging them to operate to the highest possible standards and glad of the cleaner energy transition they were helping to facilitate—and not lie awake at night in the knowledge of what they were destroying. In this mining concession, the brownfield area covers about 1000 ha (2500 ac)—a significant size, and bigger than many other entire concessions. If those of us in the Global Consumer Class curbed our ever-increasing overall consumption, limiting mining to brownfield sites here and elsewhere might just provide all the nickel we humans really need.

We followed this red road to a peak, and then turned off on a small trail to the west to explore other parts of the concession area. As the distance from the road grew, gradually clove, cacao, and coconut plantations gave way to semi-natural forest, and eventually, at two days’ walk from the nearest village, unbroken primary Sulawesi rainforest.

And what a forest it is.





Paku-paku waterfall – smack-dab in the middle of the area set to be destroyed for mining. **Photo:** Sandhy Bawotong

For the next five days, our team followed the rivers that, in the absence of trails, serve as pathways winding through the steep mountainous forest. Frogs of all kinds leapt at our feet as we walked, while their innumerable tadpoles wriggled in



quiet eddies at river's edge. Parrots and racquettails chattered, doves swooned, and hornbills barked and swooshed overhead. The riverbanks were criss-crossed with tracks of warty pigs, deer, and the elusive, endangered anoa, a dwarf buffalo. Huge, brilliant, and multicolored butterflies, lined up like a choo-choo train, wound their way back and forth across the river before folding their wings to alight briefly on a sandbar. Cautious but curious endemic macaques lingered in the treetops, coming out on a limb to peer down on us for an instant before melting back into their leaf-world. Owls hooted and cackled (yes, cackled) at dusk, while tiny nocturnal primate tarsier pairs sang their squeaky duets in anticipation of a night of foraging ahead. Mostly, we walked right in the water, but on the occasional

land-crossings our footfalls wound between enormous fig trees, delicate orchids, dense fan-palm thickets, and curling vines. The Heart of Tompotika Forest is a magical place, and after six days we didn't want our journey to end; just being passing witnesses to the beauty and vitality of this global biodiversity hotspot felt like an incalculable privilege. In short, in 20+ years of working in Sulawesi, this forest is as rich, healthy, and diverse as any I have seen.





Mercifully, not all six days' worth of our journey was included in the area that the company wants to mine; a portion of it, at least for now, is not on the chopping block. But even apart from the wholesale stripping of the area within the concession, the building of new roads will open up the entire region to other nature-destroying side-effects of mining activities: logging, land-clearing for agriculture, poaching, unauthorized settlements, and the various other discontents of civilization that the existence of motorized access inevitably brings.

Among our party are Josep (60) and Farid (64) (not their real names), who have lived all their lives in a village on the southern edge of the Heart of Tompotika Forest, now set to be partly destroyed by the mine. Josep described how, as a young man, he fell in love with a woman who lived in a village on the opposite side of the peninsula—the north coast of Tompotika. While courting, Josep and his bride-to-be would take turns walking four days through the forest we were now traveling in order to meet at their respective villages. (What took them four days took us six—they carried a lot less stuff than we do.) For four days, each time, Josep and his fiancée would walk this forest, dreaming of their future together with each step, and since then the beauty of this forest has remained the living backdrop against which their own and their four children's lives have played out.

Both Josep and Farid have spent their lives deeply intertwined with the life of the forest, which has been their place of livelihood (collecting rattan and other forest products); food (wild honey, sometimes hunting for meat); medicine (from forest plants and fungi); and perhaps most importantly, something less tangible. "This forest is in my heart," said Farid, "and from my heart, I refuse this mine." But, though they are the ones who will be most directly affected by the mine, both men believe their opinions count for nothing. "We are just the 'little people.' The permissions have already been granted by the Ministry [central government]. To whom are we going to say we refuse it?"



The Saoun River, deep in the Heart of Tompotika Forest. The waters of this river are the main source of drinking water for thousands of people living downstream. Nickel mining commonly poisons surface waters with Chromium VI and other toxins.

**Photo:** Sandhy Bawotong

In late November, elections will be held for the Bupati, head of the regency of which Tompotika is a part. There are currently three candidates vying for the position, and all—and their running mates—are wealthy industrialists: mining, oil palm, oil & gas. For all three candidates, the public discourse is all about "investment" and "industry," and how that will bring "prosperity"... in their parlance, the greatest good. There is even a lot of talk about "progress" and "alleviating

poverty.” But what political candidates really mean is that they simply wish to maximize the *money* (trillions of Rupiah to establish a new mine, or a new oil palm plantation, for instance) that they can boast is coming into this area.

The problem with this thinking is that, first: very little of that money actually ends up in the pockets of “little people.” And second: whereas for political leaders and the rich, *prosperity* = *money*, for the local, “little” people, true prosperity is actually something very different. As Farid said, “Money is only fleeting. It’s spent quickly. If a mine comes, and we’re left with misery and no forest, what will our grandchildren do?” In order to make local communities hanker for “prosperity” as the mining companies themselves would define it, the companies have to convince these “little people” that they are needy and wanting even if they do not see themselves as such. As one villager put it in a recent ALTo-sponsored meeting to seek community input, “Life is good for us now. Why would we want to ruin everything by bringing in a mine?” For the “little people” of Tompotika’s local villages, true prosperity lies in things money can’t buy: community harmony; a sense of cultural identity; clean water, clean air, and a life-giving, healthy forest on their doorstep.

The number of rectangles on the map above is growing every day: mining companies’ and political leaders’ dearest wish is to turn what is now the resplendent, biodiverse, globally-important Heart of Tompotika Forest into the so-called “Tompotika Special Industrial Area.” As members of the Global Consumer Class, we are “demanding” it in our appetite for nickel; they are doing it in our name and on our dime. But on the ALTo team, we’re committed to demanding and working toward something different: specific, tangible steps toward a fairer, saner mining policy for both consumers and the consumed. Information and a voice for the local “little” people who are most affected by these mines. Brownfield, but not greenfield mines. Accurate information and best practices in mining operations. A public policy whereby *prosperity* ≠ *money*. And human lives lived as if All Life Matters.

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