AlTo Update, August 2025: Awakening the Giant

The Nickel Dilemma

Nickel mining poses a dilemma for our times: the human world wants more and more nickel to make steel and batteries for Electric Vehicles (EVs), which, when operating, emit less greenhouse gas than conventional gasoline or diesel cars. A majority of the world's nickel comes from Indonesia, and most of it comes from areas of rich tropical forest, which gets destroyed when the area is mined (emitting tons of greenhouse gasses, not to mention other losses). Some people think that humans should immediately maximize extraction of nickel in order to feed and encourage global demand for EVs, in order to eventually reduce

Sulawesi mines: the world's source for nickel for EV batteries and more.

carbon emissions from cars. Others think humans should mine only in "brownfields" and areas already degraded, exercise some self-restraint in our "demands," and detach from the car habit. But wherever you land in that debate, hardly anyone argues that mining shouldn't be done according to the law, or that it should ignore the health and safety of workers, local communities, and the natural environment.

And there's the rub. In Sulawesi, which supplies a majority of Indonesia's nickel, the "nickel rush" of recent years has produced an explosion of mines and smelters that—at a minimum—have cut corners and ignored laws and regulations aimed at minimizing the

damage that mining causes. The irreplaceable forests of Tompotika, home to more than 20 globally-threatened species like the Critically Endangered Maleo (here, increasing under AlTo's care), and back yard to dozens of local villages, are in mining's crosshairs. In one corner of Tompotika, Siuna village, mining has already been present for decades, but has recently expanded dramatically; in other parts of Tompotika, including the Heart of Tompotika Forest that is so critical for life in the region, new mines have been permitted by the central government, but are not yet developed.

The Bear Cuscus: one of dozens of rare and endangered species at risk in the Heart of Tompotika Forest. Photo: Meldy Tamengge

And until recently, leaders in most villages were inclined to welcome mining. The mining companies do careful advance work, currying favor with government and police officials and promising jobs and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) projects like improvements to mosques and schools. And after all, mining represents "investment,"—in this case, much of it from China—which is generally considered an unquestioned social good to be sought and encouraged as the key to happiness and prosperity for all. And so, prior to AlTo's outreach work educating villagers about the benefits of leaving forests standing, and the risks to forests and people brought by mining, few Tompotikans were inclined toward anything but a warm welcome for mining companies in their territory.

See For Yourself

But now, that's changing. A couple of months ago, under the leadership of AlTo's Mining Outreach Manager Thusi Bonandito, AlTo took 21 Tompotika community leaders of various stripes to visit the North Morowali area, an epicenter of mining activity a full day's journey outside of Tompotika and a few years further advanced. This was not the first AlTo-sponsored field trip to that area, but the participants this time were not from our usual conservation partner villages. The group included village Heads from Tompotika villages that, until AlTo's outreach, had not been interested in learning more about mining. It included unaligned regional leaders. And it also included members of two newly-formed groups of Tompotika environmental activists: new groups that, not coincidentally, were initiated and founded by young adults first introduced to conservation issues through AlTo school and

community programs. (One of the new groups, “ETIKA” [“Ekology Tompotika”], for instance, is led by an active AlTo volunteer and a 2015 alumnus of AlTo’s Festival program, now a schoolteacher.)

North Morowali: landslides are common in mining areas.

In N. Morowali, the Tompotikans aimed to visit villages hosting mines and speak with village leaders, residents, and mine workers. Upon entering the region, they were immediately struck by the dust and mud on the roads, and the general devastation of the landscape. One village Head immediately said, “Now that I see this situation, we have to refuse mining [in our area].” But then they stopped at the village office in a mining village. It was a very fancy building, with two stories, and a separate office for each village official.

The village Secretary told them the CSR funds provided to the village by the mining companies were huge—the equivalent of USD $20,000 every 2-3 months. They went on to a similar, second village, where the Head told them, “So far, we’ve had no problems with the mine. Our people are receiving and enjoying the CSR funds.” He himself also had a beautiful new house with two stories, and told the visitors he’d been able to buy three cars in the past two years. Thusi noted that the eyes of the visitors, especially the village Heads, widened, and their aspects wavered.

Field trip participants are greeted by an official (in yellow) in a village office in the N. Morowali mining area.

But they continued onward, and ordinary residents of the village, and educators at a school, told a different story. “The mine has had a huge impact,” they said, “especially on water and dust.” “The river where we get our drinking water, and where the children bathe, has been polluted by the mine, but the company doesn’t provide CSR money for water. So the children have to bathe in the polluted river.”

The river where schoolchildren bathe.

Two mine workers concurred. “When the mine first came in, we were glad, because we didn’t know the impact. And for the first two years we worked at the mine, we enjoyed the extra wages, which are higher than the regional minimum wage. But in time, the river became polluted, and even the fish and the crabs in the sea were killed from the pollution. Now we have to buy all our water, and our extra wages aren’t enough to cover it. What’s the use of higher wages if life becomes a hardship because your basic human needs like water are hard to obtain?” Their strong advice: If you possibly can, before a mine comes to your area, “REFUSE IT!” A final audience with a local legislator also gave the visitors pause: “Be careful if you’re tempted to accept a bribe to issue a [false] land title [to a mining company]. Lots of village Heads around here are facing prosecution or jail for such cases.”

The trip made a strong impression, and on the journey back home to Tompotika, the visitors had a lot to talk about. Many village Heads expressed a fear that their own villages would experience the same thing they'd just seen. "Every single place we visited had problems with water pollution and dust," they remarked. They admitted that hearing about the huge sums of money and seeing the fancy buildings "disturbed their thinking" about protecting the environment and their villages. But in the end, the entire group was of one mind, to "protect forests and refuse mining." One village Head said he'd not expected much from this trip, and only came along to be part of the group. But now, he said, "I am very thankful to have been able to come. Without this trip, in our village we would have been 'blind' about mining and its impacts." Said another: "Now we understand what mining does to nature and the community. This trip has given us knowledge so that we cannot be 'made stupid' anymore by the mining companies." And another: "I'm terrified to see the condition of villages around [the N. Morowali mining area]. Mining is *never* environmentally friendly. I'm prepared to refuse mining at the risk of my position as village Head." One village Head, with a longer history with AlTo, even said this: "And don't forget that if the forest is destroyed, many animals will go extinct, including the Maleo. And the preservation of wildlife has a positive influence on human lives."

With their waters polluted, villagers in mining areas must buy water, costing most of a typical day's wage, every 2 days.

The Giant Awakens

Those who participated in AlTo's field trip were people of influence in Tompotika, and in the weeks since the group's return, public concern about mining has been growing in momentum. With AlTo continuing to hold pro-forest informational meetings in the villages, and the new young activists creating flurries on social media, people are talking. In the village of one of the field trip participants, a group of demonstrators recently blocked a mining access road. In another, community members demanded action by a mining company to clean up pollution detected in a nearby river. Bolstering the cause, in recent weeks there have been national-level stirrings about the environmental impacts of mining. And now, news media in the Tompotika region are reporting about it too. For the first time, mining companies are finding themselves on the defensive.

In the last few weeks, even provincial legislators and the regency government have gotten involved. In late July, a team of legislators visited Tompotika's mine sites in Siuna and complained publicly about horrible roads, dusty air, mangroves destroyed, and waterways turned to silt. In a regency-level government meeting, a legislator declared, "Besides investment-friendly, our area also has to be environmentally-friendly." And at the provincial level—where pro-mining forces hold especially strong sway—a provincial representative called for cancellation of mining permits: "As the only native of [Tompotika's Regency] in [the Central Sulawesi Legislature], I feel wounded to see the earth of my region destroyed. They come only to take our natural resources, then leave without caring. But we—together with our grandchildren—are the ones who have to keep shouldering the responsibility to guard and care for our natural heritage." In the past few days, even the *Bupati* (Regent) of the area that includes Tompotika called mining officials to a meeting and castigated them for harming the environment, and the governor of Central Sulawesi—who himself has been a keen mining advocate—stated that he "appreciates, supports, and backs up" the concerns that the *Bupati* expressed.

Bupati Amirudin Tamoreka released video of a meeting in which he castigates mining companies for damage to the environment.

The giant of public opinion in Tompotika may just be waking up. As the mining issue in Tompotika receives daily more attention, AlTo is just in process of hiring new legal experts to advise us and our local partners about how best to address the violations that have been identified in our area. We have no intention of letting the giant fall back to sleep.

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