

ALTo Update, October 2025: Bearing Witness in the Bongka River

Here on the ALTo team, we're proud of the fact that we've been able to facilitate dramatic recoveries of the Critically Endangered Maleo bird (*Macrocephalon maleo*) in three out of three locations where we've attempted it. Our oldest and best-known site, Libuun, is now far and away the healthiest and best-attended Maleo nesting ground in the world, having increased over seven-fold since 2006 and hosting as many as 199 birds at once.



What Maleo recovery looks like: ALTo's Libuun nesting ground

Photo: Pandji Kresno

We call our method the "Respect for Nature" (*Menghormati Alam*) approach, removing the killer threat to Maleos (the illegal taking of eggs by humans), protecting the habitat, and letting Nature do the rest. And we're keen to spread this approach, now clearly proven effective, to help recover Maleo nesting grounds outside of Tompotika, where they're in drastic decline. But the Respect for Nature approach, in its turn, depends on respect for people, and building healthy relationships of collaboration and trust with local communities. Such relationships are built slowly, and grow from within. As a small team with roots in Tompotika, we think our job is to help inspire and mentor—but not to run—projects in other regions. In recent years, our team members have made multiple journeys to consult with budding community-based Maleo efforts in other parts of Sulawesi, bringing know-how, outreach materials, encouragement, and support of various kinds, but ultimately these efforts can get off the ground only if a critical mass of dedicated people come together in that area.

Which is why we're so excited about the Bongka River area, in Central Sulawesi about a 6-hour drive west of Tompotika, and a new group, KANTAW, which has organized to conserve natural and cultural traditions from that region, and contacted us to ask for help. This is actually the ALTo team's third visit to the Bongka River area since 2017, but the first in which an active conservation-oriented community group was there to meet us.



The Bongka River. In former times, Maleos nested all along its sandy banks. Photo: Sandhy Bawotong

When we sit down to meet together for the first time, about five from their team and four from ALTo, *Pak Ipit*, the head of KANTAW (Komunitas Anak Ta'a Wana) explains that the first thing that binds their group together is their sense of common identity. Although their roughly 20, mostly young, members come from scattered villages and towns across the region, and are members of different faiths—there are Muslims, Christians, and Hindus all within the group—all KANTAW members claim some ancestry from the Ta'a Wana people who once lived in this region. And all are now also re-espousing an older, traditional religion called *Hala'i*, which they view as an additional layer underlying their worship in mosque,

church, and temple, and which, among other things, strengthens their connection to non-human nature.

KANTAW's goal is to establish a protected area in the Ta'a Wana ("People of the Forest") ancestral homeland where their traditional values can hold sway and the land cannot be taken away or developed for other purposes. Many people from outside are moving into the area, Ipit explains; roads, dams, and industries are being built; the land is being "wrecked." The strongest possible kind of protection the Indonesian government will recognize to preserve land, he says, is a *Wilayah Adat* or traditional area based on local heritage. Any other kind of protected area, he points out, can be superseded if the central government decides to allow a mine there, a through road is wanted, or the area Regent calls for a new oil palm plantation in the name of "economic development." But if ancestral lands are recognized by the Indonesian government and then go through a formal gazetting process, they are sacrosanct. All across Indonesia, including in Tompotika, ethnic groups have inhabited ancestral lands for centuries or millennia, with strong ties thereto, but most of these do not enjoy recognition by the central government; the Ta'a Wana people and their lands here in the Bongka River region are a happy exception, and are eligible to propose lands for gazetting.



KANTAW members show the AIto visitors the map they are creating as the basis for the new protected area they hope to propose. Photo: Dayah Rihu

In former times, KANTAW team members tell us, here on ancestral Ta'a lands there were rare species like anoas (dwarf buffaloes), babirusas (curly-tusked deer-pigs), cuscus (arboreal marsupials), and more—the full complement of Sulawesi's unique native fauna. And although few KANTAW members have ever seen one, they know that there were also

Maleos. Ipit points out that the Regency that this area belongs to features the once-abundant Maleo on its logo. Shall they let it go extinct, to remain only as a memory and a picture on their logo, like a dinosaur?

Though fueled by a firm conviction and compelling vision, KANTAW members are new to the practice of conserving and stewarding lands and wildlife, and that's where they are hoping ALTo will help. Within the general area of ancestral lands they hope to preserve, can ALTo help identify key areas for Maleo and other rare wildlife? With our experience facilitating the declaration of new protected areas, can we help the new area achieve *Wilayah Adat* status? Can we help them get local people—a large number of whom do not claim ties to Ta'a ancestry—on board with the idea of ending egg-taking and bringing back the rapidly-disappearing Maleo? Can our 19 years of practical experience help them avoid common pitfalls in community-based, on-the ground Maleo nesting ground protection?



While most of the area's former nesting grounds are now devoid of Maleos, a few birds still nest at this riverside site, now over poached, overgrown, and degraded... but hopefully not altogether too late.

Photo: Sandhy Bawotong

The answer to all of the above is a resounding "Maybe!" Our presence here is a testament to our eagerness to help as we can. During our 3-day visit to this area, we met with not only KANTAW members, but also leaders in the three main villages surrounding the area, ordinary citizens, long-time egg-diggers, and many others. We traveled up and down the river, re-visiting nesting areas last assessed five or more years ago. The challenges are daunting: even if they are successful in achieving *Wilayah Adat* status for nesting areas and some surrounding forest, development and human population growth is proceeding rapidly outside that area. Maleo populations here have been nearly extirpated, and will likely take a *minimum* of five years or more to begin to recover—and that only if all egg-taking can be stopped throughout that time. It will require organization, money, discipline, patience, and a strong commitment. Community and government forces of all kinds, even if they express support in words, may not always act in accordance. Climate change will be a wild card that can directly affect Maleo nesting success, especially on the banks of a flood-prone river. In short, the odds are against the Bongka Maleos.



Travel in the Bongka region is primarily by boat.
Photo: Sandhy Bawotong

A majority of conservation efforts in Indonesia fail. Only time will tell whether this endeavor can beat the odds. But with KANTAW on their side, Maleos have a critical new defender and what is likely their last, best shot at avoiding local extinction and recovering their numbers here in the Bongka River region. With your help, AIto will be an ally for them, doing all that we can, in every way that we can, to help and support the effort while recognizing KANTAW's leadership in their own community.

Naturalist Robert Michael Pyle has written movingly of the tragic "extinction of experience" that human beings suffer when a once-present wild thing in their neighborhood is lost. But conversely, perhaps one of the most important things AIto can bring to the Bongka River effort is a testament to its opposite: the powerfully transformative *birth* of experience that can

happen when a community comes together to heal and recover a precious part of its bond to wild nature. In Tompotika, this birth of experience has been positive and inspiring for both people and nature in ways that none would have thought possible. As we work with the people of the Bongka River area, Ta'a and non-Ta'a, from mosque, church, and temple alike, it is this birth that we will continue to bear witness to, and work for.

Marcy Summers

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