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A Slaughter of Fruit Bats Scott Heinrichs

Fruit bats have a brutally hard life in Sulawesi, an orchid-shaped island in the heart of Indonesia. A remarkable 22 species of fruit bats live on the island and some of them are found nowhere else. But their numbers are being decimated by overhunting for the commercial “bushmeat” trade, and their treatment on the way to market can only be described as torture.

Now a previously untouched colony of some 10,000 Sulawesi fruit bats (*Acerodon celebensis*) has been discovered by commercial hunters on a small, uninhabited island off the coast of Sulawesi. And the bats are being destroyed with frightening speed.

As founder of the Flying Fox Conservation Fund on Sulawesi, I have spent more than a decade documenting the horrible toll that overhunting is taking on these intelligent and beneficial animals.

After capture by hunters, they are packed tightly into bamboo crates for the journey to market, a trip that can take up to four days in blistering heat without water or food. Many perish along the way. Some that survive are hit in the head with steel rods or pulled on hooks from the crate and smashed against the ground. The stunned bats, still alive, have a stick inserted down their throat, their wings chopped off and their fur removed with a blow torch. Seeing such treatment is heartbreaking.

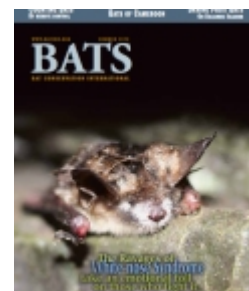
I was alerted to this latest threat by Marcy Summers, director of Alliance for Tompotika Conservation (AlTo), an organization working to protect the lands and waters around Mount Tompotika in central Sulawesi.


She reports that this colony of some 10,000 Sulawesi flying foxes (a species found only in Sulawesi) has for years spent their days roosting in trees on the small island off the coast, near the village of Taima. The bats fly to the mainland at dusk each evening to feed in the rainforests.

Although the local people do not eat the bats, commercial hunters discovered the island about two years ago. They erected four enormous poles on which to hang nets above the roost trees. In the past 18 months, she said, they have taken thousands of bats from their island for the bushmeat market in North Sulawesi.

“The colony has been devastated, and the remaining bats recently left the island entirely,” Marcy said. The locals say that although the bats occasionally left the island over the years during windy seasons, they returned when the winds settled. Perhaps that is why the surviving bats departed “but we are very concerned that the intense hunting pressure may have decimated bat numbers and/or disturbed their haven so much that they may be gone forever. Only time will tell.”

But there is hope. AlTo has been working closely with villagers in the area to raise awareness about the importance of bats and their conservation. Ironically, just as the bats



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left the island, the villagers had begun tentative moves toward permanently protecting the island's bats. Those plans are moving ahead, but much work remains to be done.

BCI Members can help save the remnants of this battered colony:

Write a letter or email urging villagers to protect their bats, to refuse permission for commercial hunters to take these bats and to permanently protect the island for wildlife. Address your letter to "Kepala Desa, Village of Taima," in care of AlTo and send it to info@tompotika.org.

Scott Heinrichs is founder of the nonprofit Flying Fox Conservation Fund, which protects Old World fruit bats.

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