

Community Conservation Programs Built to Last

By MAGGIE MUURMANS



Four years ago, a friend approached me for help—not for himself, but for an unprotected population of nesting sea turtles on the Indonesian archipelago of Pulau Banyak. The turtles’ problem? An unsustainable take of eggs by local poachers. The poachers’ problem? A chronic lack of basic income. It was a delicate situation that required attention, and I decided to see if I could help. Like many sea turtle conservationists taking on a new challenge, I was passionate, committed, and full of fresh ideas, but I was also faced with the daunting task of starting a project from the ground up.

Over the next two years, I worked tirelessly to engage the right allies and gather enough resources to establish a nonprofit organization, navigating twists, scaling hurdles, and learning along the way. Today, a successful sea turtle conservation organization is up and running in Pulau Banyak. Of all the lessons I've learned over the course of this journey, the most important has been to make my sea turtle work as relevant as possible to as many people as possible—finding the common ground among a wide variety of stakeholders.

Community Connections

Gaining community support is vital to the long-term success and survival of any local conservation project, and it takes time. Projects need to address problems in an organic way, weaving solutions into the fabric of the local culture rather than layering them on top of it. Luckily for me, in Pulau Banyak this process had started long before my arrival.

In 1994, Mahmud Bangkaru founded Yayasan Pulau Banyak, a locally driven sea turtle conservation program that focused on protecting the area's primary nesting beach. For seven years, the well-received program had helped to curb local poaching by combining beach patrols and environmental awareness campaigns with turtle-friendly income opportunities for locals. Unfortunately, despite the program's progress and popularity, a regional civil war in 2001 forced the organization to bring its activities to a halt. Thankfully, the years Mahmud had spent establishing a positive relationship with the local community were not lost. By the time I came to Pulau Banyak, the civil war had ended, and Mahmud and I joined forces to build a new program under the same trusted name of Yayasan Pulau Banyak.

As in most places, the driving force behind egg poaching in Pulau Banyak is economic; the egg trade offers a livelihood in a place where livelihoods are scarce. For us to ask the community to stop taking turtle eggs, we had to work with them to find alternatives. For example, it wasn't enough for us to say that ecotourism could be a suitable economic substitute for poaching. We needed to provide the education and tools necessary to *make* it a viable possibility, including workshops on how to guide jungle treks; English lessons to communicate with tourists; and backpacks, stoves, and tents for the treks themselves.

Over the past several years, we have found that true community support for our work has stemmed from direct, hands-on engagement. No matter what the timeline is for realizing our conservation goals, community members need to see a tangible return for their contributions quickly—they need to see that the work they do brings real and immediate benefits for themselves and their families.

Fundraising beyond Conservation

Within the not-for-profit world, fundraising is an essential and ongoing endeavor that takes on many different forms. The high demand for limited funds means that turtle conservation groups must cast a large net and package and promote their work not just for its

conservation effects, but also for its human and economic benefits. Yayasan Pulau Banyak, for example, is without a doubt a sea turtle conservation program, and we apply for grants from all of the usual conservation foundations. However, from another angle, it is also a community and economic development program; we offer educational programming and resources that build community capacity and economic opportunity. Hence, our single project can at once be seen as a sea turtle conservation program by one donor and as a program for poverty alleviation or economic development by another. By stepping back and viewing our work in this holistic way, we have been able to approach a wide variety of funding agencies, from those focused on conservation and scientific research to those focused on human well-being. This breadth of influence has allowed us to diversify our revenue stream and develop the strong track record of success needed to attract larger, longer-term donors. In addition, we have also been able to develop a volunteer and membership program that supports our work not only in a financial manner, but also through the in-kind contribution of manpower.

The path toward creating an enduring conservation program is never straight or clearly marked. Beyond your passion and dedication to sea turtle conservation, it is important for you to maintain the ability to see your work with fresh eyes and to recognize the way your goals and methods interact with those of other stakeholders. The more you focus on building relationships based on a sense of common purpose, the better the chances of long-term success. ■



THIS PAGE: Author Maggie Muurmans releases a satellite tag-equipped turtle with local staff members. © DAVID ROBINSON AT LEFT: A boy takes notes during an English lesson in Pulau Banyak, Indonesia. Local organization Yayasan Pulau Banyak conducts English lessons like this to prepare community members to work with tourists. Supporting the development of a local tourism industry is part of Yayasan Pulau Banyak's successful strategy, which fuses community development with conservation efforts. © DORTHE GAU