

“KNOWING SOPI”—Putting a Human Face on a Seram Bird Trapper

When one thinks of the horrors of the illegal trade in wild birds, it is easy to consider the trappers as “evil” men preying on these natural treasures. However, my personal experience with one such trapper in Indonesia epitomizes not only the fallacy in this view, but the futility of retaining it.

“Sopi” Sapulete was the name of one of the two foremost parrot trappers on the North part of Seram Island, Indonesia, the other being Buce Makatita. Seram, in the Moluccas of Indonesia, is the sole remaining home of some of the most beautiful and endangered parrots in the world, which are trapped illegally for trade in pet birds. Seram and its neighboring port city of Ambon are hubs for this illegal wild bird trade. Centuries ago they were an entrepot for the trade in coveted spices such as cloves, mace, and nutmeg, and are still today often called the “Spice Islands.” Spices are now grown all around the world but these parrots are found only there. So, sadly, the “Spice Islands” today should perhaps be re-named “the Cockatoo Archipelago” or the “Parrot Islands.”



**FIGURE: Sopi asks whether how we would like to live in a cage, like an imprisoned bird ...
Photo by Bonnie Zimmermann**

Sopi started poaching at the age of 16 and specialized in capturing Salmon-crested cockatoos, but he trapped lorries, lorikeets, and Great-billed parrots as well. In 2004, the Indonesian Parrot Project began a program to offer bird trappers sustainable and better-paying alternatives, including guiding on eco-tours and participating in the daily care of parrots confiscated from the illegal wild bird. The latter took place at our Rehabilitation Center just outside Sopi’s home in tiny Masihulan village. Thereafter, Sopi stopped trapping except for one brief time around Christmas one year, when he was in especially difficult circumstances and was forced to trap a few birds.

Sopi was a likeable man and proud, with interesting tales to tell. One time, he fell off a steep incline and hit his head on some rocks, suffering a concussion. The *mantri* ('Nurse Practitioner') in Masihulan treated him with the 'antidote' given for just about everything in that area—antibiotics. Such inappropriate treatment illustrates the almost-complete absence of medical care for these impoverished villagers. Fortunately, Sopi recovered anyway. Parenthetically, I never found out whether Sopi was named after "Sopi", the extremely potent alcoholic "wine" made from the starchy core of the Sago tree—a drink which Sopi loved.

One day, Sopi accompanied us in the boat as we headed back to "civilization". In a quiet voice, he said to me: "Father, we know now that we were wrong to trap parrots; you have shown us a better way." I had a difficult time maintaining my composure, struck both by the honor of his title for me, and by his 'confession'. I of course reminded him that none of the trappers did anything *wrong*—they merely did what they had to, but that hopefully there were now better alternatives. I have been told that Sopi cried when he saw one of the very same cockatoos which he had trapped, caged in the town of Masohi on the south side of the island.

Not too long after that, Sopi came down with cancer which quickly spread through his body. His family asked me to visit him at home to see if I could do anything for him, but of course I couldn't. This strong, proud man had been reduced to a frail and obviously scared gentleman. For a second time, Sopi had touched me deeply.

A few months later, we returned to Seram for the first release of rehabilitated cockatoos back into the wild, in March, 2006. After the release, we asked to go see how Sopi was doing. We were told that he had just died a few minutes ago, but that he had asked over and over whether 'the birds had been released yet'. It seems that Sopi was released from the grip of cancer and received his freedom from suffering, at almost precisely the same time as the cockatoos were released from captivity. I was invited to his funeral and was asked to sit alongside his widow and the Priestess, in the presence of Sopi who had been dressed in his best clothes. I was then allowed the honor of being the first to scatter petals into his grave. For the third time, I was touched and humbled by this simple but noble man.

These treasured interactions with Sopi put a human face on the bird trappers. They remind us that there is no justification of demonizing the trapper --only the poverty that drives them to it, and perhaps the rapaciousness of the wealthy and powerful, and their unending desire to possess the beautiful and rare.

Thank you, Sopi.

Stewart Metz
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