

Activists plan program to fight mynah poachers

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Bayu Wirayudha

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I Wayan Juniarta, The Jakarta Post, Denpasar

The chairman of the Association of Bali Mynah Conservationists (APCB), Tony Sumampau, loves taking the bull by its horns. He believes that when a "snake" is already out in the open, beating around the bush was simply a waste of time.

"Poaching is the most critical problem in the conservation of the Bali Mynah," he said. "Trying to conserve and protect this endangered animal without seriously addressing poaching and (wildlife) trade issues are tantamount to, well, daydreaming."

Poaching has been identified as the single most important factor behind the drastic decrease in the population of the indigenous Bali Mynah -- *Leucopsar rothschildi*, also known as the Bali Starling -- in the wild in the last 50 years.

Hundreds of these beautiful birds had been trapped and smuggled out of the island and into the hands of private collectors and zoos in the West.

In 1924, over 1,000 Bali Mynah flocked the dry hills and shrubby coasts of western Bali. By 1990, only a small population of around 100 birds called the area their home. And by 2005, only 13 birds remained in the wild.

The total population of Bali Mynah in the world today reaches over 800 birds. But only a minuscule fraction of them -- five to be precise -- was still living free on their native island, Bali.

"The rest are living in captivity in numerous breeding facilities in Indonesia and abroad. There are over 400 birds in the hands of individual Indonesian breeders alone. The West Bali National Park (TNBB) has around 125 birds in their facility," APCB senior member Rudy Badil said.

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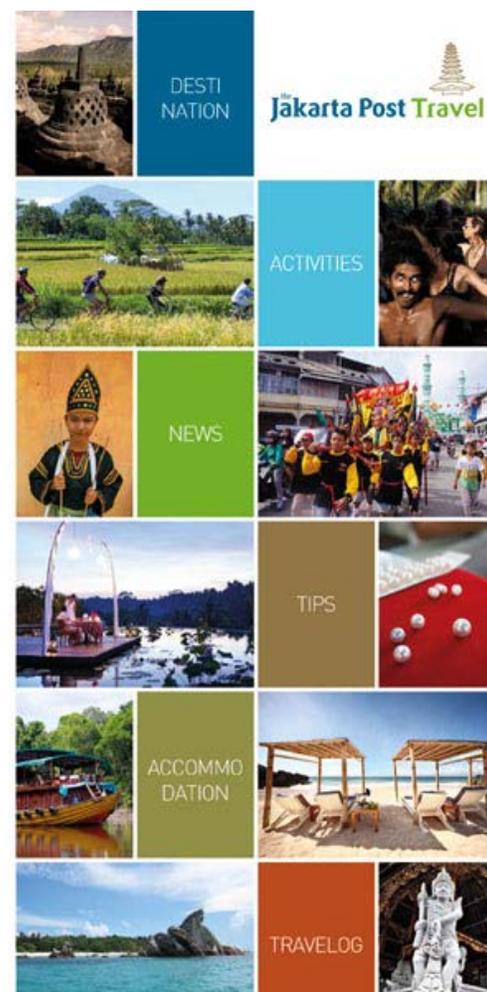
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Poachers did not even spare that facility. From late 1993 until mid-2004, local police recorded 14 burglaries at the 77.7-hectare park. So far, the thieves have managed to get away with a total of 88 Bali Mynah. The single biggest loss -- 39 birds -- occurred during a burglary in November 1999.

Some people blamed the burglary on the park's poor security. Others pointed at the park's less than harmonious relationship with local villagers. In one burglary case, however, the apparent cause was a bad recruitment decision. It turned out that one of the facility's security guards had a nasty side job: he was a Bali Mynah smuggler.

Yet, for APCB chairman Tony the cause of the rampant poaching and burglary were very clear. Being an entrepreneur himself -- Tony owns the country's largest safari park -- he understood that money, and a large sum of it, was a formidable temptation.

"The only reason people take the risk of traversing a wild jungle or breaking into a state-run facility is because the risk is worth taking in the first place," he said.

A healthy Bali Mynah could command a price up to Rp 10 million (US\$1,064) on the country's black market for birds. A healthy pair of Bali Mynah that had already raised their young, would be priced even higher.

"Illegal breeders love to get their hands on such a couple. Last time I heard, the price for such couple is Rp 40 million (\$4,255)," Bali Mynah conservationist Bayu Wirayudha said.

Tony believed that the only way to curb poaching was by ensuring that the risk was no longer worth taking.

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"If the price for a Bali Mynah is only Rp 1 million, only a few people would take the risk of scouring the dangerous jungle or breaking into a guarded breeding facility to get the birds," he said.

To achieve this, all that conservationists had to do was breed as many Bali Mynah as possible to drive down prices. Conservation laws allow the free trade of F-4 -- or the great-grandchildren -- of parental stock Bali Mynah.

"We should get as many F-4 as possible and use them to flood the market. Once the supply is continuously bigger than demand, the price would continuously decrease. It's a simple economic principle," Tony said.

The problem: there were not enough legal breeders around to create the flood.

Thus, Tony is currently busy lobbying the government to ease regulations on legal breeders.

"The APCB has designed a program which will decrease illegal trade, minimize poaching and increase community participation. Once the government gives us the green light, we will immediately commence the program," he said.

This program would include rallying private sector support, particularly from Bali's gigantic tourism industry. In a massive adoption effort, each tourist establishment would be expected to allocate a small amount of its revenue to raise a pair of Bali Mynah on its grounds.

"The APCB will provide the birds, the tourism industry will provide the facility and money to nurture and, later on, breed them," he said.

In compensation, the establishment would get a new tourist attraction and official APCB acknowledgement as a Bali Mynah conservation and educational site.

"Being pro-conservation will surely boost the industry's image abroad, particularly in Europe and Japan. Both regions have a long history in Bali Mynah conservation and also happen to be among Bali's primary tourism market," Badil said.

The offspring of these "adopted" birds would be handed over to the APCB which, in turn, would give them to other prospective "foster parents". These foster parents are expected to include government agencies, schools and concerned individuals in future.

"Some will be released into the wild, either at a tourist enclave or a pristine forest on the island," Tony said.

He believed that it would take 10 years for the program to make a significant impact on poaching and trafficking.

"By that time, the program will have enough stock of F-4 Bali Mynah to literally flood the market," he said.

By then, the number of Bali Mynah in the wild would surely be far greater than just five birds.

"Most importantly, the program provides the Balinese with a rare opportunity to reclaim their ecological legacy. By participating actively in it, the Balinese will be able to return the symbol of their island, the Bali Mynah, into its native habitat," Badil said.

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