

Released Bali Mynah find safe home on Nusa Penida

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Nusa Penida Bayu Wirayudha

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A thin shower of rain fell on the dusty road and soon an exotic, refreshing aroma permeated the air. It was a scent of longing, of an earth that yearned for the nurturing rain.

Yet, the partly cloudy sky could not hide the sun and its rays pierced through the transparent veil of the rain.

Bayu Wirayudha paused, deeply inhaling the rich fragrance of nature. He swept his forehead with the back of his palm, wiping away the irritating dirt formed by dust mixed with sweat. His lips curved into a childish grin as he turned and looked back at the group of exhausted journalists and bird-lovers who were following him that day.

"Welcome to Nusa Penida, the future home of the Bali Mynah. This is the island where the strongest of rains brings the happiest of joys," he said.

With his ponytail, bright hippie shirt and timidity, Bayu seemed more a poet than an activist. Yet, once the topic of conversation touched the Bali Mynah, one couldn't help but treating and respecting him as an activist. A passionate albeit shy one.

"I have been falling in love with birds since I was a kid," he said.

That love propelled him to enroll in veterinary medicine at Bali's Udayana University and, later on, to join the Bali Bird Park and the Begawan Giri Foundation (BGF).

The latter, a non-profit organization founded and funded by Bradley and Debbie Gardner, ran a successful Bali Mynah breeding facility from 1999-2006.

"There, I realized that the number of Balinese who were involved in conservation was very small. It was then that I decided to commit myself to this cause," Bayu said.

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Along with local environmental activists, Bayu established the Bali Friends of National Parks Foundation (FNPF). Its main objective was the creation of the island's first bird sanctuary. Nusa Penida, a small off-shore island south of Bali, was selected as the site of the sanctuary.

"Compared to the rest of Bali, Nusa Penida is a pristine area that hasn't been overpopulated nor over-developed, an ideal home for the birds," he said.

In mid-2006, the two organizations converged when bureaucratic pressures and intrigues forced the BGF to abandon its Ubud home base. The BGF relocated its breeding facility to the FNPF site in Nusa Penida. It was a decisive moment for Bayu and his friends.

"We have reached that critical point of no return. Nusa Penida is the best thing that has ever happened to us. If we fail in Nusa Penida, we won't get a second chance nor a second place to start all over again," he recalled.

The program succeeded. Assisted by a host of dedicated volunteers, including Udayana University students, Bayu helped the birds survive the transition period. Nusa Penida wasn't Ubud -- the weather, climate and vegetation were different, as were many other factors.

"We nursed the birds very carefully, making sure they only ate fresh food and had a lot of space. Other breeders generally use canned food or poultry feed and lock up the birds in confined spaces. These practices are not good, physically nor emotionally, for the birds," Bayu said. "Here, we have a dietary regimen comprised of 13 fresh foods."

The diet paid off. By January 2007, the facility had nursed a total of 93

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Bali Mynah and witnessed the birth of 15 hatchlings.

In July 2006, the facility took the conservation program to the next level by releasing 25 birds into the wild -- in Batumadeg village and in the courtyard of the revered Penataran Agung Ped.

Dozens of villagers bade the white birds farewell as they rapidly flapped their wings and disappeared into the surrounding forests.

"It was a wonderful sight. The ultimate objective of any conservation program is providing endangered animals with a chance to live naturally in their native habitat. We have just done it," Bayu recalled.

But the release triggered a wave of opposition from government officials and Bali Mynah experts.

Officials regretted that the birds were released on Nusa Penida instead of in West Bali National Park (TNBB), the government's designated site for Bali Mynah conservation. Yet, nobody bothered to mention the park's poor record in protecting its own Bali Mynah.

"The birds surely do not (care) about bureaucrats' fixation with jurisdiction and legality," chuckled a member of the Forum for the Conservation of Indonesia's Wild Animals (FOKSI), Judhabrahma.

FOKSI and the Association of Bali Mynah Conservationists (APCB) are two non-profit organizations that openly supported the Nusa Penida program.

The experts, on the other hand, worried that the birds would not survive the challenges of Nusa Penida's harsh environment. Some believed that the Bali Mynah, a very timid bird by nature, would be out-competed by the local birds and might die of starvation.

"Do not underestimate the survival instinct of the Bali Mynah, or any other animal for that matter," Bayu said. "Moreover, we have familiarized them with the local setting in a month-long rehabilitation period prior to their release."

It turned out that it took only a week for the newly released Bali Mynah to learn to feed themselves. In the first days after release, the birds stayed near the facility. By the fourth week, however, most of them had already settled in their new home, located 5-10 kilometers from the facility.

"We know this because we are monitoring the birds. Each bird has been equipped with a ring or a microchip for identification and monitoring purposes. A group of volunteers spent most of their day following these birds," said volunteer Made Sugi.

The mortality rate among the newly released birds was around four percent, most of which were caused by the Bali Mynah's natural predators.

By early 2007, the facility had released a total of 37 birds into the wild and of these, five pairs had produced hatchlings. So far, the group has eight newly born Bali Mynah -- surpassing the population of wild Bali Mynah at the TNBB.

"These hatchlings are truly wild Bali Mynah. They have never spent a single day in captivity. They will play an important role in the continuation of this species in the wild," Bayu said.

The joint BGF and FPNP conservation program has also scored another important victory in a slightly different field.

"The program has managed to educate and empower the local community on conservation issues. By doing so, the program has won not only the community's support, but also its active participation in the program," Rudy Badil said.

The Nusa Penida communities expressed their support by incorporating bird protection clauses into their Awig-awig (written customary laws) or Pararem (unwritten traditional conventions).

In mid-2006, only 14 Desa Pakraman (customary villages) had such clauses. By early 2007, all 35 Desa Pakraman on Nusa Penida had enacted these clauses, making it illegal to hunt, kill, trade or smuggle the endangered birds.

"Traditional laws and institutions are more powerful and influential in Bali than the national ones," Bayu said.

-- I Wayan Juniarta

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