

BA Feature Article

Nusa Penida: From Bali Starling Sanctuary to Community Development Centre 'Every tree that can grow here is better than grass'

By Marcella Bos

Nusa Penida, only a 45 minutes boat ride away from Bali, is not well known by tourists. Most people know it from the dive sites 'Manta point and 'Crystal Bay.' One of the reasons for Bayu, Balinese and director of FNPF (Friends of the National Park Foundation), to start his Bali Starling Conservation project on Penida. 'The island is still authentic and has the perfect habitat for the Bali Starling, a local bird that is in danger of extinction. Since we started our sanctuary in 2004 the population has grown to 105', Bayu says proudly.

FNPF is an Indonesian non-profit organization that has the desire to save one of the world's most endangered species from extinction in the wild: the Bali Starling. It's not the first time Bayu tried to save animals. 'In 1997 we started our first rescue centre in Tanjung Puting National Park in Kalimantan, Borneo. Due to deforestation, illegal logging by companies and farming by the local communities the habitat of animals like Orang Utan, birds and sun bears started to shrink. And therefore also the number of species.'

Community development



Bayu, director of the Indonesian Friends of the National Park Foundation (FNPF) - Photography ICCO SEAP

With the financial support of a tour operator FNPF started a sanctuary and research centre for Orang Utan and other endangered wildlife. Tourists, some philanthropists and donors covered the costs for the project. 'We learned a lot from our work in Borneo. After a few months we found out that the local community was very jealous of the Orang Utan. All the attention from tourists and the project went to the animals and not to the people. In the beginning the community was not willing to support the work we were doing.' A challenge for Bayu and his team. 'We had to involve the people

more if we wanted to save and increase the habitat of the animals. From that moment we changed our strategy. We focused more on community development as part of our habitat and wildlife projects.' FNPF managed to involve the forest people by giving training on agro-forestry, organic farming, animal conservation and environment education. 'With this approach we showed the people that we care about their well being as much as we care about the animals. We also demonstrate how conservation can bring benefit to the local people.'

Increased livelihood

The livelihood of the communities in Tanjung Puting National Park increased with the support of FNPF. 'We developed a program for agro-forestry and ecotourism. We helped the farmers to shift from the traditional slash-and-burn farming to a mixed approach. Slash-and-burn causes complete clearance of vegetation, which causes erosion and makes the land useless for agriculture. With agro-forestry the farmers have a variety of trees or crops that deliver income over different periods of time', Bayu explains. The tourism activity in Tanjung Puting National Park has been growing since the 1980s, but there was very little benefit for the local communities. In 2006, FNPF began a program to teach ecotourism to a group of people from one village. 'We donated tents and cooking tools and built a camping platform close to FNPF's reforestation area. We secured exclusive rights from the national park authority for the village to run camping tours in the park. This means the local people don't have to compete with established tour operators. And they interact more directly with the tourists.' Bayu really believes the integrated approach of wildlife, habitat and community makes this project of FNPF a success story. 'It was a long breath. It took us ten years to convince the communities in the National Park, but finally they recognized the need to protect their environment. Not only because it generates income, but also because it is their obligation to protect the animals and their habitat. Now they are proud of this task.'

Rescue centre

With the knowledge and experience from Borneo Bayu went back to Bali in 2002. He has since worked from his office in Ubud. Ten

years ago he worked as a volunteer for a non profit organization that rehabilitates injured, sick and orphaned animals. 'They had more animals in the sanctuary, especially birds, then they could release into the wild. The organization needed more space and Bali was one of the options to start another rescue centre. I started to do some research for them and found out that the Bali Starling, our local bird, was endangered in the wild. They were mostly held in captivity. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to do something for this bird.'

Another project was born. After two years research into the Bali Starling Bayu concluded Nusa Penida was the best option for a sanctuary for the bird. 'The Bali Starling is a bad flyer. They can't fly further than 14 or 15 kilometers. Penida is too far from Bali, so the bird will stay on the island or migrate to Lembongan or Ceningan. These islands are not big so it would be easy for us to track and follow the birds, and to find the right places to release them into the wild.'

Lesson learned

After the research of the Bali Starling FNPF started to do research in the villages of Nusa Penida. 'We learned our lesson in Borneo and I didn't want to make the same mistakes. Before we started to set up the Bali Starling Sanctuary we consulted the communities. I asked them what they thought about the idea of protecting the bird, what they thought about habitat and wildlife. And more of these questions. I found out that seven villages already used a traditional Balinese village regulation to protect birds. We call it *awig-awig* in the Balinese language.' This was a good starting point for FNPF. Although Bayu has a good understanding of the Balinese culture, customs and Hindu traditions it took him another two years to persuade every village on the island to introduce the *awig-awig*. 'It seems to be a long time, but not if you compare it with Borneo', Bayu laughs. 'We really needed those years to convince the local people and to get them interested in a long term project like the Bali Starling. Rehabilitation of animals takes time and patience.'

Bali Starling

When the whole island was effectively transformed into a unique, unofficial bird haven Bayu and his team of 6 people could start the Bali Starling Sanctuary. 'Some colleague scientists had warned me that the Bali Starling was not able to live in a dry climate as in Nusa Penida, but I was convinced the bird would survive. And I was right. We started to introduce the Bali Starling in the sanctuary in the dry season, on purpose, and after three months we had the first generation.' The Bali Starling lives in a swarm of 15 to 20 birds and they need to get use to their wild environment step by step. 'We have built huge cages for the birds, close to the native forest on the island, but after releasing them into the wild we lost a lot of birds. Too many natural predators in that area: fish eagle, hawk and other big birds. We removed the cage to another place. From everything we do we learn and eventually we managed to save the Bali Starling from extinction. Hopefully it is possible to bring the bird back to Bali one day.'



The Bali Starling - Photography: ICCO SEAP

The program has already saved the Bali Starling from extinction in the wild, but FNPF will continue to release more Bali Starlings and other endangered birds like Java Sparrows and Crested Cockatoos. 'And we also want to work with other wildlife. At the moment we are working with seaweed farmers and villages located close to the beach to extend the community-based protection to sea turtles.'

Community behavior

According to Bayu the program for conservation of the Bali Starling was so successful, because of the behavior of the communities in Nusa Penida. 'One of the biggest threats to endangered birds in Indonesia is poaching and bird traders. This is eliminated on the whole island due to the *awig-awig* of all villages. They leave the birds alone and make sure the environment will not be damaged or disappear.' In return for the island-wide community-

based protection of the bird and the habitat FNPF runs projects that benefit the local people. 'We wanted to give something back for their commitment. Most of the program is based on our experience in Borneo, but we had to change a few things. A few examples. We sponsor children from poor families to attend school and university. We also give free English language classes, traditional dance classes and we have built a small community library. With these activities we tried to win the hearts of the communities.'



FNPF distributes 30.000 tree saplings per year to the communities of Penida, for free. The organization gets support for the deforestation program from ICCO.

Photography: ICCO SEAP

But FNPF wanted to do more. When Bayu did research on Penida he also observed the livelihood and economic activities of the communities. The majority of the people are sea weed farmers or have live stock. 'Most villagers have cows and they eat grass. For that reason a lot of trees were cut in the past. Deforestation is a big problem on this island. It has a lot of influence on the soil, which is not very fertile anyway, and its ability to retain water.' In 2005 FNPF developed a reforestation program. 'We know the cows are an important income source, but we also wanted to convince the farmers that we need trees on this island. Only 5 percent is covered with forest. Every tree we can plant here is better than grass. So we started a nursery.'

ICCO support

From that moment FNPF distributes 30,000 tree saplings per year to the communities of Penida, for free. 'We have been planting thousands of saplings on severely degraded government reforestation land. We also planted an additional 4,700 pioneer seedlings of different trees and vegetables on 12 hectares. Our model shows a survival rate of 70 percent and that is very good in these extreme conditions. With funding we will continue to plant more saplings each year.' And funds are needed to continue the ambitious programs of Bayu. One of the investors of the community projects of FNPF is ICCO, an international development organization with roots in the Netherlands. 'We are very happy with the funds of ICCO. Not a lot of organizations know us and the work we do. Maybe we don't communicate enough or maybe they only see our work for the Bali Starling. The bird was just an entry point to reach a bigger goal: community development through agro-forestry. ICCO gives us the support, trust and opportunity to expand our program. The coming year we will distribute 61.500 saplings and 1.500 Gmelina arborea plants.'

Bayu wishes also other investors, donors and organizations can find a way to contribute to the work of FNPF. Although he hopes this doesn't give him too much paper work. 'Sometimes the application forms of donors are too complicated for me. I prefer donors to visit our project site. Like the team of the ICCO regional office South East Asia & Pacific in Bali. They visited Nusa Penida in September and stayed two days for team building activities. I believe ICCO got a good view of our program, the island, the communities and what is needed to continue our work for the community.'

ICCO works towards a world without poverty, injustice and exclusion. ICCO is an international development organization with roots in the Netherlands. The community program of FNPF is supported by the ICCO Regional Office South East Asia & Pacific in Denpasar. More information: www.iccokia.nl/southeastasia or nural.aeni@iccokia.org.