

SILENT ACTION SPEAKS LOUDEST

PAK BAYU

written by Christina Ng

Pak Bayu has the courage to speak through actions

Pak Bayu is the real thing when it comes to social work. Without bells and whistles, he prefers to act quietly and let his actions speak for themselves. He started out as a vet and loves animals with tender affection, so much so that witnessing the deaths of untreatable animals caused him such distress that he could not continue his profession as an animal doctor.

That was nearly fifteen years ago.

Now, Bayu is a crusader – for the animals he loves, and more. With his background – he holds a degree in Veterinary Medicine from Bali’s Udayana University – the soft-hearted man with a will of steel threw himself into wildlife rescue, habitat restoration and community development, to name a few. Before that, he had dabbled in wildlife and cultural expeditions at a travel agency, and even did consultation work with a textile company, but the versatile Balinese really has just one overarching passion – to raise Indonesia’s international profile in the world of environmental conservation, quietly demonstrating through conscientious actions that Indonesia cares.

He says: “When I worked at the travel agency, I heard a lot of people saying that Indonesia does not care about the environment, that we are not capable of running conservation programmes; that angers me.”

His defiant anger called up an unfaltering



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strength, and Bayu founded Friends of the National Parks Foundation (FNPF) in 1998. It is a non-profit organisation, where a group of veterinarians as well as conservation and community-minded Indonesians come together to create and run community-based conservation projects that respect the interdependence of wildlife, their habitat and the local community. The foundation seeks out generous donors for funds to support programmes, which include education scholarships, agro-forestry and eco-tourism, with the aim to improve the well-being of the Indonesian community as a whole.

Yet, this well thought-out approach did not work with sponsors initially. It proved to be a feat asking sceptical donors for money for reforestation or community development projects. In such projects, “failure takes at least five years, and success takes even longer,” says Bayu. When he first started out with FNPF, he had to think of creative ways to raise money for the burgeoning foundation, and what he believes in. That was a process filled with many hurdles to cross, some within Bayu himself.

First of all, Bayu had to apply for NGO status for FNPF in 1998, even though he was then a man who did not believe in NGOs.

“The NGOs that I know are all about protesting. They just blame other people but they don’t do anything in their positions,” he explains in his quietly honest manner.

Yet, as fate would have it, his time in Borneo as a voluntary vet in 1997 changed all that. During his five months saving and rehabilitating orang utans in the Tanjung Puting National Park, which was then besieged by a huge fire, he realised something new about NGOs. He admits humbly: “During that fire I met so many different NGOs who helped the animals and some helped to put out the fire. They are not all about blaming people, and that opened my mind about NGO work.”

His experience reinforced the value of observing and adapting to what works. By observing what is really going on, one stops doling out hasty judgements and treatments. His work as a vet has also taught him that “you observe your patients, not ask your patients what the problem is!” He says: “For me, I do not need to invent new things to make something work. If someone else already has a good experience, why don’t we adopt that?”

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Gleaning from the success of international NGOs, he decided that self-

promotion would do FNPF some good, even though he was never an advocate of appearances. Yet, he is not deluded in thinking that the foundation does not need a proper introduction, or at least a web presence, to get the world’s notice. “Our biggest weakness, from what I observe, is public relations work. I never deny that our PR is so bad that we even have no record of what I’m doing in the past 7 years, simply because we have no camera. It was too expensive,” he says.

Self-promotion is important, especially in the case of Indonesian NGOs, where not many survive beyond 3 years, only springing up in times of big disasters and vanishing after that. Even though Bayu thinks that it works in the short term for a critical situation, like the 2006 Java Island tsunami, he has a far bigger vision for FNPF.

He says, “I will not do the work if I can’t be convinced that it can be long-term.” He continues his observation regarding NGO management: “If the NGO is not managed in a business way it will not last for a long time. When I say business, I mean you must have a clear programme of what you are going to do, what money you need, where the money comes from and how to convince your donor that whatever they donate to you is worth the support.”

This applies especially when it is not always easy getting this support – not from donors, and least of all, from the government.

In his fervour to rescue the rare Bali Starlings – one of the world’s most endangered species and Bali’s emblem bird – Bayu had amicably informed the Indonesian government that these birds are not going extinct due to habitat loss,

but the simple fact of illegal poaching. Yet, he was nearly put into prison, as the government is not favourable towards his viewpoint. Instead, the government has spent millions of dollars on scientific research, in which, says Bayu, “scientists, people with high degrees and well-respected NGOs” arrived at no clear conclusion. Bayu says with a laugh: “For us, we work using common sense – we are not scientists but we are very practical.”

It is this down-to-earth attitude, coupled with a natural respect for community, that enabled FPNP to transform the island of Nusa Penida (14km southeast of Bali) into a sanctuary for endangered endemic birds.

In FPNP’s Conservation and Community Development Centre near the village of Ped, endangered birds are rehabilitated and released to live and breed freely on the island, under the protection of local communities. The foundation has also used its unique bird sanctuary on Nusa Penida as the location for its Bali Starling Conservation Project.

Bayu strongly believes that no one can understand more about an area better than its locals: “I listen to the people no matter how low their education is. Because for me, the locals must know more about their area than anyone else,” he says.

Due to their strong connection with the locals, FPNP has also persuaded every village on Nusa Penida to introduce a traditional Balinese village regulation (awig-awig) to protect birds. This was achieved after two years of conservation education programme, as well as through an innate understanding and respect for local culture, customs and



Hindu traditions. As a result, the threat from poaching and bird traders was eliminated and the whole island has been effectively transformed into a unique, unofficial bird sanctuary, saving the critically endangered Bali Starling from extinction in the wild. Now, the foundation is working with certain villages located close to the beach to extend the community-based protection to sea turtles.

The soft-spoken man with a lilt in his voice is guided by a steady faith. It might be this silent power that persuades his followers to believe in his purpose and stick with him during difficult times even though they are not paid a single cent for their work with him.

Even Bayu himself admits gratefully that the success of the foundation comes not just from tenacious work, but also from the loyalty of his staff. “I am also quite lucky that we have crazy staff who stick with us for many many years. We’ve gone through many financial difficulties together.”

His 27 staff members must be very proud of him now: just last year, Bayu received the 2012 Rainforest Award in San Francisco, given by international conservation organisation Rainforest Action Network for his “lifelong commitment to deep activism, species and forest conservation as well as groundbreaking community development projects.” Bayu joins a rich history of previous honorees who include Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Maria Gunnoe and Vandana Shiva, leaders revered for their work in protecting the world’s remaining rainforests, breaking North America’s addiction to fossil fuels, stemming the climate crisis and safeguarding human rights.



The accolade was probably not even in Bayu's mind when he first established FNPF, for he is one who does not spend money on fancy buildings or even a camera for his website. Yet, somehow, his "we are so busy doing the work that nobody knows us" attitude, has led to the modest animal-lover, and his beloved country, being accorded the loudest recognition of all.

- photographs provided by Pak Bayu



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