

Oasi di Bolgheri

Man and white storks: a newly found relationship

"The ultimate goal of WWF is to stop and reverse the degradation of the natural environment of our planet and help build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature."



What may represent a slogan which the WWF has chosen as its "mission" is nothing more than the application of a lifestyle of which in today's world, in an age dominated by consumerism and a twisted relationship between man and nature, can be found in sparse indigenous ethnic groups who still live in perfect harmony with the natural environment they are in: Amazon rain forests, tropical forests of Borneo, to name a few examples. These are extraordinary enclaves where man was able to maintain its role as a tile, along with countless others, in a harmonious and colorful mosaic of biodiversity.



It was the anthropocentric view of the world, where a man, victim of his presumption, managed to alter the natural habitat in which each living being occupied its ecological niche sometimes deforming irreparably relations of peaceful coexistence, creating irremediable imbalances.

Over the years this has led to the irretrievable loss of many species of wild animals, that are much more visible and easily identifiable than the lost plant species.

The abundance of wild species is in part due to climate change of which mankind is primarily responsible and often watches as a helpless spectator, as it is unable to apply solutions that safeguard habitats and their inhabitants. On the other hand, lately comforting signals of a renewed peaceful coexistence between animal kingdom and mankind make us hope well.

This phenomenon is noticeable especially for species that are related to traditions, myths folktales of which we had almost lost memory.

The prime example to this claim is tied to the return of the white stork in the territory of the mid-Maremma, how it is defined by our friend and historian Ilio Nencini, referring to the coastal strip of Bolgheri and Castagneto.

As already reported in the past on these pages, since 2008 a pair of white storks has returned to nest in this area, choosing to domicile in the WWF Bolgheri Bird Sanctuary . This came about after 200 years of absence from the Etruscan coast, because of a broken highly synanthropic relationship between man and this species that finds its ideal ecological niche within traditional rural communities, in small villages in the country, in the presence of extensive farming, pastures, countryside in which a mosaic of different environments was kept.

It is worth remembering how the white stork was widespread in Italy until the beginning of 1800; after which there was a progressive fall of appearances until its total disappearance.

The main reason for the prolonged absence of the white stork is due to unjustified persecution by mankind (hunting, direct destruction of nests) probably due to a distorted perception of the role of the species in nature, perceived as a potential food competitor.

Having lost the notion that the stork plays a fundamental role in rural control and containment of species highly harmful to man (eg. The rodents), becoming an auxiliary species in all respects for an effective running of agricultural practices. When it is not a strong limiting factor in the population growth of 'alien' species, (that is from other continents) such as the now-invasive crayfish of Louisiana (*Procambarus clarkii*).

The white stork has always been the embodiment symbol of fertility and family loyalty for the Central European and Carpathian populations, as well as for those of south of the western eastern Mediterranean.



As is well known, the return of the stork on the roof of a house in the countryside or on the steeple of a village in Hungary, in Provence or Portugal, is also hailed as a sign of good wishes for the new crops and new births; the pair of white storks is the ultimate symbol for the family and marital fidelity. It is now established that during the long life of the species (the record for longevity recorded in the wild is 38 years and 11 months for a stork marked by the Swiss Ornithological Institute of Sempach), the pair remains unchanged until the death of one of the two partners. Only then the survivor is free from all bonds and can commit to a new family.

Going back to "our" storks of Bolgheri, with the female named Duna, for its proximity to of the Bolgheri Bird Sanctuary dune, and the male named e Ciocco, in honor of the stable of Le Cioccaie that houses them, it should be noted how their settlement has been possible for a number of favorable

circumstances: the bird sanctuary monitoring conducted by the WWF, the will of Tenuta San Guido, the owner of the Bolgheri Bird Sanctuary, in creating a platform specifically for the couple willing to settle, the technical support of Enel Distribuzione of Livorno in enabling the platform installation on the pole of the power line chosen by the pair of storks.



Once again this year Duna e Ciocco returned to the nest. Like every year Dune arrived first, born in the Carapax Stork Center of Massa Marittima (which is no longer active), and she is followed in late March by the male returning from wintering sites in sub Saharan Africa.

It is exciting to observe the female who does not have the migratory instinct, as she was born in captivity, care about the nest accommodation by the end of January, consolidating the network of branches, which is vital for a safer and

comfortable platform for the future offspring. Beating repeatedly and noisily her beak as a sign of greeting and consolidation of the bond, the female produces the sound of "castanets" that inspired the birth of flamenco, the characteristic Spanish dance, sometimes replicating alone a ritual that will be repeated each time the couple will be together on the nest.

From 2008 to 2013, the storks managed to procreate 22 small storks which successfully flew away.

In the breeding season of 2014 the newborns were 3, and they took flight in mid-August.

And like every year, in mid-August, the family left the nest; the father left with the children in tow venturing into the challenging journey full of pitfalls of the first migration to Africa. The female did not join the rest of the family and is spending the winter in the area near the platform.



The storks born in the present year will remain in Africa until the 4th year of life, when they are able to reproduce; they will then return to Italy, but not necessarily to where they were born.

The pairs of white storks in Tuscany are slowly and happily growing in number. Allow me to flatter myself that the increase of this species can be related to the beautiful story of Duna e Ciocco.

Their presence in Bolgheri has brought many visitors to the bird sanctuary, turning, in case it were dormant, a renewed respect for nature and its vital cycles, becoming successful witnesses in the growth of a new sensitivity and a right relationship with wild animals, away from consumerism and the man as a predator.

29.01.2015 Text and photos by Paolo Maria Politi