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REPORT

ON THE SPOT EXPERT APPRAISAL OF THE MONTECRISTO ISLAND NATURE RESERVE

(ITALY)

15-16 March 2017

Document prepared
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INTRODUCTION

The last on the spot appraisal visit had taken place in 2003. All generalities and peculiarities of the island of Montecristo including the history of subsequent steps of its conservation and details on flora and fauna can be found in this report by Jean Claude Lefeuvre (document PE-S-DE (2003) 12 of the Council of Europe).

THE VISIT (14 – 17 MARCH 2017)

The visit started on the evening of 14 March 2017, when I was picked up at Follonica railway station by Ten. Col. Giovanni Quilghini and his colleague from the Carabinieri Forestale. I had a first introduction to my visit and its programme at the headquarters of the Carabinieri Forestale. Ten. Col. Giovanni Quilghini is head of the management authorities of the Montecristo Island Nature Reserve. By the end of 2016, the Corpo Forestale, which was the agency responsible for the Montecristo Island Nature Reserve was incorporated into the Carabinieri.

Later on, we had dinner together, where the former head of Montecristo Island Nature Reserve, Dr Stefano Vagniluca (vice questore aggiunto forestale Corpo forestale dello Stato Ufficio territoriale per la biodiversità) joined us.

On 15 March, I was picked up at 7 a.m. from my hotel by Mr Giovanni Quilghini for transfer to Porto S. Stefano for the shipment in the Army boat. At 8 a.m., we boarded and departed to Montecristo Island. For this visit of the island, I was also accompanied by several members of the Tuscan Archipelago National Park authorities, researchers and guards.

Approaching and discovering the island of Montecristo by sea, starting with the vague and mysterious triangle far out on the horizon, which becomes bigger as if it was rising and growing out of the sea, revealed to me the attraction this particular island inevitably exerts on visitors.

At landing at Cala Maestra and its strong pier, we were welcomed by the island's guards Giorgio Marsiaj and Luciana Andriolo.

Around 10:00 a.m., the participants gave an introduction to the recommendations mentioned in the last renewal decision and the actions carried out including the Montecristo LIFE 2010 (Black rat eradication, Alianthus eradication, Holm oak habitat conservation) and the ongoing "Resto con LIFE" project.

We visited the Belvedere headland and the reforested area (with *Quercus ilex* and *Myrtus communis*). We also visited some Shearwater (*Puffinus yelkouan*) nests. After the successful eradication of the rats, the shearwater colony has increased and shows an increasing breeding success.

We visited the photovoltaic video surveillance system. This is, I was told, only a part of the foreseen system, which will be completed in the coming years.

Lunch was prepared by Luciana Andriolo and Giorgio Marsiaj.

At about 15:00 p.m., we left the island for Porto S. Stefano, where we arrived at approximately 17:00 p.m. and drove back to Follonica.

The following day, 16 March, we departed at 09:00 a.m. from Follonica by car to drive to Piombino in order to board on the ferry to Elba island (10:00 a.m.).

The first meeting was at 11.00 a.m. at the head office of the Tuscan Archipelago National Park (PNAT) at Porto Ferraio with the park authorities and the stakeholders.

We had lunch in Portoferraio with free participation of the stakeholders

In the afternoon a discussion and conclusion of the visit took place with the Park authorities.

In the evening, we returned to Follonica with the ferry boat and drove back to Follonica.

On 17 March in the morning, before my departure from Follonica by train, I had a debriefing session at the headquarters with Mr. Quilghini.

THE PROBLEMS OF THE RISERVA NATURALE ISOLA DI MONTECRISTO AND THE WAYS THEY HAVE BEEN OR ARE BEING SOLVED

The main big problem of the Reserve are invasive (alien) species.

Alianthus altissima is one of them, a real invasive alien species (IAS) that was introduced around 1850 and spread almost over the entire island, at least along the ravines and valleys, taking the space of the original autochthonous vegetation. It has been successfully eradicated.

Another invasive species is *Rattus rattus* , which was very harmful to indigenous animals, amongst them predominantly the Shearwater. The rats have been successfully eradicated. Some traps are still in place at the pier, where there is the highest probability of new rats coming in with vessels.

A considerable problem arises from the goat population. The goats have been introduced a long time ago and were part of the "biodiversity" of the island when the Diploma was awarded. In fact, their population was considered worth to be preserved. However, their negative impact on the vegetation is obvious. In the discussions, opinions were contradictory as to whether the goats should remain on the island or not. The current solution in the trade off situation is fencing, which should allow the native vegetation to recover in parts of the island while in other parts the goats would be tolerated. In order to keep the population in an adequate stable number, two measures could be envisaged: supplementary feeding when necessary and removing individuals or culling the population.

In former reports, the presence of other alien species, including rabbits, were mentioned. There should be a monitoring that would allow the detection of such species before they become detrimental to the local flora and fauna, and the evaluation of their potential invasiveness and adequate response measures to be proposed.

A part from the problems with alien species, some other issues were mentioned during the visit and the hearings with stakeholders and the Reserve authorities. These include the proper evacuation of rubbish and other waste from the island. Partly they originate from the tourists visiting the island. Their collection and transportation is a matter of (a) adequate information and education and (b) the organisation of appropriate collection system. Partly, waste objects are brought in to the coastline by marine currents, although I could not detect any important waste deposits when we were going around the island with the boat. To collect such waste would not be a very easy thing as the coastline is difficult to approach by boat as well as from the land.

The limitation of the number of visitors -- not more than 1000 per year -- has been regulated from the beginning and the regulation quite strictly applied. However, the rule has been questioned by stakeholders and was a discussion point also during my visit. The quality of the visits was also an issue: what to offer the visitors when they come in? It seems that going to Montecristo Island is a bit like a pilgrim trip to a mysterious place that one should have visited once in a life time. On the other hand, what can be discovered once disembarked is little for some people. Furthermore, the infrastructure could be improved, like providing a bathroom.

Finally, although the knowledge on flora and fauna of the island is comprehensive, some scientific questions remain to be solved, e.g. as to the status of some species to be considered as endemic species or subspecies or not and as to the final ecological effects of the restoration of native phytosociological units thriving towards their climax, such as *Quercetum* and *Ericetum*.

THE 9 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 2008 RENEWAL OF THE DIPLOMA AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN ADDRESSED OR FULFILLED RESPECTIVELY

1. **In co-operation with the Tuscan Archipelago National Park, finalise and implement the Territorial Information System (TIS) for the planning of management initiatives**

   The response to this recommendation was the initiation of two LIFE projects and, in addition, the organisation of a data bank at Follonica, which is in the course of implementation. These projects will be completed by 2019 (including the mapping of *Quercus Ilex* and *Erica arborea*).
   All information related to the Reserve is stored in an information system, which is used for the management activities.

2. **Under the TIS, map the vegetation types present in the reserve, and in particular quantify the spread and distribution of *Alianthus* populations on the island with a view to control measures**

   The *Alianthus* population has been eradicated in the frame of the Project LIFE 08/NAT/IT/000353 "Montecristo 2010". Monitoring activities will be pursued until at least 2019 (according to the After LIFE conservation programme); see also the project website www.montecristo2010). In addition, a monitoring and eradication plan for other invasive (alien) species (IAS) has been developed in the frame of the Project Resto Con LIFE 13/NAT/IT/000471; it includes the monitoring of *Oxalys pes-caprae* and *Lepidium didimum* as well as a study on the distribution of *Muscicapa striata* after rat eradication.

   The mapping of the *Quercetum* is almost done (paid by Regione Toscana). The mapping of the *Ericetum* is almost done -- the problem being its patchiness.

3. **Limit the spread of *Alianthus* as far as possible through selective systems and explore the possibility of eradicating it**

   The *Alianthus* population has been eradicated; some controls are still being performed.

4. **Pursue efforts to regenerate the population of oak trees by monitoring and conducting regular checks on their development**

   The regeneration of Holm Oak is on track through exclosures preventing the goats from grazing in parts of the island, and through the adequate plantation and protection of seedlings. The saplings stem from acorns collected from old trees on Montecristo Island. The building of fences to preserve natural vegetation from the goats was an action carried out in the frame of the above-mentioned LIFE project. Holm Oak regeneration has been successful in fenced areas, which means that the only way to regenerate and conserve original vegetation is the fencing out of the goats and possibly the control of their population through culling. A collection is also conserved ex situ in the National Centre for Biodiversity Conservation in Rome together with other important species like *Arbutus unedo*, *Myrtus communis*, *Fraxinus ornus*, *Dryopteris tyrrena*.
   The above-mentioned Project Resto Con LIFE 13/NAT/IT/000471 includes actions related to the protection of vegetation and creation of seed banks of Montecristo species.

5. **Maintain the island's goat population at its current level and take steps to protect the other components of the ecosystem which are under particular threat from the goat population**

   This is the great dilemma!
   As part of Project LIFE "Montecristo 2010", special actions for the preservation of the goat population have been carried out, including yearly censuses, monitoring of sampled individuals wearing GPS collars. Apparently, the goat population is stable. A few individuals have been moved from Montecristo to the Bioparc in Rome for ex situ conservation and for project demonstration to a wider public (ca. 600'000 visitors per year).

6. **Continue to apply the quota of 1000 visitors a year recommended when the European Diploma was awarded and pursue the feasibility study on setting up a remote surveillance system; maintain arrangements for supervising groups of visitors**

   The recommendation concerning the quota of 1000 visitors per year is still applied; the limit is usually met.
   A remote surveillance system has been put in place by the Coast Guard

7. **Pursue discussion and investigations with a view to replacing the diesel generator and using renewable energy sources on the island**

   A solar panel with a powerful battery has been installed in 2016. Although the position of the panels does not allow full autonomy, the production of energy with the diesel generator has been drastically reduced, especially during the summer months.

8. **Gain more in-depth knowledge of the flora and fauna**

   Knowledge on flora and fauna is constantly increasing. See also under recommendations 1 and 2.

9. **Inform the secretariat of the progress made in securing approval of the reserve's management plan by the Tuscan regional authorities**

   Reports are provided regularly.

CONCLUSIONS

First of all, I saw, heard and learned that the Montecristo Island Nature Reserve is in good hands with respect to the knowledge of its flora and fauna, its ecosystems, their composition and functioning as well as with respect to the management of the Reserve. The major problems have been identified and solved to a large extent; those not solved have been recognised as such and solutions are being sought. I therefore recommend the renewal of the Diploma. The renewal should be linked to the following recommendations:

1. Explore, with the help of the IUCN Species Survival Commission, the status of the "Montecristo Goat", the needs for its preservation and, if its in situ conservation is needed, the ways and means of its integration and conservation within the Island's ecosystems;
2. Continue the monitoring of the Island's flora, fauna and vegetation units, and evaluate the management activities that are necessary for the conservation of the species and the restoration of the native vegetation;
3. Continue the ecological surveillance of the Island in order to detect undesirable alien species early enough to ensure their eradication;
4. Complete the remote surveillance system as far as necessary and feasible in order to be able to detect and impeach any illegal activities on and around the island;
5. Explore any sensible arrangements for the visitors as a possible alternative to the existing rule of the quota of 1000 per year, including possible improvements of the awareness raising and education of the public visiting the Island.
6. Ensure that the resources are secured in a sustainable way to maintain the management of the Reserve and to further develop its long term management plan