

Short Note

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A reflection on recent trends in wildlife protection in Italy stemming from the question of the Montecristo wild goat

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Abstract: The recent, almost complete disappearance of the original wild goats from the island of Montecristo, in the Northern Tyrrhenian Sea (Italy), raises worrying questions about the method currently employed in Italy to compile red lists of animal species requiring protection.

Keywords: *Capra aegagrus*; IUCN red list of Italian vertebrates; Montecristo.

I fear that I fail to understand the meaning and the purpose of the short note signed by S. Gippoliti (2015), in response to a previously published article of mine (Masseti 2015a). If the intention is to state that no wild goat ever existed on Montecristo, it would appear that Gippoliti has deliberately decided to ignore the extensive evidence furnished by me in the article in question (Masseti 2015a, and references therein) and in many other previous writings of mine. Consequently, I have no wish to repeat myself, and I would merely recall that Toschi (1953, 1965) already scientifically described the Montecristo goat as wild, identifying it as corresponding “in general terms to the description of *Capra hircus aegagrus*” (Toschi 1953). To the best of my knowledge, Gippoliti never carried out a survey on Montecristo nor did he observe the local wild ungulates apart, perhaps, from those employed in the recent farcical creation of the enclosure dedicated to them in the “Bioparco” of Roma. Consequently, I find it hard to understand on what grounds Gippoliti believes he has the credentials to express himself on the matter.

Given these premises, Gippoliti’s note appears to me as simply another opportunity for proposing the exclusion

of known anthropochorous *taxa* from conservation lists. He has on several occasions (Gippoliti and Amori 2002, 2004, 2006, Gippoliti 2013) suggested that this ought to be followed by the implementation of ulterior protective legislation, as a necessary measure to maintain the uniqueness and richness of biodiversity. But this leaves the question of how to treat the allochthonous populations of certified ancient anthropochorous origin (Masseti 2002, 2009a,b, 2015a). In fact, in many cases, an excessively philological and “purist” approach to the compilation of the conservation documents may prove to be detrimental, precisely because the primeval ecosystems were irretrievably lost thousands of years ago. In the more specific case of the endemic mammals of the Mediterranean islands, almost the whole of them has been practically extinct for so long (Masseti 1998, 2003, 2009b). And nor is it possible to replace them with “ecologically” similar forms for the purpose of a hypothetical environmental reconstruction, even admitting that it would have any sense.

It is indeed beyond discussion that the Montecristo wild goat is of anthropochorous origin but its probable foundation by humans in prehistoric or protohistoric times, as in the case of other insular populations of ungulates (see Masseti et al. 2008), may have resulted in the chance preservation of a significant portion of the phenotypic and genetic variability of the species *Capra aegagrus* Erxleben, 1777, up to the present. If this population is to be excluded from the international conservation lists, then the same would have to be done for many other “non-autochthonous” species which now enjoy both a continental and insular diffusion. Speaking of Italy alone, this would be true of the majority of the lagomorphs and the ungulates, as well as several species of rodents.

From the recent *IUCN Lista Rossa dei vertebrati italiani*, compiled by Rondinini et al. (2013), we would, for example, have to cancel all the red deer, *Cervus elaphus* Linnaeus, 1758, dispersed today within Italy, including the Mesola population which, despite the efforts of recent genetic studies to declare it as the new endemic

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subspecies *Cervus elaphus italicus* (Zachos et al. 2014; Lorenzini and Garofalo 2015), cannot be documented as an autochthonous population since the latter was established not prior to the 13th–16th centuries AD (Masetti 2016). We would also have to eliminate the Corsican red deer, *Cervus elaphus corsicanus* (Erxleben 1777), introduced onto Sardinia only since the end of the 7th–6th millennium BC (Masetti and Vianello 1991, Vigne 1992), although certain studies fail to take the archaeological evidence into account (Zachos and Hartl 2006). Similarly deleted from the list would be all the varieties of roe deer, *Capreolus capreolus* (Linnaeus 1758); *C. c. ssp. capreolus* (Linnaeus 1758); *C. c. ssp. italicus* (Festa 1925), the origin of which is still far from being established. Another species, the anthropochorous origin of which throughout the Italian (and hence European) territory of its current diffusion has been definitely proclaimed, is the crested porcupine, *Hystrix cistata* (Linnaeus 1758) (Masetti et al. 2010). The available evidence in fact indicates that this African rodent did not occur in Italy before late antique or even medieval times, and that it never spread in Europe beyond Sicily and the Italian peninsula; not to mention all the non-volant terrestrial mammals which, apart from the Sicilian shrew, *Crocidura sicula* (Miller 1901), are now diffused on the Italian islands where they were introduced by man at different times (Masetti and Vianello 1991, Vigne 1992, Mazza et al. 2013). And the situation is no better in the non-Italian Mediterranean islands.

Moreover, I refrain for obvious scientific and linguistic reasons from commenting on the contradictory and absurd delineation of *specie quasi-endemica* (=“almost endemic species”) offered by Gippoliti (2013), or on the erroneous and misleading notion of *specie parautoctona* (=“para-autochthonous species”) adopted in the decree of 19 January, 2015, *List of the allochthonous species excluded from the provisions of article 2, paragraph 2-bis of Law no. 157/1992*, published by the Ministero dell’Ambiente e della Tutela del Territorio e del Mare in collaboration with the Ministero delle Politiche Agricole Alimentari e Forestali of the Italian Government in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana* on 07-02-2015 (cf. Masetti 2015b), following Genovesi (2007). I do not see the purpose of these definitions, other than generating further confusion which could divert from a less conservative management of the Italian faunistic resources. In short, if we do not wish to take into consideration the historic and cultural value, as well as biological, of many populations of ancient anthropochorous origin, they would all be eradicated from their current territories of diffusion – of which they have been an integral part for millennia – in the name of an unbelievably partial retrieval of natural ecosystems which could

have unimaginable consequences for these ecosystems, or for what remained of them.

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