

# An outline of the history of the Giardino Zoologico in Naples with some personal notes

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## ABSTRACT

The history of zoological gardens in Italy is poorly documented, with potential negative consequences for their future development. The present paper is the first overview concerning the history of Naples Zoo. The Zoo was internationally known for astonishing breeding results including species such as Arabian oryx, black rhinoceros, klipspringer and king vulture. After a decade of great financial problems, from 2013 a new management has already completed new areas for several species, such as Asian elephants, tigers and savannah ungulates.

Key words:

breeding records, Astroni Crater, Quarantine Station, WWF Italy.

## RIASSUNTO

*Descrizione a grandi linee della storia del Giardino Zoologico di Napoli, con alcune note personali.*

*Il presente contributo intende offrire un quadro generale della storia e del significato del Giardino Zoologico di Napoli, una struttura famosa in tutto il mondo per gli interessanti e a volte unici successi nell'acclimatazione e riproduzione di mammiferi e uccelli, come l'orice d'Arabia, il rinoceronte nero e l'avvoltoio reale. Sebbene il parco situato all'interno della Mostra d'Oltremare ai Campi Flegrei ha mantenuto sino a tempi recenti un aspetto molto simile all'originale, sotto la direzione di Franco Cuneo vennero realizzate una Stazione di Quarantena per bovidi esotici presso il Lago del Fusaro mentre il Cratere degli Astroni divenne sede di un originale tentativo di acclimatazione di specie di ungulati. Proprio quest'ultima iniziativa offrì la scusa per la nascita della sezione italiana del WWF nel 1966. Dopo la morte di Cuneo nel 1984 la mancanza di adeguato supporto degli enti pubblici impedì l'adeguamento dello zoo. Con il fallimento nel 2003 si apriva il più triste decennio nella storia della struttura. Nel 2013 lo zoo veniva affidato ad una nuova gestione che ha ad oggi restituito un importante e rinnovato patrimonio culturale alla città di Napoli.*

Parole chiave:

record riproduttivi, Cratere degli Astroni, Stazione di Quarantena, WWF Italia.

"Napoli costituisce un caso esemplare e anche un caso limite dell'intero problema nazionale. Nessuna città al mondo, infatti, presenta punti di partenza così originali e interessanti: la Stazione zoologica di biologia marina (celebre in Europa e America), il migliore acquario nazionale, un eccellente giardino zoologico, il Parco degli Astroni, il Parco di quarantena al Fusaro. Tante stelle che non fanno costellazione, come invece potrebbero per dare a Napoli un prestigio internazionale assolutamente unico, un non imitabile complesso scientifico a riflessi anche turistici."

Gianni Roghi, 1966

## INTRODUCTION

No overview regarding the history and the development of the Giardino Zoologico in Naples, so far, has ever been published. This is a pity, considering the high international reputation this young zoo assumed in the second half of the twentieth century and additionally the role it has had in the development of the Italian conservation

movement (Pratesi, 1991; Gippoliti, 1997; Finotello, 2004). Both these aspects have been seriously undervalued in Italy. Not only, the severe problems encountered by the zoo since the 90s and the continuous criticism raised by anti-zoo associations have led the public opinion to believe that the zoo in Naples has only been a sort of roadside menagerie. This account will report, for the first

time, the outline of the true zoo's history and main achievements, integrated with personal observations gathered during the last thirty years.

## EARLY YEARS

After a brief period, following the opening of the Parco Faunistico (based on a project by Luigi Piccinato) in May 1940 in the framework of the "Mostra triennale d'Oltremare", with which the Fascism wanted to celebrate the Italian short-living overseas "Empire", the Giardino Zoologico officially reopened on 25 October 1949 in the same site (Gippoliti, 1997). The initiative was originally due to the "Ente Autonomo Mostra d'Oltremare e del Lavoro Italiano nel Mondo" and initially the duty to direct the operations was given to Angelo Lombardi (1910-1996). He was a well-known animal dealer and zoo director, who later on became famous for his role as the "amico degli animali" (the friend of animals) thankful to a successful RAI TV program. Lombardi's family lived for a while in Villa Leonetti, within the zoo grounds (Guido Lombardi, pers. comm.). Owing to his good contacts with the former Italian colonies in Africa, Somali hippopotamuses, lions and other animals from the Horn of Africa were soon imported for the zoo. In the first years, apart the ones taken by Lombardi, animals came from other sources, like Luigi Errico

(Somalia), Murri brothers (Somalia), Zoo Centre Bruxelles (Somalia), Peters (Tanzania), Big Game (Tanzania), Bertolini (Eritrea) and Kuenzler (Tanzania). Some former exhibits were modified to accommodate non-African animals. The original open moated enclosure for baboons, for instance, was divided to create four enclosures for bears and sea lions (this was probably done in 1952 when the first bears arrived). A short time after the re-opening, the position of the zoo director was taken over by Franco Cuneo (1909-1983) (fig. 1). By September 1952 several zoo directors had already visited the Giardino Zoologico of Naples, as a post conference tour after the IUDGZ annual meeting in Rome. The opinions of Heini Hediger (Basel Zoo), Bernard Grzimek (Frankfurt Zoo), Meyer-Holzappel (Bern Zoo), Katerine Heinroth (Zoo Berlin) and others were very favorable (Matteucig, 1986). The Quarantine and Acclimatization Station at the Parco del Fusaro was established, under the aegis of the Italian Ministry of Health, in 1953, but it was not officially inaugurated until 7<sup>th</sup> November 1954. Among others, the inauguration was attended by the director of Hellabrunn Tierpark Heinz Heck. The strong relationship with European and especially the German zoo world was certainly fostered by the life-long companion of Franco Cuneo, the Swiss philanthropist and pedagogist Marie-Claire Wenner



Fig. 1. Franco Cuneo in Somalia.



Fig. 2. Miss Marie-Claire Wenner and the German zoologist Lothar Schlawe looking at the central pond (1989).

(fig. 2). The first African ungulates to reach the Fusaro in October 1953 were a group of four tilonura gazelles *Gazella tilonura*, acquired by Piscietta (Eritrea).

## GOLDEN YEARS

Already in 1958 the zoo had established a noteworthy animal collection, also thankful to gifts of several European zoos, such as Antwerp, Hannover, Helsinki, Rotterdam and Zurich. The collections of macaws included nine species, among which Lear's *Anodorhynchus leari* and a pair of Spix's macaw *Cyanospitta spixi*, in addition to other interesting species such as the golden conure *Aratinga guarouba*. African ungulates that had reached Naples thanks to the Acclimatization Station at Fusaro included beira, dibatag, gerenuk, 'dik-dik', klipspringer (fig. 3) and, among gazelles, Speke's, Sommering's, tilonura, Isabella, dorcas and Thomson's (Anon, 1959). By 1963 the Fusaro Station had seen bongo antelope, Arabian oryx and okapi (Cuneo, 1963; fig. 4). It was probably thanks to the Fusaro Station that the young zoo soon reached an international relevance, so that in 1958 Franco Cuneo became a member of UIDGZ, the International Union of Directors of Zoological Gardens (now WAZA, World Zoos and Aquaria Association).

Although several of the existing facilities were expected to be temporary exhibitions, since the beginning the zoo registered good breeding results. The director of London Zoo, Cansdale, complimented the zoo for the breeding of caracal

*Caracal caracal* in 1952. Among the noteworthy species, shown in a 1956 guide, there were two shoebills (imported by Lombardi from Sudan in 1952). Regarding the relationship with the other major zoo in Italy, the Giardino Zoologico in Rome, it should be noted that its director, Prof. Ermanno Bronzini, played an important role in promoting the scientific activity of Naples Zoo. When in 1953 Naples Zoo bred the African hunting dog *Lycaon pictus* (but the four pups survived only a few days), Bronzini began an international survey regarding the breeding history of this species in captivity, with the aim to publish the Naples' breeding results. Several animals were also temporarily loaned, donated or exchanged with the Rome Zoo. These included two female polar bears *Ursus maritimus* that the Rome Zoo acquired in 1933. The latter of the two, 'Lola', died on 19<sup>th</sup> July 1959, well in her thirties. In 1959, when Bronzini started the publication of the zoo journal "Il Giardino Zoologico", the Rome Zoo Director considered it as the official journal of the Italian zoo members of IUDGZ, i.e. Rome and Naples (Gippoliti, 2014b). The establishment of this official voice allows us, nowadays, to get a good knowledge of the developments and the successes of Naples Zoo until 1963, when the journal ceased to be published. However, Cuneo has reported about some of the remarkable breeding success and achievements of the Naples Zoo in the following years (Cuneo, 1965a, 1965b, 1966, 1968a, 1968b), including the creation of an acclimatization park for exotic ungulates inside the Astroni Crater. Following the example of Rome, biological samples from the zoological collection in Naples were made available



Fig. 3. A pair of klipspringer *Oreotragus schillingsi*.



Fig. 4. Article by Cuneo on the Fusaro Station published in *Il Giardino Zoologico* (1963).

to the scientific community. For instance, two papers by Chiarelli (1962, 1963) cite the Giardino Zoologico in Naples as the source of the chromosomes of the following primate species: *Lophocebus albigena*, *Hylobates lar*, *H. agilis* and *H. moloch*. Also noteworthy is the first (and only) study of dibatag *Ammodorcas clarkei* behavior by Fritz Walther (1963). A well-illustrated paper (Comito, 1962) allows us to see some of the animals of the zoo at the time. There are photos of the lone male African forest elephant *Loxodonta cyclotis* 'Baria' imported from Gangala na

Bodio (NE Democratic Republic of Congo), a young pair of black rhinoceros, East African bat-eared foxes, a pair of Masai giraffe, a single Haggard oribi, guerezas, klipspringers, a family of common hippopotamus, Spix's macaw and golden conure. In 1964 the zoo maintained a pair of Arabian oryx ('Tomatum' and 'Edith') en route to the International herd of Phoenix Zoo from the Arabian Peninsula (in those years an international herd has been established at Phoenix Zoo by the Fauna and Flora Protection Society). During the stay in Naples a calf was successfully reared (Homan, 1975; Florio, 1981). The zoo also established from the beginning a prestigious parrot collection that was cared for by the well-known expert Marie-Louise Wenner, cousin of Marie-Claire, for several years until the death of Cuneo in 1984 (Wenner, 1978, 1979).

THE YEARS OF MATURITY

Domenico Scaramella of the University of Agraria in Portici provided in his book *Animali da pelliccia* (1984) several references to animals of the Giardino Zoologico. In this book there are several photos of animals of the zoo, including *Gazella tilonura*, *Lutra lutra*, *Panthera leo*, *Puma concolor*, *Felis bengalensis* and *Caracal caracal*, while other photos are incorrectly attributed to the Naples Zoo (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*, *Neofelis nebulosa* and *Uncia uncia*). Interestingly, there is also a photo of Scaramella bottle-feeding a young dibatag in Somalia, certainly connected to collecting activities for the Naples Zoo. In another interesting paper (Scaramella & Russo, 1974) a list of native and exotic species found in the Astroni crater is furnished. This former Borbone hunting reserve with natural barriers, due to the slopes of the crater, was conceived by Cuneo as a place where exotic ungulates could be kept in a semi-wild situation. The list of introduced species



Fig. 5. One of the two fossa *Cryptoprocta ferox* held in the 1990's.



Fig. 6. The original macaw aviary (now siamang exhibit) with the statue dedicated to Franco Cuneo and his dog.

included *Cervus elaphus*, *Cervus dybowski kopschi*, *Axis axis*, *Axis porcinus*, *Taurotragus oryx pattersonianus*, *Tragelaphus spekii*, *Silvicapra grimmia bindei*, *Comochætetes johnstoni*, *Antilope cervicapra*, *Gazella dorcas* and *Gazella tilonura*. Most species were severely affected by poaching. Male wildebeests exhibited infanticide behavior, as reported elsewhere (Gippoliti, personal observation).

A visit to the Astroni Crater by the WWF international director, Fritz Vollmer, finally offered the occasion to create the Italian appeal of WWF in July of 1966. Franco Cuneo was among the founding members (Pratesi, 1991), in full agreement with the history of bioethics in Italian zoos (Gippoliti, 2014a). Inside the zoo, a first active section of WWF was already active before 1966 through the active involvement of Paolo Pignero, Lello Capaldo and others (Paolo Pignero pers. com).

In some contributions on Gliridae (Scaramella, 1981a, 1981b) Scaramella also dealt with observations on the breeding biology of *Glis glis* and *Eliomys quercinus* held at the Giardino Zoologico. Franco Cuneo died in 1983 after a long period of illness (Scaramella, 1983; Benedetti, 1984).

My first visit at the Giardino Zoologico in Naples occurred on 14 April 1985. In that occasion, I had the chance to see one of the last mating between the prolific black rhinoceros pair (five female calves born between 1971 and 1987). An account on the husbandry, history and significance of black rhinoceros in Naples has been published recently (Gippoliti & Roomaaker, 2015). In small cages near

the offices two neonate ring-tailed lemurs *Lemur catta* were reared by the mother, while kinkajous *Potos flavus* were also kept in the same manner. In the huge parrot collection I observed one Spix macaw and among others *Psittichas fulgidus*, *Probosciger aterrimus*, *Calyptorhynchus magnificus*, *Cacatua sanguinea*, *Eclectus roratus*, *Coracopsis vasa*, *Aratinga guarouba*, *Ara auricollis* and *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*. In 1985 Matteucig (1986) lists 73 taxa of parrots in the collection! According to the data of the *International Zoo Yearbook*, in 1982 the zoo held 263 species and 1278 individuals. Although the golden age of the Quarantine Station at Fusaro was clearly gone (last importations date back to 1978), klipspringers were still present as well as a lone oribi (probably *Ourebia montana*), a wonderful group of Western sitatunga, a pair of lowland nyala *Tragelaphus angasi* (but the male was clearly a hybrid with another tragelaphine), impalas, a lone male Thomson' gazelle and several other more common species. There was also a young pair of fossa *Cryptoprocta ferox* (fig. 3) obtained from Basle Zoo, after that the lone Naples female had been sent there and bred successfully.

Franco Cuneo's last project realized in the Zoo was a big aviary for large parrots in which a statue of Cuneo himself with his dog was noticeable (fig.5; this was stolen during the last terrible zoo crisis around 2010). Although the signs of financial problems were present (and even more in my following visits), the zoo had a strong dignity and an international 'atmosphere'. This was evident by a few signs, such as the existence of a photo archive about

which I was so unfamiliar with in other zoos (allowing me to receive as a precious gift from zoologist Loredana Salvemini the photo of a group of dibatags). International contacts were maintained as in the previous tradition of the zoo. The Naples Zoo was a founding member of ECAZA (now EAZA) in 1988. In my subsequent visits in the following years I often met in Naples the German zoologist Lothar Schlawe. He was hosted by Marie-Claire Wenner (fig. 6) and he helped the zoo making a photographic documentation of the collection and preparing a map of the zoo.

### THE YEARS OF CRISIS AND THE YEARS OF HOPE

From 1993 the management was taken over by Gerardo De Simone. Marie-Claire Wenner still lived in the zoo, but she was not able to maintain an effective control of the daily zoo management. During my visit in 1997 I noted that, while some old buildings had been refurbished, the collection had continued a process of decline. This difficult period of the zoo ended in 2003 with the financial collapse of the zoo, probably due to De Simone's mismanagement. In the second half of 2004 I was personally involved in the re-opening of the zoo under the new management of Cesare Falchero (also owner of the adjoining amusement park Edenlandia) and the scientific direction of Gloria Svampa. While the surviving collection was very poor, the animals could finally be well-cared by a staff of experienced zoologists and veterinarians. In the following years Falchero was not able to undertake the ambitious masterplan that had been developed by some of the

best-known architects in the field of zoo design. The long stasis had deleterious effect on the financial viability of both the zoo and the amusement park and in 2013, after another bankruptcy, the control of zoo management was finally given in the hand of Ing. Floro Flores. In a short time a new Children Zoo was built, the reptilium was refurbished and reopened. New species were added in accordance with EEPs (European breeding programs), including Siamang *Simphalangus syndactylus* (in the formerly large parrot aviary), ring-tailed lemur (in the island lake), binturong, two species of macaws, American tapirs, giraffes, etc. During 2015 the enlarged elephant area has received two surplus female Asian elephants from Copenhagen Zoo. The new large sector for tigers was finally completed (fig. 7) together with the Savannah area in the same year. The darkest years now seem behind the zoo and it is highly probable that in a few years the zoo will be able to retake the position it previously held within the international and national zoo community. There is an ample opportunity for the zoo to become part of a new wider scientific system (that Roghi asked already in 1966 from the pages of 'Panorama') for the City of Naples together with the old and prestigious institutions, such as the Zoological Station 'Anthon Dhorn', The Zoological Museum of the Federico II University, and younger ones such as the Città della Scienza. If the zoo will be able to identify its cultural finalities, it is in a unique position to address the huge gap of knowledge found in ecology, conservation biology and the relationship existing between environment and human health among the Italian society.



Fig. 7. Overview of part of the Zoo in Naples, with the ancient Roman road, the new section for tigers and the Piccinato's original big aviary.

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