

Anti-Poaching on the Straits of Messina: Results after 15 Years of Activities

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INTRODUCTION

In 1981 the slaughterers of raptors and storks were active on the Peloritani mountains (Sicily, Italy) in spite of the regional (1981) and national Italian laws (1977 and 1992) which protected all diurnal raptors and storks.

The tradition of shooting raptors was imported to Sicily by the Calabrian hunters at the beginning of the century. At first, young Sicilian boys were collecting the shot raptors from the ground, giving them to the poachers (in those times hunters), receiving money in exchange. Then, in the fifties, Sicilian hunters started to shoot raptors too.

When we started our fight, hundreds of poachers waited every year for migrating birds of prey (and any other species) in concrete bunkers built in some areas on the Sicilian side of the Straits Of Messina. We also discovered that others did the same on the Calabrian side. In April 1981 we started the long fight against the poachers and the government's lack of control.

THE PAST

- About 50 concrete bunkers were built on the Peloritani Mountain (Sicily) and more than 30 hides made of stones or other materials were located along the route, to kill birds of prey.
- In every bunker/hide there could be 10-12 persons, out of which a maximum of 4 or 5 with guns.
- Some bunkers were rented to Calabrian poachers. The price could rise

from about \$1,000 to \$7,000 for 15 days or one month in springtime (usually May);

- The number of poachers was estimated to be about 300/350 for raptors, and over 10,000 in Messina and its surroundings, for all other species (Quails, Turtle Doves. Hoopoes, Rollers, aquatic birds, Swallows). In Calabria 2,000 poachers for raptors only!
- All kinds of raptors and storks were shot. Some poachers preferred one species only *Pernis apivorus*, but most shot all raptors. Everybody tried to shoot eagles and storks.
- With a SE wind, poachers used to shoot also from houses in the villages, because raptors were flying low over these urban areas due to the strong power of this wind and the consequent absence of thermals.
- Many good poachers could shoot 20-30 each in one day, sometimes more. We have personally observed, not without frustration, the killing of 32 Honey Buzzards in one afternoon by one poacher alone in one locality. In the same afternoon there were more than 150 persons shooting all around the area (1985).

THE FIGHT

The fight started in 1981 and it is still going on.

From 1981 to 1982 we organized:

- Daily written complaints to the local police from April to June.
- Periodical complaints to police headquarters.
- National demonstrations against the illegal poaching (1982/1983) organized on Monte Ciccio.

From 1981 to 1983:

- Articles and letters to local, regional and national newspapers.
- Contact with local, regional and national television.

Since 1984:

- An 'International Camp for the Protection of Raptors Migrating on the Straits of Messina' has been organized every spring, at first for only one month (20 April - 20 May 1984/85/86) then for two months (first days of April to end of May 1987-1995). People from Italy, Malta, Germany, Tunisia, Austria, England, America, Poland, Switzerland and Sweden, have participated. At the beginning we were very few in number because of which we could for years control only a small part of the migration area. When poachers were shooting, we all used to move to public telephones

or to the police station, because it was too dangerous to leave persons alone at the observation point. Even now there are periods when there are only a few of us and so a part of the migratory route is still not well under control.

Duties for participants were:

- Control of the known poaching area and discovering of new places.
- In case of shooting, advising the police personally or by public telephone.
- Counts of raptors migrating and falling and notification to the police.

RESULTS

For years the situation has been the following: the police were totally non-cooperative; we were considered 'crazy people' who paid no attention to the true world problems. After a car of one of us was burned by poachers the situation changed. The police started to work, poachers decreased and we increased.

From 1986 to 1989 there came a change. In May 1990 we saw the last raptor fall in front of us, as in the past. Since then, we have heard only few shots, saw no raptors killed and our presence has become a prevention whereas before it was only a repression.

At present all police forces co-operate well even if this still depends on personal will and conscience, but the highest grades are very sensitive about this problem and they ask for results.

Since 1989, the bunkers are no longer used to kill raptors, but the same poachers use them for observation only with binoculars. We cannot use the bunkers as in the past.

While before it was possible for each poacher to kill many raptors, now the few remaining kill usually only one from a private house, the police control makes it much more difficult. Also, even if security problems disappeared together with the arrogance of the poachers, it is still possible to be in a dangerous confrontation with some of them, as happened in 1992.

The annual presence of protectionists since 1984 has contributed to the saving of thousands of raptors and storks.

The complete change began when the police reacted to our calls, and, later on, the use of mobile telephones made it easier.

Many poachers arrested by the police were condemned by the courts and sent to prison for 'only' one Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* or Quail *Coturnix coturnix*, with sentence of over one year for a raptor. Poachers

started to understand that killing in a closed hunting season was dangerous for their social life and stopped altogether or became more watchful or were satisfied with fewer victims than in the past.

Present problems are:

- Poachers used to kill raptors in the southern area which we find difficult to control. In fact, we have not enough people, so we continue to prevent poaching in the historic area, trying, year by year, to extend the range, but without continuity.
- Poachers have started to shoot from houses and many strange ‘buildings’ have been growing up everywhere, especially in areas where raptors pass when a south-east wind is blowing. The raptors then fly low and are very easy to kill, whilst for us it is impossible to identify the poacher's house quickly. Contemporary poachers shoot only one or two raptors and then stop. After only one to three shots we cannot be sure of the house and police will not investigate if we are not sure of what we have seen.
- Calabrian people still come to Sicily for poaching. Usually they are few, but their numbers can increase rapidly if they know that the control is less, or absent or not qualified.
- For many years there has been a conviction in some environmental organizations that if nobody was shooting any more (not true in any case) it was not necessary to continue the International Camp. Financial problems have been for years threatening the loss of all the victories won. At the moment we can continue to control poaching, thanks to the WWF Italia, but every year can be the last. Changes in the organization have helped the fight, but it is also true that we cannot continue to organize camps for the rest of our lives. We must demonstrate to local populations that a good alternative to the economic efforts of poachers (for years a good argument) is ecological tourism, educational activities for children and research programmes for university and school groups.
- Poachers have closed some important places for the observation of raptors. These are on lands belonging to some of them and protectionists have to stay on the roads. Another important area is private property and we know that sooner or later these owners will sell the area. The other lands belong to the State and there will be no problem for continuing to stay (we hope).

ESTRATEGIC ACTION FOR CONTRACT POACHING

Keys for success of the anti-poaching activities in Sicily have been many:

- Constancy of the fight. There has not been one single year without a Camp since 1984, when we first discovered this way of controlling and combatting illegal shooting.
- Continuous contact with newspapers, magazines, and TV on any aspects of importance. The diffusion of information about what was happening on the Straits of Messina has helped to a great extent. Documentaries and interviews on different TV channels have changed the local mentality, relegating the poachers to a small part, without sympathy.
- A degree of courage in fighting against high grade police as they did not want to act without a valid reason.
- The National TV programme on nature and general documentaries, thanks to which the mentality of people changed in the face of environmental global problems, and developed and increased sympathy toward the world of animals.
- A continuous and stressful dialogue with poachers and police. Talking to them at first seemed hopeless, but over the years our words became their words through argument and facts. The famous Latin saying '*Gutta cavat lapidem*' has been our password for many years.
- International awareness of the problem. The presence of media people in the Camp has helped through their pressure on governments. The migratory raptors belong to the European Community and this is a very important point to be pushed for changing the situation.
- Our Camp made a point of requesting every year the daily intervention of Forest Guards and any kind of police pressure. Without them, we could do nothing more than be witnesses denouncing the illegal shooting. Our activities and presence have led to a yearly anti-poaching control by Regional Forest Guards, at first not without problems, but their purpose changed over the years and, in consequence, their results; with increasing work by the forest guard, the poaching ceased.
- The prizes for achievement in any occasion or at the end of a particularly good season has helped future results.
- Never to think that we have won and consequently become less careful or relaxed. This can be the best way to lose the results obtained the year before.

Finally, our Sicilian anti-poaching activities, started in 1981 and still going on, demonstrate that the slaughter of raptors can slowly be stopped.

Necessary are:

- International efforts
- A constant request for police intervention that only the protectionists' presence can guarantee through letters, personal contact, telephone, press pressure, telegrams, etc.
- A constant show of opposition without which nothing can be achieved.
- It is very important to co-ordinate all actions and never stop fighting. It is true also that some local factors do not help, such as the high numbers of poachers, the large area to be controlled, the mentality of the illegal shooters and so on (not least the political voting power the poachers have), but, in any case, anti-poaching activities must have priority and continue unabated.

THE PRESENT

- Bunkers are not used any more by poachers to shoot raptors.
- Some species have increased in number (*Circus aeruginosus*, *Circus pygargus*, *Pernis apivorus*). Because of the lack in observation which happened in the past, when it was impossible to follow the migration if poachers were shooting, comparisons with past data can be made only after 1989/90. The figures in Table.1. make evident an increasing number of raptors together with a decreasing number of birds shot. We cannot say that there is an undoubted connection, but the numbers in Table.1. are significant.

Weather conditions play a big role in the total seasonal count. In any case the high number of raptors in the last three years allows us to think that protection for two months in an area where killing raptors was previously a daily fact, has had a marked effect.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SICILY AND CALABRIA

Raptors concentrate on the Sicilian mountains, coming from the south, looking for thermal currents. For this reason it is possible to see them at certain well known concentration points. This occurs with winds from the north and, of course, the meteorological conditions (wind force, mist, clouds, temperature) influence the concentration of raptors, the height of flight and so on.

After leaving Sicily from one or more localized points using thermals, they can reach many different points in Calabria. Because of the height of their flight the area of arrival can change during their crossing of the Straits and many factors influence their direction.

Table 1. Development of anti-poaching activity 1981-1995 showing increase in numbers of migratory raptors and corresponding decline in poaching. (w=written, or=oral)

Year	Charge	TV Report	Manifestation	Intern. Camp	Days of Camp	Forest Guards Group	Use of Bunkers	No. of Raptors	No. of Shots Counted	% Shot per Raptor
1981	w,or.	yes	-	-	-	no	yes	-	-	-
1982	w,or.	yes	yes	-	-	no	yes	-	-	-
1983	w,or.	yes	yes	-	-	no	yes	-	-	-
1984	w,or.	yes	-	yes	30	no	yes	3,198	1,185	0.37
1985	w,or.	yes	-	yes	30	no	yes	3,210	506	0.15
1986	w,or.	yes	-	yes	41	yes	yes	8,868	367	0.041
1987	w,or.	yes	-	yes	58	yes	yes	5,705	205	0.035
1988	w,or.	yes	-	yes	59	yes	yes	6,186	263	0.042
1989	w,or.	yes	-	yes	50	yes	yes	9,854	241	0.024
1990	w,or.	yes	-	yes	65	yes	no	12,303	269	0.021
1991	oral	yes	-	yes	49	yes	no	7,751	139	0.017
1992	oral	yes	-	yes	53	yes	no	27,581	99	0.0035
1993	oral	yes	-	yes	52	local	no	24,669	97	0.0039
1994	oral	yes	-	yes	55	local	no	14,522	37	0.0025
1995	oral	yes	-	yes	58	local	no	18,669	27	0.0014

Table 2. Raptors and Storks seen shot during the international camp on the Straits of Messina (1984/1994) or received shot at the WWF Centre for Injured Birds (Messina) during Spring/Autumn migration.

Species	Seen Shot	Received Shot
<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	X	X
<i>Milvus migrans</i>	X	X
<i>Milvus milvus</i>	-	X
<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	-	X
<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	X	X
<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	X	X
<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	-	X
<i>Circus pygargus</i>	X	X
<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	X	X
<i>Buteo buteo</i>	X	X
<i>Buteo buteo vulpinus</i>	-	X
<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	-	X
<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	X	-
<i>Falco naumanni</i>	X	X
<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	X	X
<i>Falco columbarius</i>	-	X
<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	-	X
<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	X	X
<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	X	X

So while in Sicily the poachers could shoot from only one or a few localities, in Calabria they can disperse over a much bigger area, from sea level to 800m and for hundreds of metres or kilometres along the coast, their diffusion depending on weather conditions.

This can be an explanation for the higher number of poachers that has always existed in Calabria (about 2,000) and still does so in comparison with those existing up to some years ago in Sicily.

With winds from the south, the situation changes completely. In Sicily it is possible to kill raptors everywhere along the Tyrrhenian coast while in Calabria it is impossible to see most of them in any part of the region.

DISCUSSION

Whilst officially unproven the increasing number of raptors annually migrating is inversely proportional to the number of shots.

Protection along the migratory route of raptors can be very important for saving species. We think it is imperative that international efforts be applied to the areas where the slaughter of raptors is still continuing. Our example of international co-operation and continuity of anti-poaching activity can be used everywhere else.

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