

INTRODUCTION

Pat Foster-Turley, chairman of the "Species Survival Commission Otter Specialist Group" of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), on 5 October 1993, in the greeting letter addressed to the organizers of this Symposium, reported: "Mustelids can be considered key species to outline strategies for the conservation of habitats. This Symposium contributes to fill the knowledge gaps about these carnivores which are very often neglected within environmental management plans." These words perfectly reflect the guide-lines of the Symposium.

The choice of giving space to topics dealing with the biology and ethology of mustelids was mainly due to the fact that, although all the species are protected by a national law, an inclusive strategy for their Conservation still does not exist.

The Symposium makes the point on the current knowledge of mustelids and gives indications for a correct management of the species and their habitats. A particular attention has been addressed to the otter, a very representative species of riverine habitat which is particularly endangered in Italy.

Mustelids, as the other carnivores, have always been persecuted by human beings both directly and through the destruction of their natural habitats. It is doubtless that this process must be interrupted and that a new management policy of natural resources should take place in order to avoid the loss of biodiversity and therefore assure the survival of carnivores which more than other species suffer the effects of the ecological modifications.

The Symposium is divided in two sessions: the first one includes communications about the behavioural ecology of mustelids, the second one is devoted to the otter and in particular to the research in captivity which aims to collect useful information for field studies. For this species the methods to assess habitat suitability and the problems linked to its reintroduction have also been discussed.

I am grateful to all the foreign Authors (David Carss, Sam Erlinge, Addy de Jongh, Chris Mason, Claus Reuther, Paul Vogt) who brought their experiences and contributed to enriching the information exchange and stimulated the discussion.

I also thank the colleagues Paolo Galeotti and Alberto Meriggi who kindly reviewed many papers of this Symposium.

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I hope that this Second Symposium on Carnivores stimulates the beginning of new researches in Italy, the results of which could appear in the next edition.

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