

My friendship with a Red-footed Booby and its benefits on ecological awareness - 17.06.2013

Visitors coming on Alphonse Island are agreeably surprised to find a friendly Red-footed Booby treated with care and kindness by the Conservation Officer working for the Island Conservation Society (ICS).

With time the wild injured seabird and the woman has linked a touching friendship based on trust. The bird has been revealed to be an important island protagonist by enriching the ecotourism activity of the ICS team.

She was on the beach waiting for her fate. Her wing was seriously injured with blood covering her feathers. I could not pass by and let her die miserably even if it's the rules of Nature. It was too late, our roads had crossed and I could not ignore her. I threw my T-shirt over her head to help calm her down and to be able to pick her up. I transported her to my office, the Island Conservation Centre.

There, helped by my colleague, we realised that the bones were broken through the skin that left an open wound. There were three options for her: 'euthanasia', 'permanent captivity' and maybe 'rehabilitation and release'. It would have been kind of me to use the first option, but how could I do that without proper medicine? I had the advice from friends to break the neck. It was out of the question, the act did not match with my 'weak heart'. I deleted the euthanasia option and tried my best to cure the seabird hoping to release her into the wild.



Two years have passed and I am still taking care of Willie. She is a beautiful Red-footed Booby found while she was still a juvenile, now she's getting her full adult white plumage. I am pretty sure Willie is a female, there is no sexual dimorphism in the Red-footed Boobies except that females are heavier than males: around 1kg for the female and 800g for males. Hypothesis holds that size dimorphism is an adaptive consequence of these different roles, females spending time to brood while male are at sea to harvest fish.

Even if Willie lost her capacity to fly she's living in total liberty on the island. She walks around, trains to fly on the beach, likes to climb on my bike for a tour with me and more rarely stays for hours at sea. Since the beginning Willie is increasingly tamed to me, I was amazed to observe how she let me cure her during her invalidity; she was calm, never hurt me but was always keeping an eye on my activity around her wound. She just trusted me. However, it is with time that she really appreciated to be touched. Sometimes she comes towards me for affection, in that moment she comes to roost on me and likes to be caressed on the top of the head until she sleeps. Boobies are social animal and so need company.

Today, the centre is equipped with anesthetic (in high doses it can be used as lethal medicine) that help us to manage in an appropriate way the injured wildlife. But in case of a small injury birds are helped to recover and released to the wild. It is the case of Lucky, this one still comes to visit us sometimes. These experiences show us that Boobies are nice birds with their warm personality which at times remarkably resembles that of people. Some are very shy and easy to tame, some have a strong character and impossible to handle. If they feel comfortable with people they can climb spontaneously on their feet or hands, they know if people are bird lovers or not. Boobies are definitely not stupid as their Creole and scientific names (Fou Bet, Sula Sula) want to make us believe!

Willie and the others are a true attraction for the tourists who live moment of discoveries and great excitement. They can closely observe the physiognomy of a Red-footed Booby, see the amazing ability to

catch prey in their buckets filled with water during feeding time, and if Willie is in a good mood, and comfortable, they can even have the unique experience to handle the seabird.

Moreover the enjoyment that people feel, they also show strong interests in their life history and threats which lead naturally on environmental topics of conversation with the ICS team. I guess that by helping injured wildlife we have created another component to our ecotourism activity on the island, where Willie has a key role.



I hope that my relationship with Willie can also change the perception that most of people have on animals. When people exclaim to me 'this relationship between you and this seabird is amazing', they may become aware that birds and humans can be connected in a different way than upon exploitation. In our society we are disconnected from wildlife, and worse, we gain the idea that animals are only automatons responding mindlessly to stimuli. An idea created by human's vanity, giving us the permission to exploit these living creatures at our ease without any moral.

The present story of my friendship with Willie is just another testimony of the existence of bonds between human and wildlife; it shows that humans are linked to nature. In reality we are part of It. Nobody will ignore that we are living in a time where serious irreversible damage has been done to biodiversity because of our ignorance and greed. It is time to change our beliefs and attitudes toward nature and wildlife if we want to save ourselves!

Contributed by the Island Conservation Society