

The eels of Comacchio

Every year, at the Sagra delle Anguille, held at Yuletide and at Eastertime, an elaborately tricky device is employed to cull the eels which have rendered the Comacchio brands famous worldwide.

Fence-like structures made of reeds called *grisole* are planted in the lagoon bed in the shape of a series of communicating triangular basins in the shape of arrowheads - this allows for the differentiated capture of fish.

In autumn, especially in moonless or stormy nights, seawater entered the lagoons due to the prevailing southerly and east winds. Such waters are more oxygenated and less cold than the lagoon ones, hence enticing white fish species to migrate, together with the eels, towards the sea.

But while the white fish species hear their death-knell in the first chamber (*baldresca*), where they are imprisoned and subsequently fished, eels are able to wriggle through the *grisole* to reach the *cogolara*, from which they reach the *otele*, whose high walls (up to 30 cm) prohibit escape. In spring, at the end of the "Lent catch", the *grisole* were detached from the *lavorieri* so that young eels could re-enter and repopulate the lagoon.

Comacchio has all the requisites for a major eel packaging centre - it is endowed with a 13,000 ha system of brackish water lagoons (salinity ranging from 2-6 psu, compared with ca 35 psu for seawater) and the web of lagoons is connected to the sea only via three canals, which can, hence, easily be cordoned off.

Today's lacunar extent is just one-fourth of its former 50,000 ha, which was decimated by land reclamation schemes which have greatly reduced the water depth. Needless to say, agricultural land gained from such reclamation bears little fruit due to its high salt content.

The eel 'trade' is inadvertently driven by hormones - yes, those body chemicals driving eels once a year into a frenzy of migration from the brackish wetland system to the sea for spawning purposes to produce young transparent larvae (3-5 cm in length). Adult eels (50-100 cm in length, having a bluish-greenish collar) first perceive the urge to migrate immediately after summer when the level of salinity in the lagoons spikes. Interestingly enough, the sex of adult eels could not be determined till the 18th century and many anecdotes existed as to how eels propagated themselves. Some said that eels were born spontaneously out of mud or every time that someone cut his skin.

All eels pine to reach the Sargasso Sea, in the western Atlantic, close to the island of Bermuda, which fuels the imagination since it is largely a motionless sea (due to clockwise patterns of sea current circulation).

The existing eel business is simply a spectre of its former glory, with just 47 people currently employed within the business, with a further 14 eking out a living from the ecotourism sector. Of the 150 fishing *casoni* (large dwelling housing the male fishing communities on the lagoon, while the women worked in the processing plants back on land), only 10 restored ones remain.

Some of these *casoni* were used as guard posts against the *fiocinini*, poachers who were armed with a *fiocina* and who used a *velocipide* (a flat and fast boat) to escape guards. Other flamboyant jargon employed in the eel business include *tabarra*, or the equipment storehouse, *cavanne*, structures used for the retrieval of boats, *marotte*, or fishing boats, and *fattore*, or the acolyte of the entire community inhabiting a *casone*. The *fattore*, together with the clerk, has better quarters and living conditions within the *casoni* than the rest who had to trudge on a meagre staple diet of *polenta*, *anguille* and wine from back home.

Ecotourism on the lagoons

The Comacchio lagoons also offer a splattering of ecotourism, namely in the form of birdwatching and for botanic connoisseurs. The same lagoons are intertwined with the River Po delta wetland further north to form an 18,000 ha national park comprising the largest complex of wetlands in Italy. The same national park straddles over both the Veneto Region and the Emilia-Romagna region, encompassing nine municipalities.

The park can vaunt of more than 55,000 hibernating birds and 35,000 nesting birds, with an ornithological repertoire which includes stilts, avocets, red and black shanks, little egrets, spoonbills, pink and coral seagulls, the extremely rare Caspian tern and even the Slenderbilled Gull, which was almost completely extirpated from the Camargue wetland in France.

The onus for every bird-watcher must surely however be the sight of the charismatic pink flamingoes, which are enticed to visit the Comacchio lagoons by the high abundance of the micro-organism *Artemia* in the salty waters and which is responsible for the pink splotches on the flamingoes.

The aquatic fauna of the lagoons includes, besides the renowned common eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) species, other so-called white fish species, such as the common bass, gilthead, mullets, silverside and plaice.

The avid botanist can certainly feast his/her eyes on the dense meadows of marsh reed (*Phragmites australis*), the various rush species (*Juncus* spp.), the sea lavender (*Limonium* spp. - their flowers have the characteristic of keeping their appearance unchanged even when dried), saltwort (*Salsola soda* - specific name refers to the fact that ashing soda was once extracted from it), glasswort (*Salicornia ramosissima*), the sea blite (*Suaeda maritima*), the sea-purslane (*Halimione portulocoides*, characterised by spatulated, silvery-ash coloured leaves and which was almost completely extirpated from our islands), the golden samphire (*Inula crithmoides*) and the bright red lead grass (*Arthrocnemum* sp.) species. Because of the salty nature of the habitat, all these plant species are halophytes - i.e. they are armed with a high salt tolerance.

In view of its ecological importance, the Comacchio lagoons and the Po delta have been officially designated since 1988 as a site that meets the RAMSAR criteria for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance. The RAMSAR Convention's mission is the "conservation and wise use of wetlands by national action and international co-operation as a means to achieving sustainable development throughout the world".

As of April 1, 2002, 131 states were contracting parties, with 96 million ha of wetlands (or 1148 different sites) being protected globally. The Comacchio lagoons are also currently the recipient of EU funding through the LIFE programme.

Snippets of history

The Comacchio region first experienced Etruscan hegemony, as testified by the necropolis unearthed around the ancient city of Spina. In Roman times, the region saw little tangible developments as the Romans were imbued with a deeply-rooted dislike (still prevalent today in many societies) of marshland habitats. Testimony to this was the fact that Bogenza was the only notable centre in the area in the Roman period (with Ferrara, nowadays the region's leading centre, being founded only in the eighth century AD).

The region was a very viable trading interlocutory between Greece and the Etruscan homeland (i.e. Tuscany), an importance which was also mirrored in Roman times, as testified by the finding of a large vessel, dating from the end of the first century BC, dug up in Pond Basin on the outskirts of Comacchio in 1981.

With its web of interconnected canals, Comacchio was known as "Little Venice" and frequently waged war against its giant neighbour on the rights to sell salt, a highly-prized commodity at the time.

Ownership of the Ferrara lands, under whose jurisdiction Comacchio fell, was bestowed upon the State of the Church in 1598 by the Estense family. During the first visit of Pope Clement VIII to Comacchio, an innovative "women's regatta" was held in his honour. More recently, Garibaldi landed in Comacchio in the 1850s as part of the campaign to unify Italy. His wife was hapless enough to die in Comacchio of malaria.

The "flagship monument" of the town centre of Comacchio is certainly the Trepponti Bridge, an engineering feat close to the fish market. The bridge itself is suffused with a healthy dose of legend - three young ladies are purported to be have fallen into some form of mishap beneath the bridge (drowning for some, murder for others). Once their three names are correctly pronounced by passers-by, the three beleaguered ladies are finally "released".