PROVINCIA REGIONALE DI SIRACUSA

ORIENTED NATURE RESERVE

Fiume Ciane e Saline di Siracusa












The Nature Reserve: a bit of history

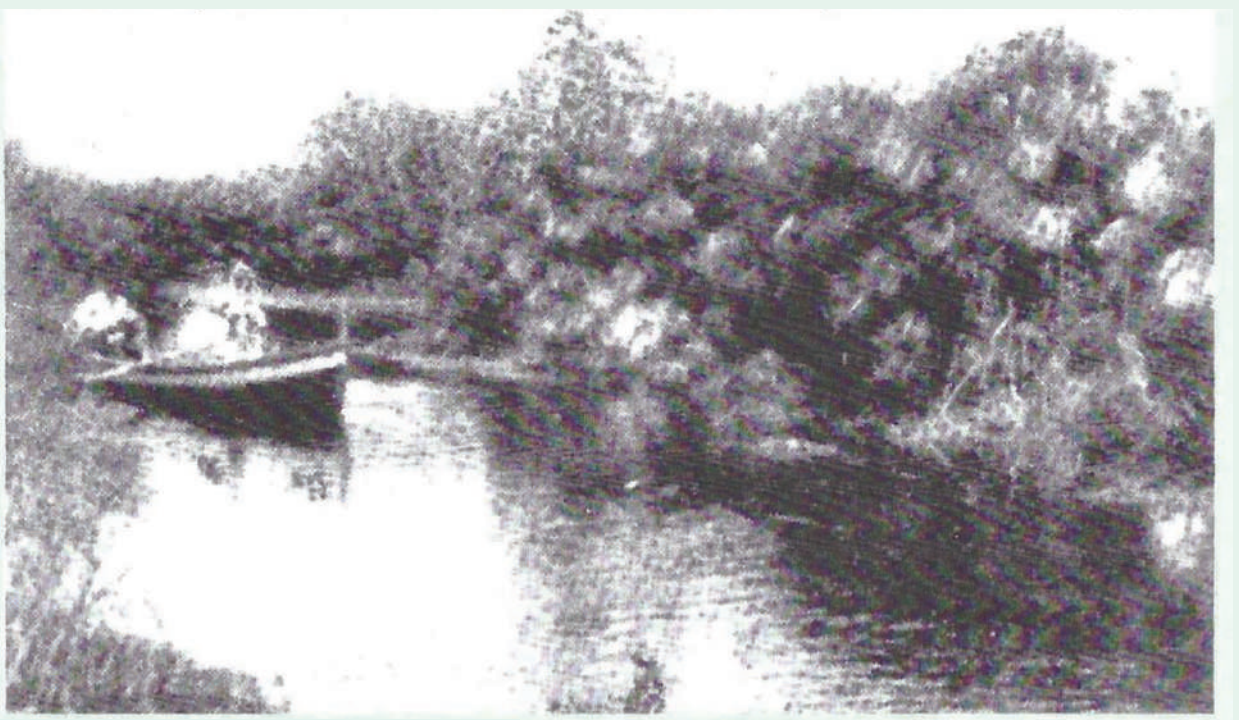


the salt harvest

hen you think of a protected natural area, you immediately imagine areas far from inhabited centers, mountains, woods, marshes built and designed by the slow rhythms of nature, rather than by the events of human history. And instead, right at the gates of Syracuse, a nature reserve comes to protect a site whose evolution over the centuries is intimately intertwined with the history of a city, with its most ancient legends and cultural traditions. When, in the 8th century BC, a group of Greek colonists landed on the islet of Ortigia to found a new colony, the plain that to the west closed the large natural inlet that today we call Porto Grande di Syracuse, was a single marshy extension where the sea waters mixed with those that the Anapo and other smaller rivers brought from the interior. It seems that the name of the city itself was linked to the name Siraka given to these marshy areas. In the centuries that followed, that natural landscape, a maze of bodies of water and reeds, underwent a slow but progressive domestication to the needs of man. In the second half of the last century, a vast marshy area, the Pantano Magno, covered its south-western part: in it flowed, fed by two large springs, a small tributary of the Anapo, the Ciane river. The spring, whose Greek name "Kyane" seems linked to the particular color of the water, had always been a place of worship, ritual celebrations and legends. The nymph Ciane, her loves, her tears turned into water, echo in the ancient pages of Plutarch, Ovid, Diodorus Siculus.

Perhaps even a small temple stood a few meters from the mythical source. The suggestion of the ancient myths made Ciane a classic destination for travelers in past centuries; we report for all an evocative description of the French.

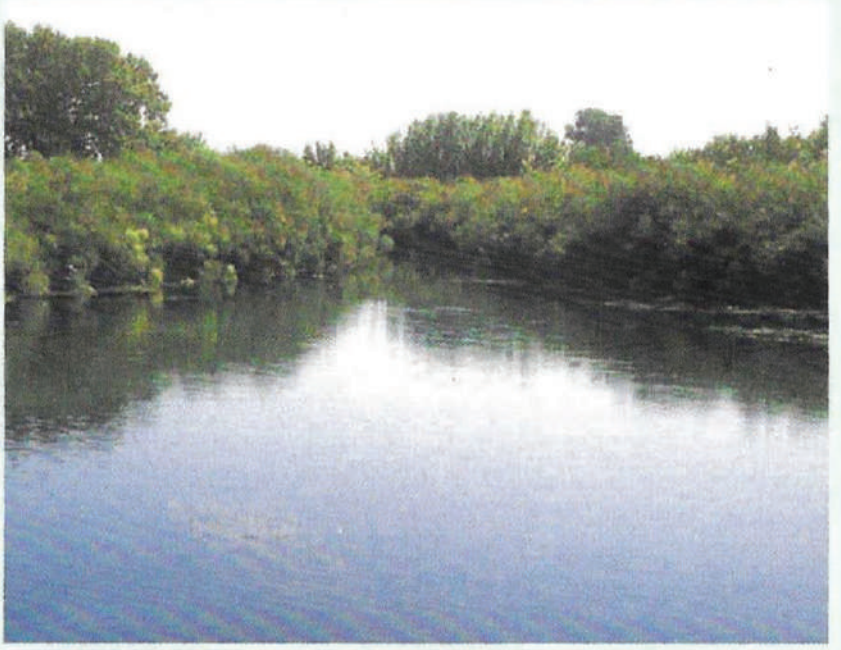
J.E. Renan dated 1875: "You take a boat at the dock of Syracuse..., you jump, not without difficulty, a bar at the mouth of the river, and you enter a beautiful clear, deep, rapid water, immediately after in a small forest of immense reeds and papyrus... The abyss of the Ciane itself is a miracle of clarity. You can see, at infinite depth, the hole from which it emerges and the innumerable fish that chase in the abyss their happy Life of eternal movement. Ciane, like Arethusa, was a chaste nymph. She died of sorrow for not having been able to prevent Pluto from abducting Proserpina and was transformed into a spring... the sunset appears to us as a theatrical art. The cold penetrates immediately, every movement of the air seems to bring a shiver: the flowers and leaves close, the little world that enjoyed itself on the floating meadows withdraws into the depths"
It is only from the second half of the 18th century that, in the descriptions of Ciane, we begin to mention the presence of a curious plant: papyrus, the very same papyrus used since time immemorial to prepare those paper rolls on which so much of human history has been handed down.
In the same period, a Syracusan scholar, Saverio Landolina, used the stems of the Ciane to make papyrus paper, starting what is still today a typical tradition of the city, a true science recovered from the oblivion of the centuries thanks to the skill of generations of Syracusan artisans.
But how did this plant end up in Sicily, which in our imagination is linked to the Egypt of the pharaohs and the slow and muddy waters of the Nile and which paradoxically has now disappeared from the Egyptian Nile? According to some botanists, papyrus would be spontaneous on the Ciane, but most scholars believe that the plant was imported to Sicily, probably in the 3rd century. BC, donated by the Egyptian kings to their ally, the Syracusan tyrant Hieron II. In any case, a mythical plant for a mythical river! And above all, indigenous or naturalized, certainly the largest papyrus colony existing in Europe. But let's go back to the end of the last century, when the centuries-old balance between the Ciane, the lands through which it flows, its papyrus, suddenly seems on the verge



The Cyane in a photo from the early 1900s

to break: major reclamation works begin on the Pantano Magno and the Ciane, whose waters previously spread freely in the marshes, is canalised and takes on its current appearance; from a tributary of the Anapo it becomes a parallel companion on the road to the common mouth in the Porto Grande of Syracuse. The story of the reclamation and canalisation of the Ciane is also the story of a real environmentalist mobilisation ante litteram that achieves at least one result: the papyrus colony, although debased in the new and more restricted environment, does not disappear, it officially becomes a cultural asset to be protected, an object of custody against abusive cutting and continuous transplants that, in the new hydraulic conditions of the river, of unnaturalness, become important for its conservation. The most recent events are linked to the construction, despite the environmental constraints already existing and that could have advised against its location, of a water pumping station for industrial use in operation since the early 1970s. From the new alarms and concerns for the very life of the papyrus colony comes the need for particular attention to the management of the short, but now famous, watercourse: in 1984 the Sicilian Region established the Ciane River and the Saline di Siracusa nature reserve, whose management was entrusted to the Regional Province of Siracusa. In addition to the historic source, the reserve includes the small and ancient salt pans that are located immediately south of the joint mouth of Anapo and Ciane, a strip of marsh that has been adapted for centuries to the production of sea salt. These areas, although transformed and even shaped by the work of man, are today a refuge for animal and plant species typical of wetlands and now disappeared from vast spaces of the surrounding territory: a historical testimony that becomes natural wealth, a living demonstration of the relationship between man and the natural environment, difficult, conflictual, but, at times, capable of reserving extraordinary surprises and right behind the front door.

The Ciane River



Papyrus along the river

The visit to Ci starts from the PRISMA spring (point 2). From the small parking lot, under a small group of eucalyptus trees, a path starts (some large boulders allow access only to pedestrians) which, after a few meters, overlooks the PRISMA spring, the main source of the river, rounded and with an average flow rate of about 800 l/sec. In relation.

in the presence of submerged vegetation, the source can have the appearance of a small pond about 15 meters wide, or if the bottom is free, you can appreciate its depth (about 7 meters), the exceptional clarity and transparency of the water and the very particular reflections of the seabed itself. Around, as if to crown the source, you can immediately see, mixed with the marsh reed, the papyrus with the stems gently bent towards the river and the characteristic umbrella-shaped inflorescence. Corrado Basile describes the legendary plant as follows: "It is a perennial plant, with a thick, branched rhizome, which spreads in a horizontal direction and from it roots are produced vertically that sink into the ground. From the rhizomes develop the airy stems or cauli, trigonal, smooth, of a light green colour which gradually become thinner towards the large, umbrella-shaped and drooping inflorescence... When the cauli reaches a height of about one metre, the bracts enveloping the future umbrella open and leave free a sort of tuft, made up of thin and very numerous twigs, further divided at their ends into other thin ramifications that bear spikelets of tiny pale yellow flowers... flowering begins in July and ends in September".

The adult papyrus reaches a variable height, related to the environmental conditions in which the plant grows, especially in the past the Ciane papyrus formed a up to 5-6 meters high. According to data collected by Basile, who has been studying the Ciane papyrus for years, the daily growth of the plants reaches 4 cm in the summer months. Papyrus paper is produced by basically "slicing" the central part of the thicker stems into thin strips then overlapping and pressing to make a sheet. It may seem simple, but it is the Nido di pendolino. substances used to treat the sheet that make the difference between a paper destined to deteriorate rapidly and one capable of defying the centuries!

On the left the path continues alongside the winding course of the river, dotted with old ash trees and willows planted after the reclamation of the Pantano Magno. Once you reach the first little bridge and cross it, you can go up Gallinella d'acqua.



Penduline Tit's Nest



Gallinella d'acqua.



The source seen from above

The salt pans

To visit this part of the reserve, reach access point 13. After leaving your car in the nearby parking area, enter from the pedestrian crossing and reach the nearby Calderini Lighthouse, located on a rocky spur with the Porto Grande of Syracuse on the right and the salt flats on the left. From this point the view of the Port is particularly spectacular; it is clear that this was considered by the ancients to be one of the safest landing places, similar as it is to a large coastal lagoon. To enter the port safely, ships use the Calderini Lighthouse, aligned with the Carrozzieri Lighthouse, the tall red and white checkered tower that can be seen inside behind the salt flats. The view extends over Ortigia dominated by the Frederick II fortress of Castello Maniace on the extreme tip, and by the imposing buildings of the Cathedral and the Church of the Collegio. On the mainland is the new city, marked by the unmistakable outline of the Sanctuary of the Madonna delle Lacrime.

The salt pans of Syracuse, covering about 50 hectares, were installed at the beginning of the 17th century and, since then, have produced sea salt until their abandonment which dates back to the early 1980s. Among the aims of the reserve there is also the partial restoration of salt cultivation to conserve, even if only for educational purposes, a testimony of a typical Sicilian tradition that has now almost disappeared. The salt pans can be observed well from the area in front of the lighthouse: the water that fills them is now only rainwater and in the summer months, the area is often completely dry. In this period you can clearly observe the network of stone or earth banks and the canals with the remains of the old wooden locks that connected different environments and allowed the distribution



sultan chicken in the salt pans

a few meters along the right bank to the confluence of the Pismotta, the second source of the Ciane, capable of about 500 1/sec. The path continues downstream on the right bank to the pumping station (no more than twenty minutes' walk). The part downstream from the station is almost devoid of naturalistic interest, but it can be a pleasant walk to reach the mouth at the intersection with the S.S. 115 walking under the long row of eucalyptus trees on the bank between the Ciane and the Mammaiabica canal.
The Ciane is not only papyrus, but offers a vast procession of other aquatic plants, from submerged ones such as the Potamogeto with long leaves dragged by the current, to the rich plant associations of the banks with Gigaro plants



Gigaro (Arum italicum)

also showy ones like the Iris pseudoacorus, and many others with medicinal properties, such as the Dulcamara, the Gigaro, the mint, the horsetail, the Cinquefoil and others, and with the imposing Ash Trees, Willows and Poplars. The animal life along the river is not very showy, but can reserve interesting observations such as that of the River Crab, a species now rare and localized (it can be found between the Pietre alla Pisma, searching for it in silence) or small, but spectacular birds such as the colorful Kingfisher or the Penduline Tit with its flask-shaped nest hanging from the branches of the willows. The turtles observable along the river are not our Emys orbicularis, but American turtles of the genus Chrysemys unfortunately thoughtlessly introduced for several years. Many mullets that habitually go up the river to the sources.

perched on the small rocks in front of the salt marshes, many and everywhere the Black-headed Gulls. With the arrival of spring the large winter flocks disappear, but the variety of species increases due to the arrival of migrants from Africa. Particularly conspicuous in this period are some large waders such as the grey Grey Herons, the very white Little Egrets, the curious Spoonbills, or the Glossy Ibis.
In April a medium-sized black and white wader with long red legs appears: the Black-winged Stilt. Many couples nest along the banks and often the adults take flight incessantly chattering Grey Heron. to scare away other birds or possible intruders. Sometimes the nests are so close to the path that the intruders could be the visitors



Airone cenerino.



Spatole.



knight of Italy



Royal swans

themselves: in this case it is best to move away immediately to avoid the eggs, cooling down, from spoiling or being preyed upon by stray dogs or magpies that take advantage of the temporary absence of the birds from the nest. In late spring, small waders of various species are common: Stint, Sandpipers, Ringed Plovers, traveling towards the ancient breeding areas. In the summer months, some Grey Herons and many Yellow-legged Gulls are always present, but it is only with the first autumn rains that the basins fill up with water again and the number of birds increases. The marked path leads to the joint mouth of the Anapo and Ciane, following the embankment that separates the salt pans from the sea and the beach. The easy path, but partially muddy in the winter months, allows you to appreciate a particularity of the salt pans: the rapid succession, in a restricted space, of different plant associations typical of sandy coasts and humid zones.



aerial view of the salt pans

of sea water to the different sectors of the salt pan up to the so-called "casedde", the square basins closest to the sea. Here the salt was collected and stored in piles protected by tiles or in the large warehouse a few meters from the lighthouse. A large band of reeds closes the salt pans towards the inside, practically marking the boundary between the reserve and the pre-reserve. Today the salt pans are above all a privileged place for observing aquatic birds.

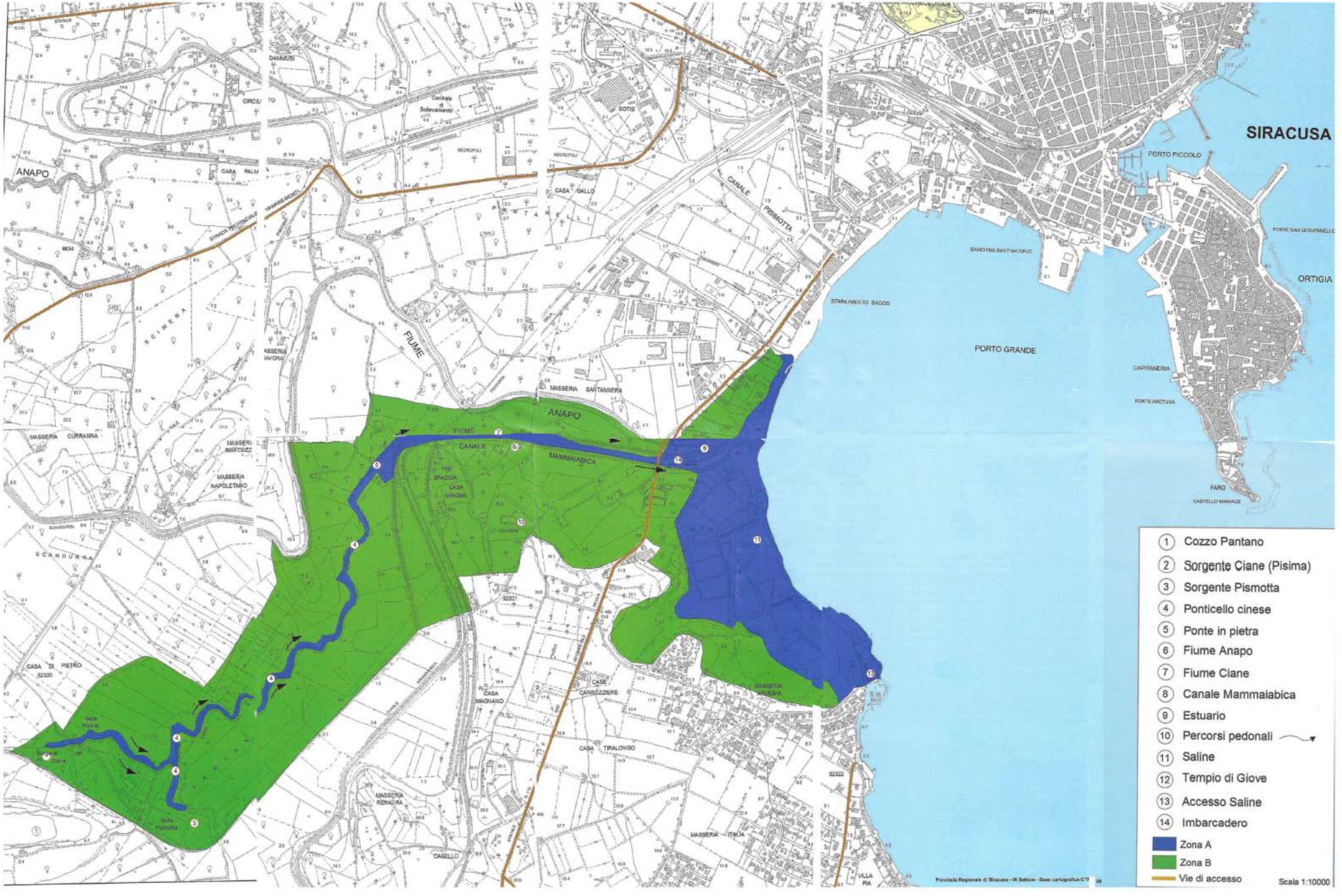
On 12/12/03, twelve specimens of Sultan Chicken were released inside the Reserve, coming from the Albufera farm in Valencia (Spain) managed by the autonomous community of Valencia.

The aim of the reintroduction is to recreate in Sicily a viable population of this species, which became extinct in 1957 due to environmental degradation and direct persecution.

Monitoring of the species has led to the certainty of nesting, as the birds spotted did not have the ring containing the microchip for their identification. Binoculars and a manual for recognizing European birds will be essential. From the rocky point on which the lighthouse stands and along the indicated path, you can easily observe the birds present: you must absolutely not enter the salt marshes, this behavior can cause all the birds to flee outside the protected area or put nests and eggs in danger.

The period richest in fauna is winter: from November to March there are hundreds of Coots, black and often in compact groups, many ducks including Mallards, Shovelers, Teals, Wigeons, often also the rare Red-crested Pochards, sometimes flamingos and Mute Swans. Some Marsh Harriers continually circle along the reeds which are often the evening roost of spectacular gatherings formed by tens of thousands of Starlings.

In this period at sea it is easy to observe Cormorants often


SIRACUSA
ORTIGIA
PORTO PICCOLO
PORTO GRANDE
ANAPO
FIUME
CANALE
MAMMAIABICA
PISMOTTA
STABILIMENTO BAGNI
BANCHINA SANT'ANTONIO
CAPITANERIA
FARO
1 Cozzo Pantano
2 Sorgente Ciane (Pisima)
3 Sorgente Pismotta
4 Ponticello cinese
5 Ponte in pietra
6 Fiume Anapo
7 Fiume Ciane
8 Canale Mammaiabica
9 Estuario
10 Percorsi pedonali
11 Saline
12 Tempio di Giove
13 Accesso Saline
14 Imbarcadero
Zona A
Zona B
Vie di accesso
Scala 1:10000