

Griffon Vultures and the Inhabitants of the Island of Cres

CO-HABITATION OF HUMANS, SHEEP AND GRIFFON VULTURES

- For centuries sheep husbandry was the fundamental economic activity on the island of Cres that allowed humans to survive. Simultaneously, humans became acquainted with other factors of the area. Hence, becoming involved in sheep husbandry also implied sharing the landscape of the island with griffon vultures (*Gyps fulvus*). It can be assumed that by watching these impressive birds humans can gain insight into their behavioural patterns. This knowledge has been passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. Similarly, the relationship with the birds has not changed significantly over time and it can hence be referred to as some kind of symbiosis. The gradually decreasing number of sheep is also the reason for the decline in the number of griffon vultures. Consequently, in the 1970's ornithologists became involved in systematic observation of these birds. Through extensive media presence, the awareness of these birds and the knowledge about this species have permeated the human co-existence on the island with it. Scientific research findings considerably contributed to focusing and improving the work in the local administration and tourist community. The shaping of the relationship can also be affected through the creation of new elements of spatial identity from the aspect of heritage, which is highly interesting for the new tourism, ecologic, economic, social and other developments. The spectrum of diversity in this relation is visible at an individual level and also within the geo-social-economic aspect of the island.

Key words: sheep husbandry, griffon vultures, Cres (island), heritage, island identity, tourism

INTRODUCTION

The islands have always been like metaphors, surrounded by a specific mystique. These are areas of search for new truths and reasons for existence, symbols of spiritual centres, contemplation and calm, uniqueness, micro cosmoses, as well as places for isolation, containment, punishment and marginality. The population living on islands is more sensitive and more subtle compared with the inhabitants of the neighbouring coastal regions. The islanders are more focused on themselves and on the nature (Matvejević 2007: 18-21). The present, saturated with materialism, simply encourages the search of undiscovered or re-discovered realities, primordial relationships with the nature and its laws. All these dimensions are the elementary reality of life on the island of Cres, they penetrate it and emanate from it, creating and shaping its community. Nevertheless, from the pragmatic aspect, the life on the island is difficult and tough, yet during the difficult everyday life, humans adapted to the natural conditions and were striving to find the path towards harmony and keeping the balance. The life of the inhabitants of the island of Cres has always been always linked with the nature. It has been dependent on and permeated with the nature and its plant and animal species. Since during the second half of the 20th century sheep husbandry, as the most important branch of the economy until that point, gradually started disappearing, tourism, as the new economic branch, became the primary activity for a large number of islanders. Balance with the nature was being searched also in that segment and some of the features that had previously been attributed secondary importance assumed new roles. A year ago, I was involved in a conversation with the Curator at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, Mrs. Željka Petrović Osmak, who was collecting materials on the island of Cres for the exhibition *Of Animals and Humans*. In that occasion I expressed my views about the relationship of the inhabitants of the island of Cres and griffon vultures. She kindly suggested that I should strive to collect slightly more information concerning this issue. In this paper I have strived to provide features of best practices and knowledge in the island community that show a continuity of the relationship between humans and griffon vultures and hence an unbreakable relationship with the nature. My findings resulted from fieldwork performed through conversations with many persons throughout the island of Cres, as well as an insight into the selected professional literature. I was also interested in whether the griffon vulture was becoming a part of island identity, as well as who influences the perception of heritage elements, as well as how and to what extent the islanders become aware of it and accept it and whether they consider the griffon vultures as a part of the heritage at all.

THE GRIFFON VULTURES OF CRES AND HUMANS

Cres, the largest island on the Adriatic (405.7 km²), is largely covered by pasture areas.¹ The northern part and the far south of the island are partly covered by the forest. Large plots of arable land that would be suitable for agriculture are very scarce. Until the mid-20th century, each karst sinkhole with any red soil used to be exploited for that purpose. After clearing stones from the shallow Dolomite slopes and the construction of terraces, they were used as arable land, normally near human settlements. Relatively mild climate and karst landscape were the most adequate for sheep husbandry and they resulted in keeping sheep outside year round. Through appropriation of land during the process of fundamental economic production – sheep husbandry –, which enabled the survival on the island of Cres, humans gained insight into all the other factors in that area. Sheep husbandry implied sharing the island landscape with griffon vultures (*Gyps fulvus*). This vulture is one of the largest flying birds and Cres is one of the last habitats of these birds in Croatia.² I assume that upon casual watching of these remarkable birds, humans identify some patterns in their behaviour. This knowledge was transmitted by word of mouth from generation to generation. Their stay in the area, whose specific landscape was the result of anthropogenic activity, was primarily linked with the rural part of the island. Nevertheless, also the inhabitants of the largest urban centre, Cres, were frequently involved in agriculture (olive growing, viticulture, gardening) and sheep husbandry. Since the appearance of griffon vultures is linked with sheep, their habitats are more frequently located above pasturelands. Griffon vultures nest on steep rocks above the sea on the eastern coast of the island. Hence, encounters with griffon vultures, if that is what we can call the noticing of these birds in the sky or somewhere on land, normally at a considerable distance, is primarily linked with rural population. The knowledge about feeding behaviour of griffon vultures, who feed exclusively on carrion, have shaped the opinion that they are useful, as they prevent potential spreading of contagion from dead sheep. Extensive sheep husbandry, where the sheep mortality rate is higher due to keeping them outdoors year round, enables the survival of griffon

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- 1 According to Stražišić, the primordial vegetation on the island were oak forests, which were brought to degradation by humans through cutting and animal husbandry. The central part of the island was completely changed (Stražišić 1981: 97). Since active involvement in sheep husbandry, as well as the number of sheep, have been in decline over the last three decades, the prickly juniper species (*Juniperus oxycedrus*) is covering increasingly large areas on the island due to succession.
 - 2 During the exhibition *Are you Craving for Facts or Myth? – a Story about Griffon Vulture* held in 2002 at the Croatian Natural History Museum in Zagreb, the authors Irena Grbac and Goran Sušić, in addition to basic facts about the biology of that animal, the presentation of life of a bird colony on the island of Cres and work on protection of endangered species, disclosed historical facts about the relationship between humans and birds in general. In addition, they presented symbolic meanings of birds in different cultures, as well as the common history of humans and griffon vultures in different environments and hence also on the island of Cres (Grbac 2002: 102-114).

vultures. Consequently, the interaction provides benefits for both factors. The relationship with these birds throughout history could perhaps be described as a specific form of symbiosis.

Collectively acquired knowledge and experiences shaped the relationship for which they say that "...they are neither good nor bad. We could say they are neutral. We know they are here but we do not pay much attention to them."³ Or: "...they have always flown... they are always on rocks and they do not interfere with us, they do not do any harm...they are rather useful instead..."⁴ They were aware of their presence and usefulness, yet they did not pay much attention or attribute much importance to them. Knowledge linked with circling of flocks of griffon vultures above pastures was acquired through observation. Then sheep farmers know "...that something died. That some animal died... a lamb or sheep. So I would go and see...to find out what it was."⁵ Since pasture land on the island covers large areas, this is certainly helpful for sheep farmers, as the circling of griffon vultures above the dead animal defines the location and the direction they need to head for. They also know that griffon vultures nest on steep and hardly accessible rock cliff sites along the eastern coast of the island of Cres, that "they are standing there on the rocks... towards Podokladi." Above the southern part of the island they would fly "to Verin, not more to the South. In winter they would come up here ...to Gračišće. There would be so many of them, twenty or thirty. But in the summer even more."⁶ The sociability of these birds was also noticed, as they often fly together and feed normally in groups: "...many of them come round ... five, six and even more of them. Some of them feed a little, then some others. Some of them sit on dry stone walls. I have seen them sometimes ... from a distance of one hundred meters ... as they feed."⁷ They also know that griffon vultures need more free space for taking off and so: "...you will not see them in the valley where they cannot take off. There needs to be a clearance ... and there needs to be a slight downward slope, as they are big and it is not easy for them to take off..."⁸ They sometimes say: "...but people did not use to talk so much about griffon vultures in the past...as they do now"⁹, yet knowledge and observations were transmitted, which confirms the interaction with these birds and the sensitivity of individuals to the occurrences in the nature.

3 M. E., Orlec.

4 K. G., Belej

5 M. F. Belej

6 K. G., Belej

7 P. M., Orlec

8 K. F., Belej

9 M. D., Beli

Although they used to and they still catch the birds on the island, hunters have not normally been after griffon vultures. There is a manuscript by a parish rector from Orlec (Turčić 1999: 40), in which it was stated that at the beginning of 20th century, different dignitaries visited the village also in order to hunt these birds. This bird species, which was protected by the law, was sometimes poached also by foreign hunters during the second half of the 20th century (Sušić 2002: 63). In the notes by Andrija Bortulin, dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, he stated that young boys – young men – used to remove eggs from the nests on the first Sundays or during festivities and they used to carry them in baskets and show them whilst they were walking around the village, collecting pieces of cheese, bacon and eggs that they would later on eat during the celebration with the others.¹⁰

During the inspection of sheep or whilst walking around outdoors, when the islanders accidentally came across a griffon vulture feather, they would often take it with them. They sometimes used to bring it home and give it to children as a present and they would then use it whilst playing. Or they used to give the feather as a present to someone they would meet on their way or they used to leave it somewhere in the dry stone wall. The sturdy and smooth rachis (the central shaft) of the feather was used by beekeepers during honey extraction to move the bees from the frames more easily and in order not to damage their fragile wings. Some beekeepers still prefer using a griffon vulture feather instead of the currently more frequently used bee brushes.¹¹ The feather was also used during olive pressing in traditional stone presses, in order to collect the remaining oil and put it inside the barrel (Sušić 2006). The co-habitation with this bird species was shown in different ways. *Orli* (lit. *Eagles*), as griffon vultures are called on the island of Cres, according to legends, provided the idea behind the name of the settlement Orlec, located in the central part of the island. It is the largest and the most important settlement where sheep husbandry is still the predominant economic activity.

In the urban environment of Cres the coat of arms of the Bragadin family dating back to the 17th century shows an engraved griffon vulture. Moreover, a griffon vulture was engraved on the tombstone of the distinguished noble family Ferricogi from Cres dating back to the 16th century (Sušić 2002: 64), whereas the heraldic hipopanthor's front legs were that of the griffon vulture (i.e. eagle) and they were engraved in the coat of arms of the city of Cres (Ćus-Rukonić 1989: 8). The legend, written down in Beli, 150 years ago by the

10 Bortulin wrote about 'hawks' and so there is a possibility that he was not referring to griffon vultures (Bortulin 1949: 24). Nevertheless, in the introductory text of the publication *Caput Insulae Beli – Prvih petnaest* (*First fifteen*) by Don Josip Bandera described the same custom mentioning griffon vultures (Radek and Sušić 2008:4).

11 Based on stories told by M. E., Orlec

local parish rector Mužina and it was retold by Tea Perinčić, telling a story about why griffon vultures do not sing anymore (Sušić 2002: 64).¹² A belief was recorded in the central part of the island: "...they used to say that when a griffon vulture used to fly above a house or around the house... Then they said someone might die... A relative or someone like that."¹³

WHEN GRIFFON VULTURES START GOING DOWN THE PATH OF EXTINCTION

Reflections, criticism of existing relationships with animals, scientific research and finally animal rights movements in different ways affected the changes in the perception of animals.

"Each generation creates their own vision of animalism, expressed as a lack of what humans are supposed to have. This refers to language, common sense, intellect and moral awareness. Simultaneously, each generation warns, as if it were a new discovery, that humans are animals, too and that comparison with other animals provides us with an insight into our own species in the easiest way" (Ingold 2000: 14).

Last century was marked by speciesism, as discrimination based on the species. Through different criticism, activism and campaigns with which animal rights advocates raise the public awareness; speciesism is losing its anchorage in society. At the global level, animal welfare initiatives and animal rights advocates, as well as scientific institutions and individuals are all striving to provide new stances towards animals and present new relationships with them to individual segments of the island community. Biologists are continuously highlighting one of the animal rights, i.e. the right to survival.

12 "They say that griffon vultures used to sing. Their singing was so unusual and beautiful that no other bird could match it and the same applies to their magic flight. They were fairies wearing birds' feathers. Their voice was also fairy-like. Their voice made everyone stop for a while in enchantment, irrespective of what they had been involved in, work or leisure. Local inhabitants used to spend hours listening to their singing and they even used to postpone their work. Nevertheless, their parish rector was faced with serious problems, since almost no one came on time to the Sunday mass anymore. The inhabitants of Tramuntana from "Vanjština" faced even worse problems. Whilst going down from the villages surrounding Tramuntana on early Sunday mornings, their journey was followed by eagles singing and they soon lost the concept of time and stopped to listen to them, forgetting the Sunday Mass and Lord's Day. Stunned, they used to eventually reach their parish rector with excuses, yet they were repeatedly late for the mass. By the time they sang 'Gloria' not even a half of the local church was full. The parish rector was in despair, imploring and praying the Virgin Mary: "Oh, Holy Mother of God, Holy Virgin, take away the griffon vultures' voice." And the Mother of God showed mercy to the caring parish rector. The griffon vultures were silent and you will not hear anything from them except their squealing and screeching" (Sušić 2002: 64).

13 K. G., Belej

Ornithologists from the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (HAZU), headed by Goran Sušić, through comprehensive and systematic research, conducted at the end of 1970's and in the 1980's, confirmed the fact that the existence of the griffon vulture species was endangered. Concerning the fact that sheep are gradually disappearing from the island, due to the decline of sheep husbandry, this directly affects the population of griffon vultures. Through warnings about the interdependence of these factors that negatively affect the life in the community, as well as about socio-economic relationships and the changes in the landscape and biodiversity, they gradually succeeded in their efforts and hence in mid-1980's two special ornithological reserves were declared.¹⁴ The concept of heritage, natural or cultural, is considered as central in establishing protected areas, as a manifestation of the wish to preserve some currently endangered state, process or occurrence considered as heritage from the past (Frangeš 2010: 7). A research and education centre was founded in Beli on the North of the island several years later.¹⁵ Numerous lectures throughout the island, as well as exhibitions, publications, field work and extensive media presence, the awareness and the knowledge that these birds are endangered have permeated and affected the recently established relationship between the birds and the islanders. The island of Cres has been identified due to the griffon vultures at a broader level (at the state, European and even international level).¹⁶ The way griffon vultures were perceived during the period when the research commenced was described in an anecdote, told by the Director of what

14 Ornithological reserves Kruna and Pod Okladi were declared in 1986, striving to protect the largest remaining griffon vulture population in Croatia (Sušić i Randić 2003: 97). They resulted in the increase in number of birds and their population, as well as on the attitudes of a segment of islanders, those involved in sheep husbandry, animal rights advocates and ecologists.

15 The eco centre *Caput Insulae* in Beli has been intensively involved in preservation and protection of griffon vultures, as well as the cultural and historical heritage of the island for over two decades. A large number of scientists, students, volunteers and members of the local population have been involved in its programmes. According to the Director of the Centre, the local government and the tourist board have not shown interest, or at least not in proportions that their work would deserve. Irrespective of the problems and disagreements, which eventually resulted in the relocation of the Centre and its moving away from the island, it is a fact that the work of the staff at the Centre certainly affected the changes in the relationship between the local population and griffon vultures. The term local inhabitants includes the population of the entire Cres and Lošinj archipelago. The island of Cres has been recognised at the European and even at the global level primarily by griffon vultures. Several years ago, the Centre relocated and left the island. A new Centre has been completed this year in Beli and it will have a similar role. Several institutions and associations both at the local and at the County level are included in the project. According to one local woman who also told us about this issue, experts in the field of biology and those involved in the preservation of nature and cultural heritage, as well as those involved in tourism and volunteers need to continue the "story at the same point where it stopped when the previously founded centre left the island." (I. S., Cres).

16 Different international travel sources, guidebooks and magazines (*Lonely planet*, *Time out*, *Adriagate*, *The Guardian*, to name a few) griffon vultures are highlighted as one of the basic features of the island of Cres. Local tourist portals, guidebooks and in general tourism promotional materials, most frequently point out griffon vultures, providing its high quality and comprehensive descriptions, as the most important feature of the nature on the island.

at the time was the Centre in Beli. The anecdote describes the relationship with the griffon vulture species and the knowledge about it in a picturesque way:

“When I was starting the project, I believe it was sometime around 1982 (or 1983), on one occasion I brought a radio journalist from HRT2 who made a feature story on what I was doing and in what way. Whilst we were standing at the waterfront in the city of Cres, a griffon vulture was flying above our heads. Hence, the journalist decided to stop a girl (17 or 18 years old) and he asked her (into the microphone) if she had ever heard of griffon vultures. She said she had. He asked where she heard of them and where they live. She said – well, I heard it on TV, they live in Africa. And he said: Look at the sky! She looked it and was surprised: ‘Aaaaaaaah, what a huge bird! What is it?’ Here, that was the knowledge of average inhabitants on the island of Cres about griffon vultures at the time.”¹⁷

According to a local man, who is currently almost sixty years old, when he was young, the public knowledge in rural areas used to be different and young people used to be aware of griffon vultures that they used to occasionally watch fly sometimes:

“Griffon vultures could be seen also when they were flying above Koromašna... During the summer when we went for a swim... They were going back. Several of them used to fly above our heads. When we were walking in the fields, we also used to see them. Not everyone was interested... Some of us were and some of us didn’t care. Some of us were more fond of observing nature... They were more curious”.¹⁸

Another middle-aged woman talked about completely different memories from the same period. She used to live in urban environment at the time:

“At school we never mentioned griffon vultures. I was born here, in Cres, but as we did not walk around the island much, I did not even know they existed. Those children who had relatives in the villages on the island were probably aware of them. They did not fly much above Cres, I mean the city of Cres. Or I didn’t notice them... It was only later on when I came back to the island and when Goran started the research, when the ornithologists commenced work in Beli [...] it was only at that point that I became aware of what we actually had... Something fascinating... Impressive. Yes, my attitudes have probably changed, too, my relationship with animals and my thoughts... Even the children from the earliest age are now aware of them. They have different workshops. Once during carnival we even wore griffon vulture masks... In that way their awareness is raised about our cultural heritage and they establish a relationship with it...”¹⁹

17 S. G., Rijeka

18 K. J., Belej

19 J. V., Cres

The scientific research findings have to a certain extent channelled the work of tourism workers. Tourism, as the most important branch of the economy, through creation of 'tourist attractions' is focused on new elements of spatial identity. In the late 1980's, the company Cresanka from Cres, involved in tourism, provided a tourism programme that included natural heritage permeated with cultural practices linked with sheep husbandry²⁰. It organised visits to Orlec where A. Kučić looked after a griffon vulture named Miki whom he had saved from the sea and whom he had taught to spread his wings. Hence, a tourism product was created which simultaneously offers "uniqueness, authenticity and originality."²¹ The heritage, which has been gaining a new dimension in tourism industry, in addition to its role of identification, also plays an economic and a commercial role (Fakin Bajec 2016: 217). A pragmatic relationship, which, in addition to providing new insights, has been developing in the direction pointed out by A. Kučić from Orlec is more characteristic of rural environments. He stated:

"...that griffon vultures attract the interest of tourists... They come here to have a look at them and then you can sell them something... people can earn some money. There were several buses full of tourists who came here to have a look at that griffon vulture. They wanted to have a photo taken of them with it... They cuddled it. I have taught it something... To spread his wings and they had their photos taken with him... And the tourists were satisfied. So was I".

That can be interpreted also as adapting to specific situations, where the newly arisen situations can be exploited.²² The inhabitants of Orlec used to come and watch the griffon vulture up close out of curiosity. They said they would normally see griffon vultures only from the distance. Nevertheless, they believe they do not pay any more attention to griffon vultures since "so much has continuously been

20 Information about this issue is provided in *Roundtable meeting minutes* organised by the Cultural Circle of Istria and Veneto Region named *Istria*. Roundtable meeting entitled "Protection and Valorisation of the Island: Different Experiences. 18th April 1992.

21 For several years, this marketing slogan was used by a tour operator from Cres to invite tourists to become acquainted with the heritage. During the Homeland War, due to a small number of tourists, this offer was abandoned. There is no available information about the criteria for the creation of such an offer, to what extent and how it was based on expert insights, or how it was accepted by the tourists. Several years later, the griffon vulture was relocated to Eco Centre Beli and there were no more organised visits to Orlec or to the griffon vulture. According to the opinion of many interlocutors, the potential of natural curiosity of griffon vultures has not been sufficiently exploited in the city of Cres (tourist board, local government, etc.) thus far. On the other hand, some people believe that griffon vultures have become the brand of the island. It is difficult to confirm whether this marks the commencement of 'heritage industry' (in the concrete example it is more the case of natural heritage).

22 He acquired new knowledge about the lifestyle habits of griffon vultures, of their being an endangered species and of their importance in the ecosystem of the rural community, through contacts with scientists and those involved in field research, through media records and different media programmes and lectures, amongst others. Similarly, they became aware that new tourism trends were focused on insights into natural curiosities and lifestyles in the local community, where they identified economic potential. Natural amenities are exploited, but never damaged.

said and written about them. As if it has become fashionable to watch griffon vultures!”, and so they are not as delighted when “they see griffon vultures in the sky, as the foreigners are.” They frequently believe that watching griffon vultures and showing delight with their flight are typical of persons who either are not native to the island or who do not live there. Nevertheless, during the last two decades changes in the relationship towards griffon vultures can be identified. There have been instances of people helping e.g. a young griffon vulture which had fallen into the sea or had been hit by a vehicle or they at least inform the staff at the Eco Centre in Beli.²³ According to the accounts told by the elderly, they do not remember having saved any griffon vultures in their youth: “We didn’t care about griffon vultures. And if any of them had fallen into the sea... Who would ever have seen it! We never used to pay attention to it... When we saw them, if ever, that was when it was high up in the sky.”²⁴ It is important to highlight the account of one of them, who lives in the urban environment: “I sometimes pull over by the side of the road and watch them fly. I am so infatuated with this beauty, there is something special about it... And I am aware of our heritage. Of the fact that they are right here. I sometimes see other people... Primarily tourists, watching them.”²⁵ A similar relationship can be identified also in rural communities, yet it is less common. Individuals play an active role in the protection and conservation of griffon vultures, as well as in the recognisability of griffon vultures in terms of heritage identity and strengthening of the emotional aspect of this relationship. It is more common in the population of younger people and/or amongst those more educated, which shows the processes within the wider, even the global, community concerning changes in the perception of co-existence of humans and animals, as well as the relationship towards the local identity and heritage. There is something that “can be recognised as heritage and that becomes emblematic, acting as a feature of identity” (Nikočević 2013: 335). Since these are organic parameters that are being continuously redefined and adapted, whilst they change the identity, we can refer to them as to a process. Following conversations with some interlocutors in field research, it can be concluded that the appearance of griffon vultures is perceived as the heritage of the island, as a natural asset concerning which the awareness has been gradually increasing.

23 In the summer months young griffon vultures, which are only learning to fly, are frequently found in the sea by the eastern coast of Cres. In addition to the inexperience of the animals, there is also the impact of irresponsible boat masters, who race their powerboats loudly under the cliffs where griffon vulture nest, irrespective of all the bans. There have also been instances of cars injuring griffon vultures, which were flying low by the road or descending on a carcass by the edge of the road.

24 K. R., Loznati.

25 J. V., Cres.

*“Some fifteen years ago when I came to live on the island of Cres, I was warned about this magnificent bird in the air. Its wonderful flight is truly a beautiful sight. Magnificent, wonderful, fantastic bird watching is an aesthetic pleasure... Still, people do not see that. I believe that the power of the media is important concerning this issue. At the moment it appears to have assumed secondary importance. Still, it requires more work, it is a beautiful story.”*²⁶

Tourism workers are better acquainted with the way griffon vultures live and with the fact that they are an endangered species. Tourists frequently ask them many questions concerning this issue. Griffon vultures have since recently been considered as the symbol of the island, although this is officially not the case. Tourists who visit the island frequently perceive it in this way:

*“I sometimes feel almost embarrassed when they ask me some details about them and I am clueless. They know a lot about these birds, where and how they fly, how big they are, about their being an endangered species and that they only live here, amongst other things... They know more about them than we do. They come here also because of that. It is our heritage... And we hardly pay any attention to them.”*²⁷

The range of differences in this relationship can be seen at the individual level, as well as within geographic, social and economic environment. In the everyday life of the inhabitants of Cres, griffon vultures are an extremely rare topic. The topic was temporarily addressed during the closure of the former Eco Centre and the opening of the new one in Beli. Still, in that occasion the focus was not on the birds by rather the relationships within the governance structures. The statements such as “griffon vultures have always been here”, or, as one of the interlocutors, a shepherd, slightly irritated, put it: “[...] why are they so concerned about these griffon vultures? If there are sheep, there will be griffon vultures. They should rather deal with the issue of wild boars and then there will be both sheep and griffon vultures!”²⁸ Both at the symbolic and a personal level, griffon vultures are perceived in a sophisticated way by individuals, who perceive them in an impressive way and with high intensity as a part of their natural environment, as an integral part of the life on the island and as a segment of heritage.²⁹ The concept of heritage has been inter-

26 S. I., Cres. The conversation took place before the renovated Visitor and Rescue Centre for Griffon Vultures in Beli.

27 M. L., Cres

28 M. M., Cres. Currently the biggest problem on the island are wild boars, which attack lambs and sheep, and the damage is increasing annually. Allochthonous wild animal species are one of the main reasons for the decline of sheep husbandry on the island.

29 It is important to mention the local poet Andro Vid Mihičić, as well as younger poets Dalida Toić and Valter Mužić, whose opus is being created during the period in which griffon vultures and

preted in different ways. Consequently, contemporary authors recommend it needs to be tackled as a discourse and as the creation of concepts and linguistic expressions that can develop within feelings and experiences of physical traces in human history and nature. Experts and political spheres create it, but it can also go beyond that, and it be created by the incompetent public in a specific environment (Fakin Bajec 2011: 83-84). As opposed to heritage framework, which is primarily focused on reproduction, more attention needs to be paid to processes, also to those occurring in this moment (Nikočević 2012: 336). It is primarily these different observations, experiences and the acceptance of individuals that are interesting in the creation of spatial identity.

CONCLUSION

“Eagles in the sky,
embroidered clouds
and the defiance of the wind.”

(Toić-Pinjušić 2004: 63)

Until the mid-20th century, the fundamental branch of the economy on the island of Cres was sheep husbandry. The survival of griffon vultures is directly connected with it. It is a rare bird in Croatia, a vulture, which currently nests only on some islands of the Kvarner islands. By the end of the 20th century, a comprehensive ornithological research confirmed the fact that this bird is critically endangered, primarily as a consequence of the decline of sheep husbandry and hence two special ornithological reserves were declared. Hence, these birds started arousing interest on the island. The Centre, which is also a rehabilitation centre for griffon vultures in Beli, has significantly affected the perception of this bird and the relationship between humans and the bird. New scientifically-founded insights reached an increasing number of the inhabitants of the island through different media, lectures, contacts with those involved in the research and at school. Griffon vultures, which had previously been rarely noticed by the local population, irrespective of being an integral part of their wider living area, assumed a different role in their everyday life. They became more visible and more attention has been paid to them since. Perhaps a conclusion can be reached that they are considered as a symbol of island identity primarily by those who are deeply environmentally conscious and more sophisticated inhabitants of the island. The largest share of the population in rural environments is more concerned with the problem of a

their being an endangered species is a more frequently addressed topic.

decreasing number of sheep, which is inextricably linked with griffon vultures. Around the end of the 1980's also those involved in tourism, the most important branch of the economy on the island, started recognising heritage as an important feature of tourism programmes. Recent ecological stances in tourism have been shown in the relationship with this bird species, primarily amongst those involved in tourism. A broad range of perceptions and stances have been recorded, from those who are truly delighted and fascinated with this bird species, to those who find its presence utterly elementary, those who believe that the bird is important for the development of tourism programmes and those who fail to notice it at all or whose stance is indifferent. Knowledge and practices linked with sheep husbandry are also linked with the appearance of the griffon vulture, which on the island of Cres is referred to as *orel*, which actually means 'an eagle'. Consequently, in rural environments it is easier to follow their continuity. Recent changes have influenced the process that perceives the appearance of griffon vultures as (natural) heritage and spatial identity. The process is significant by itself, since it reveals the everyday life of the inhabitants of the island through their personal experiences.

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