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Making Place for the Plover
Conservation, Belonging, and Multispecies Relations
at Alberoni Beach, Venice

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*Ai miei nonni,
custodi delle memorie*

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen growing concern for the conservation of the Kentish Plover amid its steady decline along the Italian coastlines, with particular attention to managing its coexistence with humans in highly anthropized environments. This thesis addresses the socio-ecological tensions within the protected natural area of Alberoni (Venice), where the Kentish Plover has become a focal point of the intersection between environmental stewardship and place attachment. Conservationists and volunteers frame the oasis as a habitat of critical importance and stress the importance of the Plover's protection, emphasising its ecological role and affirming its right to inhabit the place. In opposition, other imaginaries of the beach suggest a strong affirmation of human-centered dimensions, which emerge as multiple and dispersed ways of relating, and un-relating, to the non-human. From an Environmental Humanities interdisciplinary perspective, encompassing ecology, anthropology, and philosophy, this thesis analyzes how different actors locate the Plover and its stewardship across the multiple dimensions of the beach environment. This study employed an ethnography-led mixed-method approach involving participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a survey distributed over six months of active fieldwork. By adopting a multi-species approach, this study uncovers the belonging ontologies that manifest and renegotiate the beach environment through enabling and disabling practices and narrations. Secondly, it demonstrates how grief plays a central role in the conservation of endangered species such as the Kentish Plover, enhancing resilience and fostering action towards its protection. The study finally shows, thanks to the interlocutors, how conservation of the Kentish Plover is dismembered and remembered again through multiple modalities of relating, belonging, and making kin. This thesis is meant to spark positive change within the area of study in response to the established wildlife conservation challenge and provide valuable insight for similar socio-ecological contexts.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
ABSTRACT.....	4
INTRODUCTION	8
1 THE KENTISH PLOVER IN ALBERONI – CONTEXT AND STATE OF THE ART	11
1.1 THE KENTISH PLOVER IN THE NORTHERN ADRIATIC	11
1.2 THE KENTISH PLOVER OASES IN THE VENICE LAGOON	15
1.3 THE ROLE OF THE KENTISH PLOVER IN CONSERVATION	19
1.4 KENTISH PLOVER CONSERVATION IN ALBERONI.....	21
1.4.1 <i>Fenced Areas for Kentish Plover Reproduction.....</i>	<i>22</i>
1.4.2 <i>Transgressions and Vandalism</i>	<i>24</i>
1.4.3 <i>Disturbance Agents.....</i>	<i>25</i>
1.4.4 <i>Significance of the Study.....</i>	<i>26</i>
2 THE ALBERONI CASE AS A WILDLIFE CONFLICT – THEORIES AND APPROACHES.....	28
2.1 KENTISH PLOVER CONSERVATION APPROACHES IN ITALY	28
2.2 THE HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF CONSERVATION	29
2.3 THE HUMAN–WILDLIFE CONFLICTS AND THE HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF WILDLIFE	31
2.4 ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF NATURE(S)	33
2.5 KENTISH PLOVERS IN ALBERONI: ECOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND BIOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES	35
3 METHODOLOGY	37
3.1 CASE STUDY DESCRIPTION AND RELEVANCE	37
3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	38
3.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES.....	38
3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN	39
3.5 ETHNOGRAPHY	41
3.5.1 <i>Participant Observation.....</i>	<i>41</i>
3.5.2 <i>Ethnographic Interviews.....</i>	<i>42</i>
3.5.3 <i>Location and Timetable.....</i>	<i>43</i>
3.5.4 <i>Participants, Groups and Sampling.....</i>	<i>44</i>
3.5.5 <i>Recording and Transcription.....</i>	<i>46</i>

3.5.6	<i>Interview Questions</i>	46
3.6	DIGITAL SURVEY	47
3.6.1	<i>Questionnaire Structure</i>	48
3.6.2	<i>Survey Data Analysis</i>	48
3.7	ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	48
3.7.1	<i>Transparency</i>	49
3.7.2	<i>Minimize Harm</i>	49
3.7.3	<i>Respect for the Communities</i>	50
3.8	LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	50
4	CONSERVING: A PLACE FOR THE PLOVER	51
4.1	CONSERVING IN ALBERONI	51
4.1.1	<i>Conducting Conservation as a Local Volunteer</i>	52
4.1.2	<i>Renegotiating Spaces: Human and Natural Landscapes</i>	54
4.2	SPATIAL NEGOTIATION PRACTICES IN SAN NICOLÒ	58
4.3	TRANS-GENERATIONAL ACQUAINTANCES IN CAVALLINO-TREPORTI	59
4.4	DISMEMBERED CONSERVATION: ENABLING AND DISABLING PRACTICES	62
4.4.1	<i>An “Archipelago” of Practices</i>	62
4.4.2	<i>Fear and Exclusion in Conservation Practices – A Critical Perspective</i>	63
4.4.3	<i>Naturality in Conservation Practices</i>	64
5	NO PLACE FOR THE PLOVER – ABSENCE, GRIEF, AND RESILIENCE	66
5.1	FROM ABSENCE TO PRESENCE: DISCOVERY OF THE NEST	66
5.2	FROM PRESENCE TO ABSENCE: PREDATION	68
5.3	AFTERMATH: EXTINCTION OF FUTURES	69
5.4	LONGING FOR PRESENCE ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION	70
5.5	DEALING WITH LOSS: RAGE AND SORROW	71
5.6	FROM GRIEF TO RESILIENCE	73
6	INHABITING: IN PLACE WITH THE PLOVER	75
6.1	UNNOTICING AND FORCING (IN)VISIBILITY OF A SPECIES	75
6.1.1	<i>Lack of Knowledge or Lack of Visibility?</i>	76
6.1.2	<i>Unseeing, Unhearing, and Unnoticing</i>	78
6.2	BEACH-MAKING: IMAGINARIES OF WILDNESS AND FREEDOM	79
6.2.1	<i>Alberoni as a Bathing Site: A Perspective from the Past</i>	80
6.2.2	<i>Wild Imaginaries: A Place-making Conflict</i>	81
6.2.3	<i>Wild Entanglements – Human and Non-human Beach</i>	84

6.2.4	<i>Belonging to Alberoni: A Local Perspective.....</i>	85
6.3	MAKING KIN WITH THE PLOVER? FREE-ROAMING DOGS AND ANIMAL COMPANIONSHIP...	87
6.3.1	<i>Disturbance and Dogs’ “Freedom”</i>	88
6.3.2	<i>Animal Companions – A Local Perspective.....</i>	89
6.4	FROM DISMEMBERED TO REMEMBERED WILDLIFE CONSERVATION.....	91
6.4.1	<i>Interview with Wildlife Manager Corrado Battisti.....</i>	92
6.4.2	<i>Resonating, Belonging, and Resisting.....</i>	93
6.4.3	<i>Remembering the Plover.....</i>	95
CONCLUSIONS		97
REFERENCES		101
APPENDIX A.....		117
APPENDIX B.....		118

INTRODUCTION

Alberoni beach, located on the southernmost coast of Venice Lido, is one of the few remaining coastal areas of the lagoon that still displays a facade of “naturalness”. This characterizes the beach as a popular destination among locals and tourists, but also configures it as a high-value natural habitat. This condition designates the area as one of the last portions of land available for a small shorebird that is gradually disappearing from Italian coastlines, “the Beach Bird”, the Kentish Plover. Although yearly conservation programmes are implemented by the authorities in charge of the area, the reality seems to be far from that ideal peaceful natural oasis, and the prospect of human coexistence with the plover appears to be gradually eroding. At present, the place is the theatre of multilateral tensions that occasionally result in violent acts against the conservation measures, hindering the conservationists’ work and directly interfering with the species’ survival. This situation indicates a substantial lack of understanding between the actors’ different uses and interpretations of this human, yet wild, environment.

The research aims to understand how the presence of the Kentish Plover reconfigures relationships between people, wildlife, and place in Alberoni. However, rather than researching definite answers, the study focuses on grasping the internal processes operating within the local context from a situated perspective. The objective was to achieve an extensive place-based account through prolonged ethnographic engagement over the course of a six-month research period. To enable a multispecies perspective, the research entailed hands-on monitoring practices blending traditional wildlife monitoring with more-than-human ethnography. The research also encompassed fieldwork from parallel neighbouring oases of the Venetian Lagoon in order to enlarge its scope and foster its transferability potential.

While the ecology of the Kentish Plover has been extensively documented, less attention has been devoted to the processes through which the species is made visible and worthy of protection. The first chapter explores the contextual knowledge surrounding the species and studies conducted in the area, focusing on the Upper Adriatic coastline and gradually zooming in on the case study’s location.

The second chapter provides the theoretical foundations of the study. Firstly, it examines the present approaches to Kentish Plover conservation projects in Italy. Secondly, it discusses the multiple literature corpuses addressing conservation and wildlife-related conflicts. Ultimately, it explains how its theoretical framework is built through the lenses of social ecology, anthropology, and the humanities, to enable a multi-disciplinary gaze into the case study.

The research relies on a blending of different methodologies bound together by the leading role of ethnography, bringing the various methods into conversation with one another. The integrative framework, further explained in the third chapter, includes a pairing of the qualitative methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviewing with a predominantly quantitative instrument represented by a digital survey. This approach was chosen in order to further encourage unconventional mixing of different methodologies as well as forms of knowledge.

Through the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters, the main data-gathering questions are addressed. Chapter 4 explores the multiple ways Kentish Plover conservation is enacted and conceptualized in the various oases of the Venice Lagoon. By navigating through the different practices and ideologies, this chapter aims to understand how conservation measures unfold, clash, and interact with each other. Consequently, Chapter 5 employs the ethnographic account of the monitoring season to critically examine the processes through which the Kentish Plover becomes an object of the aforementioned practices by understanding how different emotions, modes of care, and forms of knowledge interact and shape conservation in Alberoni. Finally, Chapter 6 extends the scope to the entire Alberoni beach environment, including visitors, locals, and workers. It explores the different modes through which the actors position each other and themselves into the imaginary of the beach. It engages with the existing complicated sentiments surrounding Kentish Plover conservation both through its material and immaterial structures.

The Kentish Plover conservation challenge in Alberoni becomes an opportunity to trace the stakeholders' contrasting narratives and reflect on belonging ontologies in an environment in crisis, where people, wild animals, and the natural setting still struggle to find their place. This project is meant to spark positive change within the established problem of environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and the unequal distribution of its impact, by addressing the lack of social cooperation in wildlife protection programmes and their subsequent limited efficacy.

Moreover, this research aims to advance the literature surrounding Kentish Plover conservation in the Venice Lagoon. Simultaneously, it contributes to the established anthropological debate by addressing a contingent social-ecological problem that remains unresolved by making visible the natural-cultural subjects that were never fully represented. By paying attention to the other and through the “arts of noticing” (Tsing, 2015), the conservation issue is meant to speak for itself, showing its complex and dispersed ways of relating, and un-relating, to the environment, to the people, and to the plover.

1 THE KENTISH PLOVER IN ALBERONI – CONTEXT AND STATE OF THE ART

This chapter aims to provide contextual information about the case study and delineate the background surrounding this research. The first section examines the existing knowledge about the Kentish Plover status and breeding ecology in the macro-area of the Upper Adriatic coastline. The scope is narrowed down in the following section, which focuses on the main conservation oases of the Venice Lagoon. Consequently, the third section explores the species' role within the ecosystem and the conservation oases' public images. Ultimately, the last section closely examines the Alberoni case, describing its features and defining its core problem.

1.1 The Kentish Plover in the Northern Adriatic

The Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus* Linnaeus, 1758) is a small wading bird that can be found in marine and brackish habitats, including sandy shorelines, sandbars, and wetlands (Baldin et al., 2018). As a charadriiform bird, it belongs to the same taxonomic order as other marine birds, including the herring gull and the common tern (Armaroli, 2010). It is a migratory bird and can be found across continents, from Asia to Europe to Northern Africa, although with slightly different habits and morphology depending on the place (Chen et al., 2018). In Italy, the Kentish Plover currently breeds along the coasts of Sicily and in the regions of Molise, Abruzzo, and Apulia, extending northward to the Upper Adriatic, from the Po Delta to the coast of Friuli Venezia Giulia (Galasso et al., 2022; Perna et al., 2024). This research focuses on a specific area of the Upper Adriatic, coinciding with the Lagoon of Venice, paying particular attention to the Alberoni case study on the Venice Lido, where the primary data collection was conducted. The study will then examine and compare the closely adjacent cases of San Nicolò (Venice Lido), Ca' Roman, and in particular Cavallino-Treporti, where the fieldwork was intensive enough to provide additional scope to the research.

The Kentish Plover is reported to nest across numerous sandy habitats along the northern Adriatic coast, including beaches, lagoon shores, and dredge areas, that is, sites where

sand and sediment are periodically removed through hydraulic interventions for lagoon management or bird conservation (Valle et al., 1995; Scarton et al., 2013; Borgo et al., 2018a). A study conducted by Scarton et al. (2018) reported a significant increase in the lagoon of Venice in several charadriiform species, including the Eurasian Oystercatcher and the Mediterranean Gull, between 2008 and 2014. The Kentish Plover, however, showed a less clear pattern, broadly consistent with the approximately 9% decline recorded across the northern Adriatic region since the early 2000s (Scarton et al., 2018). A decrease in the number of nests and hatchings compared to data collected in the 1990s was also observed on the islands of Lido and Pellestrina, in particular in the Ca' Roman and Alberoni Oases (Pegorer et al., 2011).

As in many other cases involving Kentish Plover conservation in the Adriatic, but also in other coastal realities of the world, the decline in this case is attributed to bathers and off-leash dogs, the latter being consensually considered one of the major causes of disturbance (Antinori et al., 2011; Pegorer et al., 2011; Tinarelli, 2011; Baldin et al., 2018; Gómez-Serrano, 2021; Tejera et al., 2022). In the Po Delta, the construction of illegal bathing facilities and other artificial structures has been identified as a significant source of disturbance. (Scarton et al., 2018)

A similar situation has been reported in Alberoni, where tourism associated with recreational boating and land-based access is reported to be increasing. (Baldin et al., 2018). Among the activities associated with human presence, mechanical beach cleaning must also be taken into account, as it represents a major threat to nesting shorebirds. As a result, its timing and extent are often negotiated with beach operators to minimise its impacts on breeding birds. (Baldin et al., 2018; Cuccurullo & Zwirner, 2023) Another potential factor of stress for waterbirds is represented by fishing and aquaculture. In the Venice Lagoon, a distinctive form of mussel farming is widespread and has constituted an important component of the lagoon's aquaculture economy since 1939 (Vianello, 2021). Some of these activities are present in the Adriatic Sea area near the Dune Alberoni SAC-SPA Oasis. These activities, including fishing and clam harvesting, although undeniably placing pressure on the marine ecosystem of this part of the Adriatic and therefore also on marine birds, are not currently considered a threat to the protection of Kentish Plovers. (Valle & D'Este, 1992; Scarton, 2017).

The species is present not only in the Veneto region but also along the Friuli Venezia Giulia coast, where the popular beach of Lignano Sabbiadoro is particularly noteworthy. In this

seaside resort, it can be said that the Kentish Plover has managed to reclaim a small, yet extremely important, stretch of sand. "La Spiaggia del Fratino," or "Kentish Plover's Beach," is a project launched only recently, in 2021, following the unexpected return of the species to an area that had long been considered irrecoverable from a Kentish Plover conservation perspective. Cuccurullo & Zwirner (2023) argue that the decisive factor was the restrictions related to the COVID-19 epidemic and its consequent "Anthropause" (Rutz et al., 2020), which, by significantly limiting human presence on the beaches, created a perfect opportunity for fauna, such as the Kentish Plover, to reintroduce themselves, thus promoting minimal disturbance (Cuccurullo & Zwirner, 2023). In this specific case, surprising results were achieved regarding Kentish Plover breeding thanks to the assiduous service carried out by volunteers over the years, which ensured a notable repopulation even despite the lack of a dense vegetated dune system (Cuccurullo & Zwirner, 2023). The role played by the dunes in safeguarding the Kentish Plover species will be discussed later in section 1.4, where the biotope that can be found on Alberoni beach and its relationship with the Kentish Plover will be described.

Beyond this emerging site, however, no other stable populations of the species are reported in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region. To find other settlements, it is necessary to move South, into the Venetian lagoon, where larger settlements are located, including Cavallino, San Nicolò, Alberoni, and Ca' Roman. Overall, five types of environments used by seabirds in the lagoon can be distinguished: the aforementioned littoral strips and dredge zones, as well as minor islands, fish farms, and salt marshes, vegetated areas of brackish nature that are periodically submerged (Scarton, 2017). The latter are considered at high risk of disappearing from the Venice lagoon due to ongoing erosion processes linked to anthropogenic river diversion and climate change (Bendoni et al., 2012; Tagliapietra et al., 2014).

Of this already limited and precarious range of habitats, only two have proven favorable for nesting by the Kentish Plover. Beaches provide a flat, almost obstacle-free environment that *C. Alexandrinus* prefers for laying its eggs in the sand (Pegorer et al., 2011). However, as previously seen, they are characterized by intense tourist activity, making nesting extremely difficult. The second type of habitat is dredge zones, artificially constructed areas that have proven surprisingly effective in providing this species with a suitable nesting site. Thanks to their elevation above common salt marshes, they are better protected from the tides and, at the same time, far from human activity, making them suitable for nesting by many seabirds, including the Kentish Plover. Among studies conducted between 2005 and 2010, some

highlight their importance for the species, as they are thought to have hosted approximately 60% of the population (Scarton et al., 2013). Others, however, believe that their importance could decline year by year, making it necessary for Kentish plovers to return to the "optimal" areas of habitats protected by European legislation, such as San Nicolò, Alberoni, and Ca' Roman (Pegorer et al., 2011).

In light of this, not only is the range of sites that the Kentish Plover can colonize in this part of the Mediterranean Sea appearing even more limited, but the analysis also demonstrates the precarious nature of its conservation, which translates into extreme efforts to carve out small fragments of beach to protect them from seaside tourism and to redevelop sediment dredging areas to transform them into favorable nesting areas. The Kentish Plover, despite being the subject of increasing conservation efforts by national and municipal projects, and conducted by environmental NGOs, continues to occupy a negligible space compared to that occupied by humans. Despite not being globally at risk of extinction, the species is currently classified as "endangered" at the national level, meaning that the species is approaching a growing risk of disappearance from Italian territory (Rondinini et al., 2022; BirdLife International, 2025).

It appears that all the disturbances assessed so far are united by their anthropogenic origin. This demonstrates the central role that humans have played and continue to play in hindering the potential for this species to develop in the coastal areas of the northern Adriatic, as well as in other transversal settings far removed from the one examined, such as the Canary Islands (Tejera et al., 2022), amplifying the importance of this study and expanding it to a larger scale. In all the cases examined, it is unequivocal that humans, albeit inadvertently, are the main cause of the displacement of endangered seabird species such as the Kentish Plover and the resulting loss of biodiversity. To better explain this complex relationship, the next sections will investigate the role that the Kentish Plover plays within the biotope of the Upper Adriatic, and in particular in the Alberoni dune ecosystem.

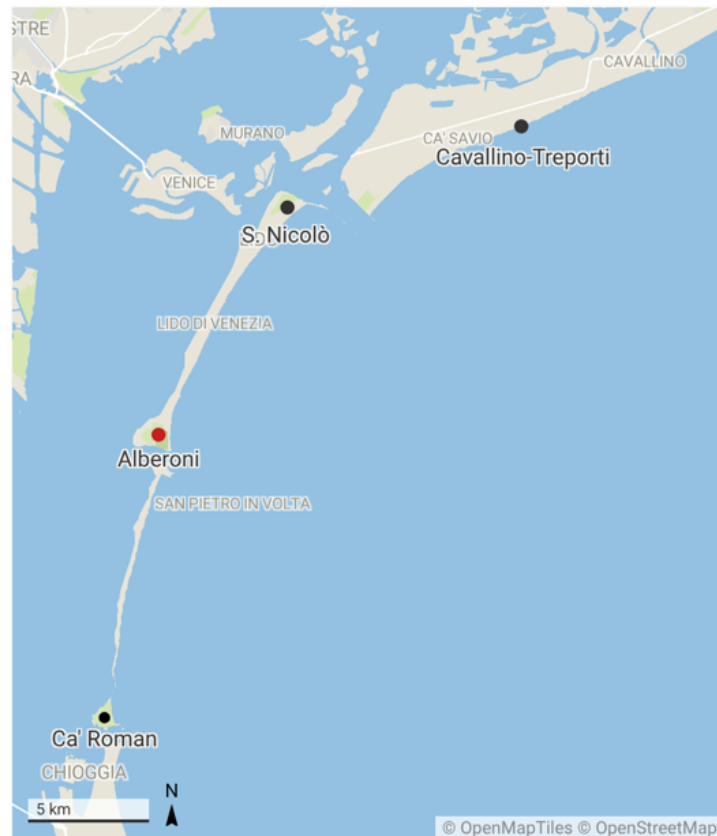
1.2 The Kentish Plover Oases in the Venice Lagoon

By scoping closer to the relevant sites for the Kentish Plover in the Venice Lagoon, four main locations can be identified (Figure 1). Moving from north to south, the first area encountered is the littoral zone of Cavallino-Treporti, a narrow strip of land extending south of Jesolo to Punta Sabbioni. This area represents one of the few locations that not only shows suitability for Kentish Plover nesting, but also has a documented and steady history of its hatchings throughout the years (Picone et al., 2019).

Continuing in this direction, the next relevant site is represented by the San Nicolò area of wildlife conservation. Located at the northern tip of the Lido island, this protected natural area is managed by the Italian League for Bird Protection (LIPU) and is part of the Natura 2000 network as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA) (IT3250023, *Lido di Venezia: Biotopi Litoranei*) (Peschiutta, 2021; Ministero dell'Ambiente e della Sicurezza Energetica, 2024).

Part of the same European-level network is the “sister” oasis of San Nicolò, located almost symmetrically at the island’s southern tip, Alberoni. Like the previous ones, this natural area is characterized by a sandy dune ecosystem that is protected and restored under European direction, home to rare endemic species of plants and animals that are being preserved by the joint effort of the Municipality of Venice, the regional Forestry Service, and the environmental NGO WWF, which has managed the “Dune degli Alberoni” SAC-SPA since 2002 (Baldin et al., 2018).

The last oasis of this series is the Southernmost: Ca’ Roman. Here lies another Natura 2000 site managed by LIPU, where the organisation has been engaged in Kentish Plover conservation since the early 1990s and remains actively involved today. (CORILA, 2005).



Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1: Location of the Wildlife Oases of the Lagoon

All these areas are united by their biotic characteristics, but most importantly by a common effort that united environmental NGOs and the Italian Regions in the joint mission to safeguard the country's wildlife. Historically, this transition can be traced back to the post-war period and became increasingly institutionalised with the emergence of the first nature conservation organisations during the 1960s, including WWF Italia (Silvestri, 2004; Agapito Ludovici et al., 2012). The period between the 1970s and 1980s is marked by the emergence of political and social transformations, including the steady establishment of the concept of sustainable development. This socio-political influx further contributed to shaping what would later become known as environmentalism (Osti, 1998). In Italy, this shift materialized in the establishment of the *Oasi* ("oases") as protected areas devoted to nature conservation. This vision was translated into a set of principles and management guidelines that continue to shape contemporary understandings of natural conservation, as well as the very concept of an oasis.

Since their creation, WWF oases have embraced the mission of “conserving nature” and “reducing the most important threats to the planet’s biodiversity” (Agapito Ludovici et al., 2012, p. 12, translated by the author). In Alberoni, this conservation ideal became closely intertwined with the increasingly evident need to safeguard coastal habitats. As liminal spaces of transition, both ecologically and geographically, these environments host a unique biodiversity that emerges from the coexistence and interaction of multiple habitats. This particular importance was already known in the 1980s; 18 years after the convention signed in Ramsar, Iran, some areas of the Venice Lagoon began being recognized as a World-level relevant wetland, marking its relevance as a key migratory site (Smart & Viñals, 2004).

The Venice Lagoon came to be valued not only for its cultural and historical significance but also for its environmental character, as an ecological crossroads. Among the protagonists of this relatively small yet highly diverse space are birds, which rely on the mosaic of habitats of the Lagoon for several essential functions, including feeding, resting, and breeding (Smart & Viñals, 2004). It is precisely this last biological function that involves, among other species on the seaside of the Lagoon, the Kentish Plover, which typically breeds from March until July or August (Garbin, 2024; Baldin et al., 2018).

As both a migratory and sedentary species, the Kentish Plover population divides between individuals who settle and those who migrate. This process of behavioural variability is not yet entirely understood, but it is attributed to the factor of habitat quality, which would enable the species to settle in the Lagoon during the colder seasons (Spina & Volponi, 2008; Garbin, 2024; Battisti et al., 2025). This resident behaviour can be witnessed in the Cavallino-Treporti area, where a small population of individuals has been consistently returning to its sandy littoral year by year, at times forming couples with the same partner, others with other fellow resident plovers, or forming mixed couples with migratory ones. To effectively track this phenomenon, the role of the bird ringer is essential to mark them and make the individuals identifiable to the human eye (Cecere et al., 2023)

This procedure enables the counting of the population by using various techniques, from the fledglings per nest count to the more controversial “counting nests in colonies” (Gibbons et al., 1996; Pegorer et al., 2011; Borgo et al., 2018a). Amid this multitude of monitoring and counting methods, the ultimate goal remains to ensure continuity in data collection on the presence of the Kentish Plover along these beaches, thereby providing a clear

understanding of how the species' population fluctuates from year to year, with particular attention to the impact that human activities may have had on the survival of this small shorebird.

These data also leave a trace of how the attention surrounding the Kentish Plover in this area mutated over the years, expanding or dispersing, scattering into the various wildlife protection areas in the lagoon and channeling into the present conservation efforts. The first relevant studies trace back to Valle & D'Este (1992). Their study, conducted between 1984 and 1986, mentions how literature about birds in the lagoon is very little to non-existent. They also note that, at the time, no measures had been implemented to safeguard the lagoon's avifauna. Instead, public and institutional attention was largely focused on the construction of the *opere fisse* associated with the MoSE project, fixed engineering structures at the lagoon inlets that were viewed with considerable concern. Valle et al. (1995) describe a study conducted between 1984 and 1989. They state that Kentish Plover data were insufficient at that time, indicating that the ecology of the Plover was still understudied.

Since the early 1990s, LIPU reportedly started an activity of protection towards the Little Tern and the Kentish Plover, but this process is rooted in the previous decade, when most environmental NGOs, including LIPU and WWF, started laying the foundation for the oases' establishment (Borgo & Mamprin, 2018).

As supported by Battisti et al. (2020), at present the conservation of the Kentish Plover is beginning to attract more concern. This growing attention is visible in the Upper Adriatic area, especially from the 2010s onwards, with studies such as Pegorer et al. (2011) and more recent ones such as Picone et al. (2019), advancing the literature on the matter. However, this attention was not just limited to research, but became visible in public discourse. More specifically, in 2019, a media case grew enough to become extremely emblematic in the Kentish Plover conservation discourse in Italy. The case exploded in response to a musical tour held by a popular Italian singer across many coastal sites in Italy, including Northern Adriatic beaches such as Lignano Sabbiadoro. This event left behind a material legacy made of waste, but an abstract one as well. One made of accusations, polarizations, and ideological conflicts. Ultimately, this case became emblematic not only for the impact it generated at the time, but also because it provided an important stimulus for interdisciplinary research approaches, such as Battisti (2023), driving a critical re-examination of Kentish Plover conservation paradigms.

Such cases contribute to channeling attention into existing issues that were never fully addressed or understood, resulting in an immediate and non-mediated explosion of responses. Yet, as the following discussion will show, the preoccupation with the presence of a small shorebird can trigger such a profound, human and personal disagreement, a cognitive dissonance that is capable of resonating deeper and farther away from its place of origin. Before exploring these dynamics, however, it is necessary to address a more fundamental question and explore how and why the Kentish Plover became a critical subject of the conservation agenda.

1.3 The Role of the Kentish Plover in Conservation

As a member of the Charadriidae family, the Kentish Plover belongs to a group of birds commonly associated with coastal and wetland environments (Armaroli, 2010). Its plumage, of light grey to brownish tones, mimics its preferred environment, a sandy one, protecting it from the sight of predators (Grandón-Ojeda, 2024), but also making it equally arduous for humans to spot (Figure 2).



Figure 2: *Charadrius alexandrinus* (Kentish Plover) in Göksu Delta, photograph by Zeynel Cebeci (2020), from Wikimedia Commons (Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0).

Its foraging activities happen on the beach, principally on the shoreline and where the Kentish Plovers find stranded materials, including aquatic plants, algae, and debris brought by the sea. This residue of decomposing material represents a vital element for this small wader's survival, as it hosts a wide variety of micro-organisms and small crustaceans it can feed upon (Scarton et al., 2013; Garbin, 2024). This is what creates that web of relations that connects any living organism to its resources (Smith & Smith, 2015), linking the survival of the Kentish Plover to the presence of a series of conditions, including the preservation of what humans would define as "waste". The coastal habitats in which the Kentish Plover thrives are endangered on many levels, from direct human disturbance to climate crisis-related impacts. All these features concur to create an interrelated set of conditions that alter these complex and vulnerable ecosystems (Perna et al., 2024).

For this reason, many have suggested that the Kentish Plover, from a disappearing species of known fragility, can become the unconscious steward of its own habitat by employing its presence as a communication strategy (Perna et al., 2024). This approach reflects a long-established agenda in wildlife conservation, based on the concept of the "flagship species". Conservation in water-based ecosystems often relies on this strategy, focusing on protecting these chosen species as a tool to extend the benefit to the whole ecosystem (Barnagaud et al., 2019). These wildlife species are not randomly chosen, but more often they carry a series of characteristics where the species' role in the ecosystem is not necessarily the most relevant. Firstly, flagship species must be considered "charismatic", which means being a species, normally an animal, which is known to particularly attract human attention (Tess, 2022). Their charisma, in turn, affects conservation strategies by gathering human attention, thus creating a sort of connection that guarantees more care and support towards its protection. This sort of connection, as suggested by Weston (2019), is capable of generating a bridge between the "natural" and "human" worlds, and triggers positive advancements in environmental legislation and conservation policies. Battisti et al. (2020) believe this strategy to be essential from a practical perspective as well, as it can be useful to motivate volunteers towards their active participation in Kentish Plover conservation programmes.

In the Venice Lagoon area, this role is historically tightly tied to the Kentish Plover. Since the beginning of the wildlife conservation programmes, the oases of Ca' Roman and San Nicolò made both the Kentish Plover and the Little Tern (*Sternula albifrons*) the center of their

protection efforts and their public image at the same time (Tess, 2022). In Alberoni, the Kentish Plover has become the full-fledged symbol of the oasis.

1.4 Kentish Plover Conservation in Alberoni

The Dune degli Alberoni Oasis was established in 1997 and is jointly managed by WWF, the Municipality of Venice, and the Regional Forestry Service (Molinaroli et al., 2023; Perlasca, 2018). Covering approximately 160 hectares, it encompasses a large portion of the Alberoni area. The oasis includes the pine forest and dune systems, but extends beyond these relatively undisturbed environments to incorporate the beach, the bathing establishments, and the extensive grounds of the Golf Club. It also encompasses historically significant sites such as Batteria Rocchetta and the Zandrini seawall (Perlasca, 2018).

Since 2003, the oasis has also designated a sub-area as SAC-SPA (Special Area of Conservation and Special Protection Area), part of the IT3250023, “*Lido di Venezia: Biotopi Litoranei*” (Regione del Veneto, 2024). As part of the European Natura 2000 network, this area is subject to specific conservation measures and, consequently, to stricter and more clearly defined regulations under the Habitats Directive and the Birds Directive. The latter constitutes the foundation of bird protection policy in Europe, establishing the creation of protected areas, the conservation of habitats, and the restoration of biotopes, while also prohibiting a range of activities, including the disturbance, capture, or killing of wild birds and the destruction of their eggs (Directive 2009/147/EC, 2019).

This exceptional area encompasses a variety of protected habitats, including woodland environments, wet and dry grasslands, dune ecosystems, together with the beach and adjacent marine environment. This last area hosts some of the oasis's most charismatic wildlife: the loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*) and the Kentish Plover. The former, *Caretta caretta*, is the focus of rescue and monitoring activities in the area, which lies along part of its migratory route (Perlasca, 2018). A different trajectory, however, characterises the Kentish Plover, which utilizes sparsely vegetated sandy coastlines and open dune habitats for breeding. Hereby, the species finds in the Alberoni sandy littoral favourable conditions for nesting (Baldin et al., 2018)

1.4.1 Fenced Areas for Kentish Plover Reproduction

Given the legal framework in force in this area and the adverse circumstances concerning the Kentish Plover which were discussed thus far, the various institutions involved in the management of Alberoni undertake annual efforts to tackle the many human-related challenges and to sustain the species' breeding season by creating favourable conditions for the species to successfully reproduce. Between March and April, this work translates into the construction of fenced enclosures along the beach, using either tape or mesh fencing. This type of measure, as shown in Figure 3, was experimentally introduced in Alberoni during the 2026 breeding season. Since 2014, these protective enclosures have been installed in the northern section of the beach, approximately between the San Camillo Hospital bathing establishment and the southern terminus of the Murazzi seawalls (Figure 4). They are then maintained throughout the breeding season and removed afterwards (Baldin et al., 2018).

To establish these protective enclosures, a series of wooden posts are driven into the beach. The plastic mesh is then attached with wire in an alternating pattern, a technique aimed at reducing the impact of storm surges and preventing the destruction of the structures (Borgo et al., 2018b). Overall, this conservation measure is primarily intended to protect sections of the beach from trampling and, thanks to the mesh extending to ground level, from off-leash dogs.



Figure 3: Mesh fences in Alberoni. Photograph by the author. 2026

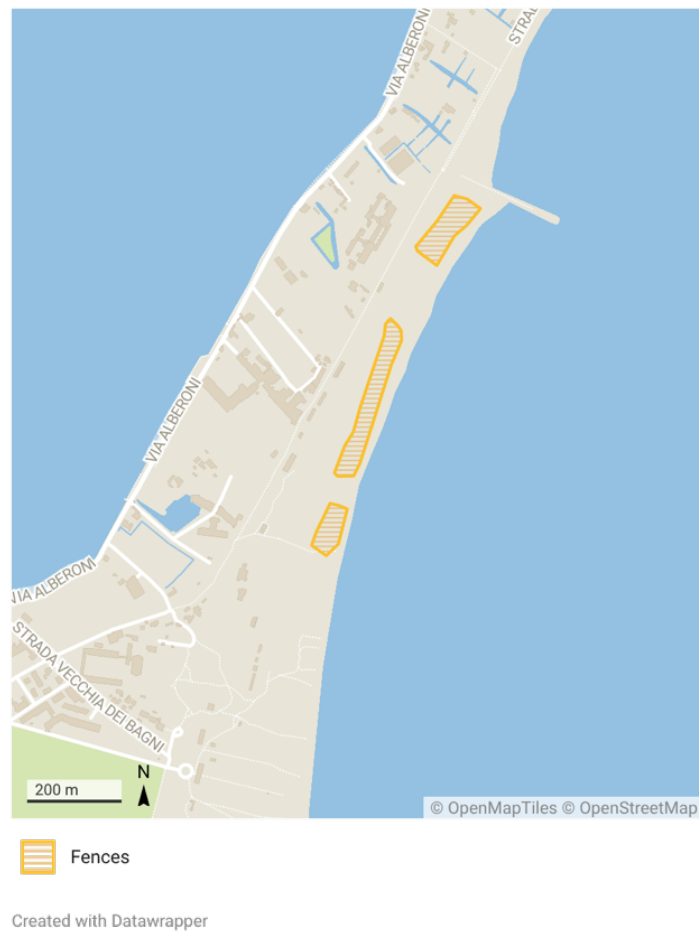


Figure 4: Map showing the location of fenced areas in Alberoni

1.4.2 Transgressions and Vandalism

Although local governance regulates dogs' access to the beach by making the leash a binding condition, and the signage posted around the fenced areas communicates these requirements to visitors, the presence of free-roaming dogs still constitutes one of the most impactful sources of disturbance for the Kentish Plover in this area (Baldin et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, despite its gravity, this issue does not appear particularly exceptional in the context of Alberoni, where minor transgressions and illicit activities resemble less disruptions of everyday life and more like an integral part of it. Beyond the confrontational atmosphere that may occasionally emerge in interactions between volunteers and beach users, the area is characterized by more subtle forms of contestation that, although less visible, can be equally significant. Acts of vandalism affecting the conservation area have been reported for years in both the press and the conservation literature. These include trampling within protected zones, illegal access by bicycles, motorcycles, and other motorised vehicles, as well as the deliberate destruction of fences and informational signage (Scarton et al., 2004). Among the most recurrent forms of vandalism is the severing of the wire used to secure the fences, a situation that emerged frequently during the course of the last breeding season (2026) (Figures 5 and 6). Local newspapers have repeatedly reported similar incidents over the years (VeneziaToday, 2017; S. B., 2019)

Unlike occasional trampling, these practices appear as deliberate and systematic actions directed against the oasis, whether as an institution, an idea, or a community of people involved in conservation activities. Crucially, however, the intended target of these actions is not the entity that ultimately suffers their consequences. In practice, the damage falls primarily on conservation efforts themselves, compromising the protection of the Kentish Plover, increasing the vulnerability of nests and chicks, and thus further aggravating the already precarious situation of the species in the area.



Figure 5: Severed wire in Alberoni fenced areas. Photograph by the author. 2026



Figure 6: Trampling traces inside a vandalized fenced area. Photograph by the author. 2026

1.4.3 Disturbance Agents

Kentish Plover conservation measures primarily embody a series of strategies aimed at reducing disturbance during the breeding season.

In Ecology, disturbance can be defined as any event that significantly alters ecosystem structure, functioning, resource availability, or biomass over a relatively short timespan (Burton et al., 2020). Different types of disturbances, hereby defined as disturbance agents, can include physical ones, such as extreme weather events, or biological ones, such as predation or grazing (Sousa, 1984). The main conservation measures adopted for the Kentish Plover are

aimed at reducing the effect of disturbance agents during the breeding season. These are represented by abiotic factors such as storms and sea surges, which may result in the burial or destruction of nests. (Borgo et al., 2018b; Scarton et al., 2004) However, the greatest sources of disturbance are biotic and are largely attributable, either directly or indirectly, to human activities. According to a study conducted by Borgo et al. (2018b), the primary cause of nest failure at San Nicolò was predation by corvids and Yellow-legged Gulls, which accounted for approximately 65% of recorded losses. Corvid birds, particularly crows and hooded crows, although not directly constituting a human disturbance, are still considered an indirect consequence of anthropogenic ecological change, as they are synanthropic species whose presence has been favoured by human presence and alteration of local ecosystems (Pegorer et al., 2011; Borgo et al., 2018b).

The remaining disturbance factors are more explicitly linked to human activities, especially trampling and other recreational uses of the beach. Compared to Ca' Roman and San Nicolò, Alberoni proves to be more intensely affected by anthropogenic pressure (Scarton et al., 2004), owing to its long-standing role as a highly frequented recreational area and, as will be elaborated in the following chapters, to a markedly different social and spatial characterization. At present, San Nicolò is regarded as one of the lagoon's most successful sites in terms of hatching success (Mitri et al., 2019). Another site that has shown significant progress is Cavallino-Treporti. Despite being located within one of the most intensively visited tourist areas in Europe, this Natura 2000 site has developed a management framework that allows conservation activities to continue effectively and has produced encouraging results despite the considerable human pressure affecting the area (Garbin, 2024).

1.4.4 Significance of the Study

All these wildlife protection realities are a testimony to the effort that has been exerted in this area to counter the inexorable decline of this species, seeking to prevent its total disappearance. Only the future will be able to show whether this attempt will be successful, or whether it will lead to the species' extinction. In both scenarios, along with the many other comparable situations that are happening all around the globe concerning the Kentish Plover or the numerous other species at risk of disappearing from this planet, the case of Alberoni and

the narratives surrounding it offer valuable insights from which key takeaways can be drawn and applied to both the local and transversal contexts.

The web of interactions, encounters, and frictions I personally experienced as a researcher operating in this protected area sparked my interest by offering the opportunity to notice what often goes unseen (Tsing, 2015). Perhaps more importantly, the nature of this study allowed me to approach the case from multiple perspectives, drawing on my simultaneous positions as a volunteer, a temporary local, and an external researcher, as well as on the diverse relationships I developed with a wide range of interlocutors.

Often simplified as a “conflict”, this entanglement is better understood as a dense fabric of narratives, meanings, practices, and ecologies that together constitute the complexity of life at Alberoni. Here, the beach emerges as a socioecological space in which multiple human and non-human actors interact, continuously reshaping both the environment and the meanings attached to it. This thesis seeks to unravel these relations by employing a set of theoretical lenses that will be introduced, evaluated, and discussed in the following chapter.

2 THE ALBERONI CASE AS A WILDLIFE CONFLICT – THEORIES AND APPROACHES

This chapter addresses the case study by building a theoretical framework through the relevant existing literature. Firstly, it assesses the current approaches to Kentish Plover conservation through the most relevant projects recently conducted in Italy. Secondly, it discusses the existing literature addressing wildlife-related conflicts first through the lenses of social ecology and then through the Human Dimensions. Furthermore, it provides an account of the anthropological approaches to environmental issues. Finally, it explains the operational framework employed for the study through the emerging literature gaps, ultimately highlighting its significance.

2.1 Kentish Plover Conservation Approaches in Italy

As discussed above, the literature on Kentish Plover conservation in the Lagoon of Venice is present, but it appears limited, in some cases showing uncertain or inconclusive results. When the focus is narrowed to Alberoni, this coverage decreases considerably. Alternative studies of the area include analyses of tourism pressure, which emphasise the intensity of human use within the site.

Despite this, it is evident that the Kentish Plover issue in Italy has gradually entered both public and scientific attention. Over the years, this growing interest has been channeled into country-wide initiatives, including the Kentish Plover national conference held in Rome in 2010, which gathered together researchers from all across Italy (Biondi & Pietrelli, 2011), as well as regional-level programmes such as the Life Redune project coordinated by Ca' Foscari University of Venice, which, alongside the restoration of dune habitats, devotes particular attention to the conservation of the Kentish Plover (Buffa et al., 2022).

The most significant initiative at present is represented by the EU co-funded LIFE Alexandro project, which, by involving numerous coastal oases across Italy and Croatia, places the conservation of the Kentish Plover at the forefront of its objectives, once again positioning the species as a steward of increasingly threatened coastal environments (CINEA, 2026).

This restoration initiative is primarily based on the strengthening and improvement of several Kentish Plover conservation strategies, including access restrictions, beach cleaning, dune restoration, data collection and sharing, and the strengthening of the network of coastal oases. An additional target of this project is the development of a new framework, the “KP Model”, intended to guide future Kentish Plover conservation efforts. This model is described as an actual conservation philosophy, formulated to be developed and transformed into robust national guidelines. Within this new approach, the public is placed at the centre of conservation efforts rather than being treated as a separate object. The backbone of the project consists of public engagement and outreach activities, including workshops, training programmes, citizen science initiatives, and participatory activities involving local stakeholders (CINEA, 2026).

This framework embraces an interpretation of conservation that transcends not only geopolitical borders, but also semantic ones. These measures move beyond the sole disclosure of information to the public, seeking instead an integrated inclusion of people in Kentish Plover conservation activities. Such participation is enabled not only through dissemination, but also through specific forms of training, opening a breach in the rigid separation that often characterises conservation environments, and which recurrently appeared during fieldwork in Alberoni and in the neighbouring oases.

Battisti et al. (2020) explain how the conservation of the Kentish Plover often produces concrete forms of separation that ultimately lead to compromising the efforts. One of the most significant is the distinction between Kentish Plover conservationists and other actors involved in conservation processes, including volunteers, residents, visitors, and even fellow experts working in related fields. Battisti et al. (2020) attribute part of this rigidity to a form of “analysis-paralysis” among Kentish Plover conservationists. The result is an apparently insuperable distance and a static, almost frozen attitude blocking mutual exchange, adaptation, and ultimately improvement. Such an uncrossable barrier, however, can be traced back to a deeper and more longstanding divide within the field of conservation science itself.

2.2 The Human Dimensions of Conservation

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) is widely considered one of the founders of modern conservation and an important influence on the environmental movement. His seminal work, *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold, 1949, as cited in Meine, 2020), introduced some of the

earliest considerations on environmental ethics and the relationship between humans and the natural world. Through the development of his “land ethic”, Leopold postulated that human societies are fundamentally interdependent with ecological systems. In doing so, he laid important foundations for later approaches that would begin exploring the social dimensions of conservation (Meine, 2020). These studies would have gradually started to reconsider ecosystems not as separate compartments, instead conceiving them in their totality, therefore including in the equation the human societies that constitute them.

A few decades later, Michael Soulé drew upon this radical foundation and contributed to establishing conservation biology as a modern field. He conceptualized conservation as a multifaceted discipline suitable for integrating insights from the social sciences to make it a real-world discipline (Williams et al., 2020).

Building on Soulé's conception of conservation biology as a crisis-oriented discipline, many scholars attempted to address complex ecological problems by incorporating human societies' interaction with the natural environment into their analyses, thereby contributing to the development of what would later be referred to as “socio-ecological systems”. The shift towards the social was accompanied by a growing emphasis on systems thinking, an approach that emerged from the need to identify effective responses to complex environmental challenges (Meine, 2020).

Recent responses have sought to systematize the social science approach into environmental studies through ordered methodological manuals such as Vaccaro et al.'s (2010), redirecting the attention towards interdisciplinarity and diverting from the traditional humanities–STEM division. However, as Dietsch et al. (2025) argue, social-ecological research is still generally informed by positivist models, that is, approaches employing science as a unified instrument of research. This creates an environment where even socio-ecological research is still overloaded with quantitative data and Western-centered approaches (Dietsch et al., 2025). An attitude that is often attributed to the scarcity of sufficient funding, the lack of specialized knowledge, but also to the sedimented ideological barrier that reflects into the institution compartmentalization (Bennet et al., 2017). Many authors thus emphasize the need for real incorporation of social dimensions into conservation, notably taking the shape of *per se* disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and human geography, but also political science, economics and psychology. When these studies are paired with ecology in a multi-disciplinary perspective, they give rise to branches such as political ecology, environmental governance,

and human dimensions (Bennet et al., 2017). This last corpus of literature is a general umbrella term encompassing studies that include human dynamics in environmental problems. This, in practice, includes researching beyond the ecosystem usage by a community, but breaking down into its parts, leaning into understandings, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, and emotional responses of a community to environmental agents (Bennet et al., 2017).

Since conservation biology emerged from the context of ecological crisis, much of its literature developed around cases in which tensions between humans and nature required urgent solutions, and where this proximity triggered immediate forms of conflict and negotiation. It was in this context that the field of Human Dimensions emerged, focusing primarily on human relationships with wildlife and, more specifically, on the challenges generated from the interactions between people and wild animals (Woodroffe et al., 2005; Manfredo, 2008).

2.3 The Human–Wildlife Conflicts and The Human Dimensions of Wildlife

The necessity to find solutions to complex problems involving the difficult coexistence between animal and human populations has generated considerable attention towards the development of case studies around “human–wildlife conflicts” (HWC). This body of research revolves mainly around the question “how can humans coexist with wildlife?” and aims at creating non-simplistic responses through addressing the social structures that generate them. As explained by Robinson in Woodroffe et al.’s (2005) *People and Wildlife – Conflict or Coexistence?*, these studies are mainly centered around the human perception of wildlife encounters and their problematic outcomes, making the issue itself “less about ‘human–wildlife conflict’ and more about ‘human–human conflict’” (p. XV).

This human-centered focus enables these studies to transcend the search for pragmatic solutions to ecological problems. Instead of simply describing the uses of an ecosystem by the local community, these studies investigate parts that have long remained in the shadow, leaning on human behaviours, values, and even emotions. The main contributor to the discipline can be considered Michael J. Manfredo, who elaborated a consistent theoretical baseline for these studies and is therefore considered one of the founding figures of the emerging “Human Dimensions of Wildlife” (HDW). Manfredo (2008) strives for a different use of social sciences in wildlife-related issues, revolving the attention to the more obscure sides of conservation,

advocating for the implementation of psycho-pathological theories as an instrument to comprehend human attitudes towards nature and the origin of values underneath them. His approach to human nature and values as objects of quantitative study proposes a structure of “multi-level modelling” that entails a macro-level study of societal shifts in values, and a micro-level one concerning the individuals. However innovative, this approach still supposes a certain degree of approximation concerning social phenomena and the distribution of values into discrete, detectable categories.

Manfredo (2008) recognized the existence of two distinct literature traditions in the United States. One, the “North American Tradition”, primarily utilizes HDW in a quantitative and wildlife-focused approach, while the other, which he refers to as the “Anthropological tradition”, is instead interested in advocacy and domestic animals’ welfare. As supported by Glikman & Frank (2011), the HDW field generally revolves around the geographical area of North America, whereas in Europe it appears to be more scattered and less systematized. Indeed, this area lacks a clear reference to the field, and wildlife-related studies most likely refer to “human–wildlife interactions” (Johansson et al., 2016).

Scoping down to Italy, the studies concerning HWCs are fairly limited both in number and in their methodological approach, relegating them to the “gray literature” zone (Glikman & Frank, 2011). This lack of willingness to integrate alternative methodologies is also identified as the cause of certain wildlife conflicts, such as the wild boar management case in Central Italy, which, according to Frank et al. (2015), would have occurred within the general lack of clarity towards the population involved.

An important objection to this methodological tendency does not only reside in the practices’ inefficacy to involve the locals, but can also be traced to the premises of this interdisciplinary approach. If psychology’s contribution might represent an important step forward, some scholars are beginning to take a step back by trying to deconstruct wildlife research not only from a post-positivist perspective, but also a structuralist and de-colonial one. Pooley et al. (2017) acknowledge the absence of the humanities inside the conflict-framing process, attributing to this factor a major fallacy. Castree et al. (2014) highlight how humanities can reach sides that social science alone cannot, explaining how the latter is more prone to describe and assess values and norms without questioning the structures that generate them. Where the HDW asks “how can humans effectively coexist with wildlife”, humanities are more concerned with tracing where the conflict originates and whether that very idea of coexistence

is fair or not. This way, environmental humanities challenge the structural paradigms from which the research originates, leaning into deeper sides such as emotions, spiritualities, and worldviews, and finally enable the discussion to enter the area of ethics and environmental justice.

2.4 Anthropology and the Study of Nature(s)

One of the major debates developed during the course of the past century is represented by the inner conflict of the Anthropological discipline itself. This conflict not only concerns the methods but also the ways of knowing behind the anthropological approach. Aside from the debates regarding its classification as a scientific discipline, many scholars tried to deconstruct its core premises, especially after the worldwide post-colonial movements and the radical changes they generated in the academic environment. This evolution inevitably intersected with sciences and, consequently, conservation science.

Cultural relativism was the anthropological current that emerged at the beginning of the past century with anthropologists such as Franz Boas, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict (Brown, 2008). It sustained the idea that human societies should not be compared or valued but understood internally. Later on, during the 1980s, this vision was expanded and employed to revise the canons of knowledge production both in anthropology and science, leading to a thorough anti-imperialist shift and refusal of Western-centric ideals and values, leaving space for alternative cosmologies and knowledges (Knauff, 1996).

Inside the already emerging sociological current of ecology, this shift became a stimulus to re-imagine conservation biology from a decolonial point of view. This entailed a critique of the Western scientific praxis and its positivistic heritage, and a new consideration of alternative ways of approaching ecosystems, such as Indigenous Knowledges and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (Vianello, 2021). This upheaval of scientific certainties, however, was not accepted by everyone. In particular, Michael Soulé, who himself had previously revolutionized conservation biology, sided in firm opposition to the scientific deconstruction movements. In *The Social Siege of Nature*, Soulé (1995) reclaims the fundamental role of scientific thought in preserving ecosystems and criticizes the idea that nature could be revisited in a postmodernist key, warning against the danger of undermining the objectivity of the discipline and thus weakening the environmental cause itself.

Soulé, like many other fellow innovators of his era, can be considered an exponent of “systems thinking”, a mode of viewing reality as separated from structures but more interested in processes and interactions. Even though this framework enables one to pay attention to relations rather than individuals, it still defines one single system, that is, a single reality. In the 1990s, anthropologist Tim Ingold (1995) introduced a different approach to the study of human societies and worldviews. Ingold sustains the idea that human beings are not creating different versions of the same reality, but instead reality is created in the process of inhabiting it, or “dwelling”. This intake collocates itself in the more general shift away from Cartesian mind-body dualism, and the acknowledgement of the barriers it created, from the nature-culture divide, to the academic incommunicability between sciences as the study of nature and natural phenomena, and humanities as the study of human representations, that is culture (Ingold, 1995).

Viveiros De Castro (2013) offers a radical shift within the anthropological debate. By employing the concept of Amerindian Perspectivism, he explains how different beings inhabit different ontologies that exist on the same level but in “plurality”. Viveiros De Castro’s “ontological turn” produced a rich literature shift towards the study of ontologies, populating the anthropological debate with localized ecological accounts which leave space for an actor that was generally never left out of anthropology: the non-human (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017). By including the environment under the term “more-than-human”, ethnographic works recently started introducing unspoken actors such as non-human animals and the plant world. Eduardo Kohn (2013) created a groundbreaking connection between the ontological turn and the more-than-human world. Starting from language studies and semiotics, Kohn (2013) elaborated the “ecology of selves” that rethinks ontologies as ecosystem features, describing reality as a network of organisms that, like different human societies, interpret each other.

Recent studies have begun absorbing this drive towards more-than-human ethnography and applying it to human–wildlife conflicts. Donfrancesco & Sandbrook (2025) enter the heated Italian debate on wolf management by reading it not only as a challenge of inter-species coexistence, but as a case of biopolitical injustice. In its complex sensorial facets, the wolf issue shifts from being just a matter of livestock management, becoming a feature of a wider set of socio-political dynamics. As operative instruments, the authors employ participant observation and interviews for the human counterpart, while camera traps and monitoring are reserved for the non-humans (dogs, sheep, and wolves). This study directly shows how wild animals like

wolves can be made more active participants in socio-ecological processes instead of passive background elements of wildlife management. Furthermore, the wild animal becomes one feature of a complicated set of relationships that configure the “conflict”, shifting the narration from the mere problematization of the animal, towards a more complex vision of the ecological, social and political relations that constitute it.

2.5 Kentish Plovers in Alberoni: Ecological, Social, and Biopolitical Challenges

As discussed above, socio-ecological system studies are increasingly integrating humanities’ perspectives and methodologies, including critical views on definitions such as humans, animals, and nature.

Nonetheless, Human Dimensions of Wildlife research in Italy is limited in number, methods, and impact (Glikman & Frank, 2011). Studies on Human–Wildlife Conflicts are primarily concerned with high-visibility and high-tension scenarios, therefore primarily focusing on megafauna, with particular attention to predators and, in general, animals that are capable of generating a considerable and visible impact on human populations (Woodroffe et al., 2005). These species can also be game animals and constitute a resource and/or a spiritual value for the communities (Woodroffe et al., 2005).

As previously explored, the Kentish Plover was made into a symbol for wildlife conservation in Alberoni and in various oases of the Venice Lagoon. However, despite its role as a flagship species, it cannot fit into the canonical standards of the previously described species. This is visible through a series of factors that the species fails to fully comply with in this literature approach. Firstly, the Kentish Plover is not subjected to hunting pressures. Secondly, the species’ small size relegates the animal outside of the megafauna category. This characteristic, however, contributes to its characterization as a fragile species and leads to the next point: the Kentish Plover does not benefit from good visibility, from multiple aspects that will be further explored. These features altogether contribute to marking the Kentish Plover case as a distinct one from the aforementioned literature, both in traditional human dimensions approaches to wildlife conflicts and interdisciplinary anthropological studies.

The Kentish Plover conservation problem, however, still presents the features of a conflict to which, as is often the case, the costs are not distributed equally. To the present day,

the Kentish Plover is a locally endangered species that struggles to adapt to the largely anthropic environment of Alberoni, which causes its breeding cycles to be largely unsuccessful, worsening the precarious state of this species (Baldin et al., 2018).

The setting, Alberoni beach, in turn reveals itself as an environment dense with contradictory stances and even more contradictory actions. This complicated situation enforces the need to drift away from the canonical quantitative-based monodisciplinary approaches that risk oversimplifying complex phenomena, towards integrated research on relational ontologies in the making.

In this context, ethnography of the more-than-human can represent a starting point to acknowledge the agency of wildlife and its social-political role. Tess' (2022) ethnographic study offers highly relevant observations on conservation science in the Venice Lagoon, including Kentish Plover conservation practices. Furthermore, it provides an insightful place-based account of Alberoni's neighbouring area, including fieldwork with experts from LIPU oases of San Nicolò and Ca' Roman. This research represents a substantial aid in the wide literature gap in multispecies approaches to conservation in the area, providing a valuable parallel of areas that are geographically and ecologically close, yet surprisingly distant in many other respects.

For this research, as it crosses multiple imaginaries and narrations, it was chosen to examine the case through different, often contrasting, dimensions (Peterson & Olson, 2024). The most relevant one is represented by the ontologies of place and belonging, but also through a philosophical reimagining of values, definitions, and relational understanding of the place. The following chapter will illustrate how the aforementioned approaches will be applied by elaborating the research's methodology.

3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted for this research, disclosing its rationale and broader implications. It includes a brief description of the case study's relevance, an overview of the research's questions, and a rationale of the methods and instruments employed. Finally, it illustrates the research's ethical principles and limitations.

3.1 Case Study Description and Relevance

This research aims to address the Kentish Plover conservation challenge in Alberoni from a situated and interdisciplinary anthropological perspective, attempting to understand its features, tensions, practices, and systemic worldviews.

The Kentish Plover situation in Alberoni represents one manifestation of a problem that recurs in many coastal and wetland areas worldwide, with particular relevance to the Italian context (Que et al., 2015; Gómez-Serrano, 2021; Tejera et al., 2022; Battisti & Gippoliti, 2024). The extensive fieldwork undertaken in the Alberoni area has revealed elements that may challenge existing perspectives and provide an opportunity to break new ground in the interpretation of similar cases.

Firstly, the site of Alberoni beach enjoys a certain notoriety deriving from its relatively natural condition and perceived wilderness. These features have shaped the site's historical trajectory and forms of human occupation, making it a distinctive case within the coastal landscapes of the Venetian Lagoon, particularly in light of the conservation challenges associated with the Kentish Plover. This leads to the second aspect of relevance: Alberoni beach is an intersectional place, an environment that is constantly negotiating between the stewardship of its valuable ecosystem and wildlife, and its attractiveness for human use and recreation. Alberoni beach embodies a paradox, where a habitat seemingly perfect for the Kentish Plover becomes the place of its inexorable decline (Pegorer et al., 2011). This contradiction lies at the core of the human–wildlife conflict in Alberoni, which not only manifests as a collision of valuations, understandings, and worldviews between the conservationists and the public, but also as a community struggle to assign their own meaning to the place, and to express their modes of inhabiting Alberoni beach. All these factors

contribute to making the study both relevant to wider debates and sufficiently context-specific to uncover new dimensions of a broader problem, potentially generating novel approaches to its resolution.

Through integrating the anthropological perspective on belonging ontologies and place-making, this study aims to fill the research gap on Kentish Plover conservation and thus advance interdisciplinary ecological studies, in line with the Environmental Humanities perspective.

3.2 Research Questions

The main research question guiding this thesis can be conceptualized as “How does the presence of the Kentish Plover shape relationships between people, wildlife, and place in Alberoni?” This question is meant to address how different modalities of relating to the place can shape the way “nature” and the protected natural environment are experienced, lived, and narrated, engaging with the anthropological discourse on place, space, and belonging in a “natural” setting.

This broad inquiry can be narrowed down to several sub-questions guiding the data collection: How do different actors define and locate the Kentish Plover within the social and ecological landscape of Alberoni? How do different ways of relating to Alberoni shape people's perceptions of the Kentish Plover and its conservation? How do different communities in Alberoni and neighbouring protected areas of the Venice Lagoon understand and narrate Kentish Plover conservation and its related practices? And ultimately, how does the Kentish Plover become a species worth protecting, and what role do emotions, care, and knowledge play in this process?

3.3 Research Objectives

The primary objective was to document how belonging ontologies manifest and operate in the context of Alberoni Beach's Kentish Plover conservation area through long-term ethnographic engagement. This entailed consistent field presence, a cycle of semi-structured interviews, and a brief survey to have both a broad and close look at the different ways the

Kentish Plover and its protection are understood and narrated within the different circles and communities.

The secondary research objective was to map the emerging ontologies between the actors and communities involved and to position them within a wider framework thanks to the existing studies and the input gathered by the neighbouring conservation realities in the Venice Lagoon. This meant not only researching how conservation can be expressed differently in similar environments but also learning, comparing, and evaluating, together with the interlocutors, different practices and narrations across the lagoon. Incorporating this perspective allows the study to move across multiple scales of analysis, connecting local dynamics to broader regional processes. By placing Alberoni within the broader Upper Adriatic context, it highlights both the wider relevance of the findings and the ecological importance of the area as a key migratory site for birds (Munari, 2021).

3.4 Research Design

The study constitutes a qualitatively-driven mixed-method research design jointly incorporating participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a survey as ethnographic instruments.

Mixed-method research represents a valuable alternative to qualitative and quantitative designs, offering a wider view into phenomena and producing a multi-angle research (Creswell, 2009, pp. 14–15). However, mixed methodologies can become ineffective when used without a critical decolonial approach (Giddings, 2006). This problem fits into the wider trend of conservation studies neglecting attention to design justification (Young et al., 2018; Sutherland et al., 2018). In the case of this research, a mixed method is meant to address the questions' need for deep insight while enabling the survey to enrich the account by contextualizing it and opening the research to more respondents. This contributes to the research's overall breadth, accuracy, and transferability.

The data were mixed through “embedding” the quantitative input into the qualitative one, enabling the survey to support the analysis without dominating it (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015; Lowis, 2025). The iterative approach of the research timeline enables the different methods to co-exist in the same temporal phase, in a “transformative” framework (Creswell, 2009, p. 208)

that mirrors the ethnographic approach of ongoing adaptability and reflexive use of the instruments. Finally, the qualitatively-driven design complies with the overarching aims of the research to bring positive change within the community and the socio-ecological system (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015).

The use of qualitative research is encouraged when dealing with social actors and researching their epistemologies (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Hesse-Biber et al., 2015). In particular, localized studies in social science represent a great opportunity and challenge to the common understanding of good research conduct. As Flyvbjerg (2006) explains, case studies provide a form of knowledge that holds an intrinsic significance in being dependent on the context that generates it. Qualitative research enables a deeper gaze into circumscribed problems and a non-simplistic understanding of social processes. Finally, qualitative research is especially useful in exploratory case studies that have little to no antecedents (Rust et al., 2017).

Scoping closer to this case study, research on natural conservation exhibits a vast history of using qualitative approaches to address ecology and conservation problems, developing to become a feature of modern-day conservation biology (Sutherland et al., 2018). Even if growing, this methodological approach in conservation is still reported to have quality limitations that determine poor transferability of these studies. This inadequacy is sometimes attributed to insufficient social science training by the researchers, often coming from different disciplinary backgrounds (Moon et al., 2016; Young et al., 2018; Rust et al., 2017; Sutherland et al., 2018). In Italy, social research on wildlife studies is still relegated to a “gray zone” of literature (Glikman & Frank, 2011).

As Rust et al. (2017) argue, alternative methodologies capable of providing a deeper understanding of ecological processes have become increasingly important in the current environmental context, where conservation science needs to go beyond technical fixes, paying attention to the social, cultural, and relational dimensions through which environmental challenges and their situated manifestations occur.

Kentish Plover conservation in the Venice Lagoon is entrenched with multiple and often contradictory stimuli that cannot be detected through traditional quantitative or qualitative studies. Novel approaches should shift the focus to the unsaid, the unwritten, and unrecognized, making visible what is still invisible.

3.5 Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative research approach involving extensive engagement with individuals and communities (Creswell, 2009; Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). Rather than a method for data collection, ethnography relies on the act of mutual learning from the other, sharing experiences, forms of knowledge, and practices (Ingold, 2018). The attempt to convert this exchange into text is what defines ethnographic work. By adopting a holistic rather than deterministic framework, ethnographic studies redirect attention from discrete phenomena to the processes that produce them. Indeed, the ethnographic framework is grounded in an understanding of social realities as relational and intersubjective, embracing the philosophical position that the world, whether “natural” or “anthropic”, cannot be fully understood through a single, exhaustive account.

This approach is not new to the Lagoon of Venice, where some noteworthy studies have explored more-than-human anthropology in relation to species management and conservation, such as Tess (2022). This research adopts the ethnographic standpoint as a central methodological framework to examine the potential role of community engagement in shaping conservation practices and socio-environmental change.

3.5.1 Participant Observation

The study's qualitative approach relies on participant observation as a *modus operandi* characterizing the research process. This approach is one of the fundamental anthropological methods and entails participating in activities to immerse oneself in the context of the research, without employing artificial structures or instruments to gather the data and enabling a two-way flow of input sharing. (Ingold, 2018). Taking part in activities with interviewees created or strengthened the bond with the interlocutors, improving the quality of the interviews. Secondly, it improved the comprehension of the processes by enabling the researcher to physically engage in them.

As explained by Manfredo (2008), descriptive instruments such as surveys can create difficulty in generalizing wildlife conflicts out of their context, struggle to address the causal roots of the problem, and become ineffective when their development is not paired with a real

understanding of the place. In this sense, participant observation can become an effective strategy to address the issue from a situated point of view, investigate the whys of the matter, and finally provide accurate context for the development of the other research instruments.

In conclusion, participant observation provided the most meaningful data from unsolicited and unprompted manifestations, offering insight into the case's unseen causes, and finally producing triangulation between observed practices and discourses, the interviews, and the survey.

3.5.2 Ethnographic Interviews

The second qualitative instrument is represented by a cycle of semi-structured ethnographic interviews conducted together with selected informants both on-site and not, and including a telephonic interview with a relevant field expert.

The interviews are referred to as “ethnographic” because they emerge from the ethnographer's fieldwork, being dependent and inseparable from participant observation (Kimber & Dairon, 2023). The characterization as semi-structured reflects their dynamic nature throughout the process. The interlocutors were given substantial freedom to lead the conversation, while the researcher provided minimal guidance on the basis of macro-topics of interest, which will be further explored. The interlocutor became a “counter-subject” equally contributing to shaping the interview (Hampshire et al., 2014). The conversations that emerged were therefore highly valuable, rich in contextual data and emotional value, adding to the overall in-depth nature of the study.

This framework prioritizes a dialogic approach to the traditional “data-gathering” research that views informants as sources of facts, making the research process an “extraction” of knowledge (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Ingold, 2018). As Campbell & Lassiter (2015) suggest, interviews are “con-versations” where both interlocutors contribute to their authorship. Nonetheless, the researcher inevitably influences the conversations' direction, possibly affecting the research's integrity and trustworthiness (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). To tackle this aspect, throughout the ethnographic project, it was chosen to employ a fieldnote audit trail as an instrument of periodic reflection. The audit trail incorporated various sections, broadly

including: a thick description of the context, a narrative log of the events, a cleanness, sensitivity, and trustworthiness rating, and finally a space for analysis.

As expressed by Knott et al. (2022), good research relies on constant and iterative pondering on personal assumptions, power dynamics, and class positioning. When conducting fieldwork, this also means wondering what impact the research can have on the communities and who will benefit from it (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). Therefore, reflexivity was perfected by adding a space to rate the potential impacts on the interlocutor both during and after the interview, in the transcription and interpretation stages (Muthanna & Alduais, 2023)

Finally, the audit trail kept track of any potentially leading prompts, following Lincoln & Guba's (1985) four pillars of research (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability), ensuring the research's full transformative and scoping-out potential (Creswell, 2018, pp. 176-185; Muthanna & Alduais, 2023; Ahmed, 2024).

In conclusion, interviews remain one of the many instruments that can be used to understand the topic. As such, the interviews were not useful to acquire answers or corroborate hypotheses, but to offer insights on worldviews, memories, and embodied knowledge (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). In Alberoni beach, interviews were able to show the invisible sides of the conservation conflict, enabling body language, silence, and emotion to emerge from the conversation mutually and horizontally.

3.5.3 Location and Timetable

Most of the research was conducted in the Oasi WWF Dune degli Alberoni conservation area in Lido, Venice. More specifically, the majority of the fieldwork was conducted on the Alberoni shoreline area located between the Alberoni Murazzi dam and the Bagni Alberoni beach. The research hotspot area coincides with the area mostly devoted to conservation activities, where nesting fences are usually set from April to September, coinciding with the Kentish Plover breeding season. This cyclical temporality dictated the course of the research itself, which required flexible timetables to adjust to unpredictable factors including weather, animals, and humans.

The research timeline began in the second half of February 2026 with two to three weeks of planning and preparation. Fieldwork activities, including participant observation and

interviews, took place from early March to the end of July. The online survey was conducted concurrently, yet towards the end of the research timeline, from July 12 until August 15. The most active phase of the research converged around the shared monitoring sessions of the Kentish Plover breeding couples in Alberoni, starting from the first sighting on March 16, peaking with my last observation of the breeding couple right after the hatching loss, on April 16, after which both my field activity and volunteers' reports became less frequent. The last sighting of Kentish Plovers dates to May 9; however, the research process and the monitoring sessions on the beach continued until the end of the summer season.

The research process entailed different and alternating phases of data collection, reflection, analysis, and re-analysis. This non-linear structure enabled the research to adapt to the required flexibility, enhancing the overall congruence of the study (Peterson & Olson, 2024, pp. 6-8).

3.5.4 Participants, Groups and Sampling

Prior to the fieldwork conducted for this thesis, I had already been involved in conservation activities at the study site as a volunteer. This previous experience facilitated access to the field and allowed me to develop relationships with several participants. At the same time, it required ongoing reflexive attention regarding my position within the research process.

The first weeks were mainly dedicated to acquainting the interlocutors, starting with the oasis's managers and volunteers, and continuing with local figures. Firstly, the participants were reached by identifying the institutions and circles of the place (oasis management board, NGOs, inhabitant friendships and familiar circles, workplaces such as touristic facilities, etc.) Then I interacted with the stakeholders by engaging in cooperative activities, formal or informal gatherings, and being an active participant in the many operations concerning the case. These activities included auditing guided tours, participating in monitoring sessions, and volunteering for the construction of protective fences. Since NGOs are usually seeking willing help, the conservation agencies operating in Alberoni and in nearby locations played a key role in both ensuring field access and bridging ulterior connections.

As anticipated, ethnographic interviewing is tied to the connections established with the members of the community, making relationships the baseline of the research itself (Munz, 2017). Familiarity with the interviewee varied deeply across different levels of acquaintance, role differences, or age gaps, making every interaction unique and not comparable to the others.

The sample size and composition depended on key informants, who were selected through purposive sampling. Starting from an initial pre-selection, fieldwork then guided the choice of the interviewees, relying on people's recommendations combined with the ethnographer's theoretical purposes. This sampling technique is both practical and suitable for the anthropological approach (Iphofen, 2013).

Since the research scope demanded in-depth, high-quality insights, the effective number of interviews and interactions was not defined, but adapted to the research necessities (Knott et al., 2022). It involved between two and three key informants from each stakeholder interactive category, including economic activity owners or workers, wildlife conservation experts, volunteers, and locals. These stakeholder groups are defined as “interactive” to highlight the nuanced and undefined nature of these categorizations, preferring to view interlocutors as individuals rather than representatives of a group. Unlike studies such as Battisti et al. (2026), these subjects' relevance is indeed not defined by their interest, but more by the position they occupied inside the ethnographer's narration of the case.

Occasional visitors, bathers, and tourists were not included in the interview cycle nor the survey for time constraints. However, they were part of the ethnographic account, and some of their contributions, such as unstructured conversations, were useful for the reflective activity of the fieldwork.

Finally, the interview cycle included a testimony from Corrado Battisti, zoologist and manager of Torre Flavia conservation area. Unlike all the others, his point of view was included non-anonymously as a leading voice in the field of human dimensions of Kentish Plover conservation.

3.5.5 Recording and Transcription

During the semi-structured interviews, the researcher employed digital audio recording to keep track of the information. These recordings were utilized for reflection, analysis, and extrapolation of citations. The recordings were not shared nor utilized for any purposes other than the thesis itself. The interlocutors were always aware of the recording and of the possibility to stop it at any moment.

The excerpts were transcribed following a clean verbatim approach, thus maintaining the original text as close as possible to the original, while removing anything that might alter its clarity. Unnecessary repetitions and false starts were corrected to give priority to content and meaning, while maintaining the overall phrasing raw and unedited to fit the research's analytical approach (Knott et al., 2022).

Transcription was assisted by artificial intelligence speech recognition systems, with constant review and rework by the ethnographer.

Unless otherwise indicated, most excerpts from interviews or fieldwork were translated from Italian into English by the author. Some excerpts from the survey's open-ended questions, however have been kept in the original language to safeguard their authentic meaning.

3.5.6 Interview Questions

Interviewees were generally left free to guide the conversation, with minimal interference from the researcher's side. The interview direction was informed by the main data-gathering themes, namely: the Place, the People and the Plover. These areas, connected to the main research question, were expressed in the form of a sample set of conversational prompts (see Appendix A).

Starting from "ice-breakers," the questions then progress towards a more experiential side, finishing with the most reflexive and in-depth ones (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015, pp. 87–94; Knott et al., 2022). Constant and iterated reflection allowed the interview questions to be increasingly tailored to the individual and the context, and to reduce attrition or distress. This implied avoiding specialized terminology (e.g., "ecosystem services", "keystone species", etc.),

and eliminating closed-ended or conceptually and emotionally loaded questions (Creswell, 2009, pp. 8–10; Campbell & Lassiter, 2015, pp. 92–93; Muthanna & Alduais, 2023).

3.6 Digital Survey

The quantitative side, represented by the short questionnaire, was designed in order to balance and integrate the qualitative findings and, at the same time, provide breadth and scoping-out potential (Knott et al., 2022). Though composing a small part compared to the rest of the design, it is expected to overcome the issue of socially desirable answers (Bernard, 2006, p. 259) and power relationships in face-to-face conversations (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015, p. 96; Ahmed, 2024).

The quantitative part is configured as a self-administered internet-based survey via the Google Forms platform. This design is particularly suitable for recruiting respondents when a representative sample is not necessary (Bernard, 2006, pp. 254-255). The questionnaire was digitally shared and distributed through chain referral.

It was designed considering existing quantitative-based approaches to conservation and human–wildlife conflicts such as Marino (2014), Bano et al. (2021), and Sabatella et al. (2024), and psychometric studies on place attachment in natural settings such as Williams & Vaske (2003) and Colley & Craig (2019). The questions were then tailored to the ethnographic nature of the research, thus maintaining the goal of reaching the respondent through human connection and treating the answers themselves as ethnographic material.

The question set is brief and mainly composed of closed-ended single- and multiple-choice questions informed by the fieldwork activity's encountered themes and practices, improving their accuracy (Bernard, 2006, p. 298). The open-ended questions are meant to leave some unprompted glimpses into the matter. Some questions employ a Likert-type scale to better reflect the multidimensional nature of people's valuations (Bernard, 2006, p. 328).

3.6.1 Questionnaire Structure

The questionnaire (see Appendix B) was designed in a simple and brief format that suits the online distribution method by facilitating respondents' engagement and securing more faithful and complete responses (Bernard, 2006). The structure is composed of four sections that mirror the major data-gathering themes of the face-to-face interviews. The first section interacts with the people's relationship with the beach, addressing the frequency, type of utilization, and personal narration of the place. The second section is dedicated to the situated perception, valuation, and knowledge of the Kentish Plover on the beach. The third section dips into conservation measures in both their physical and abstract forms, leaning on memories and critical perspectives on Kentish Plover protection in Alberoni. Finally, the last section leaves space for voicing additional comments on the matter.

3.6.2 Survey Data Analysis

The survey data was useful to expand, compare, and triangulate the ethnographic input (Lowis, 2025, p.3; Bernard, 2006, pp. 24-25). As previously explained, the survey serves as a descriptive tool embedded into ethnographic research. Questions were therefore treated as conversational prompts for further anthropological reflection, providing a thick description of the case. For this reason, inferential, correlational, predictive, or multivariate analysis was not considered. Every item was evaluated through descriptive analysis, focusing on frequencies and percentage distribution of items. The objective was to show polarizations, concordances and dissonances, ambivalences and indifferences around the answers.

Open-ended questions gave space to ethnographic reflection and enabled comparison with the interview material, revealing the questionnaire's emic ontologies and hidden narratives.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Since this project entailed close contact with people, relying on their narration and personal understandings, it was particularly crucial to pay attention to the risks and elaborate adequate mitigation strategies.

3.7.1 Transparency

The interlocutor's verbal and situated consent was prioritized over the signing procedure, which was still offered at their discretion. This choice was made to avoid creating distance or distress, in particular when dealing with vulnerable interlocutors, and enabled consent to be a process rather than a procedure (Balkin et al., 2023).

Verbal consent involved communicating details about the research and the usage, rights, and anonymity of their contribution, including content modification and withdrawal (Knott et al., 2022, p. 4).

3.7.2 Minimize Harm

As stakeholders, the interlocutors were subjected to a certain degree of exposure, according to their social condition. To ensure equality and safety, sensitive information was safeguarded according to the contextual and negotiated consent of the interlocutor.

Although the general location was made explicit due to its environmental relevance, the names, genders, and affiliations of the participants were changed or removed, along with any data that could lead to identification. The audio recordings, fieldnotes, and survey data were securely stored and never shared with third parties.

Throughout the ethnographic process, it was necessary to consider the participants' sensitivity. This entailed avoiding potentially distressing topics and scheduling frequent reflective checks throughout the research (Muthanna & Alduais, 2023).

Finally, given that most of the fieldwork took place in a natural and relatively isolated setting, it was relevant to take extra precautions to ensure the ethnographer's safety. These included being conscious of the surroundings when alone on the beach, limiting fieldwork to daytime, and avoiding potential conflicts (Iphofen, 2013).

3.7.3 Respect for the Communities

Given the intruding nature of many anthropological practices such as interviews (Iphofen, 2013; Campbell & Lassiter, 2015), it was necessary to approach the field with oversight, especially when dealing with vulnerable people such as elders, individuals with disabilities, and racialized or marginalized people. For this reason, information gathered and shared was not only carefully stored, but most importantly dutifully respected, treating data as an offering that is situated and jointly authored between the researcher and the interlocutors (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Ingold, 2018). The participants were treated as co-creators and respected as such, regardless of their status, background, or condition. All informants were equally regarded as key informants regardless of their circle, status, or knowledge level.

3.8 Limitations of the Study

As expressed by Battisti et al. (2026), generalizability can be limited in localized case studies on conservation; however, this study may be transferable to similar contexts around Italy and elsewhere.

Interview as a method implies a restricted sample and low reproducibility (Bernard, 2006, p. 148; Knott et al., 2022).

Digital surveys, in turn, entail low response rates and little control over the sample's variability. In this case, the sample was restricted to only Italian speakers with internet access and a certain amount of familiarity with technology. Response falsification or duplication is possible in anonymous digital questionnaires. Potential response misinterpretation was addressed by minimizing ambiguity in the questionnaire design (Bernard, 2006, pp. 260–270).

Finally, ethnography can impact representation, enhancing the visibility of certain narrations at the expense of others. Prolonged engagement caused the research to be time-consuming, suggesting that future studies might benefit from greater time and resource availability (Ahmed, 2024).

4 CONSERVING: A PLACE FOR THE PLOVER

This chapter explores how different individuals, groups, and communities conceptualize and narrate Kentish Plover conservation and its related practices both within Alberoni and neighbouring oases of the Venice Lagoon. Drawing from the ethnographic account of the Kentish Plover breeding season, it specifically focuses on the different ways conservation practices can be intended in the various wildlife protection oases. The chapter follows the chronological unfolding of the monitoring activities throughout the season, coinciding with the research's timeline.

Firstly, it begins by reporting the local volunteers' narrations and perspectives, assessing the different challenges encountered. Furthermore, it proceeds to enlarge the scope through the situated ethnographic experiences of Ca' Roman, San Nicolò and Cavallino-Treporti, examining their place-based practices and philosophies of Kentish Plover conservation. Ultimately, the chapter critically analyzes the findings through the contributions of the various interlocutors.

4.1 Conserving in Alberoni

The research officially began in early March, when the volunteer board agreed to start the first visit to the beach, precisely on March 8. One of the primary objectives was to observe the Kentish Plovers while introducing new members to the volunteering group and showing them the location.

Owing to seasonal winter fog, the site appeared bleak and essentially devoid of human presence. The only exception was represented by two people walking their dog off leash. Giacomo, a long-standing volunteer in Alberoni, promptly intervened by calmly and politely informing the owners of the existing ban on unleashed dogs in the area. The two individuals appeared to be receptive to the admonition, and they informed Giacomo of their history as participants in the conservation oasis' guided tours. This affirmation struck Giacomo as a rather paradoxical justification, as he would have remarked later while reflecting on the typical reactions of owners of off-leash dogs:

“The first thing they say is: ‘my dog is super quiet, it never attacked anyone’. And then: ‘we know about the birds, we did some activities with you’ ... but then you’re supposed to know that it [the dog] is quite dangerous, but apparently you didn’t learn it!”

In this way, Giacomo synthesized the average experience of a conservation volunteer in the area, highlighting how most people’s tendency is to maintain moderate tones, while not truly treating the admonition with due consideration. As Giacomo remarked during a later monitoring session: “The moment we round the corner, they will take off the leash”, highlighting the low level of regard towards regulations among beach users, and bitterly deriding the minimal effective impact that the volunteers exert in rule enforcement.

4.1.1 Conducting Conservation as a Local Volunteer

To gain a better understanding of how other volunteers interacted with similar complicated occurrences, I asked Luca, who operated in Alberoni for the 2025 summer season, to narrate his own experience with Kentish Plover conservation.

Interviewer: Is there some episode you remember in particular? Or, for example, how did the season begin?

Luca: I started the season. On the first day I arrived, I did a guided tour of the pinewood and the beach. [...] After that, we put up the fences for the Kentish Plover nesting. Then, after two weeks or so, I had learned all the rules of the pinewood and the beach. I started going around the beach with [the oasis manager], and also with [another volunteer], doing a bit of ‘beach police’, let's say, telling people with dogs to keep them on a leash, people with bicycles to get off and walk with them, and people going into the dunes to stay on the beach.

Luca’s main activities on the beach had evolved from monitoring plovers to monitoring people. He then proceeded to describe one encounter during his “beach police” duties that was particularly revealing to him. During one of his many conversations with dog owners, he had a brief exchange with a man walking his dog off leash. The man clarified to Luca that he was a long-time friend of an oasis operator, and that his dog was accustomed to the fencing, claiming that it would never attempt to cross it. Hence, Luca tried to make a reason out of this interaction:

Because for him, his dog, let's say, is better than the others. And so, he says that his dog knows it mustn't go near the fences, and this is probably true, but everyone thinks that their own dog is the best in the world, and so this episode too shows that very conscious people, very close to the issue, don't pay respect to all of the rules, and this also shows the difficulty of enforcing these rules on the beach.

By narrating this episode, Luca is also highlighting one of the many contradictions generated by Kentish Plover conservation measures, that is, the clash between the public's environmental consciousness and habits on the beach, appearing to create in Luca a marked sense of cognitive dissonance and confusion.

This clashing, however, as revealed by this episode, does not stop at the single visitor behaviour; instead, it appears to extend to conservation practice itself when mechanisms related to social bonds and relationships come into play. Practices of conservation, such as banning unleashed dogs on the beach, become therefore subjected to a wider framework of norms. One in which authorization and violation cease to have a definite significance, beginning to be influenced by a different set of assessments that are reworked, re-evaluated, and re-enacted through existing social ties, such as the interpersonal relationship the dog owner would have had with one of the volunteers according to Luca's story.

As Giacomo, Luca also felt compelled to remark that volunteers' recommendations are generally disregarded by the public, most likely perceiving them as friendly advice, albeit devoid of real authority. He recalled how he witnessed people putting the leash on their dog at its reminder, and immediately unleashing it after Luca was at a fair distance from them, which forced him to return and tell them a second time. This would likely trigger more antagonistic reactions:

Luca: There were a lot of people who told me, 'Yes, now I'm going to keep my dog on a leash,' and after a hundred meters, they left it roaming free. In this case, you have to go back and tell them a second time.

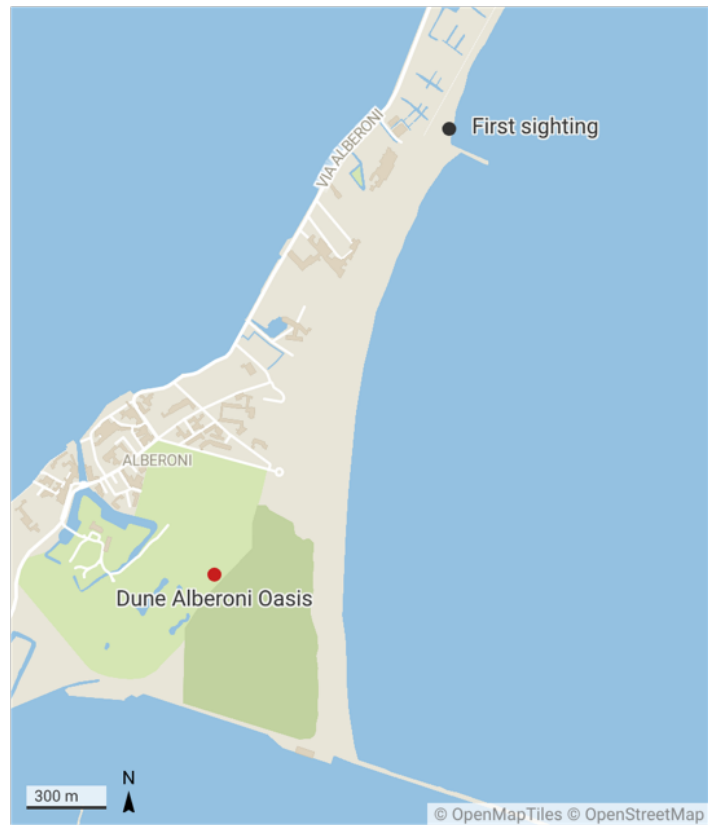
Both Luca's and Giacomo's experiences as volunteers resonated on a specific emotional level: they expressed similar views and, most importantly, felt the same frustration with a mechanism that appeared ineffective. At the same time, this was coupled with a sense of uncertainty regarding the future of Kentish Plover conservation, a sentiment that repeatedly emerged during my conversations with the volunteers and operators of the oasis. This inability

to gaze upon the future mirrored the general narrative, either focused on present challenges or concerned about the past losses. More specifically, when asked questions that required them to reflect on the situation and project future scenarios, most of them were hesitant or unable to respond. Whether attributable to a lack of experience or knowledge, this reluctance to design solutions for the conservation of this endangered species in Alberoni revealed a blindness towards the future that was not evident through their words, but through their silence. Indeed, it was not only the lack of future orientation to spark in our conversations, but a general sense of blankness that arose from the beginning, starting from the straightforward question of: *When was the last time you saw a Kentish Plover in Alberoni?*

4.1.2 Renegotiating Spaces: Human and Natural Landscapes

My observations started as unstructured visits on the beach, directed mainly at gathering fieldnotes and studying the settings. Even though I operated in the area as a volunteer before, I did not have prior experience of monitoring Kentish Plovers since no nests were reported during the previous season. By the time I started to visit the beach in March 2026, I had limited skill in recognizing Kentish Plovers, which considerably narrowed my chances of spotting them. The first collective monitoring did not provide conclusive results, leaving a mark of uncertainty upon the monitoring group. However, on the second day of fieldwork, after the experience with the other volunteers, on March 16, I witnessed a group of Kentish Plovers on the beach. This was recorded as the first sighting of the season in Alberoni.

Three Kentish Plover individuals were resting on the shore of the Murazzi Ottagono area, precisely on the small beach enclosed by the dam (Figure 7). Through direct communication with the other volunteers, I started reporting what I was witnessing and, concurrently, reflecting on it. Three plovers were in a resting position while not exhibiting any particular demeanor (Figure 8). However, the most striking observation of that day concerns not the birds' behaviour, but their setting. The three plovers were located in an area outside the borders of the protected SAC-SPA of Dune Alberoni Oasis, meaning the place was formally not covered by the environmental regulations of the reserve.



Created with Datawrapper

Figure 7: Location of the first sighting on March 16, 2026



Figure 8: Three Kentish Plovers near Murazzi Ottogono. Photograph by the author. 2026

The plovers chose an area that they deemed safe enough for their future nesting, but which would have soon become extremely congested due to the intense human frequentation. This factor precluded any future intervention by conservationists due to the legal status of that area of the beach, which was, in fact, not considered a natural protected area, thereby rendering it an anthropic space. A place where the human presence was not just habitual, but most importantly, enabled. The most immediate marks of this connotation were represented by the stable presence of artificial wooden structures, makeshift huts, and a series of artefacts created through the use of stranded material, characterizing the landscape in its human features (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Artificial structures. Murazzi Ottagono. Photograph by the author. 2026

In stark contrast, a completely different situation would soon configure a few metres further south, beyond the dam, where the protected area both legally and visually begins. In this section of Alberoni beach, approximately extending from Murazzi “Ottagono” until San Camillo Hospital’s bathing establishment, conservation is enacted through a series of material as well as immaterial measures. These include the positioning of fences, normally around the inception of the Spring season, the monitoring activity of volunteers and WWF operators, and finally the interactions with the public that altogether determine the use and the overall definition of this area.

The three Kentish Plovers appeared to feel unbothered by my presence, a behaviour that thoroughly matches the narrations I received from most experts, who identify in this species a particular adaptability to human presence, which does not, however, equate to the same amount of confidence around other species, such as dogs, for instance (Gómez-Serrano, 2021). This feature could have been an explanation for their presence in such an area, paired with the fact that at that moment of the season the fences had not been set yet, leaving the protected beach completely free for people to roam. This exacerbated the paradox of the situation by enabling the “natural” area to be populated by humans and other synanthropic predator species like gulls and crows, while the “anthropic” one to be a safe space for the plovers. Such a contradiction might have appeared confusing; however, it was not nearly as surprising for another naturalist I met during my research, Alvise.

My first interaction with Alvise occurred at the Ca’ Roman conservation oasis on March 20. There, he explained, the Kentish Plover population has been extremely scarce for many years, a vertiginous decline that is supported by the concrete evidence that plovers in Ca’ Roman went from counting 89 nests in 1985 to hosting an average of 4 at the beginning of the new millennium, and 2 in 2013 (Valle & D’Este, 1992; CORILA, 2005; Borgo et al., 2018b). Alvise seemed familiar with this situation and had limited prospects; he attributed this loss both to the great touristic drive the area has during the summers and the extensive presence of overabundant species such as yellow-legged gulls on the beach and dune area.

Alvise had a pragmatic approach to conservation, while at the same time showing a profound attachment to the birds on the various oases of the Lagoon. An attachment that drove his extensive experience in these areas, including Alberoni, where I confronted him about the first location of the plovers outside the protected area. He responded: “Why [do you think] it’s strange?” From his perspective, the selection made by the plovers was not only ordinary, but also logical, due to the morphological characteristics of the area: the site presented a good amount of space between the shoreline and the vegetation, which appeared particularly sparse in that location, increasing its suitability for the Kentish Plover (Antinori et al., 2011; Tinarelli, 2011; Gómez-Serrano & López-López, 2014). Therefore, the assumption that this species would choose the protected area revealed itself to be an incorrect valuation, stemming from a specific human-centered definition of nature through which divisions can be made clear through borders or fences.

4.2 Spatial Negotiation Practices in San Nicolò

At that time, the fences were yet to be set in Alberoni, where the landscape remained unaltered for two more weeks. However, on the other side of Lido island, the LIPU Oasis of San Nicolò was already preparing the materials for fencing the areas. The day after I visited Ca' Roman, on March 21, I travelled to the site to help with their construction (Figure 10). The perimeters were made of a series of wooden poles embedded in sand, while the barrier itself was composed of a net, similar to the one that was experimented with weeks later in Alberoni, but which appeared to be a solidified practice in San Nicolò. Indeed, the whole process appeared to be a result of a long experience of collective organization and shared physical effort.



Figure 10: Construction of fenced areas in San Nicolò. Photograph by the author. 2026

In an area of the Lagoon where interlocutors reported the highest hatching success for Kentish Plover, compared to Alberoni and Ca' Roman, it was relevant to notice the local spatial negotiation practices that took shape not just between conservationists and visitors, but between plovers and bathers. Alvisè illustrated the “seemingly paradoxical” situation that enables this unexpected balance. The area we were operating in was not just reserved for conservation; on the contrary, during the bathing seasons it would have hosted long lines of umbrellas crowded with bathers. Despite this pervasive anthropic presence, the Kentish Plovers had “learned”, in Alvisè’s words, to get past the umbrellas not just to forage, but also to bring their chicks into a safe zone to nurse them. Interestingly, this zone did not represent the closest point to the nesting

area, but a farther location of the beach that the plovers had gradually apprehended as holding less danger for the offspring.

This picture clearly showed a process of wildlife habituation to the human presence. The plovers had initiated a practice of inserting themselves into the human environment, and with a fair frequency, accomplished their objective.

4.3 Trans-generational Acquaintances in Cavallino-Treporti

After Ca' Roman and San Nicolò, the third neighbouring reality for the Alberoni oasis is represented by the Cavallino-Treporti SAC-SPA area (Ministero dell'Ambiente e della Sicurezza Energetica, 2013). An extensive sandy coastline that, along with a consistent nesting Kentish Plover population, hosts up to seven million presences in its popular touristic receptive activities (Rossi, 2024).

Despite its permeating human presence, the area still reports a consistent annual presence of Kentish Plover breeding couples that, as previously discussed, have exhibited sedentary behaviour by choosing this littoral to nest for recurring years. Between 2017 and 2024, Cavallino-Treporti hosted 94 Kentish Plover nests, of which slightly more than half successfully hatched (Garbin, 2024). As seen in the other cases, the main reasons for failure are attributed to abandonment, predation, and acts of vandalism (Garbin, 2024). At the time of my first visit, on April 4, many plovers were present, albeit still in the phase of nesting-site selection. During that period, local conservationists like Federico were completing a series of duties to detect and monitor the plovers on the beach, intending to find the first nests of the season. The observations occurred in the early hours of the morning, to optimize visibility both of the plovers and of the small traces they left behind. These appeared as three slender toes of a couple of centimeters tracing faint marks in the sand. Yet, to the conservationists, those tracks told stories, revealing the temporal distance, the age of the individual, and even aspects of its behaviour, indicating whether it was patrolling its territory, searching for a nesting site, or simply foraging.

At first glance, the first visual contrast to the other oases is the lack of extensive fences that can be witnessed in Alberoni and San Nicolò. Here, the only enclosures were made for the

existing nests exhibiting eggs and actively hatching couples, and were made with a single string of rope, and signs that indicate to the public the hatching couple's presence (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Fenced hatching site in Cavallino-Treporti. Photograph by the author. 2026

The littoral area is considerably large and comprises 13 km of sandy beach dotted with numerous bathing and foodservice establishments (Garbin, 2024). The Ca' Savio area hosts multiple campsites with annexed bathing establishments highly frequented during the hot season. The mechanical cleaning of the beach operated by bathing establishments constitutes a serious threat to plovers both in the nesting and hatching phases (Garbin, 2024). Therefore, the volunteers of the area faced this issue primarily by informing the truck drivers and befriending them, but also by developing a strong relationship with the local establishment. Particularly relevant is the relationship created between one bathing establishment and the conservationists, which exemplifies the strategy of this area and its subsequent relative success in conservation activities. This complicated relationship was described to me by both Federico and Carlo, another local conservationist. From a turbulent start made of disputes and litigation, this exchange gradually mutated into dialogue, and finally into a friendly bond. It is precisely this connection that created the premises for a mutual understanding and a careful negotiation of necessities between the different actors, including the plovers. A precarious yet solidified equilibrium during the years, which depended on one of the many paradoxes of the case. Namely, the presence of tourism-related activities entailed both controlling the presence of dogs and managing the dune advancement, creating an unexpected combination of favourable

conditions for the Kentish Plovers, notoriously preferring wide portions of unvegetated beach to nest (Perna et al., 2024). Thereby, as reported by Carlo, the conservationists went from being perceived as “sand in their eyes” to benefiting from their complete support and economic sponsorship. The results manifested in the stable presence of breeding couples in the early days of April.

Of these individuals, many of them appeared to be highly familiar to the volunteers, who employed spotting scopes to identify the code inscribed on their rings. It is only through these devices that the conservationists manage to recognize the individual plovers. Through their pivotal role, they assign them codes for identification and names as well. Indeed, this practice emerged as contested and debated within the conservation research environment; however, it appeared that people who work daily with these birds tend to familiarize themselves with them, thereby fostering their personification. Through epithets or simple personal names, some of the plovers had become known for their distinct behaviour, such as the territoriality of a well-recognized sedentary male and other anthropomorphic qualities. This was a distinct feature of conservation in Cavallino-Treporti, where the stable presence of Kentish Plovers not only enabled an advancement in their knowledge, but also fostered a sense of proximity to them.

The rings, as physical instruments, became devices of acquaintance capable of reducing the distance between the plovers and the conservationists. At the same time, the ringing practice might also constitute an aid towards cutting the human distance between the various conservation realities of the Lagoon, their practices and different approaches to conservation. These apparently fragmented and distant spaces of natural protection represent equally suitable habitats for the Kentish Plover, which reportedly migrates from one to the other. This is testified by one of the now stable males of the area, who was found to be a fledged chick from Alberoni. Despite its name and title being changed, it was the ring that told the story of this bird’s migration from its oasis of birth to another rich and complicated reality of the Lagoon.

The sole implementation of a conceptually simple, yet labor-intensive, practice for monitoring wildlife created a foundation for communicating across long distances, enabling cooperation between different conservation realities. At the same time, however, this practice represents a contradictory impulse to the conservation mission in the lagoon environment, making it a debated topic across different sites.

The next section will explore the most debated practices of Kentish Plover conservation throughout the lagoon's littoral environments, examining the annexed valuations, definitions and forms of knowledge that enable their pursuit.

4.4 Dismembered Conservation: Enabling and Disabling Practices

On March 29, I had the opportunity to connect with experts and volunteers during a guided tour held in the Alberoni oasis. The convergence of experts from different fields gave rise to profuse conversations about the situation of Alberoni and gave the opportunity for many to express their true minds.

4.4.1 An “Archipelago” of Practices

Wildlife conservation in Alberoni emerged from a complex and composite world, where many realities struggled to affirm themselves. As one of my interlocutors incisively expressed that day, Alberoni could indeed be described as an “archipelago”. In addition to this point of view, another metaphorical suggestion came along from another voice, comparing Alberoni to a metaphorical “far-west”. The perceived lack of a clear collective direction reflected broader dynamics encountered across the Lagoon, suggesting the existence of a more generalized issue. Dispersed organs not working unanimously but rather fragmentarily, and lacking a central body, contributed to a vision of conservation as dismembered. Throughout the research, these disharmonic responses coming from various sides crystallized into the sporadic emergence of dissonant opinions regarding Kentish Plover conservation measures. Starting from that fieldwork day, the newly put fences were the first reason for dissent, as someone saw in that vibrant red mesh a visual offense to the landscape, or as inadequate to serve its purpose of keeping dogs out.

One of the most discussed measures throughout the entire research period was represented by the “cages”, a critical device of protection used to physically hinder predators from hunting the eggs and the chicks. Despite sharing the same intent, these devices have very different expressions throughout the Lagoon oases, taking different shapes and being generated by different ideals. In Alberoni, the commonly used cage appears relatively small, quadrangular,

and of iron material. The design mirrors its philosophy: reducing its visibility for any possible predator, including humans, while guaranteeing enough protection for the chicks. A similar intent but different philosophy surrounds other types of protective devices experimented in other oases, where the goal is instead to maintain the instruments as less invasive as possible. A philosophy that finds expression both in the experimentation with natural materials in place of traditional cages, but also in the reluctance to engage in ringing practices, seen as too stressful for the birds.

4.4.2 Fear and Exclusion in Conservation Practices – A Critical Perspective

According to Carlo, the road towards the evolution of Kentish Plover conservation practices often faces a complex path and significant obstacles:

I started in 2011, when I took part in the first ringing campaign in the zone. Back then, we used rings with two-digit codes, placed higher up on the leg. Later on, people decided to change the system because they were really difficult to read. Then they switched to bases. After that, there were all sorts of disagreements between the different Kentish Plover groups at the national level. [...] It has never happened that a ringed Kentish Plover abandoned its nest, flew away, or had any kind of accident. Just once I saw a problem: when the metal ring was being closed, the Kentish Plover suddenly pulled its leg back. It jerked and injured itself, but it was really a tiny, insignificant thing. The ornithologist didn't sleep for two days because of it. I had reported it and later went back to check on it.

Carlo reports the arduous process conservation measures must face to get absorbed into accepted practices. He also remarks on the unavoidable limitations that any of these measures entail, first and foremost, in their inherently invasive nature:

We had other females that kept on pecking at their ring because they would feel it. Then they got used to it, but they would continue pecking at it for the whole day, trying to take it off. Anyways, it's an impediment for them. Like us, barefoot, wearing a pair of hiking shoes, you feel their weight.

Carlo acknowledges the animal's struggle and expresses a sensorial empathy towards the damage this practice entails; however, he looks at the big picture by identifying it as the lesser evil to safeguard this species. A flexibility that he claims not to be sharing with other conservationists, whom he deems too anchored to old practices and beliefs. These convictions,

he explains, are not supported by actual experience, but are more dependent upon titles or status, and caused by a substantial incapacity to address fear: “A mindset: fear of causing harm. And fear holds you back. And just as ignorance holds you back. It closes doors.”

The same adaptability, he elaborates, reflects in the attitude towards strenuous presence on the field, an element that for Carlo is not only important, but an essential part of his life as a conservationist:

The secret to understanding the Kentish Plover, to understanding the dynamics of the nest, is what we do with [my colleagues]. You have to come every day. You can't come once a month. Because once a month you can realize that you find a nest with three eggs and you don't see the Kentish Plovers; you go to the sea, and they're feeding. They distort your data; you don't have reliable data, you don't have precise identification.

4.4.3 Naturality in Conservation Practices

Another topic that Carlo briefly touched on involves the different expression of conservation in relation to nature and naturality: “In nature, you have to think that if you have to do an act of conservation, you have to do it exclusively as close as possible to the natural state of the species.”

In particular, the debate revolved around the extent of intervention in wildlife conservation. Federico, as a fellow conservationist, had a clear mindset and set of rules in this sense, explaining that the line of intervention should be drawn at human-generated issues, which are to be addressed with decisiveness: “I accept they get preyed on by predators, but not by humans or tractors”. Conservation here is intended as compensating for human damage but not, or minimally, interfering with natural processes and entities. Federico reasserted the role of the Kentish Plover as an independent individual whose capabilities should not be diminished, as he felt other conservationists tended to configure an alternative narration of the plover as necessitating constant assistance. Conversely, Federico explained how conservation practices should not “transform them into pets”, hindering their independence from humans; instead, they should only “grant them space”.

This attitude poses itself in countercurrent to the narration of the plover as a “fragile” species, symbol of an even more fragile environment in need of protection. As will be further

explored in the following chapter, its fragility is associated by conservationists like Gabriella, an expert operating Alberoni, with the projected feature of plovers being too “stubborn” in choosing nesting areas. This characterization radically reconfigures the plovers' agency, viewing the species as limited in its inherent capacity to adapt and survive, thus reinforcing the stereotype problematized by Federico.

Federico instead strives for a different approach to Kentish Plover conservation that enables its protection without cancelling its agency inside the conservation narrative. In heartfelt sympathy towards the Alberoni struggle, he synthesizes this approach as metaphorically “wearing blinders” to reduce peripheral vision, allowing conservationists to unsee the issues they cannot face or control, such as animal predation or human unpredictable behaviours, while focusing on the ones they can tackle, such as the systematic measures and practices they continuously and tirelessly refine and perfect.

Naturality in this sense is expressed not through the material usage of non-anthropogenic measures or materials, but through a conscious re-calibration of human agency within the ecosystem and a subsequent acknowledgement of the impacts of conservation actions, which expand beyond the species damage, interacting with various agents and triggering different responses, including human ones.

The “natural” spaces are narrated as places reserved for wildlife conservation, yet, as previously shown, are consistently being renegotiated by the very wildlife species subject to these measures. By erasing the boundaries physically or virtually separating the protected area from the rest of the coastline, as well as the different conservation oases of the Lagoon of Venice, the Kentish Plover helps uncover the multifaceted dimensions of naturality, not anymore as a conservation paradigm, but as a mutable and relational feature inside the narratives surrounding the protected natural area, as well as the imaginaries of the beach environment. Through the most tangible experience of conservation practices, the next chapter will gradually uncover how these conservation narratives are experienced, expressed, and embodied.

5 NO PLACE FOR THE PLOVER – ABSENCE, GRIEF, AND RESILIENCE

Drawing from the same chronological framework previously established, this chapter resumes the critical analysis of the ethnographic diary reporting the second half of the Kentish Plover monitoring season, following its peak of activity and abrupt decline. The analysis employs the ethnographic account to critically re-envision how the Kentish Plover becomes a species worth protecting by exploring the role of emotions, care, and knowledge in the process.

5.1 From Absence to Presence: Discovery of the Nest

From the first sighting on March 16, a collective monitoring schedule was set in Alberoni. Firstly, it resulted in a series of sparse visits, then it developed into a more organized calendar, and finally it led to the creation of a shared spreadsheet to track data from the monitoring sessions. The sheet included basic information about the individuals, such as number, gender, and location, but also notes about the conditions of the day, including weather, as well as visitors' presence and behaviour. Finally, the sheet included a portion dedicated to the possible finding of nests and their location. This cell was populated for the first time on April 6. Until then, the monitoring sessions in Alberoni had stayed sparse and limited.

The monitoring was scheduled on that date primarily to supervise the area in anticipation of increased human presence expected for Easter Monday. Earlier in the day, some visitors had described the area as heavily crowded, yet by the time I reached the northern section of the beach, the shoreline had become almost completely deserted. Apart from a cyclist passing in the distance, few signs of human presence remained. By replicating the practices I witnessed in the other oases, I identified an area with a high density of traces and small scrapes in the sand, indicating a possible hotspot for plovers searching for nesting sites. Shortly after, I discovered a nest containing two eggs (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Nest with two eggs in Alberoni. Photograph by the author. 2026

What had previously appeared as an empty beach was suddenly beginning to represent a highly vulnerable space, occupied by a real and tangible presence. At the same time, the nest location revealed the same tension that was encountered before, as the nest emerged from an unfenced area of the conservation zone; an area that had been heavily occupied by people only a few hours earlier, and that would soon become characterized by increased human presence with the rise in temperatures.

Most notably, the Kentish Plover ceased to be simply an abstract feature of narration and became a concrete, factual presence whose survival appeared contingent upon a complex network of monitoring, protection, care, and uncertainty. That void in the local volunteers' narrations had been suddenly filled with a new presence and renewed hope. This new occurrence carried a series of new attitudes, practices, as well as emotions. Indeed, the amazement paired with the experience of this new condition, for many volunteers, could only manifest as turmoil. This sense of urgency was especially exacerbated by the problematic location of the nesting site, inside the protection zone, but outside of the fenced area. As Francesco, one of the operators, expressed via text message shortly after the discovery: "the important thing is that it resists".

5.2 From Presence to Absence: Predation

The following weeks were characterized by a renewed sense of hope visible in the general excitement around the protection of the nest. From the cage being put on April 7 to the numerous checks with the other volunteers, our effort mainly revolved around representing the smallest inconvenience to the hatching couple. This concretized into small acts such as speeding up the procedures to reduce the time spent in proximity to the nest, monitoring the plovers, identifying their rings, and tracking the time the hatching parent took to come back to the nest, all accompanied by the due hesitation and worrying. Indeed, the main danger was represented by the wary predators, especially the crows. Much like ourselves, they were observing the area, and our presence could have helped them locate the nest.

What these measures also entailed was ensuring low visibility for other beings on the beach, such as humans who, like crows, had a strong harmful potential, if not lethal. Therefore, the decision was not to employ any sign nor to fence the surrounding area of the nest. During the weeks, on April 12, one of the volunteers found the cage displaced from its original site. Since the nest was still intact, the issue was promptly addressed by putting the cage back to its original place. However, this episode sparked agitation and debate around the possible explanation for this event, which was deemed anthropogenic. Four days later, on April 16, I arrived on the beach around late afternoon to check for new couples and to monitor the cage. As soon as I arrived on the beach, at around two hundred meters from the nest zone, what immediately caught my attention was a single Kentish Plover exhibiting a peculiar behaviour. The plover was in a “bobbing” mode, moving its abdomen and neck quickly in upward and downward motion. This behaviour in Kentish Plovers is associated with states of alarm and agitation employed by the adults to signal danger and to protect the chicks by attracting the attention of the predator to themselves (Gupta et al., 2022).

Approaching the nest site, the dreaded suspicion of a nest disturbance was promptly confirmed. Where once was the caged nest, nothing remained. The cage was completely absent, and the eggs were also missing, but the surrounding debris and sticks were signaling that the coordinates were incontrovertibly correct. Where once were the eggs, now was an empty hole in the sand, still showing the three little empty hollows marking the original spot of the eggs (Figure 13).



Figure 13: Empty nest in Alberoni. Photograph by the author. 2026

In the emptiness of the beach, another trace was signaling a presence that was already gone. Different trails of footprints were extending from the area of the emptied nest, some corvid-like traces, and some bigger tracks in the shape of footprints spreading in multiple directions. One of these trails led to the finding of the cage, marking the unequivocally human dimension of this predation.

5.3 Aftermath: Extinction of Futures

As forensic science, conservation requires the reconstruction of violence through the debris of its legacy. The following days were dedicated to gathering data regarding the incident, as well as reconnecting the pieces of what had been lost, reconfiguring them into a coherent plan. Allowing the hatch loss to occupy space inside the discourse was contended by the immediate necessity to move beyond the event to promptly return to the monitoring season. The substantial shift in the approach, however, was noticeable from the hesitant organizational responses resulting in an overall decrease in efforts, which went paired with a sharp drop in plover sightings. By the beginning of May, reports had almost ceased, disappearing as the Kentish Plovers, which were last spotted on May 9.

Many of my interviewees provided their insights on the matter. Beatrice, who had followed a Kentish Plover breeding season in the past, when asked about the future she could project for the species, answered with cautionary optimism and with a hint of hesitation:

Well, yes, obviously the trend is always that things are going a little worse, but one hopes that maybe they will get better, well, as long as there is [the other volunteer], as long as you [volunteers] are there, for sure... I mean, some chance will emerge. As long as there is this monitoring. Well, yes, even now with the nets... anyway, the Municipality has intervened ... so maybe there is more interest.

Beatrice recognised the situation was not promising, but she still chose to believe in better times. Her positive mindset stemmed from carefully selected experiences, such as this year's new nets and the rise in volunteers' numbers, and from concealing the negative sides, such as the vandalism of the nest, where optimism became more of a choice than a logical conclusion.

Conversely, Gabriella, despite also operating in Oasi Dune degli Alberoni, had a more pragmatic and less optimistic vision of this bird's conservation, which was expressed while she was attempting to make sense of the breeding couple's choice to make their nest in the bathing establishment area:

[...] but the fence, in my opinion, is just a pro forma, because then it's not that it [the Kentish Plover] goes there. I mean, yes, you should fence where you see it goes, but if it can't be done [in the bathing establishment], then... You know what? It is a little bird that doesn't adapt very well; that's why. I mean, it is very attached to certain characteristics, not adapting to others, and so it will go extinct, in my opinion; at most, it won't come here anymore, because, if it always wants to go there!

By associating different characteristics with the plover, such as low adaptability and stubbornness, Gabriella expressed a sense of disillusionment towards the very conservation practice she was putting effort into. By doing so, she not only drew from that imaginary of fragility frequently connected to this species, but also added the Kentish Plover to the broader gallery of extinction imaginaries.

5.4 Longing for Presence on the Brink of Extinction

Michael Soulé (1985), in his first normative postulate of conservation biology, explains that even though “diversity of organisms is good”, it is not testable, as it relies on a purely human necessity for “variety” pushing us to attach value to diversity. The corollary postulate

and direct consequence of this relates to extinction. Soulé (1985) explains how the previous assumption shapes the negative connotation of extinction, which he thoroughly analyzes in its multiple forms. Extinction is problematized in conservation biology only if paired with the concept of biodiversity, where its loss determines a problematic, “bad” extinction for conservationists (Soulé, 1985, p. 730).

Not only do these problematized scenarios act as drivers of crisis adaptation, but, as Jørgensen (2022) argues, they lay the very foundation of the discipline itself. Conservation does not start as managing ecosystem services, but is initiated in the moment people project a future extinction. This projection, however, does not have a definite or linear scale; instead, Jørgensen (2022) argues that extinction, often imagined as the death of a single last standing organism, exists as a complex historical process of imagining a future without a species.

Elaborating on this, extinction can be conceptualized as an act of acknowledging the absence of ecological diversity and its consequent refusal, which then results in the adoption of measures to reacquire what was lost and restore it to its former state. Jørgensen (2019), in *Recovering Lost Species in the Modern Age*, takes a step back, not questioning why we should restore the past, but how we define that past in the first place. She argues that modern conservation is no longer satisfied with preserving the ecosystems as they are, but it strives for something more abundant, richer, and more diverse. To do so, she argues that restoration and rewilding practices rely on a process of nostalgia for a projected past, which most likely never existed. This brings in the human mind the same reaction as it is to grief and its five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Jørgensen, 2019).

5.5 Dealing with Loss: Rage and Sorrow

Although after the event conservationists tended to display detachment and scientific rigor, a certain exception was made for one single emotion that appeared to be the most acceptable between the groups. This sentiment can be conceptualized as anger, in all its possible nuances. This emotion could not help but spark not just vividly but also consistently, even before the loss occurred. Throughout the research, anger emerged mostly from the lack of achievement, or when a dissonance between the desired and the outcomes became too evident to ignore. It could take the shape of light to harsh insults directed towards the breakers'

regulations. Anger is therefore the most evident expression of loss; however, it represents only one of the many facets of the emotional sphere.

Carlo, when discussing the frequent transgressions of protected areas' regulations, described his struggle to control his impulsive reactions, which frequently would give rise to heated confrontations. In the interview, he outlined priority factors to combat while releasing deeply suppressed emotions. However, amid anger and frustration, a deep sense of commotion emerged as he explained the obstacles of Kentish Plover conservation, while connecting it with similar environmentalist causes he deeply empathized with:

Sometimes I think about the struggles of those who dedicate their lives to species preservation. Those who go to Antarctica. The struggles of environmentalists, animal rights activists... I say, damn, it would take even the smallest respect to achieve results at any level. Dogs, cats... Sorry, I got emotional... just knowing the sacrifice you make for [species] preservation. You see it ruined by some idiot who abandons the dog. By some stupid photographer who lifts your cage to get a scoop.

Even though these obstacles seem negligible compared to the conservationists' extensive presence on the beach, they have a much greater relevance in terms of impact. This generates a deep sense of disbalance and injustice, first causing anger and then sorrow. Carlo recalled the many unpleasant experiences that he witnessed during the years spent monitoring plovers, describing some gruesome incidents involving the animals. Immediately creating a distinction between animal predation and anthropogenic killings:

I've had bad experiences, for example, ringing a chick, dropping all three of them together, one veers off for a moment, a seagull comes, picks it up, carries it up, and eats it. Or it drops it on the ground and then picks it up. Finding a chick under a tractor's footprint—that's heartbreaking. Because that was avoidable. Or finding a footprint with a Kentish Plover inside. That's even worse.

Here, the grief of witnessing the death of a chick is split in two radically different assessments: on one side the non-human killer, on the other the human killer. This vision reinforces the previously discussed dichotomy in conservation philosophy by emphasizing the difficulties conservationists face when interacting with wildlife, while also underscoring its inescapable emotional dimension.

5.6 From Grief to Resilience

As described by Jørgensen (2019), the mourning process behind restoration projects enacts the five stages of grief in an idiosyncratic way, leading to a “nostalgic” projection that is ultimately misleading. This process is explained by the author as an interruption of the canonical grieving process by inhibiting the depressive stage. Grief is therefore redirected towards a state of “hopeful bargaining” as wildlife restorationists enact a negotiation of the future, while forgetting to mourn the past. The focus on processing and embodying sadness in restoring lost species or protecting endangered ones redirects the attention to the lost emotional side of conservation (Jørgensen, 2019).

As Carlo’s contribution has thoroughly shown, this counterpart is not just a corollary, but represents the central, often hidden yet ineludible, heart of Kentish Plover conservation. Carlo decided to narrate the inception of his interest in the cause. Its justification, the memory connected, its significance in the specific moment he was living. He provided a vivid description of a Kentish Plover female from his memories:

I mean, the effort made by the she-plover. She stays swept by the Bora [wind] so much that she gets buried by the sand. She turns the eggs thirty times per second, because she is always moving when it’s windy. You see her with her beak open on the second nesting, the one that ends in June-July. You see her there, agonizing under the scorching sun.

Through his eyes, he notices mostly the female plover’s fatigue during the reproductive season. He extracts one aspect to resonate with. He recalls, remembers, and re-embodies that moment, empathizing with her capacity for endurance. Tsing’s (2015) “arts of noticing” become manifested as observation becomes resonance with the wildlife animal. Carlo describes the process by which the sorrow and pain felt through empathy with the Kentish Plover’s suffering became a call for action that he could not avoid. As he explained that he “must have done something”, he demonstrated how his affliction had transformed into action.

Resistance here ceases being a mere act of sustaining labour, and begins coalescing into a relational act of understanding the other. An empathy that transcends the corners of species, becoming a true resonance between alike, yet different, beings. The resonance that Carlo feels between his own struggle and the Kentish Plover’s enables him to continue this extenuating yet ongoing battle against extinction. Empathy and care arise even from the most arduous challenges, as in the aftermath of the hatch loss. As Federico added to my account of the event:

“I know it’s demoralizing, but I can assure you, when you see the Kentish Plover’s resistance, you will change your mind”. The grief ceased being an individual process through the act of sharing, thereby evolving into a relational feeling of belonging.

As expressed by Jørgensen (2019), longing for an object that ceased to exist can be a feature of nostalgia; however, this feature does not necessarily imply a fearful rehabilitation of a projected past. Instead, as De Vroey (2023) argues, in some cases nostalgia can become a powerful instrument for “cultural rewilding”, defined by the author as the process of leveraging the past as a critical foundation for the future, hence re-learning and re-memembering past emotions, relations, and practices. Here, nostalgia stops existing as a paradigm of conduct that pushes forward an ideal past (Jørgensen, 2019) and is reconverted into resilience, resistance, and action. Ultimately, as Malavasi (2025) suggests, grief can be channeled into conservation planning and transformed into a driver of sociopolitical engagement, fostering proactive change rather than short-term fixes.

As expressed by many of the conservationists I interacted with, such as Federico and Carlo, conservation can compensate for the loss of biodiversity, but only when employed as an act of reparation for human violence, and not as a restitution of a figurative wild nature devoid of humans, which, as a piece of historical fiction, is impossible to mourn. Conservation can become an action made by humans to restore what was appropriated by humans. Ultimately, conservation is reconfigured as an act of love, where care and attention are devolved in a personal and collective way through a sense of belonging, rather than longing.

The following chapter will discuss how these processes are enacted in Alberoni while examining their intersections with the conservationists, the inhabitants, and the various agents, groups, and realities converging in the place.

6 INHABITING: IN PLACE WITH THE PLOVER

This chapter investigates the mechanisms through which different actors on the beach relate to, negotiate, and relocate one another within the Alberoni beach environment. To address the question, the survey data is integrated with interviews to support the ethnography.

First, it addresses the problematic tension between visitors and the presence of the Kentish Plover, linking the paradigm of visibility to a broader framework of conservation discourse and clashing narratives. Moreover, it explores how different modes of inhabiting interact with the use of the beach, outlining its belonging ontologies and the different ways they become manifest. Furthermore, it reconsiders human-animal relations through a multispecies framework. Finally, it condenses the different stimuli into a coherent framework to address the research's main inquiry and navigate the possible solutions to the problem.

6.1 Unnoticing and Forcing (In)visibility of a Species

Throughout the six-month research period, I had the opportunity to engage in conversation with some locals I had acquainted with during fieldwork, mostly in a casual setting and in completely unstructured conversations. After I explained my research direction, the negative sentiment towards the topic was similar among many interlocutors. Their reaction to the mention of the Kentish Plover seemed to lie at the intersection of disappointment and annoyance. Some responses included: "I've had enough with the Kentish Plovers!" or even more drastic ones, such as "Aren't they dead already?" These remarks were often accompanied by an attitude of bitter irony to conceal a more disguised sense of discomfort upon hearing discourses regarding this species.

During one of the many guided tours I attended, a conversation took place between the naturalists and some visitors. Among the latter, a woman was interested in learning the right conditions to practice birdwatching on the beach, with particular interest in observing the Oystercatchers. However, the same kind of reaction did not occur when Kentish Plovers were mentioned, as she immediately changed her attitude. From enthusiastic and curious, she started displaying a distant and annoyed behaviour. The reason for her bother was not as simple as a

personal taste, as she soon explained. Indeed, she used to be actively interested in the matter; however, her interest had diminished after a number of times she had failed to witness the plovers. Therefore, she had decided to abandon the intention. The species' absence from the beach not only hindered her determination to spot it, but rather evoked a combination of frustration and resentment. Notably, this sentiment was not directed at the Kentish Plover itself, which she had demonstrated to appreciate, but more likely towards what surrounded it.

The narrative of the oasis, as anticipated, largely revolves around the presence of this little bird and its protection. However, the vivid contrast between the immediately visible absence and its vivid presence in the conservationists' narrations may have fostered a sense of disillusionment and, potentially, deception.

6.1.1 Lack of Knowledge or Lack of Visibility?

This sensed absence, which was emerging in parallel in the conversations with the volunteers, became a quantitative measure that the survey participants contributed to unfold.

At the question "*Did you ever happen to see the Kentish Plover directly on Alberoni beach?*" the answers were distributed as shown in Figure 14. Of 95 valid answers, 52 were positive, while 23 were negative. Despite demonstrating a marked preponderance of people who had an actual visual encounter with the plover, a relatively consistent part of the answerers, constituting 20 of the total valid responses, revealed not to be certain about whether the encounter happened or not. This contributes to adding to the analytical equation a marked sense of doubt and lack of knowledge about the Kentish Plover's visual appearance, hence blurring its image in the collective imaginaries of the beach users.

The knowledge and awareness about the species' presence on the beach was expressed by a striking majority, constituting 89% of the 96 valid responses (Figure 15).

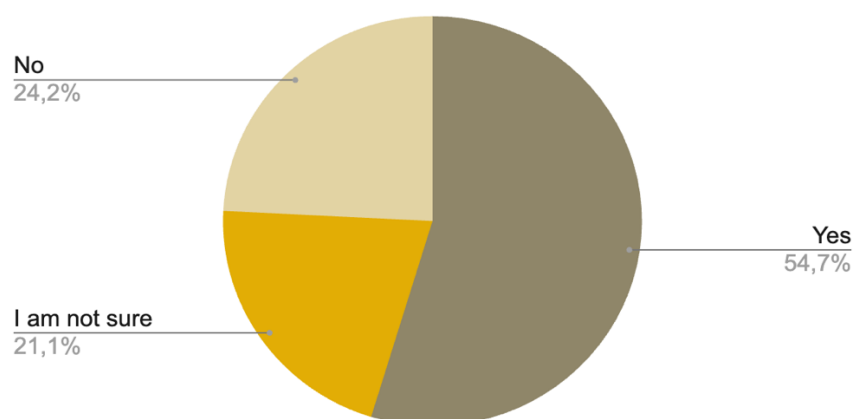


Figure 14: Direct witness of the Kentish Plover on Alberoni beach

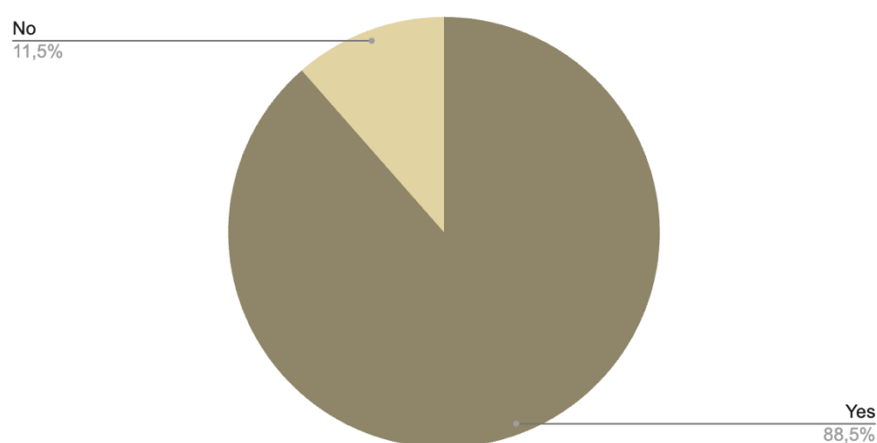


Figure 15: Awareness of the species' presence on Alberoni beach

This evidence suggests a consistent presence of visitors who successfully paired the utilization of the beach environment with the awareness of the Kentish Plover. This reveals how the knowledge of the species on the beach is not necessarily coupled with an actual visual encounter, rendering the Kentish Plover presence in the respondents' imaginaries less

experience-based and closer to an abstraction coming from alternative sources such as narrations and discourse. The following question enabled a closer gaze into the different pathways for acquiring awareness of the species' presence on Alberoni beach.

The most mentioned channel of information coincides with the most tangible one: the signs and informative panels the oasis management distributed across various spots of the protected area (44%). However, the second place in answer distribution is represented by direct observation (38%), remarking on the essential role of visual encounter in knowledge-making. A slightly inferior frequency is reserved for the role of intrapersonal communication between friends and relatives (36%). Guided tours rank fourth (24%), while media communication ranks fifth (14%). The most noticeable component, however, was produced by the many singular additions to the selectable options, through which 10% of valid respondents added their personalized view on their first approach to the Kentish Plover, from scholastic memories to personal and/or professional involvement with the cause.

Not only did these respondents contribute to illustrating the most efficient channels of communication, but they also provided answers on *who* and *what* makes the Kentish Plover visible in such a contested and complicated environment. Visibility thus is configured as a key component in this intricate web of contrasting perceptions of the Kentish Plover. Notably, one of the year-long weekly visitors of the beach added the following statements to the open-ended prompts:

“È da anni che non ne vedo uno”.

[I haven't seen one in years.]

“Ho avvistato raramente i fradini nonostante vada molto spesso, quindi la loro presenza non mi suscita particolare interesse.”

[I have rarely spotted Kentish plovers despite going there very often, so their presence doesn't particularly interest me.]

6.1.2 Unseeing, Unhearing, and Unnoticing

The visibility of this species can be conditional on the actual sight of it, but it does not always form a simple equation. Tsing's (2015) *The Mushroom at the End of the World* stresses

the essential role of cultivating the capacity to navigate the complex realities of the ecological crisis. This ability, defined as the previously mentioned “arts of noticing”, is achieved through rejecting the monodirectional vision of progress-oriented stories and embracing an expanded “lateral” vision enabled by ethnography and natural histories. Engaging with this concept, Lou (2022) analyzes the legacy of air pollution in China, exposing the practices of collective toleration enacted by Guangzhou’s local population, which in turn exacerbate the already toxic landscape they inhabit. This collective inaction is conceptualized by Lou (2022) as the “arts of unnoticing”, uncovering a frequently overlooked dimension of researching with communities, the one that fully attributes agency to the people both in its positive and negative implications. Lou’s (2022) unnoticing takes the form of conscious inaction in the midst of known environmental problems; however, in the context of Alberoni, this immobility can manifest as a mechanism of iterated invisibilization of the Kentish Plover, through various degrees of severity. The species can be made invisible in discourses and narrations, but it can also be silenced through a certain form of selective unhearing. Otherwise, the Kentish Plover can be physically erased by the different forms of violence directly perpetrated to the detriment of the species, such as nests’ vandalization, or indirectly perpetrated against its conservation measures, such as the severing of fences. This pushes the discourse further away from a simple process of inertia or inaction, but towards the lines of a conflict, of which the Kentish Plover emerges not as an active driving force of opposition, but as a feature of its narration; a “meta-object” which inherently describes, defines, and influences the entities that surround it. In this sense, the Kentish Plover unconsciously designs the agents of the conflict while not having an actual part nor voice in it. Its reduced presence on the beach creates a dissonant coupling with the augmented presence in the conservation narrative, igniting the already existing conflictual relationship between the conservation oasis and the public.

6.2 Beach-making: Imaginaries of Wildness and Freedom

Alberoni beach’s value is often expressed by its extensive biodiversity, highly dependent on its substantial state of “naturalness” (Pegorer et al., 2011). Conversely, the beach hosts a parallel, intertwined history of human utilization that contributed to shaping this place’s narrative and practices throughout the last century. As Molinaroli et al. (2023) suggest, the place underwent radical changes in the period just prior to the institution of the oasis in 1997, undergoing what the authors refer to as a process of “re-naturalization” between 1987 and 1996.

This process entailed the progressive stabilization of the dune system and the near-total dismantling of the thirty bathing sites that used to occupy the area, to which Alberoni's history is inextricably tied. Indeed, of equal relevance was the extensive presence of welfare and youth camps, such as the Principi di Piemonte one, constructed in the Alberoni area between 1936 and 1937. In recent times, however, the place progressively lost its attractiveness, leading to the closure of the three main seaside colonies (Danesi & Di Resta, 2024).

6.2.1 Alberoni as a Bathing Site: A Perspective from the Past

I discussed the beach's past with some elderly interlocutors who had experienced Alberoni as a summer vacation site.

Interviewer: Tell me what comes to mind when I say Alberoni beach.

Interviewee: An earthly paradise. An earthly paradise because it was a livable beach. There were very few people. And where there are few people, there is plenty of life, you can do whatever you want, no one bothers you. It was truly a paradise.

Interviewer: Why? Why was it a paradise?

Interviewee: Because everyone was comfortable together, there was no rivalry whatsoever, the prices were reasonable, everyone was happy, and there weren't many people because in those days, not many people went on vacation. And they wanted Zone A, Lido's first fruits, and Alberoni was forgotten. It still had to be reborn. It was reborn. And the best part of it is when they are born.

Interviewer: And then?

Interviewee: And then came all the people who liked Alberoni better than Lido. So many people who came there would never go to Lido again to stay in Alberoni. Because they understood that there was a community of people who could live together without effort. It was good because there weren't so many people. The inconvenience of the twenty-minute ride from Lido instead of going directly to Zona A [beach] was all a convenience they found. Specifically for people who saw convenience in ten minutes instead of half an hour to get there. There you go. And since we were convinced that it was better the way we did it, we enjoyed ourselves even more, because the conviction gave us the strength to be happier, because others suffered when they didn't come.

My interlocutor explained the change as a gradual decline of Alberoni, from a “paradisiacal” place of communality, to a space that he could not recognize anymore. The place did not just undergo a physical change, but also an ontological transformation that determined a shift in the people's use and narration. The reason for this radical change was identified by the interlocutor in the sudden increase in human presence, marking again the issue as widely relevant in the history of Alberoni, this time from an inherently human side.

6.2.2 Wild Imaginaries: A Place-making Conflict

At present, Alberoni's place identity is a concept subjected to an ongoing negotiation by the visitors. As indicated in Figure 16, between the users who participated in the survey, a striking 60% affirmed having a utilization of Alberoni exclusively during the summer season, confirming the place's substantial role as a vacation destination. The second consistent part of the answers (28%) indicated that their visits to the beach were not just relegated to a specific season, but year-round, perhaps as inhabitants or workers of the area. Only a quite reduced portion indicated using the beach in the winter season (5%), while scattered responses connected their frequentation to other times of the year or to specific personal or job-related activities (6%).

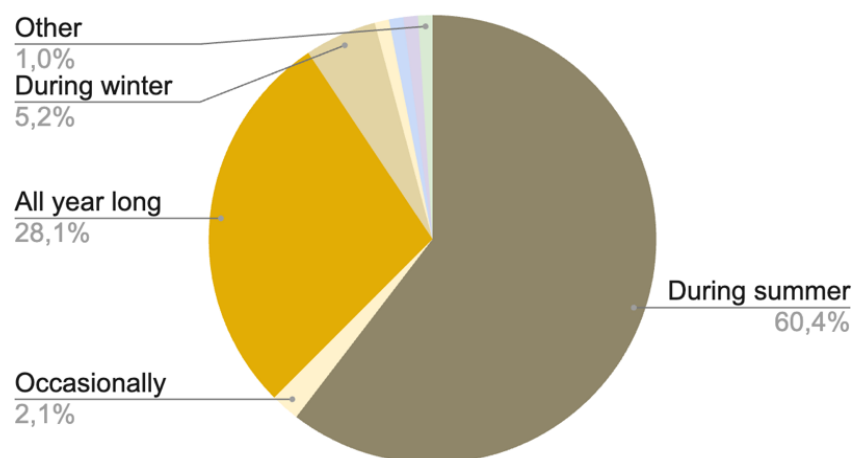


Figure 16: Visiting period of the year

The type of activities that the respondents expressed as their most habitual on the beach both confirmed the expected role of a bathing attraction and added new nuances to the various ways this place can be inhabited. The majority of respondents marked “going for a stroll” as their most habitual activity on the beach of Alberoni, followed by the canonical utilization of the beach as a bathing location, as 56% of valid answers point to sunbathing or resting in the shade of an umbrella.

It was, however, the open-ended prompt asking respondents to define Alberoni beach that provided more complex expressions of these modes of inhabiting. The striking component is represented not by the variety of responses but instead by a polarized and definite theme emerging distinctly among these textual intermissions. As Figure 17 aims to visualize by showing the most recurrent terms, the imaginary of the beach clusters around definitions related to two distinct yet often correlated concepts: freedom and nature.

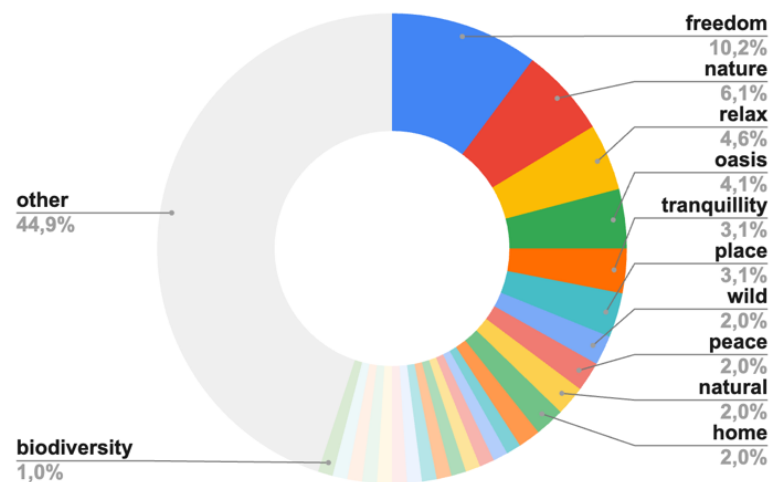


Figure 17: “Even in just one word, what does Alberoni beach represent for you?” (Visualization of recurring terms)

The collective imaginary of Alberoni beach, which was both provided by the survey and ethnographic interviews, is constructed around the idea of nature as an expression of unconstraint from limitations, liberation, and self-expression, generally leaning towards a visualized calmness and peace that the natural environment of Alberoni beach can offer. This

sense of liberation that comes from nature is, however, conflicting with the regulations coming from the oasis of conservation, emerging in some unprompted manifestations. The open box at the end of the questionnaire functioned as a valve to make room for the unexpressed contentions, as two distinct respondents stated:

[1] “Sono d’accordo nel rispettare la natura e proteggere le specie più a rischio ma non si può ostacolare la vita e le attività delle persone in uno dei pochi posti dove la spiaggia è libera; [...]”

[“I agree with respecting nature and protecting the most endangered species, but we can't hinder people's lives and activities in one of the few places where the beach is free; [...]”]

[2] “I metodi applicati dai gestori dell'oasi, per quanto riguarda il far rispettare le regole, sono potenzialmente erranei e controproducenti. Altri ma minoritari metodi sono invece corretti.”

[“The methods employed by the oasis managers to enforce the rules are potentially flawed and counterproductive. Other, but lesser, methods are correct.”]

As shown in Figure 18, the general sentiment towards the conservation measures emerges as largely positive, showing a general acceptance of their presence. Nonetheless, some elements of disagreement still emerge, scarce but not less impactful, as the episode of the hatch loss proved.

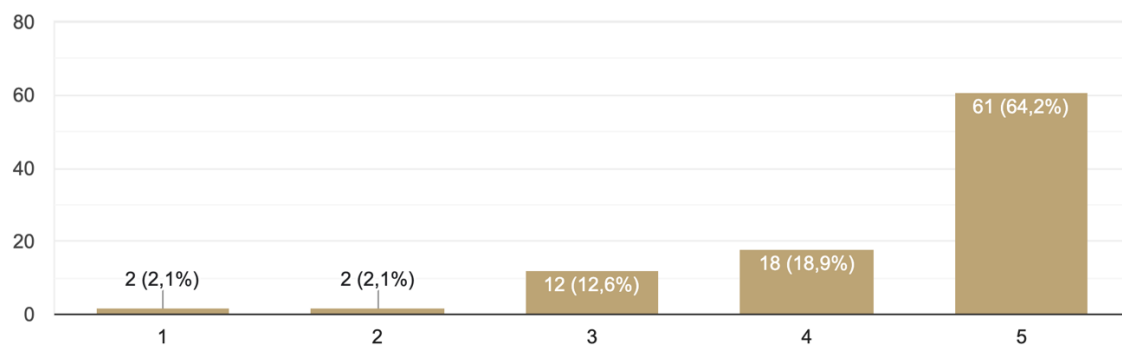


Figure 18: Perception of conservation measures on Alberoni beach (1= very negative, 5= very positive)

Conservation measures, despite not directly impacting the users or hindering locals' presence, are still somehow perceived as too strict or too invasive for some, where their negative connotation is directly attributed to the perceived loss of freedom. This, as shown by the previously cited open-ended responses, can result in "counterproductive" outcomes, hinting at the possible retorsions of the public and the human role of conservation. In this sense, conservationists would represent the drivers of this crisis of place-making by unknowingly operating on the locals as a perceived "cognitive injustice", as conceptualized by Iovino (2016), where the most impactful feature is an unconscious attack on the users' imaginaries of the place.

6.2.3 Wild Entanglements – Human and Non-human Beach

An anonymous survey respondent employed the final open-ended prompt to voice the silent crisis in action:

"La spiaggia deve poter essere anche utilizzata dall'uomo, nel rispetto di tutti gli animali, fraterno compreso"

["The beach must also be able to be used by humans, with respect for all animals, including the Kentish Plover."]

From this affirmation, a radical new sense of humanity resurfaces in a changing environment and changing identity. The agency of the Kentish Plover as a meta-object becomes apparent by manifesting as an obstacle to the people's capacity to locate themselves in the natural environment, thus fostering a sense of exclusion. The dualism that virtually separates humanity from nature becomes in this context a tangible division for some beach users, who perceive themselves isolated from nature due to a physical barrier: the fences. Freedom, in this sense, is enacted through the violent act of their severing, liberating humans from a physical constraint and, at the same time, from the semantic constraint of feeling separated from the environment they inhabit.

This sense of separation confirms how the perceived oppression attributed to the conservation narrative originates from a rigid nature-human distinction, which results in forcing some elements out of the equation, enabling some discourses while disabling others.

When wilderness becomes associated with the concept of “pristineness”, as argued by Stanfield (2015), it becomes tied to a single, arbitrary definition of the environment as unaffected by humans and based upon the dualism of either their presence or absence. By doing so, the author stresses how this value exacerbates cases of environmental injustice. The modern concept of wilderness thus relies on an essentially figurative dimension of nature that Casetta (2023) views as irrelevant in light of modern-day heavily modified habitats due to anthropization and human-generated climate change.

As demonstrated by this case, the narrative of wildness yields adverse effects when the nature-human dualism is not thoroughly overcome. These effects become tangible in the locals’ opposition and vandalism. Conservation narratives, in turn, become toxic when they rely on the projection of an ideal and misleading pristine nature without humans. Overall, this contributes to framing the human-wildlife conflict in Alberoni as a conflict of narratives, locating it in the broader framework of both environmental and epistemic justice.

6.2.4 Belonging to Alberoni: A Local Perspective

As previously explained, when a clash of definitions occurs, the result is likely to be conflict. Both narratives try to affirm themselves in their specific demands. This also interacts with the ontologies of belonging that were previously analyzed from the perspective of conservationists. Locals and beach visitors possess a specific inner knowledge and practices related to the beach, which external agents such as conservationists, but also occasional visitors and tourists, may fail to understand.

As a local stakeholder who both lives and works by the beach, Andrea has witnessed the place’s various spatial and temporal transformations. Thanks to his lifelong and year-long presence on the beach, he has “seen it change”, from the landscape mutation due to dune advancement to the various marine species’ emergence and disappearance. Andrea has a diachronic experience of the beach that allows him to see its temporality, a perspective that only individuals with an extended presence in the area can achieve, by creating an interspecific bond with the local presences, including its landscape elements.

In this context, Hughes’ (2005) ethnographic analysis of the Great Limpopo Transboundary Conservation Area in Southern Africa re-examines the definition of nature

through its possible nuances. He defines “first nature” as the environment in its uncontaminated form, while “second nature” as the existing highly anthropic environment. However, the author adds another layer to this distinction by conceptualizing a “third nature” as an abstract projection of what the environment should be, defined in its potentiality to host wildlife. This type of nature is therefore designed to be protected; however, it only exists as an image in conservationists’ minds. In its volatile essence, Hughes (2005) notes how third nature “is not past, present, or future, but conditional; not a tense, but a mood of speech” (p. 158). Third nature therefore does not unfold in a linear, chronological timescale, but is latent in the speculative imaginaries, timeless and eternal.

To enable a temporal cognition of the environment means to see it as a real, complex entity, in its multiple forms, both in its “natural” and “human” facets. Conservationists, by creating a projected idea of the natural environment, can enable logics that drive away from any alternative conceptualization of the environment, often imposing it by employing Western science as an instrument for validation and, as previously exemplified by Carlo’s contribution, adopting a patronizing stance. This mechanism of self-justification and rational superiority becomes a tool for extracting the political debate from the natural environment and, therefore, depoliticizing conservation narratives and practices.

The same depoliticized environment, however, manifests on other fronts, for example, when the natural facade of Alberoni beach becomes an excuse to transform the place into a projection of wild, untamed nature, extracting regulations and transforming nature into its unlawful imaginary. Freedom becomes a feature of self-expression, at the expense of others. As a local, Andrea seems to understand this struggle on a personal level:

The freedom I feel is a freedom that someone else can interpret differently: the freedom to play music, the freedom to make a mess, not clean up, the freedom to go and tear up all the beautiful flowers. In my opinion, it doesn't do the world much good, all this freedom. I feel free walking in this place, respecting it.

Andrea’s attachment to Alberoni is expressed as a sense of gratitude for being part of it, and not just a visitor:

Having chosen to stay here, not just in the summer, is precisely because you are not in a random place; you are in an oasis for animals, and ultimately an oasis for human beings

too. Yes, because there are people who always frequent this place; they recognize its importance, as it is also a good place, obviously, as long as you don't disturb anyone else.

The human-animal dichotomy is acknowledged and overcome by Andrea through the simple formula of respect, as a structural feature of inhabiting this environment. Respect conceptualizes a reduction of disturbance towards the other, for the first time extended across species and kinds, to include the disturbance humans create to their fellow.

We know it, the community knows it, we have respect, and obviously you notice, this is my point of view, with the utmost respect, I like animals, I like nature, I never like to leave traces, but thousands of people come here on weekends; it's difficult to expect that the people who come here daily have the same respect as the people who come here all year round.

Andrea's internal understanding of inhabitants as carriers of respect and knowledge of the place serves as a reminder of what "community" can come to signify. As suggested by its ecological definition, community can be intended as a group of different species that live and interact in the same environment (Smith & Smith, 2015). Community ceases to reflect the cultural relativist imaginary of union around a single ideal or tradition, nor around the exclusion and oppression of the other. Community in this sense incorporates differences, interactions, and conflicts. Ultimately, community is renegotiated as an "archipelago" of different ways of belonging, caring, and making kin, in contrasting processes by which the community doesn't exist despite it, but because of it.

6.3 Making Kin with the Plover? Free-roaming Dogs and Animal Companionship

Francesco, as a long-term operator within the Dune Alberoni oasis, has accumulated both expertise and experience of the place. When asked to identify the principal threats to Kentish Plover conservation, he identified the impact of roaming dogs as the primary challenge:

The biggest disturbance for [Kentish Plover] adults when trying to identify areas for nesting is for sure the problem of off-leash dogs, because unfortunately Alberoni is considered a free beach. People mostly come from the Murazzi, the northern part, which is the main nesting area, and there are off-leash dogs. As soon as they arrive on the beach,

they let their dogs off leash, and there it's a bit of a battle. I have to say that this year we've seen several people keeping their dogs on leashes. Luckily, people are starting to understand and spread the message, but it's not easy because even just one or two dogs off-leash, especially large ones, can ruin all their efforts.

Gómez-Serrano's (2021) study modelled the plovers' "flushing" response, that is, the abrupt abandonment of the nest when the perceived danger is too elevated. The study distinguishes three categories of perceived threats for the Kentish Plovers: human, represented by walkers and runners; animal, represented by dogs; and mechanical, represented by motorized vehicles. The study corroborates Francesco's account by locating dogs as the most threatening factor to Kentish Plover nesting, and way above humans, due to their exhibited high-order predator attitudes.

6.3.1 Disturbance and Dogs' "Freedom"

Figure 19 shows the distribution of the responses to the self-attributed degree of disturbance towards the Kentish Plover. The fair distribution across the different alternatives, the inclination towards medium-low values, and a relatively significant portion (16%) conceiving their disturbance as completely negligible, suggest that the perception of human impact on the Kentish Plover is generally weak, especially striking compared to the high degree of consciousness towards its protection shown by other queries.

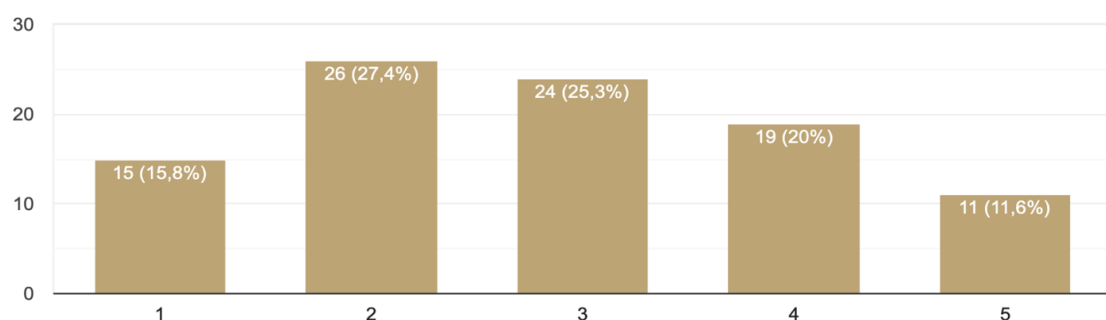


Figure 19: Level of self-attributed disturbance to the Kentish Plover (1= Not at all, 5= Extremely)

When asked to further elaborate on the practical methods they might have employed to reduce their negative influence on the plover, the responses varied between minimization of the risk and close attention. However, in the respondents' descriptions, practices of care revolved around the concept of distancing and keeping quiet. Only a smaller portion of the answers (12%) made direct reference to the practice of keeping dogs on a leash.

As Federico remarked during one of the monitoring sessions in Cavallino-Treporti, some owners may identify in the leashing practice an attack on their dog's "freedom". In this way, that yearning for liberty observed in Alberoni is extended to the non-human companion by allowing it to roam free. For conservationists like Federico, addressing this behaviour results in being defined as a "dog hater". Hate is thus transferred from one species to another, almost as a process of symbiosis. If the owner receives hate, the same is extended to the pet, in binary alignment between friend and enemy. At this accusation, Federico would counteract by remarking that he in fact owned a dog too, thus implying that he could share the same care towards dogs that the off-leash dog's owner has towards their companion.

The apparent contrast between dog owners' care and the one held by conservationists is not a novel discussion. As Soulé (1985) underlines, one of the main features of practicing conservation is detachment from wildlife and its suffering, which the author deems unavoidable. Additionally, as Gómez-Serrano (2025) notes, wildlife welfare underwent a considerably more turbulent evolution compared to pet rights advocacy and legislation. The difference between conservationists' and dog owners' care thus becomes more striking, as the distance between domestic and wild animals' legal status is widened.

6.3.2 Animal Companions – A Local Perspective

Bateman & Gilson (2025) recognize the issue of dog owners' problematic behaviour as a worldwide phenomenon, attributing its roots to a substantial ignorance regarding their pets' impact on the environment. As the shared assets provided by the beach become subject to individual unregulated access and exploitation, the authors read this phenomenon as a feature of Garrett Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons*, and recognize the ultimate missing piece in a "community feeling" whose lack might only be balanced by implementing restraining measures.

I discussed the issue of dog disturbance with Anita, a local inhabitant and proud dog owner. She narrated the experience of being informed of the ban on off-leash dogs by the volunteers for the first time, to which she recalled having a positive response. Afterwards, she expressed her empathy towards the current situation of the Kentish Plover, suggesting that limitations may be the only way to solve it, since the problem resides in the locals' vision and attitude towards the environment, which she viewed as resistant to change and based upon rigid schematizations:

The Kentish Plover is a bird, so it's not even a pet, and there's also this thing here. Because we're so sensitive towards dogs, because there's this sensitivity towards dogs and cats, actually, because they're pets; they're not free animals. So maybe some people say: 'What's the point? I can't take [a Kentish Plover] home anyway'. There's also this thing here. Then, it is used to living alone; in one way or another, it scratches a living. There's also a lot of this. If it were a pet, we would be much more careful.

Anita provided a practical explanation to the perceived difference humans detect between wildlife and pets. She later elaborated her relationship with her animal companion as a sort of kinship, defining her dog as "almost her sister". Yet, Anita brought to light a contradictory side of animal domestication by identifying it as a specifically human necessity for "ownership":

There's this thing: we humans love to own things. So, I have a dog – because I love dogs – but I also know I love dogs because they give me something. The dog gives me something. The dog *gives*. Like a cat, it gives you love, it gives you cuddles, it gives you presence, okay? A bird, a Kentish Plover, doesn't give you presence; it doesn't *give* you. It's more difficult to get into this mechanism here.

Donna Haraway (2003) in *The Companion Species Manifesto* calls into question the popular narrative framing dogs as man's best friend whose primary role is to provide humans with "unconditional love", calling for a critical reenvisioning of human-animal relationships. This crucially connects to the concept of ownership disclosed by Anita, revealing that the same critique many dog owners move to conservationists' "uncare" for animals can be extended to pet owners themselves. The claim of inherently holding a capacity for interspecies care that conservationists lack ceases to hold any relevance when they are faced with the "property relation" (Haraway, 2003, p. 53) that owning a dog entails, configuring them, in a multispecies

optic, as enablers of oppression of the animal other, and ultimately as disablers of animal agency.

This giving-and-taking nature of human relationship with animals further expands the previously discussed sense of deceit in the Kentish Plover narrative. As visibility and “presence” are not provided, the relationship with the plover stops offering something for humans to own, thus disabling the bond before it is ever established.

Anita concludes: “Care, attention, I believe that if you care for human beings, you also care for animals. And vice versa, if you care for animals, you care for human beings.” Here, attention towards another species is equated to the care humans bestow upon their own kind, letting this process transcend the boundaries of species. Echoing Haraway (2003), processes of making kin with the non-human entail processes of respecting the “significant otherness” of different beings, where no entity is owning the other, but reciprocally infecting and affecting.

6.4 From Dismembered to Remembered Wildlife Conservation

Between the interlocutors who had a complex relationship with the conservation cause, Sonia’s contribution serves as a reminder of the lost opportunities, but also of the potentialities for the future.

We've communicated with the Municipality, we wanted to collaborate with all the various associations [...] and so on, which are part of Alberoni, but there's no collaboration. I mean, there's talk; even the Municipality tried, everyone wants to collaborate, but in the end, no one wants to collaborate, do you know what I mean? We've even held meetings, via Skype, this way and that, with the Municipality, with the various associations, but ultimately it all comes down to that meeting.

By being engaged in economic activities at the beachfront, Sonia has had a long trial in finding pathways of communal understanding, often leading to conflicting interests with the conservation management. The unpromising results mirror the same disorganized response that was previously addressed:

Interviewer: So, is it a widespread or localized problem?

Sonia: It's a problem of the brain, it's a problem of brains. We are limited. Because we are in such a beautiful place, but we are all limited by our brains, in my opinion. We don't want to broaden our horizons; everyone looks after their own little patch, and that's wrong. In my opinion, there must be synergy, collaborative, but not destructive. This is my opinion.

[...]

Sonia: If there's synergy, we move forward. Otherwise, there's a spoke in the wheel. I hurt you, and you hurt the other. It's the dog biting its own tail.

Synergy becomes the key word in Sonia's imaginary of coexistence, where the plover, however, still appears as a distant, vague entity.

How can “the dog” possibly cease to “bite its own tail”? How can conservationists coexist with locals? How can the many emergent imaginaries of the beach become one? How can the Kentish Plover survive the impending ecological and climate crisis? To seek a solution through the existing structures that enabled the problem to arise is to fuel that “derangement” that Amitav Ghosh (2016) detects in the modern incapacity to address ecological problems. Crisis forces a confrontation with reality, demanding a fight-or-flight response as an instinctive action towards survival; however, in a “crisis of imagination” (Ghosh, 2016), the abstract and scattered dimension creates a sense of disengagement. As Sally Weintrobe (2020) expresses, “disavowal” is generated, hindering reaction and response, not even a “flushing” one. Instead, as demonstrated by Battisti et al. (2020), a freezing response from Kentish Plover conservationists leads conservation practices to become stagnant, as well as the narratives to become shadows of nostalgic imaginaries that don't resonate with the mutable nature of ecosystems.

6.4.1 Interview with Wildlife Manager Corrado Battisti

The interview with Professor Corrado Battisti provided insights drawing from his long-standing experience as the manager of Torre Flavia protected wetland area. Explaining the steps that enabled the area to reach the present benchmark results, he highlighted the central yet often overlooked role of volunteers, who, as people with little to no experience or training, are frequently excluded from conservation programmes. Battisti instead demonstrates how their role can be far-reaching when they are rigorously trained. Education becomes an act of

caring for the other and, most importantly, a commitment to inclusion. An effort that may represent a “lengthy process” but relies on a deep understanding of the social structures to effectively enable communication. This would avoid, according to Battisti, exacerbating a conflict that drains all the energy, which could instead be used to protect the Kentish Plover.

Battisti re-assesses the act of mere quantification, which only serves the purpose of a primary contextual analysis in the early stages of a project. Instead, he remarks, conservation is not defined by “counts”, but is constituted through “action”. He recognizes citizens as the key drivers of this prospect, as their actions are steered by a unique passion and emotional dimension:

It is ordinary citizens who get things done. They obviously need training, but we must give credit where credit is due. Because at least they have *pathos* and they have understood what it means to take action.

6.4.2 Resonating, Belonging, and Resisting

A resonance with Battisti’s contribution can be recognized in Carlo’s emotional, yet rational, approach to Kentish Plover conservation, where constant presence on the beach becomes the baseline for representing the conservation cause. This presence, however, becomes comparable to absence when not paired with some essential elements: passion, knowledge, perseverance, and a fourth ungraspable ingredient that Carlo recognizes in the luck of finding good collaborators. The union of efforts and intentions solidifies as a promising turning point. Teamwork and coordination between volunteers constitute a vital necessity to ensure consistent presence in the field for monitoring and protecting the species, but also to fill the gap of that perceived absence and to re-affirm the missing roles on the beach.

Beatrice’s intense and spiritual relationship with conservation adds another layer to this conceptualization, one that extends this inclusion to non-human and abiotic ecosystemic actors. She recalls a particular memory where she was observing the plovers and, in the meantime, reflecting on the connections that made their survival possible. From the *Cakile maritima* pioneer plant she recalled the plover was using as a shelter from the Bora wind, to the other conservationist who was monitoring them even during the night, to the sea itself that was

“nourishing” the plovers. These biotic and abiotic agents altogether represent for Beatrice the good collaborators that conservation requires to properly function:

[Kentish Plovers] have passed on to me many of their characteristics, such as being Spartan, being persevering, the purity of the animals. They are satisfied with little: this little nest like this. The teamwork with the sea, the *Cakile*, [the conservationist]. There were four elements: the volunteers, the sea, the *Cakile*, and the Kentish Plovers working in synergy, and in the end, they succeeded.

Along with synergy, the resistance of the Kentish Plover becomes a recurring theme in conservationists' way of approaching their work, as resonance drives their intention. This resonating process can happen by and for different purposes, as the interlocutors' different perspectives demonstrated. With different outcomes, the process is alike. From the anthropomorphic process of relating to Kentish Plovers and their struggles, empathy is cultivated. In turn, this step fosters a relation to the other. This process is what enables belonging ontologies to be manifest in their multiplicity.

For Beatrice, this act of belonging is concretized into entering into a dialogue with the other ecosystem actors, including the Kentish Plovers, the beach vegetation (*Cakile maritima*), the other conservationist, and herself. Belonging becomes for her a spiritual connection with nature and place, where the beach acquires meaning through the Kentish Plover, and vice versa. Furthermore, belonging can be configured as a sense of connection to a certain narration or a certain social group, academic or work field. In this sense, belonging operates in the witnessed acts of inclusion and exclusion that take place both in the conservation field and between the oasis and the public, causing the conflict of narrative imaginaries that was previously explored. Belonging ontologies exceed the traditional anthropocentric definition linking humans to a place or environment in a dualistic form, as that “ownership” ontology at the roots of human relationships with wildlife and pets. Hence, belonging occurs not only between the beach and its inhabitants, but also between humans and the protected wildlife, through acts of personification, such as name-giving, enabling rapprochement and closure to the non-human. Finally, belonging manifests as a feature of shared grief towards the habitat losses of a disappearing species, enabling an emotional, empathetic response driving concrete acts of resistance and ultimately fostering resilience.

6.4.3 Remembering the Plover

Kentish Plover protection passes through these processes of belonging, which are formed through experience and time dedication. This temporal dimension of conservation enables a more positive relationship with the past and the future. The past ceases being a mere projection to imitate, as Jørgensen (2019) explained in the context of wildlife restoration, instead, it becomes a source of connection, through which experience becomes memory and memory becomes care. Imaginaries of the future in conservation of the Kentish Plover, in turn, are enabled by the collective remembrance of the past, both as a feature of longing for what was lost throughout the years, but also acknowledging the effort and struggles that led to the present conservation realities in the Venice Lagoon, in its faceted philosophies and practices, and in their significant transformation since the oasis foundation until today. This is visible primarily in the widespread knowledge regarding the local presence of this species, but also in the multiple narrations associated with it, some of which resulted in gratitude towards this research, expressed both during interviews and through the questionnaire. These efforts are finally made visible by the interlocutors and respondents who willingly contributed to shaping this research, making their voices heard and demonstrating how Kentish Plover conservation is substantially enacted through human narrations, relations, and ways of belonging.

Belonging ultimately manifests as an act of remembrance of a past encounter, evoking what was lost, while at the same time enabling the bond to resurface and reconnect with the present. Whether it was a place, a person, an animal, or a practice that faded away.

Andrea: I remember when my dad was there, maybe that time when [the conservationist] was there too, you know, [the Kentish Plover] had nested by us. Well, at that time, I remember my dad having a kind of enclosure built for it. I was little; I wasn't doing seasonal work here yet. He told me there was this [Kentish Plover] mother he'd grown fond of. She basically kept him company because my dad was alone at work and the mother was incubating. After that, things didn't go so well because, I think, one Sunday the kids went to play soccer nearby, and it ended badly.

Kentish Plover conservation becomes entrenched in the necessity to remember a species that is gradually disappearing from the environment. As expressed by Jørgensen (2019), when a species is forgotten, it is framed as "not belonging," which completely dissolves any collective longing to restore it. This exacerbates the modern imperative not just to allow the

species to exist inside its own habitat, but to enable the Kentish Plover to settle in our minds, to dwell in our memories, and to inhabit our narrations.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis set out to explore how different agents inhabit, interact, and shape an environment as complex as Alberoni beach, a place shared by multiple communities, species, and entities in their necessity to be part of the ecological space. The study engaged in understanding the differing and often clashing discourses between the conservationists, who are actively committed to safeguarding Kentish Plover presence on the beach, and the contrasting and conflictual counterpart represented by emerging voices of dissent, which are often concretized into tangible, deliberate actions of opposition such as sabotage of the Kentish Plover conservation measures. To address the present ecological problem represented by the gradual disappearance of the species from Italian coastal environments, of which the Alberoni case is a tangible feature, the study resorted to active listening to both the human and non-human agents of the beach to enable in-depth research on the complex socio-ecological reality that interests this place in its multiple identities, imaginaries and narrations.

The reduced presence of the Kentish Plover was first approached from the perspective of volunteers operating in the area, showing a generalized difficulty in visualizing a future for the species in this place, mainly due to the lack of efficacy of their actions towards enforcing rules in an environment that is highly dominated by practices of renegotiation of conservation measures, suggesting an overlooked yet substantial role of personal inputs and human relationships in wildlife conservation.

Secondly, the research has described and evaluated the different conservation practices thanks to the contribution of the interlocutors, indicating how certain instruments, methods, and approaches tend to suffer from stagnation. The research has shown how this is attributable to a complex mix of exclusion and fear, which altogether undermines the potential of Kentish Plover conservation in the Venice Lagoon and around Italy. The cage practice has shown how measures are calibrated on different and often contrasting conservation philosophies, collocating in different ways human intervention into wildlife. The ringing practice in turn evolved from representing a violent invasion of the animals' personal spaces to configuring rings as devices for acquaintance between conservationists and the Kentish Plovers.

The ethnographic account of the breeding season's only nest discovery and its loss has provided contextual knowledge on how grief plays a central role in conservation by enabling emotional resonance and fostering resilience. This enables the discipline to break free from the sense of impending doom as well as from the "analysis-paralysis" (Battisti et al., 2020) and begin to project the future. At the same time, as supported by Jørgensen (2019), the complicated relationship that conservation has with the past is overcome through the act of remembering while giving space to new imaginaries of adaptation to the inescapable change. This ultimately adds a temporal dimension to wildlife conservation, underlying the essential need for dedicating time to field presence, but also for engaging local communities and stakeholders, making them an integral part of both the management practices and the narrative identity of the oasis.

Furthermore, the research has shown how the tension between the experienced absence of the species and its presence in the conservationists' narratives increases the public's sense of deceit, fueling dissent. This manifests as selective unhearing or silent acts of violence, which transform a narrative conflict into a tangible one. The main features of this clash can be summarized in a series of acts of enabling and disabling from both the oasis operators and the beach users, exacerbated by the de-politicizing of the Alberoni beach environment.

This thesis has explored how different entities enact and react through interrelated actions of belonging. Belonging, in its manifestations as caring and making kin with the other, is manifested not as a single binary, but as a multidimensional process of relating to humans, animals, and habitats. Belonging in and to Alberoni beach can manifest as a suppressed sense of longing for wildness in a world increasingly characterized by loss of biodiversity and natural spaces. This results in a struggle for inclusion in a narrative that has ceased to include humanity in nature, configuring the Alberoni human-wildlife conflict as a case of both environmental and narrative justice.

As evidenced by this research, narrations of the beach center around the conceptual imaginaries of wildness and freedom. These imaginaries, in turn, engage with the memory of Alberoni's visualized past and, through its idealization, the beach is rendered into a de-politicized space for humans and their pets. This freedom, however, does not encompass the other ecosystem actors, such as the Kentish Plover, who tends to be relegated to a different status.

Henceforth, Kentish Plover conservation's primary challenge, represented by unreceptive dog owners, was reframed in an anti-anthropocentric perspective. Through the lens of Haraway's (2003) *The Companion Species Manifesto*, the perceived egalitarian relationship between humans and their animal companions was critically re-examined as a feature of ownership logics, weakening the narration of animal compassion exhibited by off-leash dog owners, who selectively enable empathy towards pets, while disabling it in the context of wildlife. In contrast, through local narrations, community was reimagined as a comprehensive, inclusive concept encompassing different parts, species, and semiotics that co-create the environment. In this sense, acts of caring, or un-caring, transcend the single species, population, or group by being extended to the non-human co-agents of Alberoni beach.

The research has demonstrated how the Kentish Plover not only exists as an object of conservation actions, but represents an independent, dignified agent, reaffirming its role amid the various narratives projecting its fragility and weakness. Through the ethnography in the various conservation realities of the Lagoon of Venice, it was shown how, similarly to the other actors included in the research, this non-human animal renegotiates space with humans. The Kentish Plover's agency is particularly manifested in the redefinition of spaces in Alberoni, San Nicolò and Cavallino-Treporti by disabling the separation of anthropic and wildlife areas, thus proving the essential fallacy of the nature-human ontological divide.

The Cavallino-Treporti case provided a specular parallel to that of Alberoni by showing how such a highly anthropized space, characterized by numerous campsites and bathing establishments, can represent one of the most successful Kentish Plover conservation sites of the Lagoon. Notably, these outcomes are achieved not only despite, but also through these touristic establishments, as their shared interests have evolved to contribute by supporting conservation actions, limiting dogs' access to the areas, and safeguarding the natural landscape while controlling the dune advancement, thus providing the right combination of conditions for Kentish Plover stewardship. In opposition, the relative "naturalness" characterizing Alberoni beach, albeit representing the most promising reason for Kentish Plover reproduction suitability, crucially becomes the reason for the species' disappearance, as the land is eroded both from the sea and the vegetated dune system that conservation plans protected and restored throughout the years. This paradox marks once again the role of the definition of natural spaces through the nature-culture binary, stressing the role of narratives inside wildlife and conservation problems.

Lastly, through the reconceptualization of remembrance, this thesis has argued how “remembering” conservation involves the collective gathering of lost parts, excluded bodies, and discarded narrations. This action is enabled through an all-round inclusion mindset capable of embracing different conservation paradigms and connecting spatially dispersed conservation realities.

As this thesis has shown, an emergency-oriented mindset does not provide conclusive results in the conservation of highly endangered species. Instead, the research suggests that a more action-oriented mindset paired with proactive planning has strong potential to overcome the present stagnation in applying and testing practices and innovative methodological approaches to wildlife conservation. A thorough rethinking of conservation as a highly personal and human discipline can help uncover the invisibilized challenges that might be persistently overlooked by experts, thereby fostering the inclusion of different forms of knowledge and expertise, thus driving field transformation. This as well calls for novel approaches in conservation that recognize humans as integral parts of the ecosystem, hence incorporating humanities into wildlife conservation projects.

To achieve a greater transformative potential, the study could have benefited from more time availability, especially considering the seasonal nature of the monitoring activity, which restricted the timeframe to the Kentish Plover breeding season. Moreover, the employment of a digital questionnaire, while enabling flexibility, entailed limited control over the sample size and target groups. The place-based dimension of the study in turn poses constraints on the generalizability of the findings; nonetheless, the widespread nature of the ecological problem addressed by the research suggests potential for comparative, parallel application in different ecological and geographical contexts.

The relatively high engagement and positive response to the research, both shown through the survey and the ethnographic fieldwork, demonstrated a great interest in the research’s direction, hinting at a strong potential for a continuation of similar research within the local context of Alberoni. Future research could channel this testified interest into projects designed to implement a higher degree of public involvement, where participatory methods hold tangible potential.

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APPENDIX A

Guiding Questions for Interviews (in Italian)

Domande rompighiaccio sulla spiaggia

Da quanto tempo vieni qui/ vivi qui?

Come descriveresti la spiaggia degli Alberoni?

Come usufruisci normalmente della spiaggia?

Cosa trovi particolare di questa spiaggia?

Domande esperienziali sul fratino

Come sei venuto in contatto/a conoscenza per la prima volta con il fratino?

C'è un ricordo che ti viene in mente di questo incontro?

Cosa hai sentito dire/sai sul fratino? Cosa ne pensi di queste informazioni?

Domande in profondità sulle connessioni

Che cosa rappresenta per te la presenza del fratino in questa spiaggia?

Come ti senti riguardo allo stato attuale della situazione?

Che cosa speri cambi in futuro?

C'è qualcosa che secondo te è importante per capire cosa succede qui, e che non ti ho chiesto?

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire (in Italian)

Indagine sulla percezione del fratino agli Alberoni

Questo questionario è destinato a chi ha frequentato o frequenta la **spiaggia degli Alberoni** ed è parte di una ricerca per tesi magistrale. Il suo scopo è di raccogliere opinioni ed esperienze riguardo la spiaggia degli Alberoni e l'area di nidificazione del **fratino** (*Charadrius alexandrinus*).

La compilazione è **anonima** e richiede **2-3 minuti**. Grazie per il tuo contributo.

1. La spiaggia degli Alberoni

La spiaggia degli Alberoni è situata sull'estrema punta meridionale del Lido di Venezia (Italia).

In quale periodo dell'anno frequenti la spiaggia degli Alberoni di solito?

- ☐ Tutto l'anno
- ☐ Nel periodo estivo
- ☐ Durante il periodo invernale
- ☐ Altro:

Con quale frequenza la visiti?

- ☐ Quotidianamente
- ☐ Settimanalmente
- ☐ Mensilmente
- ☐ Raramente

Quali sono le principali attività che hai svolto o svolgi abitualmente sulla spiaggia degli Alberoni? (è possibile più di una risposta)

- ☐ passeggiare
- ☐ portare a spasso il cane
- ☐ prendere il sole o sostare sotto l'ombrellone
- ☐ feste in spiaggia
- ☐ correre o praticare sport
- ☐ andare in bicicletta
- ☐ partecipare a delle visite guidate
- ☐ ricerca o monitoraggio
- ☐ birdwatching
- ☐ Altro:

Anche solo con una parola, cosa rappresenta per te la spiaggia degli Alberoni?

.....

2. Il fratino

Il fratino è un piccolo uccello che nidifica sulla spiaggia degli Alberoni, dove negli ultimi anni sono state introdotte alcune misure di protezione per tutelarne la presenza.

Sei a conoscenza della presenza della specie del fratino (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) sulla spiaggia degli Alberoni?

- ☐ Sì
- ☐ No

Se sì, come ne sei venuto/a a conoscenza? (È possibile più di una risposta)

- ☐ Cartelli informativi
- ☐ Avvistamento di uno o più esemplari sulla spiaggia
- ☐ Amici o familiari
- ☐ Notizie o social media
- ☐ Visite guidate
- ☐ Altro:

Ti è mai capitato di vedere direttamente il fraterno sulla spiaggia degli Alberoni?

- ☐ Sì
- ☐ No
- ☐ Non sono sicuro/a

Quanto ritieni importante la presenza del fraterno nell'area?

Per niente importante

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5

Molto importante

Quanto pensi che la tua presenza sulla spiaggia possa disturbare il fraterno?

Per niente

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

Moltissimo

Hai mai modificato il tuo comportamento in spiaggia per evitare di disturbare il fraterno?

☐ Sì

☐ No

☐ Non so

Se hai risposto sì, in che modo hai cercato di ridurre il tuo disturbo nei confronti del fraterno?

.....

Ritieni che la presenza del fraterno sia: (è possibile più di una risposta)

☐ essenziale alla salvaguardia dell'ecosistema

☐ un valore aggiunto

☐ mi è indifferente

☐ un ostacolo o un impedimento

☐ Altro:

Potresti spiegare brevemente il perché della tua risposta?

.....

3. La conservazione del fraterno agli Alberoni

Come vivi le misure di protezione del fraterno sulla spiaggia?

Molto negativamente

☐ 1

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

Molto positivamente

Quali delle seguenti misure di conservazione del fratino attueresti o miglioreresti? (È possibile più di una risposta)

☐ Recinzioni

☐ Cartelli e segnaletica informativa

☐ Attività di informazione e divulgazione

☐ Attività di scienza partecipativa o citizen science

☐ Maggior collaborazione con la comunità locale

☐ Monitoraggi del fratino più costanti

☐ Vigilanza contro le infrazioni più assidua

☐ Sanzioni amministrative

☐ Nessuna

☐ Altro:

Quanto sei d'accordo con la seguente frase: "Il fratino fa parte della spiaggia degli Alberoni"

Per niente d'accordo

☐ 1

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

[] 5

Completamente d'accordo

Se vuoi, puoi aggiungere qualcosa sulla tua esperienza sulla spiaggia degli Alberoni e/o sulla situazione del fratino

.....

DICHIARAZIONE DEL RICORSO A STRUMENTI DI INTELLIGENZA ARTIFICIALE (IA)

La sottoscritta Martina Ciampi, matricola numero 881758, iscritta presso Ca' Foscari al corso di Laurea magistrale in Environmental Humanities, autrice della tesi di laurea “Making Place for the Plover – Conservation, Belonging, and Multispecies Relations at Alberoni Beach, Venice”, relatore Fabio Pranovi, consapevole delle sanzioni previste dall’art. 76 del Testo unico, D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n.445, e della decadenza dei benefici prevista dall’art. 75 del medesimo Testo unico in caso di dichiarazioni false o mendaci, sotto la propria personale responsabilità ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n. 445,

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di aver fatto ricorso a tecnologie di intelligenza artificiale generativa per supportare vari aspetti della ricerca e della scrittura della sua tesi di laurea, in particolare:

- Grammarly (ultima consultazione: Settembre 2026)
- Turboscribe (ultima consultazione: Luglio 2026)

- Gli strumenti sono stati utilizzati per:

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