

## GRIFFONS OR AIRPORTS: THAT'S THE QUESTION

On May 6 2018 a Vueling Airbus A320 landing in Bilbao impacted with a griffon vulture. The big bird, which was part of a flock of 6 or 7 animals, was sucked into an engine, damaged it and metal parts, together with the remains of the poor animal, literally rained in the garden of a family that risked to be struck by metal fragments fallen a few inches from their heads. However, the plane managed to land even with the obvious damage suffered.

Why should this news concern Alghero and the passengers using its airport?

Because few days ago 14 griffon vultures, imported from Spain, were released in the Marina di Lioneddu area, within the Park of Porto Conte and within the radius of 13 Km. imposed by ENAC regulation to safeguard the safety of aeronautical activities of Alghero airport, that means to protect passengers and airplanes operating on it.

But how was it possible to waive from a regulation established to guarantee the safety of travelers, pilots and residents in the surrounding areas?

Let's summarize the terms of the question. Almost by chance (nobody had informed them), the officers of the Alghero airport discovered the project "Life under Griffon Wings" which provides for the releasing of 60 birds from Spain and the establishment of a "company charnel" intended for to feed them. They immediately contested the project promoters and the local authorities the inappropriateness and indeed the unlawfulness of the project itself because of the location of the charnel too close to the airport and for the risk of interference with the air traffic circuits.

The promoters fell from the sky: no one had thought about the risks for air navigation, despite the restriction maps had been published and they were even available on the website of Alghero Municipality. The disconcerting discovery was that none of the public bodies that had formally approved the project was aware of the limitations imposed by the internal and international regulations on the wildlife attractive factors, on the risks associated with the release of new birds and on the minimum distances from an airport that had to be respected.

Of course, the issue ended up on the ENAC table and a negotiation was therefore opened between those who suggested the displacement of the charnel and the release of the vultures in the Bosa area (about 40 km. south), where there is already a griffon vulture colony, and those who feared the loss of substantial European funding if the project had not included the Porto Conte Park.

The solution was a downward compromise: the establishment of the charnel at Marina di Lioneddu was authorized but with the release of only (!) 14 griffons and the establishment of a "no fly zone" on the area above, from ground up to 1400 ft. (about 450 meters). Moreover, 7 griffons would have been equipped with a GPS device to monitor their position, which obviously does not prevent the birds from going where they want and being possible only to check later their flight trajectories.

It is well known that the griffons are animals that love to fly in groups and that can go up to 6000 meters. From the first surveys it seems that our griffons, in spite of the Park's desires, prefer instead to move to Bosa in a back and forth that unfortunately presents the unpleasant peculiarity of crossing the take-off and landing paths of the Alghero airport with the risk, always present, of an impact with an aircraft full of passengers.

In Alghero, due to its nature of a coastal airport, the main problem was so far constituted by seagulls (8 collisions in 2016), which after years of impacts with double-digit numbers was however under control and really anybody did feel the need to introduce in the area new animals of a species so dangerous in size and weight. Moreover, in the context of a project aimed at allowing the reproduction of those big birds and therefore the restocking, with a consequent increase in risk.

Would not the Bosa area have been better suited for the location and even the well-being of animals, of which no one, of course, wishes their extinction?

Once again, we fear that considerations extraneous to the safety culture prevailed, despite previous accidents in Spain (13 deaths since 1996 due to impacts with griffons), the eminent recommendations of some zoologists of the University of Barcelona and the appeals - unheard – from local experts.

The landing on the Hudson River of "Sully", immortalized in the Clint Eastwood movie, does not seem to have taught anything.