

The Festival of the snakes of Cocullo!

19 March to 30 April 2025 | Cocullo, Italy

Faith - Tradition

An adventure lasting more than 15 years. Almost 2,000 snakes measured and marked. Seven different species of ophidians. Rifcon has become part of this tradition and for 10 years has sponsored conservation measures such as the purchase of terrariums that are donated to snake hunters to improve the conditions in which these animals are kept in captivity after being taken from the wild.

In this ancient ritual (at least 500 years old), snakes are caught by expert hands of the village between 19 March and 30 April every year. On 1 May, some of these snakes (four-lined snakes) are used to dress the statue of St. Dominic, which is then carried out of the church and adorned in this way as it is paraded around this historic village in the Abruzzo mountains. Once the festival is over, the animals are released back into the wild in the place where they were captured.

The project has grown in recent years through collaboration with the Max Planck Institute in Constance (earthquake sentinel snake project), the University of Bari (One Health project) and the University of Ferrara (genome project). The genome project, whose samples were collected on 29 and 30 April 2024, will be the basis for sequencing the four-lined snake (*Elaphe quatuorlineata*) genome for the first time. Parasites and microorganisms associated with snakes are collected at the Festa dei Serpari in Cocullo, Italy.



Image Source: The Guardian/Stern



Image Source: The Guardian/Stern



Image Source: The Guardian/Stern

Research - What's the role of RIFCON here?

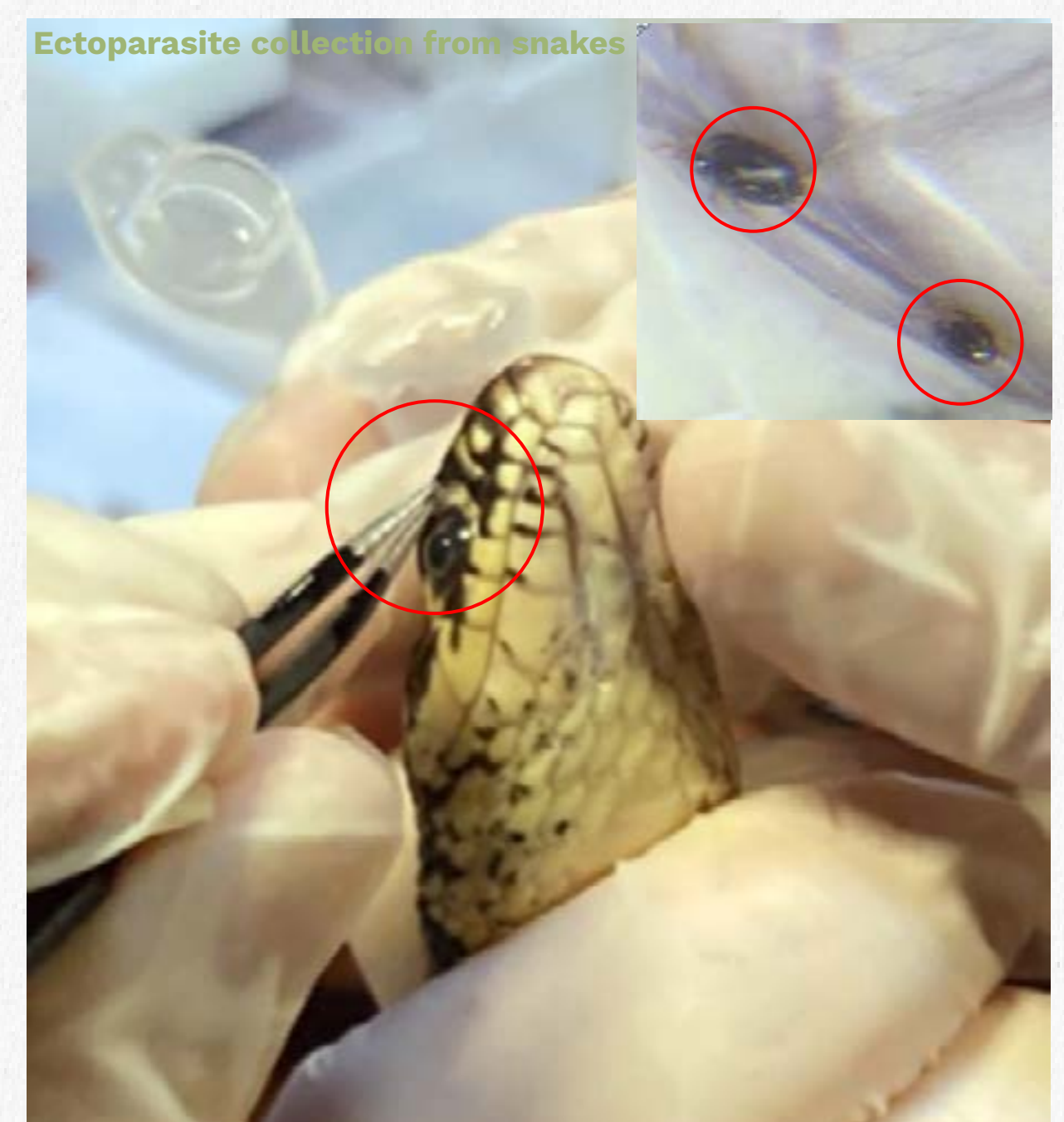
An employee of RIFCON has joined this research.

One of the fascinating aspects of this project, what began as a purely religious event so long ago has developed into a steadily growing ecological dataset, constantly leading to new scientific questions and publications on the subject of snakes. Therefore, the Festival of the Snakes of Cocullo is a unique interplay of belief, custom and science, as well as a cultural tradition.



From left to right:
Gianpaolo Montinaro (RIFCON), Dr Mariaelisa Carbonara (University of Bari, veterinarian), Prof Emiliano Trucchi (University of Ferrara, geneticist), Prof Domenico Otranto (University of Bari, veterinarian), Ernesto Filippi (Ministry of the Environment, Rome), Prof Jairo Mendoza (University of Bari, veterinarian) and Silvia (University of Bari, student)

“This is a unique interplay, it combines faith, tradition and science!”



Ectoparasite collection from snakes



Image Source: The Guardian/Stern

Catching snakes in Cocullo not only plays an important role in organising the festival, but also supports research. Among other things, Scientists are investigating whether snakes can sense seismic activity, which is important for people living in earthquake-prone regions.

Numerous scientific and popular publications have been produced. You will find them e.g. in 'nature', the New York Times, The Guardian, stern and a lot of scientific documentations.

Here are some links related to these projects:

Parasites and microorganisms associated with the snakes collected for the “festa Dei serpari” in Cocullo, Italy.

link: <https://journals.plos.org/plosntds/article?id=10.1371/journal.pntd.0011973>

Cultural human-snake interactions in the festa dei serpari as an opportunity for the surveillance of bacterial pathogens of zoonotic concern.

link: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0147957125000335>

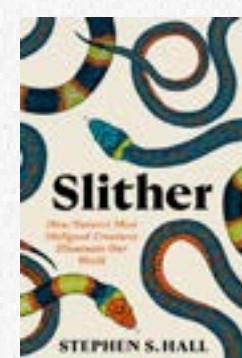
Snakes as sentinel of zoonotic yeasts and bio-indicators of environmental quality.

link: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-024-73195-0>

Screening of *Ophidiomyces ophidiicola* in the free-ranging snake community annually harvested for the popular ritual of San Domenico e dei Serpari (Cocullo, AQ, Italy).

link: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1810553/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Between science and populism: “Slither” from Stephen S. Hall
Stephen S. Hall, a journalist, has been studying snakes for many years. His new book ‘Slither’ has just been published. RIFCON is mentioned in his book in the sources section alongside Gianpaolo. Chapter 5 is about Cucullo. Highly recommended!
ISBN 978-1-5387-4133-7



STERN:  **stern**

https://www.stern.de/panorama/wissen/natur/cocullo--warum-ein-dorf-in-italien-einmal-im-jahr-schlangen-verehrt_34695184-34695162.html

NEW YORK TIMES: 

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/29/travel/snake-festival-cocullo-italy.html>

THE GUARDIAN: 

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2024/may/06/snake-catchers-festival-in-italy-in-pictures>

NATURE: 

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-02313-9>



Image Source: The Guardian/Stern



Image Source: The Guardian/Stern



Image Source: The Guardian/Stern



Image Source: The Guardian/Stern