

## Graduation 2007 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand Dominique Tropeano

Orator: Professor Graham Underwood

**Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred on DOMINIQUE TROPEANO.**

Participants of this degree congregation today, who have come to Colchester by train, may have noticed the logo of Colchester Zoo on the platform name signs at the railway station. This illustrates the status of the zoo as one of the regions major tourist attractions, and one of the country's top zoos. This situation is a reflection of the vision and abilities of Dominique Tropeano.

As Director of Colchester Zoo, he has, over a period of twenty-four years, transformed an ailing business into one of Europe's leading zoos, a major centre of captive breeding programmes for critically endangered species of animals, and in recent years, an organisation actively involved in outreach to establish nature reserves, and fund conservation activities in Africa and Asia.

Dominique Tropeano was not destined for such a career. Born in November 1945 in Nice, France, his parents ran a small country farm. The Mediterranean countryside of his youth was full of flowers, tortoise, wild cats, spectacular predators such as Lynx, and this was where he gained his love for the countryside and for wild animals.

He describes himself as not having "a deep affection for studies" but he did manage to obtain his baccalaureate, and after some business studies, he joined the hotel industry. He moved to England in 1962 on a student exchange scheme, to a position at the Palace Hotel, Southport, where the young receptionist caught his eye, and they were married in 1966. For twenty years he worked in the hotel and catering industry, connected with the construction of hotels and restaurants. And during this time, the Tropeanos lived near Chester Zoo, which they visited regularly with their two children.

Then in 1983 Colchester Zoo was up for sale, and the Tropeanos decided, against the advice of their solicitor, to take the gamble and buy the zoo. At that time, the new Zoo Licensing Act was coming into force, and it was thought that Colchester might not meet the standards required. In fact, Colchester had been labelled as one of the country's worst zoos. The zoo had few staff, a poor financial structure and had suffered from a lack of investment.

Those of you with long memories may remember that in the 1970s and 1980s zoos were seen by many as obsolete institutions. Genuine concerns about animal welfare were highlighted in the media; stories of bears repetitively pacing in cramped, barren cages, animals exhibiting strange behaviour, clearly at odds to their natural rhythms. The anti-zoo lobby argued strongly that zoos were merely menageries, akin to the circuses of old; where animal deprivation was coupled to societies desire to jeer, be frightened by, or to attach human characteristics to animals, such as the pantomime of the chimp's tea party.

The way things have changed in the past twenty years is in no small measure due to people such as Dominique Tropeano at Colchester Zoo. Now zoos are seen by most people as beacons of

hope for endangered species, key components in a global strategy to conserve biodiversity. Slowly, society is waking up to the impact we are having on our planet, of habitat destruction and loss of species in the wild. The extinction rate is now at least forty times faster than at any time in the earth's 3.5 billion year geological history, directly as a result of our unsustainable use of the planets' resources, destruction of habitats, and direct hunting and poaching. For many species, their only hope to avoid extinction is through captive breeding in the world's zoos, and zoos now collaborate internationally to maintain genetic diversity within their captive populations. Colchester Zoo is an active participant in many of these schemes, with forty-one of its two hundred species involved in breeding programmes for rare and endangered animals. The environment for animals kept in zoos has also improved substantially in the last twenty years. New, expansive enclosures now allow the animals more space to roam, behave naturally, and interact with other species. The zoo at Colchester has increased in size from twenty-five to sixty acres, with plans for further expansion and the development of a local nature reserve along the banks of the Roman River.

Dominique Tropeano may have a passion for animals and conservation, but that has not clouded his judgement as a businessman. His philosophy has been that the zoo has to be managed efficiently to generate the income needed for its conservation activities. The commercial success of the zoo is due to innovation, each year adding new products to the portfolio of activities offered, for example catering and retail outlets, banqueting facilities, schemes such as being a "keeper for a day" and "adopt an animal". The Zoo has a team of senior finance, business and efficiency managers, and involves its entire staff in management through various committees and structures. The financial model is to match each pound collected on the gate with another pound spent in the Zoo. Zoos, as part of the leisure industry, are vulnerable to changing economic conditions, such as rising interest rates, which can have a significant impact on visitor numbers. Due to good management, Colchester Zoo is now able to maintain a substantial financial buffer against such fluctuations.

Zoos are now increasingly popular with the public; over twelve million people in the United Kingdom visit zoos each year, about the same number as those attending premier league football matches. Visitor numbers at Colchester Zoo total five hundred thousand people per year, up from one hundred people per year when the Tropeano's took over the zoo in 1983. Engagement of the young, children's activities and education through schools, are part of the long-term strategy to highlight conservation and the fate of species in the wild. With over half of the world's six and a half billion human population due to be living in cities by the year 2010 (incidentally, the first time in human history when more of us will be living urban, rather than rural lives), zoos will remain for some their only connection with the natural world.

Partly due to the reputation of Colchester Zoo, Dominique Tropeano is a zoo inspector for the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has served on the councils for the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums, for the European Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and has been active in promoting animal welfare standards in zoos worldwide, especially in those countries where zoo standards still fall below those expected in Western Europe. Such low welfare conditions are often caused by poor business models, where zoos are run by local authorities, and managed by political appointees. One of Dominique Tropeano's roles as a mentor to overseas zoos is to encourage a better business ethic, to generate the income that can drive change.

Part of Colchester Zoo's conservation activity, is run by a charitable arm, Action for the Wild, that supports projects overseas, including setting up nature reserves to allow the reintroduction of species to areas where they had become locally extinct. Colchester Zoo has won many awards for its conservation work, for example, in 2004; it won a prize from 21st Century Tiger, an organisation funding tiger conservation projects in India, South East Asia and the Russian Far East. This combined approach to conservation is at the heart of modern, leading edge zoos.

Dominique Tropeano's story is a demonstration of the ability of all of us to make a difference and contribute to making the world a better place, not only for people, but for the other species we share the planet with. Not everyone will be able to do what he has done, but his story is testament to what can be achieved with hard work, vision, and a little luck.

As a successful entrepreneur and businessman, as a man who has made a significant contribution to Essex, and to the Colchester area, and as a visionary, who is actively working for a more sustainable world, it is fitting indeed that the University should recognise these achievements with this honour.

**Chancellor, I present to you DOMINIQUE TROPEANO**