

Graduation 2007

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Dominique Tropeano

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you very much indeed for allowing me to be here and to share this wonderful occasion with you. It is of course, a great honour to be here and to receive this honorary degree from such an acclaimed University. Such recognition for Colchester Zoo is of course, high praise indeed and something that not just I but the whole team at the Zoo can take real pleasure and pride from. As you heard, I have been the Director of Colchester Zoo for some 25 years now and those that have long memories will recall that unfortunately 25 years ago it was a very different institution to the one that we have today. And yes, much has changed since those years but they have not just changed at Colchester. They have changed in the world as a community I am pleased to say, and zoos have faced a very difficult period where our detractors have tried their best to discredit what we try to achieve and also question, perhaps rightly, the morality of what we are trying to do. So, I think we have come a long way in the last 20 years and thankfully it is now recognised that we play a very important role in the conservation of species. But we are one of the pieces of a patchwork of solutions to the biodiversity and the conservation current crisis and our expertise lie in the breeding of course, of endangered species through scientific research, through educating and inspiring our visitors because for many people we are perhaps the last link between wildlife and an increasingly urbanised human population. The planet and its wildlife have never, I am sorry to say, been at such a risk. We live in an age of climate change, over-harvesting, and a loss, an amazing loss of biodiversity. And it is the role of the zoo to be one of the vehicles for change in attitude. It is in fact one of our ethics to create experiences which bring people together much closer to nature, an empowering them to take action in their daily lives. We achieve this through the development of interesting and stimulating exhibits of course which allow visitors to observe species performing natural behaviour and through interactive and educational talks and displays that are designed to inspire our visitors. Increasingly, zoos are involved in issues of conservation in many, many parts of the world from Madagascar to Columbia, from Sri Lanka to North America. And we are very proud to be part of that through our Action for the World charity which will be 15 years old next year I believe. Action for the World supports species as diverse as the Komodo Dragon, the Golden Lion Tamarind, Amur Leopards and, of course, many, many more. The culmination of Colchester Zoo's efforts is in our own private nature reserve in Kwazulu- Natal, South Africa. A place where, as I speak, we are re-releasing wildlife that once existed there. None of this of course, would be possible, without the support of our visitors and many of our visitors of course, are from Colchester. In many respects, the honour that has been bestowed on me today is as much for all the people who have given us support over the past 25 years and of course for all my staff too.

I have to say that it has been a real privilege to be here today and I certainly would like to congratulate everyone on graduating today. It is a real achievement; I think you can all be proud. And I sincerely hope that it is a stepping stone to your continued success.

Thank you very much indeed.