

ORYX

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Notes and News

In March the British Government announced the decision, for which FPS and all conservationists have been pressing, to ban all imports of tiger, snow leopard and clouded leopard skins, and to strengthen the regulations for the import of leopard and cheetah skins so as to ensure that only skins legally exported from the country of origin are allowed in; in the case of Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda export certificates must be authenticated by the British

Consul or High Commissioner. In Kenya all trade in leopard skins is now banned. (The loophole that permits made-up coats to be imported will have to be stopped up.) But in all the jubilation there has been little recognition that it was the fur trade itself that asked the Board of Trade to make the ban, in order to back up the voluntary ban agreed between the International Fur Trade Federation and IUCN/WWF in which FPS was involved two years ago. The fur trade is now pressing for similar legislation by the EEC commission in Brussels. It is also very good news that the Russian State Organisation responsible for the Soviet Union's entire trade in furs have confirmed their full support for the agreement. But it still remains to stop the demand for spotted (and striped) cat skins, for it does seem that the ban on leopards and cheetahs has shifted some of the pressure on to ocelot, margay, jaguar and other South American species which so far are banned only in the USA. The USA has put eight of these cats on its endangered species list – those above plus tiger and tiger cat – which means that all imports are prohibited.

A Convention to protect all Antarctic seals on the sea ice in the Southern Ocean – they are already protected on the shores and off-lying islands of the Antarctic continent – was agreed in London in February by the twelve Antarctic-treaty nations, and

Protecting the Antarctic Seals will come into force when seven of their governments have signed it. The vast area covered by the Convention represents one-fifth of the world's surface. So far these seals have not been commercially exploited and this is the first time governments have acted to protect animal populations in advance of their exploitation. (If only this could have been done for the

whales!). Six seal species are involved: southern elephant, leopard, Weddell, crabeater, Ross, and southern fur. The provisions of the Convention are the same as those of the 1969 voluntary agreement, now made mandatory (see *Oryx*, December 1969, page 151); they give total protection for Ross, southern elephant and fur seals, quotas for crabeater, leopard and Weddell seals, and prohibit the taking of the last species (apart from pups) in the breeding season. Six sealing zones are defined, one to be closed each season in rotation, and three areas are declared seal reserves – around the South Orkney Islands, part of the south-western Ross Sea, and Edisto Inlet. What is missing from the Convention is any provision for inspection and enforcement, although it was agreed that this would have to be established when a sealing industry started. One of the more heartening provisions is that when the number of crabeater, leopard or Weddell seals killed in any season reaches the very low limits of permissible catch, sealing must stop until the parties to the Convention have considered the matter and decided whether to continue the moratorium or allow sealing to start again. This pause for breath will allow further regulations to be drafted to ensure adequate conservation in the light of experience.

The news of Mediterranean monk seals off the Libyan coast, reported on page 328, is remarkable as they had not previously been recorded in Libya since 1810. The most encouraging aspect is that the existence of

the seals is well known to the local fishermen who never molest them. Very different stories come from other monk seal colonies. UFAW has been conducting a survey of the seals in Sardinia – one of the few areas in the Mediterranean where this highly endangered seal survives in any numbers – helped by Professor P. Antonio Furreddu S.J., a physicist and geologist who has made a special study of the island's grottos and has explored over 600 of them. In one grotto where seals had been seen within the last 20 years and were not persecuted by fishermen, none has been seen since 1964, perhaps because the grotto is visited by 35,000 tourists a year. In another where 20 years ago there was a colony of 5-10 animals, the last one disappeared a year ago, probably killed by a local fisherman who resented a rival taking tourists to see it. In 1970 this grotto was visited by 15,000 tourists. A third grotto had at least seven seals in October 1970, perhaps because humans could only reach it by potholing through a hole in the cliff or by underwater swimming to get at the subterranean passage about thirty feet underwater. But the survival of this colony is 'extremely problematical'. The local boat-owners and fishermen say they do not kill the seals because of their value as a tourist attraction, but this may be nearly as damaging. The seals are legally protected, but there is little if any supervision; other animals are not protected and there is hunting

and shooting along the entire shore. UFAW has recommended to the Italian national appeal of WWF that there should be a total ban on firearms in the areas inhabited by seals; that tourists should be forbidden in these areas, and that there should be no drift-netting of fish within two kilometres of the seal habitats. UFAW is continuing the seal studies, which are essential for the protection of the seals.

In 1962 the scientists, later called the Committee of Four, who advised the International Whaling Commission on whale stocks, estimated the Antarctic population of the blue whale at the disastrously low figure of about 1000. Now, as a result of figures produced by Japanese survey vessels, it looks as though this was an underestimate. These Japanese figures suggest that the average stock between 1965 and 1971 was over 10,000 animals, and that there was a significant increase during the period. Probably in 1961 there were in fact at least two or three thousand blue whales (in addition to similar numbers of the sub-species, the pygmy blue whale), and the figure today may be seven or eight thousand apart from the pygmy. This is welcome news indeed, and means that the blue whale stocks are recovering well. It would, of course, be madness to lose this heartening gain by allowing catching to be resumed. If the blue whale protection is continued long enough it will be possible to allow annual catches of several thousand whales on a sustained yield basis. Ten years ago the Committee of Four estimated that it would be fifty years before this could happen. It now looks as if that figure could be considerably reduced. Three cheers for conservation – it works!

Enclosed with this issue of *Oryx* is a green leaflet containing our Vice-President Señor Felipe Benavides's hard-hitting address to the Lima conference on the vicuña last December. The conference discussions and resolutions were fairly predictable, but the conference also got considerable publicity in Peru for the plight of the vicuña, and as public support is absolutely vital if vicuña conservation is to succeed this is a most important achievement. Señor Benavides made a lively start by publicly attacking Fidel Castro, Prime Minister of Cuba, for accepting from the Chilean Government the gift of a vicuña poncho, which, he pointed out, must have been made of contraband skins; shortly afterwards the Chilean Government requisitioned all vicuña products on sale in the Santiago market. Great Britain banned the import of vicuña skins two years ago, but in Italy, France and West Germany vicuña cloth is still on sale. Even in Bolivia which has officially banned all trade in vicuña products there are still shops in La Paz where they can be had.

A total ban on polar bear hunting on the high seas from 1973, except where local people have traditional rights and depend on the bears as a resource, was recommended by the Polar Bear Group of the Survival Service Commission at its meeting in February, and the group drafted a protocol to this effect. The reports to the meeting by the five countries involved suggest that considerable progress had been made since the last meeting two years earlier. Denmark reported strong hopes of a new national park in East Greenland which would protect the main Greenland denning areas; Canada reported the total protection of polar bears in Newfoundland and along the Labrador coast, and improvement in methods of preventing illegal traffic; Norway reported new hunting regulations in Svalbard (Spitzbergen) and Jan Mayen Island, the banning of all sport hunting from ships in the Svalbard region and the creation of a temporary reserve in Kong Karls Land. The USA reported the reduction of hunting permits for trophies to 300 in 1971, the bag for residents (formerly unlimited) to three per hunter, and also a hope that one of the worst practices, hunting from aircraft, would be banned after this year. The USSR, which already has a total ban on hunting, reported the introduction of stricter protection for denning areas. The total estimate of polar bears killed in the entire circumpolar region in 1970/71 was 900, compared with 1300 the previous year. A by-product of the increasing protection and consequent reduction in the numbers killed is that the number of recoveries of marked bears will also decrease, and new tags that are visible and identifiable on live animals will have to be developed.

Scientists from the New York City Museum studying two species of terns on the 17-acre Gull Island, in Long Island Sound, 'one of the more polluted areas of the world's oceans', have incidentally discovered some rather horrifying abnormalities which they think could be a danger signal for humans as well as birds. In 1969, when they ringed over 2000 young terns, they found one with an abnormal bill and two with missing flight feathers. These assumed some significance the following year when they found four young roseate terns and 33 common terns with abnormalities, including feather loss, under-developed legs, feet with almost no down, one bird with four legs, one with very small eyes and several with abnormal bills. In 1971 one chick had a rudimentary upper mandible growing out above its eyes, one had no left eye and a crossed mandible, three had bare featherless patches on their bodies, and some eggs were so thin-shelled they broke under the weight of the incubating bird, a phenomenon first observed in British peregrine falcons in the 1950s and caused by a derivative of DDT. Examination of the terns has shown high levels, not of DDT, but

of PCBs (polychlorinated hydrocarbons). Describing these discoveries in *Natural History*, two of the scientists, Helen Hays and Robert W. Risebrough suggest that these terns, occupying the approaches to New York City, are detecting 'a newer more insidious enemy to man'. The canaries down the mine in fact.

There are now good hopes of starting up again the international biological station at Azraq, in Jordan, opened in 1968 under a British director, Dr Bryan Nelson, to study desert and wetland problems, and closed in 1969 because of the political situation. Azraq is a large oasis 70 miles out in the desert to the east of Amman, the wintering ground of vast flocks of ducks and other water birds and resting place for many migrants. Nearby is a 5500-acre enclosure, formerly the Shaumari agricultural research station, which is still in good shape, and where it is planned to start on a programme of breeding stocks of animals for release in the wild, especially gazelles, and acclimatising reintroduced species. The Jordanian Government is putting the restoration of the national park first. A government committee, chaired by Mr Anis Mouasher, Minister of Finance and also Hon. Secretary of the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature, was appointed last year, and roads are being built, a tourist motel is planned for this year, and the archaeologists are restoring the splendid old desert castles. It is hoped that the biological station can get going again some time in 1973.

Two of the 14 British species of bats are seriously endangered – the greater horseshoe and the mouse-eared. This is the finding of a Mammal Society report published on page 319; others are suffering serious losses, but the evidence does not show that they are decreasing seriously overall. But there is cause for alarm in the recent findings of D. J. Jefferies in Huntingdonshire, where 30 bats of five species, mainly pipistrelles, were found to be carrying one-third of the lethal level of organochlorine pesticide residues (DDT + DDE) in their bodies and almost the lethal level after hibernation. Both the endangered species are cave-dwellers, and they are affected by loss of habitat due to caves being blocked up or used for rubbish tips – many miles of tunnels in the North Downs will be blocked soon during the building of the M23 motorway – and by disturbance from people entering the caves during the bats' hibernation, sometimes in order to mark them for scientific purposes. Such disturbance may be disastrous to hibernating bats, waking them so that they use up energy they need to last the winter. Local naturalists' trusts could help here, as the Gloucestershire Trust has already done, by protecting caves and erecting grilles that allow passage for the bats but not for people. There

would also seem to be a case for controlling bat marking in the way that bird ringing now is, making it illegal, certainly for endangered species, except with the authorisation of the Nature Conservancy.

Reducing pollution in the River Thames has had a remarkable effect on all the wildlife that depends on the river. A rich variety of fish in the estuary are now moving up the river – fish have been seen as far upstream as Barking – and enormous quantities of

Effects of worms and molluscs in the estuarine mudflats, have
Cleaning the attracted large numbers of birds and even attracted some
Thames migrants to abandon their journey and stay the winter.

The London Natural History Society in January last year counted large flocks of waders, especially dunlin (5600), lapwing (1000) and redshank (1000) in a bay near Thamesmead where they had not been seen for generations. Shelduck and pintail have increased, and teal, tufted duck, pochard, goldeneye, wigeon, shoveler, gadwall, smew, and goosander seen where a few years ago mallard alone were prepared to stand the conditions. But the successful cleaning-up, due largely to the rebuilding of London's major sewage works, could easily be reversed by excessive use of pesticides.

In a short exploratory visit to Zanzibar to study and photograph the red colobus monkey, T.J. Kingston estimated numbers in the 484-acre Jozani Forest, possibly the only habitat and certainly the main one, at a minimum of 144. Much of the forest's primary

The Threat vegetation has been cleared, and a group of ten
to the woodcutters is permanently employed in removing the
Red Colobus larger trees for timber. A grid of cuttings cleared for access has increased the disturbance of the monkeys by man (while aiding their study). The FPS has made another grant from the Oryx 100% Fund to enable Mr Kingston to return to Zanzibar this summer with three other scientists for a 2-month study to census this highly endangered colobus and assess the threats to its survival.

The tiny (25-square-kilometre) Europa Island in the Mozambique Channel (between Mozambique and Madagascar), has been declared a national park to protect what is believed to be the largest green-turtle nesting area in the world. George Hughes found these

Turtles huge numbers when he visited the island in November
Galore at 1970. During the one month he was there at least 4274
Europa green turtles nested on the island's 6½ kilometres of beach. With sometimes over 700 females emerging in one night competition for space was intense and females excavating nests

frequently destroyed the nests of those that had preceded them. The island has been a turtle sanctuary for nearly fifty years, since 1923 when the French authorities prohibited all turtle killing and stopped the slaughter by fishermen, but the large number of the nesting turtles was not generally known. George Hughes calculates that, at a conservative estimate, at least 9000 green turtles nest on Europa Island.

An FPS member who wishes to be anonymous has made an earmarked grant to the Oryx 100% Fund to buy two pure-bred Indian lion cubs from the Junagadh Zoo to present to the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, and Air India flew them to London. This is in

Indian Lions order to start a breeding unit of this very rare cat in for captivity. With numbers down to about 150 in the Gir

Jersey Zoo Forest in north-west India, probably its only surviving habitat, their outlook in the wild is not bright. Despite full protection by the authorities the pressure on their habitat, particularly from settlers with domestic animals, is very great. A member of the Jersey Zoo staff flew out to Junagadh to collect the lion cubs, and Air India's contribution in flying the lions back to Britain is a most welcome and encouraging contribution to conservation by a major airline. (It was notable at last year's conference on the transport of exotic animals held by the Federation of Zoological Gardens that only two airlines sent representatives though all were invited.) By a happy coincidence the lion cubs arrived at the Jersey Zoo immediately before the conference there in May on breeding endangered species (see page 334), and were ceremonially presented by the FPS President, Lord Willingdon, in the presence of the Indian High Commissioner, HE Mr Apa B. Pant.

A 13,800-acre sheep station in South Australia has been bought as a reserve for the hairy-nosed wombat *Lasiorhinus latifrons* by the Chicago Zoological Society with a grant from the Forest Park Foundation in Illinois. The reserve will be handed over to

Protection the South Australian National Parks Commission. It for will protect a resident population of about 2000 a Wombat hairy-nosed wombats which were threatened with destruction, and will be the only reserve to protect this

species. This wombat was taken off Australia's endangered species list some years ago. However, Peter Crowcroft, who is executive director of the Chicago Zoo, points out that it could not be regarded as safe just because the few (unprotected) colonies were large; large colonies are just as susceptible to drought as small ones, and it was important to have at least one reserve for it. A local management committee will run the reserve, from which all sheep have been removed, and a resident warden will control the rabbits.