

ORYX

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Notes and News

On October 30 last the Wildlife and Countryside Bill, which occupied so much parliamentary time in 1981, received the Royal Assent; the only addition in the final debates was the protection of curlew and redshank. The conservation

**Will the
New Act Help
or Hinder?**

movement is especially indebted to Lord Craigton, chairman of both ffPS and CoEnCo, and to Lord Melchett, chairman of Wildlife Link, for their skilled and tireless work as it passed through the Upper House. Changes to the original Bill include protection for many endangered birds, the introduction of marine reserves and protection for bats more comprehensive than in any other country. SSSIs have considerable added protection but alarming loopholes still exist. By formalising the financial compensation of farmers and foresters wanting to change the management regime of SSSIs, the Government has opened Pandora's box. Already one naturalists' trust has been faced with the necessity of making an indefinite annual payment in order to save a fritillary meadow from the plough. If landowners choose to press this advantage, no conceivable amount of money will save the remnants of the traditional British countryside from eventual destruction. As it is, in the present financial climate we shall be fortunate if the Nature Conservancy Council's grant is increased by the amount needed, first to survey existing SSSIs adequately and then compensate those owners who see a chance of increased income by modernising operations. The agreement over Wendlebury Mead, in Oxfordshire (compensation for not ploughing), the battle of Sedgemoor and Halvergate Marshes (to save habitat threatened by grant-aided destruction), and the loss of part of Crymlyn Bog (to rubbish disposal), let alone the dispute over the scheduling of Berwyn Mountains as an SSSI, show the shape of things to come. Conservationists are still not a strong enough lobby to give the Department of the Environment the backing it needs to combat the farmers, foresters and landowners, funded by the EEC and massed behind the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

For some time the mainly southern members of the Wildlife Link Grey Seal Group, to which ffPS belongs, have been open to criticism for having no personal knowledge of conditions in Orkney, where there is an annual controversy about culling the grey seals in the supposed interests of the local fishermen. So last August the Group went to see for itself, ffPS being represented by its Vice-Chairman, Richard Fitter. What they found was very interesting. Far from there being an active lobby of local fishermen calling for a cull of adult seals, they failed to find anybody actually demanding a cull except two officers of the Orkney Fishermen's Association. The fishermen themselves, who now almost all fish for lobsters, did not feel that grey seals were too numerous, or that they threatened their livelihood. A few were concerned that the current annual pup harvest, from which they make a small income, should continue. One or two local people seemed to be trying to make out that grey seals eat lobsters, but the Group found no eyewitness of this, only people who knew somebody who claimed to have seen a seal eat a lobster – and many of the seals in Scapa Flow, where most of the lobsters are found, are in fact common seals. In the event the Secretary of State wisely agreed to continue the local pup harvest at its present level and not to reconsider an adult cull until current research is completed. Since the Group's visit, the fringe activists in the *Sea Shepherd* have tried to disrupt the pup harvest, without success. The one question everybody asked the Grey Seals Group was whether they were connected with the *Sea Shepherd*. Like all responsible conservationists the Group is of course completely opposed to activities such as spraying the seal pups with green dye to make their coats worthless.

As in medieval Poland the members of the International Whaling Commission have a *liberum veto*. No country can be forced to keep an agreement that it deems to be against its national interests. So the two main achievements of the last IWC meeting have each drawn a veto. Japan has given notice under the 90-day rule that it will go on taking sperm whales in the North Pacific, even if the special meeting of the Commission next March decides there should be a nil quota: so much for lip service to following the advice of the Scientific Committee. But of course it has a precedent: the United States has refused for several years past to allow the IWC to follow the advice of the Scientific Committee that there should be a nil quota for the bowhead whale, the one great whale species in danger of actual extinction by the end of the century. The other veto has been invoked by Japan, Norway and Iceland, who all want to be allowed to go on using the cold harpoon to kill minke whales. The cold harpoon has been amply documented as an extremely cruel and brutal weapon that prolongs the time the animal takes to die. What claim has a nation to be called civilised if it insists on being allowed such barbarous cruelty to animals?

Seals and Fishermen in Orkney

Vetoes Against the Whales

Last November ffPS appealed for money to save a small population of the highly endangered Mediterranean monk seal in a group of Greek islands. In response to an article by Brian Jackman, *Sunday Times* readers contributed the splendid sum of £7900. The money was needed to save the seals from being killed by the local fishermen, and

**Saving
a Monk Seal
Population**

November was the deadline. The fishermen wanted compensation for the damage the seals do to their nets and fishing, and Dr Thomas Schultze-Westrum, who brought the situation to ffPS notice, agrees that the fishermen have a good case. The islands are the North Sporades in the Aegean, and this seal colony, discovered only a few years ago, and very important in view of the monk seal's status, has increased to about 50 animals. The local fishing is already seriously reduced as a result of overfishing by large commercial boats using small-mesh nets, and the local fishermen are prepared to conserve the seals if they have compensation. The money saved the seals in the short term, but a permanent solution is needed. To do this it is proposed to create a conservation area in the islands, with zones in the shallow waters round the islands where only local subsistence fishing would be allowed. This would satisfy the fishermen, who in return would protect the monk seals. The proposal has been on the appropriate ministerial desk for a considerable time.

The problem of the Botswana veterinary cordon fences has been with us for some years. More than 800 miles of these fences have been erected in the wilderness areas of Botswana for the control of foot and mouth disease in the country's important cattle industry. The problem arises

**Where
Antelopes Die
in Thousands**

because the fences cut right across the migratory routes of the plains game, and a quarter of a million wildebeest, hartebeest and zebra, among others, have died of starvation and thirst striving to get through the fences to their watering places at the end of what may have been a 370-mile journey. In September 1980, for instance, over 80,000 migrating wildebeest were funnelled into a small area that was a tiny fraction of their former range. Fences also blocked thousands more wildebeest and hartebeest from the Limpopo river in southern Botswana. These two concentrations represent the entire remaining Central Kalahari wildebeest population, which at one time numbered a million. In 1964 and 1970 there were catastrophes when 80,000 and 40,000 animals died due to drought and the fences that prevented them reaching water. The situation is extremely complex, for the migration itself seems to be of comparatively recent origin, only over the past 80 years, and to have been caused by the extension of the desert due to overgrazing by man's livestock. The interests of both wildlife, a potentially valuable source of meat, and the cattle industry have to be taken into account. Are the fences necessary to control the disease? If so, could they not be located so as to permit the wild animals access to traditional watering places. As a result of representations from IUCN, WWF and others, the Botswana Minister of Agriculture has

asked for a survey of the fences' effect on wildlife; the Wildlife Department is asking for the removal of certain fences near Lake Xau and the creation of a wildlife management area there; and the Senior Rural Sociologist is investigating the possibility of removing the few ranches that both interrupt the migration and cause the overgrazing. These are only the first steps, and effective action is urgent if the most impressive concentration of plains game in Africa after Serengeti is to survive.

When the New Zealand Wildlife Department began to remove the feral goats on Arapawa Island, in the Marlborough Straits, because they were damaging native vegetation in the coastal nature reserve, which also protects the steep cliffs from erosion, a group of people protested that the goats were a relic of the Old English breed, and should be preserved. Goats have been on the island, it is known, since 1839, but more have been added to the stock at intervals since. Two Government departments and a farmer on the island now have captive herds of the goats, but none are breeding satisfactorily. As Dr Michael Rudge points out, in an article on page 226, new Zealand's tradition is to remove feral animals in order to protect what survives of the native fauna and flora – with good reason: no country has suffered more from feral animals. But the Arawapa case raises the question for New Zealand whether certain ferals should be conserved – and if so how?

**Problem
of an Island's
Feral Goats**

**Outlook Good
for
Amur Tiger**

Tigers increased in numbers in the Soviet Far East in the 1960s and 70s, thanks to good protection in two vast reserves, Sikhote-Alin (347,000ha) and Lazovski (116,000ha) – tigers need space. Their status 'gives grounds for optimism', say the three authors of *The Amur Tiger in the USSR*, a report based on their field research published by IUCN, but they add that this does not mean the tiger is 'wholly secure'. Poaching is still a problem, especially because of the risk that wounded animals could become dangerous and attack human beings, which in turn would mean demands for reducing the number of tigers. In fact these huge animals rarely attack man, although to meet a tiger is quite a common experience; but apparently they sometimes get curious. The authors describe how, one May evening, a forester met a tiger and left the trail to allow the animal to pass. But the tiger also left the trail, hid behind shrubs and came towards him, following him as he retreated, at a distance of only some 25 yards. In desperation the forester climbed a tree, whereupon the tiger lay down at the foot of it. Shouting proved useless, and only when he dropped a burning paper did the tiger move slowly away. Another possible threat to the tigers is economic development of the mountains and forests of the North-east, which might not harm the tigers directly, but would do so indirectly if it reduced the numbers of deer and other ungulate prey.

The dangers and threat of mineral extraction in the Antarctic dominated the discussions on the continent's future at the IUCN General Assembly last October in Christchurch, New Zealand. All delegates felt the desperate importance of not allowing this last great wilderness to be destroyed by hasty exploitation. Finally a mammoth resolution (five closely typed pages) was passed urging that no mineral extraction at all should be allowed until full consideration had been given to protecting the environment completely, and the environmental risks had been fully investigated and safeguards developed. The preamble pointed to the paramount importance of the continent's wilderness for science, education and inspiration, the remarkable achievements of the Antarctic nations in protecting the environment so far, and pointed out that the 2nd World Conference on National Parks in 1972 had urged that the Antarctic continent and surrounding seas be made the first World Park. A host of desirable developments were urged – more protected areas, more research, a krill sanctuary, no krill fishing in whale feeding grounds – but the crux of the matter is summed up in the one requirement that all human activities in the Antarctic should be compatible with maintaining the environment. But the pressures to get at those minerals continue to mount.

Minerals and the Antarctic

The disaster that threatens as a result of the current extinction of, at a very rough estimate, one (often undescribed) vascular plant species every day is becoming ever clearer. An Occasional Paper of the World Conservation Strategy, *Wild Plants and Crop Improvement** spells out how our material interests are acutely threatened. Hardly a cultivated plant is not having to be strengthened for continued human use by cross-breeding with wild relatives. Blackcurrants, for instance, have been made proof against several devastating pests and diseases, spring frost damage and poor pollination by an injection of genes from the wild North American *Ribes bracteosum*; hops have had their bitterness augmented by wild plants from California and Manitoba; five important potato cultivars have had blight resistance bred into them through *Solanum demissum*, and three other South American solanums are being used to breed virus resistance into the potatoes that feed British consumers. The need to conserve wild relatives of crop plants is abundantly clear. What is less clear is how this is to be done with tropical forests and other natural habitats now being cleared at the rate of thousands of hectares a day. Information on a computer at Kew is fine, and essential, but even when we know where to find all the endangered species we have to save, this will not be enough. Much more botanical survey work has to be done, and a really adequate sample of tropical rainforest and other biotopes has to be set aside to act as a gene bank. If even .001 per cent of what the world is squandering on armaments were diverted to this we should be well on our way.

*By R. and C. Prescott-Allen, £1 from WWF, 11 Ockford Road, Godalming, Surrey GU7 1QU.

Few of the threatened plants on South Atlantic islands are to be found in cultivation; those that are come mainly from Ascension and St Helena. Goats have brought much destruction to St Helena, and 18 of the island's 33 endemic

**Plant Rescues
in
St Helena**

plants are endangered, some reduced to a single individual plant. However, in 1980 an English botanist, Quentin Cronk, and a St Helena naturalist, George Benjamin, discovered, on a steep cliff face, one plant that had been presumed extinct since 1875, the St Helena ebony *Trochetia melanoxyloides*. Now one cutting in the Cambridge University Botanic Garden, three seedlings at Lancaster University, and several cuttings on the island are growing well. Another endemic tree, *Nesiota elliptica*, believed extinct until one specimen was found in 1978, which has resisted all efforts at propagation, may be saved by seed – two seedlings have been produced – and a senecio that was near extinction *Senecio redivivus* now has some 200 seedlings scattered over the island.

Twenty-six primate species, including lowland gorilla, will be protected in the three new national parks being developed in Cameroon. The Korup, Dja and Pangar-Djerem forests together total 4000 square miles and represent more

**Three New
Parks
in Cameroon**

than 10 per cent of the world's present protected rainforest. Fortunately these three forests have few good commercial tree species, reports Dr Stephen Gartlan, who has been working in Cameroon for five years, but there is a danger from oil prospectors who have already penetrated into some forests. It is important to select conservation areas now, and oil companies are being asked to minimise damage and help with conservation. The Korup National Park will protect several rare and endangered species, including forest elephant *Loxodonta africana cyclotis*, and the endemic Cameroon rockfowl *Picathartes oreas*. Local people will be allowed to hunt for food, using traditional methods, but ways of providing alternative protein are being investigated, such as fish farming and captive breeding of the cane rat *Thyronymus swinderianus*. This prolific animal, the meat of which is very popular, feeds mainly on grass; one name for it is the cutting grass.

Lack of wild prey, especially deer, has long been one of the limiting factors for the lions in the Gir Sanctuary in India, the last Asiatic lion population in the wild, and numbering only about 200. But now there is a big change, thanks to some major management changes by the Gujarat State

**New Look
in the
Gir Forest**

Government. No longer are 18,000 domestic cattle driven into the sanctuary every day to graze, and the number of cattle-owning families living inside the sanctuary has been halved – over 400 families have been resettled outside, aided by grants and loans and attractive facilities such as drinking water and schools. A low turf wall now marks the sanctuary boundary and is respected.

As a result Peter Jackson, in March last year, frequently saw herds of spotted deer 40 or 50 strong and many smaller herds. Sambar deer and nilgai were scattered through the forest, and occasionally four-horned antelope; marsh crocodiles basked on the reservoir banks, and he saw two of the 11 blackbuck that had earlier been introduced into their former habitat in the eastern Gir. Moreover, although it was the dry season, the vegetation was in good condition with large areas of dry grass, some very high, still standing and trees regenerating. All this gives a very different picture from what Lee Talbot reported in 1955: thousands upon thousands of buffalo, with cows and goats competing for what grazing they could find. The only wildlife to be seen in two weeks were three spotted deer, two small herds of nilgai and chinkara gazelles and one wild pig.

The situation of the endemic golden lion tamarin *Leontopithecus r. rosalia* in Brazil is 'not hopeless', says Ken Green in his report on this endemic marmoset's prospects for survival – but it will be if action is not taken in the near future. His study of the Poco das Antas Reserve, the only protected area for it, suggested that there were very few groups in the reserve – perhaps seven or eight, numbering some 75 animals, but he also found that less than one-third of the reserve's 5000 hectares was 'good' tamarin habitat, and half of it was little or no use. Indeed, the 'protected' area is hardly enough to maintain a genetically viable breeding population. Moreover, heavy hunting (of other animals), cattle grazing, squatters, a railway crossing the reserve, and the building of a dam and an irrigation project in one sector are all major sources of disturbance, as well as the new road bordering the north boundary making access easy. With only five guards, however good, the idea that the reserve offers a viable future for the golden lion tamarin is, he says, 'a complete illusion'. But he adds that 'the Brazilians should not carry the ball alone'. Both scientific help and money are needed from outside, and captive breeding efforts in zoos should be used to get both so that the necessary management plans can be put into action in Poco das Antas.

For the first time ever an endangered subspecies of crane has been captive bred and successfully released into the the wild. The Mississippi sandhill crane was only identified as a distinct subspecies in 1972, and numbers were down to 30-40, largely due to habitat destruction. But in 1977 a Supreme Court decision stopped the building of a 'superhighway' and saved the cranes' few remaining wetlands. Meanwhile, captive breeding had been started at the Fish and Wildlife Patuxent Research Center and there were 21 birds in captivity. Release of other species had shown that birds reared by parent cranes, not by human hands, coped better with release into the wild, and in 1979 eggs from the captive birds were put under Florida

(greater sandhill) cranes and the foster parents allowed to rear the birds. In January last year nine Mississippi cranes reared in this way were colour-marked, fitted with radio transmitters for follow-up, and released in their natural habitat in south-east Mississippi, after a brief period for acclimatisation in an enclosure. 'All appear to have successfully made the transfer from captivity to the wild', is the verdict, and more releases are planned.

Self-Help in the SSC

The Species Survival Commission of IUCN (SSC), in a notable piece of self-help, has launched an endowment fund to finance its activities. One thousand people are asked to give US\$1000 (or £500) each to be invested, the income only to be used. The launch took place during the SSC meetings in New Zealand, during the IUCN Assembly, and immediately 17 members of the Commission signed up. By the end of the meetings \$22,000 had been promised, and the Fund is now open to subscriptions, which may be sent via ffPS.

The SSC Chairman, Gren Lucas, in his report to the Assembly, was able to display some of the products of the data collecting units at Cambridge and Kew, notably Volume I of the revised Mammals Red Data Book in the new bound format (not loose-leaf); this covers the New World – Americas and Australasia – and can be obtained from WWF UK. The Amphibians and Reptiles RDB should be available by March (crocodilians and chelonids), and the Invertebrates RDB is expected before June. A second Mammals volume will cover Africa.

Otters in Britain

Examination of several hundred fish from rivers all over the UK to find out whether pesticides were still affecting the food of otters in 1980 and 1981 showed contamination by chlorinated hydrocarbons in only six per cent. The Vincent Wildlife Trust which commissioned the work is continuing the studies. In its annual report the Trust describes its use of radiotelemetry to study otters in the Outer Hebrides and Perthshire, and also surveys made to show the most favoured type of river bank. In the River Teme catchment area, and also in Wales and on the Welsh border, these showed that otters favoured tree-lined banks, especially those with mature ash and sycamore, where the tree roots provided good potential holts. Bankside trees also improve the food supply for fish and therefore otters: four times as many terrestrial invertebrates fell into the river on tree-lined stretches as on bare stretches. Moreover, says the report, this food comes at a time when prey for the fish is reduced because many aquatic invertebrates are emerging as adults.

The Otter Haven Project, set up by the Trust with ffPS, has now created 146 havens in England and Wales, and has attracted a great deal of interest, help and support for otter protection. The havens are established by agreement with landowners and are intended to give maximum habitat protection combined with minimum disturbance. Because otters are so rare in most of England the work is concentrated on the rivers with 'better' populations as the only way to conserve viable populations that may increase and spread to other rivers.

The Editor

The editor of *Oryx*, Maisie Fitter, has resigned and is succeeded by Dr Jacqui Morris, who takes over with the June issue of *Oryx*. Dr Morris was formerly Education Officer with the Sussex Trust for Nature Conservation.