

India's Threatened Wild Life

By E. P. Gee

India's wild animals and birds, famous in the old days of big and small game hunting, now lead a precarious existence. This dwindling of wild life is, of course, a well-known fact in most parts of the world; but the enormous growth of human population in India, together with the development and industrialization, is resulting in great pressure on forests and other places of animal settlement or of cultivation and grazing. Consequently the habitats of wild life in the remoter and wilder parts of the country are shrinking to such an extent that many rare species of mammals and birds have become endangered.

The era of Jim Corbett was the transitional stage between the former days of plenty for big game hunters, and the present day, when the need for conservation is so apparent in order to save what little is left. In the mid thirties Corbett saw the writing on the wall, and with a few others attempted to start wild life conservation in India, but the Second World War put an end to this. It was not until some years after independence, in 1952 to be exact, that the first Indian Inspector-General of Forests, Mr. M. D. Chaturvedi, brought the Indian Board for Wild Life into existence; this board has been functioning ever since at least in theory but with little actual effect in the field.

The reason for the ineffectuality of the centre is not hard to explain: under the constitution, wild life in India is not a central but a state subject; consequently the Union Government can do no more than recommend, advise, and coordinate. Only the 16 states and several Union territories can legislate and attempt to enforce their laws. Even national parks have to be constituted and administered by the states, though the Indian Board for Wild Life has strongly urged the states to upgrade into national parks only those sanctuaries which are approved by the centre as places of outstanding importance and national significance.

PERSONAL INTEREST

So it follows that any steps that may be necessary to ensure the survival of the country's wild life can be taken only by the state governments; and the states vary greatly in the interest they show in wild life and in the effective implementation of the wild life laws. Where the Forest Minister and Chief Conservator of Forests of a state happen to be interested in the conservation of wild life, then things get done; but where the personal interest is lacking there is a policy of *laissez faire* to the danger of wild life and wild places.

For instance, in the case of the rare Indian lion, now restricted to the Gir forest in Gujarat state and estimated to number 285, only Gujarat can take the necessary steps to upgrade the lion area into a sanctuary or national park—a measure that is expected soon. For only by effective enforcement of the law, and possibly by judicious compensation for domestic stock killed by lions, can one prevent the poisoning of carcasses (which the lions will eat) by aggrieved villagers when they have lost their buffaloes or cows.

ELEPHANT CONTROL

Similarly the government of West Bengal and, more particularly, that of Assam, are responsible for the preservation of the Indian rhino; that they are making quite a success of it is proved by an undoubted increase in the numbers of this quaint anachronism of nature. But constant vigilance has to be maintained: any temporary relaxation of control results immediately in an increase in the poaching of these creatures for their horn, which is still, even in this space age, supposedly valuable as an aphrodisiac.

Unlike Ceylon, India has no fear of losing her wild elephants. These persistently survive in numbers greater than there is room, and in many parts of India control measures have to be taken. In south and north-east India, where expert elephant-catchers annually account for many of these huge beasts, there is no problem. But in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Orissa, where the tradition of catching has died out, the problem of how to reduce the excessive elephant population is acute.

The Indian cheetah unfortunately became extinct in the late forties,

because it could not win the struggle for survival; and the pygmy hog and hispid hare seem somehow to have slipped out of existence during the past 20 years or so. But it is gratifying to note that the noble gaur, or Indian bison, the largest of the world's wild oxen, is actually increasing in some places where conservation is enforced. The fine Indian swamp deer, peculiar to this sub-continent, has also increased in Kaziranga sanctuary, though its continued existence in Kanha national park is open to doubt, because of some suspected disease as well as reported poaching.

On their swamp of a sanctuary in Manipur, about 100 brow-antlered deer are believed to survive, but they are entirely dependent on the effectiveness of the local administration. To construct an enclosure for keeping some of these unique and beautiful creatures in greater safety near their sanctuary, a grant from the World Wildlife Fund has been awaited for two years but has unfortunately not materialized. If some aid is not quickly forthcoming to save this species of deer, it may be too late.

PERSECUTED DEER

Of the two sub-species of red deer found in the sub-continent, it is feared that the Sikkim stag is either extinct or nearly so in Bhutan and north-east India. The Kashmir stag survives at a dangerously low level in Kashmir, and it is to be hoped that the Government of that state will be able to take more effective steps to preserve this grand animal. The famous little musk deer manages to live in the higher elevations of northern India, in spite of persistent persecution by all and sundry for its musk pod.

Because of their inaccessibility and endangered state, these creatures, together with some of the wild sheep and wild goats and goat-antelopes, require a high-elevation zoological park for their study and ultimate survival. A zoo of this type has been made in Darjeeling, but its smallness and meagre resources preclude much being achieved. A larger zoological park for Himalayan fauna is now being planned near Simla: if it fails to materialize, the outlook for the rarer high-elevation fauna is indeed bleak.

Of birds the pinkheaded duck unaccountably became extinct a few decades ago, and the whitewinged wood duck is becoming rarer with each passing year. But the bird that we are now most anxious about is the great Indian bustard. As in the case of the blackbuck (an antelope becoming rare these days), this large and edible bird frequents the wide open spaces where there are cultivations and grazing, and thus it is extremely difficult to protect by the sanctuary method. The possibility of keeping and breeding this species in captivity ought to be investigated before it is too late.

INTERESTING ASS

An extraordinarily interesting creature found in the extreme west of India, in semi-desert conditions in the Little Rann of Kutch, is the Indian wild ass. Formerly believed to exist in thousands, a recent brief survey made by the writer puts its present estimated population as low as 870. As with the Indian lion, the responsibility for preserving this species rests on the government of Gujarat.

It would probably be a true estimate that the numbers of the better known wild animals of India, such as tigers, leopards, deer species, blackbuck, and others, have declined to about one-tenth of what they were 50 years ago. This is understandable, and probably true of many other parts of the world, including Africa. But what is needed now is to check the decline and maintain the present level: it would even be a good thing to increase the population of certain desirable species.

At the centre there is a certain degree of zeal shown in nature conservation, and in the states varying degrees. What would be helpful now would be for a greater interest to be shown in India by international organizations and eminent biologists. These tend to concentrate on Africa and on other parts of the world, to the detriment of the magnificent wild life and wild places of India.