THE FATE OF GAME IN EAST AFRICA

By MERVYN COWIE

A crisis approaching : The havoc caused by native poachers : Safaris as an aid to conservation

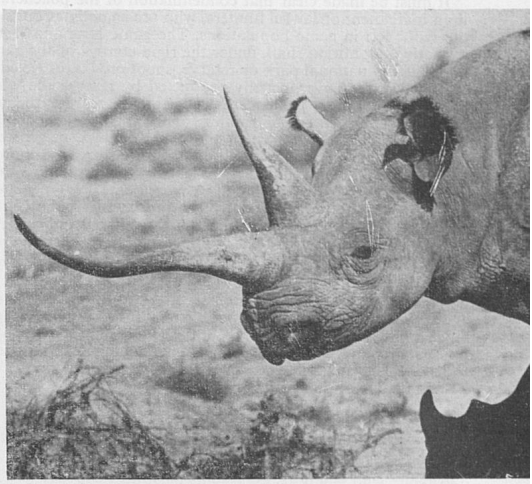
IT is logical and right that any new country should be developed to improve the standard of living of its inhabitants, to supply the needs of the world markets, and to provide an outlet for the energies of expanding populations. In this race to marshal the resources of an undeveloped land, however, we must pause to assess, and to assess very carefully, what is happening to the natural and somewhat intangible assets.

The wild life of East Africa is being rapidly and disastrously exterminated. Where in the past there were vast herds of antelopes there are now only remnants; where elephants used to roam there are now fences, plantations and towns; and where lions used to drink there are now pumping stations and pipes. This not only is inevitable but it is correct, for it would be manifestly absurd, for example, to keep most of Kenya and Tanganyika as a wild life sanctuary and to restrict all agricultural and other development. There must, however, be a limit. There must be a point beyond which the expansion of agriculture and native ranching cannot go if we wish to retain a reasonable share of nature's dominion. Unless we stop to think wisely, and decide to set aside adequate sanctuaries for wild animals, it will be too late and there will be no chance of their survival.

Nature has maintained a balance in the wilds of East Africa for thousands of years. The predators have not eliminated their prey and the herbivores have not destroyed their grazing or habitat. It is an extremely delicate balance, and the creatures that form its main elements have to contend with many problems and hardships. Droughts, locusts, floods, fires and disease continually render their existence uncertain, and only when there are large numbers of wild animals distributed over wide areas can they overcome these difficulties. A calamity affecting the game population in one area was not perhaps a disaster 50 years ago when there were many animals in other places, and any section denuded by some misfortune could in time draw replenishment from elsewhere. Any system designed for the successful preservation of wild life must embrace a variety of conditions and an extent of land greater than most observers like to admit.

During the long period in which nature maintained an equilibrium, man in his primitive state formed an element in the scheme. He lived with and on the wild creatures for thousands of years, but he did not destroy them; nor did they destroy him or his means of living. Only in the last 50 years has man in a new guise entered the arena and brought with him his machines and methods designed to meet his insatiable needs. He can, therefore, no longer be accepted as an element within the balance of nature, and his modern requirements have tipped the scales to such an extent that wild life is being thrown into confusion and driven to the point of destruction. It is not so much that the animals have been deliberately destroyed—although considerable slaughter has been undertaken for the clearance of tsetse fly—as it is a case of their not having the conditions or the habitat in which they can breed normally and, if they do breed, rear their offspring to maturity.

Thus there must be sanctuaries wherein the creatures can live and regenerate in circumstances which are just as favourable to them as were those of perhaps 50 or more years ago. This is the logical argument for the establishment of national parks and reserves as a means of granting protection to the natural scene and calling a halt to the scramble for land. In Kenya there is a group of national parks covering a variety of ground and vegetation, but only two of them offer protection to fauna. Neither of these is ecologically suitable for the preservation of any large number of animals. One, near Nairobi, is too small to support its present game populations; the other, the Royal Tsavo National Park, is, although much larger, predominantly a section of desert in which only big game and the solitary bush-dwellers can exist. In Tanganyika there is only one faunal national park at present, and this is partly shared with and threatened by thousands of useless scrub cattle. Under such conditions the wild life of Kenya and Tanganyika cannot exist in a state of natural balance, and if the trend of extermination, so apparent over the last 20 years, continues, there will be no place for the wild animal in these two countries at the end of another 20 years.



RHINOCEROS HORN is another much-prized trophy of the poachers. The bearer of this unusual specimen is affectionately known to the game rangers as Gertie.

There are still places where wild life is abundant but where it is not accorded total protection, although not used by man or his livestock. The main reason is that these places are dominated by the tsetse fly, which carries trypanosomiasis, to which wild creatures are immune, to domestic livestock. It would surely be sound policy, economically, aesthetically, and even logically, to allocate such areas to the protection of wild animals, for it is obvious that they are of no present use for any other purpose.

The choice is between holding these areas for the doubtful future expansion of the hordes of scrub cattle or for the preservation of wild animals which can never be recreated. On the one hand the scrub cattle contribute practically nothing to the economy of the country by sales of milk, meat or other products, and are merely held as wealth by their tribesman owners at the expense of the land itself, which is invariably overgrazed; on the other, the wild animals, apart from their intangible value, attract millions of pounds each year in tourist revenue from visitors and photographers.

It may well be that there are some who would claim that it is better to destroy all wild life in these places with the object of destroying the tsetse fly and so making more room for man and his livestock. This is the argument that has been presented and accepted in Rhodesia; but there the livestock was capable of contributing to the economy of the country, whereas in Kenya the expansion of areas for scrub cattle would add nothing to its markets and would enhance only the prestige of relatively rich pastoral tribes who already own and pasture vast herds. The argument that wholesale destruction of wild life will successfully eliminate one of the factors by which nature has for thousands of years prevented over-grazing is in any case not convincing.

A line on a map with a label saying "National Park" or "Reserve" does not in itself protect the animals within it, for without adequate staff, or a means of proper administration, it mainly creates a happy hunting ground for poachers. This is no idle statement, for there is at present a huge smuggling ring operating through most of Kenya and Tanganyika whereby wily African poachers take toll of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of animals each year. In Kenya their objective is mainly ivory and rhino horns. They kill with poisoned arrows, traps and muzzle-loading guns, and every year great quantities of big game are slaughtered for the value of their trophies, meat or skins. This poaching racket is operated all across the remoter regions of East Africa, and the slaughter increases as market prices rise. I estimate that in the eastern zone of Kenya alone more than 600 elephants were killed last year by poachers. Ivory is demanded in India and the East as an essential element in the price of a bride, and rhino horn is required for its alleged supernatural properties and as an aphrodisiac.

But poaching could be stopped, or at least so materially reduced that it could no longer constitute a threat to the existence of wild animals. The principal requirement is a change of attitude towards poaching on the part of the governments

LOCUSTS are another menace, but to man's crops as well as to the grazing of the herbivores.

concerned. The game departments, the national parks and the police need more men and resources to catch the traders who lurk in the shadows of the bazaars and organise the smuggling ring, and when they are caught their punishment must match their crimes, for they are crimes against posterity. Without the traders the poachers would have no markets. There is nothing to be said in defence of poaching, for it is not done from the necessity of obtaining food; it is simply the exploitation of nature's dwindling dominion for unlawful profit, and there is no hope for the remaining wild animal life unless it is stopped.

It must be made clear that condemnation of the poachers does not carry with it an indictment of lawful hunters, who are sometimes quite wrongly blamed for the reduction in game populations. The game laws and regulations require that a hunting expedition shall, under the rigid control of the game departments, and never in any national park or reserve, shoot only a restricted number of animals. Safaris are, moreover, usually conducted by responsible white hunters who are themselves honorary game wardens or at least aware of the need for preservation, and there is no chance of ruthless or unlawful destruction. In fact the hunting safari, and the fine support of the white hunters, means that the scope of the African poacher is considerably curtailed. More wild animals are saved from destruction by the salutary effect of lawful hunting safaris in remote areas which are inadequately patrolled than in a closed area seldom visited by anyone. There is no reason why properly controlled and lawful hunting should not continue in East Africa for many years, and it is more likely to be possible if certain areas are set aside as national parks and sanctuaries for the natural restocking of shooting grounds.

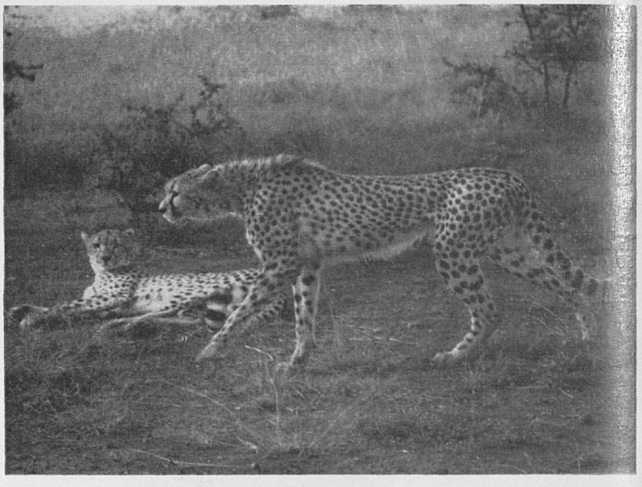
But why save wild animals at all? Is it not more simple to accept here and now that they are useless and obstructions to the necessary expansion of human endeavour? Anyone who cannot answer this question cannot very well be convinced that there is any virtue in preserving the natural scene, or perhaps growing flowers, or painting pictures. The value of wild life can be assessed only in relation to its absence. Imagine, for instance, a pretty valley or a forest glade devoid of living creatures—no squirrels, no birds, or in Africa no big game. Nothing could be a greater disaster than to wipe out all the beautiful, interesting and sometimes dangerous animals that give life to the African scene, and no words can adequately appraise the intangible, almost immortal, pleasure of seeing wild animals in their natural setting.

Anyone who is untouched by this plea must concede that there is another and perhaps very material reason to preserve wild life. All the animals that fly or roam or creep across the plains of East Africa have an earning capacity. People travel from all corners of the world to see and photograph them, and travellers spend freely in hotels, shops and transport agencies. In 1946 the amount spent by tourists in East Africa was estimated at £200,000 per annum; today that figure exceeds £5 million and is capable of still greater expansion. Thus, even if to some there is no pleasure in the beauty of nature, they must admit the economic advantage of retaining an irreplaceable asset which earns a considerable share of the national income.

It may appear that the case for preservation in East Africa is designed to favour only the rich traveller, or the soulful observer from cultured communities. but this is only the immediate phase. Africans are beginning to realise that wild animals are more than objects for destruction. They know that much of their history, their folk-lore and their customs are entwined with their knowledge of the wilds. They will, in time, regard it as a tragedy if their children cannot see the extraordinary and exciting animals which their fathers have described or to which they have dedicated many of their songs and rituals. In proof of this I point to a recent decision by one of the West African governments to examine the possibility of establishing national parks. This was a decision by an African government, not one promoted by immigrant races.

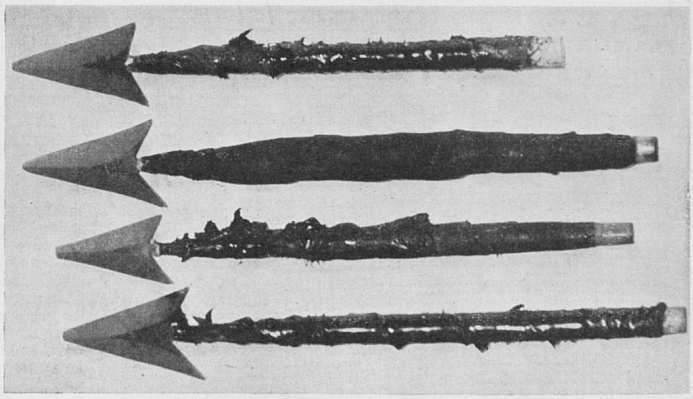
Thus the wild life of Africa is the heritage of all Africans. The extent to which it can be protected is clearly a question to be decided by the respective governments, and not, it would seem, the direct concern of people in Britain. If, however, those decisions are being unreasonably delayed, as I contend they are in Kenya and Tanganyika, then it is justifiable for the British public to express an opinion. Such opinion influences the trend of developments in colonial territories—certainly in those which are not yet fully self-governing—and it is for that reason that I appeal to people in Britain to take an interest and to take note of this warning that the wild life of East Africa is being exterminated. Unless we choose between scrub cattle and game, unless there is a change of heart, and unless we decide to preserve our wild life heritage—and that within the next few years—it will be too late.

A HERD of Grevy's zebra. Through the ages the delicate balance has been ke naturally between prey and (*below*) . . .



. . . PREDATORS. Now, in face of man's encroachment, wild life in general finds it no longer has the conditions or habitat in which to maintain it. These are cheetah.

TROPHIES the poachers stole, but did not keep. This ivory and rhino horn were recovered by African rangers.



POISONED ARROW-HEADS are commonly used by native poachers along with traps and muzzle-loading guns.