

The Journal of the United Service Institution of India

Vol. LXXXV JULY-SEPTEMBER 1955

360

The views expressed in this Journal are in no sense official, and the opinions of contributors in their published articles are not necessarily those of the Council of the Institution

EDITORIAL NOTES

The Geneva Conferences

Not since the summer of 1945 has such a surge of optimism been felt around the world as was evident after the two recent conferences held at Geneva—the “Summit” Conference of the Heads of Governments of the Big Four; and the International Conference on Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy, which brought together 1,200 scientists from 72 nations (and at which, incidentally, an Indian was elected President). The Summit Conference gave the world fresh hopes of a future free from the horrors of nuclear war; the “atoms-for-peace” gathering foretold an era of medical and commercial development in which the atom would play the part of a new Philosopher’s Stone, bringing untold wealth to nations—medical and commercial—if only they would contribute all their available knowledge into a common pool.

During the last ten years of cold war and atomic stock-piling, all scientific information regarding the developments and characteristics of nuclear energy have been kept as well-

THE PRESERVATION OF WILD LIFE IN INDIA

"AMRITAGHATA"

MANKIND is blessed with an abundance of natural resources. The exploitation of these resources tends to upset nature's environmental equilibrium. This either causes alarming over-production, as happened when the rabbit was introduced into Australia, or may result in the total extinction of a species. Countries which are scientifically and technically advanced have taken steps to ensure that their natural wealth is conserved. Even the most common minerals are not wasted. Wild life preservation is one of the forms of activity designed to conserve a nation's natural wealth.

India has a wonderful range of over 500 varieties of mammals alone, not to speak of her rich resources of bird, insect and plant life. No natural resource is more sensitive to change than our wild life and none has suffered more from lack of conservation. In the last 50 years, certain specimens have actually been exterminated.

FACTORS NECESSITATING CONSERVATION

Wild life is an integral part of our forests. The reduction of any one species of animal, insect, bird or plant tends to an imbalance which often has repercussions on human life. A shortage of pigs and deer will force tigers and panthers to depend on domestic cattle for food. There are signs that the depredations on domestic animals from adjacent reserves are increasing. Then again there are species of insectivorous birds which prey on pest of agricultural crops. Apart from this utilitarian value of wild life preservation, there is the breath-taking beauty of the species, which are not only often rare, but also characteristic of a country. To allow a species to die out by default would be a gesture of indifference for which future generations would find it difficult to forgive us.

The 1951 Census indicated that the Indian population will increase by 40% within the next 30 years. This increase of population inevitably means an extension of the cultivated area and the clearance of forest and grasslands to meet the increasing demands of food production. The problem is increased by the large-scale migration of refugees after partition.

Large tracts of jungle lands have had to be cleared to rehabilitate these displaced persons. The problem is accentuated by the opening of railways and roads through virgin land. All these activities are killing off large numbers of wild creatures.

Then there is the indiscriminate shikari, who neither abides by the closed-season rule nor any other of the shikar restrictions. He prefers to shoot at night with a powerful searchlight or take up a position in a machan overlooking either the last fresh water pond or salt-lick, which all animals are forced to use. Sometimes deer are chased and overtaken in fast jeeps and fish are dynamited in rivers. This type (one cannot use the word 'sportsman') is either determined to get his kill at any price, because he has a blood lust or because he is a professional killer who wishes to sell his kill as a trophy or for its meat value. It is surprising how many of us unconsciously connive at, if not actually take part in such activities, without realising the harm we may be doing.

Another source of damage is the local shikari, who nets and traps his game all the year round. Here again, how often we connive at this practice unconsciously. Every time we are offered partridge or quail in a restaurant, we should appreciate how this game has reached the pot. The outcome of this can only be tragic. Mhow, which was once one of the favourite 'game' cantonments is today almost barren of game due to indiscriminate netting by locals, who are well paid by local restaurant managers, catering for the large demand for game both in and out of season. Bigger game has also suffered. One could once meet deer and panther a few miles out of Mhow. These are now difficult to obtain even in reserve forests, due to the vicious activities of a handful of unsporting shikaris, one of whom openly boasted of how he had killed over fifty panthers in three years.

THE DAMAGE

These depredations, so long as they affect prolific breeds can be adjusted almost in one season by a few restrictions. There is little danger of such species being exterminated. This is unfortunately not the case with all species. An all-India survey by the Indian Board of wild life indicates that some of our characteristic and most beautiful species are facing total extinction if we do not take immediate steps to protect them.

The Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros, probably the largest of all existing rhinoceros, was once extensively distributed in the Indian

peninsula. Today it is restricted to parts of north-east India. The latest report in 1954 states that there are 547 in Assam, 43 in Bengal, 2 in Bihar and 48 in Nepal. The Gaur or Indian Bison is another majestic animal which is becoming rare, not only because of indiscriminate shooting at salt-licks but due to its susceptibility to disease spread by domestic cattle or buffaloes. The wild buffalo, though differing little in general appearance from the tame buffalo, except that it is a sleeker and more robust looking animal, is also being seriously affected by domestic animals.

The Swamp Deer, which unlike the Sambar, confidently frequents more open places becomes an easy target for poachers, who find its meat value comparing favourably to that of the Hog Deer. The goat antelopes, the Serow and Goral, both also require protection from meat hunters. The Thamin or Brow-antlered Deer, was India's most beautiful deer; nearly 4 feet high at the withers, the length of its antlers was 42 inches. No trace can be found of this beautiful creature by the Forest Department in Manipur, where these once existed in fair numbers. Suggestions have been made to re-introduce this species from Burma, but it will never be the same again, since the Burma Brow-antlered Deer is a different specimen.

Only two genera of pigs are found in India—the wild Boar and Pigmy Hog. The latter type is a diminutive pig but is reported to have disappeared from the foot-hills of Bhutan.

The Asiatic Lion was once found over the whole of Northern and Central India as far south as the Narbada. Today it is restricted to the Gir Forest in Kathiawar, where the laudable efforts of the Junagadh authorities saved them from extinction. The Clouded Leopard is however facing progressive reduction. The markings of a Clouded Leopard give it a beauty and distinction equalled by few of its tribe. The upper canine teeth of this species present the nearest approach among living cats to the great tusks of the extinct Sabre-toothed tiger. The Mysore conference of the Indian Board of wild life recommended that beautiful animal for full protection. It is hoped that its preference for thick forests will prevent its becoming extinct.

Indian mammals are not the only wild life that faces extinction. The opening of large tracts of grassland for cultivation and grazing, has made the Bengal Floriken, a beautiful large long-legged bird, become rare. A number still exist at the Kaziranga wild life sanctuary in Assam.

Several types of duck also face extinction. It is regrettable that there is no authentic evidence of the Pink-headed Duck for the last few years. Reptiles too have to be protected. The Monitor Lizard and Python are already protected in some states, but elsewhere their destruction for trade in their skins goes on undetected.

LEGISLATION

The general complaint today, is not so much of the lack of effective legislation as the lack of enforcement of existing legislation. Machinery exists for preserving wild life all over India but this has fallen into disuse through neglect. For example the Bombay Act of 1951 is generally accepted as an excellent piece of legislation but experts wonder if this can be enforced. As it stands, anyone who shoots a Bul-bul in his back garden can be prosecuted.

Under present conditions, the detection of an offender is difficult and the charges hard to substantiate. If the case is proven, the Magistrate imposes a fine of Rs. 60/- for say a Sambar, which is valued at Rs. 400/-. This is because the rates of fines were fixed, under the Wild Birds and Animals Protective Act of 1912. The value of money has since changed without the rates of fines being raised proportionately. The cost of arms licences was also worked out on the value of money 50 years ago, and requires revision.

Individuals who hold 'crop-protection' guns are also responsible for the illicit extermination of much wild life. 'Crop-protection' guns face legislators with a special problem. The handing in of such guns after the crops are reaped presents administrative difficulties and appears to be impracticable.

SOME MEASURES BEING ADOPTED

The answer appears to be a simplified and up-to-date version of the wild Birds and Animals Protective Act of 1912, stripped of all verbosity and made intelligible to the layman and capable of reduction to key slogans for propaganda posters. All efforts at enforcement should be directed in realistic stages—the first attempts being to make existing sanctuaries and reserve forests proof against poaching and illicit practices and then only giving attention to other forests, waste and private lands.

It is generally accepted that no separate Wild Life Organisation is necessary and that wild life is best looked after by the Forest Department.

However, each state will have a Wild Life Board, whose main function would be to advise the Forest Department on how wild life may be best looked after. The activities of respective State Boards will be guided by the Indian Board of Wild Life. It is of paramount importance that State Boards consist of representatives of all the important sections of public opinion and contain a strong element of non-official experts, natural historians and sportsmen. Some measures which are receiving close attention are:—

- (a) the formation of State Boards;
- (b) the opening of national parks, nature observatories, game sanctuaries and reserved forests;
- (c) the preparation of standard rules for the management of zoos, national parks and reserve forests and the training of Forest Officers in animal management;
- (d) the improvement of Forest Regulations in so far as these apply to wild life preservation, to include deterrent penalties and the cancellation of licences of habitual offenders;
- (e) the increase of power of Forest Officers to those of a Police Officer, to enable them to demand the production of gun licences and guns;
- (f) the increase of licence fees and fines to come into line with the present-day value of money;
- (g) the restriction of the activities of 'crop-protection' gun licence holders to the actual area of the crops;
- (h) the production of suitable text books for School Children and an increased emphasis on wild life preservation publicity by means of the press, radio and cinema.

CONCLUSION

No amount of legislation can prevent the destruction of our wild life unless due respect to the problem is paid by the general public. The conservation movement at present represents a few enthusiasts, nature observers, scientists and zoologists. What is required is a mass conservation movement such as in the USA or Europe.

Our Vana Mahotsava ceremonies by corporate bodies and individuals are healthy attempts to organise the public towards taking active steps for the conservation of Indian flora. However, one cannot help noticing

how misguided enthusiasm for quick results tempts the organisers to plant inferior quick-growing ornamental trees. These will no doubt serve our generation with a gratifying sense of achievement but could never be a substitute for the solid slow-growing Banian or Peepal trees, which require to be carefully nursed for longer periods.

Planning the preservation of wild life involves both long and short term measures but invariably the results are not at once visible. These will only pay dividends to the next generation. This factor is apt to discourage individual efforts.

There should be no apprehension that shooting or hunting is inconsistent with the preservation of wild life. The aim of any national wild life board is to manage the nation's wild life on the principle of conservation with the ultimate object of utilizing wild life on a sustained annual basis.

Every individual can take an active part in a national conservation programme by :—

- (a) strictly abiding by game laws;
 - (b) refusing to adopt or condone unsporting activities, *i.e.*, spot-light shooting, the stalking of water-holes and salt-licks, shooting from jeeps and the dynamiting of fish;
 - (c) refusing to accept netted game in season and reporting out of season transgressors;
 - (d) assisting the State Wild Life Boards by becoming active members wherever possible.
-