

ORYX

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The grey seal saga continues. Last October the voluntary organisations, spear-headed by the Greenpeace activists, scored a considerable victory when the Government's ill-considered Orkney seal cull was called off. This was the second of a series of culls, ordained by the Scottish Office,

Grey Seals — which so far as can be ascertained, first decided to have a cull and only then asked its scientists to justify the decision. The ngo's (non-governmental organisations) did not rest on their oars. Stimulated by FPS, the Council for Nature organised them as a Grey Seal Group and, financed by the People's Trust for Endangered Species and WWF, the Group appointed two investigators to follow up the Secretary of State's offer to consider fresh evidence before coming to a decision on the proposed third cull in the autumn of 1979. This investigation has been proceeding throughout the winter, and at the time of writing it is planned to present the Group's report to the Secretary of State at the end of April. While we cannot prejudge the issue, certain things are clear even on the most superficial examination of the facts. It is undeniable that seals eat fish, but it cannot be assumed that any fish eaten by a seal could otherwise have been caught by a fisherman—which is what fishermen, politicians and civil servants too often appear to believe. In the present case, however, the fishermen seem to be more sensible than the politicians and their civil servant advisers. Many Orkney fishermen are prepared to live with seals, provided they are allowed to take their small local cull, and fishermen who take lobsters recognise the grey seal as a friend which eats the squid that prey on lobsters. The root of the trouble is that we have almost no facts, apart from a pretty fair guess, at the total population of grey seals in British waters (70,000) and the rate at which it is increasing (7 per cent). What seals eat is largely a mystery, partly because we do not know where they spend a large part of the year. Do they go far out to sea, where they might eat the large cod and other whitefish that are economically important? Nobody knows, and hardly anybody has reported them more than ten or twenty miles offshore. If they spend all their time inshore, do they eat fish there which inshore fishermen might be catching? Again, nobody knows. And it would be very expensive to find out. What is clear, however, is that a bold decision to reduce the existing

population of grey seals by 15-20 per cent, which it might be supposed would increase substantially the number of fish available for fishermen to catch, looks a very good political ploy. That is what this particular decision appears to have been. The ngo's are not opposed to the culling of seals where it is proved necessary, and in particular do not oppose the Orkney men's traditional pup cull. But they do believe that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to prove that such a cull *is* necessary. Politicians are all too prone to believe that if they do *something*, they will be forgiven. The ngo's believe that the something the Secretary of State chose to do is a gross waste of resources that will not even help the fishermen it is designed to aid.

The Corsican red deer *Cervus elaphus corsicanus*, extinct in Corsica since 1969, now survives only in southern Sardinia in three small separated populations numbering about 230 animals all told. Poachers have been and still are their chief enemy—since 1973 it is estimated they have killed at least 30-40 each year; habitat destruction has also contributed its share to their decline. Last September the Sardinian Regional Government offered to collaborate with Corsica in conserving the red deer, so in November a party of Sardinian foresters and others inspected suitable reintroduction sites in Corsica and attended a meeting to discuss research, education and publicity, and the establishment of a captive breeding population from which reintroductions could be made. The whole project is advised and supervised by IUCN/WWF. Helmar Schenk, in promoting the new project, points out that the red deer is a species with high economic potential, and the aim should be to restore numbers in both Corsica and Sardinia to enable a harvest to be taken on maximum sustainable yield principles.

**Corsican
Red Deer for
Corsica**

The key event of the special meeting of the International Whaling Commission held in Tokyo last December was a case of the dog that didn't bark in the night. For the first time the Commission's watchdog, the Scientific Committee, which had met the week before in California, offered no advice on the quota that was the main purpose of the meeting, that of the male North Pacific sperm whale, because it judged the available scientific data to be inadequate. The wheel has come full circle: in the 60s the Commission regularly ignored its scientific advisers; now it seeks advice and is told, what many conservationists have been saying for years, that the data base is insufficient. So this quota had to be settled, as so often before, by horse-trading among the Commissioners. For female sperm whales in the North Pacific the Scientific Committee had recommended nil quotas and for the males merely offered four possible options. The Commission accepted the nil quota for females but fixed a 3800 quota for males (equivalent to last year's actual catch) and an 11 per cent by-catch (= 437) for females to allow for possible accidental catches; when the female by-catch quota is reached the

**Sperm Whale
Data
Inadequate**

whole fishery must stop. All parties regarded this result as unsatisfactory—conservationists of course wanted a nil quota for males as well as females—but it is probably about the best as a matter of practical politics. If the next meeting of the Commission is not to be equally frustrated, the IWC will have to acquire more computer hardware for its scientists than the financial straitjacket presently allows. A minor victory for the conservationists was Japan's announcement that it would not take any sperms in the Australian sector of the southern ocean, where the latest scientific assessment (made since the IWC's June 1978 meeting in London) reveals the stocks to be dangerously depleted.

Once again the Project Tiger report comments on the cumulative improvement of the habitat in several reserves as a result of taking villages out of the parks, stopping grazing by domestic animals and protecting against fire. In

**Side Effects
of
Project Tiger**

Kanha National Park both prey and predator species have dispersed widely to new areas within the park, and most are increasing, including very satisfactorily the barasingha (swamp deer), which now number over 300; this compares with 66 in 1970. This is the only known surviving population of this subspecies *Cervus duvauceli branderi*, although in his paper to the Deer Specialist Group meeting in 1977 H. S. Panwar, Field Director in Kanha, reported that, in a new 2000-sq-km sanctuary for wild buffalo in the Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh, there were reports of barasingha up to 1970; a small herd could persist there. This new reserve will be the ideal area for translocating a small herd of barasingha from Kanha when numbers and other factors make it possible. There are now 11 Tiger Reserves in India, Periyar and Sariska having been added to the original nine: Manas, Palamau, Simlipal, Corbett, Ranthambhor, Kanha, Melghat, Bandipur, and Sunderbans. All but two have a minimum 'core' area of 300 sq km where all human activity is strictly excluded.

It seems likely that 500 or so hawksbill turtles are still being killed every year in the Seychelles, reports Martin C. Garnett, recently Resident Scientific Administrator on the ICBP-owned Cousin Island, who continued the investigations of his predecessors into the turtle breeding on Cousin. For the hawksbill Cousin is one of the most important nesting sites in the north-west Indian Ocean.

**Hawksbill
Killing in the
Seychelles**

With a population estimated by Frazier at a maximum of about 575 females for all the Seychelles and outlying coral islands, and assuming an equal sex ratio, this means that something in the order of 50 per cent of the breeding population is killed each year, possibly more of the females as they are much more vulnerable than males because they come ashore to breed. The demand for hawksbill shell has increased greatly with the rapid increase in tourism following the building of the international airport in 1972, and the trade in worked tortoiseshell jewelry and other goods is now a significant item in the islands' economy. There is also a steady sale in stuffed

hawksbills, using the animals with shells too thin to be worked into the more profitable jewelry: in 1977 traders were required to register their stocks and 300 stuffed hawksbills were among them. In these circumstances, Martin Garnett suggests, where one hawksbill turtle may bring the finder the equivalent of an average labourer's monthly wage, increased hunting and improved techniques could start a decline in the populations; already hawksbills now breed only on the smaller islands, probably due to increasing disturbance and the introduction of nest predators such as rats and dogs. So far all attempts at protecting the stocks have failed—and even the dealers support some protection. But much more needs to be known about the hawksbills before a rational and effective conservation programme can be drawn up, particularly about status and distribution, numbers killed and feeding ecology. Martin Garnett ends rather ominously that 'in view of the present importance of the tortoiseshell trade to the economy it is extremely unlikely that the Government would be willing to afford complete protection to adult hawksbills'. Probably the only effective way of guarding the turtles will be by setting up reserves at key breeding sites. But the protection will have to be enforced.

The Madagascar serpent eagle *Eutriorches astur* is listed by the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP) as one of the five most endangered birds of prey in the world. No zoologist has seen it for a half a century. But in October last year Drs B-U. and C. Meyburg had reports from foresters that the bird at least survives, in the Marojejy Strict Nature Reserve in the north-east, and possibly also in the almost impenetrable primeval forest of the Masaola Peninsula, part of which was once a strict nature reserve.

**Eagles
Decline in
Madagascar**

Another large bird of prey in the island that has rapidly decreased is the Madagascar sea eagle *Haliaeetus vociferoides*, numbers of which, the Meyburgs suggest, may be down to 10 pairs. Both species urgently need protection and it seems that little is known about their biology and therefore requirements.

For many years conservationists have criticised the mismanagement and animal welfare groups the cruelty involved in the killing of harp *Pagophilus groenlandicus* and hooded *Cystophora cristata* seals in the north-west Atlantic, and this year, for the first time, the British voluntary bodies combined their voices. On February 1 representatives from the Animal Welfare Trust, FPS, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, International Fund for Animal Welfare, International Society for the Protection of Animals, Marine Action Centre, People's Trust for Endangered Species, RSPCA and WWF met in London with the Canadian High Commissioner and some of the Canadian scientists who advise on annual seal quotas. Although the groups represented a diversity of expertise and viewpoints, they had all agreed to press for a two-year halt to the kill, to give time for an investigation into its impact on populations. Conservationists maintain that the 1979 quota of 180,000 harp seals is not consistent with the Canadian policy to allow the

**Animal Groups
Combine in
Seal Protest**

admittedly depleted population of about one million to increase, and the plight of the hooded seals, with a quota of 15,000, was even more serious. Both quotas take insufficient account of the uncertainties in available data, the large number of adults killed, environmental factors, and other species in the ecosystem, such as the over-exploited fish populations resulting in depletion of the seals' food supplies. These doubts were pointed out by IUCN in a press statement issued in February before the kill took place. All the groups were also concerned about the netting of seals and about the very high wastage, and probable cruelty, of shooting seals, usually adults, in the water. Though the kill went ahead as scheduled in early March, the Canadian Department of Fisheries has promised to consult IUCN and WWF before setting the 1980 quotas, and Norway, which derives about half its sealing income from the Newfoundland hunt, has similarly promised to consult Greenpeace. Demonstrations (in London on March 10, a thousand people gathered in Trafalgar Square, outside the Canadian High Commission, to protest against the kill) have made this one of the most famous of conservation issues, as well as a confusing mixture of science and sentiment, humaneness and economics.

As expected, the US Supreme Court decision to stop the completion of the \$116 m. Tellico dam in Tennessee because it would wipe out a tiny fish, a perch called the snail darter (*Oryzias latipes*, November 1978, p295), has led Congress to

**The Snail
Darter
Survives**

amend the 1973 Endangered Species Act. But the changes are not nearly so damaging as had been feared. Section 7, which categorically prohibited Federal agencies from jeopardising the 'critical habitat' of a listed species, now allows for exemptions, though by a review process that seems sufficiently tortuous to discourage all but the most dedicated petitioner. A three-member local board, appointed anew for each case, decides whether an exemption application may go forward to a permanent, seven-member, Cabinet-level Endangered Species Committee, whose final decision must be by a majority of at least 5-2. If the application fails at either the local board or the Committee level no appeal is allowed, but the Interior Department can appeal if a possible extinction is involved, in which case the ESC has to start all over again. Grounds for exemption mainly concern lack of alternative or great overriding social benefit, the whole procedure can be dispensed with when defence or disaster is invoked, and an exemption can be declared invalid if it violates an international treaty. Of the many other details (including a redefinition of 'critical habitat' to account for economic considerations) perhaps the most likely to prevent a repeat of Tellico is a rule forbidding the petitioning agency to spend any money on its project until the exemption is in hand. How this will work in practice of course remains to be seen, but the amendments might well have been worse, and the Act's overall integrity appears to have survived. The first test, appropriately, was Tellico itself, which, along with Wyoming's Grayrocks Dam, a project that would have withheld water from a whooping crane resting place on the Platte River in Nebraska, had been specifically allowed to bypass the local board stage and go

straight to the ESC, which has 'upheld' the Supreme Court's decision: the Committee ruled unanimously that the Tellico dam may not be closed, and that Grayrocks must allow enough water through to keep the Platte wetlands wet. However, the reason for refusal of the Tellico closure was not to save the endangered fish but because, although the dam was 90 per cent completed, it was ruled uneconomic to complete it.

The Alaska Lands Bill—which according to the Library of Congress has attracted more public participation than any issue since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and entailed, in the words of its proposer, Representative Morris Udall of Arizona, 'the most tireless, detailed and sophisticated study that I've seen in my career'—was killed in the closing days of the 95th Congress by the two Alaskan Senators, Ted Stevens and Mike Gravel, the first by obstructing and weakening a final committee report and the second by filibuster. Fortunately, President Jimmy Carter foiled both of them by subsequently invoking the rather obscure 1906 Antiquities Act to preserve most of the land in question as National Monuments, which it will remain until Congress has had a chance to pass the original legislation. This calls for some 90 million acres of virgin land to be set aside under various national parks, forests and wildlife refuges, a policy opposed by Alaskans who would like a free hand to exploit their State's timber, game and mineral wealth, but largely supported by residents of the 'Lower 48', who regret the disappearance of so much of their own wilderness. The 17 National Monuments declared by the President could be made to cover only 56 million acres, but these include the nation's highest mountain, largest virgin forest and longest unpolluted river; and most of the remaining land is already administered in one way or another by the Federal Government. That a Bill will eventually become law, and in the next Congressional session, is all but certain, but it will not measure up to the original Bill.

In 1965 the largest number of vicuñas in South America was in the Pampa de Galeras, 12,000 ft up in the Andes. It still is. But whereas in 1965 there were only about 1000, today there are nearly 40,000. This is a major success story; unfortunately the numbers are far more than this National Reserve can stand. A two-year drought has exacerbated the situation and an average of 10 vicuñas are dying of starvation every day. The reserve, the land for which was given by the local people, cannot be enlarged, so this year it is planned to translocate 5800 animals by truck to other parts of Peru and to cull 10,000 more. This has aroused some criticism, especially as some will be sold. But of course cropping is what was envisaged in 1965 when the reserve was established. Pierre Pierret, of FAO, one of the prime movers of the project, believed then that cropping could start 'in two to three years, thus providing valuable fur and meat for the villagers'. If this crop can be established there will be some hope of persuading the villagers to reduce the number of domestic

**The Battle
for
Alaska**

**Vicuña
Success
Story**

cattle which share the reserve, and thus allow more grazing for vicuñas. At its recent meeting in Costa Rica the Survival Service Commission of IUCN congratulated Peru on its remarkable success with the vicuña and on devoting considerable resources to the task. What all conservationists would like to see, of course, is the revival of the ancient method practised by the Incas of rounding up the vicuñas regularly to shear the wool, and this Antonio Brack, the manager of the project, hopes to be able to achieve, and to do it as a major tourist attraction.

Islands are particularly vulnerable to damage by introduced animals and plants. Islands with arid ecosystems are more vulnerable than most, as their sparse vegetation can so easily be overgrazed. Fuerteventura in the Canaries is one that has recently been put at such risk by the careless

**The Squirrels
that
Got Away**

release of a species of North African squirrel, which is spreading rapidly. Some time between 1966 and 1970, so Antonio Machado of the ICONA, the official Spanish Wildlife Conservation body, told the recent workshop on Arid Ecosystems in Cairo, the owner of some of these squirrels, which he kept as pets, released two or three pairs. Later at least two more pairs were set free elsewhere in the island. By February 1978 the Barbary squirrel *Atlantoxerus getulus*, which looks not unlike the common Indian palm squirrels, was found to be widespread over the arid mountain ecosystems of Fuerteventura, whose desolate landscape looks like a detached part of the Sahara, which is only 110 km away. The squirrels are, of course, vegetarian, and little is yet known about their diet on Fuerteventura or whether they are likely to become a pest to crops or to reduce still further the scanty vegetation of the arid zone. They may yet prove to be harmless and even a tourist asset on an island with rather little wildlife. But it would have been better not to embark on yet one more unsolicited experiment on the colonisation of a new habitat by a possibly harmful rodent. The grey squirrel in Britain is a reminder of what can happen.

Unbelievable as it may seem there is a very real danger that a railway line will be built right across the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania—one of the wildlife wonders of the world, with its vast array of African mammals and the wonderful spectacle of the great annual wildebeest and zebra migrations. Several routes for such a railway have

**A Railway
Across
the Serengeti**

been suggested, including one by the Serengeti Research Station, which would do least damage. But the latest one, put forward by Japanese consultants, and now being considered, could not, according to one expert, be on a worse route to cause disturbance. It cuts right across the main plains areas used by the migrating wildebeest and zebra, and also across the main migration route to and from their crucial dry-season refuge to the north. One of the most damaging effects of the railway is likely to be on the fragile fine volcanic ash soils of the eastern Serengeti plains, where the use of heavy machinery would inevitably cause serious erosion, and the Japanese-prepared route goes a maximum distance

over these areas. Inevitably the railway will attract settlement. Why the route recommended by the Research Institute was rejected is not known, but the importance of the many years of research and continuous monitoring in the park done by the scientists at the SRI is now very clear, for without all this information it would be very difficult to explain to the government why the railway would do so much damage and very difficult to put up a really good case for not only considering but finding a less damaging route. The sad thing is that the funding from overseas that supported both the SRI research and the park management has ceased. Inevitably poaching has increased and even houses have been built in the park, quite illegally of course. Once again the model for what is needed in the Serengeti is surely the Charles Darwin Research Station in Galapagos, where international money pays for the invaluable scientific presence and scientific research, working always in close cooperation with the national parks authorities.

The conservation groups achieved most of their objectives at the second meeting of the Parties to CITES—Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species—in San José, Costa Rica, in March, at which FPS was

**More Species
Protected
by CITES**

IUCN's TRAFFIC Group. All whales, dolphins and porpoises, all birds of prey (except New World vultures) and all owls were added to Appendix II (unless already on Appendix I); proposals to remove some of the cats from the Convention altogether were successfully opposed, and Grévy's zebra, a species in which the FPS has taken a special interest, was added to Appendix I (no trade of any kind allowed). Trade in Appendix II species is only permitted on licence from the exporting country, and a number of species are listed on Appendix II for monitoring, so that they can be effectively managed *before* they are in danger of extinction. If all the changes in the Appendices agreed are implemented we should see effective conservation for the species concerned, but the reports and discussions at the meeting showed only too clearly that in some countries the Convention is barely working at all. Using the evidence of data presented by TRAFFIC (Trade Records Analysis of Fauna and Flora in Commerce), Suriname and Brazil strongly criticised the UK and the Federal Republic of Germany for allowing imports of apparently smuggled wildlife, including tens of thousands of wild feline skins in 1977 alone. One of the most controversial issues was a proposal by the US Government to suspend temporarily the Berne Criteria. These are the strict criteria developed at the previous meeting of the Parties (in Berne) governing the addition and (more important) deletion of species from the Appendices. Eventually the UK proposed an amendment which effectively reinstated them. A proposal by the UK, Switzerland and West Germany for the adoption of a minimum list of parts and products to be controlled was rejected. The Government delegations were divided, but the conservation groups were unanimously opposed, believing, on the basis of past experience, that once adopted many countries would do no more, and the minimum list would become in effect a maximum list.