

Wildlife Imports in Great Britain

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On 3rd March 1973 the British Government signed in Washington the 'Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora'. This, when it is ratified, will govern the trade in hundreds of kinds of mammals, birds, reptiles, fish and other animals, besides many plants. Its implementation will set Great Britain and the other signatories an onerous task.

From a conservation point of view, living wild animal imports are at present controlled by the Protection of Birds Acts of 1954 and 1967, and the Animals (Restriction of Importation) Act, 1964. Their implementation, at places of animal entry, rests upon Customs officers, who have a wide range of other duties and are often hard pressed. There is not, at any port or airport in Great Britain, an organisation to deal adequately with the identification and subsequent disposal of even the present influx of living birds and other animals, still less to impose the further control which will be needed under the new Convention.

Now is the time to put this right, and the moment is politically opportune because of the drastic restrictions on the importation of mammals which are now being imposed, due to the danger of rabies from the Continent.

Since 1939 a rabies epizootic has been spreading across Europe from the east, chiefly through the fox populations. By 1968 it had crossed the Rhine into Belgium, Luxembourg and France. In 1970 the danger of its entry into Great Britain resulted in the appointment of the Waterhouse Committee, whose Report, published in June 1971, recommended:

1. The introduction of comprehensive legislation governing all mammal importations, to be implemented by a single authority.
2. The imposition of six months quarantine on all mammals with a rabies risk—this included nearly all mammals usually imported. Cattle, horses and related animals are considered separately.
3. Restriction on the entry of 'quarantine' mammals to designated ports and airports.
4. Provision of temporary quarantine facilities at these designated places of entry.
5. Appointment of a government veterinary Portal Officer at each designated place of entry, with responsibility for all aspects of animal importations.

Implementation

The Rabies (Importation of Mammals) Order 1971 No 2045 gave effect to some parts of the Waterhouse Report—notably the imposition of quarantine and the restriction of entry (to eight ports and six airports), but no comprehensive legislation on the import of mammals has been introduced, no quarantine facilities have been provided at the designated ports and airports, and no portal officers have been appointed. Indeed at any considerable place of entry,

Heathrow Airport for example, the services of such an officer would be of little use without a quarantine station to receive the animals, which are brought in by many airlines, each with its own reception shed. Cargoes may come in almost simultaneously, to widely separated sheds, at any time of the day or night.

At Heathrow plans are now being considered to deal with temporary quarantine for rabies-risk mammals. But they do not take into account the likely need to quarantine other kinds of animals for other diseases, for which future research may yet show the need. Nor do they give any consideration to conservation, although the importation of many animals is already controlled on conservation grounds, and many more will be controlled under the Washington Convention.

Recommendations

Perhaps it is not surprising that plans based only on rabies prevention should exclude other aspects, but it is a short-sighted view. The Waterhouse recommendations of comprehensive legislation to govern all mammal imports, and restricted places of entry, ought to be extended to the import of all living wild animals. The recommended quarantine facilities should become reception centres, with separate facilities for quarantine and other animals. At each reception centre, the portal officer should have responsibility for the centre and for all other aspects of animal imports—health, conservation, welfare.

Note: The FPS is taking steps to secure the appointment of portal officers at the designated ports for mammal imports. *The Times* on July 14 published a letter from our Hon. Secretary, Richard Fitter, urging the Government to do this.—*Editor*.

Wild Nature Comes First

General Mobutu Sese Seko, President of the Republic of Zaire, in a speech last year during which he announced that national parks would be expanded in the next few years to cover 12–15 per cent of the country, also said,

‘We refuse to follow blindly the trend of “developed” countries that want production at any price. We have certain advantages in being under-equipped. We do not believe that peace and happiness is dependent on the number of cars in the garage, the television antennae on the roof, or the amount of noise that technicians say can be endured. . . . What does it help to have innumerable factories if their chimneys spread poisonous products over us day and night? We do not want destructive industries that kill the fish in our rivers, depriving people of the pleasure of fishing or drinking clean water. Our ambition is to make our country a paradise of nature. We do not intend to sell crocodile skins for handbags. We want first to study these animals because we want to preserve them in our national parks. . . . We believe that the industrialised countries are running the risk every moment of becoming poorer and losing their identity. When scientists have created an artificial world our desire is that in Zaire wild nature will survive.’