

Red Data Books

It is arguable that the most brilliant single idea in wildlife conservation in the past quarter of a century has been the Red Data Books for endangered species. They are certainly the most widely known activity of IUCN, and were the brain-child of Sir Peter Scott, for many years Chairman of IUCN's Survival Service Commission and now, among many other distinctions, President of the ffPS. The first RDBs, compiled by Noel Simon for mammals and Jack Vincent for birds, were published in 1966. The amount of material available, together with the accelerating slide of so many animals towards extinction, soon made the original horse-and-buggy arrangements for compiling the RDBs out of date, and there was a serious possibility that they would cease to be regarded as the authoritative works of reference they had become. Fortunately there were sufficient concerned people to persuade WWF and IUCN into financing the Species Conservation Monitoring Unit at Cambridge (now part of the IUCN Conservation Monitoring Centre), and for the first time the RDB operation was properly housed, staffed and equipped.

The firstfruits of the united effort that launched SCMU have now appeared in Part 1 of a new edition, in bound not loose-leaf form, of *The IUCN Mammal Red Data Book*, edited by Jane Thornback and Martin Jenkins.* There are now so many endangered mammals, and so much more is known about them that the RDB has had to be split in two, which is done on geographical not systematic lines. Here the 155 endangered mammals of the Americas and Australasia are dealt with in 516 pages. The creation of SCMU has enabled the research to be even more thorough than was possible before and the team of correspondents even more extensive. One can confidently say that nobody, anywhere in the world, is in a position to produce a more authoritative survey. The effort that was put into setting up the Cambridge centre has paid off.

Endangered Birds of the World is a Smithsonian Institution Press reprint of the ICBP Bird Red Data Book, unaltered from the original text by Warren King published in 1977 and 1979. It therefore antedates SCMU, and is now under active revision by the new ICBP RDB compiler, Nigel Collar, working alongside the IUCN compilers in Cambridge, where ICBP itself shares an office building with the Conservation Monitoring Centre. It is of the greatest value to have this important reprint, at a price which ordinary individuals as well as libraries may be able to afford.†

* Available IUCN, Avenue du Mont Blanc, CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland. £10.

† Available Hereward Books Ltd, Unit 3, 33 Woodthorpe Road, Ashford, Middlesex TU15 2RP. Hardback £15.00 plus £1.75 p and p, Softback £6.50 plus £0.75 p and p.

Illegal Snake-Skin Trade

An estimated \$60 million worth of snake-skins are still smuggled out of India every year. At present there are 15 million snake-skins and 200,000 lizard skins in Madras city alone and this is declared stock – undeclared illegal stock is anybody's guess. Smuggling is easy across the 1000-mile border with Nepal which does not prohibit exports. One rodent specialist has suggested that snake catchers should turn to rats – new techniques for tanning and finishing rat skin make it suitable for shoes and purses. All that remains is for fashion-conscious westerners to make the switch.