

CONFERENCES & MEETINGS

BRITISH NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION 75th ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE 'WHAT FUTURE FOR THE NATURAL WORLD—ECOLOGICAL BASIS FOR NATURE CONSERVATION', HELD AT THE HAYES CONFERENCE CENTRE, SWANWICK, DERBYSHIRE, ENGLAND, 7–9 NOVEMBER 1980

The British Naturalists' Association (B.N.A.) was founded by E. Kay Robinson in 1905. It has always sought to bridge the gap between professional and amateur biologists, to further the study of natural history, and to promote wildlife conservation. During its 75th Anniversary Conference a film was shown, made by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and there was also an exhibition of photographs, staged by Eric Hosking, illustrating 50 years of wildlife photography. A Vice-President of B.N.A. and the world's first full-time wildlife photographer, Eric Hosking remains today a leading innovator and undisputed master of his art. An exhibition of British and European flowers was also mounted by Desmond and Marjorie Parrish, who contributed a beautifully illustrated lecture on the flora of Europe, stressing the need for the protection of wild plants.

Other speakers included Roger Tabor, Editor of *Country-Side*, on the bleak outlook for the world's wildlife over the next 25 years, and with special reference to India. Dr Frank Perring, Director of the Society for the Promotion of Nature Conservation, discussed the role of nature conservation in the United Kingdom. He was extraordinarily pessimistic about wildlife conservation in view of the dramatic losses that have taken place in most habitats over the past 30 years—even those rated for protection as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)—although he was more optimistic about wildlife organizations.

Desert expansion engendered by human misuse of the environment was described and illustrated by Professor J. L. Cloudsley-Thompson, Chairman of B.N.A., while Dr Conrad Gorinsky expressed deep concern about the destruction of the Amazon rain-forests, proposing that the integrity of the remaining virgin forests should be protected, as there are already vast regions of secondary forest and destroyed areas which might be rehabilitated. In preserving the natural forest we have a responsibility towards those human societies which have sustained relationships with the ecosystems that have not yet been investigated.

Dr David Bellamy, the Guest of Honour, gave a dramatic after-dinner speech, pointing out that it is necessary to make people realize in economic terms that conservation is the *only* way ahead. We cannot conserve in relation to a population explosion, and we have to go about positively making conservation a part of the world economy. The final paper in the Conference was given by Dr Brien O'Connor, Deputy Director of the Nature Conservancy Council. 'The pace of change in the countryside is now so dramatic and so widespread', he said, 'that we really are in danger of serious habitat loss, as marginal land is now under threat to agriculture, forestry, and recreational use'.

Much of the discussion was concerned with the British Government's Order amending the Agricultural and Horticultural Grants Schemes. Whereas archaeological and

architectural monuments are now strictly protected, the Nature Conservancy Council has not been able to fulfil its functions over SSSIs (Sites of Special Scientific Interest), which becomes even more worrying when one considers that these might represent only 10% or less of those areas that are of scientific interest. Farming today is a major industry, heavily subsidized by Government funds—the tax-payers' money—to produce *inter alia* further unnecessary surpluses for the EEC at the expense, on public and private land alike, of the few remaining hedges, ditches, and copses, of the once-beautiful British countryside. Even so, a backlash against environmentalists is developing: their every error, every exaggeration, and any fault, is seized upon and criticized. 'We must make every effort', said David Bellamy, 'to ensure that we get our facts right'. The anti-conservationists' and farmers' lobby are wealthy and powerful adversaries: we cannot afford to play into their hands!

John L. Cloudsley-Thompson
Department of Zoology
Birkbeck College (University of London)
Malet Street
London WC1E 7HX
England, U.K.

MEETING OF THE CONTRACTING PARTIES TO THE CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF WETLANDS OF INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE, ESPECIALLY AS WATERFOWL HABITAT: HELD AT CAGLIARI, SARDINIA, ITALY, 24–29 NOVEMBER 1980

This was the first meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Convention on Wetlands, commonly known as the 'Ramsar Convention' after the town in Iran at which it had been adopted in 1971. It is one of the four global conventions—the others are on trade in species, migratory species, and the World Heritage—which the World Conservation Strategy suggests all countries should adhere to as soon as possible.

The Ramsar Convention is designed to encourage the protection of the world's most important wetlands—especially those which are critical as the habitat for waterfowl. Under it, parties commit themselves to strengthen wetland conservation generally, and to identify and list certain sites for particular protection because of their international significance. Criteria relating to waterfowl have been developed, by the International Waterfowl Research Bureau (IWRB), to assist countries to establish whether wetland sites merit inclusion in the international list.

Twenty-nine countries now belong to the Convention, which is reasonably well represented in the Western Palaearctic region (Europe, the Soviet Union, the Middle East, and North Africa), but with only a handful of other countries farther afield. More than six million hectares of land, in well over 200 sites, have been listed as of international importance under the Convention.

The Meeting took place at Cagliari near the end of November 1980. It was convened by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), which provides the interim bureau for the Con-

vention. The Contracting Parties received documents, prepared by IWRB and IUCN, which summarized the achievements of the Convention and critically assessed what might be done to strengthen its effectiveness.

In recommendations adopted at the end of the Meeting, the Contracting Parties called upon more States to support the Ramsar Convention, so as to increase its impact—especially by strengthening the protection of habitats for migratory birds—and called upon States which are already parties to the Convention to designate more sites. Other recommendations called for more support by international development agencies for wetland conservation, and for national action to draw up wetland conservation policies. Many of these recommendations reflected the concern of delegates about the threats posed to wetlands by drainage projects, irrigation schemes, dams, industrial development, pollutant disposal, and other activities in which conservation interests have been largely overlooked.

The parties also agreed that steps should be taken to strengthen the Convention—for example by providing a permanent Secretariat with associated financing arrangements. Until such a permanent Secretariat can be established, IUCN's interim responsibilities will continue. A recommendation of the Meeting called on the contracting parties to make voluntary contributions to IUCN to enable it to carry out this latter function more effectively; recent developments indicate an encouraging response by a number of the parties. By 1982, IUCN hopes to be able to employ a staff member to promote the Ramsar Convention and thus enable it to play a stronger role than hitherto in conserving these vulnerable resources.

Adrian Phillips, Programme Director
I.U.C.N.
Avenue du Mont-Blanc
1196 Gland, Switzerland.

WORKSHOP ON THE ROLE OF TROPICAL FORESTS IN
THE GLOBAL CARBON CYCLE, HELD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEW HAMPSHIRE, DURHAM, NEW HAMPSHIRE,
USA, DURING 7–10 DECEMBER 1980

The Ecosystems Center of the Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole, Massachusetts, has long been working on the contribution of terrestrial biota, and notably of tropical forests, to the buildup of carbon dioxide in the global atmosphere. This interest has been exemplified by the Center's Director, Dr George M. Woodwell, who has published widely on the topic in *Science*, *Scientific American*, and other leading journals.

Woodwell is a proponent of the view that buildup of atmospheric carbon dioxide is due not only to the burning of fossil fuels, but also to the burning of tropical forests. In all three regions of the tropical forest biome, much wood is despatched in the form of useless smoke each year, at the hands of forest farmers, cattle ranchers, and others who put a match to appreciable tracts of forest in order to make way for croplands and pasture-lands. The process releases substantial amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, followed by more carbon when soil humus is exposed to the air and oxidized.

This conclusion, proposing that burning of tropical forests is a major factor in the global carbon cycle, is supported by many reputable scientists. Equally, it is opposed by rather many others. The question needs to be resolved with all urgency, in view of the massive environmental repercussions that may ensue if the carbon dioxide content of the global atmosphere continues to increase, with a 'greenhouse effect' on climates in all parts of the Earth.

To further the Center's work on this question, Woodwell and his colleagues called together a workshop at the University of New Hampshire, which was held during 7–10 December 1980. Participants included foresters, tropical ecologists, and soil scientists, from various parts of the United States, plus experts from Brazil, Venezuela, England, West Germany, and Kenya, as well as from FAO. A few of the participants presented the opinion that deforestation trends in the humid tropics are not nearly so widespread as has been suggested (see, for example, the high rates of deforestation postulated by N. Myers, *Conversion of Tropical Moist Forests*, National Research Council, Washington, DC; 1980; *Global 2000 Report*, Council on Environmental Quality, The White House, Washington, DC, 1980; and *The World's Tropical Forests: A Policy, Strategy and Program for the United States*, Report of US Inter-Agency Task Force on Tropical Forests, US State Department, Washington, DC, 1980).^{*} A strong consensus emerged from the workshop, however, to the effect that the practice of forest farming in many parts of the tropical rain-forest biome no longer amounts merely to *shifting* cultivation—allowing a secondary forest, with its immense capacity to soak up carbon dioxide, to establish itself. Rather do the forest farmers appear in the guise of 'squatter peasants' and 'spontaneous settlers' who, advancing upon the forest in 'waves' of thousands of persons, allow forest ecosystems next to no chance to regenerate in any substantial form.

At the end of four days of intensive discussions, the quantified conclusions were fed into a computer model, which in due course will produce a refined estimate of the amount of carbon that is purportedly being released from tropical forests each year. The betting is somewhere between one and five gigatons (each of one thousand million metric tonnes), with a hunch towards the higher end of the range. Obviously a more concise determination of tropical forest burning is eagerly awaited by several agencies that are preoccupied with this issue, notably the US Department of Energy and the International Council of Scientific Unions' Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment (SCOPE).

Norman Myers
Consultant in Environment and Development
Senior Associate of World Wildlife Fund—US
P.O. Box 48197
Nairobi
Kenya.

^{*}We feel we should add here Dr Norman Myers's 'The Present Status and Future Prospects of Tropical Moist Forests', which we published in our issue of last Summer (*Environmental Conservation*, 7(2), pp. 101–14, 1980), and which engendered Roger de Candolle's 'Open Letter' on pages 2–3 of our last issue.—Ed.