

FAUNA CONSERVATION IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

(The following paper was presented by the Superintendent to the Biological Sciences Section of the Pan Indian Ocean Science Association during its recent meeting in Perth).

In this very brief review of fauna conservation in Western Australia, I propose to confine my remarks to mammals (except whales, seals and other marine forms) and birds. In doing so I largely follow the Fauna Protection Act of this State, for in the definition of "fauna" only reptiles and frogs, in addition to the two groups named, are included.

Some difficulty is encountered by fauna conservationists in Western Australia in implementing conservation programmes. Although there is no overt opposition from the people as a whole, there is nevertheless widespread indifference to fauna conservation. At the same time, by some sections of the community, notably farmers and pastoralists, fierce opposition is frequently voiced to laws which in effect protect fauna which undoubtedly take heavy toll of crops, stock, pastures and property in certain areas. Western Australia's economy is predominantly agricultural, and any undesirable impact on agriculture is, they argue, detrimental to the State at large. It is, of course, a case of giving a dog a bad name, and because some protection is afforded to fauna which damage agricultural holdings, few farmers have any sympathy with fauna conservation at all, despite the fact that only a very small proportion of the fauna may be said to be harmful.

Today land settlement schemes involving the clearing of hundreds of thousands of acres of new country are being vigorously pursued. All this clearing is destroying natural fauna habitats, and the fauna is being driven to other areas, principally settled areas, in search of food. Old-established crops and pastures, and crops and pastures which new settlers are endeavouring to establish, are being actually damaged or seriously threatened by hordes of migrant fauna, and many farmers are indeed fighting a losing battle against their depredations. It is little wonder, therefore, that influential people, both in and out of Parliament, are clamouring for modification, if not actual repeal, of many of the fauna laws.

Another factor which makes fauna conservation difficult is the popularity of many of the birds and animals for both food and sport. Particularly in less settled areas, which in most cases are remote from towns and where diet variants are not easily obtained, settlers look upon it as a right to take any fauna at all as food, and in actual fact one would be hard put to discover a plausible reason for denying them that right. Then there is the sporting shooter who does not readily accept curtailment of his activities. Both these classes have their supporters - some of them extremely vocal - and the matter of conservation is still further complicated.

A further very important factor is the large area of this State - almost a million square miles - and the relatively small population. It is just not possible for the State, with comparatively slender financial resources, to appoint sufficient personnel to provide even a modicum of supervision for most areas.

So by and large the problem of fauna protection in Western Australia is not an easy one. If little appears to have been achieved it must not be thought that a defeatist attitude has been taken up. On the other hand, there is much evidence that the Government is fully alive to the requirements of the situation, even if nothing spectacular has yet emerged. All sections of the community have a right to be heard, and their views weighed, and the best that can ever be expected in a State like this is the attainment some day of a proper balance between the needs of agriculture and the needs of conservation.

The fauna protection laws were first codified in 1912, when the Game Act was passed by Parliament. The very name of the Act is an index to the popular view of those days. All fauna at that time were regarded merely as game. Without any doubt the legislators and public of forty years ago would have regarded the present day concept of conservation as ridiculous. Protect game as game, by all means! Fish are protected so that better fishing will be available in the future, so why not protect game so that we shall have bigger and better game! But to conserve fauna, for the sake of fauna itself, or on purely aesthetic grounds, perish the thought! Our forbears were far too practical for that! At the same time, despite many shortcomings in the new

code (some amendments in 1913 did improve matters slightly), there were a few good features. It was possible to proclaim reserves for native game, to declare game strictly preserved in the whole or any part of the State, and to establish close seasons. In the majority of cases, however, because there was little or no supervision, many of the reserves were reserves in name only, and very little was done to ensure that close seasons were observed. True, hundreds of honorary guardians of game were appointed all over the State, but because they were almost entirely out of touch with the administration, from whom in any case they received little encouragement, they served no useful purpose.

For more than thirty years fauna conservationists struggled to make their voices heard and to have the rather inadequate legislation replaced by something better. At last, in the 1940's, a new spirit had been awakened in official circles, and the Government, by administrative action, set up a Fauna Advisory Committee to advise the Minister on all phases of fauna conservation. The personnel comprised the Chief Guardian of Game as Chairman, one man who was an authority on the marsupial fauna of Australia, and two noted ornithologists. Later, in order the better to co-ordinate the activities of the fauna protection and vermin control authorities, the Chief Vermin Inspector was added to the committee. Early in the life of the committee, the members became seized with the importance of habitat preservation and the initiation of investigations into the life histories of different fauna. Its recommendations included the appointment of at least one full-time guardian of game, and revision of the existing code. Both recommendations were accepted by the Government.

The code was wholly re-cast and modernised with the passing of the Fauna Protection Act, 1950. The date of commencement was fixed as July 1, 1952. The name of the Act is itself evidence of the change of heart of the legislature in the four decades between the enactment of the original and the existing codifications. Conservation is now the keynote of the legislation. Fauna is no longer merely game, and the policy of the administration has changed accordingly. Although the new law did not go as far as strict conservationists would have liked, it must nevertheless be taken as an earnest of the new concept which has been developed in the

community by bodies like the Royal Society of Western Australia, the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union and the Western Australian Naturalists Club; all of which have played their part in giving publicity to conservation principles.

The old advisory committee was reconstituted by the Fauna Protection Act and given statutory authority under the name of the Fauna Protection Advisory Committee. Its personnel was widened, and now consists of the Chief Warden of Fauna as Chairman, the Chief Vermin Control Officer, the Conservator of Forests and three other persons at least one of whom must be a person, other than a civil servant, who has a wide, practical knowledge of the native fauna of Western Australia. Its duty is to inquire into and report to the Minister on any matters referred to it by him or by the Chief Warden of Fauna in relation to the conservation of fauna in the State, and on the effect or likely effect on the conservation of native fauna of the importation of fauna from outside the State. The Committee is therefore the body to whom the Minister and the Chief Warden turn for advice when framing fauna conservation policy.

The Act provides that all fauna is protected unless the Governor declares it to be unprotected, although because of the specific provision that the Act shall not apply to any fauna which has been declared vermin under the Vermin Act, the power of the administration is not absolute. At the same time, the appointment of the Chief Vermin Control Officer as a member of the advisory committee, and of the Chief Warden of Fauna as a member of the Agriculture Protection Board, which administers the Vermin Act, has resulted in much better co-ordination and reduced overlapping as between the two somewhat conflicting authorities.

The Governor is empowered to proclaim open seasons and close seasons and to declare any Crown land to be a sanctuary for fauna. In the Minister reposes the power to issue licenses to take fauna, whether protected or unprotected, and to carry out investigations into the conservation and protection of fauna. He is authorised to enter into agreements with landholders for the use of their lands as sanctuaries.

Certain government employees, e.g., inspectors of fisheries and police and forest officers, are ex officio wardens of fauna, and a number of interested citizens have been appointed honorary wardens. The powers of the latter, while they fall short of those of wardens, are still reasonably wide.

The present situation in Western Australia is that the new fauna protection law has not been in operation sufficiently long to have had a fair trial, although the indications are that progress is now possible. The clothing of the advisory committee with statutory powers encourages the belief that it will achieve more than the old non-statutory body was able to do. Already it has strongly expressed the view that the preservation of the habitat, and for this end the creation of a number of suitable sanctuaries, is the only realistic approach to the question of fauna conservation in this agricultural community. The Committee believes that now, before all Crown lands are alienated - and alienation is proceeding apace - there should be a survey of future conservation needs. Any land which will be required either now or in the future should be set aside forthwith, and so tied up as to render future alienation difficult, if not impossible. It holds the opinion that national parks which are also fauna sanctuaries should not suffer through being "improved" by their controlling bodies, generally as an excuse to raise funds for further "improvements". Furthermore the "development" of certain coastal plain country by the draining of swamps for agricultural purposes should, the Committee considers, be sternly discouraged. They are the natural breeding places of many varieties of waterfowl.

The Committee and the departmental administration are working in very close co-operation with the officers of the Wildlife Survey Section of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, several of whom are located in Western Australia. Greater Treasury appropriations have made possible the appointment of additional officers, and enabled the administration to commence a wild-duck banding programme. Some publicity in regard to the need for better conservational measures has also been given. What will be the final outcome, only the future can tell.