

SUBMISSIONS TO THE WILDLIFE INQUIRY

In 1970 a House of Representatives Select Committee was appointed to inquire into and report on Wildlife Conservation in Australia.

The Committee was asked to report on the following:—

- (a) The need for an urgent and comprehensive survey of wildlife populations including birds, mammals of the land and water, and reptiles, and their ecology to enable conservation measures to be effectively applied to threatened species;
- (b) The adequacy of the several systems of national parks, reserves, etc., of the States and territories to ensure that at least the minimum areas of the major animal habitats and the wildlife of the continent are preserved, held securely, and are properly managed in the national interest;
- (c) The effects of pollution and the widespread use of pesticides on wildlife population;
- (d) The effect on the population of kangaroos of the trade in meat and hides and the effect of other industrial exploitation on wildlife;
- (e) The need for international and interstate agreements for the effective conservation of migratory animals;
- (f) The threat presented to wildlife by the large numbers of domestic animals gone wild, particularly in northern Australia; and
- (g) The need for a Commonwealth wildlife conservation authority.

Under the chairmanship of Mr. E. C. M. Fox, M.P., the Select Committee visited Perth during February.

Submissions were made by the Department of Fisheries and Fauna, the Museum and a number of other organisations concerned with wildlife and conservation.

A resumé of the Department's submissions follow.

(a) THE NEED FOR A SURVEY

Dr. A. A. Burbidge, Senior Research Officer, who put the Department's submissions, said that the Department considered that there was a definite need for a wildlife survey not only of birds, mammals and reptiles (as indicated in the Committee's terms of reference) but also of amphibia, fresh-water fish, invertebrate groups, and plants, as the aim of any conservation measure should be to preserve representative ecosystems, not just individual species.

It was indicated that a comprehensive survey would either confirm or disprove the present doubt regarding the rarity of some species and enable conservation measures to be directed toward threatened species.

Dr. Burbidge also pointed out that limited staff and finance prohibited the Department's research officers from undertaking extensive surveys of this type.

(b) THE ADEQUACY OF THE RESERVE SYSTEM

It was submitted that a reserve system should be adequate in two main ways:—

1. It should protect as wide a range of ecosystems as possible; and
2. The individual reserves should be of adequate size and should be managed so that the flora and fauna persist. The Department's aim in this direction has been to obtain representative areas of the primitive environment and its fauna and to retain a number of smaller reserves which permit the co-existence of native species and man.

The number of reserves set aside for the conservation of flora and fauna totalled 326, covering approximately 12 million acres (30/9/1970).

These areas have been tentatively classified into five groups:—

(1) Primitive Areas

These areas of bushland contain all the elements of the local flora and fauna and are considered large enough to maintain this variety with a minimum of management.

The major areas under this category comprise eight reserves totalling 11½ million acres.

(2) Rare Species Reserves

A. Mainland Areas

Contains rare or important species in a relatively small area of land



One of the gullies at Two Peoples Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (Rare Species Reserve) where the Noisy Scrub Bird is found.

which may not be entirely in its primitive state. Intensive management is necessary.

There are 11 main reserves totalling 37,000 acres.

B. Offshore Islands

These important areas contain rare or threatened species which have been isolated from the mainland and have generally been less affected by man or exotic fauna. Island reserves also act as refuges for marine fauna. Considerable surveillance and management needed.

The 27 island reserves have a total area of approximately 80,000 acres.

(3) Local Bushland Reserves

These areas have been set aside to provide breeding habitat and stopping places for a variety of local flora and fauna and to maintain the character of the particular area. These areas comprise 190 reserves.

(4) Wetland Areas

These are areas reserved for the conservation of waterfowl and associated flora and fauna. Shooting of game birds in season is permitted on some of these areas. There are 80 wetland reserves.

Dr. Burbidge told the Committee that the reserve system in Western Australia is incomplete and inadequate because of the lack of information on the indigenous flora and fauna, the unavailability of some areas to be reserved due to agricultural development, and because no reserve is secure from mining.

(c) EFFECTS OF POLLUTION AND PESTICIDES

In Western Australia there are no available data on this problem, although the Department is designing a pesticides monitoring programme for fish and wildlife.

(d) COMMERCIALISATION OF FAUNA AND THE EFFECTS OF INDUSTRY

(1) Kangaroos

It was pointed out to the Select Committee that the effects of direct commercial exploitation are not necessarily the most important factors influencing survival, although extensive exploitation of insecure populations could affect chances of survival. The particular strategy of management for any species will depend on the situations involved, but the criterion of success in each case is identical, i.e. the survival of viable populations of the particular species. In a wider context, the aim of nature conservation is to ensure the preservation of viable populations of both plants and animals in their natural



Photo by courtesy of "Sunday Independent".

habitat, and management programmes which involve the direct exploitation of wildlife should also satisfy this aim. For these reasons exploitation should be assessed in relation to the conservation and management programmes for the particular species. From the viewpoint of resource analysis, wildlife populations have values in terms of retention of wilderness conditions, not only for the scientific value of these areas, but also for their contribution to the satisfaction of the moral and aesthetic desires of the general public. In addition to this, some species have a direct commercial value either for the sporting or commercial hunter.

The real problem in the conservation of kangaroos is not so much one of preservation, because these animals can survive in relatively disturbed situations, but one of optimisation of total value of a natural resource. In the appropriate situations, a controlled exploitation programme will realise part of the direct value of this resource but more importantly such a programme can help to re-

solve some of the major conflicts associated with populations on the open range and still lead to retention of these populations. In these circumstances controlled exploitation is a legitimate management practice available to Fauna Authorities.

Dr. Burbidge, in discussing the Western Australian kangaroo trade, summarised the position as follows: Uncontrolled exploitation of the different species of kangaroos would result in the reduction of the existing population to fugitive remnants on inaccessible, marginal areas of habitat, and the collapse of the kangaroo trade itself. Furthermore, it appears unlikely the removal of kangaroos in this way would appreciably affect the economic position of the pastoral industry and the loss of these species would represent the squandering of a national asset.

(2) Crocodiles

The committee was told that two species of crocodiles exist in the north of Western Australia. The freshwater crocodile is fully protected and, although it has never been the subject of an industry, a considerable amount of poaching has taken place. Poached skins are sold in Queensland where exploitation of crocodiles is not controlled. In the past the saltwater species was exploited but as a result of a report by Dr. H. R. Bustard of the Australian National University, this crocodile has also been protected. The Department visualises commercial farming in the future.

(3) Emus

An emu farming project is under way in Western Australia and, if successful, may become an important industry. All animals will be bred in captivity.

(4) Industrial Effects

Whether or not to permit mining on National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries is an area of some controversy at the moment.

The Department has presented its views on this problem to the Government appointed Committee of Enquiry into the Mining Act.

[The Department's submissions were reproduced in S.W.A.N.S. Vol. 1 No. 2 Spring 1970.]

(e) THE NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL AND INTERSTATE AGREEMENTS

(1) Migratory Species—International.

Dr. Burbidge said that very little information was available on possible problems relating to bird migration. The attention of the Committee was drawn to Resolution 7 of the 1970 Australian Fauna Authorities' Conference (AFAC). The Conference resolved to appoint a working

party of three to attempt to define the problem and, if necessary, prepare terms of reference for a Committee to be formed by the AFAC.

(2) Migratory Species—Interstate.

It was stated that Western Australia had few problems in this regard due to its isolated position. One area of interest referred to however, is waterfowl conservation, particularly in the north of the State, which is at present being examined by the Australian Committee on Waterbirds, a Sub-committee of AFAC.

(3) Interstate Trade.

Problems may arise in the future, especially in relation to trade in kangaroo products, the Committee was told.

(f) FERAL DOMESTIC ANIMALS

It was pointed out to the Committee that little information is available on this topic. Attention of the Select Committee was drawn to Resolution 18 of the Australian Fauna Authorities' Conference.

The resolution pointed out that the Northern Territory and Kimberley area of Western Australia have high populations of feral domestic animals which are regarded as pests. Many of these animals have become established in wildlife sanctuaries and have contributed to the destruction of habitat.

AFAC therefore resolved that:

"There is a need for research to be carried out in the North-West of Australia on the effect of feral animals on indigenous species and their habitats."

(g) THE NEED FOR A COMMONWEALTH WILDLIFE CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

It was submitted that the conservation of flora and fauna is basically tied to the States since only they can control the reservation of land for this purpose. The Department, however, suggested to the Select Committee that the Commonwealth could assist in a number of ways:

- (1) Control of import and export of fauna.
- (2) Providing grants to the States for fauna conservation. Funds could be used to purchase private land for reserves. Money is also needed for research and management; this could be provided directly to the States or indirectly to C.S.I.R.O. and the Universities.
- (3) Setting up a national biological survey to provide information necessary to reserve allocation and management.
- (4) Supporting Legislation. This may be necessary in specific cases, e.g.: the movement of kangaroo products between States.