

WILDLIFE PRESERVATION

HIS EXCELLENCY, Sir Alan Mansfield, K.C.M.G., LL.B, Governor of the State of Queensland, had a long and distinguished career as a barrister, university lecturer, Judge of the Supreme Court and as Chief Justice of Queensland before being called to his present high office in March, 1966.

This report of his talk to the Rotary Club of Ipswich, which was supplied by District Governor David Munro, is reprinted by kind permission of the "Queensland Times".

His Excellency called for positive action to preserve Australia's wildlife in a talk to the Rotary Club of Ipswich.

He warned that if the present massacre of kangaroos continued they could become as rare as the koala and the platypus.

Sir Alan said that one of the major problems confronting Australia's wildlife was that there was no control on the numbers being killed and the numbers being preserved.

He said that in some places it would be possible to preserve the habitat of animals, as was done in South Africa which had large reservations.

At no time would the animal population be allowed to become too great for the reservations.

When Australia became an island, perhaps about 100,000,000 years ago, a variety of animals was isolated here and so they were preserved from outside molestation, he said.

In short, the more "progressive" furred animals that were on the Eurasian and African land masses were unable to cross the intervening seas and so did not replace the older and more primitive stocks as they did elsewhere.

Thus, from the ancestral, kangaroo-like creature there developed the red kangaroo, grey kangaroo, rock wallaby, wallaby, wallaroo, pademelon and potaroo. Possums and wombats also developed.

Sir Alan said, "Even more archaic than the marsupials are the monotremes - platypus and two species of spiny anteater.

At the time of the first European settlement in this country in 1788, kangaroos and platypus were abundant around the shores of Sydney Harbour and Botany Bay.

The bush to our great grand-fathers was the enemy to be conquered. In the early days animals were eaten for food, but this had no effect on their survival."

From 1815 onwards, when the way across the Great Divide was found from Sydney, the explorers and then the landholders and bush workers pushed further into the hinterland. By 1836 kangaroos had become scarce as far afield as the Western slopes of the Blue Mountains. This was nearly 20 years before the first gold-rush and after the establishment of sheep runs on the western plains.

This was only a depletion of the local population of animals; the species still remained safe.

But when the destruction of animals for trade in their fur began, a more insidious danger developed.

By 1852 kangaroos had been reduced in numbers, but they were in no danger of extermination.

In 1863, the large diminution in numbers of the platypus was serious, but still was not a real threat. Even though these animals were relatively scarce near the coast, they still abounded inland.

Soon, however, came the great extermination and for this the sheep farmer was almost entirely responsible.

The men who were known as squatters had no feeling for the countryside. What they wanted to do was to run as many sheep to the acre as they could. They set about ringbarking every tree, and so today you can see mile after mile of dreary treeless artificiality - particularly in the western district of Victoria.

The other thing they did was to kill all the bigger native animals on the place. They butchered every kangaroo, every koala and every pademelon.

Also, the introduction of the fox, the rabbit, sparrow and prickly pear caused many problems because they flourished here in their new environment.

The fox was responsible for the decimation of the small native pouched mice.

For a century the kangaroo remained plentiful in the hills and lands around the pastures, but the spotlifter and the sheep farmer became engaged in the production of pet food in the exportation of sub-standard sausage and other meat to West Germany, Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan.

This trade got heavily under way in 1958. In 1960-61 over 5,500,000 lb. of kangaroo meat was exported.

David Fleay, who first drew national attention to what is still going on, has calculated that at least 10,000 kangaroos, including pouch joeys, are killed in Queensland every week.

In many parts of Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia the slaughter continued.

In Western New South Wales at least 25,000 were killed every week.

As recently as July, 1964, newspaper reports from Mildura said that red kangaroos were being shot at the rate of 200,000 per week in south-western New South Wales.

Pressure groups of sheep farmers and kangaroo-shooters say that kangaroos are in no danger of extinction, but they can be ignored.

Nobody thought the American bison in its millions was in danger, but today it exists only in a few national parks.

Who would have thought that the koala - at one time one of the commonest mammals in Queensland - would ever be rare? But where is it today in its wild state?

One of the most regrettable episodes in relation to wildlife occurred in this State in August 1927, when an open season of one month was declared for possums and koalas, and the Government drew license fees from 10,000 registered trappers. Over 1,000,000 possums and nearly 600,000 koalas were massacred in that month.

David Fleay had stated that at that time the Queensland koala population suffered a blow from which it had never recovered.

In New South Wales the position was worse. In South Australia they were all wiped out. There were some in Phillip Island in Victoria.

In less than two centuries we had exterminated a number of species and endangered dozens of others.

There are now many people who were extremists in relation to the animals of Australia. Some said the indigeous animals must be destroyed because they prevent pastoralists keeping their herds and flocks alive. To some others, every furred or feathered creature must be preserved.

It was, however, clear that pests, feathered, furry or invertebrate, must be reduced in numbers.

At the same time, an enlightened community would do its best to achieve a humane and sensible balance between legitimate development and conservation.

And that is where we, the Australian people, have failed. We have been not only negligent, but criminally culpable.

There is today an appreciable proportion of the sheep farming fraternity which would exterminate the red kangaroo if it could, and if an open season were declared for koala and platypus there would be plenty of socially acceptable people who would race in for the quick quid and wipe them from the face of the land.

The key to the survival of our native animals is the preservation of their habitats and the declaration of a close season.

Australia is a vast country and there is room for sheep and kangaroos, koalas, platypus and farmers.

We can help by supporting any genuine cause which you think deserves your sympathy. Let your Member of Parliament know your views, and join a conservation society.

(Rotary Down Under)