

THE ANIMALS THAT NOAH FORGOT

The following talk was given by the Chief Warden of Fauna, Mr. H.B. Shugg, recently on A.B.C. radio.

"The title of this talk was one of the best descriptions of Australian fauna that I have heard - it was used a few years ago in Sydney. "The animals that Noah forgot!" Poor old Noah! He didn't really forget them - he had never heard of them. I'm afraid there are too many Noahs in the world today - even among you country folk who live closest to our wildlife.

Did you know that we have something like 850 different kinds of native Western Australian species? About half of them are birds, about 140 odd are mammals - of which 56 are marsupials. There are over 260 kinds of reptiles and frogs. Doesn't it make you wonder where they all live and why we don't see them more often?

Certainly, this diversity makes their conservation difficult. Preservation of habitat, as Dr. Burbidge told you on this session last month, is one of the great keys to wildlife conservation. But this is no easy task when good reserves are so hard to get, and to keep. Not only is the habitat brittle, and easily altered from the native state required by most of our animals, but we are also so anxious to change it for agricultural, industrial and other purposes. I'm also afraid that too many of us just don't care enough about preserving our flora and fauna. We undervalue it, just as our forefathers did.

The early settlers saw the Australian scene as strange, and often as unfriendly. Because it was strange and their technology was based on the European environment they set about changing it. It was so different from what they had known that even the artists among them couldn't reproduce it. Understandably, the newcomers to this land wanted familiar sights and sounds about them and introduced trees and shrubs and grasses and animals from their homelands - often accompanied by their particular pests and diseases. Many exotic animals were turned loose or escaped and we know some of them today as our worst pests. Mr. Tomlinson talked about them last week - rabbits, foxes, snails, goats, feral cats and donkeys and so on. We don't want any more of their kind.

Any exotic animal that survives in our bush can only do so at the expense of one or more native ones. This is my Department's reason for generally prohibiting the import of

exotic fauna. It is almost impossible to predict precisely how an animal is going to react in a new environment. Mostly they fail to survive. A few take hold immediately and with spectacular success. Others need a series of introductions before they suddenly acclimatize and multiply. An example of the latter group is the laughing kookaburra. Although it was native to Eastern Australia, it was very slow in securing its first foothold here, but now it is spread throughout most of the South-West Land Division.

Another exotic bird which is currently going through a period of increase in numbers and extending its range is the feral domestic pigeon. I, myself, in the last 10 years have noted the increase and spread of these birds along the riverfronts, public parks and backyard gardens. I'll even admit to a personal grudge against them as they perch above my parking space and their over generous droppings erode the duco on my car! But this is small beer compared with the damage that they cause by their fouling of roofs and gutters and the grounds below their roosting spots, and to the fire hazards they cause where they nest among the electric light leads into ceilings, and so on. Something effective has to be done to control them before they adapt to our bush and threaten the survival of distinctive local birds - the handsome, harmless and purely Australian bronzewings, for example. Fortunately, local and State authorities have recently recognised the pest potential of feral pigeons and a special committee has been set up to see what should be done.

With all these examples of exotic animals becoming pests, too many people, most of whom should know better, are still campaigning for the introduction of yet more foreign species.

Sporting shooters want to acclimatize pheasants and other upland game birds and so-called sporting mammals such as various kinds of deer. Some aviculturists want to introduce cage birds like the Java Sparrow and Weaver Finches whose pest potential is quite enormous. We can't ignore the fact that many species such as these have been acclimatized in different parts of the world through individual animals escaping from captivity. With the best of intentions on their owner's part, cage doors DO get left open - by forgetful friends and by children, and sometimes by thieves or even just for spite. We simply cannot afford to run the risks involved in allowing potential pest species to be rbought in and kept anywhere other than in "A" class Zoos where maximum security operates. We must remember too, that this is a changing world and we can never be sure that any species might not become a pest at some time in the future.

Instead of looking to foreign animals for something new, we must turn to the study of our own native creatures about which so little is known. If we are to keep them we must learn more about them. To do this we must bring them into our lives and not just lock them away in reserves and leave them to a few scientists. This doesn't necessarily mean that we have to allow their exploitation for profit. But it does mean that we have to take an interest in them and learn why we should cherish them and how we can guard them.

If we fail to interest ourselves in them and care for them we will all become modern Noahs and our wild creatures will never make the passenger list in the modern Ark - the s.s. 'Conservation'. And make no mistake my friends - She sails today!"