

Book Reviews

A World Like Our Own by Alison Jolly. Yale University Press, £18.90.

Madagascar should really be a continent. In size, perhaps, it is not on a truly continental scale, though being a thousand miles long, it is by no means inconsiderable. But by most qualitative criteria – zoological, botanical, ethnographic – it is a land on its own. Ninety per cent of the plants in the forests occur nowhere else in the world. Four families of birds, five of mammal exist only here. Its most famous inhabitants, perhaps, are those engaging primitive primates, the lemurs, and there are some twenty different endemic species here, most of which are now rare. All these organisms owe their existence to the fact that Madagascar split from the flank of Africa some hundred million years ago, with the result that the community of animals and plants that populated it at that time has, since then, continued to evolve in isolation. So here is a world with a character as absorbing and as individual as any isolated continent in the world, including Australia.

Yet, astonishingly, the island is still comparatively little known. This book is, effectively, the first comprehensive popular survey in English. Dr Jolly is an international authority on lemurs, and these fascinating creatures figure conspicuously in her pages. But she also writes illuminatingly about the botany and the geology, the ethnology and the ornithology, and sets her accounts in the context of a recent five-month journey through the island. Her text is generously illustrated by Russ Kinne's photographs (though he has not been altogether well served by his publishers who, in some cases, have reproduced what appears to have been splendid colour originals in rather muddy black and white).

Dr Jolly's message is an alarming one. Over the past few centuries, the human inhabitants of Madagascar have devastated their land by shifting agriculture and fire. The island has now lost 80 per cent of its unique forest cover and with it, inevitably, the creatures that lived in it. And the process is still continuing. The Malagasy Government, faced with crippling economic problems, is being forced to adopt policies that may bring some slight easement today but certain ecological catastrophe tomorrow. They are not alone in doing that. Other far richer governments, with far less excuse, are daily guilty of such short-sighted expediency.

Some say that conservation is faced with painful strategic decisions. Everything in the world that is in danger cannot now be saved. Choices must be made. Small regional variations may have to be abandoned provided the main population of the species is secure. The world's major efforts and funds must be concentrated on creatures which are the last representatives not merely of their species but their genus or even their family, in a last-ditch attempt to retain what we can of the biological diversity of the world. In this important book, Dr Jolly shows only too vividly that Madagascar must be reckoned one of the most important priorities in the conservation battle – and, tragically, that it is a place where, at this very moment, that battle is close to being lost.

DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

The African Fish Eagle, by Leslie Brown. Bailey Bros & Swinfen, £8.50.

It is fitting that in this the first, though one hopes not the last, of his works to be published since he died last June, Leslie Brown devotes himself to a bird of prey which, though not one of the larger or grander of 'his' eagles, he can nevertheless justly epitomise as 'magnificent'. It is certainly a bird that is noticed and probably photographed more often than any other by the visitor to eastern and central Africa. This book should help many to appreciate what they see. Your reviewer, for example was intrigued to learn that a note he made forty years ago to the effect that fish eagles 'seem to spend much of the day wheeling and calling high in the air' reflects the fact, disclosed by Leslie Brown's pertinacious observations, that these eagles can indeed