

News and Views

An Island at Risk

Few islands of any size in the South Pacific have escaped the ravages of man. One of the few is Henderson Island, an 11-square-mile, elevated coral atoll which lies 90 miles ENE of Pitcairn Island. Last inhabited by Polynesians between the 12th and 15th centuries AD, the only signs of man now are a few coconut and citrus trees near the main landing place, planted by Pitcairn islanders who occasionally visit to collect firewood. Apart from the introduction of the small Polynesian rat *Rattus exulans*, which may have exterminated certain small bird species such as storm petrels, the island ecosystem has remained largely undisturbed. The flat top of the 100 ft-high atoll is densely wooded; of the animal and plant species identified so far there are 18 tree species, including an endemic sandalwood *Santalum hendersonense*, 55 shrub species, and of the herbaceous plants ten are endemics. The bird population includes four endemic land birds: the almost flightless Henderson Island rail *Nesophylax ater*; Stephen's lory *Vini stepheni*; a pigeon *Ptilinopus purpuratus insularis*; and a warbler *Acrocephalus vaughani taita*. In addition, 15 species of sea-bird breed on the island, including the little known Murphy's petrel *Pterodroma ultima*, which is confined to this area.

There is no doubt the island is both valuable and vulnerable: it was recommended as an Island for Science under the draft convention which emerged from the International Biological Programme. But the present tranquillity of the island could be broken soon and its wildlife could become threatened. The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) are at present considering whether to allow Mr Smiley Ratcliffe, an American, to settle there. If permission is granted, he will need to clear a large area for an airstrip and for housing for himself and his 15 employees. In addition to the damage that this will cause, it is inevitable that exotic plants and animals will be introduced, both deliberately and accidentally, and this would spell disaster for the native wildlife. Among the accidental introductions that aircraft could effect might be the mosquitoes that carry avian malaria, which appears to have been responsible for the loss of many birds on other Pacific islands.

In exchange for permission to settle on Henderson Island, Mr Ratcliffe is offering to build an

airstrip on Pitcairn and in making a decision the FCO are bound to consider the best interests of the Pitcairn islanders. Few ships call at Pitcairn Island now and it is becoming depopulated: 25 years ago there were 150 people, now there are only 40. There is no doubt that the islanders would benefit from an airstrip and the British High Commissioner in New Zealand, who is also Governor of the Pitcairn Group, reports that the Island's Council have approved the proposal. Replying to representations from a number of conservation bodies, including the International Council for Bird Preservation, The Royal Society, and ffPS, the FCO has promised to take conservation issues into account and WWF/IUCN are coordinating a joint submission from NGOs on reasons to reject the application. One problem is that no survey has been carried out since 1934 but it is possible that, if further studies were to be done, the results would provide even stronger reasons for leaving the island alone. A parallel may be drawn with Aldabra Atoll, in the Indian Ocean. When the British wanted to build a military airstrip there in the 1960s, little was known about Aldabra. When the airstrip plan was withdrawn in 1966, after world-wide protest, The Royal Society organised a research programme which has since revealed an unsuspected wealth of wildlife.

It is not the first time that Henderson Island has been the subject of conservation protest. In 1922, a visitor suggested introducing goats for the benefit of future shipwrecked sailors, which led Sir Percy Lowe of the British Museum (Natural History) and a member of ffPS (then the Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire), to make representations to the Colonial Office against the proposal. Henderson was saved from the depredations of goats then. It is even more important to save it from a far greater threat now, when most South Pacific islands have been disturbed and so much conservation effort is being spent in a last ditch attempt to save the many endemic species on the brink of extinction. It has been calculated that £2 million would be sufficient to help the Pitcairn islanders. It is hoped that the British Government will be able to find a way of providing this financial assistance instead of accepting Mr Ratcliffe's proposition with its resultant sacrifice of Henderson Island's wildlife.

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Military Road Threatens Honduran Virgin Forest

A road, the primary purpose of which is to facilitate the movement of troops to the Honduras-Nicaragua border, is to be constructed through the heart of one of the few remaining virgin tropical rain forests in Honduras. The forest, La Mosquitia, which ecologists have called the 'Amazon of Central America', is one of the most valuable lowland primary forest areas in Central America. It is rich in tropical plant species and animal wildlife—notably mahoganies, cedars, tapir, jaguar, ocelot and harpy eagles—and is the home of the Paya and Miskito Indians. According to foresters and international development officers familiar with the region, the road will have disastrous consequences for wildlife, watershed protection and indigenous peoples.

Officers in the US Agency for International Development's (US AID) Rural Development Division, who were charged with writing the project proposal, did in fact request that the construction of the road be accompanied by environmental safeguards to prevent rain forest destruction and repercussions on the Paya and Miskito Indians. They also suggested that the adjacent area be designated as a park or forest reserve. It is reported that both the request and the suggestion were rejected by the US Embassy in Honduras.

The concern of the region's foresters appears to be well-founded. A US AID field team report suggested that the road could be used to log the region's hardwoods, mainly mahoganies and tropical cedars, to provide much-needed foreign exchange. Understandably, this aroused protest from the Honduras Forest Development Corporation whose own development plan for the area, which they have set aside as a protected sustained-yield forest reserve, has been carefully worked out to prevent the rapid deforestation that mars other parts of Honduras and Central America.

The road will open the region to a pattern of colonisation that has become all too familiar in much of tropical Central America. The Honduras Government has insufficient resources to prevent the inevitable influx of landless farming families who will clear the forest for crops. After two or three years, problems with weeds, insect pests and

erosion will probably force these people to sell their plots to cattle ranchers who, consolidating the plots into large ranches, will raise beef cattle for home and US markets. At present US companies buy more than 58 million pounds of beef each year from Honduras and it has been estimated that, since 1960, more than 20,000 sq km of virgin forest in Honduras has been cleared by colonising farmers and cattle ranchers.

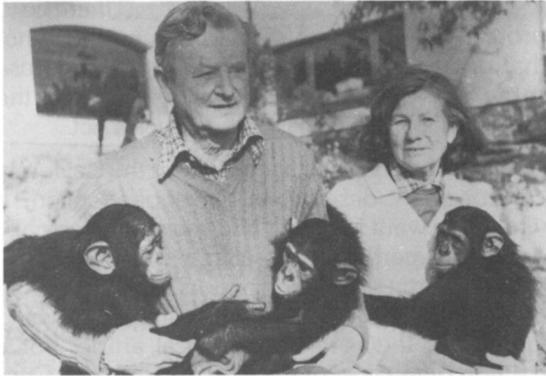
A major irony of the project is that it was to have been financed by the US AID (using \$7.5 million from President Reagan's \$350 million Caribbean Basin development programme) which in the past has provided large sums of money to advance the protection and wise use of Latin America's rain forests. The road has many opponents, and the controversy surrounding it has now led US AID to turn it down. But the US Ambassador in Honduras is still determined to have the road and it could be funded from other sources. The road seems inevitable, yet there is still time for the US Government to reconsider the seriousness of the implications and to make funding available to mitigate the effects the road will have.

Chimpanzees—Exploited for Tourists

Over 150 young chimpanzees are being used illegally by photographers in Spanish holiday resorts. For each baby chimpanzee that reaches Spain—mainly from Equatorial Guinea and Zaïre—at least seven other chimpanzees have died, either shot when the baby is captured or in transit. As well as resulting in unacceptable losses to the wild populations—chimpanzees are threatened with extinction throughout their range—the trade is cruel. A photographer's chimpanzee has a short and miserable life: imported as one- to two-year-olds, they are drugged from about three years of age to make them easier to control, and discarded by the time they reach five. The Spanish authorities have the power to confiscate chimpanzees used in this way—no import licences have been issued for three years now—and the International Primate Protection League and WWF are urging tourists to refuse to be photographed with a chimpanzee and to report offending photographers to the police. IPPL's representatives in Spain, Simon and Peggy Templar, who

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Simon and Peggy Templer with three rescued chimpanzees.

have campaigned for many years to stop the practice, have set up a holding station at their own expense for confiscated chimpanzees. The aim is to rehabilitate as many as possible; already seven have been returned to a protected area in West Africa.

The Condor Controversy

A comment by Jeremy Cherfas, Life Sciences Consultant to *New Scientist*

The California condor really is an embarrassment. It has driven a wedge between two groups with essentially the same ideals and seems wilfully to frustrate our well-meaning attempts to conserve it. Back in 1980 a chick had the temerity to die shortly after being examined by a scientist who, it later emerged, was sadly inexperienced in this sort of work. Then, in 1982, the parents of the only known egg kicked it out of the nest during a quarrel. They soon laid another, but knocked it out while protecting the nest from a marauding raven.

In the face of such incompetence scientists and conservationists worked hard to get permission to interfere. They wanted to trap birds and release them fitted with radio transmitters to find out about the condor's life. They wanted to catch birds for captive-breeding programmes. And they wanted to remove eggs, raising the chicks in captivity and encouraging the wild birds to lay again. After a great deal of argument the Condor Research Center got at least some of what it wanted,

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and already there are signs of success. Two eggs taken to the 'condominium' at San Diego Wild Animal Park this spring hatched and the chicks were doing well at the time of writing.

The budget for all this is of the order of \$25 million so far, and by anyone's standards that is a lot of money. Is it being well spent? There are so many arguments and counter-arguments that it is hard to know where to begin.

The severity of the threat is undeniable. Estimates of the total population vary, from 14 birds to 'about 20' or even 30. They are confined to small areas in California where they are hemmed in by cities and agriculture. And they breed slowly, even when they don't destroy their own eggs.

The obvious response is to save the condor. But how? The two classic approaches are both being tried, and it is too soon to say whether any good will come of either of them. The Condor Research Center is pursuing both aims, protecting the animal in the wild and breeding it in captivity. The Center's scientists want more information, hence the desire to fit wild birds with transmitters. Opponents say that these aggressive intrusions are not needed; 'We know why the birds are dying', says one. 'They're being shot, eating poisoned carcasses, and running into power lines. We don't need radios to tell us that.' To which the Center's co-director replies, 'for 90 per cent of the time we don't know where the bird is. People say "save the habitat", but we don't know what habitat to save.'

There are, of course, points in favour on both sides. It isn't hard to see that breeding birds in captivity could mean the difference between extinction and survival. Equally, if the long-term goal is to preserve condors in the mountains of California, there can be no point in breeding the birds unless you have the land to release them into. But while the arguments rage, one question goes more or less unanswered. Why bother? What is so special about the California condor?

It isn't likely to be of any direct economic benefit, now or in the future. So that disposes of the easy justification. It isn't a key species in some complex ecosystem; if the California condor goes, it isn't likely to take vast chunks of California biome with it. The naive view, that no species should be allowed to go extinct if that can be avoided, can-

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not be the major consideration; \$25 million would buy a lot of rain forest outright, and that would save a considerable number of species. We are left with the species as symbol.

I have nothing against species as symbols. They can focus attention, attract funds, act as indicators of success (and failure). But the condor seems an unlikely symbol, more one of bureaucratic muddles and conservation mistakes than a symbol of Nature, wild and untamed.

It seems to me that, despite our best intentions, the condor in the wild is doomed. Perhaps, if we truly believe in animal rights, we ought to allow it the dignity of a natural death. In a zoo, it could serve to remind us of yet another species we might have saved. The money spent is important, not just for what else it might have bought but for what it could mean in the future. There are some cynics, and I confess that I find their argument appealing, who say that the present US Department of the Interior is funding the condor programme in order to hasten its demise in the wild;

with the birds gone, what incentive will there be to protect the habitat? \$25 million is probably not that great a price to pay for the freedom to use some of the finest land in California, free of the restrictions of the Endangered Species Act.

Again I ask, what is so special about the California condor that it deserves this level of attention? If what they want is a giant bird soaring majestically overhead, perhaps the Californians should consider importing Andean condors. They too could use a little help, and none but an expert would know that they are not the local article. For a fraction of the cost of the Condor Research Center, there could be plenty of condors in California. Or am I missing the point?

Footnote: The 1983 California condor programme comprises: radio-tagging an additional two condors of any age; taking the first eggs from any nest for artificial incubation and captive-breeding; keeping an underweight immature male condor, taken to Los Angeles Zoo last December to gain weight, in captivity for breeding purposes; and trapping an unpaired adult that is believed to be female for the captive-breeding programme.

Editor

**RAMASSAGE
REGLEMENTE**

l'escargot est protégé...

...du
1^{er} avril
au 30 juin
inclus,

et toute
l'année si
sa coquille
fait moins
de 3 cm de
diamètre.

Par arrêté ministériel du 24 avril 1979, le ramassage de l'Escargot commun (Escargot de Bourgogne) est interdit pendant sa durée de sa période de reproduction : du 1^{er} avril au 30 juin inclus.
Pendant les autres mois de l'année, le ramassage de l'Escargot de Bourgogne est autorisé, sauf si la coquille a un diamètre inférieur à 3 cm.
Le non-respect de cet arrêté constitue un délit puni de 2 000 à 40 000 F d'amende, jusqu'à 80 000 F en cas de récidive (loi du 10 juillet 1976).

A cause du ramassage abusif, les escargots disparaissent. Respectez la loi.

IMMO. J. PELLET - VOULZIERE

L'EPINE NOIRE

There seem to be few examples of invertebrate conservation posters. This one was produced by a French conservation group, L'Epine Noire, to publicise the legislation restricting snail collecting.