

NATURE PROTECTION IN THE U.S.S.R.

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From earliest times man has taken an interest in animals, but our ancestors were mainly concerned with hunting them. The oldest documents dealing with hunting laws date from the eleventh century. In Russia hunting was never a privilege, the prerogative of princes or state, but the state was always concerned with the products of the chase. One of the first reserves was made in the seventeenth century to protect the eyries of the gyr falcon, much in demand for falconry. An early government monopoly in fur trading guaranteed some measure of protection for fur-bearing animals.

Under Peter the Great the oak forests in European Russia were protected except for naval and military needs. The populace, many of whom depended on hunting for their livelihood, were anxious to conserve their resources in so far as they could. In 1763 a very progressive law was passed proclaiming a close season for all hunting between 1st March and 29th June. These and other measures were fairly effective until more recent times when the increase in population, the effectiveness of weapons and the high prices paid for game made hunting a menace to animal populations. Towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries man's destructive influence was being felt especially by such species as the sea otter, fur seal, sable and moose. In 1912-1916 the sable was given some protection in Siberia where it had become much reduced in numbers.

After 1917 the new Soviet Government had to study nature protection in an entirely new light, because of social changes, the breaking up of large properties and the nationalization of the land.

Nature protection in Russia to-day is envisaged as a social and scientific problem requiring the organization and control of natural resources on a scientific basis. Accordingly research is carried out under such headings as reproduction, migration and distribution of species, changes in biotopes and populations, and so on. This research is conducted by the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R, the Academies in the Republics, the universities, and scientific institutions such as the national parks.

The Russian Society for the Protection of Nature was founded in 1924. Many scientific papers have been published by the National Parks, among them those by Raevski and others on the sable; by Kaplanov on the tiger and moose; by Nasimovitch on the ungulates of the Caucasus; by Dmitriev on the ungulates of the Altai; by Zablotski on the European bison. The planned use of natural resources is based on the principle that all animals are a national asset. Hunting for sport; planned exploitation for industry; the war against pests affecting agriculture, forestry and health;—these are permissible. Otherwise all action is directed towards conservation.

Attempts are made to improve the habitats of the animals, for instance improved water supplies, prevention of pollution, and new forest plantations. Birds are encouraged by artificial nesting sites, and fish are given special food. In addition, there are restrictions on killing certain creatures at certain times, and some animals have complete protection.

The bodies responsible for different aspects of protection, e.g. the ministries of fisheries, agriculture and geology, the national parks, etc., are co-ordinated by a special commission set up in 1955 by the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. This Commission is composed of members of the Academy and other experts, and representatives from the official institutions concerned. Most of the Republics of the Soviet have similar commissions. On the education side the idea of nature protection is spread through schools and young naturalists' organizations. The system is upheld by hunters who act as inspectors and voluntary helpers, and by forest guards.

Among mammals which are totally protected are the beaver, goral, sea otter, red deer, axis deer and bison. Others which have partial protection are the sable, otter, martens, desman, fur seal, moose and saiga antelope. Animals whose numbers have increased to a good stock may be killed by holders of licences which show the number, dates and other conditions of hunting. For example, the moose had become very rare and was given total protection in 1919. By 1945 it had increased so much that licensed hunting was allowed. Now it is quite common, not only in Siberia but in European Russia, and even in the surroundings of Moscow. It is illegal to destroy nests or eggs of birds, or to kill female ungulates and their young under one year of age. The state holds a monopoly in fur trading.

Russia contains sixty-two administrative units, and these local authorities can recommend special protection in their district for any creature thought to be in need of it. Animals

benefiting from some regional protection include roe deer, silver fox, weasel, mink, badger, wild boar, brown bear and tiger. In many cases the regions where they are protected contain in fact the total range of the species in Russia. Birds are also protected in a similar way. Shooting from cars or aeroplanes is forbidden, as also is the use of means for catching birds *en masse* or birds in a vulnerable state, such as moulting geese.

Forests are divided into three categories: the first includes forest sanctuaries, forests in national parks and forests near towns and industrial centres; all these are strictly protected and tended. The second category comprises forests which may be exploited to a limited extent. The third category consists of those far away from inhabited areas, situated in the north and north-east of European Russia and in Siberia, which are subject to planned use on a large scale.

As part of the plan for enriching the fauna of the country, much has been done to introduce, reintroduce or spread certain species. Before 1917 such acclimatization as took place was mainly haphazard and experimental. Under the new regime it has been carried out on a considerable scale. The musk rat was brought in in 1927, and up to 1953, 117,000 individuals had been introduced in 500 localities. It plays an important part in the fur trade. The coypu was introduced into the Caucasus and Turkestan in 1930 and latterly farms of these rodents have been established in other areas. Beavers have also been acclimatized in many parts of the country. The desman, a kind of mole, was reintroduced in places where it was becoming scarce. One interesting, although not entirely successful venture, was the introduction into the Crimea and Causasus of squirrels from Siberia, which had particularly fine fur. After quite a short time in their new habitat the pelts lost their remarkable qualities.

Similar work is being done with birds such as the pheasant, partridge, capercaillie, black grouse and ptarmigan.

The Soviet Union recognizes the value of international co-operation in the sphere of nature protection, particularly with regard to migratory species and marine mammals.