

THE REQUIREMENTS OF A CONSERVATION PROGRAMME *

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A good conservation programme may be considered under four headings,

- The need for modern and flexible legislation.
- Control of reserves.
- Policy formulation.
- The enlistment of public sympathy.

The need for modern and flexible legislation.—The first essential is legislation to protect fauna from destruction either by farmers or “sportsmen”. In Western Australia we have almost model legislation along these lines. There is “blanket” protection for all mammals and birds, while provision has been made for some to be declared unprotected should all the circumstances warrant it. In other words the long-established privilege of human beings in English countries to be considered innocent until proven guilty, has been extended to these two major groups of animals. Reptiles are still outside this “blanket”, though some species have been given safety, but by and large, this legislation can be considered satisfactory. Yet a negative attitude to conservation is scarcely sufficient; there is the question of preserving the habitat. Without this, many species must inevitably disappear.

The setting aside of sufficiently large areas presents major difficulties. First of all we are fortunate in the rather arid nature of the country and that large areas are set aside as catchment areas. These are in essence fauna reserves since the controlling authorities discourage human visitors. Such reserves dot the countryside and constitute invaluable refuges. Almost in the same category come forest reserves. The cutting of commercial timber probably has little effect on the animals in such forests. Since trees are commercially valuable, we can rest assured governments will be fully alive to protecting this asset. So long as the trees remain, the fauna will be safe. I refer of course to native trees. Pine plantations are in a different category, since their spread benefits only a few species of animals.

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Other fauna reserves are in a less happy position. There is no co-ordinated control, and although on paper the position may appear reasonably satisfactory, in actual practice it is very different. For example, we often talk of the thousand acres of virgin bush represented by King's Park, right in the centre of the City of Perth. But interference with the bush areas of the park by firewood cutting, rubbish burning, planting of exotics and special clearing continues.

Control of Reserves.—Let us imagine that legislation has laid down a broad framework of policy. Most national parks would need to be zoned in some way. Obviously some of the national parks, such as Rottnest Island, the Abrolhos Islands, the Stirlings, Caves, etc., would be popular tourist attractions. These areas would need to be zoned. First a certain fraction would be set aside for tourist facilities, such as hotels, roads, picnic spots and so on. The major section would be left entirely undisturbed except for access roads which would skirt, rather than cut through the wild areas. A major difficulty in this is that quite often people put in charge of such areas are too hard working. They find time on their hands and think up ways and means of keeping busy. Unfortunately such "busy-ness" usually means attracting the public to wild areas, not to enjoy the bush but to listen to music, swim, dance, visit fun fairs and so on. All these are extremely pleasant ways of passing the time, but it were best they be carried out in more suitable places. The proper way to manage a national park is to leave it alone.

There will also be areas set aside which will be of interest only to the naturalist. Such areas will need no facilities, since naturalists are well able to cater for their own requirements.

Policy Formulation.—We now turn to the question of administering the parks under the broad framework of the policy laid down by legislation. Some areas, such as Rottnest, could be managed by the Tourist Bureau. This was done in the case of the Abrolhos Islands, and worked quite well. In general, however, it would seem the Forests Department would be best fitted to be the major controlling body. It has experience, equipment and staff trained in managing such areas.

The formulation of policy also includes the question of research. We still need to know the areas required for national parks which will be large enough to satisfy the requirements for all the native fauna. For example, Garden Island is only big enough to keep one species of wallaby. Also important is a careful study of threatened areas and the immediate provision of national parks in such type-places. The use of trace elements

and superphosphate, as well as new farming techniques, is rapidly removing vast areas of sandplain. Similarly, the clay zones along the Swan coastal plain are being exploited. Of course this is a good thing from the point of view of the State's progress, but it is equally essential that substantial slabs of these virgin areas should be set aside to meet demands from the scientific, sporting and æsthetic points of view.

Enlistment of Public Sympathy.—In the enlistment of public sympathy and support we are on happier ground.

We need an educated population to back our desires, and it is axiomatic that the first steps to achieve this must be taken in the schools. Hitherto teachers have been familiar with the need for teaching protection of animals, and in this respect have done a good job. The 20,000 membership of the Gould League of Birdlovers is an indication of the spread of protection ideas where birds are concerned, but this is only a first step in fauna protection. The axe kills more surely than a gun and clearing of the bush removes species permanently.

A step has been taken to impress these dicta on receptive minds. In the new Elementary Science curriculum of the Education Department, one of the major aims is to conserve our natural resources by encouraging a full appreciation of their national importance. Attention has been directed to the need for preservation of virgin areas if we want to keep our fauna.

At the secondary level there is a need for the conservation idea to be introduced into the Biology and Civics curricula.

At the tertiary level, zoology students receive training in the necessity for habitat preservation. Similarly, at the Teachers' Colleges, stress is laid on the positive requirements of conservation.

Natural history exhibitions in this State attract about 35,000 visitors annually, and the number of such shows is growing rapidly. The recent show in the Perth Town Hall emphasized the theme of positive conservation, and this sort of education will gradually bear fruit. I can say with some confidence that public sympathy for fauna conservation is already present. Our main job is to preach the doctrine of habitat conservation.