

Monkeys and Medical Research

The Drain on Certain Populations

THE increasing demands for live monkeys and apes for medical research is a new and severe threat to the stocks of the world's primates. In a two-day conference on the supply of primates for medical research, sponsored by the New York Zoological Society and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, in New York last year, Mr W. G. Conway, Director of the New York Zoo, quoted some disturbing figures and facts. In one year, 1962, 25,000 vervets were exported from East Africa, and in 1963 42,000 monkeys passed through London airport. Since 1959 an estimated 100,000 monkeys have been exported every year from India, and in the USA, the country which imports the largest numbers, the annual imports between 1958 and 1964 ranged from 115,000 monkeys to 223,000, the higher figures reflecting the peak demands for polio vaccine. Moreover, for every monkey that arrives alive it is estimated that two die in capture or transport. The new technique of kidney transplantations threatens to pose a considerable danger to chimpanzee stocks. With 30,000 people in the USA alone dying of kidney deterioration every year, the drain on the world stocks of perhaps 250,000 chimpanzees could be deadly, especially as only about 10 per cent. of the chimpanzees would be of the right blood group. Mr Conway pointed out that not only is the obvious answer—the building up of captive breeding stocks—expensive, but that much is still to be learned about the successful breeding of some species. More satisfactory and much less expensive is the semi-wild colony, such as the rhesus colonies at Cayo Santiago, in Puerto Rico, where 800 rhesus monkeys roam three small islands, and the population tends to double every five years. This plan could be copied for other species, and, he thought, might prove successful with chimpanzees.

Nevertheless the most economical way of ensuring the long term supply of monkeys is by maintaining sufficiently large populations in the wild, and for this it is necessary to know what their wild status is. About many species little is known, and the need is for ecological studies and the establishment of adequate reserves. The development of a new technique or vaccine might make a sudden demand on a species, which, if its status was not known, could be virtually exterminated in meeting the demand. It is also important to eliminate waste. Baboons, for example, are increasing in East Africa, but in one year only 1200 were exported compared with 23,000 vervets, and a few years ago Sierra Leone actually destroyed nearly 25,000 guenons as an agricultural pest. The Conference initiated several enquiries into urgent problems, including one into the problems of capture and transport where the greatest losses occur.