

UGANDA'S NATIONAL PARKS

By CAPTAIN C. R. S. PITMAN, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.

The Uganda Government has long been subject to much adverse criticism for its apparent reluctance to fulfil its share of the obligations towards wild life which were agreed upon by Great Britain in 1933, at the international conference held in London for the better protection of the African fauna. The world however was then in the throes of a disastrous financial depression, from which recovery was slow, and it was scarcely the time for the small Uganda Protectorate, with its limited resources, to embark on a costly scheme for creating national parks. Moreover, ever since the proclamation of the Protectorate in 1894 Uganda has suffered more severely from rinderpest, that terrible scourge of cattle, than any other British territory in Africa. The direct loss in livestock has been appalling, but the indirect loss, which can be assessed as the measure of the preventive effort on the part of the Veterinary Department, has been positively staggering. Rinderpest has for long been endemic in the regions of Ethiopia to the north-east and never a year has passed without the dread disease appearing on Uganda's northern and eastern frontiers. The wild ungulates introduced, harboured and transmitted the disease—the cattle could be controlled, not so the wild animals except possibly by the repugnant method of destruction. Outside the limits of Uganda few have realized the grim and costly struggle which continued relentlessly year by year, and still fewer have ever appreciated that little Uganda with its gallant band of veterinary workers has again and again staved off disaster from reaching the territories lying to the south and south-west. Rinderpest was no respecter of game reserves in which the disease-stricken ungulates suffered as heavily as anywhere else and therefore there were economic factors of considerable gravity involved in the question of alienation of relatively large areas as national parks. It seemed preferable and wiser to endeavour to free Uganda from the ravages of rinderpest, before setting aside as national parks areas which could function as reservoirs of the disease.

In the meantime Uganda had not overlooked the necessity of creating national parks in due course and various suitable areas had been borne in mind for many years. So far, lack of the necessary funds and the presence or threat of disease have been mentioned as obstacles to the creation of national parks, but, when these are overcome, the availability of suitable "bodies"

for staff and a strong supporting public opinion are also necessary. A major world conflict intervened to set the clock back, but national parks had not been forgotten and once the war had ended the situation was re-examined.

In 1948 the Uganda Government appointed a committee to report on the practicability of the establishment of national parks and to recommend specific areas. The committee was representative of the departments principally concerned and had the privilege of the assistance and advice of Colonel Mervyn Cowie, Director of the Royal National Parks of Kenya. It was soon evident as a result of the committee's deliberations that the meagre sum which had been allocated in the development plan was hopelessly inadequate, and that therefore, first and foremost, if Government was not prepared to provide the necessary financial support, which would be considerable, the prospect for national parks was indeed gloomy. The committee's report was available for Government's consideration in 1950 and, notwithstanding the very considerable financial implications, was accepted. Moreover, a draft National Parks Ordinance which was submitted with the report enabled the necessary legislative machinery to be set in motion, so that the first step towards the establishment of national parks—the enactment of the National Parks Ordinance—was effected in March, 1952. This was quickly followed in July by proclamations declaring national parks respectively in Bunyoro and Acholi astride the River Nile and the Murchison Falls area, and in the region around Lakes Edward and George and the Kazinga Channel; the former 1,200 square miles in extent, is known as the Murchison Falls National Park, and the latter of 700 square miles, with the gracious consent of Her Majesty, is called the Queen Elizabeth National Park. This is only a beginning for more national parks may follow; these are likely to include a portion of the Bwamba forest adjacent to the Ituri forest of the Belgian Congo, the Toro (or Semliki) Game Reserve at the southern end of Lake Albert, the British portion of the Birunga volcanoes (or Mfumbiro mountains), the home of the mountain gorilla, Nkose Island in Lake Victoria, which is a sitatunga sanctuary, and two neighbouring islands.

Precise details of the cost are not yet available but capital expenditure of approximately £87,000, spread over a period of years, is envisaged, together with annual recurrent expenditure of about £21,000. In addition, a sum of £10,000 has been made available for a road survey in the Murchison Falls National Park, with the primary object of spanning the Nile in order to

link directly the Bunyoro and Acholi sectors of the Park. A Director of National Parks has been appointed—he is Mr. Kenneth Beaton who was for several years the energetic and enthusiastic warden of the Royal Nairobi National Park in Kenya. He is assisted by two Parks Wardens—Captain J. F. R. Mills and Mr. G. W. M. Holmes—both of whom were previously members of the Uganda Game Department. It is a fine team which inspires unbounded confidence. Uganda may have been a slow starter, but once having started events are moving with gratifying rapidity. The time to embark on a comprehensive national parks programme could not be more opportune, for adequate funds and suitable bodies for the necessary staff are now available. Rinderpest at long last seems to be well under control, and public opinion, both African and European, is strongly in favour of national parks. To have attempted to initiate them without these prerequisites would indeed have been courting disaster.
