

PRESERVE OR DESTROY?

From an address to the Society by

MERVYN COWIE,

Director of the Royal National Parks of Kenya

Why do we try to preserve wild animals? Why do we set aside delightful scenes of nature? Why do we establish open spaces and national parks? Would it not be better to accept here and now that man in his dominion over all the lesser creatures has every right to divest the land of animals, trees, or anything else which may stand in his way, or hinder him in exploiting the earth for the alleged well-being of mankind? Vast sums are spent in the larger continents to control domestic animal diseases; greater sums are spent in denuding the face of the earth of its natural cover, so that there can be more room for cattle, crops, factories and cities, in an attempt to meet the insatiable clamour of millions of human beings. Should we not pause to assess what irreplaceable assets are being endangered by this scramble and to what extent those assets contribute to men's peace of mind?

Africa is the last stronghold of wild nature and to-day is surging under the various forces of human achievement. It is a harsh country which retaliates, often by means quite unpredictable, wherever man seeks to interfere with the forces of nature. Droughts, locust invasions, plagues and political upheavals, all militate against the enterprises of man in Africa. What will he achieve and at what cost if he succeeds in his endeavours and converts the greater part of this dark continent into a highly civilized economy? However much the great machines of modern invention tear through the soil, Africa, left to itself, reverts in a remarkably short time to its original state; but never can wild animals, once destroyed, be re-created. The balance between man and beast, between beast and vegetation, between life and death, has been maintained through the centuries, and by a force for which even in this atomic age nothing can be substituted—neither can this force be defied.

Let us accept then that only in certain parts of Africa can man now go forward with his destructive plans and harness the potential of this great continent for his immediate requirements. Even where he does, let him assess whether he is making Africa, and the world, a better place, where man is happier or more peaceful. Only future generations will be truly qualified to make this assessment, for they will find that many of those things

which once inspired peaceful enjoyment, and the scenes in wild nature which captured the imagination have ceased to exist. The case for preservation is therefore intangible. We who have the responsibility of administering certain territories in Africa, must recognize that in them we have the world's greatest abundance of wild animal life. It is not ours to dispose of as we please ; we hold it in trust.

The Fauna Preservation Society stands in the position to-day of being an association founded on British tradition, uniting men of fair will, who are prepared to champion the cause of the lesser creatures. At no time in its history has it faced a bigger challenge than is held out to it to-day in Africa.

It would be illogical to seek the protection of all wild life, since there must be development. There will surely also be increases in population, and there must be food for millions of human mouths. It is, however, reasonable that, before it is too late, Africa should be divided into zones ; so that each claimant for the use of the land can have a fair share. In this division there must be a place for the wild animal. Stock farmers cannot range their cattle with lions, nor can the wheat farmer allow his crop to be plundered by thousands of grass-eating antelopes. And so, on the one hand there must be areas for human development and on the other hand let me plead for areas for total protection of nature.

It is farcical to think that a line on a map described as a national park will ensure the survival of all the species of game within it, unless that area is faunally and ecologically complete and is properly administered. It is equally farcical to think that man and his cattle can share an area with game, for when Africa in its harshness revolts, when waterholes dry up and grass becomes scarce, then man and his cattle take what is left, and the beasts of the field perish. Thousands of square miles of British Africa, which in living memory carried millions of head of game, are now almost bare. In some countries hundreds of thousands of wild animals have been deliberately shot to make room for more cattle. Unless this destruction is checked, and unless it is made possible for the wild creatures to breed, nature's great balance in Africa will be upset and the remnants of its wild life will vanish.

A gloomy picture, indeed, but judge the future on the trend of the past and the conclusion is inescapable. National parks, game reserves, protected areas and other little pockets enshrined for the safety of wild animals, give no more than lip service to the cause of preservation, unless they are adequate,

wisely chosen, properly administered and ecologically complete. The challenge to the Fauna Preservation Society, at least within the territories in Africa administered by Great Britain, is to strive for this cause with resolve and determination. Every means should be used to convince a greedy and blinded world that there must be a change of heart if the wild animals are to be preserved.

We must set aside suitable areas for total protection in which human claims are only secondary. We must ensure that the places already allocated to wild animals qualify in all respects as animal sanctuaries, and not merely as eventual cemeteries. Such places must remain inviolate and free of continual counter-claims. Budgets of colonial territories must contain a regular minimum share of finance for proper maintenance and development of established sanctuaries, and not be merely a subvention in times of plenty. The Judiciary must be convinced that the disastrous destruction of God's great beasts by ruthless poachers is a crime against the rights of posterity, deserving really effective punishment. Colonial treasuries must be made to admit the monetary value of game in developing the vast potential of tourism. We must preserve properly if we mean to preserve at all, and we must do it now before it is too late.
