Book reviews

Wildlife for Man: How and Why We Should Conserve Our Species
Richard Fitter
Collins, London, 1986, 223 pp, £14.95

The purpose of this book might not be clear from its slightly ambiguous subtitle, but it is intended to provide factual support for the necessarily brief *World Conservation Strategy* published by IUCN in 1980. It is divided into two parts, each of six chapters, with Part 1 dealing with genetic resources in the past and present, and Part II with genetic resources in the future.

The book is a mine of information, well written, as might be expected from the author, but, curiously, for a 'source book', few of the facts are backed with references to published sources. One can take someone of Richard Fitter's experience on faith, but no one is infallible, and in those examples with which I am familiar, I occasionally detected inaccuracies or ambiguities. For instance, the slaughter of wildlife in Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park is made to seem even worse than it was. Presumably, the expansion of the original elephant population by an order of magnitude was a printer's error, but it is incorrect to say that kob declined along with the other wildlife. On the contrary, kob have not only increased in numbers but have also expanded their range, a fact that is in itself interesting and deserving of comment. Further, it is true, but misleading, to say that the entire adult elephant population was killed in Rwanda when only a small relic population survived in one forest, where they were being persecuted because of their crop raiding. The account of tourists disturbing crocodiles on the Nile tells only half the story, which is surprising in view of the fact that it was the Fauna Preservation Society that helped to alert the public to the danger and eliminate the disturbance. The happy ending to the threat to Round Island, off Mauritius, is also omitted. The introduced rabbits are no longer 'breeding apace' there, and the authorities believe that they have been successful in exterminating them.

The author frequently invokes the World Conservation Strategy in his support of the economic utilization of wildlife, but not all conservationists regard it uncritically as Holy Writ. The implementation of cropping schemes does not always advance the cause of conservation, and many such schemes have been abandoned as costly failures. Even those that are economically sound and acceptable on conservation grounds, such as the Pribilof sealing, run into trouble from the animal welfare lobby. It is unfortunate that the exploitation of buffalo in Mozambique is quoted with such approval for it was not an unmitigated success. Similarly, the Kajiado Wildlife Management Project in Kenya ought not to be held up as a model as it too is generally conceded to have been a costly failure, albeit through no fault of those running it. It did, however, highlight the problems inherent in such large-scale projects, and a more critical discussion of these problems and possible solutions would have been valuable.

A fuller discussion of the genetic problems in conservation would also have been of interest. Some geneticists believe that a population below 500 is at risk, and one of less than 50 is doomed. Many of the species that the WWF and others are trying to save are below the latter number. Richard Fitter quotes (with approval?) the suggestion that the military policy towards the wounded of triage should be introduced into conservation so that the limited resources can be concentrated on that third of threatened species for which help is likely to be successful. Those species that will probably recover without assistance can be left to get on with it, and those that are unlikely to survive, whatever happens, can be abandoned. It is fortunate that triage was not in vogue when such species as the Hawaian goose, Arabian oryx and white rhinoceros were close to extinction.

The subject of genetic bottle-necks is not mentioned although it is covered in one of the books in the bibliography. The issue is highly relevant since the cheetah seems to be in danger from having passed through such a bottle-neck. Other species have fared much better in similar circumstances, and the reasons are of significance in conservation policy. The concept of effective population size should also have been mentioned for it is of great importance in captive breeding, upon which endangered species seem increasingly to depend for survival.

The book is attractively produced and certainly achieves its objective of explaining why we

should conserve species. It is less sure on 'how'. In his 'Coda' (Chapter 12) the author admits that we do not yet know how to achieve the two very simple aims of maintaining the habitat of animals and plants, and of not over-exploiting them. In fact, we do have the technical knowledge but lack the political power or will to take effective conservation action. It is to be hoped that this excellent book will come to the attention of those politicians who can do something about it.

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The State of the Ark
Lee Durrell
Bodley Head, London, 1986, 224 pp, HB £12.95

In *The State of the Ark* Lee Durrell has attempted the near impossible—an up-to-the-minute balance sheet of the current standing and the future prospects of our plant and animal fellow travellers on the earth, our latter-day ark. In this formidable task she was aided by a team of researchers working in collaboration with the IUCN. Together they have covered an amazing amount of ground: the first chapter considers the basic life-support systems of climate, water, carbon and nitrogen cycles and the web of living things that have evolved on our planet. The diversity of ecosystems and plant and animal species follow and their well-being (or otherwise) is dealt with on a mainly biogeographic basis. The final chapter is concerned with the development of conservation ideas and bodies.

Throughout, the relationships of animals with all aspects of their environment are stressed, and man is generally seen as the destroyer. No punches are pulled over the problems of soaring human populations or the belief, too often held by governments and big business, that the future is well mortgaged for today's quick buck. Yet not all is gloom, and the good sense and good will towards the environment shown by some people shine through many of the 'case studies' that give supporting details to the main themes of the book. These case studies include such diverse topics as soil loss through agricultural malpractice, the effect of dune buggies in the California Desert, caribou and the Alaska oil pipeline, crocodile farms in Papua New Guinea, survival of the cahow, and the Chipko movement, which protects trees in India.

So wide-ranging a book must to some extent be superficial and some mistakes are inevitable, although these are mostly minor misidentifications and misspellings. More aggravating to me is the basic layout, with the main text often interrupted by two or more pages of case studies, photographs or maps, which break the thread of the argument. The photographs are, on the whole, stunning, but the artwork does not match their standard, and the maps, for which the book is subtitled 'An atlas of conservation in action', are too frequently overcrowded with detail and are not easy to read.

But these are minor quibbles, for this will be a valuable book for students at all but the most elementary levels. Specially useful are the references to sources of information, which are given in far more detail than is usual in a popular work. They will allow readers to follow up any subject that has aroused their interest, and surely, with so much to choose from on so vital a topic, nobody reading this book can remain totally indifferent.

Joyce Pope, Department of Zoology, British Museum (Natural History).

Iceland: Nature's Meeting Place
Mark Carwardine
Iceland Review, 1986, £9·50

Iceland is much more than a convenient location for Reagan–Gorbachev summit meetings. Nothing like as bleak and inhospitable as its name implies, Iceland has warmer weather than might be expected, the scenery is magnificent, and there is an abundance of wildlife. Twenty million breeding puffins, 200 pairs of the majestic gyrfalcon, pods of killer whales patrolling the coastal waters and the odd polar bear that has wandered too far south are just some of the highlights.

Surprisingly, relatively little has been written about Iceland's fauna and flora—until this book, that is, which more than makes up for the existing gaps. It provides a comprehensive and very readable account of everything you could want to know about Iceland's birds, mammals, fish, invertebrates and plants—where to find them and how to get there—and has a complete species