

Book reviews

wise husbandry. Indeed the opening paragraphs deplore our willingness to rely on just three species of bovids — cattle, sheep, and goats, while ignoring the study and fate of the many others. Indeed the choice of actual types domesticated was a consequence largely of the limited range of species available in the Middle East, an area poor in bovid diversity. A section on conservation is also added as an Appendix.

These books are a celebration of zoology and it is a great pity that their high price will make them available to so few.

Jane Thornback,
Compiler of IUCN's *Red Data*
Book: *Mammalia*

The Gibbons of Siberut

Tony Whitten (Foreword by Sir Peter Scott)

J.M. Dent, £9.50

This book is the result of several years of dedicated study by Tony and Jane Whitten, aided by botanist Alan House, in a remote Indonesian island off the west coast of Sumatra. The title is misleading, in that the book is not just about the ecology and behaviour of the endemic species of gibbon—the subject of his doctoral dissertation—nor the other rare primates found there, but about the local people and their struggle to survive and to maintain their cultural traditions (evolved in harmony with the tropical forest ecosystem) in the face of political and economic pressures from central government (and multinational companies). One can perhaps forgive the frequent interruption to the delightful descriptions of the forest and its primates, because of the fascinating insights he gives of the people and their way of life. Tony Whitten's affection for, and admiration of, these resourceful, stoical and friendly people comes across strongly, as does his pragmatic approach to nature conservation allied with sustained human development.

He describes their early days on the island—getting to know the forest and the people and starting his gibbon study—followed by the main problems and successes in studying the elusive gibbons, all interlaced with tales of the local people and their folklore. Then they go on

Book reviews

survey, which takes them to other, more remote parts of the island, and finally he weaves together the plight of wildlife and the people.

Siberut is facing the crisis now confronting all forested regions in the tropics—drastic degradation for short-term economic gain to the detriment of the local people and wildlife. The crucial role of forests in these ever-wet regions in soil and water balance and in ameliorating climate are being appreciated almost too late, as is their long-term potential for food, medicine and other chemicals and living materials. The remoteness and compactness of Siberut offers unusual opportunities for conserving the rain forest and improving the standard of living for the local people. This book should do much to help promote such aims; it is essential reading for anyone interested in rain forests, primates (and other wildlife) and people.

David J. Chivers,
Sub-Department of Veterinary Anatomy,
Cambridge University

The IUCN Amphibia — Reptilia Red Data Book. Part 1: Testudines, Crocodylia, Rhynchocephalia Brian Groombridge (Compiler)

It would be extremely easy to write a glowing review of Brian Groombridge's compilation. There is absolutely no doubt that the 400 pages are thoroughly and accurately researched, and that the data are presented in as lucid a manner possible within the constraints of the RDBs. I could not praise it enough. But I would like to take the opportunity to look beyond the present volume.

This volume deals with Testudines, Crocodylia, and Rhynchocephalia — some of the largest, best documented species of reptiles; there are also only a few species. It will be impossible to treat the rest of the reptiles and amphibians of the world with the same degree of detail. This means that effectively the compilers of the RDBs are performing 'triage' for the conservation world. There may be dozens, if not hundreds of tropical frogs becoming extinct every year as forests are cleared, but because a decision has been made to