

Ups and Downs of Living with Man

Almost every one of the speakers at the FPS/Mammal Society Symposium on mammal conservation in February made the point, directly or implicitly, that as man continues to press ever greater demands on the earth's space and resources, other animals to survive will have either to be of use to him, adapt to live alongside him, or be preserved by him in small remnant populations. Dr Keith Eltringham, for example, suggested that one way to conserve the African elephant would be to domesticate it. Its only economic values today are as a tourist attraction and a source of ivory – the one undependable and the other destructive – while much of the land that elephants occupy is coveted by a burgeoning human population. In many places elephants only exist by courtesy of man, who, as he becomes hard-pressed, may only continue to extend this courtesy if he gets an economic return.

Paradoxically, what is threatening to elephants can be good for crab-eater seals and kangaroos. Crab-eaters are flourishing because a man-induced shortage of southern whales has led to an explosion of Antarctic krill, the mis-named crab-eaters' principal diet, and grey kangaroos because Australian stockmen have replaced scrub with grass, their preferred food. Dr R. M. Laws, discussing Antarctic marine mammals, and Dr Michael Bryden, speaking on the seals of Macquarie Island, both pointed to the amazing recovery of the once endangered fur seal as at least partially attributable to the abundance of krill. But the seals' prosperity may be only temporary if man, in skipping down the food chain and harvesting krill directly – as he is already doing – is as improvident with this resource as he has been with whales. The grey kangaroos will probably never be in danger, and regular killing by Government hunters has little effect on their numbers. But many other Australian species, as G. Wilson was careful to point out, had vanished along with the scrubland, and while it is good to hear that grey kangaroos and seals are thriving, it would be even better to know that other marsupials and the great whales had not been decimated to achieve this.

Dr D. Macdonald spoke about the wolf in Italy, which also survives only by courtesy of man. It is hard to convince an Italian shepherd that there is any good in an Abruzzo wolf, and yet a small population remains. Various conservation tactics can take credit here – not least funds to pay an average of \$1200 per wolf per year in compensation for lost sheep – but an approach that was surprisingly effective in restraining vendettas against the wolf was to ask, 'Would you like it if there were no more wolves?' That the answer was often 'No' suggests that there is hope for the predators yet.

But while the Abruzzo wolf is being maintained at little more than a token population, the dingo is still in conflict with farmers throughout wide parts of Australia, and both parties suffer as a result of indiscriminate 'control' methods: the dingo because of a breakdown in its stable pack system, allowing it to hybridise with dogs (only 10 per cent are now pure dingo), and the farmers because this breakdown has in some places caused a dingo population explosion. Dr Laurie Corbett pointed out that in a pack only the dominant female reproduces; without a pack, all do. And in those places where the killing has been thoroughgoing enough to cause a dingo decline, other agricultural pests – wallabies, wombats and rabbits – have flourished.

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