

Editorial

The cost of supporting the fur trade

The battle between the anti-fur lobby and the fur trade has made headline news in recent months. Animal welfare supporters have held demonstrations in the US and in Europe to 'highlight the cruelty behind the glamour of fur' and have paid for often controversial and emotional advertising campaigns. The fur trade has responded with propaganda of its own. The battle is fought largely on grounds of morality, and conservationists fight shy of involving themselves.

There is one area of the trade where conservationists do not fear to tread—in the section that involves trade in endangered species. Here they have intervened to attempt to control the trading of skins through the Convention on Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. Through this they have gained some spectacular successes, most notably in listing most big cats on Appendix I, thereby dramatically reducing the commercial exploitation of these animals. However, there has been a shift to the use of the skins of small cats in the trade and this is much more difficult to control. Some small cats are under particularly heavy exploitation, for example, Geoffroy's cat, little spotted cat, ocelot, margay and pampas cat in South America. Being listed on Appendix II of CITES offers little protection to these, although additional national legislation can help.

The biology, behaviour, habitat requirements and population status of most of these small cats are practically unknown—and some biologists are concerned about the level of exploitation. Conservationists can press to have some of them listed on Appendix I, perhaps before it is too late, but even if this were achieved there would still be problems. Enforcement of CITES regulations is exceedingly difficult when so many of the exporting countries are too poor to patrol their borders effectively or to increase the numbers of Customs Officers. South America has strong wildlife protection laws, but the illegal skin trade flourishes in Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay and Panama. Documents are forged and sold to traders; smuggling is rife. West Germany's CITES data indicate that it has imported little spotted cats from Uruguay, where they do not occur, and ocelots from Paraguay, which is home to an endangered sub-

species of ocelot on Appendix I. In addition to these problems Customs officials face identification problems that would challenge wildlife experts. For example, CITES permits commercial trade in leopard cats, but forbids it in the leopard cat subspecies of peninsular India and South-East Asia. Yet in 1979, when the International Fur Fair exhibited two leopard cat pelts in New York, experts were unable to say whether or not they came from the endangered subspecies.

How much simpler it would all be if the fur trade were outlawed altogether. Think of the time, the money, the conservation effort that would be freed for other conservation purposes, quite apart from the number of species saved. Why do conservationists not call for an end to the trade? Why do they not direct their efforts more towards attempting to change attitudes in the consumer countries, especially in West Germany, the world's largest consumer of wild cat skins, where there is apparently no shortage of rich customers willing to pay \$40,000 for an ocelot coat. The wearing of cat skins is socially unacceptable in many circles in the US and the UK, a change due at least in part to the activities of the animal welfare lobby and conservationists. The animal welfare lobby would go further and discourage also the wearing of rancher fur. Such a stand could only benefit the conservation cause. Putting questions of animal welfare aside, there are unfortunate spin-offs from allowing a trade in rancher furs to continue. There is the well-documented danger from escaped exotic animals from fur farms establishing in the wild and causing devastation amongst the native wildlife. This danger may well increase in future if more and more farms are established because of a shift away from wild trapped skins and if misguided and hysterical animal rights activists continue to attempt to liberate the animal inhabitants. There is also a more subtle effect. While rancher fur coats are still regarded as the ultimate luxury, but are yet being promoted as something 'everyone' can afford, there will always be those people who want something different, who will perpetuate the demand for the rare and expensive. Thus the pressures for exploiting wild populations will continue or be renewed, especially if they can be seen to be flourishing—and then we are back to all the problems of controlling the trade again.