

International conference on forest biology and conservation in Borneo

A rather unusual conference in Yayasan Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, East Malaysia, held on 30 July–3 August 1990, attracted 219 delegates from 13 countries, with an additional 50 in the 'home team'. A key feature was the stimulating interaction between scientists from the countries in the island of Borneo—133 of the participants were from Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. They were augmented by scientists from other countries world-wide who have worked, and are working, on the island, going back many years. Thus it was a valuable reunion for many and a first meeting for others. The Sabah Foundation and the Malaysian National University–Sabah Campus are to be congratulated on bringing together so many scientists and for developing such a productive programme.

The conference took place on the largest forested island in the tropics, against a background of widespread concern about the over-exploitation of its natural resources. The main aims of the conference were to promote an understanding of Bornean rain-forest ecology, to develop sustainable management practices for a wider variety of plant and animal products, rather than present reliance on unsustainable logging and conversion to intensive agriculture. The establishment of an adequate system of protected areas to conserve the island's great wealth of species and recognition of traditional knowledge of this ecosystem by Bornean people were additional themes.

There were 4.5 days of scientific sessions, with five plenary sessions and 14 other sessions running in pairs, covering about 70 papers and plenty of discussion. Much recent biological research has focused on a limited number of sites: Kinabalu Park and Danum Valley in Sabah; Kutai and Wanariset in East Kalimantan; Barito Ulu and Tanjung Puting in Central Kalimantan; Gunung Palung in West Kalimantan; and Gunung Mulu Park in Sarawak. The Royal Geographical Society's current expedition to Ulu Temburong, in Brunei, will in due course add another site

and the third Bornean country to this developing network. The conference provided a venue to compare results on topics ranging from dipterocarp regeneration dynamics, to *Rafflesia* conservation, orang-utan rehabilitation, and the uses of traditional plant medicines. Such technical sessions and contributions provided a sound ecological basis for others on forest economics, plans of conservation organizations, human/environment interactions and regional perspectives. Thus the meeting produced a constructive mix of science and policy discussion.

The conference produced seven Resolutions, addressed to the national, state and provincial governments of Borneo and to their partners in development (multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental organizations with an interest in sustainable patterns of land use on the island). In summary, these focused on:

1. Improved forest management: reducing damage during logging, through the provision of incentives.

2. Institute of Borneo Studies: to be established for the participation of all Bornean territories for the development of a co-ordinated and long-term programme of environmental, ecological and socioeconomic research.

3. Transfrontier reserves: more international collaboration to develop new transfrontier reserves, such as a Malaysian counterpart to the Kayan-Mentarang Reserve in Kalimantan, to add to the first such reserve (Lanjak-Entimau, Sarawak, and Cagar Alam Bentuang dan Karimun, Kalimantan).

4. Extension of protected areas system: the creation and protection of new reserves on the island to secure limited ecosystems, such as coastal, freshwater swamp, peat swamp, kerangas and forest over limestone and ultra-basic rocks.

5. Mangrove protection: no further conversion should be attempted, in view of their overwhelming importance to fisheries and coastal protection.

6. Valuation of renewable natural resources: accelerate research into valuations of non-timber goods and services so that the capital value of forests can be valued properly as part of national wealth.

7. Resettlement: great caution to be exercised in the use of such projects as a method of rural development, because of the risks of creating a landless peasantry, unnecessary loss of native land and significant violation of fundamental human rights.

The significance of these Resolutions is heightened, and the need to implement them rapidly is strengthened, by the current plight of tropical rain forests, of their wildlife and of the people who depend on them. The most widespread threat is from logging. Although the rate of timber extraction is likely to decrease rapidly over the next few years, this is mainly because of resource depletion rather than any fundamental changes in policies. Logging must become more selective and less damaging, with other forest products contributing to welfare in a more sustainable way than is possible from timber extraction alone. Encouragingly, there are signs that Indonesia is shortly going to require concessionaires to treat or replant with indigenous species all timber lands immediately after logging.

The very rich biological diversity of Borneo is under serious threat. There are about 420 species of birds, 92 species of bats and 120 other land-mammal species. A third of these species can be found nowhere else. Large parks spanning the full altitudinal range of the island, such as Mount Kinabalu, contain more than 4000 plant species. Not only is human welfare being threatened all over the island by environmental degradation, but human rights are being violated.

Borneo offers an unique opportunity to lead the way in reducing such damage, and in harnessing the available resources to the benefit of the people (locally and globally) and to the wildlife. Although the pace of forest clearance and disturbance in Borneo can shock those who knew it even 15 years ago, about 60 per cent of the island is still covered in forest and substantial areas remain essentially undisturbed, especially in the mountainous interior. Overall its condition is better than any other major region of South East Asia (New Guinea excluded) and tiny Brunei's forests are in perhaps the best condition of any country in Asia. Elsewhere on Borneo there is still time to pro-

tect key forest areas (only 5 per cent is currently protected) and to place much of the rest under sustainable management. Co-operation throughout the island, as envisaged in the proposed institute and transfrontier reserves, is an essential ingredient, as are the proposed valuations of renewable natural resources for assessment as part of national wealth and the more rigorous control of development projects.

This productive conference on this vital issues saw both the dispersal and germination of the seeds of survival for the Bornean ecosystem. The next few years will be critical for their maturation and bearing of fruit.

David J Chivers.

Environmental Protection Act for Britain

The Environmental Protection Act came into effect on 1 November 1990. Under Section 138 the Nature Conservancy Council ceased to exist on 1 April 1991 and was replaced by three new bodies—English Nature, the NCC for Scotland (which in 1991 will fuse with the Countryside Commission for Scotland to become Scottish National Heritage), and the Countryside Council for Wales.

New arrangements for dismemberment of the NCC into three independent country agencies were announced in 1989. The NCC itself had not been consulted and was angered, particularly as it had prepared a proposal that would have devolved powers and responsibilities for England, Scotland and Wales, while at the same time maintaining a Great Britain overview. Consequently the government agreed to the creation of a fourth body, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, to ensure that the UK would be able to meet its international obligations under relevant Agreements and Conventions.

The NCC has handed on to its successors much unfinished business and serious problems. Sites of Special Scientific Interest are deteriorating or being damaged and the problems of nature conservation in the wider countryside need new imaginative approaches. Lack of financial resources and staff will make

those tasks difficult and it will be some time before the new arrangements can be judged.

Editor.

Tropical Forest Forum launched in UK

The inaugural meeting of the UK Tropical Forest Forum was held in London at the Linnean Society on 26 February 1991. After an opening address by Lord Cranbrook representatives from academic, conservation, development and international funding organizations considered a number of issues, including the current activities and policies of IUCN, the Tropical Forestry Action Plan, International Tropical Timber Organization, Overseas Development Administration, World Bank and UK Government.

The draft mandate of the Forum suggests that its primary objective should be to 'strengthen the coherence and effectiveness of British-based actions in support of the sustainable use and conservation of forests and forest lands in tropical countries, for the benefit of their peoples, and for the forest's global environmental values'.

Clearly such a wide range of weighty topics need more detailed and serious consideration than is possible in a single day and in addition to regular meetings of the whole forum, working groups are to be set up to consider such issues as the TFAP, ITTO, biodiversity, global warming and sustainability. It is to be hoped that through this structure and with a proposed 20-strong advisory panel, the Tropical Forest Forum will be able to make an innovative, well-focused and measurable contribution to the future of tropical forests and their peoples. The FFPS will of course be represented on the Forum and lend its weight to achievement of the Forum's laudable goals.

Mike Read.

IUCN/SSC Shark Specialist Group

Following increased international concern about the conservation of elasmobranchs (sharks, skates and rays), the Species Survival

Commission of IUCN has formed a Shark Specialist Group. This group, chaired by Dr Samuel Gruber, University of Miami, will provide leadership for the conservation of threatened species and populations of all elasmobranchs. The aims are: to determine the status and conservation needs of the taxa; to promote the implementation of necessary research and management programmes; to press for the wise management and sustainable use of elasmobranch species; and to ensure their conservation through the development of conservation strategies and the promotion of specific projects to be carried out by appropriate organizations and governments.

The inaugural meeting of the Shark Specialist Group was held at the first international shark conference and conservation workshop, 'Sharks Down Under', at Taronga Zoo, Sydney, Australia in February/March 1991. This venue was particularly appropriate because New South Wales has the only coastal waters in the world where certain sharks have totally protected status.

Regional vice-chairmen for the specialist group are being appointed to co-ordinate work and to provide links between members, the chairman and the SSC. The recent proposal for a European Elasmobranch Society, affiliated to the American Elasmobranch Society, should assist with the establishment of a North-East Atlantic Shark Specialist Group network.

Sarah Fowler.

Good news for the white-headed duck

The endangered white-headed duck *Oxyura leucocephala* is the only member of the stiff-tails, a group of diving ducks highly specialized for an aquatic life, occurring naturally in Europe and Asia. In 1989 the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust and International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau (IWRB) launched an action plan to conserve this species. The plan was partly sponsored by WWF UK and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The species is particularly vulnerable because most of the world population of

15,000 winter together on one lake, Burdur Golu in Turkey. Hunting from speed boats is a popular pastime on this lake, and so the single most important action identified in the plan is the banning of hunting at this site.

This has now been achieved following the publication of the plan in Turkish. Last August this was sent to the Turkish central government with an appeal for them to take action, but they made no response. Then in December, with the help of the Turkish Society for the Protection of Nature, it was sent to the local governor of the Burdur Region. The governor responded immediately by banning hunting on the lake and on Yarisli Golu, another important wintering site. This ban has been successfully enforced by the police, and the reduced disturbance may explain the fact that in February 1991, 10,900 white-headed ducks were counted on Burdur Golu, the highest count ever. The local pride generated by the international interest in the lake was so strong that the entire action plan was serialized in the daily paper, *Burdur*.

The Action Plan is based *The Status and Conservation of the White-headed Duck* compiled by S. Anstey, IWRB Special Publication No. 10, available from IWRB, Slimbridge, Gloucester GL2 7BX, UK for £10.00 plus £1.50 p & p.

The Pemba fruit bat

In the last issue of *Oryx* (25, 110–112) Ole Seehausen reported on a short survey of Pemba in October/November 1989 where the endemic fruit bat *Pteropus voeltzkowi* appears to have undergone a drastic decline. He reported that despite extensive searches with the help of local villagers no fruit bats were seen in the vicinity of Ngezi Forest in the north-west of the island, where a roosting site had been recorded previously.

Since publication we have heard from Dr H. Beentje, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, who writes:

'In December 1989, about a month after Mr Seehausen's visit to the area, I was in Ngezi, doing a forest inventory, and at 11.00 h, in the north-west part of the forest I saw between



White-headed duck (Andy Green).

150–200 *Pteropus* roosting in large trees. I must say that during my inventories of other forest patches on Pemba (Msitu Mkuu and Ras Kinyu) I did not see any more *Pteropus*. Still, the view of such a large colony in Ngezi was wonderful!'

Correction

On page 110, second column, penultimate line of Ole Seehausen's paper in the April issue, 27 September should have read 27 October.

Golden langur—distribution confusion

Two items in recent issues of *Oryx* reported on golden langur *Presbytis geei* distribution records. Choudhury (1990) states that the golden langur is confined to Bhutan and Assam, while Saikia *et al.* (1990) believed that the species occurred only in hill forests on the Indo–Bhutan border until a recent survey had found them 100 km south of their known distribution area. Hugo Varley has written to say that he thought it was generally known that golden langurs had often been sighted by villagers in eastern Nepal and refers to his own sighting of a group in central Nepal in 1982 (Varley, 1985).

References

- Choudhury, A. 1990. Primates in Bhutan. *Oryx*, **24**, 125.
 Saikia, P., Raj, M., Deka, J. and Bhattacharjee, P.C. 1990. New golden langur records. *Oryx*, **24**, 194.
 Varley, H. 1985. A rare sighting of the golden langur.