Too Much Doom?

How to Save The World: A Strategy for World Conservation, by **Robert Allen.** Kogan Page, £2.95.

For twenty-five years and more the reading public has been well supplied with articles and books proclaiming that man appears intent on damaging beyond repair the ecosystems which sustain him. In many of these writings the basic message has been that a burgeoning human population when combined with present day technological development is a recipe for environmental disaster. The sense of disillusionment with man's activities carried out in the name of progress gave rise to a general pessimism about the future, a pessimism which was reinforced by the appearance on bookshelves of emotive titles such as *Can the world be saved?*, *Plan in Peril?* and *The Doomsday Book*. Bold statements and the use of provocative phrases certainly focused attention on the ecological problems arising out of man's activities but the reactions to such writings were not always favourable. Charges of sensationalism and overstatement of the ecological case to gain attention were levelled against the 'prophets of doom' and the epithet 'ecofreak' became part of common parlance. A critical appraisal of the predictions of ecodisaster appeared in the book *The Doomsday Syndrome*', where it was argued that pessimism about the future made so much of distant and abstract calamities that it was inexcusably detached from the present. Given attitudes and approaches such as these it is not surprising that by the mid-seventies the fully committed proponents of 'ecological awareness' on the one hand and 'technological advance' on the other found themselves poles apart and firmly entrenched at the extremes of a spectrum of opinions.

In 1980 it is refreshing to note that a concerted effort is being made to establish that development and conservation are not incompatible. This fresh approach is embodied in the World Conservation Strategy published by IUCN, UNEP and WWF for decision-makers, and its overall message is that not only can conservation contribute to the developmental objectives of governments, industry and the like but also that development can be a means of achieving conservation objectives. Cooperation instead of confrontation is the keynote of this balanced document.

How to Save the World is an unofficial and expanded popular paper-back version of the World Conservation Strategy; it follows therefore that cooperation in place of conflict is the intended theme. Unfortunately the title is reminiscent of the more provocative conservation tomes of the 50s and 60s, and one can only hope that it does not refuel the charges of sensationalism and overstatement experienced by the earlier exponents.

The factual content of the present volume is sound and on a much firmer footing then the near speculations of a decade or so ago. The general pattern of the book, and indeed of each chapter, is description followed by prescription, a familiar theme for any conservationist and author of management plans. But, as is well known, a major problem is to strike the correct balance between description and prescription. In my view *How to Save the World* has not found the correct balance: too much emphasis has been afforded to past mistakes and imminent disasters. The early chapters are filled with phrases of the type, 'If present rates of land impoverishment are allowed to persist, one-third of the world's cropland will disappear in a mere 20 years'; 'At the present rate of felling all tropical rain forests will have disappeared within 85 years'; 'The bottom is dropping out of the world's breadbasket', and 'Coral reefs are the tropical rain forests of the sea'. For me such phrases raise the spectre of the adamant technocrat and his accusations of emotionalism, it would be a pity if this came to pass because the intended theme is cooperation not confrontation.

Needless to say, the book is not just a catalogue of overexploitation and pollution incidents; there are prescriptions, but compared with the descriptions these are of a very general nature. For example, 'unless concerted action is taken immediately there will be a further decline in the planet's capacity to support its population'; 'Maintain ecological processes'; 'Utilise species and ecosystems sustainably', and 'The way to save the world is to invent and apply patterns of development that will also conserve the living resources essential for human survival and wellbeing'. Perhaps the author should have rejected the main title of this book and substituted the sub-title.

I have no argument with the intentions underlying the writing of this book. What does concern me is that with such a title the non-committed reader will search for solutions and react in much the same way as he did some twenty years ago.

JOHN PHILLIPSON

Demain la Famine ou la Conspiration du Silence, by **Jean-Paul Harroy.** Hayez, Brussels, BF495.

Homo tyrannicus: A History of Man's War Against Animals, by **Peter Verney.** Mills & Boon, £6.95.

Tomorrow Famine or the Conspiracy of Silence is a passionate and factual 'j'accuse' against the laissez-faire attitudes of the Third World governments and those associated with them, including multilateral and bilateral aid organisations, to the rapidly deteriorating conditions of rural populations in the tropics. The author is an outstanding authority on tropical Africa, where he spent a considerable part of his career, both in the field as conservator of Zaire's Virunga (formerly Albert) National Park and later in political high office as Vice-Governor General of the Congo and Governor of Rwanda and Burundi; the last two he guided into independence. Professor Harroy's PhD thesis was the now classical *Afrique, terre qui meurt* (1944), one of the best treatises on African ecology, but little known in Anglo-Saxon countries. Had politicians and decision-makers read this book 36 years ago, Africa's renewable natural resources might not now be in such deplorable shape. The author is also prominent in international conservation, having been the first Secretary-General of IUCN and for six years Chairman of its National Parks Commission.

This book makes an eloquent, though at times somewhat repetitive, analysis of the main culprits and reasons for the worsening food crisis and environmental rural conditions in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania. He describes several full sets of political, socio-cultural and economic obstacles which block any meaningful development of Third World rural areas. Hand in hand with deteriorating life conditions and dwindling food and domestic fuel resources go the shrinking natural resources – water, soils, vegetation and wild animals. It is a vicious circle.

Harroy regards the ongoing North-South dialogue as an exchange of polite banalities that avoid all honest approach to basic problems. In the chorus of unrealistic nonsense the aid organisations share the responsibility, or rather lack of it. Either they do not understand what they have been seeing for decades in developing countries, or they just accept the policies favouring urban populations and forget the vast, silent rural majority. He divides the three billion inhabitants of the Third World into a modern sector of about one billion individuals, mainly living in cities and therefore politically important and a rural sector of two billion that is virtually ignored and starving.

It is interesting that Harroy includes IUCN in the 'silent conspiracy' because it prefers not to speak out about the population explosion and other basic factors behind the actual destruction of renewable natural resources. Many would agree.

Homo tyrannicus presents a parade of familiar stories of man's plundering of animal resources in various parts of the world – whaling, the fur trade, the elimination of the American bison, the disappearance of the passenger pigeon, the dodo, the auk and so forth. This chronicle of often-encountered historical facts may be useful to have repeated for the benefit of young readers, to whom they are new, although there are a