

New Hope for Wetlands

Sir Hugh Elliott

One should perhaps be a bit more wary of milestones – spotting them too often is a sign of fog or of going round in circles – but there do seem to be grounds for hoping that the international conference on the conservation of wetlands and waterfowl, held at Ramsar on the Caspian Sea, last February, is a genuine milestone on one of conservation's more difficult roads. Certainly this was the view of the half-dozen participants who, eight years ago, attended the MAR Conference at Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, in the Camargue, which began the campaign for recognition of the importance of conserving 'marshes, bogs and other wetlands' – hitherto almost universally regarded as wasteful nuisances, or even menaces to health, to be drained at the first possible moment.

At that first meeting twelve of the fifteen countries represented were west European or north American, and the task of converting public and governmental opinion before it was too late seemed an almost hopeless one. At Ramsar, however, ten of the 23 countries represented were east European, Asian or African. Eighteen governments sent delegations and five more sent observers, in response to an invitation from the Iranian Government, which, with support from the three original sponsors, IUCN, ICBP and (mainly) IWRB, planned the whole enterprise. But what really marked the astonishing change of attitude of the last eight years was that the prime object of the meeting was to ensure that, at the earliest possible date, an international Convention on Wetlands of International Importance as Waterfowl Habitat will be ratified by the 23 Governments and open to accession by others.

Convention Text Agreed

Despite the very considerable procedural and even political hurdles which had to be surmounted, in which the intermediary value of the mixed status of IUCN (as a non-governmental organisation yet supported by member governments) was again amply demonstrated, the aims of the conference were successfully achieved to the extent that all delegations were eventually able to sign the 'Final Act'. This summarised the background and the general conclusions, annexed eleven very heterogeneous resolutions, and – most important of all – produced a unanimously agreed text of the Convention, with a strong recommendation to their Governments to authorise diplomatic representatives to initial this text as a first step towards ratification. It is hoped that, before the end of this year, the Government of Iran will be able to convene a formal meeting for this purpose.

The signs therefore are hopeful. The two points in the Ramsar Convention worth emphasising are that it allows *all* kinds of wetland, not only important wildfowl habitats, to be brought within the scope of the Convention; and, secondly, that although the provisions scarcely restrict national sovereignty (a Contracting Party may add its wetlands to the Schedule, withdraw or vary them as it wishes), there is no doubt that once ratified the Convention will exert powerful moral pressure on

each participating country to 'conserve and manage' its scientifically important wetlands.

Lead from Iran

Finally, two notable initiatives which emerged from the Conference deserve special mention. The Shahanshah, in a message read by Prince Abdorreza, announced that 'Iran is prepared to place one of her wetland ecosystems of special global significance in joint trust with a suitable international agency, such as the United Nations Organisation, to conserve and administer for all mankind' – a fine gesture, setting a precedent which, if successfully implemented, could have far-reaching influence. Secondly, towards the end of the Conference, two or three papers were presented as a basis for planning the next major step forward, namely 'the rationalisation of (wildfowl) hunting'. Once the habitats are safeguarded, it is vital that utilisation is placed firmly on a sustained yield basis. It is to be hoped that before another eight years have elapsed this aim too will be achieved.

Bogs and Carnivores in Finland

Before the new Lokka reservoir in northern Finland was created, drowning 30,000 hectares of bog, scientists predicted what would happen – quite accurately. Today the turf has loosened, and nearly a quarter of the reservoir surface is covered with floating turf, as a photograph in the Finnish journal *Suomen Luonto* shows. The journal also reports that the downward trend of the brown bear population in Finland has stopped. In 1970 the close season was extended, and the population is established at about 150 animals. Wolves, however, have no protection and are thought to number about ten. The wolverine, with a population of 50-60, is also in danger of extinction.

One More Wild Whooping Crane

Fifty-seven whooping cranes turned up last autumn at the Aransas National Refuge in Texas from their breeding grounds in Canada – 51 adults and six young birds, an increase of one on the 1969 totals of 48 and 8 respectively. At the Patuxent Research Station in Maryland there are now 14 birds, 12 of them reared from eggs collected in the wild. The birds usually lay two eggs but only rear one young bird; the collectors always leave one.

Moving Sea Otters

Forty-two northern sea otters, taken by Canadian biologists from Alaska, have now been released off the British Columbia coast, where they became extinct at least 40 years ago. They have proved very difficult to transport, and a sea voyage, despite the time taken, seems to promise better results than air travel. A sea voyage tried last year went well until the ship ran into a 60 mph gale.

New Red Data Books

Reptiles and Amphibia, compiled by René E. Honegger, and the first volume on flowering plants, *Angiospermae*, compiled by Dr Ronald Melville, volumes 3 and 5 respectively of the IUCN Red Data Book, have the same binding and loose-leaf format as the earlier volumes. Both are obtainable from the FPS office, see enclosed Order Form.