

VICTOR VAN STRAELEN: An International Conservationist

THE untimely death of Professor Victor Van Straelen of Belgium, a Vice-President of the FPS, occurred on February 29th this year. One of the leading personalities in international nature conservation, he was for more than thirty years Director of the Musée Royal d'Histoire Naturelle of Belgium, and Professor at the University of Brussels and later Ghent. A member of the Executive Board of IUCN from its inception at Fontainebleau in 1948, and from 1954 to 1960 a Vice-President, he was also a founder-member of the International Commission on National Parks, established at Delphi in 1958, and at the first World Conference on National Parks in Seattle in 1962 was made an honorary Vice-President.

His outstanding achievement unquestionably lay in the creation, organisation and scientific investigation of the national parks of the Congo and Ruanda. It was at his instigation, and with the enlightened support of King Albert, that the first "gorilla sanctuary" was created in 1926 in the Parc National Albert, and in 1929 his great concept was brought to fruition with the transfer of the administration of this park (and later ones to be created) to an autonomous scientific institution with a budget of its own. In 1934 this became the Institut des Parcs Nationaux du Congo Belge, over which he presided until independence. It is to his energy, the clarity of his vision and judgment and his powers of organisation that the present satisfactory position of the four Central African national parks is due, and his personal prestige among the African authorities and the personnel of the parks was not the least of the reasons for the successful maintenance of the parks' integrity after independence, which at one time seemed so unlikely.

In the international field he was one of the instigators of the Office International pour la Protection de la Nature, which from 1929 to 1940, under the presidency of his Dutch colleague and friend, P. G. van Tienhoven, laid plans for what in 1948 became the International Union for the Protection of Nature, which in turn became the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. He was one of the leading figures at the 1933 London Convention for the preservation of the indigenous fauna and flora of Africa, and later one of the promoters of a similar conference for the western hemisphere held in Washington in 1940. He was a member of the Board of the Nederlandsche Commissie voor Internationale Natuursbescherming, and also a Trustee of the Uganda National Parks.

His final achievement was the presidency of the Charles Darwin Foundation, to which, with his usual far-sightedness and dynamism, he devoted much of his time in his last years. Established on the initiative of IUCN, strongly supported by UNESCO, the Foundation officially inaugurated in January, 1964, its main research station in the Galapagos Islands, a ceremony at which he made a most striking speech. In mid-February he signed at Quito with the Government of Ecuador an agreement confirming the status of the research station, and agreeing on the need for adequate protection measures for the natural communities of the archipelago.

Those who knew this fine man, with his indomitable energy, firm principles, and sometimes severe judgment, admired his encyclopaedic knowledge, his selflessness, his hospitable nature and his exceptional linguistic gifts. The cause of international nature conservation has lost one of its most active and uncompromising protagonists.

J.-P. HARROY.