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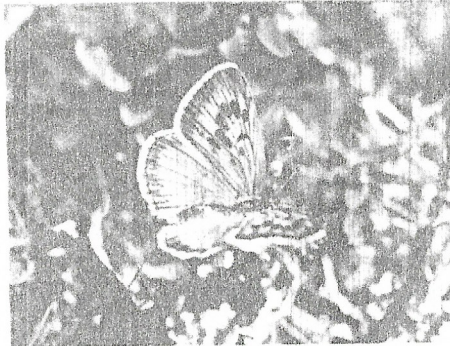
Conservation treaty shot full of holes

Yesterday, Britain's minister for wildlife, Hector Munro, was due to sign the Council of Europe's Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats. The convention describes itself as "a new international legal instrument to protect nature". Munro told *New Scientist* that he hopes "virtually everyone will sign it".

The convention, hammered out in a series of meetings of the 21 members of the Council of Europe, was proposed at the second conference of European ministers responsible for the environment in Brussels in 1976. It has three main aims.

First, it lists the species—plant and animal—so endangered that they need special protection. It calls on member states to prohibit killing of these species and to protect the places where they live. Secondly, it prevents indiscriminate methods of killing species not judged to be endangered. Thirdly, there are to be stricter controls on the introduction of non-European species.

The convention specifies no method of dealing with offenders, other than to expose them to public opprobrium. There will merely be a standing committee to



The large blue butterfly, which the UK's Nature Conservancy Council thinks is probably extinct

assess the performance of the signatory states and to draw attention to malefactors. Neither does the convention impose a very strict set of guidelines; countries can exempt themselves from its provisions for any one of a number of reasons, such as "overriding public interests".

The convention is very much a compromise between the different needs of 21 member countries. John Goldsmith, one of the UK Department of the Environment civil servants involved in

negotiating the convention, explains: "The English are renowned as animal lovers. This is not so throughout Europe. We must help countries that are backward."

Munro showed the qualities that make him minister for sport as well as wildlife when he explained the ban on indiscriminate killing. "One wouldn't use a machine gun to kill deer." Another technique banned in the convention is to use decoys "live animals... which are blind or mutilated", but, as the convention does not apply to fish, anglers will not be affected. Gassing is prohibited, but exemptions are possible.

The convention encourages members to reintroduce native species but under strictly control, the introduction of non-native species. There seems to be some confusion about what constitutes a native species. Beaver and wolf were once common in Britain, but are now extinct; experts could not agree whether they were, or were not, native.

In all, the government thinks the convention a useful document. But at the same time Munro admitted that the convention could have done nothing to save the large blue butterfly. He added that it might provide the "spirit and will" to better next time.

New Towns for rhinos

Jeremy Cherfas

The World Wildlife Fund has declared 1979 the Year of the Rhino. It is to co-ordinate efforts to assure the future of the five species of rhino in Africa and Asia. At last week's meetings of conservationist groups in Cambridge, Professor Rudolf Schenkel outlined his plans to save the Asian rhinos. There are three rhino species in Asia: the Indian, Javanese and Sumatran. All three are endangered, but not to the same extent.

The Indian rhino thrives mainly in the Kasiranga reserve in Assam. The reserve is well guarded against poachers and the rhino population has recently increased quite markedly. There are now some 600 animals in Kasiranga—almost more than the land can support. Adding to the rhino's problems, man's destruction of forests in the foothills of the Himalayas creates either floods, as a result of rainwater running off the denuded surface, or droughts, because the forest no longer acts as a reservoir. The floods and droughts are steadily eroding the rhino's habitat.

Schenkel's plan is to transport some of the Kasiranga rhinos to Manas, some 200 kilometres away. Schenkel is aware of the veterinary and organisational problems of transporting rhinos, and proposes a team of specialists.

There are probably 40 to 100 rhinos already at Manas, so the translocation would not be setting up a new breeding population. It would, however, be a pilot project to train the translocation team. After the transfer to Manas, Schenkel says, experts would scout out other areas



A team of keepers transferring a pair of half-grown rhinos to new quarters

suitable for reserves. If such places can be found, and if the Indian government can be persuaded to make them reserves the team would be ready to take animals to the reserves to form nuclei of new breeding populations.

Plans for the Sumatran and Javan rhinoceros are different because the animals live in forest, rather than grassland, and are much rarer. The first priority is to establish the status of the various stocks. There are perhaps 300 Sumatran rhinos left mostly in reserves in Sumatra and Malaysia. These have been reported from other sites in Malaysia, Thailand, Sumatra, and Borneo. All these reports have to be confirmed. In particular, Schenkel wants to know whether the animals are relics, left behind by a vanishing population, or members of a viable breeding group. Wherever there is a breeding population, the World Wildlife Fund and other groups will try to get reserves set up.

Javan rhinos probably exist only in one

spot, Ujung Kulong in western Java. There are sporadic reports of rhino elsewhere and Schenkel wants to check them out. The population in Ujung Kulong has grown from about 25 in 1968 to about 100 today, but is still at great risk. A single disease epidemic could wipe out the whole population of Javan rhinos. Schenkel's idea is to capture some Javan rhinos and move them to new reserves, but the job will be considerably more difficult than with the Indian species. Sumatran and Javan rhinos are more solitary and need bigger land areas for survival than their Indian counterparts. The task of saving Javan rhinos looks almost impossible.

The WWF is leaving no stone unturned in its fight for the rhino; it has commissioned chemists to analyse rhino horn to see if there is any firm foundation for its pharmaceutical reputation. If the rhino slides into oblivion, the WWF has considered removing the horn from every rhino it can catch.