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The Peril to Africa's Big Game

Why the Conference is Necessary

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THE International Conference for the Protection of the Fauna and Flora of Africa now sitting in London brings home to the man in the street the importance of preserving the animals and plants of the world for the benefit of future generations. The Conference is only concerned with Africa, but it is to be hoped that similar machinery will be set in motion to deal with the protection of wild life throughout the world. One of the objects of the Conference is to draw up an agreed list of species which shall be given, as far as possible, complete protection.

Our slackness in the past has already resulted in the complete extermination of two of the most interesting game animals of South Africa; I refer to the Blaauwbok (*Hippotragus leucophaeus*) and the Quagga (*EQUUS quagga*), both of which have disappeared for all time. Others, like the Bontebok and the Blesbok, are trembling on the verge of extinction. The Blaauwbok was a relative of the roan antelope and appears to have been exterminated about the year 1850, when the last specimens were shot down in the animal's final refuge between Swellendam and Algoa Bay. This antelope never seems to have been very numerous, the species being confined to the southern district of the Cape Province.

At the present day the only remnants of this animal which exist are a few faded skins in the museums of Europe and a couple of frontlets with horns, believed to belong to this species, in the collection of the Natural History Museum.

The Last Quagga

The Quagga, a kind of zebra, was exterminated in South Africa by the year 1873, the last specimens having been shot in the Cape Province between 1865 and 1870, and in the Orange Free State between 1870 and 1873. Thirty years before this animal was very abundant, and Gordon Cumming speaks of seeing it in immense numbers in the Colesberg District.

The Dutch colonists were largely responsible for the wholesale destruction of the quagga, along with the almost complete extermination of the Bontebok, Blesbok, and White-tailed Gnu. As with the Blaauwbok, the only evidence of the existence of the quagga, apart from photographs and drawings, is a few specimens preserved in various museums.

The quagga in the Natural History Museum is an animal which was presented to the Zoological Society of London by Sir George Grey in 1858, and lived in the menagerie until 1864, when on its death the specimen came to the Museum. In South Africa, where once the quagga roamed in herds beyond counting, the only representative is a young foal in the South African Museum.

The Bontebok was formerly distributed over the Cape Province and ranged as far north as the Orange River; the Blesbok was more widely distributed, ranging from the Cape to Bechuanaland. Both these antelopes were at one time present in vast numbers in these areas, but they have now dwindled to comparatively few examples confined on a number of farms in the Transvaal, Orange Free State and the Cape Province. The Gnu, or Black Wildebeest, was, in the early days of South Africa, living in countless thousands on the Karoo and in the Transvaal and Orange Free State. These vast herds have long ago disappeared, and the animal can now be regarded as one of the rarest animals in South Africa where it exists in a semi-domesticated condition.

The White Rhino

Another animal which has suffered sorely at the hands of civilisation is the White Rhinoceros, the third largest land mammal now living. The name White Rhinoceros is, perhaps, a misnomer, as the animal is brown in colour, but it has as much right to be called white as its cousin, the Black Rhinoceros, has to be called black, which is also brown. The horns of this rhinoceros sometimes grew to immense dimensions, especially in the female sex; the record front horn of a female white rhinoceros measuring rather more than 62 inches in length.

This species was formerly found in South Africa over a vast area to the south of the Zambesi, but it is now represented by just a few specimens in the Zululand Reserve and there is a faint possibility that one or two may still inhabit the more out-of-the-way corners of Southern Rhodesia.

Further north this giant pachyderm is still to be found in the Sudan, Northern Congo and parts of Uganda, a different race of white rhinoceros having been discovered by Major P. H. G. Powell-Cotton in 1908 in the Lado District and named by the late Mr. Lydekker *Rhinoceros simus cottoni*. Selous, in his early days in South Africa, speaks of the animal as being very abundant in the uninhabited districts of Matabililand, Mashonaland, Zululand and parts of the Transvaal. One by one these fine beasts have been shot down in the country to the south of the Zambesi, until only a few specimens remain alive under protection.

We see the same sort of thing going on in other parts of the world. For instance, the Indian Rhinoceros is now a very rare animal in most of its former haunts, and its cousin the Javan Rhinoceros, the other one-horned species, may be regarded as an exceedingly rare animal, a few remaining in Java, a few in the Malay Peninsula and perhaps some in Sumatra.