

TALK ON PRESERVATION OF WILD LIFE.
PREPARED BY Mr. SHEBBEAR AND DELIVERED BY Mr. MEIKLEJOHN
ON THE 15th APRIL 1935.

Some of you may have read in the papers the accounts of a conference held in Delhi, at the end of last January, about the Preservation of Wild Life. It may interest you to hear something more of it—what it was all about and what suggestions were made there.

The idea of preserving wild birds and animals is not, of course, an altogether new one, but it is one that has come into the limelight recently. I must not take it for granted that everybody who is listening to me is convinced of any necessity for preserving wild life and I had better begin by telling you the objects of the numerous wild life preservation societies that have sprung up all over the world.

The best way for me to do this is to quote the objects laid down by one of these societies—the one that aims at preserving wild life throughout the British Empire. They are as follows:—

1. The main object of the society is to ensure that no more species of wild animals shall be exterminated within the British Empire.
2. It considers that this can be best effected by the creation of a strong public opinion on the subject both at home and abroad, by furthering the formation of

National Parks and permanent sanctuaries, and by enforcing suitable Game Laws and Regulations.

3. It believes that practical steps can be taken by which every species of wild life can be preserved, without hampering in the slightest the economic development and civilization of our territories.

4. It is no part of the aim of the Society to preserve animal life to the detriment of human industry, or the natural development of mankind; nor does it offer any opposition to the fair and legitimate pursuit of sport.

This last sentence shows that the society, like most reasonable people, does not disapprove of fair sport. Sport is generally the foundation on which a love of wild life is built and, what is more, it is mainly sport on which we shall have to depend for the sinews of war, in our struggle against the wanton destruction of wild animals.

Mankind has waged war on wild animals from the very earliest times. At first, as a hunter, he killed whatever would serve him for food, as well as the beasts of prey that would otherwise have killed him. Later, when he had discovered the secrets of agriculture and the domestication of animals, he became a farmer and stock-breeder and, no doubt, killed the grazing animals that ate his crops as well as the carnivorous ones that ate his cattle.

Naturally, with a history like that behind us, we are all of us born with the hunting instinct more or less strongly developed and this, to my mind, is all to the good. It is all a part of the love of nature, for you cannot help noticing that those who love nature most, and are the keenest on its preservation, are the very ones in whom this sporting instinct is most strongly developed—those, in fact, who, in their youth first displayed their love of wild life by their energy in trying to kill it.

It was all very well for man to kill whatever he could indiscriminately in his early, savage days when he was poorly armed and engaged in a constant struggle against wild nature. As his armoury improved, particularly when firearms were invented, the odds became heavier and heavier against the animals, and man had to begin to handicap himself by means of game laws and close seasons. All the modern inventions, the motor-car and aeroplane, the spot-light and electric torch, demand further restrictions to preserve the balance between the number of animals killed and the natural increase in the stock of game.

No sportsman objects to such reasonable restrictions made in the interest of the game, though, of course, opinions may differ as to what is reasonable and what is not. The true sportsman is more interested in the increase of game in his own neighbourhood than in a heavy individual bag. It is for this reason that I believe that the Shooting and Fishing Clubs of Northern Bengal will become the backbone of any scheme for the preservation of wild life in Bengal. These clubs, since they have leased the fishing and shooting in the Reserved Forests, have imposed restrictions on themselves in the interests of the game.

Of course, the Shooting and Fishing Clubs are really only concerned with the protection of those birds, beasts and fishes that are considered game, though, in practice, they extend their protection to all wild things. Wild Life Preservation

Societies are not only interested in game, but in all kinds of wild life, as well as wild vegetation and scenery. They also interest themselves in the foundation of what are known as National Wild Life Parks,

In all parts of the World nations are making sanctuaries to preserve their wild animals and natural vegetation, which they now regard as a national heritage. In these National Parks Nature is left to herself, and sightseers, besides enjoying the scenery, can watch the birds and animals in their natural surroundings.

In such places wild animals lose all fear of mankind in an unbelievably short time. Visitors can feed wild black bears from their motor-cars in the National Parks of North America and watch lions at close quarters and without danger in the Kruger National Park in South Africa. One of the most thrilling sights in the World is to see out of the train window as you steam across the Athi Plains in East Africa the enormous herds of antelope and zebra, with occasional groups of giraffe and to walk almost among the zebra, wildebeeste, kongoni and gazelles, on the golf-course at Nairobi. There are sanctuaries nearer home in Burma and Assam and a newly established one in the United Provinces. One is almost tempted to hope that it may one day be possible to feed our Bengal rhinoceros on carrots!

More and more people every year are in a position to spend their holidays in sightseeing and, with the improved transport of the future, Wild Life Parks will become the great rival of mountain scenery and ancient monuments as an attraction for sight-seers. It will not be long before the countries that possess such attractions will reckon themselves lucky.

Another sign of the times is the way in which the sportsman traveller who, ten years ago, was mainly a collector of trophies has given up the rifle for the camera—an example set by the Prince of Wales. Every year more books on Wild animals and birds are written by men who have watched them in their native haunts, and these are illustrated with the most beautiful and intimate photographs in a "home setting." "Movie" and "still" photography is becoming yearly easier for the amateur, particularly that most fascinating hobby, flashlight traps. A camera is set up in the jungle alongside a game-path or over a tiger's kill, and the animal is made to take its own portrait.

I seem to have drifted away from my principal subject—the Wild Life Conference at Delhi. The idea of holding this conference originated with a small group of enthusiasts—sportsmen and nature-lovers—who were distressed to see the wholesale destruction of wild birds and animals that is going on in almost every part of India, and at a steadily increasing rate. These men got in touch with as many others in all parts of India as they could, and proposed a meeting to see what could be done. The proposal came to the ears of the Government of India who, realizing at once the importance of the matter, not only offered its fullest support but undertook the whole organization of the conference. About sixty officials and non-officials representing Provinces and Indian States attended the conference, which lasted for three days.

The Preservation of Wild Life will be a matter for Provinces and States under the new constitution, and not for the Central Government, which will pass on the

resolutions with their recommendations. It will then be up to Local Governments to show what they can do to remedy the present deplorable state of affairs.

This is not going to be an easy matter. It is not merely a question of making laws to control the destruction of wild birds and animals, or of laying out sanctuaries to protect them. This is an important part of the work but it can never be effective unless it has the backing of public opinion. The formation of local wild life societies and the appointment of Honorary Game Wardens from among good sportsmen of influence are two good lines to work on.

Fortunately the whole attitude of mankind towards wild life has changed and is changing rapidly with the spread of education. The extent to which the British schoolboy has changed within one generation was well put by one of the speakers at the conference. Whereas, in his own schooldays, his interest in natural history had consisted mainly in birds-nesting, he found, when he went on leave, that his son, armed with a pair of field-glasses, really studied the habits of wild birds and animals. He thought that this was partly due to the excellent, and very cheap, natural history books that boys in England can now get, and partly to the lectures on natural history with lantern slides that they are given at school.

The conference recommended the drawing up of an All-India Convention for the preservation of wild life, on the lines of the African Convention of 1933. This would be a sort of agreement between the various States and Provinces to co-operate on certain definite lines. It also recommended that if the proposed Asiatic Conference is held, India should be represented.

The most important recommendation made was that all provinces and states should enact legislation for the preservation of the wild life in their territories. The old Wild Birds and Animals Preservation Act of 1912 has been practically a dead letter because offences under it are non-cognizable. A policeman who finds a poacher selling deer's meat in the close season can neither arrest the man nor seize the meat. All that he can do is to lodge a complaint with the nearest magistrate who can issue a summons. If the poacher fails to obey the summons the magistrate can order his arrest but, by that time, the meat will have been sold and eaten and the poacher will have departed for his home—often outside British Territory.

One of the most definite conclusions arrived at by the conference was that an effective way to stop the indiscriminate slaughter of wild animals is to prohibit, or at any rate to regulate the sale. All really serious destruction of wild life is brought about by those who kill for profit. The danger to our Bengal rhinoceros is the value of his horn. The scarcity of sambhur is due to the sale of meat. It is safe to say that, if the trade in game could be checked, the effect would be apparent in the country-side to the most casual observer within a year or two. The conference recommended that, if the sale of wild animals could not be prohibited entirely, it should be closely regulated.

The Delhi Conference will have done some good, if it has opened our eyes to what is happening to some of our wild birds and beasts, and shown us what ought to be done to protect them. But the conference was only in a position to recommend; it remains for local governments to put the recommendations into operation with the help of

public opinion which will surely be behind them in any sane efforts to protect our wildlife. Before an Asiatic Conference is called together I hope that we shall be in a position to show that India, and particularly Bengal, has done its share of the task.
