

## CIVILISATION

The following is excerpted from a Bulletin of The International Office for the Protection of Nature, 21 Rue Montoyer, Brussels.

*"If there is a subject which takes us into the realms far beyond our human horizon, it is certainly the preservation of the eternal goods of which we are the provisional, yet responsible, possessors.*

*"Have we the right to alter at will the natural state of things, without taking into consideration the consequences which our present knowledge of the phenomena already enables us to foresee?"*

THESE were the words spoken before the African Society in London on November 10th, 1933, by the then Duke of Brabant, a few months later Leopold III, King of the Belgians.

The preservation in their natural state of the fauna and flora of a country is a problem the importance of which is no longer questioned by most civilised nations.

To maintain intact all the physical and biological characteristics of certain well defined areas is an object not only inspired by sentimental and aesthetic reasons, but imposed upon us as a duty by *moral* and *scientific* considerations.

No cultivated person can remain unconcerned in presence of the rapid diminution and even extinction of various faunas and floras and the disappearance of picturesque and grand regions which are the finest ornaments of our world.

Science itself, in its progress, ends by defying Nature. Science contributes to the development of natural resources for the benefit of mankind, but, in so doing, it destroys those parts of Nature—and they are in the majority—which are not of immediate use for economic ends.

Yet it is necessary to think of this preservation, even from a purely utilitarian point of view. Up to the present, Man has learned to utilise only a small number of organisms. *He should therefore be careful not to destroy those which may some day be of use to him.* The progress in agriculture, the development of industry, and the increase of the human population, have had for effect that in many regions of the world the fauna and flora are on the eve of *total annihilation*.

For Man is constantly widening the field of his activity. Not only does he modify the aspect of the surface but he disturbs it, and often without any necessity, ends by destroying

the numerous organisms which occupied the soil.

During the last 50 years the intertropical regions have been the scene of the greatest destructions.

We may fairly say, without exaggeration, that in the course of the last half century devastation has been worse than during the whole previous period.

These depredations always begin by the annihilation of the vegetation covering larger areas than can be put into immediate use. Inconsiderate and exhaustive cultivation bring the ruin of a capital accumulated by the action of natural forces during thousands of years, without any real or lasting benefit to the establishment of a constructive and prosperous civilisation.

Thus disappear the forests which used to occupy 92 per cent. of vast intertropical territories where they only cover about 5 to 10 per cent to-day.

The surfaces laid bare in this way undergo deep alterations. First there is a rapid destruction of the humus, soon followed by erosion, which carries away the soft soil to deposit it at lower levels, obstructing the river-courses and creating marshes, while the lower plains get covered with detritic sediments.

No one would think of preventing a rational appropriation of the earth to the reasonable needs of humanity. But it is possible to conceive this evolution, while maintaining, beside the spaces necessary for human activity other spaces devoted to the free action of physical and biological forces.

The practical means of such preservation will be found to consist in the creation of what are called *Reserves* or *National Parks*, on a vast scale, where human interference is reduced to a minimum. The scientific importance of natural reserves is as great as their economic and moral value.