

## **Some Aspects of Conservation in South Australia**

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Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

What we have to say here is more in the nature of a report than any sort of proposal. We are not moving any motion at this time, and we have attempted to express ourselves as temperately and dispassionately as the nature of the subject permits.

We assume that one of the objects of this Congress is to gain information on ornithology in South Australia, and no apology should be needed for referring to local matters that are relevant.

Both Mr. Brookman and Mr. Bryant in their able addresses took note of differences of approach between South Australia and the other States. We feel that it comes entirely within the ambit of this conference to discuss some of the causes of those differences.

It is evident that more and more people in the community are becoming aware of the need to preserve our bird life, and it seems appropriate at this time and place to draw attention to some aspects of conservation in South Australia.

That our birds are worth preserving nobody here will deny. As the primary agents of insect control they help to make the earth habitable to man, and, for good measure, give him much aesthetic pleasure at the same time—which is more than can be said for DDT.

That many of our birds are threatened with extinction will not, we think, be denied either. The techniques of modern land management pose a very real threat indeed. The rapid clearing of huge areas of habitat, and the mass use of pesticides that also kill birds, make the existence of the bird populations increasingly precarious.

The destruction of birds is not only a loss from the practical viewpoint; it raises moral and aesthetic issues which we, of all people, may not evade. It has been well said that "the extermination of rare and beautiful species differs from other crimes in being absolutely irreparable". However, it is only in recent years that the principle that all birds deserve some protection has been recognized.

Conservation is a word now on the lips of many people. Some, no doubt, regard it as synonymous with 'protection' and 'preservation'. It has been defined by one prominent local aviculturist as 'the care and the breeding of both Australian and foreign birds'. Of course, none of these inter-

pretations is completely correct. Conservation, as we see it, must be aimed at the maintenance of the natural order of plant and animal life with a minimum of interference, so that civilized man, the newcomer, the rich upstart of the animal kingdom, may live in harmony with his older, poorer, and more defenceless relations. To permit that, our knowledge, ingenuity and intelligence must be used to their limits.

In South Australia, conservation is confronted with many difficulties. Ignorance of modern practice and lack of funds are two of them, but any enterprise must be prepared to face as much, and may expect to overcome them in time.

The word 'conservation' does not appear in the Animals and Birds Protection Act, the terms of which leave many possibilities of interpretation. Up to the present, the Act has been administered more from the gamekeeper's point of view than from the conservationist's. Protection, even when enforced, is one thing; conservation another.

The Conference of Interstate Fauna Authorities, held in Sydney last year, passed a resolution drawing the attention of all Australian governments (p. 59 of the published transcript of the minutes) to the fact that conservation of wildlife, and its management, is basically dependent on the retention of sufficient natural habitat.

In South Australia, lack of knowledge has engendered a diversity of no doubt sincerely-held, but mutually obstructive, views on conservation practice, and lack of funds has made it impossible either to correct the ignorance or to carry out even those measures that command general agreement. No competent conservation body exists in this State. There is a Flora and Fauna Advisory Committee, composed of representatives of various interested bodies and government departments, including the local ornithological association, whose function it is to advise the Minister of Agriculture when he asks its advice. It can in no way be regarded as a conservation body with continuity of function. As for the Fisheries and Game Department, reference to the Protection Act indicates that its principal function is game-keeping from a commercial and sporting point of view. Many bird sanctuaries in South Australia have a twofold purpose—they are also pleasure resorts. Some sanctuaries are privately owned, and there is no provision in the Act for the control or maintenance of habitat.

While these things are to be regretted, they are scarcely to be wondered at. Where the conservation of birds is concerned, it appears to us that the proper body to initiate action is the local ornithological society, in this case the South Australian Ornithological Association. It is not necessary to remind you that there is no active branch of the R.A.O.U. in this State.

Efforts have indeed been made in the local Association

to amend the Animals and Birds Protection Act and to urge the enforcement of its provisions. In 1955 Mr. Brian Glover proposed an amendment to strengthen the protection afforded to animals and birds by the Act, but it was resoundingly rejected at a meeting composed largely of the city membership. This year, in March and April, a repetition of the pattern occurred: motions for the amendment of the same Act were passed at one meeting, only to be rescinded at the next. That both meetings truly represented the Association's point of view is, of course, impossible, and in any case the incident is not fit matter for discussion here, beyond saying that modifications of the motions will be offered by poll for voting by the whole membership later in the year.

But the fact remains that a powerful and apparently organized section of the local ornithological community opposed, both in 1955 and in 1959, a positive move for conservation, and not because the conservation moves were demonstrably misguided. The reasons given were moderate enough, suggesting that the difference was one of application rather than principle, and hard to refute convincingly in the absence of a greater knowledge of conservation than most members possess. But at any rate the motives can be examined and the arguments for and against assessed by their light.

It is evident that the proponents of the motions to strengthen the Act could hope for nothing, except perhaps odium, if they were successful. Many of those who opposed the motions were aviculturists, egg-collectors, and their friends—people who can conceivably benefit from any weaknesses of the present Act and its enforcement. And anyone in this State who attempts to advance conservation and protection by strengthening the legislation may expect their opposition at all levels.

So a third obstacle must be added to those mentioned earlier. Not only is there lack of knowledge and lack of money; there is also active opposition in the very place where there should be only support. If further evidence is needed, it is only necessary to observe that in the last redrafting of the rules of the South Australian Ornithological Association the long-standing clause excluding dealers in birds was expunged—a move whose importance and far-reaching consequences the bulk of the membership failed to recognize at the time.

Let us repeat: What we have to say here is more in the nature of a report than any sort of proposal. We are not moving any motion at this time, because frankly we do not know what can be done, nor even what should be done. Perhaps something may suggest itself to this meeting, for there must be many among those present who know more about conservation than we do.