EDITORIAL NOTES

Noxious Animals Control—or Eradication?

Among all those concerned with the management of our forests and watersheds, there will almost certainly be satisfaction over the recommendations of the Lands and Agriculture Committee of the House of Representatives, as stated in their recent report on Noxious Animals Control, 1965. Despite the very strong representations made by deerstalking and venison exporting interests, present legislation to control noxious animals is considered to be in need of strengthening, rather than relaxation, and this must stand very much to the credit of the Committee. Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that if this legislation does eventuate it will not be strengthened merely in mandatory respects, but also empower greater flexibility in both administration and execution. There is an element of irony in the thought that much of the dissension leading up to the Select Committee's enquiries arose from the emphasis on "extermination" in the 1952 National Parks Act and the subsequent equating of control and eradication by the Noxious Animals Act 1956. However convenient legallyistically, this facile basis for defining policy forced a multifarious set of control problems and a variety of needs into one straitjacket—with the consequence that local and often peculiar problems became confused with wider national ones. Practical solutions to local problems of noxious animal control and recreational hunting can be, and are, worked out locally; but as soon as it is attempted to extend these satisfactory compromises to principles, or to discuss them at higher levels, a deadlock ensues—simply because eradication and wildlife management (whether it be for recreation, meat, hides, or watershed protection) are irreconcilable. The Select Committee's comments (pp. 15, 16) on extermination should therefore be read by anybody who is in doubt on this matter.

However, quite apart from its general impracticability, is extermination of all the animals scheduled as "noxious" really our objective? Assuming a method of extermination, 100% effective but safe for human life and domestic livestock, were available tomorrow—would it ever be used on a countrywide scale? Almost certainly not. The prospect of a landscape once more devoid of wild animals would appeal only to an esoteric minority, for whom the status of our flora and fauna at a certain point in the past appears to be sacrosanct, but to most people the prospect of the butchery involved and the aesthetic and ecological vacuum created would be appalling.

It is certainly desirable to hold particular areas inviolate by eliminating harmful animals, and it may be practicable to give the illusion of recreating conditions of a former era on others; but in each case pragmatic tests should be applied. This is indeed the

† Special Report 1.2A laid on the Table of the House of Representatives, 1965.
current trend; but, as Dr Howard indicates in his recent report, it should be taken a great deal further: "If large sums of money are to be expended in the control of pests, it is important to define a realistic goal and to establish precise objectives before starting control programmes. . . Control and damage are linked, therefore the cost of control should sooner or later be made proportionate to the amount of damage being suffered" (pp. 68–9). Forest Service working plans for New Zealand's major protection forests have, for many years, attempted to put such principles into effect; but these two reports leave one wondering how much is really being achieved. A passage in the submission to the Select Committee from the New Zealand Catchment Authorities' Association puts these doubts in a nutshell: "The New Zealand Forest Service has done a really good job in many areas but the hunting pressure that they have brought to bear even in their most intensive campaigns has really only served to demonstrate the very low levels to which noxious animal numbers need to be reduced before there is any effective recovery" (p. 25). Apart from the near-eradication of goats on certain restricted watersheds, examination of the figures for noxious animals killed annually reveals how far we are from achieving any real impact upon the annual rate of replacement. Indeed, the tables (pp. 47 and 62, 63 respectively) more nearly reflect changes of hunting pressure and policy than induced or natural fluctuations of animal populations. The decrease in the number of kills by government hunters over the past nine years, for example, follows the change of emphasis towards a concentration on critical catchments—it has no parallel in the annual kill by private hunters.

These comments do not imply that the Select Committee's compliment to the Forest Service staff's "dedication to the tasks in hand" is not wholly merited—rather that the means are so inadequate for the complications and size of the task involved. If the report secures greater public and political awareness of these problems, the government will vote further funds, and dedicated servants, to carry the legislation into effect. But personnel must meet exacting specifications—particularly for research and field staff. In the execution of control, there is an almost unique difficulty. Assuming that effective hunting techniques are devised for reducing the population of a destructive animal to safe levels in certain critical catchments, how is the necessary hunting pressure to be sustained over many years, once animals are at these minimal levels? Skilled hunters are then more than ever necessary, but to maintain enthusiasm and interest in such circumstances requires quite other incentives than hunter satisfaction. Thus it might be argued that the complete commitment to an adequate reduction and sustained control of destructive animal populations in critical catchments will only occur when those responsible for protecting values in the lower catchment have a large measure of authority, if not also of executive control, over the whole catchment. This commitment will only become practicable and effective when the men responsible for its execution no longer have a national outlook but a parochial one that compels them to evaluate the effectiveness

of control measures in terms of catchment values and risks, rather than number of kills and hunter satisfaction. Can control avoid being sporadic while it is administered by some national authority without direct responsibility for downstream values? Some such doubts must underlie Dr Howard’s statement that “No management plan should be based on a scheme that will necessitate continuous control of deer by government personnel” (loc. cit., p. 84).

Is it time that the permissive clauses of the Noxious Animals Act, whereby local authorities are allowed (subject to the prior consent of the Minister of Forests) to prepare plans for the destruction of deer and opossums, were made mandatory?

A greater measure of local autonomy in the control of catchments would also permit closer integration of local interests, including recreation. Private hunters already kill more than twice as many noxious animals as do official hunters. Although it is frequently pointed out that these are predominantly from more accessible country, the sportsman may look forward to a time when the increasing impact of private hunting will supersede official campaigns in some more stable catchments. Much is being done by the Forest Service, in anticipation of that time, by accelerating their programme of constructing huts, tracks and river crossings, by invitation to private hunters to join official control operations, and in the training and guidance of young deerstalkers.

May we be permitted to forget the word “eradication”, which has been such a stumbling-block to all concerned? A regeneration of goodwill is essential if local Noxious Animal Advisory Committees are to prove effective in co-ordinating the many diverse interests involved. This can be achieved only if both deerstalkers and foresters take a realistic and a farsighted view of each other’s activities. We might then make real progress with the task of controlling animals where they are destructive.