

IN BRIEF

Porton decision due

A decision on the future of the Microbiological Research Establishment at Porton is expected shortly now that the Medical Research Council has considered the complete report of its special advisory committee under Professor Sir Robert Williams and transmitted it to the Secretary of State for Education and Science. The Ministry of Defence is due to leave the establishment by 1 April next year.

The advisory committee assessed the scientific potential of Porton for civilian research. The Institute of Biology has published its written evidence in the latest *Biologist*. The institute considers that the pilot fermentation plant, enzyme laboratory and containment facilities, together with staff and ex-

pertise, should be retained, developed and exploited rather than dissipated and dispersed.

Nuffield's good turn

The Nuffield Foundation has decided to help UK scientific and medical research, by supporting projects which would normally receive research councils' money but which might go unfunded. It means a temporary change of policy for the Foundation, which was set up to support research leading to social benefit for which there is no ready source of public money. The Trustees have already allocated funds amounting to about £60,000 for research which they normally would not consider. The level of support is expected to increase next year.

In 1976, of the £1.67 million income (up almost 25%), £1.16 million was spent on support for research. Only £50,000 of that went on scientific research, however, and £70,000 on medical research. The latest annual report says one reason for the small demand on Foundation resources may have been that researchers assumed funds were low after the Foundation sold its shares in British Leyland.

NASA reorganisation

A reorganisation of NASA by its administrator, Robert Frosch, includes a revised role and title of chief scientist, who will advise on the agency's "total programme from the standpoint of scientific objectives". The change takes effect this week.

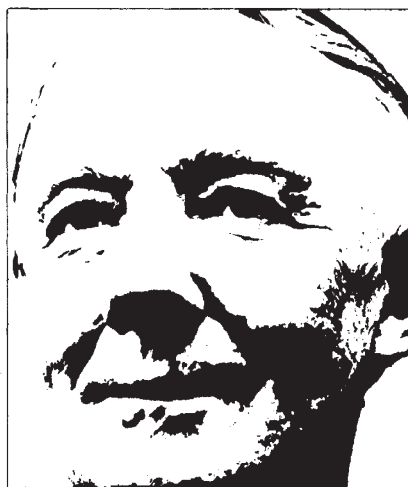
MOST people think that the only way to conserve wild plants and animals is to leave them alone. They imagine that the perfect nature reserve is an area surrounded by a man-proof fence, where natural processes can proceed without his baleful influence. This is sometimes true. The immense national parks in North America, areas like the Kruger Park in South Africa, and some reserves in the less-inhabited parts of Poland and Scandinavia require the minimum management of their vegetation, though even under these favourable conditions the larger mammals may increase beyond their optimum and require control.

The situation in countries like Britain is generally very different. We have a few large nature reserves in the highlands and islands of Scotland where nature can be left to take care of itself. Here the main management is to control man, including over-zealous naturalists who wish to collect rarities, and over-enthusiastic ecologists whose scientific sampling may destroy the vegetation. But even the most 'natural' area has probably been modified by human activity, perhaps by eliminating wolves and other predators, which allow deer to increase to numbers which ruin the vegetation unless they are severely culled.

In most areas man has reduced the tree cover and so encouraged the development of moorland vegetation. The conservationists, many of whom believe they are preserving natural conditions, oppose any move by farmers to restore the fertility destroyed by the agricultural techniques of our iron age ancestors. They produced the present beautiful—but semi-desert—landscape of, for instance, Exmoor.

Nevertheless, in many parts of Britain the native vegetation may develop if it gets the chance. The famous Broadbalk Wilderness at Rothamsted Experimental Station was a wheat field until it was enclosed and

Managing wildlife



KENNETH MELLANBY

left alone over a hundred years ago. Soon shrubs and trees appeared, and it is now a small wood of oak, ash and other indigenous species. At Monks Wood in Huntingdonshire we started a similar experiment on a larger scale in 1960, by leaving the ten acre Stocking Close field, an area which had been arable for centuries, uncultivated. Within seven years it was covered with a scrubby growth of hawthorn and dog rose, with a scattering of oak of up to 100 saplings per acre. It was clearly on the way back to something very like the natural deciduous woodland which covered southern Britain before man

cleared it for his farms.

However, such natural regeneration may be thwarted by some of the exotic species man has introduced to Britain. When we began the Stocking Close experiment, rabbits were very scarce following the spread of myxomatosis in 1955. Today rabbits are common again, and though acorns are still scattered around the countryside by jays, pigeons and small mammals, many seedlings are destroyed. In some parts of the country the aggressive imported sycamore prevents native tree species from becoming dominant, and so management is needed to produce natural forest.

Things may be even worse in other countries, particularly in oceanic islands. In Mauritius, for instance, conservation is a nightmare. Man has been there for under 500 years, and in any numbers for 200, but he has left little of the unique indigenous flora and fauna. Though he has exterminated birds like the dodo, and removed most of the natural vegetation to grow sugar cane, it is his introductions, plants and animals, which provide the worst problems today. Where small relict areas of indigenous trees are preserved, they are swamped with the rampant growth of guava and bramble (introduced species) producing impenetrable thickets which defy control. The introduced monkeys delight in destroying the nests of the rarest birds, and mongooses in killing the most interesting mammals and reptiles. Thus conservation may provide the most difficult management problems not in developed areas where man is obviously dominant, but in an oceanic paradise where nature might be expected to control the situation.