

But given the relative weakness of labour unions and official opposition parties, the consumer movement has become one of the few direct routes for attempting to influence government policies. "We create pressures within the bureaucracy" says Martin Khor Khok Peng, CAP's research director. "If we educate the public, the bureaucrats will have to listen."

David Dickson

Conservation

Bill of rights

The British government is hoping that its new Wildlife and Countryside Bill, introduced in the House of Lords last week, will be law by the end of next summer. Its passage through parliament, however, may not be easy. The bill has taken a long time to compile, preliminary consultation papers having aroused considerable opposition from conservation groups which do not feel that all inadequacies have been ironed out in the latest draft.

The chief effect of the bill is to bring British law in line with that of Europe, but Mr Tom King, minister for local government and environmental services, stresses that many of the new measures are badly needed anyway. The clauses in the bill on the protection of birds, methods of killing wild animals and the introduction of exotic species fulfil European requirements while those relating to nature conservation, the countryside and national parks are designed to improve wildlife management.

Mr King is especially pleased with the clauses relating to the management of areas designated as sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs). The conservation groups, however, say that these clauses are amongst the most worrying in the bill. Under them,

owners of some SSSIs will have a statutory obligation to inform the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) of any planned operations which may affect the physical or biological features of the site and to wait for up to a year for the consent of NCC. Failure to notify would carry a penalty of up to two years imprisonment and a fine of £1,000 or both.

The conservationists will be seeking to amend these clauses to include all SSSIs, not just those singled out for special treatment, and to include some statutory obligation on the landowner to carry out the management recommendations of NCC. Under the bill, if agreement on management of a site is not reached within one year of notification, the landowner is free to carry out his original plan, although he may risk compulsory purchase by NCC.

On the whole, conservationists welcome clauses in the bill relating to the protection of wild birds, animals and plants, seeing them as a major improvement over existing legislation. The bill will tighten up the laws on the import and export of endangered species, methods of killing wild animals, keeping birds in captivity and selling them either dead or alive. Most of these amendments are in line with the European Community Directive on Wild Birds. The bill also seeks to protect "rare" creatures, such as the otter in Scotland, before they reach the endangered list.

A serious omission in these clauses, however, say the conservationists, is the lack of adequate provision for enforcement. They will be lobbying for the creation of a small investigation unit, probably under the aegis of the NCC, to give support and expert advice to customs officials and police who often miss infringements in the law because of unfamiliarity with wildlife.

Recent controversies about the main-

Fallout from China

China's latest nuclear test on 16 October was "dirty" — according to the official Polish news agency PAP. The dust cloud had previously been monitored in Japan and New York, but the Polish agency reports of work from the Central Laboratory of Radiological Protection outside Warsaw is an example of the new policy of openness adopted by the Polish press. The laboratory has been working in the field since about 1973 with little publicity in Poland.

The Polish team, in the person of its leader, Dr Zbigniew Jaworowski, says that it has observed a significant amount of radioactivity at a height of 15 km. The Polish monitoring method is novel. A converted Mig-18 fighter flies horizontally through the dust cloud, opening a collecting duct at a predetermined altitude. The results suggested a fission-fusion-fission device, and this information was made available to the American group at the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington.

These aerial activities are not Dr Jaworowski's main interest, however. He is principally concerned with monitoring background levels of radioactivity — both natural and that produced by discharge of radioactivity into the atmosphere by "conventional" means — in Poland, largely from the combustion of coal. In September of this year Dr Jaworowski was appointed head of a United Nations commission on fallout, directly responsible to the General Assembly. His measurements of radioactivity levels in glaciers and icecaps throughout the world have met with some controversy, as he says that apart from a few black spots, the global build-up of radioactive fallout over the last century is far less than is claimed by the powerful "doomwatch lobby".

Vera Rich

English floodmeadows: threatened by ditch or protected by bill?



Photo: RSPB

tenance and safety of public footpaths are only partly dealt with in the bill. Although the rights of farmers to keep bulls in fields crossed by public footpaths will be restricted to some extent, beef bulls will be allowed if they are accompanied by cows. Ramblers will be no happier with that provision than with the transfer of general powers over footpaths from central to local government. Ramblers fear that local bias will mean that many paths are lost.

Although many conservationists agree that the bill improves on existing legislation, they consider it far from ideal. The opportunity to revise wildlife and conservation legislation comes up only about every five years so some hard fighting seems inevitable. The bill may have to take more blows than the government seems to have anticipated.

Judy Redfearn