watch; civil engineers have, for example, done a great deal to strengthen Iraq's arm in the recent war by building bunkers in which to hide Iraq's aircraft, but putting pesticide plants underground is not child's play either. □

# What biodiversity?

There is a danger that the concept of biodiversity will become an aspect of political correctness.

WE all so welcome the great variety of living things on the surface of the Earth that the question why diversity is to be encouraged is rarely asked. On the contrary, it is more often assumed that diversity — or biodiversity — is so self-evidently a good thing that the question is both irrelevant and irreverent. But is there not a danger that, like all concepts whose truth is supposed to override dissenting argument, that of biodiversity, like that of motherhood in the United States in the 1950s, may be heading for a tumble? Reports of a meeting organized by the British government's Department of the Environment a few weeks ago (*Nature* **351**, 596; 1991) suggest a kind of revivalist meeting from which backsliders might have been expelled (or simply not invited).

So why bother? Because there is no doubt that natural diversity is declining, that there is a powerful movement to halt that process and that it is important to know what the cost of doing so will be. There are several different fields in which the argument for biodiversity may be pitched, and which may be roughly classified as exploitative, ecological, evolutionary, aesthetic and philosophical.

Under the first heading is the argument that less diversity means less opportunity to find helpful medicines in, for example, plant cells; it would be stronger if the dream of making a modern medicine chest from folk remedies had been more amply realized. The ecological arguments are related; do not get rid of the wild mouse, which is a scavanger of scraps of food that might otherwise be breeding-grounds for harmful bacteria, and which itself is food for other nobler creatures, badgers and eagles included. Yet people continue to trap mice apparently blithely neglectful of the ecological imperative that everything hangs together.

Unfortunately, neither class of argument can be held to safeguard two of the creatures on which conservationists have lavished attention over many decades — whales and tigers. Each sits at the top of a food chain independent of that on which people depend (except that Indian tigers often eat domestic bullocks and sometimes even their owners). That is why a stronger case for their conservation is evolutionary — the vivid proof their form provides of the malleability of the mammalian genome and the practical importance of the better understanding of evolution at the genetic level now in prospect. But not even that is clinching; a six-digit vertebrate fossil may be as stimulating of the imaginations of future molecular geneticists as is a visit to a well-run zoo. Comparative physiology deserves a better place than it is given at present, but the present documentation of the natural world should otherwise suffice.

Does the aesthetic argument then take over? Professional people profess themselves uneasy at the idea, protesting that there are no objective yardsticks to hand. But really? It is a matter of common observation that people, given the chance, enjoy the countryside and that the more affluent they are, the more often they make opportunities for themselves to do so. That is neither surprising nor morally wrong, but the biodiversicists would be well-advised to guard the flank they expose to those in the poor countries of the world who have not yet understood why they should keep their squalor intact for the benefit of others.

The philosophical argument is quite different. In the world as it is, human beings are quite successful, but they may not last. So is it not prudent to arrange that some other form of life should succeed to predominance? And since it would be wrong, and speciesist as well, to preordain a successor species, does not inter-species equity require that there should be a level playing-field for the others? Of course. The trouble is that there are no votes in that proposition. □

# Washington 'busy'

Last Thursday, Washington D.C. was almost shut down by a computer glitch. But life has continued.

WHAT happens when when a capital city's telephone system breaks down? When a software failure at the telephone company turned Washington D.C. into a giant busy signal one day last week, the *Washington Post* became hysterical and declared, "When the communication system fails, civilization's lifeline seems to snap" as politicians and lawyers, lobbyists and news organizations, and even mothers and daycare centres found themselves unable to make simple telephone phone calls. Ironically, as the telephone system throughout the Washington region went down, telephone company officials were on Capitol Hill lobbying Congress for permission to expand their horizons from telephones to cable television and other communications businesses. Since none of them was on the telephone at the time — cellular telephones are kept out of hearings rooms — the lobbyists did not know that their main business had shut down.

Not to be outdone, a software glitch at Pacific Bell, the California telephone company, put Los Angeles on hold for three hours on the same day, apparently by coincidence. The basic problem seems to be that the telephone industry is offering more services to more people than technology can sustain. In Washington, a new routing technology called Signalling System 7 allows more calls to be completed more quickly than ever before, while allowing customers to buy add-on services such as "Caller-ID" that displays the caller's number in advance.

Especially in Washington, there has been much tension. Psychologists (routinely consulted by the press in emergencies) report that when telephones are out of order, "people tend to get aggressive very fast". It is, they say, a problem because nervous systems are trained for instant fulfillment from telephones. □



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