

maintains that the population is dropping by 17,000 seals annually and could face extinction in about 50 years. However, seal scientists who have evaluated this study found that even though it was based on data supplied by ICNAF's working group on seals, it contains numerous erroneous assumptions and arithmetical errors.

Aside from the scientific opinion, however, part of the opposition to the hunt certainly centers around those irresistible, huge, round, sad brown eyes of the pups, nestled in a background of white, which arouse so much human emotion. And the hunt is especially difficult to justify for those who do not believe in killing an animal for the sake of someone's fur coat or accessories.

The U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act makes it illegal for anyone in the U.S. to participate in the seal hunt or to import any of the skins of the harvested seals. Further, no marine mammal (or the product of the mammal) younger than eight months or nursing at the time of taking may be brought in to the U.S. The American fur seal industry filed suit in January challenging this importation ban.

U.S. representatives (who are non-voting members) to the ICNAF meetings have urged that ecological factors be considered along with economic ones in determining what to do about the seal hunt. In the future, the debate will likely continue. It is now largely up to the Canadian government to regulate the quotas, unless some sort of regional agreement is worked out for conservation of the seals. This would require more reliable scientific data than are presently available and a willingness of the nations involved to cooperate.

### Soil Erosion

Very subtly and without much public concern, the nation's soil resource is washing and blowing away, according to the Wildlife Management Institute. That means less food, less fiber, and less wildlife in the future. Soil is being washed away on the nation's cropland at an average rate of nine tons per acre per year, the institute reports. That is nearly twice the rate considered "acceptable" by soil conservationists. The soil loss rate was discovered by the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in a new study of erosion and sedimentation.

In 1975, when data were collected, U.S. soil losses on cropland totaled 2.8 billion tons. More than 1.4 million acres of land were damaged by wind erosion in the Great Plains during the last two months of 1977, and more than 10.3 million acres may be damaged by wind erosion in the next few months, says the SCS.

### Carrier Pigeons: The Latest Paramedics

Devonport Hospital in Plymouth, England, foregoes taxi service for carrying crucial blood and tissue samples to the central laboratory two miles away and instead employs carrier pigeons, saving valuable time and money. The pigeons arrive at a designated cage, where they activate a bell and light signal. Never flying at night or in the fog, their perfect flying record of four minutes is attributed to their mates waiting at the lab.

### African Elephant Proposed as Threatened Species

The African elephant, the world's largest land animal, has been proposed for listing as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The species has declined in many parts of its range in recent years because of loss of habitat caused by an expanding human population and illegal killing for ivory. About 1,300,000 elephants are estimated to remain, but according to the Elephant Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, as many as 100,000 to 400,000 are being lost each year from ivory-poaching alone. Because there are still some large populations, however, some of which are stable and carefully protected, the Fish and Wildlife Service does not believe that the elephant is in immediate danger of extinction. For this reason, the service proposes to classify the species as threatened rather than endangered.

The elephant once occupied all of Africa, except for extremely dry areas. Today it occurs in 33 countries south of the Sahara, but it is progressively losing habitat in most of these areas as human settlements and farms expand. In western and southern Africa, the species has held out only in remote border areas or in small, isolated patches of suitable habitat. Many elephants are killed be-

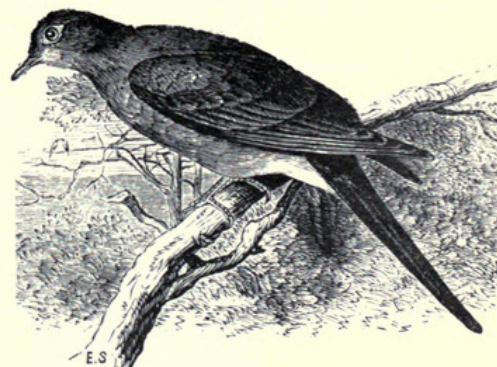
cause they are considered a threat to man and his crops and settlements, and others die because the remaining habitat cannot support them. Certain elephant "population explosions" that have recently received publicity are often associated with forced crowding imposed by man, and actually result from humans encroaching on former elephant habitat, rather than the opposite. In any case, these occur only on a small percentage of the overall range of the species.

Because of its ivory, the elephant is one of the world's most commercially valuable species. Within the last few years, illegal killing has increased along with a tenfold rise in the price of ivory. Poaching appears to have been largely responsible for a drastic reduction of elephants in Uganda, and for eliminating nearly half of the elephants in Kenya, since the early 1970s. If large-scale poaching continues, the still large populations of elephants in eastern and central Africa could be further reduced, and the remnant populations in western Africa could be entirely wiped out.

### Demand Increases for Natural Rubber

In the early 1940s, the United States depended on the Malay peninsula for most of its rubber needs. When the Japanese occupied the peninsula, cutting off wartime rubber supplies needed for jeep, airplane, and truck tires, the U.S. quickly organized an Emergency Rubber Project at the California Institute of Technology. The project consisted of two parts: one to produce synthetic rubber from petroleum and one to produce natural rubber from guayule, a small shrub native to Mexico and Texas. Synthetic rubber production soon surpassed that of natural rubber, and the guayule program was abandoned.

However, cheaper and more easily produced synthetic rubber has been un-







1978. "Carrier Pigeons: The Latest Paramedics." *Field Museum of Natural History bulletin* 49(5), 11–11.

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