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A QUESTION OF BALANCE

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A survey of American insurance



Warm world,
cool heads



The Sahara

Desert slaughter

HUNTING, once the pastime of Arabia's princes, has become the pleasure of the Gulf's new rich. Having thinned out their own game so that it is no longer worth pursuing, they have taken the hunt into Africa, where drought and overgrazing by domestic herds already endanger some wild species.

Sudan was once rich in game. Now its stocks are so depleted that its government declared, in 1989, a three-year ban on hunting. In southern Algeria and Morocco game is so scarce that the hunting parties are moving into Niger and Mali.



Just waiting for the freezer truck

Saudi Arabians are the keenest hunters. Their parties, armed with automatic rifles and searchlights, travel with up to 40 four-wheel-drive vehicles, towing water trucks, generators and refrigerators for food and carcasses. Several princes and at least one minister have been involved in the mass slaughter of animals. Local preservation laws, barely enforced by underpaid officials, are waived for very senior visitors.

In Sudan this year, despite the ban on hunting, a party of 97 men, led by a Saudi prince, is said to have killed more than 1,500 gazelles and twice as many bustards. In previous years an aircraft of the Saudi air force, on loan to the Saudi Red Crescent, smuggled out carcasses of Dorcas gazelles. Some of the culprits' servants were arrested, but the charges were dropped.

In Mali, after a visit by a Saudi prince, wildlife officials found a pit containing the feathers of endangered varieties of bustards, and the skins of rare gazelles. In Niger officials report that several hundred Dorcas gazelles—a species near extinction—were slaughtered in 1990.

In Saudi Arabia itself efforts are being made to preserve endangered species, and to reintroduce extinct ones. Prince Saud al-Faisal, the foreign minister, urges his countrymen to conserve rare species at home and abroad, saying that Muslims have a duty to protect them. He has started, near Taif, a programme of captive breeding of houbara bustards, Arabian oryx, ostriches and other rare creatures. Some experts disapprove, fearing that the creatures may be reared only for hawking or (as the British rear pheasants) to be shot.

Game preservation in Africa began when European settlers grew angry at the depredations of outsiders such as Theodore Roosevelt, America's 25th president, who shot Kenyan elephants wholesale in a brief and bloody safari. The Gulf Arabs have less far to travel, and deadlier weapons to hand. The poor nations of the Sahara lack both the will and the resources to stop a business that brings instant money, but may eliminate an irreplaceable resource.

Africa's wildlife

SIR—It is indeed unfortunate to read (October 27th) of the reported abuses of wildlife in Africa by Saudi Arabians. If true, such actions are inexcusable.

However, the depletion of wildlife in Sudan and elsewhere in Sahelian Africa cannot be ascribed solely to the activities of foreign hunters. It is also due to the combined ravages of drought, desertification and inadequate management of natural resources, including wildlife.

The proper management of wildlife through sustainable utilisation, including hunting for sport, can contribute considerably to rural productivity, as

has been demonstrated in southern Africa. The abuses are a result of governments that prevent impoverished local people utilising game animals as a natural resource, which leads to the exploitation of those animals for quick profits.

In Saudi Arabia the efforts to conserve wildlife extend beyond the successful captive breeding programmes you refer to. Since 1987 eight protected areas totalling over 50,000 sq km have been created, and a recently completed national plan has proposed an additional 95 terrestrial and marine sites for protection.

ABDULAZIZ ABUZINADA
National Commission for
Riyadh, Wildlife Conservation
Saudi Arabia and Development