

THE QUIET CRISIS

by **George F. Ledingham**, Regina

During the past 12 months I have been on sabbatical leave from my work in the University and have spent the year in travel and study. Briefly, my travels took me around the world with many days in both Iran and Turkey. It also took me south with much time in the United States and Argentina and with shorter visits in Brazil, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Panama. Everywhere people were friendly and interesting but being a biologist I also had much interest in the plants and animals of each country that I was in. Wherever and whenever I could I went out into the country, frequently finding much to admire and to photograph but sometimes being much saddened by obvious signs of man's abuse of his environment. One cannot look at the desolate overgrazed lands of Persia, or Bolivia, or the United States without wondering if our "get-rich-quick" attitudes in Canada will not soon bring similar empty ugliness. You may be surprised that I include South America in this gloomy picture for there many areas are still sparsely populated but now this is rapidly changing and "a wonderful wilderness is disappearing" (*The Land and Wildlife of South America*. Life Nature Library. By Marston Bates and the Editors of Life. 1964. Time Inc.).

While still on my travels and full of thoughts of man's selfish use of his environment I read *The Quiet Crisis*. This book with its 30 black-and-white and 12 beautiful colored pictures is a quiet but convincing recording of the history of American natural resources and conservation concepts by the Secretary of the Interior of the United States of America. To quote from Mr. Udall's foreward (page viii) "America today stands poised on a pinnacle of wealth and power, yet we live in a land of vanishing beauty, of increasing ugliness, of shrinking open space, and of an overall environment that is diminished daily by pollution and noise and blight. This, in brief, is the

quiet conservation crisis of the 1960's."

Mr. Udall's book describes the thoughtless destruction of America which is still continuing and at ever increasing rates as the population increases and as more powerful machines are built. But it also records the growing sentiment of concern for the beauty of the country and for the life of wild plants and animals. This concern began with the thoughts and writings of individual naturalists, such as Thoreau, and even penetrated some Universities where Aldo Leopold was an eloquent spokesman for the cause of conservation.

Through the efforts of individuals the government gradually became aware of its responsibility as the guardian of our natural heritage. There have, however, been great pressures placed on the government for the sale of public lands and the use of the forests, grasslands and other habitats, even in the national parks. Mr. Udall points out that: "in 1940, 130,000,000 Americans had a spacious National Park system of 22,000,000 acres; twenty years later, a population which had grown to a more mobile 183,000,000 inherited an overcrowded system that had been enlarged by only a few acres. Of 21,000 miles of ocean shore line in the contiguous 48 states, only seven per cent was reserved for public recreation. In addition, the most eroded lands in the United States—the overused grasslands of the Western public domain—were not restored to full fertility despite the new American awareness of the importance of soil conservation."

The developers make the plea that there must be progress, rapid progress, and that they as individuals have the right of free enterprise, the right to exploit our natural resources. They do not care about the future. In the words of Mr. Udall, "The modern land raiders, like the public-land raiders of another era, are ready to



Herder with his sheep and goats,
north of Esfahan, Iran, June 14, 1965

Photo from transparency by G. F. Ledingham

justify short-term gains by seeking to minimize the long-term losses." Governments have trouble resisting such pleas for them, too, are interested in more development now, bringing in more people, getting more taxes, et cetera. "‘Present the repair bill to the next generation’ has been their unspoken slogan."

Mr. Udall laments such short term attitudes and says that we must develop a land ethic for tomorrow, which "should stress the oneness of our resources and the live-and-help-live logic of the great chain of life. If, in our haste to ‘progress’, the economics of ecology are disregarded by citizens and policy makers alike, the result will be an ugly America."

Mr. Udall gives credit to societies which have done much in the United States to stop the slaughter of wildlife and to create an awareness of the need to conserve natural habitats as well as individual animals and plants in danger of being exterminated by man's greed or thoughtfulness. But in his second last sentence he implies

that they must do much more, in his words; "we must have a ground swell of concern over the quiet crisis, which could culminate in a third wave of the conservation movement."

As a member of one of the societies interested in conservation it is encouraging to me to read *The Quiet Crisis* because it records the awakening awareness of the need for conservation and because it proves that an important policy maker, Mr. Udall, realizes how essential it is that something be done now. In Canada we share with the United States the sad history of abuses of natural resources and we have the same need to act now to safeguard the future of much of our wonderful heritage. We have some government people who seem keenly aware of the conservation crisis but are we as individual naturalists and as a natural history society doing enough to support and to encourage them?—*The Quiet Crisis*. By Stewart L. Udall. 1963. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, N.Y. xiii+209p. Illus. \$5.00.