

Endangered species

Japanese flout convention

Tokyo

THE Japanese government is once again under fire for its inability to deal decisively with the illegal import of endangered species.

The problem has been brought back to public attention by a private visit to Japan from Dr Coimbra, director of the Rio de Janeiro Primate Center. Fourteen lion tamarins (*Leontopithecus rosalia*), an extremely rare species close to extinction in the wild, have been illegally imported into Japan and Brazil wants those that still survive to be returned.

Trade in tamarins is prohibited by the Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna to which Japan is a signatory. Unlike other signatories, however, Japan has no domestic legislation to back

up its provision.

What that means in practice is that if an animal can be brought into the country, even by use of false documents, there exists no means to punish the offenders or to force them to return the animal to its country of origin. In the United States, by contrast, under the Endangered Species Act and the Lacey Act, the illegal import of animals can incur confiscation, fines of up to \$20,000 and five years' imprisonment.

The result in Japan is that unscrupulous animal dealers have brought endangered species into the country knowing that if they can get past customs they are home and dry. What motivates them is the big profits to be made in the animal trade. There are plenty of private zoos in Japan whose owners know they can boost their attendance figures by display of rare and exotic animals and seem not too concerned about how they lay their hands on them.

Fourteen lion tamarins were brought into Japan two years ago by using a loophole in the Washington Convention. The convention does permit trade in endangered species that have been bred in captivity. False documents showing the monkeys to have been bred in Guyana were used to obtain an import permit.

There are three races of lion tamarin: golden, golden-haired and golden-rumped, which come from different regions of Brazil. Destruction of the south-east coastal rain forest and its replacement by farmland and the conurbations around Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo have reduced their numbers to a few hundred. Logging of the older forests, which provided large trees with holes in which tamarins could shelter, has been particularly harmful. The golden lion tamarin is now the focus of a worldwide breeding programme based at the National Zoo, Washington. A similar programme for the golden-headed lion tamarin is run from the Rio de Janeiro Primate Center and the zoo at Jersey, in the Channel Islands.

The golden-headed race was brought into Japan. Three were re-exported to Hong Kong whose zoo is a member of the international scheme to conserve tamarins. These three have subsequently bred. The eleven remaining in Japan had a less happy fate. One died of stress soon after arrival. Most of the others were transferred to private zoos. Two that were transferred to the Japan Monkey Center at Inuyama were inspected by Dr Coimbra during his visit to Japan. He confirmed what other visitors had found; the two monkeys are kept in a small dark cage indoors where they never see sunlight and receive a poor diet. Judging from their present condition he believed they would not live long. But the Japanese government is

powerless to force their return to Brazil.

That the import of the lion tamarins was allowed in the first place reflects poorly on the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) which is responsible for granting licences. Anyone with a knowledge of monkeys, or with reference books to hand, would have known that Guyana has no captive breeding programme and that the papers showing their origin must have been faked. MITI's skill in stopping exports does not seem to equal its past skill in promoting exports. Nor are the tamarins an isolated case: 32 tons of ivory were recently illegally brought into Japan from Uganda but it is now too late to do anything about it. And during the recent Tsukuba Expo, some thirty endangered species, including Komodo dragons from Indonesia, were on display near the Expo site.

The closed nature of ministerial dealings does not help matters; in the United States and Europe, applications for import licences may be inspected by interested parties whose zeal is likely to exceed that of government officials. Deceptions are unlikely to succeed.

Despite much public criticism in the mass media, it seems that the Japanese government is making no move towards legislation. The best that might be achieved at present is that unofficial links will develop with conservation groups that will raise the level of the ministry's expertise.

Alun Anderson

Innocents to speak

FRENCH schoolchildren are to be asked what they think of science and of scientists in an inquiry launched by the chief French research council, CNRS, and the educational magazine for 10-15 year-olds, *Okapi*. The fact that the inquiry is taking place is a mark of the degree to which the government plans to forge a new France in which science and technology are the leitmotif for the future.

Okapi claims a circulation of 82,000, and the sponsors of the survey, which will take the form of a questionnaire in a future issue, hope that they will receive replies from a sample of 5,000 French schoolchildren. Among other questions, children will be asked "how confident are you of the progress of science?" and will be expected to answer on a four-point scale ranging from "very" to "not at all".

Many of the questions are concerned with the image of the scientist. Is he a dreamer, or a man of action? (Only the masculine image is offered.) A benefactor or an egoist? Creative or a pedant? A loner or a team-player? But respondents will also be asked to rank countries in order of scientific strength, from a list consisting of Australia, China, France, Japan, Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union and West Germany.

CNRS also hopes to learn from the inquiry something of the way in which French children learn of developments in science. "It's the first time children have been asked to give their opinions on a subject that will affect their future", says one official. But the motivation of the inquiry is also linked with the conviction of the education minister, M. Jean-Pierre Chevènement, that the time has come to break the stranglehold of mathematics and theoretical science in the school curriculum in France. Robert Walgate

Roast turkey

Washington

SPARKS flew at a recent hearing in Washington on the administration's plans to regulate biotechnology, when Senator Albert Gore quizzed Dr Henry Miller of the Food and Drug Administration on his role in the development of guidelines on biotechnology safety for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Having established that Miller considered himself unbiased on the regulations, Gore produced with a flourish a letter from Miller to Dr Robert McKinney of the National Institutes of Health, in which Miller asked McKinney to review "this turkey" and be "very critical". Miller also asked what "the Rifkins and [Representative John] Dingells will make of this". Miller protested that his meaning had been misunderstood, a reply Gore considered "unacceptable".

The OECD guidelines have had a controversial history (see *Nature* 31 October, p.758) but a draft dated October has now been agreed by US agencies and is to be sent to OECD's headquarters in Paris for review. Some of the more controversial statements in an earlier September draft have been deleted from the final version.

Tim Beardsley