

Plant Extinction: A Global Crisis (2nd edition)*H. Koopowitz and H. Kay*
*Edited by S. Knees*Christopher Helm, London
1990, 208pp., £11.95

The title proposes a scenario of doom and the text clearly gives the reasoning for this. It is certainly more of a compendium of facts on plant extinction than an account on the causes.

There has been so much said and written on rain-forest destruction, desertification and the greenhouse effect that we are in danger of thinking that all the world, or at least the western world, is now tinged with a little green. Ignorance is unfortunately becoming replaced by myopia as the general public's ideas on looking after the environment become centred upon the recycling of paper, bottles and plastic, litter control and on saving the whales and elephants. Both ignorance and myopia should be fought with facts and this book can definitely help here.

After posing the basic problems, the authors proceed to detail our dependence on plants for medicine, food, plant products, fuels, fibres and our desires to possess them for their intrinsic beauty. They then consider the effects that man is having on the floras of the tropical rain forests, island floras rich in endemics, deserts, temperate forests and prairies. Examples are given of past and likely future extinctions and the shortcomings of our attempts to combat them. Even if much of this seems all too familiar to the reader, the book will be a handy reference source for details that are not always so easily recalled.

The following section explains the value of seed banks and plant collections and gives examples of their useful-

ness, but it is a depressing thought that species or even whole plant communities might be reduced to collections of frozen seeds in some far away land. Here again we must be aware of the dangers of public perception. How easy it might be to forget the living ecosystem and the interrelationships of plants with animals. Saving a species from extinction through cryogenetic preservation may be easy, but the recreation of the ecosystem is impossible.

The authors then dwell on the role of plant societies in conservation and rightly show that we still have a long way to go in influencing both those people who have vested financial interests and those who collect for personal gratification. Legislation attempts to limit international trade in endangered species and the roles of WWF, IUCN and CITES are outlined, although the account is far too brief. Also there was not even a hint of the many national laws that protect plants.

The authors say quite clearly that they are offering a gloomy prognosis and that the percentage of endangered species saved will be small. They also hope that they will be wrong. We can all agree with that sentiment but the majority of people need to be given some hope that actions will produce results. My criticism, therefore, is that the book does not do this. The six pages on getting involved hardly fire the reader's enthusiasm and the Prognosis followed by 19 case histories of near extinction combine to fill the reader with gloom. Nevertheless, the facts are there and it is a brave attempt to be taken seriously. The book should be on your shelf. Buy it!

Barry A. Thomas.

The Natural History of China*Zhao Ji, Zheng Guangmei,*
Wang Huadong and Xu Jialin
Collins, 1990, 224pp., £14.95

The Natural History of China is somewhat unusual in its class in that comparatively few of its readers are ever likely to experience at first hand the wild life it portrays. Even those that do could hardly hope to see more than a fraction of the variety of habitats, flora and fauna. And what a variety it is! Most westerners have little idea of the vast size of the country and the consequent wide range of climate and vegetation—we tend to think of the Chinese countryside as endless flat paddy fields on the plains and endless terraced paddy fields on the hillsides, with an overwhelming pressure of human population. No doubt this is true for many parts, China's 114 people per sq km is about three times the world average. Yet in comparison the UK has more than twice the population density of China, and Holland even more—something like four times as much. Given that such places as the Yangtze and Yellow river basins do accord largely with the popular western belief, the map shows vast tracts of mountain, desert and steppe that are less heavily populated—some no doubt with a population sparse by any standards, although even in such places there has often been considerable human impact on the environment. After the Introduction comes an instructive chapter on the geography of China, which addresses geological history and evolution as well as present day land forms.

The next chapter, Forests, is the longest. The forested areas are comparatively limited, comprising but 13 per cent of the country, yet we learn that only