



**West African Ornithological Society
Société d'Ornithologie de l'Ouest
Africain**



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of slaves to the West Indies redundant. This enterprise resulted in the death, within a few months, of Isert, his wife and their new-born daughter; the project then collapsed.

Although Isert was one of the earliest post-Linnean biologists to visit West Africa, his scientific work is not dealt with in detail in this book. This is his account of his experiences, including his participation in a Danish-led war and narrow escape from murder on a slave ship to St Croix. He was far ahead of his time in his almost value-free and unprejudiced accounts of West African culture. Peppered throughout, he does record some of the plants and animals that he found, and his adventures in searching for them. Some of his bird notes are interesting, including what are perhaps the earliest records of woodhoopoes and indigobirds (which visited his ship on the voyage out!).

Although Isert was a competent naturalist, his biological notes are not especially well interpreted in the editor's footnotes. She is not a biologist, and has done well in searching for identifications in references known to her but, unfortunately, some of her biologist informants (credited in the footnotes), have misled her in a number of cases. Isert consistently provides the contemporary Linnean names of the plants and animals he mentions, which are sufficient for any modern biologist aware of the ways that nomenclature has changed over the years to identify most of them. However, in the footnotes, Isert's names are often wrongly interpreted; for instance, the *Motacilla curruca* of Isert is interpreted as a wagtail because *Motacilla* is thus currently applied, whereas in Isert's day, that genus covered a much wider range of birds (in the golden age of lumping) and it is obvious that Isert meant *Sylvia curruca* (and, with good scientific circumspection, Isert admits that it might not have been this precise species but a similar one). Such instances are common, and the unfortunate fact is that, because Isert's names are themselves so easy to interpret, no footnote is needed at all in the majority of cases. However, Isert's bird references provide little information that is not available in other contemporary accounts or from later, more exhaustive studies, so ignore the biology and enjoy this book for its historical description of the Coast, which is its proper purpose in any case.

Alan Tye

Conservation of West and Central African Rainforests. Ed. by K. Cleaver, M. Munasinghe, M. Dyson, N. Egli, A. Peuker, & F. Wencélius, 1992. 354 + xi pp. World Bank, Washington. ISBN 0-8213-2256-7. Obtainable from World Bank, 1818 H St NW, Washington, DC 20433, USA.

This is "World Bank Environment Paper No. 1", published in cooperation with IUCN. It consists of papers from a 1990 conference, which originated from the controversy over whether development aid contributes to forest destruction, or whether its role in the alleviation of poverty creates the social and economic climate necessary for forest conservation to succeed. The subject concerns all biologists interested in West Africa, where what little forest remains is disappearing at an alarming rate.

An introductory paper by J. Sayer sets the scene, stating that "The hard fact is that most aid projects, and especially those in forestry, fail." and citing examples of the disastrous effects of World Bank aid in the destruction of natural forest. The association with IUCN is brought out in several papers, and IUCN's forest policy identified as based on three principles: conserve viable populations of all species, retain sufficient forest to provide for national requirements of forest products, and retain forest in areas prone to erosion or flooding. These are sound, and one hopes that the World Bank policy-makers will take them into account when planning future aid. Another good idea, mentioned in two papers, is to establish a forest conservation convention listing important sites, after the fashion of the Ramsar wetland convention.

The underlying causes of forest destruction are identified as poverty combined with poor land management and inappropriate development. Chapter 2 summarizes World Bank forest policy, designed to address these problems; basically this is to support population programmes and agricultural intensification, minimize the negative impact of developments, support international controls which promote sustainable use of forests, promote community forestry and the creation of "forest resources" (presumably meaning plantations) and support the expansion of natural forest reserves.

Many papers are verbose, dry and jargon-ridden, while others are clear and concise. One section deals with country strategies and the "protection status" of forests in various countries. Another looks at the agricultural and demographic causes of deforestation and possible solutions, including a highly detailed paper on the effects of fire. The section on natural forest management includes an alarming chapter on Ivory Coast, where primary forest is selectively logged and non-commercial species "devitalized", a management practice which must heavily damage the biological value of the forest. An unrealistic chapter on "rational timber exploitation" gives questionably low estimates of the damage caused by logging. In contrast, a chapter on estimating sustainable levels of harvesting sensibly concludes that they should imitate natural mortality by taking over-mature trees (present harvesting criteria do not work like this). Back to the other extreme, a chapter by three anthropologists stupidly claims that biodiversity in African rainforests "exists ... because of human activities". This is based on a misunderstanding of the term "biodiversity"; the number of species might increase with the creation of secondary habitats, but this contributes to the restriction and extinction of species dependent on the primary habitat, thereby decreasing global biodiversity: biodiversity only makes sense as a global concept.

There is much in the book that is misguided in this way, but some that is very sensible. Unfortunately, those World Bank and other decision-makers without biological training will probably not know which is which, and one wonders what effect the publication will have on their future activities.

Alan Tye