

# THE WILSON BULLETIN

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## EDITORIAL

THE *Ibis* (LONDON) FOR OCTOBER reviews Dr. Linsdale's paper on the use of thallium in California, concluding with the following remarks: "This campaign has been going on for four years with apparently quite useless or harmful results, but we are astonished to learn that it has been done in coöperation with the Biological Survey! At all events it is a lesson to the rest of the world how *not* to tackle a pest question."

Nowhere have we seen anything in print, by anyone outside the Survey, in defense of the Biological Survey's poisoning program. There seems to be a growing and unanimous tendency on the part of scientific societies to condemn the Survey's policy. However, with a desire to be fair and as impartial as possible we pass along the following claims made by the friends of the Survey.

1. That very little, if any, of the actual poisoning (in California) has been done directly by the Survey.
2. That the poisoning will be done anyway, whether the federal Survey participates or not; and it is better that it be done under scientific control.
3. That the poisoning is not indiscriminate, but is carefully selective, and that birds are not highly susceptible to doses used for mammals.
4. That much (or some) of the poisoning in California has been done in "plague" areas, that is, in areas within which the ground squirrels, or other rodents, have become infected with the Bubonic Plague (with the germs corresponding to the *Bacillus pestis* of Asia).
5. That with one or two exceptions the poisoning efforts have not been exterminatory in any area, the rodents having recovered in numbers within a few years.
6. That in many parts of the west the agricultural lands are limited to the valleys, beyond which lies the public domain, usually consisting of waste land. This public domain becomes a breeding ground for pests which then overrun the fertile agricultural lands, destroying crops. Those speaking for the Survey state that the Survey aims to destroy the rodents on the public domain only within a certain zone surrounding the producing areas. Beyond this the rodents are not disturbed.

To what extent these arguments are grounded upon fact we are not in position to affirm. One of the arguments presented to Congress for so large an appropriation (one million dollars a year for ten years) to the Survey for control work was that by making a sufficiently large appropriation now a thorough job

could be done and would not have to be repeated. Of course, this argument is based on the idea of extermination. With less control than extermination the animals have been able to recover, thus making necessary renewed appropriations. (Of course some of the Survey's friends claim that no funds from this large appropriation have yet become available).

It seems to be evident that the federal Survey has organized and dignified the poison work, spread it over greater territory, and multiplied it a hundredfold. The Survey may make the defense that they have been beset by landowners and agriculturists; but, nevertheless, before the world the responsibility is on the Survey. The action is theirs, they sought the enlarged appropriation, they have emphasized this work, and at the expense and sacrifice of the scientific investigation which formerly was the major function of the Survey. Scientific research has been on the wane, so far as publication shows, ever since the Survey became charged with the administration of federal game laws (beginning chiefly in the later years of the Migratory Bird Law). Aside from our scientific and sentimental attitude against the extermination of any forms of life, there is a certain repugnance against our government scattering poison over the earth for destructive purposes. The finer human sensibilities recoil against such practices, much as they are shocked by the use of poison gas in human warfare.

It has seemed to us for some years past that the Biological Survey is in need of a reorganization. The Bureau was originally organized as a scientific bureau, pure and simple. In more recent years it has had thrust upon it the burdensome administrative work of game law enforcement, rodent control, and predatory animal control. These have become the major functions, and scientific research has been compelled to take a back seat. Here the claim is made that it is easy to get money from Congress for animal control and such things because partisans are always present to assist the Survey in urging Congress to grant the desired funds. It is more than likely a fact that the scientific interests of the country have been derelict in their active support of the Survey in seeking appropriations for scientific investigations. To remedy this weakness biological societies throughout the country should take steps to have representatives at Washington at the proper time to lobby for appropriations for scientific research by the government forces. There should be some sort of a clearing-house, or tie-up, between the biological societies of the country and the biological bureaus of the government, to the end that the latter may have the moral support of the scientific world in securing financial support from the government *for scientific research*. In the meantime it may be necessary for the Biological Survey to show a different hand, and it may become advisable to find some means of making the scientific staffs independent of these other distracting functions which seem, at present, to be securing a strangle hold on the Survey. This is the reorganization referred to at the beginning of the paragraph.

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WHILE THE SUBJECT of thallium is being widely discussed as a poison for rodents, it will be interesting to note that the *Journal of the American Medical Association* for May 30 and September 5, 1931, contains reports of young women being seriously poisoned by thallium obtained in the use of depilatory creams.

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