

In Life’s Web, Aiding Trees Can Kill Them

By CORNELIA DEAN

A few years ago, Todd Palmer, an ecologist at the University of Florida, was walking past a fenced-off research site in Kenya when he noticed something curious: instead of thriving, acacia trees that were protected from leaf-eating elephants and giraffes were withering and dying.

“That struck me as paradoxical,” he said in a telephone interview this week from the site. “If you remove large herbivores, you should see more vigorous trees.”

Dr. Palmer and his colleagues investigated. Their findings, reported in Friday’s issue of the journal Science, add to the mounting evidence that relationships between plant and animal species can be far more complex than had been thought and that even seemingly benign interference can have devastating effects.

The acacias and a species of ant that colonize them live together in an arrangement called mutualism. The ants nest in the trees’ thorns and sip on their nectar; in return, they swarm out ferociously, ready to bite, when a tree is disturbed by an elephant, a giraffe or other grazing animal.

But somehow, Dr. Palmer said, the trees seem to sense when no one is munching on their leaves and, after a year or so, seemingly decide, “We are



ROBERT PRINGLE

A giraffe in Kenya feeding on an acacia tree. Protecting the trees from herbivores can expose them to new threats.

going to reduce our investment in ants” by not producing so many roomy thorns or so much tasty nectar. The ants’ responses — lassitude is one — eventually encourage wood-boring beetles to invade the trees. Soon their tunnels leave the trees sickly, dying or dead.

The finding shows that what looks like two-species mutualism may involve other species. And they offer new proof of the fragility of the web of life, a phenomenon observed, for example, when wolves vanish from mountain landscapes or sharks and other top marine predators are fished out of the marine food chain.

Without wolf predation, elk are freer to roam and eat more plants. Result: aspen begin to vanish. Similarly, the overfishing of sharks and similar large fish leave smaller, algae-eating fish free to graze unhindered on algae growing on (and feeding) coral. Result: dead coral.

Dr. Palmer said it was shocking to see how quickly the ant-acacia mutualism, evolved over thousands of years, “dissolved” once the herbivores were removed. Now, he said, he and his colleagues want to see if they can restore the old pattern by again allowing giraffes and elephants to feed on the trees.

U.S. and Germany Plan to Recognize Kosovo

By DAN BILEFSKY

LJUBLJANA, Slovenia — The United States and Germany have agreed to recognize Kosovo after it declares independence and to urge the rest of Europe to follow suit, say senior European Union diplomats close to negotiations over Kosovo’s future.

In a recent conversation about Kosovo, a Serbian province that has been under United Nations administration since 1999, President Bush and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany agreed it was vital to recognize Kosovo to stabilize the western Balkans, European officials said Wednesday evening. After months of failed negotiations, Kosovo is expected to declare independence after the second round of Serbian elections, planned for Feb. 3.

The European officials said the United States was aggressively pressing the European Union to ensure that the recognition of Kosovo was not delayed by even a week. They spoke on the condition of anonymity because diplomatic negotiations were continuing.

“The cake has been baked, because the Americans have promised Kosovo independence,” a senior European Union official said. “And if Washington recognizes Kosovo and European nations do not follow, it will be a disaster.”

The government of Serbia and Russia, an ally, vehemently oppose independence for Kosovo. Several European Union countries — including Spain, Slovakia, Romania and Cyprus — fear

spurring secessionist movements in their own territories. But European Union diplomats said a majority of European nations — including Germany, France, Britain and Italy — planned to recognize Kosovo, regardless of dissenters.

The German Foreign Ministry said no decision had been reached on when the European Union would recognize Kosovo.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the American ambassador to the United Nations, said in December, when the Security Council was unable to resolve the issue of Kosovo’s future, that the time had come to proceed with granting independence. “The continuation of the status quo poses not only a threat to peace and stability in Kosovo but also to the region and in Europe,” Mr. Khalilzad said then.

Slovenia, which took over the European Union presidency for six months on Jan. 1, is pressing members to make good on a pledge to send an 1,800-member police and civil force to Kosovo this month. European officials said Slovenia was determined to have the force in place before Kosovo declared independence.

Dimitrij Rupel, the Slovenian foreign minister, said this week that the European Union’s best hope out of a potentially explosive situation in Kosovo was to soften Serbia’s recalcitrance by offering it closer ties to the European Union and the prospect of joining the bloc. “The financial situation of Serbia is terrible, and coming closer to the E.U. will help change that,” he said.

Kosovo legally remains part of Serbia, and the two rounds of

Serbian elections are scheduled for Jan. 20 and Feb. 3. A declaration of independence before then would be likely to play into the hands of Serbian nationalists.

The European Union has said it will not fully embrace Serbia until it hands over those indicted on war crimes charges, including Gen. Ratko Mladic, the Bosnian Serbs’ wartime military commander. But Mr. Rupel hinted that the European Union could show more flexibility if Serbia softened its stance on Kosovo.

He stressed that the ethnic Albanians who are the overwhelming majority of Kosovo’s population were brutally subjugated by Slobodan Milosevic, the former Yugoslav president who died in 2006. Mr. Rupel said the Albanians had the same right to self-determination achieved by Slovenia, which declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 as the nation began to disintegrate.

Kosovo, a territory of two million people, has been in limbo since NATO intervened in 1999 to stop repression by Serbian forces against the ethnic Albanians.

Some Slovenian diplomats are concerned that tiny Slovenia’s efforts will be upstaged by France, which takes over the European Union presidency in July. But Prime Minister Janez Jansa said Slovenia’s size could prove an advantage.

“The fact that our political work might be perceived as lesser than other E.U. member states could give us an advantage by giving us more room for maneuver,” Mr. Jansa said. “It will help us to be an honest broker.”

General Clears Army Officer Of Crime in Abu Ghraib Case

WASHINGTON (Reuters) — The only United States Army officer to face a court-martial over the scandal at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison has been cleared of any criminal wrongdoing in the case, the Army said Thursday.

A court-martial convicted Lt. Col. Steven Jordan in August of disobeying an order not to discuss the investigation of abuse at the jail and issued him a criminal reprimand as penalty.

But Maj. Gen. Richard Rowe, commanding officer for the Army Military District of Washington, on Tuesday disapproved of both the conviction and the reprimand, the Army said. The decision by General Rowe wipes Colonel Jordan’s record clean of any criminal responsibility.

“In light of the offense Jordan has been found guilty of committing, and the substantial evidence in mitigation,” an Army spokesman, Col. James Yonts, said in a statement, “Rowe determined that an administrative reprimand was a fair and appropriate disposition of the matter.”

Colonel Jordan had once faced a maximum punishment of five years in prison and dismissal from the Army over the Abu Ghraib scandal, which unleashed a wave of global condemnation against the United States when

images of abused prisoners surfaced in 2004.

The photos included scenes of naked detainees stacked in a pyramid and other inmates cowering in front of snarling dogs.

Colonel Jordan, who was in charge of an Abu Ghraib interrogation center, said he had played no part in the abuse and complained that the military was trying to make him a scapegoat.

His defense team also argued that he held no command authority at the prison.

The judicial panel of 10 officers that convicted him in August of disobeying the order also acquitted him of any responsibility for the cruel treatment of Abu Ghraib detainees.

The letter of administrative reprimand that Colonel Jordan will now receive is a document used by military commanders to correct conduct that fails to comply with established standards.

Eleven lower-ranking soldiers have been convicted in military courts in connection with the physical abuse and sexual humiliation of Abu Ghraib detainees.

Two other officers have been disciplined by the Army, but neither faced criminal charges or dismissal.

World Briefing

ASIA

NORTH KOREA: U.S. SUGGESTS A NEW NUCLEAR DEADLINE Christopher R. Hill, the State Department’s point man on North Korea, urged it to give a full accounting of its nuclear weapons programs before Lee Myung-bak, the new president of South Korea, who is inclined to offer the North more sticks and fewer carrots, takes office on Feb. 25. North Korea missed a year-end deadline for declaring its nuclear activities. After meeting with Mr. Lee in Seoul, Mr. Hill said while there had been “bumps in the road,” it would be “very desirable” if the process were finished by Mr. Lee’s swearing-in. Unlike the departing president, Roh Moo-hyun, Mr. Lee intends to make aid and economic exchanges conditional on nuclear compliance. *CHOE SANG-HUN*

SOUTH KOREA: COURT RULES FOR INQUIRY OF PRESIDENT-ELECT The Constitutional Court cleared the way for a special prosecutor to start an investigation into allegations of links by President-elect Lee Myung-bak to a 2001 stock manipulation scheme. The inquiry is to be finished before his swearing-in on Feb. 25. *CHOE SANG-HUN*

EUROPE

GEORGIA: OPPOSITION LEADER CHARGED WITH COUP PLOT Prosecutors charged Badri Patarkatsishvili, a failed opposition presidential candidate, with terrorism and conspiring to overthrow the government. From London, where he has been living, Mr. Patarkatsishvili, a media tycoon, dismissed the charges as political. The prosecutors’ action seemed certain to restrict his access to his native country and his ability to operate businesses there. *C. J. CHIVERS*

BOSNIA: POLICE TAKE PASSPORTS OF KARADZIC FAMILY At the request of the international war crimes court in The Hague, the Bosnian Serb police seized the passports of the wife, son, daughter and son-in-law of Radovan Karadzic, the Bosnian Serb leader during the country’s 1992-95 war and one of the most wanted men in the world. His family is suspected of helping him evade capture, along with a network of supporters. *(AP)*

BRITAIN: LETHAL BIRD FLU AT FAMED SWAN RESERVE The deadly H5N1 strain of avian flu has reached one of England’s most famous swan breeding grounds, the Abbotsbury Swannery on the Dorset coast. Tests on three dead mute swans confirmed the virus, spread by wild birds. The manager said he was working to determine how many swans might be affected. *DONALD G. McNEIL Jr.*

FRANCE: SARKOZY’S EX SEEKS TO BLOCK BOOK President Nicolas Sarkozy’s ex-wife Cécilia asked a Paris court to block release of a book that quotes her describing the president as a philanderer, a skinflint and “a man who loves no one, not even his children.” The book, “Cécilia,” by Anna Bitton, is to hit shops this week, just days after Mr. Sarkozy, whose poll numbers have been dropping for months, all but confirmed his engagement to Carla Bruni, a former model. Excerpts have been published in magazines. After arguments from Ms. Sarkozy’s lawyers, who said the book was a breach of her private life, the court said it would give a decision on Friday. *(AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE)*

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fur-trimmed leather,
sheared beaver and
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