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GIANT OTTER PROJECT IN PERU FIELD TRIP AND ACTIVITY REPORT - 2002

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INTRODUCTION

The project 'Status, habitat, behaviour and conservation of Giant Otters in Peru' of the Frankfurt Zoological Society - Help for Threatened Wildlife (FZS) is now in its 14th year; progress has been described continually in the IUCN Otter Specialist Group Bulletin (Schenck and Staib, 1992, 1995a, 1995b; Schenck et al., 1997, 1999; Staib and Schenck, 1994; Groenendijk et al., 2000, 2001; Groenendijk and Hajek, 2002). The giant otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) was uplisted from 'vulnerable' to 'endangered' by the IUCN in 2000 with habitat destruction in South America currently posing the greatest threat to the species. Activities in Peru have been geared toward developing a national integrated conservation strategy, incorporating research and monitoring, environmental education, management of human activities in giant otter habitats, capacitation and awareness raising, networking, and the creation of a distribution database and mapping facility.

MANU BIOSPHERE RESERVE POPULATION CENSUS

In contrast to previous years, only one census was carried out in the Manu Biosphere Reserve, during September and October. This was because the Frankfurt Zoological Society's second Peruvian project, the Protected Area Support Programme, was initiated, reducing time available for fieldwork.

We entered 21 oxbow lakes, and also investigated the Pinquen River. The total number of different giant otter individuals encountered was 66, including 3 solitaries, with the remainder being members of 12 groups. The largest group numbered 12 animals and average group size was 5.3. The total number of observation hours was 59. The total number of litters was 7 and the total number of cubs was at least 15; average litter size was therefore 2.1 cubs.

Of the 66 different giant otter individuals encountered, no less than 57, or 86%, were successfully identified. The 9 throat markings that were not filmed were all of cubs. What is particularly noteworthy is the identification of 6 individuals during this census that had not been seen by the Project for between 2 and 4 years.

A new vocalisation was heard, behaviour intended to establish hierarchical dominance was observed for the first time, and a simple method to sex otters at dens or campsites was discovered and tested. Of the 111 different neck markings filmed since the beginning of 1999, the sex is definitely known of 37 individuals, that is 33% (compared to 27% in 2001, 18% in 2000 and 10% in 1999); an additional 11 require confirmation.

En route to and from Manu, several oxbow lakes of the Madre de Dios River were investigated for giant otter presence. The Madre de Dios is the aquatic link between the protected areas of the Department. If human activity can be managed here so that humans can coexist peaceably with the species then a safe corridor for giant otter dispersal and colonisation will have been established. On Cocha Huitoto we observed a solitary (an animal first seen in Oct. 2001 as part of the main group), a pair, and a group of 9 individuals, including 4 cubs, totalling 12 different individuals. Cochach Endara, Caracol, and Pañacocha are all in the vicinity of the Asociación para la Conservación de la Cuenca Amazonica (ACCA) conservation concession, on the opposite bank of the Madre de Dios River. In Endara we did not encounter giant otters but found an old den and miners active at the far end of the lake; in fact, mining pressure has been intense in this area. When we returned 7 weeks later we found an old campsite (estimated to have been last used less than two weeks before) in a different location, and the miners had gone. On Caracol, an old campsite was also the only sign of giant otter presence, which had not been re-used by the time we passed by again. Pañacocha seemed to be entirely uninhabited by the species. It is clear that most, if not all, these lakes, however, have potential as permanent giant otter territory if restored and if human presence and activity is managed.

A family of 7 otters, including 2 juveniles, was observed on Cocha Capiripa, whilst on Cocha Kamungo, we found 4 nervous animals; no cubs were evident. Despite the fact that tourism is being managed on both lakes, we were a little concerned by the marked reaction of the two otter groups.

SMALL RIVER RESEARCH: PALMA REAL AND PATUYACU

Two separate surveys were conducted in the Palma Real watershed during the course of 2002, in April and November (at the end of the rainy season and at the height of the dry season respectively). We also twice briefly visited the Briolo tributary that runs adjacent to the Palma Real River.

Results of Survey 1

Palma Real

Giant otters were sighted on 6 occasions on the Palma Real. The first and second was probably of the same trio, of which one member was identified as Real (last seen in Sept. 2001), and the third and fourth were of a pair which may or may not have been repeat sightings of the group of three. The fifth observation occurred two days later, of two individuals, one of which was identified as Onyx. The final sighting was again of Onyx and partner, named Honguito. We suspect Honguito is female. A total of 12 campsites were recorded, of which 8 were fresh. Two fresh dens were also found. An old den was unexpectedly recorded on the lower Palma Real Grande, near the confluence with the Madre de Dios River, on a small quebrada. Neotropical otter individuals were sighted three times.

Patuyacu

Giant otters were observed on 9 occasions, but at least 5 of these were of a solitary male named Charlie, first seen in April 2001 in the upper Patuyacu, also as a solitary. Of the remaining 4 sightings, two were of different solitaires, later named Leche and Miel (maybe female). These two sightings were situated close together so we cannot discard the possibility that the animals may form a pair. A group of 3 individuals was sighted twice, the male Patu, the female Timida, and Suerte (who was a juvenile in 2000). A total of 6 campsites were encountered, of which 2 were fresh. Only one fresh den was found in the upper Patuyacu. A Neotropical otter was observed once and a den of this species was also recorded.

Briolo

On each trip we sighted giant otters twice. The first sighting was of a pair, the second of a solitary; none could be identified. On the second trip, a pair was observed twice and the throat markings were partially filmed. Eight campsites were recorded, of which 5 were fresh; one old and one fresh den were also found.

Results of Survey 2

Palma Real

In November 2002, we had two sightings, the first of a pair, Onyx and Honguito, and the second of a group of 3, which we could not identify. In addition, we found 15 campsites, of which 6 were fresh, as well as 6 dens, 4 fresh. We sighted a Neotropical otter once and encountered 3 dens of this species, 2 of which were fresh.

Patuyacu

On the Patuyacu, we observed giant otters on 5 occasions. The first was a brief sighting of a pair that we could not film; the second of a group of 3 in the upper Patuyacu, none of which we recognised (two animals were named Polka and Laberinto, the third was a cub); the third again of a pair; the fourth, in the middle reaches, again of a family of 3, one of which was identified as Leche and a second individual was a small cub; and the last, near the Palma Real / Patuyacu confluence, also of 3 individuals one of which we suspect was Suerte. A total of 11 campsites were encountered, 8 fresh, as well as 5 dens, of which 2 were fresh. We observed single Neotropical otters three times, although the first two sightings were suspected to be of the same individual, in addition to numerous beach spraints.

Palma Real Grande

The surprise during this survey was the amount of evidence seen on the Palma Real Grande, below the confluence with the Patuyacu. At least one otter was sighted as it was swimming downriver, but it changed direction as soon as it became aware of us. Unfortunately, we could not identify this individual. We also found 6 campsites, three fresh, and 3 dens, one fresh.

Logo Sandoval, Tres Chimbadas and Cococha: survey and management plan progress

An ecologist, Raphael Notin, was employed by the Project in March 2002 to work on a full-time basis in Puerto Maldonado and the surrounding two protected areas. His main roles are to further giant otter monitoring on the 5 important oxbow lake systems in the region, and to advance associated tourism/habitat management plans. After many setbacks, the construction of the Sandoval Control Post was finally completed during 2002; the national protected areas authority, INRENA, employ three game wardens to staff it, including a member of the local Mejia family. Initially, there was considerable resistance to the Control Post on several levels, with tourism companies being unhappy about the charging of entrance fees to the Protected Area. However, after a period of adjustment, no further problems came to light. The Sandoval Environmental Education Programme (SEEP) visits were channelled through the Mejia lodge, with refreshments being regularly purchased there. In addition to the Control Post, already existing infrastructure was preliminarily converted to an Interpretation Centre, with the intention that SEEP visits, and local and international tourists, will have an opportunity to be informed about the Protected Area and its biodiversity. A first design for the complete Interpretation Centre was planned during a workshop in Puerto Maldonado, but the final layout and implementation will be carried out in 2003. The fixed observation point (tower) on the lake has still not been constructed, but this is a firm future objective of the project.

SANDOVAL ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Sandra Felipa was employed by the Project in May 2002 to help design and implement the Sandoval Environmental Education Programme. The principle aim of the programme is to organise visits of school children to the lake in such a way as to minimise their impact, while simultaneously introducing an educational element so that the children begin to understand and appreciate what they have in their immediate environment.

The SEEP visits included an interactive presentation by game wardens to the children as well as the involvement of 6 different Puerto Maldonado technical college students as voluntary guides. T-shirts, using as the main logo a drawing resulting from the SEEP drawing competition, were made and are being distributed to key people related to furthering management and environmental education in the Lake Sandoval area.

GIANT OTTER METHODOLOGY STANDARDISATION COURSE

Between the 23rd of November and the 6th of December 2002, the first-ever international giant otter field course took place in order to standardize distribution survey and population census methodologies, as well as habitat management techniques. The course brought together giant otter specialists from several countries, i.e. Helen Waldemarin and Emanuela Evangelista from Brazil, Luis Pinos from Ecuador, Paul van Damme from Bolivia, H el ene Jacques from French Guiana and Juan Carlos Botello from Colombia (see [Figure 1](#)).



Figure 1: Attending members of the first international giant otter field course. From left to right: Jessica Groenendijk (Peru), Paul van Damme (Bolivia), Emanuela Evangelista (Brazil), Helen Waldemarin (Brazil), Luis Pinos (Ecuador), Dario Cruz (Peru), H el ene Jacques (French Guyana), and Juan Carlos Botello (Colombia) on a giant otter campsite, on the Palma Real river

The idea was to contribute and compare experiences from different work areas, which include flooded forests, oxbow lakes, small rivers, and large rivers with rocky banks, to improve upon a second draft of a paper on distribution survey and census methodology standardization ([Groenendijk et al. in prep.](#)), and to test the accompanying data collection sheets such that they can be applied to any region throughout the giant otter's range in South America. A number of workshops were held to this effect, as well as a brainstorming session on how to incorporate the standardized methodologies within an overall range-wide monitoring strategy (using that which exists for *Lutra lutra* as a starting point).

The second part of the course brought the participants to three different tourist lodges; each involved with tourism management plans on two lakes, Cocococha and Tres Chimbadas. Since tourism is an important, potentially sustainable, activity that can be harnessed as a force for conservation in many study sites, we felt it important to demonstrate and further discuss how to minimize the impact of tourism on giant otters, yet maximize tourist satisfaction. A second such course is planned for June 2003 in order to collect input from the remaining giant otter researchers in South America.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Two issues of the Friends of the Giant Otter bulletin were distributed to almost 300 enthusiasts, an article was published in one of the most important national travel/conservation magazines, contributions were made to a German film focusing on Manu's biodiversity, and the Project website was further developed and updated. The Project's long-term and close collaboration with the national protected areas authority, INRENA, continues to be rewarding and is regarded by the Project as one of the keystones of

its work. The extension of the Manu National Park by more than 250,000 hectares in June was excellent news; this has been an objective of the Project since its initiation and has been consistently worked towards since.

The capturing of at least one cub from the Palma Real watershed was an event that was also reported for two other locations, Lago Valencia and Cocha Isla de los Valles. This is a worrying trend and demonstrates the need for an awareness-raising campaign amongst local inhabitants, explaining the protected status of the species and the futility of keeping giant otter cubs as pets in the long-term. Moreover, there is an increasing perception by local people that giant otters compete with them for fish resources; this is a complicated, controversial issue that needs to be addressed, especially within a scenario of recuperating giant otter populations.

On the 1st of April, a one day course/workshop 'Research and conservation of the giant otter and ox-bow lakes in the Madre de Dios region' was given in Cuzco with the aim of bringing together representatives of the protected areas authority, INRENA, local authorities, NGO's, and nature tourism companies, in order to share research findings and work towards a variety of ox-bow lake management models for the area. A total of 45 people attended, including the head of Manu National Park, a representative of the Cuzco regional Tourism Board, INRENA personnel, three park guards, six lodge or campsite administrators or owners, and many guides.

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