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THE OTTERPARK *AQUALUTRA*

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Abstract: The activities of the Dutch Otterstation Foundation (SON) are described, notably the foundation of Otterpark *AQUALUTRA*, which consists of a breeding centre, a research centre and a visitor centre. Each of these is described in turn. The Otterpark is situated in the "Groene Ster" nature reserve near Leeuwarden, Friesland, Netherlands.

INTRODUCTION

The deterioration of the fresh water environment has taken its toll; the otter, one of the most beautiful animals the Dutch fauna possessed, is now extinct. The otter is an important indicator species for the quality of the fresh water environment. The high sensitivity of the otter to the deterioration of its habitat has given this animal the image of "ambassador of the fresh water environment". The fact that this animal has become extinct, therefore casts suspicion on the state of the fresh water environment in Nederland.

The Dutch Otterstation Foundation (SON) was established on 27 November 1985 with the aim to contribute to environmental recovery and nature development of the Dutch fresh water ecosystem. The recovery of the Dutch otter population and its habitat, the fresh water environment, will crown it all. SON is engaged in natural and environmental education, research, advising in environmental policy, and the preparation of a national otter breeding programme. Its most important activity however, is the realization of the Otterpark *AQUALUTRA*.

Together with the nature trust "It Fryske Gea" the SON set up the Working-group Otters Friesland (WOF). Large subsidies were received after the report "de Otter bliuwt in wrotter" was delivered. These made it possible to develop new otter habitats in the "Oude-Venen" (a large fresh water environment in Friesland) and to isolate other parts in this area from the polluted 'boezem' water (water from the Rhine via the Ijsselmeer).

THE OTTERPARK *AQUALUTRA*

One of the most important activities of the SON is the realization of Otterpark *AQUALUTRA*. SON started the construction of the Otterpark in 1992. The Otterpark will consist of a breeding centre, a research centre and a visitor centre. An appeal is made to trade and industry to contribute in paying the costs of this project by means of sponsoring. The Otterpark will be situated in the nature reserve "De Groene Ster" close to Leeuwarden, Friesland. The entire site measures 10 ha. Walks and excursions through impressive flora and fauna in the midst of the many indigenous birds, combined with the possibility of a visit to the exposition and a route through the park, will attract many visitors. Thorough national marketing and publicity efforts should make the prognosis of 40 000 visitors in 1993 to 100 000 before the end of the century hold.

THE BREEDING CENTRE

In view of planting otters in Nederland in the future, SON has applied itself from the start to house and breed otters. The policy has always been to free otters only after sufficient environmental recovery and nature development is realized. The first "release" will be an experiment to check whether sufficient management measures have been taken. SON has acquired experience abroad and in its own (temporary) research centre in Haren, not far from Groningen.

THE VISITORS CENTRE

An impressive national "natural and environmental educational centre" will be constructed in Otterpark *AQUALUTRA*. Over the past few years, large interest for a visitors centre has arisen in which otters can be seen in a natural environment. The interest of the media for such a centre underlines the previous statement. This increasing interest runs parallel to the increasing involvement of the public for the condition of nature and environment.

Otterpark *AQUALUTRA* is a unique attraction park. It is enjoyable, instructive and exploratory. The first otters will probably come to the Otterpark in April or May 1993. Not only otters, but also beavers and many other animals can be seen in the Otterpark. There will be bird-watching posts and beautiful brooks full of fish that one can see through periscopes, an underwater tunnel in the otter basin and spectacular feeding moments. In the exposition building there will be a multi-media show, a live otter cartoon, aquaria and large expositions. A restaurant for refreshments and a recreation-ground for the children will complete the Otterpark.

The SON hopes to welcome members of the IUCN to Otterpark *AQUALUTRA* in the near future.